

Featured review

IMAGINING IRELAND'S PASTS: EARLY MODERN IRELAND THROUGH THE CENTURIES. By Nicholas Canny. Pp xiii + 414. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2021. £90.00.

For more than fifty years, Nicholas Canny has been one of the leading historians of early modern Ireland. His latest book, *Imagining Ireland's pasts: early modern Ireland through the centuries*, offers an incredible survey of the complex ways in which this crucial period has been interpreted, beginning with sixteenth-century humanists and concluding with late nineteenth century-historians (although the commentary spills over into the twentieth century). The result is a monumental work of scholarship and a landmark book, which makes a major contribution not only to our understanding of the early modern period but also to the development of Irish historiography over five centuries.

Imagining Ireland's pasts begins with the impact of the Renaissance and Reformation on the writing of history in the context of Ireland's 'two memory traditions' (p. 1). Canny explains how the humanist scholars Richard Stanihurst and Edmund Campion imbued their readings of the recent Irish past with a negative appraisal of Gaelic Irish society (the influence of Gerald of Wales was crucial here and, indeed, it looms over much of the work considered in this book). The turn of Stanihurst and Campion towards Catholicism encouraged Sir Henry Sidney, the lord deputy, to promote a new kind of Irish history, at once pro-English and Protestant. Canny styles this genre 'apocalyptic history' and he traces its early development in the work of John Bale, John Derricke and John Hooker. Canny is unconvinced that Stanihurst's later work, *De rebus in Hibernia gestis*, written in exile on the continent, marked much of a shift in his attitude towards the Gaelic Irish. Indeed, he writes, 'the Old English authors can be seen to have failed to meet the challenge of writing a history of their own time that would counter that being published by those who had become bent upon their destruction' (p. 28).

Chapter 2 shifts attention to more successful 'counter narratives' to the Protestant accounts typified by someone like Hooker. Canny detects a new kind of history writing among the Gaelic Irish in Lughaidh Ó Cléirigh's life of Aodh Rua Ó Domhnaill, but it was above all the movement of Irish Catholics to the continent (and sometimes their return) which provided the impetus to create significant new approaches to the Irish past. Canny offers insightful readings of three key interventions: David Rothe's *Analecta sacra*, Philip O'Sullivan Beare's *Historia Catholicae Iberniae compendium* and Geoffrey Keating's *Foras feasa ar Éireann* (although Keating took his history only as far as the twelfth century). For Canny, Rothe and O'Sullivan Beare offered important but contrasting Catholic readings of the recent past. Rothe constructed the history of an Irish Catholic nation, but one loyal to the English monarch. O'Sullivan Beare composed 'a history of the dispossessed' which fostered hope of recovery of 'lost status and patrimonies' (p. 50) in association with continental allies, especially Spain. Indeed, Canny's reading of O'Sullivan Beare underlines the significance ascribed to him by a range of scholars in recent decades, notably Clare Carroll and Hiram Morgan. While Rothe, O'Sullivan Beare and Keating naturally shared an antipathy to English military activity in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Ireland, new arrivals constructed their own version of recent events 'to describe and celebrate what they had witnessed or experienced', as well as 'to reflect on the past'. (p. 61). For some, like Thomas Stafford in his *Pacata Hibernia*, this meant something like a continuation of the 'Protestant apocalyptic' narrative; for others, like James Ussher or James Ware, it meant engagement with Catholics, including Gaelic Irish scholars.

The 1641 rebellion occupies a crucial place in Irish historiography and Canny devotes a full chapter to the relationship between the episode and ‘Ireland’s contested pasts’. From a Protestant perspective, the most important contribution was, of course, John Temple’s *The Irish rebellion*, whose anti-Catholic rhetoric was rehearsed and, where necessary, repackaged into the eighteenth century and beyond. For Temple, the events of 1641 illustrated the dangers of Catholicism, and especially the clergy educated on the continent. Canny identifies two streams of Catholic response. The first included Roderic O’Flaherty, Charles O’Conor, and — above all — the Dublin physician John Curry, ‘writing on behalf of Catholics who still enjoyed some property and status in Ireland’ (p. 110). Curry’s historical writings, published between the 1740s and 1770s, certainly reflected the views of those Catholics who sought compromise with the Protestant state and who were willing to emphasise their loyalty for this purpose. In consequence, tackling Temple’s version of the events of 1641 was essential. Curry’s arguments bore some resemblance to those of Old English Catholics like David Rothe more than a century before. At the same time, the idea that Curry was ‘writing to uphold Old English interests’ (p. 109) seems a step too far. Curry’s views may have found favour in the homes of the tiny band of Catholic landowners clinging on to their properties, but he also reflected the opinions of the Catholic merchants and professionals for whom the prospect of a Jacobite restoration looked increasingly remote and, therefore, who sought other means of overturning the penal laws. Even if Curry (and O’Conor) revealed the development of post-Jacobite Catholic thinking, Canny is correct to emphasise the significance of a contrary position among ‘the dispossessed’. Indeed, one of the strengths of this book, which will come as no surprise to readers of Canny’s extensive oeuvre, is his ability to draw on multilingual sources, in English, Irish, Latin and a number of other languages. Canny is able, therefore, to examine the ‘history of the dispossessed’ as reflected in Irish language sources, like the seventeenth-century composition *Tuireamh na hÉireann* and the *Aisling* poetry of the eighteenth century.

