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Thomas Bartlett. *Ireland: A History.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xvi + 625 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-19720-5.

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When Thomas Bartlett mentioned to me some years back that he was about to embark on a short single volume on the history of Ireland from the beginning of recorded time to the present, I tendered the sage advice that he should think twice before doing so because he still had serious original historical work to complete, and I thought his proposed undertaking would put paid to that. Whatever about the road not taken, Bartlett has given ample demonstration in *Ireland* that his time since then has been well spent because he has not only read, but also reflected on and summarized the most recent writing on the history of Ireland from the eve of St. Patrick's supposed coming to Ireland to the present. He has proven that one can advance an original interpretation in a general history as effectively as can be done in a monograph.

I had to seek deeply for the key to his success, and while I am not certain that I have fully fathomed it I can give some pointers to why this volume is certain to reach and influence a wide audience. First, unlike earlier authors, Bartlett carefully avoids concentrating on larger-than-life personalities who supposedly dictated the pace, if not the course, of events for good or evil at particular junctures. Instead he looks quizically on all principal actors and sees some vindicating feature to each with the possible exceptions of David, Lord Trimble, and T. M. Healy. In doing so, he alludes to a wider cast of characters than others have done, and regularly takes account of the role and influence of women on the course of events.

Bartlett also situates happenings in Ireland in wider contexts (three kingdom, European, Atlantic, and even global), which enables him to explain the limited scope for maneuver that was usually open to his dramatis personae. Another feature of his method is that he develops comparisons both between events in Ireland and those happening elsewhere in the world at roughly the same time–one example is when he compares the civil war in twentieth-century Ireland with analogous struggles in Finland and in Spain–and between events that occurred within Ireland but in different centuries. Bartlett can indulge in these various devices because he has mastered a wider range of historical literature (and particularly of non-Irish historical literature) than most of his competitors.

However, lest potential readers gain the impression that this volume is totally different in approach from any previous attempt at writing a general history of Ireland over time, I hasten to point out that it is, like most such accounts, a political narrative, and my only major criticism is that it does not give sufficient weight to socioeconomic historical writing on Ireland and elsewhere. Thus, for example, on the one hand, when challenging the frequently expressed contemporary view that nineteenth-century Ireland was vastly different from nineteenth-century Britain, Bartlett (in my view) does not adequately acknowledge that societal differences were wide and widening because Ireland was being rapidly deindustrialized at the very time that Britain was becoming the most industrialized country in the world, and the most urbanized outside of Asia. On the other hand, some of his contextualization alone sustains the arguments he chooses to promote. One example is his treatment of the government led by W. T. Cosgrave, which has been as much derided by many recent historians as it was by contemporary republican opponents for having abandoned the ideals of 1916. Instead of alluding to its shortcomings, which were many, Bartlett credits this government with achieving functioning statehood for Ireland in the face of terrible odds: internal and external threats of war which were major by any standards; the requirement that it, like any new state hoping to survive in the international arena, conform with normal diplomatic protocols; and a worsening, and eventually a calamitous, international economic climate.

While Bartlett may succeed better as a narrator than most authors of general histories, because he is less judg-

mental than they, this does not explain his further success in being strongly interpretative. His strength here is that he allows himself the license of assigning space relative to the importance that he accords to the episodes he treats; and there is no episode that receives a more generous assignment of space than the period to which he has devoted his life to studying in detail: the mid-eighteenth century to the 1830s. Even within this timeframe, the author sees no decade more important than the 1790s from which he looks forward and backward to other centuries. In other words, Bartlett succeeds in being interpretative because his interpretation hinges on what he knows best.

The features he finds most striking in the tumultuous decade of the 1790s are the consolidation of the separatist impulse leading to sectarian mayhem and bloody civil war; the clearer articulation than previously of both Irish and British Unionism; the emergence of militant loyalism; and, over and above these, the general commitment of the Irish Catholic community to the constitutional path. As Bartlett looks backward, he traces the origins of these various threads, and as he looks forward from the 1790s he shows how each came to be woven into the texture of Irish political life. In doing so, he alludes to developments in Ulster more frequently than most previous authors have done, and while he does point to the pushiness of Daniel O'Connell and the sectarian dimension to many of his actions, and to the real challenge presented to the Protestant interest by the land war, he always avoids being teleological and allows for the possibility of different political outcomes for Ireland, at least until 1918. He also avoids being polemical by balancing the separatist impulse against the militancy of Unionism and the ready willingness of the latter to flout constitutional conventions, particularly after 1914. And as he deals with the sequence of conflicts that beset the twentieth century, Barlett can almost be heard to sigh with relief that the ultimate, and potentially most devastating, conflict–a fully fledged civil war between Catholics and Protestants in Ulster–was somehow avoided.

This summation will make it clear that this is a book that challenges both nationalist and the so-called revisionist interpretations of Ireland's past. Those favoring strong nationalist accounts will be displeased by his repeated references to the sectarian dimension to most separatist movements, while those branded as revisionists will take issue with his insistence on what he regards as Unionist disregard for constitutional niceties. But the strength of this book is that the author is not striving to please any party; rather he is struggling to give a judicious appraisal of what happened over time and to present this in lucid prose with frequent witty interjections. In this, he succeeds magnificently, and I have every confidence that this volume will attract the wide and international readership it deserves within the academy and with the educated public.

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