



Modern Ireland, 1600-1972

R.F. Foster

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Masterfully blending narrative and interpretation, and R.F. Foster's *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972* looks at how key events in Irish history contributed to the creation of the 'Irish Nation'.

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Modern Ireland, 1600-1972 Details

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Benjamin Eskola says

Very dry; OK in the first chapters but eighteenth century onwards, and especially nineteenth, were pretty dull.

Loring Wirbel says

I read this in conjunction with Ferriter's 'Transformation of Ireland', and might have given both books 3's instead of 4's if read in isolation. When read as a pair, however, the books give a good narrative of how a colonial Protestant Irish consciousness of the 1600s, where a native Catholic view was considered all but subhuman, evolved into the bifurcated Catholic nationalism and Northern Ireland UK support of the current era. Both Foster and Ferriter craft different books than a traditional historical narrative that focuses on leaders, and both look at what changes in lifestyle were like among common people. Where Ferriter (since his book is newer) focuses on specific advocacy communities like women and socialists in Ireland, Foster looks at how the methods of encouraging colonial "planter" settlements profoundly affected the way Ireland developed in the 1700s and 1800s. Both authors give interesting accounts of the 1916 Easter uprising and the civil war, but neither provides a blow-by-blow account. In the end, Foster and Ferriter have both written cultural studies, not strict histories of Ireland.

Angela says

Oofdah. At times, this felt like eating brussel sprouts but it was an amazing background book for my trip to Ireland. Well worth it to provide some context to understand what I was seeing throughout our two-week trip. Thanks for the suggestion, Jamie Wall!

Nick says

Well, I tried with this one, but I only made it about 150 pages into this 600 page book and had to quit. The author assumes a much deeper background in European history than I have; I can keep straight what's going on with Charles II, James, and William of Orange off screen, but when the narrative starts asking that you already know the details about their various religious attitudes towards their Irish subjects, that's where I start getting lost. Probably a good book if you already know the material, as it seems more like a reflection on changing Ireland than a straight narrative history (for which I continue to search in vain - seriously, message me if you have any recommendations, please!)

Michael Bibow-Finucane says

Foster's history of modern Ireland provides a unique insight into the diversity of Old Irish, New English,

Norman, Scottish-Irish, and the many other varieties of "Irishness" that make up the people of Ireland. I found the diverse array of cultural and ethnic backgrounds to be a fascinating expose on who is Irish, and what that means in terms of being Irish from the British colonial period from the Elizabethan era to the early beginnings of the Troubles in the 1970s. However, I also found that Foster dismisses the various groups that sought to revive the Irish language, culture, and other aspects of ancient Gaelic life, which he views as part of the mystical fiction of Ireland. For instance, the Inghinidhe na hÉireann (The Daughters of Ireland) are depicted as being an invention of the Celtic Twilight without historical merit in the cause for an indigenous Irishness during Nationalist Movement. More humorously, Foster assumes that William Butler Yeats' Anglicized education in London owes much to British literary traditions--even though Foster considers Yeats a major "talent" in the quest for Irish national identity during the Celtic Twilight. This cynical view of Irish nationalism is part of the Anglo bias that Foster brings forth, which he views as a non-historical cultural invention. In fact, he appears to support the Anglo-Irish (not just in Northern Ireland, but also in the Pale/Republic) cause as the primary foundation for a more easily categorizable documentation of Irish identity. More so, I don't like the "modernization" of Ireland beginning during the time of Elizabethan colonization of Ireland, which assumes some sort of superior civilizing factor during the early 1600s. Foster's defines important insights into Irish identity, but the credulity of historical empiricism often gets the best of him in terms of culture, language, and artistic expression in Irish history.

adam says

While I love Foster's 2-volume biography of Yeats, I find this book incredibly difficult to follow. I think part of the problem is that he describes many things in a manner which assumes some knowledge of them. In other words, this isn't the best book for the neophyte.

Sam says

This book is a concise review of the growth of modern Ireland from 1600 to 1972 that could be divided into two separate books. The first half is an economic and social study of an agricultural society and the second half is a review of how Eamon DeValera shaped Irish history.

In the first half of his book, Foster explores the creation of modern Ireland through the lens of class warfare and property rights. While he admits that the invading force was predominantly Protestant and invaded with the goal of conquering what could be a fifth column of Catholics, he argues that economic tensions fed into the religious tensions and not vice versa. He argues that the creation of the Protestant Ascendancy was based on land seizure and redistribution, providing them with large swaths of land in which to build a fortune. They also had the benefit of protection from the crown, whereas the lower and middle-class Catholics owned smaller domains of land, received infrequent protection, and suffered from an immigration crisis. Foster argues that, while England had a restless and innovative middle class that helped spark the Industrial Revolution, Ireland's restless middle class left for England and the Americas, taking their innovative ideas with them. This left the largely Catholic population still reliant on agriculture and whatever money was sent home while the Protestant population relied on their property's worth, rent, and industry.

