Book Reviews


Ben Novick’s book about Irish nationalist propaganda during the Great War, 1914-1918 is a very important contribution to knowledge. It is not only one of the very few books written on Ireland during the First World War but quite unique as it deals with the political impact the war had on Ireland. So far, most of the recent books dealing with Irish participation in the war are studies of Ireland’s military contribution to the conflict, or else studies of Ireland’s problematic and ambiguous approach to the commemoration of her fallen soldiers. Novick’s approach is completely different as he sets out to analyse the consequences the war had on Ireland’s political life in those decisive years that shaped the country’s destiny.

His main argument is that anti-Redmondite nationalists used the war in Europe as a first-hand propaganda tool against John Redmond’s Nationalist Party and also against Britain. This anti-war propaganda was maintained throughout the entire duration of the conflict and even after the Easter Rising. It is Novick’s belief that the war provided more propaganda for Sinn Féin and Irish Volunteer activists than the Rising did, and the author puts forward convincing arguments, supported by excellent research.

The book departs from the traditional chronological methodology of historians and uses a thematic approach, very suited to the propaganda theme. Novick analyses attitudes of “advanced nationalists” towards those Irish nationalists who believed that the interests of their country was best served in the appalling trenches of France and Flanders, and the bloody beaches of Gallipoli. The effects of atrocity propaganda, a speciality developed and refined by Lord Northcliffe’s Press early in the war, on Ireland and the anti-war opposition are carefully examined. Arthur Griffith’s response to the sanguinary pro-war Press was to turn the Allies, Britain especially, into hypocrites or to describe them as being at least as bad as the Germans, certainly far worse than the “Huns” after the Rising. France, Ireland’s old traditional ally, was not spared either by Griffith and his so-called “Mosquito Press”, an appellation given by the authorities to describe anti-war newspapers edited by “advanced nationalists”. The French were depicted as infidels, freemasons and anti-clerical people whereas the Germans were seen as the saviours of Catholicism. According to Novick, the idea was to operate a rapprochement between the nationalist opposition and the Catholic Church, and this was successful. Morals, therefore, played an important part in Griffith’s and other nationalists’ anti-war propaganda. The fight against immorality was made by contrasting the noble and pure Celt with the degenerate Anglo-Saxon, bound to lose the war and trying to pollute the sound spirit of the Celt with immoral behaviour and an unreliable Press intend to recruit Irishmen to fight Perfidious Albion’s battles abroad.

Other chapters look at specific themes and approaches used by the anti-war nationalist propaganda such as the use of humour, aggression and economy. The last point was of crucial importance since Ireland was enjoying her first “Celtic Tiger” economy due to the global war effort. Farmers had plenty of work and food production was high. However, Novick points out that the advanced nationalists’ “agrarian propaganda” was, unfortunately for them, not successful. This was hardly surprising since many farmers owned their land and were living under prosperous circumstances, paradoxically engendered by the war. Therefore, Sinn Féin’s propaganda largely failed to persuade farmers of the advanced nationalist cause until the conscription crisis of April 1918.
The book also contains a certain number of facts that will astonish the reader since the First World War is a theme that was for years conveniently forgotten by successive governments with a strong nationalist agenda who chose to eradicate the memory of the Great War in Ireland. A few examples spring to mind. For instance, the respect which the advanced nationalist propagandists showed towards Irish nationalist soldiers on the front once the horrors of trench warfare became known in Ireland. As mentioned above, Griffith did not hesitate to portray the English people as a degenerate race. But the Sinn Féin leader also displayed a wider xenophobic and racist attitude, reflecting it would seem the ideas of the “Mosquito Press” generally. This is what he wrote in 1915 on the participation of non-European combatants in the war: “Europe, not America, is the white man's land and the introduction of savage Asiatics and Africans into Europe in war between civilised Powers is unparalleled in European history since anno domini. It is a betrayal of the white race”.