Curry, O’Conor and others associated with them in the eighteenth century drew on Enlightenment thinking, but the Enlightenment had a complex impact on historical writing in Ireland. Anglophilia combined with hostility to the institutional Catholic Church in at least some quarters of the Enlightenment (Voltaire is an obvious example). This meant that the religious intolerance experienced by Irish Catholics did not feature prominently on the radar of Enlightenment writers. Indeed, the events of 1641 provided evidence of Catholic intolerance, a point noted by Voltaire, and accepted also by David Hume whose *History of England* essentially reshaped Temple’s version of events. Catholics like Curry and O’Conor were appalled by Hume’s reading of Irish history and they made the case for a truly ‘philosophical’ history of Ireland which would offer an account of the Irish past acceptable to Protestants and Catholics (or at least to Catholics who sought political compromise). As Canny notes, some Catholics and their allies could agree on the shape of such a history but when the task fell to the Church of Ireland clergyman, Thomas Leland, his *History of Ireland* fell very short of the mark. Like many of his contemporaries, teetering on the edge of Catholic relief in the early 1770s, Leland ultimately fell back on a version of the past which justified the continuation of penal legislation.

Canny devotes considerable attention to a very interesting reading of Leland, but he also points to what he calls ‘popular challenges to philosophical history’: the work of Hugh Reily and Matthew Carey. At the same time, ‘more popular historical narratives of Ireland’s past ... were circulating within both Protestant and Catholic communities’ (p. 199). *Aisling* poetry and the verse of Antaine Raiferaí provided good examples in Irish. Canny draws attention to the influence, to some extent, of print on Irish language work: ‘the radical edge to the Irish-language vernacular histories of Ireland of each succeeding century can be attributed in part to seventeenth-century Continental influence’ (p. 204). Indeed, he goes on to note the impact of James Mac Geoghegan’s underrated *Histoire d’Irlande*, published between 1758 and 1763, on Irish language composition and the crucial role of Daniel O’Connell’s ‘careful deployment of remembered grievances ... to fix in the mind of his Catholic audience that the narrative of Ireland’s history during the early modern centuries that had been sketched out by Irish vernacular authors of the seventeenth century was valid and immutable’ (p. 212). Interestingly, Canny situates Richard Musgrave’s coruscating history of the 1798

rebellion as a Protestant ‘vernacular alternative’. Musgrave, writing squarely in the tradition of Temple, drew a similar anti-Catholic message, one with particular force in post-union Ireland.

In the 1790s, as part of their attempt to redefine Irishness, United Irish radicals like Theobald Wolfe Tone hoped ‘to abolish the memory of all past dissensions’. *Imagining Ireland's pasts* illustrates the uphill nature of that endeavour. Indeed, as Canny notes, even the ‘philosophical historians had failed to agree on a narrative to which all educated Irish people, regardless of religious or political affiliation, could subscribe’. (p. 221). In a sense, the Young Irelanders, notably Thomas Davis and John Mitchel, revived this ambition, and Canny devotes considerable space to their project. He also shows how a resurgent Catholic Church challenged them, particularly through the work of Patrick Francis Moran, who Canny identifies as a progenitor of a new form of history writing, embodied in the wave of ecclesiastical and diocesan histories which appeared from the second half of the nineteenth century (although he is very critical of some of Moran’s would-be followers). By this point, the catastrophe of the Famine, the upheaval of the Land War and the tension over home rule all fed into a re-writing of early modern Irish history. Canny illustrates this through his incisive readings of key contributors: Margaret Anna Cusack, John Mitchel, John P. Prendergast and James Anthony Froude. As Canny shows, Prendergast’s *The Cromwellian settlement* laid bare through careful scholarship the injustice of seventeenth-century land expropriations, but although the author favoured contemporary land reform, he rejected arguments in favour of social change and it fell to others to repackage his findings for more radical contemporary purposes. Froude’s work provided a counter-weight to Prendergast’s history. Unlike Cusack, Mitchel or Prendergast, Froude’s *The English in Ireland in the eighteenth century* (which took in a longer period than the title suggests) pronounced positively on the Ulster plantation, drew on Temple on 1641, disagreed with Prendergast on the merits of the Cromwellian conquest and followed Musgrave on 1798; his ‘contribution was welcomed as a lifeline by Irish upholders of the Union’ (p. 288).

