



The Oxford History of Ireland

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Few countries can boast as compelling a history as Ireland. This volume captures all the varied legacies of the Emerald Isle, from the earliest prehistoric communities and the first Christian settlements, through centuries of turbulent change and creativity, right up to the present day. Written by a team of scholars--all of whom are native to Ireland--this book offers the most authoritative account of Irish history yet published for the general reader.

Emphasizing the paradoxes and ambiguities of Irish history, this book presents a more realistic picture than other histories. It explores, for example, the reasons behind the intense regional variations in agriculture, prosperity, and political affiliation in so small a land, and shows why Victorian norms prevail in certain areas of twentieth-century life. It also examines more familiar themes--such as the recurrent religious strife and the shaping of new political entities--and offers a special section on the interaction between Irish history and its rich literary tradition. Wide-ranging and highly readable, this vivid view of Ireland will entertain and inform anyone interested in this fascinating and colorful island nation.

The Oxford History of Ireland Details

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Margaret Harris says

This book is a revisionist history of Ireland, published in 1989 as a set of essays by six academic professors. I found it condescending throughout. I read it to the end, hoping to find at least one of the contributors who didn't simplistically describe history as "clashes of classes." But, alas, from the year 77 to the date this "history" ended in about 1987, the people of Ireland are portrayed as either tribal class, lordship class, vassal class, magnate class, rural class, noble class, peasant class, ascendancy class, tenant class, landholding class, rebels, militants, degenerates, priests, bards, high society, low society, and of course the ultimate Marxian assignments: bourgeoisie and proletariat. Herr Marx himself is cited for his "observations" about the hierarchy of status among populations, which does at least suggest a source for these professors' fixation upon categorizing everyone according to some social "status."

Besides general group classifications, each historical individual cited—from mythology through royal, political, literary, religious, military, or rebellious fields—is placed into one "class" or another, but if any is said to have moved from a birth class to another class during a lifetime, he or she is besmirched for some sort of betrayal. Every phase of the 2000-year-old history of Ireland is demeaned as it is summarized by these authors, and the conclusion on the final page seems to be that the Irish are hopelessly inept and unlikely to ever be able to govern themselves should they ultimately succeed in their recurring attempts to extricate themselves from rule by foreign invaders over the centuries.

How ironic that since 1989, the Irish have proved these writers to be wildly mistaken. I will have to find another book to teach me the history of the past 27 years, so that I will understand how a tourist to Ireland today finds such a clean, orderly, and exquisitely beautiful land filled with kind, generous, industrious, prosperous, gracious, and welcoming native citizens. How, indeed, did such a degenerate culture produce such vast numbers of musicians, writers, craftsmen, corporate executives, politicians, professional golfers, small business operators, large business managers, agricultural producers, and every other skilled occupation one might name, both at home and throughout the world?

Whatever accuracy is related about Irish history in this book is overridden by a tone of unnecessary snobbery that spoils the telling.

Uptownbookwormnyc says

The second star is for the pictures.

May Ling says

It's great if you want an overview. A little dry for what it is.

I gave it three stars because if you want a quick overview it will do the trick. Otherwise, I think you might want a longer form of the stories of Ireland. This really does cover from Vikings to the British, to Henry VIII

and to the present day. I can't complain. I get that much out of it.

But if you actually go to Ireland, well, that is a place that knows how to make a short story long. As such, it was kind of striking how this made a long story short. Depends what you want.

James Violand says

This book accomplishes what had been assumed to be impossible: making the colorful history of the Irish people irrelevant and boring. Perhaps it represents the relatively new perspective of history: facts unhindered by persons or events. It's like a poor travelogue: "Interstate 9 has been constructed based upon the typical Roman technique but modified by newer materials such as macadam. Travel has become more comfortable and hence enjoyable." What about the Rockies? The vast grasslands of Montana? Prairie dogs? Bison? Lewis & Clark? Seattle? The Columbia River?

You get the point.

It seems to me that the new historian writes for himself. His intent is not to educate but to impress the reader with his depth of knowledge, synthesizing data as proofs for an innovative view.

Avoid this book.

Caitlin says

A thorough and enlightening explanation of the major episodes in Irish history. I think this book would probably be best if combined with other reading material, say, in a college course. Not having a knowledgeable source available to ask my questions of, I had to resort to googling things I was unfamiliar with. A glossary would have been useful. Overall, comprehensive and worth reading if you want to invest the time and energy into learning about Irish history.