When one deals with propaganda, the crucial question is, of course, to know whether it is effective or not. So, was Irish nationalist propaganda effective during the First World War? Novick reckons that it probably was although he admits that it is difficult to establish with certitude. Perhaps, on this point, the author should have made more use of the Colonial Office files (CO 904) that are available to the public. Indeed, the various county reports of the Royal Irish Constabulary and later on, after the Rising, of the British Military Intelligence provide some indications on the evolution of nationalist public opinion at the time. Reading those reports, the impression one gets is that the Irish people were rather apathetic from a political point of view, be it before or after the rising. For example, the intelligence officer of the Southern District (south of Ireland) wrote in the second half of 1917 that the novelty of the heroes and martyrs of 1916 was wearing off. It would have been judicious to put these reports in the context of nationalist propaganda. The book contains superb illustrations of anti-war propaganda literature. It is a pity that the author did not systematically include all illustrations and relied, on occasion, on written descriptions of leaflets, pamphlets etc. Images would have been better.

This book on propaganda and on the First World War in Ireland is highly informative and certainly is a major contribution to an area in modern Irish history which has been neglected for many years by Irish historians. It ranks in importance with other recent works on the period in question such as Keith Jeffery's Ireland and the Great War or Terence Denman's Ireland's unknown Soldiers. It will hopefully encourage further research on those crucial years between 1914 and 1918 which shaped the course of Ireland's history.

Jérôme aan de Wiel
University of Reims


This is a welcome first volume in a new series of archaeological reports from the locally based Aegis Archaeology Limited. The authors can pat themselves on the back for the speed with which the information retrieved from the ground in 1999-2000 has found its way between two covers. Would that we could all get our reports published so quickly.

The report describes the first complete excavation of a ringwork castle undertaken in Ireland and, as such, it will provide the yardstick against which future excavated examples will be measured. For those unfamiliar with the monument type, a ringwork is an earthwork castle similar in form to the ringfort with which it can be confused. The motte is the more familiar form of earthwork castle.
The first chapter follows a foreword by David Sweetman, author of The Medieval Castles of Ireland, and is a general introduction to ringworks. Their purpose, siting, and historical background are all discussed, as is the state of play in the study of the monument type. This is a very useful scene setting chapter, even for the castle specialist, and it is this chapter which justifies the monograph format. If published as a journal article there would have been much less of the background information. The second chapter describes the excavation of the two-phase fosse which enclosed two circular buildings, a cooking pit and a keyhole furnace, together with a third hut and a kiln outside the enclosure. The site is dated on pottery evidence to the thirteenth century. It is unfortunate that there has been more recent disturbance of the site which has removed much of the stratigraphy, so the finds do not match the impressiveness of the features.

The third and fourth chapters are a synthesis and the conclusions. The principal conclusion is that the site is not a major garrison castle, but probably that of a minor lord or strong tenant. In this respect one wonders if the circular nature of the buildings, unusual for a Norman site, could be coming directly from a native tradition. The next section is the finds catalogue which is, as noted, rather sparse. The main artefacts are 12 sherds of medieval pottery, part of a stone mortar and a piece of quernstone, which place the monument squarely in the Anglo-Norman period. A bibliography rounds off the report.

The authors are to be congratulated in not going over the top with superlatives. There is a tendency among archaeologists to claim the ‘earliest, oldest, largest etc’… and to imply that their site is probably the most important being dug at present. This site certainly is a first and thereby of great importance, but it is not the biggest or best in its category and future ringwork excavations will undoubtedly produce more spectacular results. The authors realise this and have presented the information in a straightforward and sober manner without, to use the modern expression, hype.

Brian Hodkinson
Limerick Museum


I enjoyed this book and welcome it as a valuable contribution to the history of Glin Castle and the social history of twentieth century gardening in the varying landscapes of both west Limerick and British Columbia. It mingles the story of the creation of one woodland garden in Canada and the saving of the one at Glin with that of the life of an extraordinary woman. That central figure is the formidable Veronica Villiers, wife of the 28th Knight of Glin from 1929 until his death in 1949, and from 1954 the wife of successful Canadian businessman, lawyer and art lover, Ray Milner. In an introductory note to the book Desmond Fitzgerald, the present and 29th Knight, welcomes the frank account of his mother’s life (the ‘Nightmare’ as she became known because of her domineering ways) and acknowledges that her endeavours saved Glin and helped create and then save the woodland garden at Qualicum Beach on the eastern shores of Vancouver Island.

