

The Challenges of the Historical Survey

[Review Article]

Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: A History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. ISBN 9780521197205. £25 hbk.

Christine Kinealy, *War and Peace: Ireland since the 1960s*. London: Reaktion Books, 2010. ISBN 9781861897794. £25 hbk.

The historical synthesis is the ultimate work of craft requiring the historian to be chronicler, surveyor, narrator and at times witness. But surveying the tangle of Irish history in any one time period is no simple undertaking; it poses formidable, even perilous, challenges.

The first and critical hurdle is how to frame a conspectus chronologically and thematically. Thomas Bartlett has chosen a long historical arc from 431AD to 2010, from the beginnings of Christian Ireland to the shattering economic and institutional developments that have taken place since 2007. Seven chapters of varying lengths treat distinctly Irish themes including, among others, English conquest and Irish resistance, religion and denominational division, land, self-government, emigration and economic failure. Christine Kinealy's canvas is more modest and covers the past half century. Both surveys have the same domain: the island of Ireland. Yet Kinealy's title is problematic as her focus is almost solely on the Northern Ireland troubles. The sections on the Republic have the character and appearance of forced and disjointed afterthoughts. No compelling reason is offered for choosing the 1960s as a *terminus a quo*. In many ways, taking 1945 as a starting point for modern Ireland, as Bartlett does, would have put the study on sounder foundations because key to explaining the convulsions of Northern Ireland in the 1960s is the failure of the unionist government to embrace post-war political and economic modernisation.

The second challenge relates to the intended audience and the concomitant matter of proportion. There is a strong public appetite for historical synthesis. While specialists typically disagree with the generalisations and simplifications required of explicitly synthetic volumes, they can greatly enrich public discourse. Moreover, there is an

obligation on the historical profession to provide accessible overviews and thereby appeal to a larger and more diverse readership. Bartlett and Kinealy strive to accomplish this. To this end, both are largely concerned with traditional high politics while paying due attention to aspects of economic, demographic and social change. Both authors can be commended, for example, for their efforts to chart the changing position of Irish women in the twentieth century and in attempting to locate Irish developments in the context of the wider world. Kinealy helpfully notifies the reader of developments in British politics.

Bartlett's effort is a *tour de force*. Impressively contextualised and stylishly written (apart from some convoluted sentences and an excessive use of French terms), his treatment is fresh and at times unclenched. He does not, for instance, skirt around describing the events between 1169 and 1171 as an 'invasion'. The text is punctuated with perceptive observations, intriguing parallels and arresting questions. It is also peppered with humour. Thus Major James Chichester-Clark is deemed 'an amiable old duffer' (p. 504) and Enoch Powell 'an antique Conservative who had, it seemed never quite forgiven himself for missing the Home Rule crisis of 1886' (p. 563). Yet conscious of the historian's responsibility, Bartlett reminds the reader that

the task for the historian of medieval (and modern) Ireland is to identify where, and why, peaceful contact became deadly friction; to balance the local with the provincial, national and international perspectives; and to present a narrative that reflects contemporary realities, rather than the preoccupations of later generations (p. 45).

He remains true to this injunction guiding the reader smoothly through knotty episodes such as the discriminatory Statutes of Kilkenny, the Tudor conquest and end of Gaelic Ireland, the much propagandised 1641 uprising and its brutal aftermath, the 1798 rebellion, the Anglo-Irish Union, the catastrophic Great Famine, the dismantling of the Union, the partition of Ireland, the survival of Irish democracy, and the stumbling performances of the two Irish states. Throughout, he maintains a sense of proportion and judgement. That is until the final contemporaneous chapter, where Bartlett writes with manifest anger and dismay at the unravelling of the Republic's economy and key institutions: 'Disgracefully the billions deployed to bail out the

delinquent banks in the first decade of the twenty-first century would be a charge on future, unborn generations: the Republic had eaten its children' (p. 471). At the same time, he is nervously optimistic about the future of Northern Ireland under the St Andrew's Agreement dispensation. For the general reader, Bartlett's survey lives up to the dust jacket's pronouncement that his is an 'authoritative historical road map'. In this it is aided by eleven informative maps and 94 handsome and wisely chosen illustrations.

Kinealy's survey is less successful. This is due, in part, to the difficulty of being contemporary with the events being analysed and the general unavailability of primary source material to gird the study. It is also partly a question of approach and structure. Three weaknesses can be identified that diminish the value of this survey for the general public and specialist alike. First, as the chapter titles – Fault Lines, Troubles, War, Implosion, Stalemate, Hunger, Overtures, Ceasefire, Endgame – indicate this book is dominated by the Northern Ireland question which undermines the claim implicit in the title that this is a history of the entire island since 1960. It would have been wiser to have taken the Troubles as the subject and to comment on the Republic only in so far as it impinged on this and the peace process. By not doing so the result is a study distinctly unbalanced in terms of North-South coverage. The reader interested in the Republic in the 1980s and 1990s might reasonably have expected a consideration of the economic recovery from the fiscal crisis of the 1970s and 1980s and the emergence of the Celtic Tiger. Instead, the discussion is largely confined to the referenda of the 1980s and the position of the Catholic Church, where Kinealy makes the regrettable error of confusing Article 41.3.2 of the constitution which treated divorce and Article 44.1.2, the special position of the Catholic Church (p. 26). For all the discussion of religion, members of the Church of Ireland, Methodist Church and Presbyterian Church would surely raise eyebrows at the reduction of religion in Northern Ireland to 'a powerful Protestant fundamentalist Christian lobby' (p. 29). The exposition is not helped either by analysis that is rushed rather than considered, by rapid changes of topic and incongruous interjections. For instance, chapter two moved directly from the Arms Crisis to Francis Bacon and Dana. Bizarrely, *All Kinds of Everything* received lengthier treatment than the implications of the Arms Trial.