Caoileann says

Very illuminating. The chapter written by editor Mr Foster is far and away the most evocative and compelling and clear

Kelly says

senior thesis

Al says

Too many facts and figures (and opinion) without much depth.

Mark Fallon says

A dry, scholarly text that corrects many of the myths of Irish history, while destroying any romance as well. The final chapter by D. Kiberd is superfluous. The book requires a knowledge of the histories of both Ireland and England, as many of the major acts are only given a line or a paragraph.

Bruce says

The collaborative effort of six scholars, this history covers Ireland's history from the prehistoric period to 1989, when the book was published. It has many illustrations but is far more than simply a "picture book." The differences in style among the authors is a bit disconcerting, and for the years before 1500 the reader can become bewildered by the continually shifting political loyalties among huge number of minor Gaelic leaders, but beginning with the opening of the sixteen century, patterns begin to emerge that are easier to follow. The primary constant theme determining social and political change is the continual Irish (using the term to include not only the Gaelic population but also the "Old English" who had been both resident and dominant in Ireland for some time) resistance to English government authority, involvement that waxed and waned but was always seen as exploitative and coercive.

I found the final chapter the most interesting, although it would have made little sense without those that came before. It contained a discussion of the course of Irish literature, comparing and contrasting Gaelic-Irish writings with English-Irish works and exploring the mutual interactions and evolution of both. There was also a discussion of the extent to which authors tailored their writings to their intended audiences, audiences that changed progressively over time; this tailoring often involved the creation and perpetuation of types and stereotypes that often persist to the present day. Authors with whom I have had little familiarity have moved onto my to-read list.

Aya says

somewhere in the first 50 pages Foster refers to mercenaries as 'ubiquitous'...but actually we don't see many of them. Cromwell is also dismissed rather quickly.

At the same time, points of this history are very detailed--the early period especially so-- but it still manages to get at some of the greater arcs of Irish history

Sean Lynch says

A long, sweeping ride through the history of Ireland starting in the prehistoric era and passing the barbarian tribes and kingships of the Middle Ages, the Norman Invasion, the Ascendancy, and finally ending up in modern-day Ireland, the *Oxford History of Ireland* covers a lot of ground. Unfortunately, much of the writing is snoozy and the big, important arcs of history are camouflaged in a landscape rife with weeds, an overwhelming surplus of facts of minor importance to the reader not writing a research paper. The beautiful

contours of the Emerald Isle are hard to see from the dense thicket of vegetation you're confronted with. If you're looking for Irish history in broad strokes, as I was, this is probably not the best place to start. I felt like I was looking at a Monet under a magnifying glass when all I wanted was to back up a few feet and take in the whole thing.

This sounds like a mostly negative review, so why did I give this work 5 stars? Because the last chapter is dazzling. As a collaboration of six scholars, the book doesn't soar until Declan Kiberd takes the helm in the final chapter, "Irish Literature and Irish History." Unlike the dry, academic writing of the preceding chapters--not befitting the land of Yeats and Joyce--Kiberd's essay stands apart as he contextualizes the works of the great Irish writers, exploring the unique mixture of nationalism, ancient lore, pride, and colonial oppression that spawned the Irish Renaissance. And he ends with a sad assessment of the current state of art in Ireland and the failure of modern writers to do justice to the mythical Cathleen ni Houlihan. He laments a once fierce literary tradition that is now shy of politics and has failed to rise to the occasion during the "hunger strikes of the 1980s, or the torture of innocent suspects in Irish and British gaols, or divorce and abortion referenda of the mid-80s." Kiberd partially blames the state's coziness with artists (tax-exemptions, guaranteed minimum income) for writing that eschews examining social conditions in favor of addressing social problems in the context of the pathology of man, arguing that artists and intellectuals "don't wish to bite the political hand that feeds--or might feed--them." He exalts the meaningful role that writers like O'Casey and Synge, whose plays caused riots, had in Irish culture and soberly observes, "Not long ago, artists and intellectuals were oppressed by the Irish people; but now, there is a distinct possibility that the Irish people are oppressed--in the sense of misrepresented or ignored--by the intellectuals."

I want to go on quoting the whole last few pages, but instead I'll just highly recommend you go out and buy the book, if only for the last chapter.

John says

An excellent book, the standout contribution being Declan Kiberd's chapter on Irish literature.