Veronica was born in London in 1909 into the British aristocracy, albeit untitled; she never forgot, or let anyone else do so either, her perceived exalted position. In chapter two, the author provides much detail about this family pedigree and connections. Veronica saw herself as one of the ‘top of the top’, a part of the evolutionary predominance of the British Empire, remaining both Anglo-Saxon and Norman in almost everything she did, passionately disagreeing with any notion of
Celtic superiority. While acknowledging that the Celts could be creative, they were, she avowed, not practical and hopeless at organising; ‘it took’, she said, ‘an Anglo-Saxon to get things done’.

Her marriage, on 9 January 1929, to Desmond Fitzgerald, the future 28th Knight of Glin, just before her twentieth birthday is the stuff of fairy tales. At almost six feet tall and strikingly beautiful, Veronica impressed everyone, including the locals at Glin. Her son, Desmond recounts:

When she first married into Glin in 1929, the locals who were farmers to the man, loving cattle more than most, made the comment ‘ah sure, doesn’t she have a fine fall for her water’, which translated as, ‘doesn’t she have a fine pair of long legs’.

The compelling narrative for these early years in Ireland in chapters three and four draws heavily on the letters and diaries of her husband (The Glin archive is now catalogued and housed in the Special Collections area of the Glucksman Library at the University of Limerick). The enthusiasm which they both shared in bringing the garden back to life was tempered by the difficulties of living with the cantankerous and wheelchair-bound 27th Knight. And, of course there was a constant struggle to keep an asset-rich but cash-starved hereditary estate running. Projects ranged from seizing the supply opportunities presented by the nearby ‘flying station’ at Foynes to providing farm produce for general sale, all recounted in fascinating snippets in the book, as are encounters with friends and artists. The birth of their three children and the rigours of the war years were milestones before the 28th Knight’s failing health and his despair at his increasingly dysfunctional marriage – Veronica was not an easy woman to live with – finally ended with his premature death in 1949.

A beautiful woman of Veronica’s stature and needs was hardly liking to remain single, but she waited five years for the right person. Wealthy Canadian, Ray Milner had married a Limerick woman, Rina Bury (née Collins from Shantrade) after World War 1. In 1937 they purchased a summer house at Qualicum Beach, beginning to create a garden there with extensive clearing of trees. Rina died in November 1952 following years of progressively poor health. Veronica married Ray in February 1954, when she was given away by her teenage son, Desmond. She was 45 to his 65 years. There is no doubt but that Veronica married the Canadian (largely) for his money. Her mother Elaine could write afterwards that she was pleased that ‘wonderful Ray (of light) came along with his love and dollars’. Ray, bedazzled by her beauty, seems to have fully understood the situation. Writing to Veronica before their marriage, he asked, ‘how much do you owe and to whom?’

Veronica was again a new bride in a foreign land but this time far away from her native England and her adopted Glin, but at Glin the garden at Qualicum was her salvation. With the help of plantspeople Ted and Mary Greig the development of the woodland garden took on new impetus, and improved to such an extent that by 1970 the garden began to come to international attention. Chapter one describes this achievement in detail. Veronica’s role was that of the artist: Nothing vulgar like bedding plants or annuals which in the William Robinson style were labelled garden graveyards were allowed. Her garden would be ‘a place of serenity, elegance, rhythm and harmony’ particularly the ‘cultivated’ areas, ‘a wild garden’ not from nature but one carefully designed to appear so and areas of controlled wildness were created where the garden merged with the forest. Seeds and cuttings were collected on her travels from all over the world. The Shannon estuary was well represented: hydrangeas from Glin, fuchsias and camellias from Tarbert House, all of which grew with varying degrees of success. But Glin myrtle was difficult to establish at Qualicum. Plant traffic was also the other way and many informal areas at Glin owe their genesis to Veronica’s work on the Pacific coast.

A lesser man than Ray Milner would have had real ‘nightmares’ about the work required at two
extensive properties on two widely-distant continents: major renovations at Glin castle and garden and further building projects at Qualicum. But despite serious financial concerns about ‘the well drying up’ the work continued at both places. During the 1960s the forty ton slate roof at Glin was replaced with two tons of Canadian shingles, the house completely rewired, the battlements removed and reinstated, the farm re-established and a quality giftshop opened at one of the castle gates. Incidentally the top floor of the main building, left unfinished in the nineteenth century, was finally completed in 1999 with five en suite bedrooms: when asked when was Glin built, the present Knight can answer 1790 to 1999!

