

James S. Donnelly (ed.): *Encyclopedia of Irish History*

There has always been a demand for encyclopedias, companions, dictionaries and other compilations regarding Irish history and culture. One only has to glance at reference shelves in libraries to see how many editions there are. There is little to suggest that this trend will stop, moreover. James S. Donnelly, Jr., alludes to the term "Celtsomania" to indicate the growing interest in Ireland and the Irish. Despite their evident appeal, however, one may question whether future projects can sustain a satisfactory level of scholarship amid the pressures to differentiate themselves from their competitors.

If the sizeable two-volume *Encyclopedia of Irish History and Culture* is anything to go by, then we can rest assured. James S. Donnelly, Jr., together with his associate editors Karl S. Bottigheimer, Mary E. Daly, James E. Doan, and David W. Miller, not forgetting the 205 contributors, have produced a most informative and useful piece of work. There are more than 400 articles focusing on predominantly thematic issues and almost 100 biographical items. These are organised according to the main chronological periods in Irish history: early Irish, medieval, early modern, modern and contemporary. Such categories are furnished with thorough analyses of political, social, cultural, economic, religious and military aspects. Central themes include politics in northern and southern Ireland, nationalism, migration, population and the Irish diaspora, education, the family (with particular emphasis on marriage patterns), women, prehistoric and Celtic Ireland, land settlement and distribution, agriculture, religion and church history, wars and warfare. Nor is the dimension of Irish culture ignored: art, architecture, folklore, language, literature, drama, music and sport are all ably accounted for. Indeed, the entries under culture are equal in length to the historical items. A more striking feature is the rather novel idea of including primary documents in the second volume. There is a total of 148 extracts, which comprise about a quarter of the *Encyclopedia*. Every period is well represented, starting with St. Patrick's *Confessio*, ca. 450 AD, and finishing with excerpts from the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The documents and articles are skilfully interlinked by the provision of a key at the end of each entry. Furthermore, the documentary selection serves the editors' overall objectives in offering a blend of historical and cultural themes.

The vast chronological scope of the *Encyclopedia* has undoubtedly brought its own challenges. For James S. Donnelly, Jr. and his colleagues the fundamental question was to determine what to include or exclude. This is most acute in the selection of the biographical entries. That said, the thematic approach has helped the structure and content of the two volumes, not least because it allows the contributors scope to expand on their respective fields of expertise. This approach helps to distinguish the *Encyclopedia* from *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* [1] and *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* [2], which set the standard for reference books in this genre. Whereas these editions tend to focus on concise definitions, the *Encyclopedia* facilitates broader issues while maintaining scholarly principles in the process.

Clearly the recently completed *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [3] and, more specifically, the imminent multi-volume *Dictionary of Irish Biography* [4],

imposed difficult choices on the editors. They admit that a biographical dictionary was not their intention, and yet the influence of historical and literary individuals could not be ignored. To maintain continuity, the *DNB* biographical authors of, for example, Archbishop James Ussher, Lord Deputy Thomas Wentworth, Giovanni Battista Rinuccini, and Henry Grattan, are necessarily retained. Nevertheless, leading figures are deliberately limited in the *Encyclopedia* to the extent that they are placed within the contexts of major events in Irish history. Even on the basis of these guidelines, where does one begin and end? There are entries for Ussher and Bishop William Bedell of Kilmore but not for the highly influential John Bramhall, bishop of Derry and later successor to Ussher. Similarly, the Catholic theologian, historian and archbishop of Armagh, Peter Lombard, receives special attention, but the distinguished Franciscan scholar and prominent figure of the Irish college movement, Luke Wadding, is overlooked. From a literary perspective too, there are entries for James Joyce and Oscar Wilde but nothing for George Bernard Shaw or Sean O'Faolain. These are minor details, particularly since such notable individuals are dealt with in other reference works, but they nonetheless highlight the problems that the editors encountered.

In truth, the positives in the *Encyclopedia* far outweigh the negatives to make this contribution a worthwhile exercise. Its virtues include an excellent index. Whereas an informed reader may quibble about the exclusion of certain personalities, there is a good chance that they will feature in the index (although the omission of Richard de Clare, or Strongbow, is indeed conspicuous). The fine selection of illustrations (maps, diagrams, engravings, cartoons, paintings and photographs) also serve to inform the reader and enliven the publication. Maps showing the evolution of parliamentary constituencies in addition to the impact of emigration and population change for each Irish county are to be commended. Likewise, engaging illustrations from John Derricke's *The Image of Irelande* (1581), contrasted with the sombre photographs of Bloody Sunday and subsequent burning of the British Embassy at Dublin in 1972, demonstrate the wide variety of illustrations. The superb analyses on twentieth-century Ireland, especially Northern Ireland, and the role of women deserve special mention. Overall the main historical periods are equally treated with plenty of substance. The accessibility of historical documents is perhaps the most valuable aspect. Providing a wide range of primary material incorporating the core chronological periods should induce the general reader to extend his/her study of Ireland. It will also be a useful tool for students wishing to explore their preferred field of interest.

The chief concern regards navigation. Presenting the articles in a thematic format means that entries such as 'plantations' are disguised under the heading of 'land settlements'. Likewise, someone researching the Reformation will encounter 'Protestant Reformation in the Early Sixteenth Century', while the impact on the Catholic church appears under 'Religion: 1500 to 1690'. This is where the concise definitions of the *Oxford Companion* series are more user-friendly. That said, the two volumes are so well indexed that initial difficulties can be overcome. As with all reference works, moreover, the *Encyclopedia* is quickly becoming dated in some respects. Articles such as 'Gerry Adams' and the 'GAA "Ban"' are understandably in need of revision.

There is no doubt that the *Encyclopedia* will be of enormous benefit for the educated lay public which the editors admit is their intended audience. It provides an enlightened and fresh approach to understanding the evolution of Irish history and culture. But it will also be useful for the student who will gain from the primary documents that accompany the articles.

Notes:

[1] S. J. Connolly (ed.): *The Oxford companion to Irish history*, Oxford 2002.

[2] Robert Welch (ed.): *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, Oxford 1996.

[3] H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (eds.): *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford 2004.

[4] James McGuire and James Quinn (eds.): *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, forthcoming 2009.

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