Canny illustrates clearly that the intense interest in the early modern past during the nineteenth century, and especially after the Famine, reflected present concerns: ‘History writing played its part in eroding the confidence of most Irish Unionists, because ... almost all historians of Ireland who labelled themselves as nationalists, or Catholics, or liberals tended to trace the problems of the present to the injustices of the past, particularly the early modern past’ (p. 291). Canny illustrates this point in a number of ways, including an innovative and revealing assessment of county histories. Chapter 5 concentrates on a series of eighteenth century ‘aristocratic histories’, notably Thomas Carte’s *Life ... of Ormond*, but it also engages with the county histories produced by Charles Smith in the 1740s and 1750s under the aegis of the Physico-Historical Society. Chapter 10 turns to county histories produced in the later nineteenth century and Canny shows, through a series of fascinating case studies, how these works recycled the reputation of the local landed elite and underlined ‘intercommunal harmony’ (p. 326) at a time when unionist landlords felt increasingly isolated (although Canny is careful to point out that there was no generic ‘unionist’ position: George Hill’s study of the Ulster past offered a more complex assessment than those of his southern peers).

At a more general level, the unionist search for a ‘liberal’ or ‘impartial’ or ‘balanced’ account of the early modern past was reflected in W. E. H. Lecky’s influential *History of Ireland in the eighteenth century*. Lecky had been highly critical of Froude and his work offered a reading of the early modern past designed ‘to promote national reconciliation through history’ (p. 354). Canny identifies two crucial responses. First, Catholic county historians asserted ‘the essential Catholic politico-religious message that the county community was coterminous with the Catholic community’ (p. 350). Canny describes this as emblematic of an ‘exclusivist turn’, although one with roots in the seventeenth century, and he shows that it elicited a renewed Protestant reading on the part of the indefatigable Mary Agnes Hickson. Indeed, Canny devotes considerable attention to Hickson, notably in the final chapter, which bears the arresting title: ‘The failure of the imagination concerning Ireland’s pasts’. Hickson’s archivally-rich work supported Froude’s interpretations, but this failed to win over those of a similar mind to Lecky. Canny argues that Hickson’s failure to foster a

consensus unionist position close to Froude, coupled with Lecky's withdrawal from Irish historical research, left unionist history in the hands of those with more security from which to write it, in Ulster.

Imagining Ireland's pasts draws to a close towards the end of the nineteenth century, but the final pages ('Conclusion and epilogue') offer revealing insights on further developments. Canny adds weight to the argument that the 'historiographical revolution' initiated by T. W. Moody and R. D. Edwards has been overblown. He points out that 'with the benefit of hindsight', their early books make it 'clear that neither was a promoter of the value free history that is frequently attributed to them' (p. 377). Instead the crucial shift in Irish historiography occurred in the 'next generation', notably in the work of D. B. Quinn, Hugh Kearney and Aidan Clarke who showed 'that early modern Ireland was an epoch worthy of investigation in its own right, and not just as a staging post in the unfolding of some grand narrative' (p. 379).

Imagining Ireland's pasts is an absorbing work which offers incisive readings of individual authors, from Stanihurst to Hickson, while also drawing (sometimes surprising) connections between them. The book avoids the creation of a simplistic 'canon' by drawing in such an array of sources. The result is a study which eschews simple binaries in favour of a much more complex picture. Of course, a work on this scale cannot cover everything. While the book is a major contribution to the underdeveloped genre of Irish historiography, it is not concerned with theoretical issues. Nor does it follow recent historical pathways into memory studies or folkloric sources. *Imagining Ireland's pasts* is alive to the question of audience, but does not examine in detail the social and cultural history of history writing and publishing which might investigate print runs, circulation and related concerns. To follow these or other lines of enquiry would have required another book — as would a full study of the evolution of twentieth and twenty-first century versions of the early modern Irish past. One of the recurrent themes which emerges from the pages of *Imagining Ireland's pasts* is the relationship between historical interest and present-day concerns, as writers and others grappled not only with how to understand the past, but also with what that meant for the present. The proximity and violent nature of much of what happened in early modern Ireland ensured its relevance. Canny notes, however, that historical attention shifted elsewhere in early twentieth-century Ireland, only to return to the early modern period to produce the incredible scholarship which has transformed our understanding of the subject over the last half-century and more. The author has played a central role in that development. At a time when early modern Irish history appears to be under some pressure, *Imagining Ireland's pasts* is a timely reminder of its enduring importance.

doi:10.1017/ihs.2023.27

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