Second, *War and Peace* is more a chronology than a contextualised study. All too frequently insufficient perspective, explanation or example is offered. The convictions for the Birmingham bombings of 1974 are outlined in chapter four but the reader must wait until the end of chapter five to learn that they were unsafe. The Downing Street Declaration is mentioned in chapter seven but its significance is not explained. Likewise, the Hume-Adams discussions receive much attention but the respective positions of the SDLP and Sinn Féin do not. Even the account of the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement is sketchy for a study of the Northern question (p. 283). The third limitation is related. While there is a unity of theme in charting the torturous journey from Northern street protest to paramilitary violence to devolution, aspects of the story are often skewed or overemphasised. For example, unwarranted weight is attached to partition. This fixation misses the most significant development in post-World War Two Northern Ireland: the shift in the nationalist approach from highlighting the injustice of the state to injustices within it. Similarly, the benefits of EEC membership for the Republic are briefly outlined but no reference is made to shared membership as an element that facilitated greater intergovernmental co-operation between Dublin and London. Clarity about key concepts is vital in any broad canvas narrative. There is no proper conclusion, no drawing together of emergent themes and tendencies, Rather the reader is left with a sense that when the chronology ran out, colourfully it may be said, with Iris Robinson in January 2010 so too did this survey's steam. *War and Peace* is informative without being particularly illuminating. To be fair, Bartlett does not provide a conclusion either but in his case enough interpretative comment and perspective is offered throughout the book. The general reader would have benefitted from maps and illustrations but none accompany Kinealy's text.

Irish historiography has moved in new, interesting and fruitful directions over the past three decades. This development has prompted increased specialisation with a wide variety of subfields and encouraged the emergence of a host of new perspectives and genres that have replaced a single narrative. This brings us to the third daunting challenge facing the historical surveyor: the sheer output of Irish historical writing and the new interpretations and reassessments offered. Irish History Online contains some 70,000 individual bibliographical entries on Irish history published between

1940 and 2009.* In this context, synthesis of recent historiography is an especially necessary but forbidding undertaking.

Those embarking on writing historical surveys must steer a course between bibliographic obesity and an evidential base that is too thin. There is also the challenge when working out-of-field of avoiding interpretative quicksand in favour of focusing attention on the most significant developments. A rounded tour of the historiographical horizon can crystallise a generation of scholarship. Bartlett accomplishes this in respect of the Vikings and eighteenth-century Ireland, to cite just two examples, but Kinealy is less successful.

The Northern Ireland troubles have generated a veritable library of writing yet the bibliography of *War and Peace: Ireland since the 1960s* is surprisingly short. Conspicuously, the pioneering assessments of J. H. Whyte, Pádraig O'Malley's, *The Uncivil Wars*, and Steve Bruce's many contributions on Paisleyism and loyalism do not feature. Neither does McKittrick et al's majestic *Lost Lives*. This is simply astonishing for a survey that devotes considerable space to describing paramilitary killings but utters not a word on the complexities involved in reporting deaths occasioned by political violence. The most engaging chapters – those on the failure of Sunningdale and the hunger strikes – utilise to excellent effect recently released material from state archives and the papers of Margaret Thatcher. But for the most part, Kinealy's account relies heavily on a narrow array of texts often by journalists and there is an overreliance on websites such as the BBC, Counterpunch and CAIN. The net effect is to reduce *War and Peace's* explanatory claims and consign it to being a chronology.

The breadth of *Ireland: A History* makes Bartlett's bibliographic challenge gargantuan. He tackles this by slicing through the thickets of publications and distilling their essence. Inevitably some chapters are a little thin. Disappointingly, Bartlett does not provide an orthodox bibliography. Instead the notes offer a valuable, if brief, guide to key works consulted. This serves the general reader well.

* I am grateful to Professor James Kelly for this information.

In different ways, *Ireland: A History* and *War and Peace: Ireland since the 1960s* highlight the important place of the comprehensive overview. Producing a compelling historical survey is an arduous task. It requires not alone reflection but careful choice of framing, audience and bibliographical scope. When executed as impressively as *Ireland: A History*, the result sheds enriching light on the character of the Irish past and its connection to the present.

DAITHÍ Ó CORRÁIN

ST PATRICK'S COLLEGE, DCU