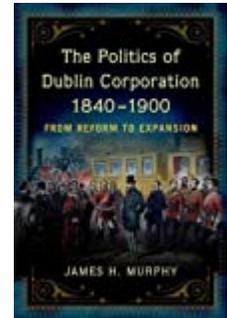**James H. Murphy.** *The Politics of Dublin Corporation, 1840-1900: From Reform to Expansion.* Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2020. 240 pp. $70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84682-853-9.

Reviewed by Richard Butler (University of Leicester)

This book offers a political history of Dublin Corporation between the Municipal Corporations (Ireland) Act of 1840 and the expansion of the city's electorate and its boundaries at the end of the century. In thirteen short chapters, James H. Murphy gives a narrative account of the key personalities involved and the various topics that occupied debates, ranging from grandstanding over loyal addresses to Queen Victoria to the glacial speed at which major social problems, such as sanitation, were tackled by a largely uninterested elite. Many readers will be familiar with the author's two major studies of nineteenth-century Irish nationalism in the context of "the institutions of constitutional affinity"—*Abject Loyalty: Nationalism and Monarchy in Ireland during the Reign of Queen Victoria* (2001) and *Ireland's Czar: Gladstonian Government and the Lord Lieutenants of the Red Earl Spencer, 1868-86* (2014)—and as he explains in the introduction, this volume was initially planned as the final volume of that trilogy. Murphy notes that his working hypothesis was that Dublin Corporation, "the most important and

prestigious deliberative body in Ireland," could be understood as Ireland's "little civic parliament" (a phrase associated with the "Repeal" debates), in the absence of a national parliament after the Act of Union. Yet, as he discovered, the corporation's men were too preoccupied with internal divisions and old sectarian tribalism and too removed from many of the totemic rural crises of the century (the Great Famine, the Land War) to make much of a name for themselves. The corporation, Murphy concludes, "was thus to contribute little to the functioning and successful parliamentary culture that developed in the twentieth century in post-independence Ireland" (p. 11).

Murphy's analysis does not deviate substantially from the three best-known studies of Dublin's modern history, Mary Daly's *Dublin, the Deposed Capital: A Social and Economic History, 1860-1914* (1984), Jacqueline Hill's *From Patriots to Unionists: Dublin Civic Politics and Irish Protestant Patriotism, 1660-1840* (1997), and David Dickson's *Dublin: The Making of a Capital City* (2014).[1] Where the book stands out, however, is in how

Murphy illuminates the day-to-day intrigue, rancor, and bellicosity of the corporation's debates. Limited, as he explains, by the "fairly minimal" archival records, his narrative is based on a painstaking reading of the full reports of each debate in the *Freeman's Journal* ("the Hansard of the Corporation") over sixty long years—which he estimates at nearly thirty million words (pp. 13-14). Murphy thus does a huge service to historical scholarship in summarizing such a vast body of material and arranging it into a coherent—and broadly chronological—narrative. The book has something of an encyclopedic quality to it, with Murphy's erudite commentary akin to what one might expect to find in an annotated collection of primary sources.

Many of the thirteen chapters are brief—some little more than five pages. Murphy begins with the reform of the old corporation that led to its takeover by Liberal/O'Connellite representatives in an election in 1841. We learn that one of the last acts of the old Tory-dominated corporation was to paint the statue of William III in the center of Dublin and that there were rumors (perhaps recognizable in the politics of our own time) that the *ancien régime* mayor refused to accept the result of the election and go peacefully. Murphy's mischievous sense of humor carries us through the various unsuccessful attempts to stymie reform of the corporation and of the salaried officials who feared losing their patronage as the Protestant ascendency was swept away. Thus, Murphy notes, there was a petition "on behalf of the Dublin sword bearer who was reported to have twenty children" (p. 19). Chapters 2 and 3 then focus on Daniel O'Connell's time as Lord Mayor and the crescendo and diminuendo of his Repeal campaign. Beyond discussing the constitutional question, Murphy introduces us to the myriad complexities of local taxation and the financial problems faced by the corporation, heroically summarizing for the reader in a single paragraph nearly twenty hours of speeches by future mayor John Reynolds in a marathon thirteen-day debate. Reynolds's turbulent ascendency in the late 1840s is the subject of chapter 4, though Murphy rightly turns much of his attention to the "ambivalence" of the corporation toward the horrors of the Great Famine, arguing that "the Corporation did not rise to the occasion." "Thus," he adds, "one of the reasons why [it] failed as national forum was because its interests—urban, professional, mercantile—were out of alignment with rural, agricultural Ireland" (p. 50).

