



<Book Reviews> Modern Irish History : Joseph J. Lee, Ireland 1912-1985 : Politics and Society (Cambridge University Press, 1989)

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Book Reviews

MODERN IRISH HISTORY

Richard J. Kelly

Joseph J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Ireland 1912-1985 presents an in-depth analysis of Irish performance, North and South, in the twentieth century. The book focuses on the primacy of politics in Irish public affairs, and promulgates that Irish politics must be understood in the broader context of economic, social, administrative, cultural, and intellectual history. Drawing extensively on primary or original sources, and placing the Irish experience firmly in a comparative context, this work is by any standards a major analytical study of the first importance that, I think, is required reading for all who wish to deepen their understanding of the nature of modern Irish history.

A great strength of the book is the way it objectively makes use of the avalanche of archival material that has recently come on stream in Ireland to validate or refute arguments it sets forth. Such material can be as much a curse as a blessing for the historian in that it can cause 'complacency concerning the enduring qualities of his necessarily provisional conclusions.'¹ The author is not just aware of this pitfall; he does his best to avoid it by aiming to transcend the fragmentation of perspective characteristic of the contemporary mind. This goal to strive towards a total history or synthesis, not in the futile sense of trying to write everything about everything, but in the sense of seeking to re-

1. Lee, Joseph J. (1989), *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge University Press), p. xii.

veal the range of relevant linkages between the varieties of activity with which he is concerned, is the supreme challenge for any historian. Aware of falling short of that goal, Prof. Lee's hope is that his book will put the reader facing in the right direction: this it achieves.

Comparative perspective can illuminate an understanding of the Irish condition, but as Prof. Lee interestingly points out, 'there is wholly no comparable case.'² To illustrate this, he discusses several distinctive features of the Irish experience. The Republic of Ireland, following a highly unusual colonial-type history, achieved a degree of political stability rare for a new state. Northern Ireland, on the other hand, failed to find legitimacy in the eyes of an adequate number of its inhabitants to prevent itself being torn apart from what appears to be a variety of tribal religious war. The South has succeeded in maintaining military neutrality, but it has succumbed ever more to cultural dependence. It has a unique demographic history, and a most unusual economic history, with one of the slowest rates of growth in gross national product (G.N.P.) of any European country in the twentieth century. The North, too, in a somewhat different way, presents a similar negative economic pattern. Even this cursory catalogue suffices to remind us that recent Irish historical experience cannot be encompassed within conventional categories of either European or Third World historiography. This, as Prof. Lee suggests, may have some interesting results in that if comparative perspective can illuminate the Irish scene, an understanding of Irish history may in turn enrich wider historical perspectives.

The biggest dichotomy facing the Irish contemporary historian is being simultaneously insider and outsider. He cannot pronounce on both Northern Ireland and the Republic from the same perspective, replying on the same silent assumptions. This book is written from a Southern perspective; therefore, Prof.

2. Lee, *Ibid.*, p. xiii

Lee's own perspectives are not concealed. But he has tried to assess individuals, North and South, within their traditions. By facing up to this challenge of contemporary Irish history the book marks a new direction because a generation of Irish historians up to now tend to exorcise passion from the study of the past which is attained for the most part by evading this challenge.

The most significant achievement of the book lies not so much in the historical details it sets forth as in the questions it raises about these details. It is true that Ireland has been obsessed with a sense of its history, and has for too long faced the future looking backwards. 'Without history', de Paor writes, 'the Irish nation is nothing. It has defined itself by its history. Perhaps it is nothing. That remains to be seen.'³ This ironic balance may reflect, according to Prof. Lee, the disenchantment of the mid-eighties, stumbling towards the future with tragedy in the North and gloom in the South. It may reflect too a sense of the unfulfilled potential of self-government. He goes on to suggest that the modern Irish, contrary to popular impression, have little sense of history. What they have is a sense of grievance, which they choose to make respectable by terming it as history. Thus, history is 'not so much a matter of learning from the past as of stirring old grievances to keep them on the boil.'⁴

To learn from history, Prof. Lee concludes, is one of the most difficult challenges confronting any people, and the Irish of the late-twentieth century have still to learn how to learn from their recent history. This book not only heralds the beginning of this task, it also, in its critical evaluation of Irish historiography, suggests ways of achieving it.

Ireland 1912-1985 is, I think, the most powerful analysis yet to appear of contemporary Irish society, and an essential book for anyone wishing to understand and discuss the past, present and future of modern Ireland in any meaningful

3. de Paor, Liam (1985), "Gone with the wind," *Irish Times*, 4 July.

4. Lee, *ibid.*, p.xiv.

way. It is written in a style that is abound with wit, and has a depth and freshness of perception that makes it by any standards a remarkable achievement.

Since this book was published, and especially since 1995, the economic fortunes of the Republic of Ireland have taken an upturn: it presently has the most rapid economic growth of any of the European Union (E.U.) countries. In the light of these recent developments the nature of such socio-economic analysis of political-historical change must constantly and closely address the current climate of change and direction. We await what would be Prof. Lee's penetrating and perceptive critique as ongoing soon in a second edition.