

The Cambridge History of Ireland

Facing up to ugly truths and reflecting today's Ireland—Thomas Bartlett

When I began the serious study of Irish history, in the 1960s, relatively few scholarly monographs were available—perhaps no more than twenty—that met the key requirements for evidence-based research and scholarly rigour. Total publications—books and journal articles—would scarcely have reached 300 a year. Progress was slow: by the 1970s about 500 items a year were being published, but from then on there was an exponential rate of increase. By 2000 about 2,500 items were being published annually, and the current figure is around 3,000.

In the past four decades the number of publishers (and journals) that specialise in Irish history has grown dramatically. In Ireland, Four Courts Press alone publishes about 50 works on Irish history each year, and Cork University Press, UCD Press, the Royal Irish Academy, Irish Academic Press, Lilliput Press and the Ulster Historical Foundation also publish very significant works on Irish history on an annual basis. In Britain, the university presses at Oxford, Cambridge, Manchester and Liverpool, and in the United States, those at Princeton, Notre Dame and Wisconsin-Madison publish regularly on Irish topics.

Quite why books and articles on Irish history continue to be published in such large numbers (and here there is a sharp contrast with the situation in Scotland, where historians of that country struggle to find a publisher) must remain a discussion for another day. (The short answer, that Irish history books sell but Scottish history books don't, is true enough, yet raises other important questions in turn.) The fact remains that publications (and Ph.D theses) on Irish history have proliferated over the past 40 years. In addition, many articles of Irish interest are frequently published in the leading international

journals. As a result, we are seriously in danger of not being able to see the wood for the trees. This makes the need for a new synthesis all the more pressing, and this is what *The Cambridge History of Ireland* aims to provide.

There is a further reason why a new four-volume work on Irish history is justified. And here I look back at the last multivolume work on Irish history, *A New History of Ireland*, which Oxford University Press published in nine volumes between 1976 and 2005. The brainchild of T.W. Moody of Trinity College Dublin, this was an amazing enterprise for its time—imaginative,

creative and with many wonderful chapters that set new standards of scholarship. It remains a very valuable addition to the writing of Irish history.

It was also a work of its time, however, as shown by its almost entirely male cast of contributors (4 of the projected early team of some 50 scholars were women); its emphasis on politics, usually high politics; its rather dull writing (the rhetorical flourishes of earlier writers on the Irish past were firmly discouraged—no exclamation marks!); and its general lack of interest in social or economic matters.

Perhaps more importantly, the



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entire project was conceived in the 1960s, when most academic historians believed that the furies that had beset the history of Ireland were comfortably in the past and that a bright, trouble-free (and Troubles-free) history beckoned. Irish history could now finally be told because it had been removed from Irish politics. Here is Moody in 1968, announcing his plans for the *New History*: ‘It could hardly be said that Ireland is in the van of ecumenism, but in a surprisingly short time a great deal of theological ice has been thawed out, and laity and clergy have been talking to each other in public as well as in private in a way that would have seemed impossible a year or so ago’, all of which, he noted, ‘creates an atmosphere favourable to the pursuit of history.’

It is easy to scoff, but scarcely anyone foresaw what was slouching down the track in 1968. And other historians were equally sanguine about the future: the popular historian A.J.P. Taylor, the first ‘telly don’, had declared that the ‘Irish question’ was over—solved by David Lloyd George, no less. The result was that when the Troubles broke, the entire concept that underlay the *New History*, at least in Moody’s vision of it, was revealed as flawed. This did not derail the project, of course, but there was a cautious tone to the writing throughout, an understandable desire not to add fuel to the mayhem in the North and thus a shying away from the uglier aspects of Irish history—massacres, evictions, sectarianism and colonisation, for example—that rendered the finished product uneven and ultimately unsatisfactory.

The historians writing in *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, by contrast, have for the most part come of age in the era of the Troubles and are thus all too mindful of the furies that lie

below and sometimes above the surface of Irish life, and their chapters to an extent will reflect this. Not that there is a focus on atrocity, or that the rosy optimism that underpinned the *New History* will be replaced in *The Cambridge History of Ireland* by a gloomy pessimism. Rather that, where appropriate, the role of violence in the making of Ireland will be considered, and that the definition of atrocity might be extended to cover such questions as the treatment of orphans, unmarried mothers and the poor and destitute.

And therein lies the final justification for the publication of a four-volume *Cambridge History of Ireland*: in the years since the publication of the *New History* ‘new’ questions have been addressed by a remarkably talented cohort of historians—on gender, sex, print, environment, culture, sport, leisure and memory, among other topics—that were scarcely touched on in the earlier volumes. These were all embraced by the editorial team of Profs Jane Ohlmeyer, James Kelly and Brendan Smith—and by the more than 100 contributors from 39 universities and research centres who researched and wrote for each volume.

In addition, these ‘new’ questions,

along with ‘old’ questions about the Vikings, politics, the land, insurgency, the economy, social life and religion (indeed, the entire early modern period from 1500 to 1850) have benefited in their treatment from the enormous amount of new material that has become available in the past four decades. The study of medieval Irish society, for instance, is being radically transformed as a result of the huge increase in archaeological activity that accompanied the economic growth between the early 1990s and 2007. A short list of these new sources might include the vastly improved calendars of state papers for the Tudor period, witness statements from the ‘Irish Revolution’ (and from the 1641 Rising), Corpus na Gaeilge, Early English Books Online and the digitised records of the medieval Irish chancery, among many, many more.

The chapters in *The Cambridge History of Ireland* reveal the influence of these new online materials—and here every Irish historian has to raise a glass to the archivists who were instrumental in making this material available. As with the Irish historians of old, this history is dedicated: *Dochum glóire Dé agus onóra na hÉireann.* ■



The editorial group pictured with the President at the launch