

A place for Protestants in Ireland today

Outside the Glow: Protestants and Irishness in Independent Ireland

By Heather Crawford
(UCD Press, €28)

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In the past, many of the books published on the history of the Church of Ireland have fallen into one of two categories: they were either uncritical, hagiographical biographies of long-dead prelates and cathedral dignitaries, paying little attention to the lives of ordinary parishioners and their neighbours; or they were chronological accounts of parishes or dioceses, paying little to the wider social and political environment, and inter-action with neighbouring communities of the other traditions.

In recent years, these approaches have lost their appeal, thanks in part to collections edited by James McGuire, Kenneth Milne and Toby Barnard, or John Crawford's pioneering study of the Church of Ireland in Victorian Dublin.

Through all these can be traced the influence of the Department of Modern History in Maynooth, when historians looking at the

Church of Ireland have been encouraged by Vincent Comerford, who retired earlier this year, Jacqui Hill, Jacinta Prunty, Raymond Gillespie, Colm Lennon, Miriam Moffitt with her recent study of *Soupers and jumpers* (Non-such Press, €5.19), and others.

Heather Crawford's study uses a skilful and fascinating blending of the tools of history and social studies to provide an engaging study of how Catholics and Protestants have interacted with each other in Ireland since the foundation of the Irish Free State.

In her extensive research and interviews, she asks whether there are still underlying tensions or emotional legacies left over from the events of the past.

And she does it with humour and with style, questioning and challenging some of the myths that still persist among some people to this day - that there is no such thing as a poor Protestant, that there is a particular Protestant work ethic, that Protestants have small families, or that many Protestants are the descendants of 'planters'.

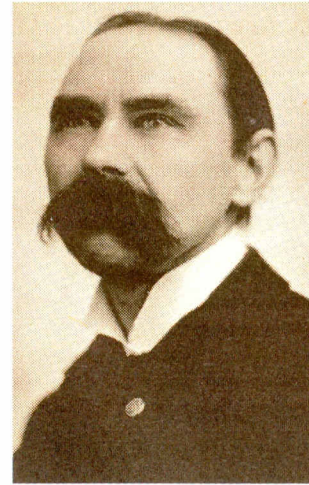
She even came across a popular myth that Protest-

ants and Catholics can be told apart because Protestants wash fruit before eating it while Catholics do not.

She is not afraid to discuss difficult problems, such as inter-Church marriages, difference and assimilation, social differences created by or expressed through the GM or segregated tennis clubs, old canards such "jobbery", privilege, old boys' networks, class differences, the Irish language and the ethos of hospitals, or the influence of the Freemasons and the Knights of Columbanus.

Inevitably, with a study like this, quoting first-hand interviews, there are times when a writer is challenged to maintain continuity and coherence. But Heather Crawford manages to do this with verve and with humour as she wrestles with literary images and stereotypes.

After discussing Brendan Behan's description of an Anglo-Irishman as "a Protestant on a horse", she turns John Banville's novel, *Christine Falls* - penned under the pseudonym Benjamin Black - and his account of one group of "horse Protestants" in the bar of the Shelbourne Hotel in the 1950s, "all tweeds and sensible shoes and braying, overbearing



A Protestant with a Place: Or Douglas Hyde, first President of Ireland

voices", with at least one "displaying an equine grin".

She adds humorously: "The words 'horsy', 'braying' and equine conjure brilliantly the cluster of stereotypes - although there is some doubt in this instance as to whether the quadruped in question is equine or asinine."

She talks gracefully and with dignity about the large Protestant working class in Dublin at the beginning of the last century, "of which most Catholics as well as

middle-class Protestants appeared to be ignorant. Its members certainly countered the stereotypes of the prosperous, snooty Protestant". Yet "Protestants further up the social scale themselves often refused to acknowledge their 'own' poor".

These stereotypes persist and are resented. Many of the people Dr Crawford interviewed are not afraid to say they are hurt by the use of terms such as "West Brit" and "non-Catholic". They feel they are perceived unfairly and relegated to a fictive category in which they feel stranded.

I was recently visiting a Church of Ireland church in a small parish outside Dublin, and was startled to see fresh graffiti scrawled on the wall in a number of places. But I find it hard to accept that there are many people who could think today that Protestants cannot have an authentic Irish identity.

But I spent much of my childhood and part of my early adulthood in the

south-east, where the Fethard-on-Sea boycott was fresh in the memories of all. And the legacy of that boycott still cast dark shadows forty years later over some the 1798 bicentenary commemorations in 1998, and I found myself fencing off some inappropriate and ill-informed comment in Co. Wexford that year, even in the company of Sheila Clooney, who died last summer.

And so it is compelling that those who are planning the events to mark the centenary of the 1916 Rising over the next few years are careful not to paint a monochrome image of Irish national identity, for there is a danger that those events will be hijacked and misused by those who would want us to think that to be truly Irish one must be Green, Gaelic and Catholic.

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