Throughout a long and eventful life Veronica never changed, and constantly embarrassed both family and friends with conduct that would have led to ostracism for a lesser human being. At the age of eighty-eight she could proudly proclaim that she, unlike many of her friends, never had her ‘hands in a dishwasher’. Coming from a long line of formidable women, this was one of the more innocuous statements she made. Her imperious comment in any gathering ‘I have spoken’ offended many and she was constantly rude and disagreeable to guests whom she did not like. ‘How dare that woman even speak to me’ was uttered at a public gathering in reference to Olive Diefenbaker, the wife of the then Canadian Premier.

As ‘don’t help the help’ was one of her frequent sayings, it was a wonder that any employee stayed with her but stay they did. Two personal maids, Nancy and Una, who she brought with her from Limerick to Canada, remained faithful despite combined wages of $120 a month and constant hassle, including being woken in their attic bedrooms in the middle of the night and ordered to ‘go down stairs and take four salmon out of the freezer. There will be twenty guests for dinner’. But late in life she stunned Nancy by telling her, ‘Nancy, I’m Veronica now to you, not Mrs Milner’. Nancy’s reply to this incredible statement was ‘You’ve lost your marbles, Madame!’

She admitted to having her heyday after Ray’s death in 1975 when she travelled extensively and had sufficient funds to maintain a very extravagant lifestyle, all the time fine-tuning the garden, and of course having her say, and way at Glin. Her cousin Mary Soames, Churchill’s daughter, visited her in Canada in 1984 but it was the visit of Charles and Diana in 1986 (Diana was a distant relation through the Churchill connection) followed by the visit of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip in 1987 that reinforced her social standing. These royal visits are recounted in fascinating detail in the book.

By 1996 Veronica was almost bankrupt as she struggled to support an extravagant lifestyle with her desire to preserve the Milner Garden and Woodland for posterity. She eventually succeeded. In 1969, Malaspina University-College had opened as Vancouver Island’s first community college. By 1996, its President Rich Johnston had found a way to endow the property, allowing Veronica to remain in the house and the University to preserve the estate. At first this was a precarious ‘marriage’ as Veronica insisted that the President deal personally with her on every matter that she deemed worthy of attention. In one of her incessant phone calls to him she complained that the black squirrels were chasing the brown squirrels and something should be done about this immediately.

The author, Margaret Cadwaladr, with an easy readable style, has produced a handsome work, beautifully designed and well illustrated. It will delight many, particularly those who thrill to handle and read a good book, and of course, all of us who like to eavesdrop on the private life of a remarkable, larger than life woman. Its Canadian importance is evident but it is also a valuable and timely contribution to the full story of Thomond.

George Cunningham

This booklet provides a varied and variable mix of information about one of the oldest parishes in the city. As is acknowledged in the preface the material is gathered largely from the standard general histories of Limerick though manuscript material in the parish archives, mainly registers and title deeds, as well as the annals of St. Mary's convent have also been consulted. The latter sources provide the most valuable sections of the work. The baptismal and marriage registers begin in 1745 and are the oldest in Munster. In addition to invaluable material for genealogists and family history researchers, there are lists of the priests of the parish, historical notes and incidental references of great interest. Various leases and official documents, containing interesting information are also reproduced.

It would appear that the parish might have started to use a unique calendar in the eighteenth century if the entry for September 1752 is correct as it dropped twelve days rather than eleven in introducing the Gregorian system. This may be a later and misinformed insertion. Incidentally the Julian calendar, which was being replaced, was named after Julius Caesar and not Pope Julius as is stated here.

There are useful short accounts of prominent priests and bishops, from or associated with the parish, ranging from the sixteenth century Archbishop Creagh to Monsignor Lee, parish priest for 36 years until his retirement in 1980. Sacristians and other lay people involved with the parish are not forgotten and the variety of parish organisations and activities listed show how dynamic it has been in recent times.

