

## **Ian Mitchell's Ireland-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS**

35 – Ireland  
(27 February 2019)

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### **THE OXFORD HISTORY OF IRELAND**

**Author:** R.F. Foster (ed.)

**Publisher:** [Oxford University Press](#), 1992 (1989)  
(The text is identical to that in the *Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*, published at the same time.)  
(available on *Amazon*, [click on cover image for link](#))

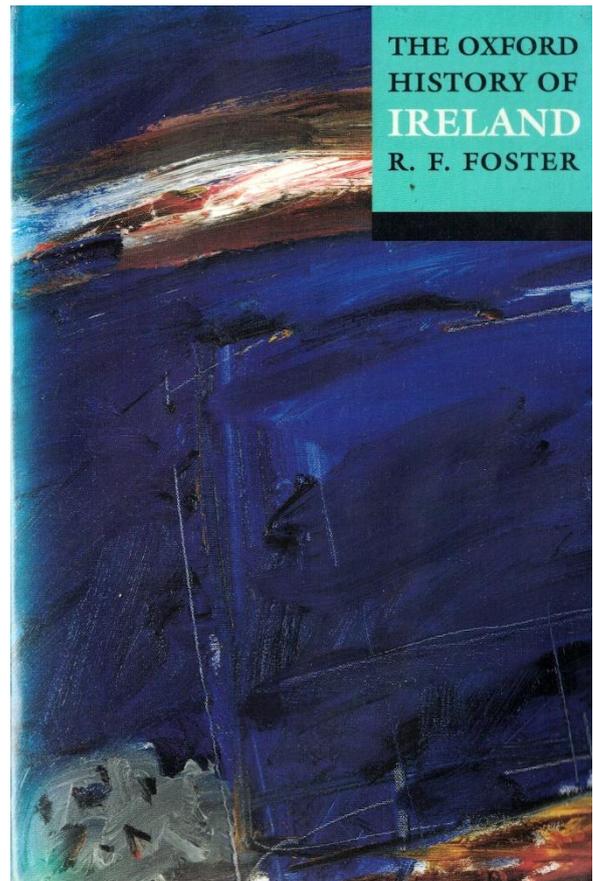
**Descriptor:** Early and important harbinger of the new, more mature, Irish historiography which is calling into question many of the politically-sponsored and/or Church-imposed myths about the country's past.

**RusRoL relevance:** *Raises the question of whether Ireland was part of the British "internal" empire or its "external" one. Illuminates the issue of the development of the rule of law in Irish history, and the English role in that.*

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**Reason to read:** A dispassionate history of Ireland from ancient times which "makes official" some of the new historiography of that country. After more than a century of flatulent nationalist myth-making, aided by a priest-ridden educational system, Irish history was more self-congratulatory than self-revelatory. Buttressed by censorship, the Catholic/Republican hierarchy imposed an atavistic, myth-based stasis on local intellectual life. But that started to crack around the time that "sexual intercourse began" (i.e. "in 1963"). That was when the dethronement of Eamon de Valera, the Pope of the Phoblacht, started turning Ireland into a country which is no longer afraid to look its past in the face. Today there is a huge volume of interesting and challenging historical work going on. This book was one of the first collections to give an overview of the new thinking.

**Main talking points:** Debunking the myth of "communal" Ireland in the distant past, Nicholas Canny talks about the dispossessions of the seventeenth century in these terms: "If the peasants had but known, they had not technically been deprived of anything: land under the old dispensation had belonged to ruling kinship groups rather than to communities of peasants, and most of the ruling families who had not conformed to English ways had either been killed in battle or had abandoned the



country.... Of the survivors from the old order, it was the previously privileged groups such as priests and poets who had lost status; and it is significant that it was these who fostered the myth of a lost golden age which might again be recovered.” (p. 133)

Writing about the eighteenth century, Roy Foster says: “Life in Connemara, or on the Kerry peninsulas, remained fixed in the old modes which were being abandoned by the increasingly Anglicised and commercialised east and south. The picture of a dispossessed Gaelic rural proletariat eking out an embittered existence in smoke-filled cabins is partial, to say the least... The idea of Irish rural life as universally and ostentatiously poverty-stricken owes more to polemical pamphleteers than to dispassionate observers.” (p. 143)

A century later, Daniel O’Connell, the great nineteenth century civil rights campaigner, called a monster meeting at Clontarf in order to exploit the myths about Brian Boru and his battle with the Norsemen: “This encounter, like so much else in Irish history, had by the early nineteenth century been incorporated into an inspirational tale of an unsuppressible Irish nation constantly struggling against invaders and sustaining its indomitable cultural identity going back to Gaelic (and, implicitly, Catholic) roots. The process by which Irish history became an instrument of political rhetoric as well as national assertiveness is complex one.” (p. 159)

By the twentieth century, the idea was fixed in Irish heads that Gaelic was good and British was bad. “For every English action, there must be an equal and opposite Irish reaction... Thus was born ‘the ingenious device of national parallelism’... So, if certain Irish antidotes did not previously exist, they had to be invented—Gaelic football being a classic case of instant archaeology, but definitely not a game known to Cuchulain. So, a new use was found for the Irish language as a kind of green spray-paint, useful in concealing the embarrassing similarity of the Irish parliaments as well as Irish post-boxes to their English models, even after the institution of the Free State. It became all the more necessary to call the native parliament the *Dáil* in order to conceal its depressing similarity to the despised Westminster model.” (pp. 268-9)

