

Irish Review

Irish Famines before and after the Great Famine. Edited by Christine Kinealy and Gerard Moran. Hamden, Conn: Quinnipiac University Press and Cork University Press, 2020. Pp. 392. £25.00

Famine Pots. The Choctaw-Irish Gift Exchange, 1847-Present. Edited by LeAnne Howe and Padraig Kirwan. Hamden, Conn: Quinnipiac University Press and Cork University Press, 2020. Pp. 260. £24.00

The great revival of Irish history in recent decades is one of the more positive features of the ‘four nations’ history of the period. Much is owed to entrepreneurial publishers. There was a similar pattern in Scotland, with publisher John Donald being particularly prominent from the 1970s to 2010s, but, of late, there has not been the energy that might be expected given the strength of Scottish National Party sentiment, or maybe that operates as a damper to the necessary spirit of free enquiry. Similarly, Welsh history is not as strong as might be expected. Again politics might play a role, in this case the somewhat suffocating character of Labour dominance. These themes will doubtless be an issue in later historiography.

Alternatively, or in addition, it could be argued that the very focus of much modern historiography on identity politics, in the shape of gender, sexuality, and race, has left relatively little space for the national/protonationalist approach. Certainly, there is a widespread failure to probe the dimensions of Englishness and even more English regionalism.

In turn, one of the weaknesses of Irish historiography is that it is overly focused on the Great Famine and the struggle for Irish independence. Those topics hope to explain the consumer appeal of some publications, and notably so for the American market; but they can become narrow and even formulaic, as well as uncritical and partisan.

The two editions under review are both negative and positive in this respect. They cleave too much to the standard topics, unsurprisingly so given the role of Ireland’s Great Hunger Institute in their genesis, but they definitely provide differing coverage and are particularly valuable for that. *Famines*, valuably, begins in the fifteenth century and continues to the twentieth, and the range of famines covered is enhanced by the large number of contributors and the different perspectives offered, the only major problem being a widespread failure to address adequately the important question of British, European and global comparisons, both chronological and thematic. The entire volume has much to commend it, but my preferences are for Brendan Scott’s wideranging account of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in which he argues that extreme weather conditions plus internecine Gaelic warfare and brutal English military tactics, led to significant levels of excess mortality, and Laura Smith’s discussion of Canada as an Irish famine frontier in the 1840s. The latter

looks to the other volume in offering another strand to Atlantic history. Indeed, that is the case with much of the coverage in the Irish Famines collection, from Robert Smart interestingly on the role of Irish colonials in the formation of the new United States, to the four contributions on Canada, and others on American-Irish philanthropy in the late nineteenth century. Bringing Canada into the picture provides a valuable parallel to the United States.

Famine Pots takes another direction, beginning with the \$172 donation of the Choctaws to the Irish Famine Relief Fund, and considering the subsequent relationship between Choctaws and Irish and the cultural processes and resonances that can be teased from it. The volume did not work so well for me because I missed a self-critical tone in it, but then the purpose is memorialisation and postcolonial cooperation, and its methods interdisciplinarity, transnational and multi-genre. The remarkable story of the money sent by the Choctaw to the Irish in 1847 is one that is often told and remembered by people in both nations. This gift was sent to the Irish from the Choctaw at the height of the Great Irish Famine, just sixteen years after the Choctaw began their march on the Trail of Tears toward the areas west of the Mississippi River.

Famine Pots honours that extraordinary gift and provides further context about and consideration of this powerful symbol of cross-cultural synergy through a collection of essays and poems that testifies to an empathy and connectivity between the two communities. As well as signalling patterns of movement and exchange, this study of the gift exchange invites reflection on processes of cultural formation within Choctaw and Irish society alike, and sheds light on long-time concerns surrounding spiritual and social identities.

That is definitely worthwhile, but many of the echoes offered and strands teased out may also be considered tendentious. At any rate, both volumes are of interest and reflect the strength of publication in this field.

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