In the second half of his book, Foster argues that it was the issue of land rights that led to O'Connellism and Parnellism, which eventually led to Home Rule and Easter Rising 1916. Like other historians, Foster argues that Protestant minority was threatened by Home Rule and created Ulster Defense Leagues to protect their

land. This led the creation of defense leagues in southern, predominantly Catholic Ireland, and convinced men like Pádraig Pearse that self-rule could only be won through sacrifice. Foster chronicles Easter Rising, the Anglo-Irish, and Civil War well, but with less of his keen insight he provided in the first half. He also sweeps from 1950 to 1972 in rapid chapters, providing the lack of detailed analysis found in the first half. DeValera's policies are covered in some detail, but the resurgence of the IRA is covered in passing, there is minimum mention of the constricting of women's rights, the strengthening of the Church's position in Ireland is a given, and there is little conversation about how Ireland's leaders were different from DeValera.

Pros: The first half of this book is a fascinating look at the development of Ireland from an economic and social level. While the personalities are brushed over, Foster provides enough information to make the reader want to learn more about Ireland pre-1800s. He also places Ireland in an international context, presenting Ireland's various rebellions as responses to continental events as well as to internal affairs. His study of migration patterns and land redistribution was an interesting look into how the Protestants were able to 'ascend' and stresses the importance of land ownership in context of invasion. This is something that come up frequently, especially during the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe during and after WWII.

Cons: This is a rapid overview of Irish history, so someone who knows nothing about Ireland may be lost or confused. There are times when he assumes the reader knows what happened in Ireland in the 1970s or the 1880s and doesn't provide complete context. The personalities are frequently brushed over which I, personally, found disappointing. I would have loved to have learned a little more about Wolfe Tone, Daniel O'Connell, and Richard Mulcahy. It would have given us a better idea of Irish culture at the time and these men often define their epoch, so knowing them on a more personal level would have helped us understand why men in the 1900s were still naming societies after Wolfe Tone and why Parnell is still an honored name in Ireland. The second half is not as strongly put together as the first half and the level of analysis is not the same. It is an even faster overview of Irish history and could have used with more time spent on context. While he provides an interesting explanation as to why Ireland was the way it was prior to the 1920's, this explanation falters after the Irish Civil War and we are left with only a fuzzy understanding of how partition and DeValera's politics affected Ireland's development during the latter half the 20th century.

Bruce says

Much more readable than Foster's collaborative *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*, this work is more narrowly focused in terms of time span and also understandably more detailed. Thus, it is less an endless list of personalities, and instead is able to explain their relative history and unique roles. The footnotes are excellent, providing a brief biography of each major character as he is first introduced. And Foster skillfully relates movements and events to their later consequences, thus laying a solid foundation for the understanding of more recent issues. He also places literary figures in their appropriate political and cultural context, throwing light on the issues they addressed, their relative sequence and relationship to each other, and their resultant styles.

Regarding the Great Potato Famine of 1845-49, before the crop failure occurred the average poor farm family in western and southwestern Ireland consumed 10# of potatoes per person per day, the potato being almost the sole element in their diet, except for occasional pork. I find that astounding.

I thought this was an excellent and fascinating trip through modern Irish history, only regretting that it was written more than three decades ago and thus contains no information about subsequent events, especially in Northern Ireland.

Patrick Cook says

Foster is widely considered the preeminent historian of Modern Ireland. His knowledge of the subject is certainly not in doubt. But I found this book rather hard going. The real problem is that it's two books, neither of which is a general history of Ireland. The first book, told in the main text, addresses certain controversies in Irish historiography. It is chronological in its structure without really being a chronological history. The second, told in the copious running biographical notes, is a series of biographies of famous Irish people. There is very little interaction between the two sections: judging by the preface, the notes are the work of Foster's research assistant. They also often seem aimed at a different audience than the main text.

Foster can be a witty writer, something that is particularly evident in the later chapters. His particularly gleeful when puncturing the pomposity of some of Patrick Pearse's more bizarrely romantic pronouncements. Doubtless, this work has its uses as a textbook for an Irish history course at the postgraduate or advanced undergraduate level (one cannot imagine it being assigned for lower-level undergraduate courses, except perhaps in Ireland itself). Other readers might well prefer a more accessible and livelier introduction.

