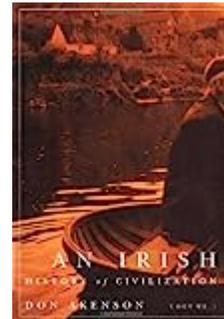


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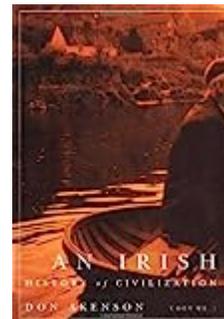
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Donald H. Akenson. *An Irish History of Civilization: Volume 2.* Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006. 704 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-2891-8.



Donald H. Akenson. *An Irish History of Civilization: Volume 1.* Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006. 840 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-2890-1.



Reviewed by Francis Carroll (St. John's College, University of Manitoba)

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Donald H. Akenson is one of the most distinguished and prolific scholars currently working in Irish history. He has published well over a dozen books, mostly on Irish topics and the Irish overseas, but also several on biblical subjects; he has produced five novels as well. He has been a driving force behind the Ontario rural history project and the McGill-Queen's University Press. These efforts have earned him a Professorship at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, and the Beamish Research Professorship of Migration Studies at the Institute of Irish Studies at the University of Liverpool, four honorary degrees, numerous visiting professorships, prestigious fellowships (such as the Guggenheim), membership in the Royal Society of Canada and the Royal Historical Society, and several prizes (including the Grawemeyer Award

for Ideas Improving World Order). Throughout all of this, the hallmarks of Akenson's work have been his instinct for the neglected subject area and his capacity to re-conceptualize the conventional wisdom, including his three volumes on Irish education; his works on the Church of Ireland; and his assertions that the Irish in North America did settle in rural areas, and that Catholics and Protestants did get along once they were away from the old country. So, how might this scholar, at the pinnacle of his career, envision the great sweep of Irish history—the history of Ireland and the Irish at home and abroad in the broadest possible sense? Well, a straight chronological narrative history is out, as is political history in its usual configurations; an historiographical discussion is too rarefied, as is a cultural-intellectual analy-

sis; and a short, illustrated history is too predictable and commonplace. Akenson, as might be expected, has come up with an entirely new form of historical discourse. One is tempted to call it an anecdotal history of Ireland, and the Irish perception of themselves and the worlds they touch. The books are a series of short but related episodes, running from a paragraph to three pages. Akenson calls it *An Irish History of Civilization*.

These books are large. There are 1,459 pages of text. Volume 1 starts with Irish pre-history and goes up to the Famine, and volume 2 goes from the Famine more or less to the beginning of the Troubles. There are many wonderful quotations in the text, although there are no footnotes or even a bibliography. Only a writer in whom one had complete confidence could produce an acceptable work without any scholarly apparatus, and even so one would like some documentation to pursue many of the fascinating points made in the text. However, Akenson's vast reading and range of scholarship have given him the resources to move comfortably from Ireland in the sixteenth century, to the migrations into the West Indies in the seventeenth century, to Ulster settlers on the Pennsylvania frontier in the nineteenth century. Always alert to the ironic, Akenson calls attention to the attraction of the West Indies for upwardly mobile Irishmen, as he had done in his book on Montserrat; similarly he shows that the Protestant Irish dominated the migration to the mainland colonies, and later the United States and Canada into the nineteenth century. As he proceeds chronologically, Akenson focuses increasingly on Irish migration to Australia, New Zealand, and islands in the Pacific. Indeed, although he emphasizes the numerically large migration to the United States and Canada (Canada having the largest proportion of Irish born of any country other than Ireland), roughly 23 percent of the text is devoted to the Irish in these Pacific colonies (the United States and Canada receiving about 10 percent and 6 percent respectively). Akenson's sense of irony never leaves him, particularly when discussing the nationalist tradition in Ireland. The struggle over language and culture, the tensions between

Eamon de Valera and Michael Collins, the working out of the Irish Free State, and de Valera's new constitution in 1937 ("a Catholic constitution for a Catholic people," as he puts it, echoing Sir James Craig's historic statement, "A Protestant parliament for a Protestant people" [pp. 572 and 578]), are all given a slight twist. As John Bowman and J. J. Lee have done before him, Akenson calls attention to the contradictions and failings of Irish society, both north and south, in the years between the First World War and the Troubles in 1969, and he also highlights the success of the Irish overseas—whether in England, Australia, or North America.

The strength of these volumes is to be found in the vast collections of anecdotes and their quotations. Akenson presupposes his reader has a firm grasp of the outlines of Irish history, and even of the Irish abroad, to which he has provided an elaborate gloss. There are hundreds of stories of people and events, to which Akenson has supplied the family connections, the subsequent actions, and the parallel events. For example, Akenson recounts episode by episode the emergence of Cardinal Cullen as the figure who dominated and reshaped the Catholic Church in Ireland and the United States in the nineteenth century; as a parallel he tells the complex stories of John Nelson Darby, the founder of the Plymouth Brethren and the inspiration for modern American Christian fundamentalism (right up to William Bell Riley and Billy Graham), noting not only their influence on religion but also their birth within three years and fifty miles of each other. Nothing in the book seems to happen in isolation. There is always a link or connection to somebody else—a sibling or an in-law or a chance acquaintance. All of this makes very good reading. There is one surprising story after another, particularly if the reader already has the historical framework into which these fascinating details can be placed. In this respect, the books can be said to be a set of tools for scholars. Certainly the books will provide historians with wonderful material with which to enhance their lectures.

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