***Incidental interest:*** One of the more paradoxical results of the 1846 famine was to destroy the Irish land market by bringing about, a couple of decades later due to Gladstone’s reforms, a situation in which almost all agricultural tenants had almost complete security of property. This meant that innovation was no longer at a premium, and the whole sector, which was the backbone of the Irish economy outside Ulster, stagnated. Within fifty years the whole country was poor. It was not for another century, despite all the myth-making, that Ireland regained its prosperity, and then only by turning its back on sacred agriculture as a source of national profit (as opposed to family sustenance or as private recreational resource). The Gaelic obsession with security of tenure on small farms had the effect of stifling agricultural progress, suffocating the economy and ensuring that Irish country women had to emigrate to England or America to avoid being forced into marriage and eternal drudgery on an undercapitalised and inherently unprofitable family farmlette. Landless, unmarried men could aspire to the priesthood, while women had to be content with the ferry to Liverpool or Glasgow.

***Surprising points:*** “The Temperance movement, inspired by a Cork priest Father Mathew, began in 1838 and by late 1842 an estimated five million Irish people had taken the pledge of total abstinence.” (p. 165)

**Thought(s) provoked:** Southern Ireland is a lot more English than it likes to think. And, I would say, northern Ireland is more Scottish than it likes to think. And both “British” countries are more Irish than they like to think. The Victorian concept of a Celtic land which is culturally distinct from an Anglo-Saxon one needs to be replaced by a similar “border” that runs, very roughly, from Sligo to Berwickshire. Ignoring local quibbles and quirks, I suggest it would be true to say that north of that line there is one approach to life and thought, and south of it another, subtly different, one. That is not to say Ireland and England are identical; it is however to say that southern Ireland has at least as much in common with England as it does with northern Ireland. Likewise, I think Scotland has more in common with northern Ireland—not least the combination of sanctimony and sectarianism—than it does with England.

This book provides evidence for both propositions. In the North, the emigration of the Dark Age Scots (Dalriadans) created an “Irish” empire in Scotland, after they had expelled the Britons and exterminated the Picts (as the Declaration of Arbroath put it). Descendants of those Scots then came back to colonise much of the north of Ireland in the seventeenth century and later.

Likewise in the south: “Migration from Britain into Ireland was greatly increased by ... and the total movement of people in the decades before 1641 cannot have been much less than 100,000.” (p. 118) When you consider that this represented nearly 10% of the population at the time, and add to that the Norman invasions in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Tudor invasion of the sixteenth, and the later population interchange between Ireland and Britain (mutual emigration) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by the time of the Easter Rising and protestations of Irishness, the population of Ireland was to a large extent mixed race (assuming “race” is the right word here). Of the seven “bombastiers” (if you’ll pardon the word) who signed the famous Proclamation of Independence, four of the names—Clarke, Pearse, Connolly and Plunkett—have English roots, though Connolly’s ancestors were doubtless once called something Gaelic. However, he was himself not Irish, having been born in the Edinburgh slum to which his parents migrated after tiring of life among the harps and haystacks of old County Monaghan.

This raises the same question that I addressed in *The Supreme Court* and *John Hearne*, namely: what does it mean to be really Irish, and how is that in any deep-seated way different from being British, in the widest sense of the term? The RusRoL-relevant answer is that there is no great difference between Britain and Ireland. Both countries base their ideas of civil society on the rule of law as understood in the common-law world, broadly defined. Both peoples have similar ideas about the etiquette of sport, which is, in my view, the best guide to popular understanding of how the world should be arranged if fairness and competition are to co-exist (more on this in later reviews). In this respect, Gaelic football is no different from ordinary football—or rugby for that matter, a game which, paradoxically, De Valera played very well and which he thought should be the spearhead of Irish “soft power”.

**Negative issue(s):** None, except that lack of wittily ironic Irish-style writing, which enlivens any title of this sort intended for general consumption by the lay but educated public. It has the additional merit of reflecting life as it actually is.

**Publishing quality:** Acceptable, though the companion *Illustrated History* is a beautiful book. It is still available from second-hand sources. In both editions there is an excellent chronology.

**Author:** Roy Foster (pictured right) hails from Waterford where he had a Quaker education. He is a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, and was Professor of Irish History at Oxford from 1991 to 2016.

**Link(s):** You can see Professor Foster reading (sadly: better to address the audience) a talk about the issue of myth and truth in Irish history here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDy22fZZ3XI>

**Overall recommendation level:** HIGH



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**About the reviewer:** Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including *Isles of the West* and *The Justice Factory*. He is writing a comparative study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*—hence the “RusRoL Relevance” section at the top. He can be contacted at: [ianbookrec@gmail.com](mailto:ianbookrec@gmail.com). For other reviews in this series, see [Ian Mitchell’s Book Recommendations](#).