Daniel Carrol says

This came highly recommended as the best single book to provide an overview of Irish History and it proved to be just that. Starting from a place of having no understanding of Irish History I found Foster's approach to eschew focus on individual events and instead consider the social and political impact of them very rewarding and central to covering such a wide time period in any detail (if I want to read detailed histories of the Easter Uprising or The Nine Years War I now have an understanding of the socio-political climate that birthed and followed the events).

The writing itself was also a highlight, a near 600 page book never really felt like a slog or difficult to read, the prose is economical and not without anecdotes or strong criticism for certain historical figures or groups but his analysis is always deeply reasoned, clear and authoritative.

Perhaps the best thing that a general history can provide is an urge in the reader to dig deeper and read more into the subject and at that, the book succeeds with considerable ease.

Glen says

It is long and it assumes quite a bit of prior familiarity with some hallmark events and political terminologies that a learned British or Irish reader would know, but for other readers it might be a bit of a slog. It is heavily documented and includes many footnotes about notable persons in Irish history along with the general narrative, which proceeds in straightforward chronological fashion from the advent of the Protestant Ascendancy to the modern "Troubles" and the dissolution of the Stormont parliament. Foster dispels a number of myths about Irish identity, myths for which many thousands have been and continue to be willing to fight and die. He concludes the book on a hopeful note for the Irish Republic, but seems less optimistic about the prospects for the North. His role as historian of Ireland and as a historian who happens to be Irish is somewhat ironic and conflicted in that he seems to think that Ireland is a land plagued by people who take

history seriously enough to war over it, but not seriously enough to see it for the confusing mess that it is, a mess with no clear victims or victors, no clear heroes or villains. In the end he seems more sympathetic to the British exasperation with "the Irish problem" than he is with the Irish nationalist exasperation with and anger over their treatment by the British, but above all he seems to want to try to tell the history in a way that emancipates the actors of today and tomorrow from reenacting the roles and rules of yesterday.

Greg Akins says

Difficult to read with no elementary understanding of Irish history.

Paul Blaney says

Quite exhausting in its detail but I'm glad to have made it through this excellent history of modern Ireland. A revisionist account of the country since the Elizabethan plantations, the book establishes continuities, political and social, against decisive shifts, and examines how the Anglo-centric, Ireland-as-martyr story has shaped the notion of what it means to be Irish. Thought-provoking chapters re-examine The Great Famine, the influence of emigration and transnational Irishness, the Easter Rising, De Valera's Gaelicized, theocratic state, and the events that led up to 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland. The author ends with a hope for a more inclusive, less Irishier-than-thou, concept of being Irish.

Ed says

"Modern Ireland 1600-1972 is a well done and well presented history of the economic, cultural, architectural, religious, military and political history of Ireland. Foster writes well (not always a given among historians, even those who write popular surveys) with a self-conscious literary style.

Running footnotes are very valuable--instead of interrupting the narrative to tell the reader who someone is on first reference there is a footnote (separate from the Notes at the end of the book) at the bottom of the page that gives a very short thumbnail biography of the person, usually only three or four lines. He references everyone which at first seems odd but it works. For each name that everyone will know--Burke, Swift, Yeats--there are ten for individuals such as: "Robert Monroe (d. 1680?): the zealous plunderer of many Ulster towns including Newry, 1642...seized Belfast, 1644; routed by Owne Roe and Benburb, 1646...given up to General Monck by the treachery of his own officers..." Excellent stuff.

He gives a very detailed discussion of structure of Irish politics and political life during the eighteenth century although without really showing that it was terribly important. Foster undermines his descriptions with statements on how the real decisions were made in London and not only on Foreign and Defense affairs.

The Catholic Church as a political and social force was handicapped by impoverished clergy and a hierarchy whose authority was often shaky; beset by traditional problems of Irish Catholicism: internal indiscipline, vague and latitudinarian bishops, factional squabbles often with a family orientation.

This is a "literary" history of Ireland--not literary in the sense of discussing the poetry and prose of the time and place but in the way Foster wrote it with plenty of rhetorical devices and imagery.

A reasonably detailed account of Ireland from the time of Elizabeth I.

Jean says

Took me awhile to finish this. I'm not that familiar with all the characters and details of English and Irish history that I'm sure are second nature to a native and it just made the read a bit more tedious. That said, it is a good account, bigotry, terrorism, exploitation, sound familiar? Some things never change, sadly.
