

Yet Another History of Ireland

Since the early Irish monks began laboriously to compile the Annals of Ireland the writing of the "History of Ireland" has become something of a national sport for academics, historians, retired schoolteachers, journalists with the odd eccentric thrown in for good measure. So much so that Thomas Bartlett's recently published Ireland A History has a tired sense of déjà vu about it sparking the inevitable question: "Do we really need yet another history of Ireland?"

Normally such books are worth only a cursory glance before being added to the growing pile of such histories, but Bartlett's impeccable track record and – a moot question of local pride – his erstwhile connection with Galway as a valued member of NUIG's excellent History Department earn it much more than that. The dedication to "my grandson Roc Bartlett Mc Donnell (b.2008) in the hope that his Ireland will be both peaceful and prosperous" – a wish we all aspire to – and the opening line of text – "May I begin in the year AD 431?" – suggest that a closer examination may be indeed worthwhile.

An this reader, for one, was definitely not disappointed with the possible caveat that the book should carry with it a health warning in that it is so informative, so engrossing, so refreshing, so probing and so accessible to the normal punter that it may change all personal preconceptions of what it means to be Irish. Another problem the book presents is that it needs more than one, even two readings to fully appreciate the depth of knowledge it contains and to digest properly the full import of the questions it raises.

Bartlett's technique is fascinating. He approaches his subject in a laconic style mixed with a glint of ironic humour. Behind the apparent offhand manner there emerges a pragmatic and informed narrative, which entertains as much as it informs.

He tells us, for example, that the country was inhabited 10,000 years ago but that we know virtually nothing about the first 8,000. All that can be established is that by the first century, The Gaels, their language, laws and culture were supreme. As

soon as he gets that out of the way, he drags us back to 431 AD when, obviously as far as he is concerned, the real history of Ireland began, and he gives us a clear picture of Patrick and the island he is purported to have converted.

As he explores Early Christian Ireland it becomes evident that, while exploding the myths that permeate our sense of Irish history, he doesn't dismiss them but explains how they came to be. Describing the positive elements of the Viking period, he explains that it was the Christian chroniclers who defined their reputation and after all, "When one's throat is being cut, it is difficult, even for a Christian priest, to fully appreciate the entrepreneurial skills and building talents of the Viking attackers".

In fact, the Vikings never really set out to conquer Ireland but were content to be yet another power group within a divided Irish polity, allying with one dynasty and then another.

And so the narration moves on up through the centuries, probing, informing, entertaining and questioning. Perhaps the real strength of this extraordinary book is that it gives us a real sense of what we are, debunking the old myths that had been hammered into those of us whose knowledge of Irish history is defined by a "Them And Us" mentality than by the reality of what actually happened as Irish Society evolved from 431 AD.

Thomas Bartlett's "Ireland A History" is a hugely sobering and stimulating read and a great deal more than yet just another history of Ireland. For anyone genuinely interested in the make-up and ethos of this our country and in what we are, it is not to be missed.