

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Kyla Madden. *Forkhill Protestants and Forkhill Catholics, 1787-1858.* Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005. xviii + 246 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-2855-0; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7735-3060-7.

Reviewed by Sean Farrell (Northern Illinois University)

Published on H-Albion (April, 2007)

In recent years, Irish historians have become increasingly aware of the unsatisfactory and often counterproductive nature of viewing modern Ulster society through a traditional binary (Catholic-Protestant) lens. Kyla Madden's award-winning *Forkhill Protestants and Forkhill Catholics* is a welcome addition to this growing literature. Resolutely determined to capture the dynamics of everyday life in this richly documented parish in south Armagh, Madden convincingly shows that scholars must move beyond making assumptions about the sectarian nature of Ulster life if they are to more accurately capture its complex mosaic.

Forkhill Protestants and Forkhill Catholics is built around Madden's close examination of seven case studies. Ranging widely from rural violence to landholding to education, each of the chapters challenges analyses that start from sectarian presumptions, providing more grounded and nuanced portraits of nineteenth-century Forkhill life. Madden opens the book with a detailed reconstruction of the infamous Forkhill Incident of 1791, when a group of men assaulted Alexander Berkley, the local schoolmaster, and his family in their home. The attack was a particularly gruesome one; all three household members (Berkley, his wife, and his brother) had their tongues cut out and limbs severed, wounds that led to the death of Berkley's wife. The attack was immediately categorized as sectarian and historians have tended to go along with this interpretation. Building her case from a close and skeptical reading of available documents, Madden argues that the atrocity had little to do with Berkley's Protestantism. It was rather a product of his active opposition to the Defenders (he had participated in the prosecution of several local men), a clear violation of their moral economy. The attack was thus a threatening mes-

sage to "those like him," but this referred to opponents of the local Defender community rather than Protestants per se (p. 27). While I am not convinced that Berkley's outsider status was not sharpened by his identity as a Protestant, Madden's account is a rich one indeed and an excellent corrective to "sectarian first" approaches. One of the real strengths of the book is Madden's rigorous empiricism. Forkhill is blessed with a comparatively rich array of sources, and Madden uses these with creativity and sophistication throughout. Perhaps the best example of this is her use of a manuscript-bound copy of the 1821 census for Forkhill, a document she found in the study of the Church of Ireland rector for south Armagh. Her find is richly rewarded, as Madden utilizes the census to construct a rich social portrait of the parish, one that shows that Catholics and Protestants shared a number of important characteristics in terms of family size, household structure, and farm size. While a few Protestant elites controlled the vast majority of parish land and Protestant households were much more likely to be engaged in textiles, Madden's work here is a nice reminder that plebeian Catholics and Protestants often worked from a similar social base. *Forkhill Protestants and Forkhill Catholics* is not without its problems. At times, Madden's rhetoric extends a bit beyond her reach, particularly in an introduction entitled "The Sectarian Disease," where she understates the sophistication of the existing literature on sectarianism. While she is certainly correct to say that few scholars have questioned the concept of sectarianism itself, a number of scholars have explored this ground in recent years, offering rich and complex explanations of many of the events covered in Madden's study, a fact reflected in her references. Thankfully, her conclusion is much more balanced and effective, highlighting the dan-

gers of navigating the waters of modern Ulster history with a compass built on simple sectarian assumptions. It would be a disservice to end on such a negative note, for this is an impressive and important book, essential reading for students of nineteenth-century Irish history and ethnic relations across the world. In fact, the quality of the book is reflected in the roadmap that it creates for future Irish Studies projects. Two important questions suggest themselves here. First, this is a model local history, and it would be interesting to see if close analytical examinations of other parishes across the north of Ireland produced findings akin to Madden's portrait of Forkhill. Was Forkhill an anomaly? On a broader and more conceptual level, if local everyday relations defy the simplicity of sectarian categorization, what is the relationship between the complex and nuanced everyday and the manifestly communal displays of mid- to late-nineteenth-century Ulster? These are sympathetic questions, triggered by a provocative and thoughtful study.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Sean Farrell. Review of Madden, Kyla, *Forkhill Protestants and Forkhill Catholics, 1787-1858*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. April, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13048>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.