The sections dealing with the earlier medieval and early modern eras are the weakest particularly where an attempt is made to relate the local material to the wider historical picture. Thus we get Danes founding the city, simplistic accounts of the reformation and seventeenth century wars and inaccurate statements about the Penal laws. Assertions that by 1698 "all practice of Popish religion was outlawed" and "all priests had to go into hiding" are not only incorrect but actually contradicted by other sections of the text. The oath of abjuration was not "equivalent to accepting British rule in Ireland" and the penal laws were not "repealed in 1740". This is unfortunately just a selection of the errors which are found throughout the work and which makes it particularly dangerous as a work of reference. One must regretfully also mention the repeated misprints which are particularly irritating not least the misspelling of the names of Limerick's noted historians, Lenihan and Begley. Had greater care been taken with the research, writing and proof reading this would have been a more valuable work but despite its faults and limitations it still provides much useful information about this historic parish.

Mary Ryan


Those familiar with Athlone, despite its many positive features, may be taken aback somewhat by the author's description of his work as that of a 'truffle-digger' - the widespread availability of such delicacies in the town not being immediately obvious. He is in fact referring to the methodological approach which he has adopted in his research. The French *annales* school of historians coined this term to differentiate their approach of historiography from those they termed 'parachutists'. In essence
this means that there are a great number of ‘facts’ in the work. As it derives from a doctoral dissertation this is to be expected but the author is at pains to point out that he feels such an approach is particularly suitable for the historian of a town as well, in his view, being the better approach to historical research in general. This is not to say that he neglects analysis or explanations of the processes of change and development where necessary.

So we learn a great deal about Athlone and its complex history from the stone age to the end of the eighteenth century. For this reviewer at any rate, it is immensely satisfying to find a work which does not attempt to do too much and as it brilliantly demonstrates there is more than enough fascinating material in the time span chosen. The origins of Athlone and its growth into a major town has a simple, estate agent’s explanation, location. The ford grew up at a point where the Shannon was shallow and where esker ridges across the surrounding bogs converged. Precisely when human settlement began cannot be ascertained with any precision but bronze age people were certainly there either as occupants or supplicants to some river god as evidenced by the range of material from this period discovered on the riverbed. Surprisingly the Vikings did not settle there though the surrounding areas were subject to periodic attack by Limerick Vikings particularly under the leadership of one, Olafr Cenncairech. Whether this less than flattering sobriquet ‘seabby head’ accounted for his dislike of Westmeath people or his formation in the original stab city is at this stage not determinable.

It was following the rise to prominence of the O’Connors of Connacht in twelfth century Ireland that Athlone became an important centre. They used it as a key area in the expansion of their power, erecting a castle, bridges and houses, originally in wood, and attracting a Cluniac monastery, the only such foundation ever recorded in Ireland. In the 13th century, wood was replaced by stone and the expansion of the town progressed under the Agnlo-Normans. It was walled, acquired a Franciscan friary and possibly a charter though no record of the latter survives. As the Gaelic revival reversed the Norman conquest, during the 14th and 15th centuries, so the fortunes of Athlone declined. They revived again, as with other Irish towns, under the Tudors. A further boost was provided in 1569 when the seat of the newly established Presidency of Connacht was established in the town. The economic development continued till the wars of the mid seventeenth century when the hitherto Catholic domination was ended by the Cromwellian changes. However the author argues that the older Catholic merchants survived and were prominent into the next century and more surprisingly suggests that there is little evidence of political, social or religious tension between Protestants and Catholics.

Decline set in after 1672 when the Presidency system in Ireland was abolished and the ill-fated siege of 1691 further damaged the town’s prosperity. Its inland location meant it shared the fate of other such towns in the eighteenth century who lost out economically to the seaports of the east and south. It did not begin to recover until the 1840s.

The author has done a remarkable job of reconstructing the history of Athlone over this long period. His achievement is all the more impressive when one learns that almost no local records survive. Relying on central government records, supplemented by newspapers and pamphlets and visits to archives in Britain, France, Denmark and the Vatican he has produced a masterly account of his native town. He writes clearly and elegantly and the high standard of production of the volume is a credit both to the author and his publisher, the Old Athlone Society. It is a fine example of the high academic standards to which local history can aspire and which could be used as an exemplar for anyone contemplating a similar task for their own area.

