

BOOK REVIEW

Ireland's Empire: The Roman Catholic Church in the English-Speaking World, 1829–1914

Author: Colin Barr

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Colin Barr's dedication at the start of *Ireland's Empire: The Roman Catholic Church in the English-Speaking World, 1829–1914* states simply: 'For the archivists'. And reading through his bibliography that lists 104 archives in 12 countries on 5 continents – a veritable Cook's tour of the Catholic world – one can see why. American historian Barbara Tuchman once wrote that she used material from primary sources only, seeing secondary sources as but guides at the start of a project. 'I do not want to end up simply rewriting someone else's book,' she proclaimed.¹ Judging by the extensive list of secondary sources, Barr is not as puritanical as Ms

Tuchman. Yet *Ireland's Empire*, which Barr explains was inspired by a visit to Australia and grew out of 'an archival odyssey that ... lasted well over a decade' (p. viii), is certainly not someone else's book. It is a *tour de force* of transnational ecclesiastical history by an author well versed in his subject that is both enlightening and rewarding.

1 Barbara W. Tuchman, *Practising History: Selected Essays*, (London: Macmillan, 1983), 18–19.

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The text includes chapters on the United States and the British dominions of Newfoundland, India, South Africa, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, with reference throughout to other places such as Scotland, Gibraltar, Trinidad, and the Falkland Islands. England is not included, explains Barr, because '[Cardinal Paul] Cullen and his successors never challenged the powerful English church on its own terrain' (p. 20).

In his introduction Barr observes that in the period under review a transnational Irish empire emerged throughout the English-speaking world: '[B]y 1914, Irish Catholics across the English-speaking world largely worshipped in the same way, read the same books, were educated by the same religious orders, observed the same social and sexual disciplines (especially surrounding marriage), and shared the same heroes, villains, and martyrs' (p. 21). He contends that this was due to the fact that wherever the Catholic Irish settled they maintained their Irish Catholic identity, unlike Irish Protestants who blended with the dominant British culture. While some historians might question the latter contention,² Barr's concern, of course, is Irish Catholics, who, he persuasively argues, maintained their identity through an organised campaign conducted by Propaganda Fide under Cullen's influence to ensure Hiberno-Roman dominance of the Catholic Church in those various places. According to Barr, 'Ireland's empire was planned. ... It was also largely the work of one man: Paul Cullen' (p. 7).

The focus of the book, he explains, is 'the ecclesiastical politics associated with the Hiberno-Roman takeover of each national church and its immediate aftermath ... how Ireland's spiritual empire was built and not how it was then governed' (p. 21). So, for the most part the book is an examination of high politics as practised by bishops in Rome and in each of the selected countries rather than a comparative study of the Irish Catholic people across the English-speaking world. Nevertheless, in the concluding chapter Barr does provide an overview of attitudes and practices that were common to the Irish Catholic faithful living in those countries.

Australian readers will be pleased to know that the book's longest chapter is the one devoted to Australia. At 122 pages, it fully occupies a quarter of the book's text, well in excess of any of the other chapters. It begins with a survey of the historiography of nineteenth-century Australian

2 Cf. Dianne Hall, 'Defending the Faith: Orangeism and Ulster Protestant Identities in Colonial New South Wales', in *Journal of Religious History*, 38/2 (2014): 207–223.

Catholicism and the division between those who have praised and those who have disparaged the contribution of the Benedictines. Barr describes John Moloney's failed attempt to shift the debate by emphasising the power of Rome rather than Ireland in shaping Australian Catholicism and how Patrick O'Farrell's counter-interpretation overwhelmingly prevailed: 'O'Farrell accepted that the two "were blended, but it was an Irish blend"' (p. 284). According to Barr, more recent scholarship has dispensed with the 'goodies versus baddies' approach in favour of an attitude he supports that acknowledges both the hibernianism of the Irish bishops and the influence of Rome.

The chapter then describes the church's development in Australia through the nineteenth century, beginning with the early years of the colony, when 'neither the English nor the Irish bishops had much interest in Australia: at every stage it was Rome that took the initiative' (p. 289). Barr details Polding's struggle to forge a national church that was neither Irish nor English but Australian, an endeavour in which he failed. According to Barr, by 1868 the Irish had won: 'The appointments of Murray, Quinn, Murphy, Lanigan, and O'Mahony, together with James Quinn in Brisbane, introduced undiluted Hiberno-Roman Catholicism to Australia' (p. 349).

The next section of the chapter, 'Building the Irish Church', covers the period from 1867 to 1883. Its complex narrative of ecclesiastical feuding in Australia and Rome suggests Barr's declaration of Irish victory may have been premature. The appointment of the wily English Benedictine Roger Vaughan to Sydney and of the Anglophile Robert Dunne to Brisbane along with the eccentric resistance of James Goold in Melbourne delayed the Cullenite takeover. But as Barr observes, 'Vaughan's death changed everything.' The appointment of Cullen's 'literal and ecclesiastical heir', Patrick Francis Moran to replace him 'set the course of Australian Catholicism as a whole well into the twentieth century' (p. 376). Somewhat controversially, Barr argues that 'Moran rejected the assimilationist hopes of Polding and Vaughan', calling into question the view, which he attributes to Peter Cunich and John Luttrell, that Moran accepted 'an Australian church neither Irish nor Roman' (p. 379).

The final section of the chapter dispenses with high politics, devoting itself to a description of Moran's 'transformative' rule when the Australian church became almost completely Hiberno-Roman, with Brisbane under

Dunne holding out until his death in 1917. According to Barr, 'the church now followed almost without exception a distinctively Hiberno-Roman pattern of rapid growth, institutional consolidation, and social, sexual, and educational separation overseen by Irish priests, nuns, and bishops' (p. 382). Devotional uniformity and social conformity were imposed on Australia's Catholics, while their 'institutions and community identity were saturated in Irish imagery even as they took their place in Australian life and defined themselves as Australians'. From Barr's 'top-down' perspective his conclusion in this regard is supportable, yet some historians who have adopted a 'grass-roots' perspective have argued that only a small proportion of the Irish population took an active interest in the promotion and retention of Irish identity and culture.³

For those with an interest in the ecclesiastical politics of the Irish diaspora throughout the English-speaking world, Barr's book is essential reading. Yet, even those whose interest is normally confined to Australia will find the book's extensive coverage of the local church enlightening, while its transnational coverage provides insights into the history of the church in Australia that national histories struggle to convey.

³ See, for example, Louise Ann Mazzaroli, 'The Irish in New South Wales, 1884 to 1914: Some Aspects of the Irish Sub-Culture' (PhD Thesis, University of New South Wales, 1979).