

Brian WALKER. *Dancing to History's Tune. History, Myth and Politics in Ireland*. Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies. The Queen's University of Belfast, 1996. xi + 185 pages.

Owing to the recent renewal of disturbances in Northern Ireland and the highly precarious future of the peace talks among the various political parties in the province, the publication of Dr. Walker's book can only be called extremely good timing. Walker is a historian and a political scientist who attempts to deconstruct many of the myths associated with Ireland and Irish identity and to analyze how history is used in a very selective fashion to justify the present religious and political conflicts.

The book is a collection of seven essays, some of which have already appeared in journals or as conference papers. The aim of the book is, therefore, to provide a fairly comprehensive idea of the almost pathological insistence on blaming the past for the country's present ills. In his introduction Walker outlines his purpose in collecting these essays together in one volume. He suggests that history is no more relevant in Ireland than it is elsewhere but that Irish people, regardless of their religion, tend to burden themselves with an unnecessarily heavy historical legacy, which prevents them from viewing the current problems objectively.

Chapter one, «1641, 1689, 1690 and all that: the unionist sense of history» explains how these dates, so revered by protestants in Northern Ireland today, were «rediscovered» as historical landmarks in the 19th century although, prior to that, they had been celebrated by catholics and protestants alike. Walker warns of the danger of forgetting that Irish people were not always divided along religious lines and that not all protestants were united.

Chapter two, «The 1885 and 1886 general elections: a milestone in Irish history» underlines the historical impor-

ance of these elections in Irish political history and shows how the 1916 rising in Dublin and the civil war of the early 1920s were a continuation, rather than the beginning, of political rivalries that had already emerged in the previous century. Thus the aim of this chapter is to analyze the genesis of two political movements grounded in distinct religious formations, with a very different understanding of concepts such as «nation» and «state».

Chapter three, «Religion and politics: Irish problems and European comparisons» promises to place Ireland firmly in a larger Western European context but Walker is rather sketchy on the European comparisons he insists on taking into account when analyzing religious conflicts in Ireland. The reader may well find Walker's claim that Ireland is no different to other western European nations to be somewhat flimsy and lacking in more clear evidence.

Chapter four, «The use and abuse of history in Ireland today» together with chapter six, «Irish identity», are by far the most useful of all the essays in the book. Possibly the key sentence in chapter four (and indeed in the whole book) could be «The blame for Ireland's poor economic position in the twentieth century is not to do with history but with the failure of modern Irish political and economic policies» (p. 62). Chapter six deals with the ambiguous use of the term «Irish», especially for Ulster unionists. The chapter provides statistical evidence as to how the notion of Irishness has undergone subtle transformations both for catholics and protestants, unionists and nationalists during the course of the twentieth century. At this point in the book, Walker tends to repeat earlier arguments, which is under-

standable when one remembers that these essays were produced over a period of five years. It means, of course, that the essays can be read independently and in any order. However, it does become a little repetitive for the reader who decides to read the whole book. Walker's main thesis is clear and enlightening but does not need to be repeated (often using the same quotations) over and over again in virtually every essay.

Chapter five, «Commemorations, festivals and public holidays» examines the use to which the main historic days in Ireland such as St. Patrick's Day, Easter Sunday, July 12th and Remembrance Sunday have been put. This chapter underlines the main thesis of the book that «the significance of history is due to the way that we receive and understand it rather than it providing a clear and undisputed link with the past» (p. 109).

After a very promising introduction, Chapter seven, «Historical perspectives in and on Northern Ireland» turns out to be a twenty-three page-long list of further reading. Useful though it is, this could have been restructured or renamed «further reading». Walker's brief concluding essay «Final observations» sums up his argument once again with quotations that by this time have become familiar to the reader.

Walker's book is helpful but must be read to complement other studies in Irish history. I would not recommend it as a book for beginners with little or no knowledge of Ireland's history. However, the two chapters that make the book worthwhile are 4 and 6 in spite of the blatant absence of Irish women. It is somewhat incomprehensible that a book published in 1996 which sets out to deconstruct the historiographical process virtually ignores the role of gender in the formation of Irish identity. Walker has failed to take the opportunity to analyze how the myth of Irish womanhood has also been manipulated (see the article by Mireia Aragay in this issue). He writes about «the Irish» in an inclusive way but his all too occasional references to Irish women suggest that he does *not* include them in the construction of Irishness at all.

Finally, there is no bibliography at the end of this book, which means that the reader has to keep checking the notes to find references. Dr. Walker might have eliminated chapter 7 altogether and provided a select bibliography for further reading at the end of the book.

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