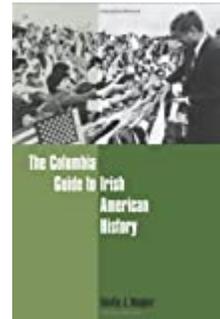




Timothy J. Meagher. *The Columbia Guide to Irish American History.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. 384 pp. \$51.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-12070-8.



Reviewed by Bill Mulligan

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Commissioned by Michael De Nie (University of West Georgia)

Irish America Encapsulated

The *Columbia Guide to Irish American History* is a remarkable accomplishment, impressive in both the breadth and depth of its scholarship. It is part of a new series of guides to different eras and topics in history from Columbia University Press and the first volume in the series to deal with an ethnic group. Previous volumes have dealt with chronological periods or nineteenth-century women's history.

Scholars should applaud Timothy Meagher for this very useful contribution to the literature of Irish America. The format is neither that of the traditional monograph nor the topical dictionaries and encyclopedias that have become quite common recently. The format is new, at least new to me, but quite effective for the purposes of the book. There are five distinct parts to the volume, each with a specific function and purpose. The first is a six-chapter chronological history of the Irish in America from the earliest colonial settlement to the present. Next is a section that deals with four broad and highly significant themes in the Irish American experience—gender and family, politics, Irish American nationalism,

and Irish Americans and race. Part 3 is a series of encyclopedia-style entries on important people, organizations, events, and terms. A timeline of Irish America follows, and finally a very useful annotated bibliography. The chronological and thematic essays devote extensive attention to the scholarly literature, with a detailed and incisive discussion of important works, themes, and controversies. Meagher provides a very thoughtful analysis of the existing literature that is hard to fault. Setting aside a minor quibble here and there about a specific interpretation or the assessment of a particular book, Meagher has brought a huge amount of material together effectively. This will be the starting point for students of the Irish in America, or anyone wanting to get a sense of the state of knowledge about the Irish in America for some time.

The annotated bibliography is of necessity highly selective but Meagher combines major books that have shaped the field with important recent works and his comments are not simple descriptions of the items but highlight the importance or special contribution of each.

His assessments are balanced and fair and will be of special benefit to students beginning work in the field. A small section includes works on Ireland, but the vast majority of the books discussed are on Irish America. He highlights individual essays in anthologies and collections when they are especially important—a very useful aspect of the bibliography. These can be among the hardest things to locate.

The "Chronology of the Irish in America" begins with the Norman invasion of Ireland and includes many events in Irish as well as Irish American history and ends with the Good Friday agreement. It is, like the annotated bibliography, highly selective. One might argue it is incorrectly titled since it offers far more than the title suggests. One might also quibble with some items because any such list opens itself to countless questions. Why is this included? Why not that? The list, as a whole, is very useful to have and in putting events together chronologically underscores connections that might otherwise be missed by the non-specialist. For example, in January 1994, the United States permitted Gerry Adams to visit and on August 31 the same year the IRA declared a cease-fire.

If the annotated bibliography and chronology have the potential to begin a healthy debate over what is and is not included, the section on "Important People, Organizations, Events and Terms" is an open invitation for such a conversation. Given all that Meagher sets out to include and the length of the book, just under 400 pages with index, Meagher had to make a number of hard decisions here as elsewhere. It is very hard to argue against the inclusion of anything that is included or the space allocated to the items. The essays cover items from the earliest presence of the Irish in America—e.g., James Logan, prominent in colonial Pennsylvania, to very recent political figures. Protestant Irish are well represented, a strength throughout the volume. This is not a guide to Irish Catholic American history. Meagher has achieved a reasonable balance along sectarian lines. Politicians and labor leaders figure prominently among the individuals included, but several orders of nuns and a number of individual women are covered as well. More women, especially women religious, might well have been included, but as I said before one must acknowledge the difficulty of fitting all that might be included in 400 pages. The AOH and K of C are here, as are the Fenians, Clann na Gael and the Friends of Ireland for Catholic Emancipation, among other organizations. Dion Boucicault and

(Edward) Harrigan and (Tony) Hart are included as well as a number of bishops and cardinals. Are there things that might have been included? Certainly, but without knowing the parameters of the book—how many pages were projected, for example—it seems unfair to present a laundry list of the excluded. That said, Irish American athletes, especially in boxing and baseball, are noticeably absent, as are Irish Americans in the motion picture industry. There were many Irish Americans important in those areas, which are important parts of American culture. Irish American business leaders seem underrepresented as well. I am hard pressed, however, to identify someone or something that could have been excluded to yield the necessary space. Still, if Dion Boucicault and Harrigan and Hart are included, why not John L. Sullivan, Jack Dempsey, Ed Delahanty, or John Ford, to name but a few candidates? But, I am being drawn into doing something I know is unfair. The essays in this section are well written and offer sound interpretation and insight rather than sterile recitation of facts.

"Issues and Themes in Irish American History" addresses four issues and themes. Two are quite traditional: Irish Americans in politics and Irish American nationalism. They would be hard to avoid in a book like this since they are central to much of the literature. However, the other two topics are less traditional and obvious: Irish American gender and family, and Irish Americans and race. Meagher handles both well, summarizing the literature and subtly suggesting areas for future work. That, of course, is a subtle part of any work like this that summarizes what has been done—pointing to the things excluded.

This is a highly useful book, but that is faint praise for a tremendous accomplishment. Meagher has taken on a very difficult task and executed it extremely well. If others disagree with his choices that only reinforces how much he has accomplished in bringing a large and diverse literature into focus so there can be a focused debate. This will serve as a handy reference for those already familiar with the history of the Irish in America as well as sparking reflection on who and what Meagher has chosen to include and what he has said. It was also serve as the best single-volume introduction to the history of the Irish in America and the historical literature for graduate students and others beginning work in the field, or for those needing a good resources for development of a course or in a course on the Irish in the United States.

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