The Famine monument on Dublin’s quays: the Young Irelanders condemned England for its ruthless behaviour.

Quinn’s focus is on the creation and control of this selective narrative of history that wished to highlight the cruelties of English rule in Ireland. But what emerges is how Irish society was too multifaceted to embrace the movement’s ideals.

The Young Irelanders believed that their narrative would unite Catholics and Protestants. But John Dillon admitted in exile that instead of mending this fractured relationship, their work became “fuel to feed our animosities towards each other”, with the militaristic nationalism of the Nation alienating the Protestant minority.

Their version of history focused on heroic battles lost more by Irish misfortune than English supremacy. But they were also keen to control how they themselves were perceived.

Quinn examines the lengths to which Michael Doheny and Charles Gavan Duffy – prominent Young Irelanders – went on to blame O’Connell for their split, claiming that he was dominated by his son John O’Connell.

Their treatment of the Famine is an interesting aspect of Quinn’s book. Their writing aimed to build Irish pride, but it seemed impossible to make mass starvation sparked by the repeated failure of the potato crop appear heroic. Most Young Irelanders blamed the catastrophe on England, with John Mitchell condemning the authorities for not providing proper relief, saying that their genocidal treatment of the Irish was “more ruthless than any Seven Years’ War or Thirty Years’ War that Europe ever saw.”

But it was also important for Mitchell’s heroic narrative to stress how the English plan was only partly successful; it “failed to quench Ireland’s undying national spirit.”

As the 19th century ended, other historians argued against the validity of this interpretation of history. Quinn, however, explores how the new Free State adopted the Young Ireland narrative, placing it at the core of the school curriculum. It was left to writers such as Sean Ó Faoláin (who called the curriculum “fairytale textbooks in history”) to write more nuanced profiles of O’Connell and Hugh O’Neill, and historians such as TW Woody and RD Edwards to compose more factual accounts of Irish history.

Quinn has crafted an insightful and impartial examination into a movement which had little interest in impartiality, an exploration into why such history was written and how it was received. While his book will particularly appeal to students of the period, his style is accessible enough for anyone to enjoy.