John O’Connor

This is the third edition of a work first published in 1940. It is a facsimile of the second edition, published in 1968 with the important addition of a new scholarly introduction. In the early 1930s two American anthropologists, Arensberg and Kimball, came to Ireland to conduct research in Co. Clare, primarily in the rural areas but also in Ennis. They were part of a wider project which has been given various titles but it probably best encapsulated in the term Harvard Irish Study. This research was under the direction of Professor Earnest Hooton, of the Anthropology Department at Harvard University and it focused on three areas, archaeology, physical anthropology and social anthropology. The archaeological work was of immense importance particularly in regard to the Stone Age and the excavation reports were published in Irish journals, mainly the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* and the *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*. The racial survey of the people was in part published in 1955, titled *The Physical Anthropology of Ireland*. But it was the social anthropology which excited the greatest interest and debate. In addition to the work under review, Arensberg also published *The Irish Countryman* in 1937. The first edition of *Family and Community in Ireland* dealt only with the rural part of Clare, it was only in the second edition that the work on Ennis was published, both studies are included in the third edition.

While making the work available in print again to a wider audience, the most valuable feature of this new edition is the long, wide-ranging and scholarly introduction by Anne Byrne, Ricca Edmondson and Tony Varley, all from the Department of Political Science and Sociology at Galway University. In general the authors are favourable to Arensberg and Kimball's work which has been the subject of serious criticism. Both their approach and findings have been questioned, particularly the distinction made between traditional and modern concepts of Irish society. It has been argued that rural Ireland in the 1930s was already modern in very many respects and that the Americans failed to take account of class differentiation arising from this. Positive and negative views of the influence of the work remain and indeed of the debate that has ensued about it. One the one hand the work has been condemned as retarding the discipline in Ireland while others have seen it as providing an important and valuable point of reference. While the Galway scholars present the arguments in a balanced manner it is clear that they are sympathetic to the Americans, not least for the opening up of debates on a whole range of anthropological and sociological issues. “More than sixty years after *Family and Community’s* appearance” they write “the book is still capable of attracting readers and even of generating passion”. Clasp Press are to be congratulated for making the work available to a new, post Celtic Tiger Irish audience and for taking the opportunity to provide a valuable commentary to accompany it.

Mary Ryan


William Ronan was born in Clonduff, Co. Down in 1825 to a farming family. After his secondary education at St. Coleman’s College, Newry, he studied for the priesthood in Maynooth and was ordained for the diocese of Dromore in 1848. Having served as a curate for just two years, he decided to leave the secular priesthood and join the Jesuit order. It is not clear what motivated him to make this change but his biographer speculates, on the basis of his later interest in mission and retreat work, that it may have been the Jesuit emphasis on contemplation allied to external activity that appealed to him. It is also noted that his bishop was well disposed to the order though one supposes that he can hardly
have been ecstatic about losing a talented young priest so soon after ordination.

There was then no Jesuit novitiate in Ireland so Ronan was sent to St. Acheul near Arniens in 1850 where he completed his studies. As he was already a priest, he was excused the normal marathon preparation period for Jesuits and he returned to Ireland in 1853. His initial work was in St. Francis Xavier church in Gardiner Street, Dublin from where he also gave missions throughout the country. However the following year he was appointed as a chaplain to the Irish Sisters of Mercy who had gone to nurse the wounded soldiers in the Crimean war. Ronan’s time in Turkey was not a happy one and within a year he had resigned due to ill health. The author suggests that he had suffered a nervous breakdown. Ronan had become embroiled in the bitter dispute which developed between the Irish sisters and Florence Nightingale. Ronan was particularly devastated by the hostility he also had to face from the community of English sisters and the other Irish chaplains there who criticised his role. He also had to face charges of proselytism both from the Protestant chaplains and Nightingale. This complicated and sad episode is expertly discussed with enviable clarity and balance, as one would expect from this distinguished historian.

