

H-Net Reviews

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Alan Ford, John McCafferty, eds. *The Origins of Sectarianism in Early Modern Ireland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. ix + 249 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-83755-2.

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Coming to Terms with the Past

The decision made by the Ulster Unionist Ian Paisley, in March 2007, to share power with the Sinn Fein in the Northern Irish Assembly offers an opportunity to examine the recently published proceedings of a symposium which coincided with the historic Good Friday Agreement of 1998. This book attempts to assess the emergence of religious division in Ireland during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This was a time of flux and one of the problems to overcome is that of compartmentalization. Apart from isolated efforts, the start of Irish confessionalization and sectarianism has largely been overlooked, a point made by Alan Ford in his introduction to this volume (p. 3).

In the first article, Ute Lotz-Heumann uses comparative methodology to apply the concept of confessionalization from German historiography to Ireland in the period from 1534 to 1649. Whilst the two are at odds on the appropriate use of the terminology, Lotz-Heumann and Ford concur that parallel processes of sectarianism and confessionalization emerged with inter-denominational hostility in the 1580s (pp. 5, 53). This sets the tone for the dispassionate approach taken by the editors in contrast with romanticized histories propagated until the twentieth century, which both expressed and fuelled sectarian thought and action.

John McCafferty surveys the difficulties confronted by the newly established state church during the reigns of James I and Charles I. Despite being “well-educated [and] accomplished preachers,” Church of Ireland bishops became caught up in “ruthless recovery of revenues

and unrelenting insistence on a narrowly conceived conformity” (pp. 71-72). The juxtaposition of this article with Tadhg O’hAnnrachain’s upbeat appraisal of the activity of Catholic prelates trained in continental Europe highlights the weakness of “Briticizing” the episcopate in the early years of Irish protestantism (p. 57). This, it would seem, added to a sense of alienation amongst an indigenous Catholic population who could turn to their own clergy, recently returned from new Irish seminaries on the continent filled with the zeal of post-Tridentine teaching. Whilst wrong-footed elsewhere in Europe, therefore, the introduction of Council of Trent decrees in Ireland was facilitated by the relatively late arrival of reformation in the country.[1]

The book’s European theme recurs in Micheal Mac-Craith’s assertion that the opinions of Irish Catholics “on the nature of their obligations to James I” should be set in the wider context of the debate generated in Europe “by the controversy emanating from the oath of allegiance” (p. 188). His interdisciplinary contribution makes two valuable primary sources in the Irish language available to a much wider public and, in doing so, casts light on the contemporary appeal of different political philosophies to the Gaelic-Irish in the seventeenth century. Taken together with Brian Jackson’s account of internal strife amongst Irish Franciscans, this nuanced understanding challenges the received view of monolithic ideologies on either side. This point is taken up by Alan Ford who draws on a varied range of sources to evaluate the Irish historical renaissance and the shaping of Protestant history in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth

centuries. Whilst detailing James Ussher's role, he has little to say about the sharing of manuscripts between the Archbishop of Armagh and Micheal O'Cleirigh.[2]

David Edwards provides an impressive analysis of the arrival and settlement of English Catholics in Ireland where evidence suggests the enforcement of laws against their confession may have been less exacting than in England. Their presence, he reveals, had significant and hitherto unforeseen repercussions upon the outcome of the rebellion in 1641 (pp. 123-126). Marc Caball tests and refines Samantha Meigs's thesis on the resistance to reformation offered by the bardic elite of Gaelic society. In common with Edwards, he concludes that contemporary politics were based upon religious allegiance rather than ethnicity which, in turn, appears to be at variants with Declan Downey's review of how Irish Catholic nobles made recourse to "purity of blood and faith" overseas, especially in Habsburg territories.

Therefore, as John Morrill states in his conclusion to the volume, rather than reaching an overall consensus, this collection of essays makes a most useful contribution to what has long been an "under-researched" topic (pp. 237-239). Decades of conflict both stifled and polarized such debate. It is to be hoped that, in today's more open Irish political climate, this book will give rise to further publications on the subsequent development of sectarianism and confessionalization.

Notes

[1]. For earlier secondary sources on the subject, see Nicholas Canny, "Why the Reformation Failed in Ireland: Une Question Mal Posée," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 30 (1979): 423-450; and Karl Bottigheimer, "The Failure of the Reformation in Ireland: Une Question Bien Posée," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985): 196-207.

[2]. Cf. Joop Leerssen, "Archbishop Ussher and Gaelic Culture," *Studia Hibernica* 22-23 (1982-83): 50-58.

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