Murphy draws our attention in chapter 5 to the "now forgotten" reform of the corporation in 1849-50, which "changed [its] boundaries and increased [its] powers … by merging many of the hitherto independent boards into it" (pp. 71, 73). These reforms also brought some tranquility to the corporation, with Murphy suggesting that the thirty years between the famine and the Land War were a period when "nationalist politics [was] more muted" (p. 75). Much of chapters 6 through 10 then focus on more classic urban history questions of markets, law and order, water and sanitation networks, gas, electricity, boundaries, and taxation—with occasional if very brief comparisons with the state of other Irish and British cities. Yet with such short chapters and an analysis weighted toward political intrigue inside the corporation's debating chamber, readers wanting to learn more about Smithfield market, the Vartry water scheme, the failed Fenian uprising, or perhaps the middle-class townships outside the corporation boundary will need to consult other more specialist histories. [2] One of the strengths of this book is the way Murphy demonstrates how, when, and in what contexts these matters were considered—or overlooked—by the corporation's elected officials.

Chapter 11, the longest in the book, considers the "Parnellite takeover" of the corporation in the 1880s. Murphy argues that "the Corporation, as a political entity, was not greatly affected by what was happening nationally except in rather subtle ways," despite the high drama of a decade marked by Charles Stewart Parnell's imprisonment, the Phoenix Park murders, and so on (p. 147). Echoing

Daly, Dickson, and others, he shows how the composition of the corporation broadened in this era to include more shopkeepers and publicans but also how a focus on constitutional questions meant that many social problems remained unaddressed. In the final two chapters, Murphy portrays the corporation as starved of funds by the middle-class flight to the townships, but boundary reform in 1900 brought some of these areas into the city's tax base (though the "redoubts of Unionist power" [p. 186]—Pembroke and Rathmines—remained independent until the 1920s). At the same time, the third and final political reform of the nineteenth-century corporation expanded the electorate to include some women and some working-class voters—leading to expressions of "bemusement at the pace of change" from more conservative voices (p. 182). Overall, Murphy's verdict is critical: Dublin in 1900 had "the same old problems as it had been noted for in the nineteenth century": notoriously poor housing and high rates of working-class poverty and disease. "No forward-looking civic vision emerged," he concludes, and "the Corporation certainly never lived up to the much-vaunted aspiration of some that it would be proven to be Ireland's civic parliament and thus a harbinger for Irish self-rule" (pp. 188-89).

This book is likely to be an often-cited reference work for many years to come. Though its brevity and limited engagement with secondary literature beyond Britain and Ireland means that it is unlikely to satisfy a more generalist urban or social historian, it provides a valuable framework for both disciplines in terms of the workings of the corporation, its key personalities, and the ways social issues percolated into political debate. While Murphy acknowledges that Dublin's many underlying social problems meant that it was "just as much a British city as it was a specifically Irish one," a more universal statement is also true: Dublin's elite inherited issues that would have been familiar in any nineteenth-century city, which, owing to sectarian, constitutional, and class politics,

they failed to address in predictable and recognizable ways (p. 12). Through his reading of more than sixty years of often turgid and rancorous political debate, Murphy brings color and personality to the urban politics of a major European city.

Notes

[1]. Murphy also points to Stefanie Jones, "Dublin Reformed: The Transformation of the Municipal Governance of a Victorian City, 1840-1860" (PhD thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 2001), and many other published works by Virginia Crossman, Jacinta Prunty, Patrick Maume, and others.

[2]. Some key works include, for example, Shin-Ichi Takagami, "The Fenian Rising in Dublin, March 1867," *Irish Historical Studies* 29, no. 115 (1995): 340-62; Jacinta Prunty, *Dublin Slums, 1800-1925: A Study in Urban Geography* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998); Séamas Ó Maitiú, *Dublin's Suburban Towns, 1834-1930: Governing Clontarf, Drumcondra, Dalkey, Killiney, Kilmainham, Pembroke, Kingstown, Blackrock, Rathmines and Rathgar* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003); Michael Corcoran, *Our Good Health: A History of Dublin's Water and Drainage* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005); and Juliana Adelman, *Civilised by Beasts: Animals and Urban Change in Nineteenth-Century Dublin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

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Citation: Richard Butler. Review of Murphy, James H. *The Politics of Dublin Corporation, 1840-1900: From Reform to Expansion.* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2021.

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