After a period of recuperation, Ronan resumed his work as a missioner and retreat director, which continued until his appointment as Rector of the Jesuit school and church in Limerick in 1872. He faced both financial and diplomatic problems in this post, which he successfully revolved. The large debts associated with the acquisition of the property at the Crescent, where the church and school had been established, were gradually eliminated through his tireless fundraising activities. The resentment and opposition of the Bishop and secular clergy, which arose from various issues, were gradually eased through his efforts at reconciliation. However his major achievement in Limerick was the establishment of the Jesuit apostolic school at Munagret College. The buildings and land at Munagret had originally been an agricultural school and model farm set up at the initiative of Lord Emly in 1853. This had not prospered and was closed in 1878. This was followed by an equally unsuccessful attempt to have the diocesan college of St. Munchin based there until finally Ronan successfully negotiated the establishment there of his long held dream of a school to prepare young men of poor background for the priesthood, a need which he had identified during his mission activities.

The details of his struggle to bring this dream to a reality make interesting reading not least the opposition from within the order and Ronan’s technique of appealing over the heads of his superiors, which though successful led to even greater resentment from his conferees. Their attitude was not unreasonable: many felt that such a school was not needed while others argued that the limited resources of the order, both in terms of manpower and money, could be better employed in the other activities of the order in Ireland. Ronan persevered in face of all the odds and was appointed first rector of the new school in 1882. To help alleviate the continuing financial difficulties he went to America in 1884 on a fund-raising tour for the school. He remained there for nearly two years, travelling extensively and raising about £13,000 though this led to further criticism from members of the Irish Jesuit province and also from some American bishops. The author also notes that his American trip also showed him to be capable of “extravagant promises, misjudgements, insensitivity and even deviousness”.

He returned to Munagret in May 1886 so enthused with things American that he introduced baseball to the College, a game which, the author laconically notes, enjoyed temporary popularity. However his own stay was to be just as brief and in September he was transferred to Miltown Park, Dublin where he took charge of a newly formed mission staff. In 1893 he moved to Gardiner Street becoming superior there in 1895. However within two years he had to retire as he had become embroiled in a new dispute with his superiors this time over a somewhat improbable claim of impropriety with a rich widow.

Ronan reacted with indignation to the charge that he was sexually involved with the woman, a Mrs Doyle, but his real anger was directed at his superiors who effectively removed him from office, on the
basis of the rumour, and exiled him to the island of Jersey, "for the sake of his health". Ronan reacted with characteristic arrogance, moving without permission to France where he continued to meet with Mrs Doyle, who presumably had followed him there. While the author does not explicitly make any judgement he clearly feels that Ronan was innocent of any sexual misconduct, citing his age and, more convincingly perhaps, his life long ability to form deep friendships with women both nuns and laity. Eventually, at the age of seventy-seven, he returned to Ireland and to Mungret where he lived out the remainder of his life as confessor to the students and a cherished member of the community.

Fr. Morrissey has vividly brought to life this sincere, dedicated, difficult and complex man. While never a major figure he nevertheless made an important contribution to the church both in Ireland and abroad. His work as a missioner and retreat director provides a useful insight into the devotional revolution in the later nineteenth century Irish church. The establishment of the Mungret school brought him into contact with bishops not just in Ireland but in Britain, the United States, Australia, South Africa and India and the students who received their initial spiritual formation and education there went on to make important contributions to the areas throughout the world in which they subsequently ministered. Mungret College continued to play an important role in Irish education, not only through the apostolic school but also through the highly regarded lay school which operated alongside it until the 1960s. As the author notes the buildings erected through Ronan’s vision and tireless dedication are now largely unused and the man himself had been virtually forgotten. While he may not always have been well regarded or fairly treated in life by his Jesuit colleagues, Fr Morrissey has more than made amends by this excellently researched, elegantly written and empathetic biography.

Liam Irwin

Mary Immaculate College


This short book was written, the author informs us, to repair an omission and correct a widespread confusion. The latter belief is that all Limerick Methodists were Palatines and the former lacuna is any account of Methodism in the county. He has expertly achieved his aim with the elegance and style for which he is renowned.

Methodism in Limerick can be traced back to two preachers, Robert Swindells and Thomas Williams who preached for the first time in the city on St. Patrick’s Day 1749. One of their earliest converts was Thomas Walsh, originally from Ballylin, between Rathkeale and Adare, who in his teens had abandoned his plans to become a Roman Catholic priest, converted to the Church of Ireland and set up his own school. Walsh became one of the foremost Methodist preachers and achieved widespread success both in Ireland and England before his premature death in 1759.

He was probably encouraged to undertake this work by the founder of Methodism John Wesley who met him during his first visit to Limerick in 1750. Wesley made many visits to the Limerick area subsequently and there are brief accounts given of each of them. The author casts doubt on the widespread belief, literally written in stone on the Adare Manor golf course, that Wesley preached under an ash tree there in 1756. This is largely because Wesley himself makes no mention of it in his journal, merely recording that he rode back to Limerick from Ballingrane through Adare, which he mistakenly describes as having once been a walled town. Cooney suggests that the preaching may have been in 1752 or on one of his later visits. The practice of holding an annual Field Meeting at the site began in 1819 and has continued ever since.

The relatively well-known quotations from Wesley’s journals about the Palatines, especially the
Killeheen, Courtmatrix and Ballingrane settlements, are reproduced though it is emphasised that many of them never became Methodists. He also notes that there is no mention of Ballyryggen, Ballyorgan or Glenosheen in the journals and as no preaching house was built in these settlements he wonders if they largely remained Anglicans. While some English and Irish came to hear him preach, especially in Kilfinane and Pallaskenry, it was among the Palatines that he had the greatest impact. The emigration to North America in 1760 of Philip Embury and Barbara Heck was to lead to the formation of the Methodist church there and give Ballingrane worldwide fame.

The date of the erection of the chapel at Ballingrane is discussed and from the conflicting evidence, the author suggests that the first preaching house was probably built in 1766, a second in 1775, the third in 1797 and the present one in 1829 which was in turn refurbished in 1885. A large new chapel was erected at Pallaskenry in 1814. The site in the middle of the village was given free by the Countess of Charleville and paid for by a Mr Evans, who was not himself a Methodist. Pallaskenry at that time, the author notes, had an entirely Protestant population.

The first Methodist preaching house in Adare was erected in 1797 though there was certainly a Methodist society there prior to that date. The author speculates, on the basis of a reference by the Countess of Dunraven in her Memorials of Adare Manor that the society may have met in part of the old Augustinian priory before it was restored for Anglican worship. The 1797 structure was on the north side of the old road from Adare to Limerick, which is now an avenue through the golf course. This was used until 1872 when the new building on the Black Abbey Road was completed. Their move was facilitated by the 3rd Earl of Dunraven who did not relish the sight of the Methodists entering his demesne several times a week for worship and meetings.

In 1830 Newborough acquired its own meeting house at the initiative of the Legear family. Two small cottages on their farm were adapted and given to the circuit so that the family and their immediate neighbours could worship there. Given the proximity of Adare this seems somewhat bizarre and one wonders if there was not some dispute or division involved. Sadly this little chapel was the subject of a sectarian arson attack in 1922 and the present building, now no longer in use, was erected in 1925.

The strength and confidence of the Methodists in county Limerick in the mid nineteenth century is shown by the erection of a new chapel and manse in Rathkeale in 1873, just a year after the completion of that at Adare. It had a seating capacity for one hundred and sixty and was lighted by gas. Four years later a schoolhouse was added. In 1899 there were 205 members of the five congregations, which in addition to Sunday services, had Sunday schools and weeknight prayer meetings.

The twentieth century saw a gradual but inexorable decline. Pallaskenry chapel closed in 1921, Newborough in 1967 and Rathkeale in 1968. Newborough reverted to the Legear family and it still survives, in the case of the other two chapels, and that in Tarbert, demolition quickly followed, in some cases at least as a requirement of the sale. Adare and Ballingrane happily remain open with active and vibrant congregations.

The author’s choice of title for this work is based on a description by Wesley. It should be read, as it was intended, as a compliment suggesting that the aims and ideals of Methodism were properly understood and faithfully followed by his Limerick followers. Their history extends over two and a half centuries and forms an important if not very well known aspect of the religious and social history of the county. For illuminating this aspect of our heritage, the author is to be warmly commended.

Tony Browne