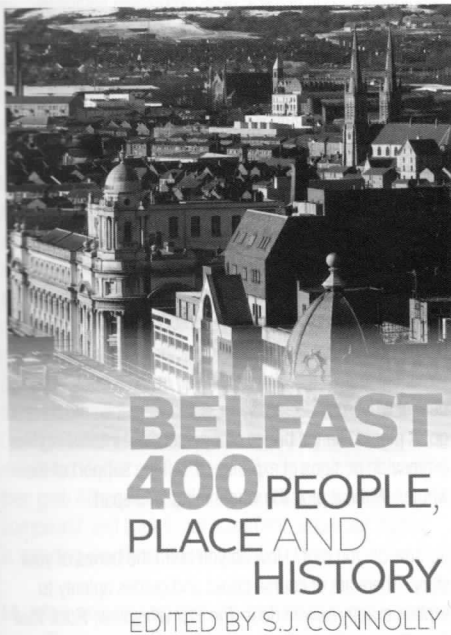


BELFAST 400: PEOPLE, PLACE AND HISTORY

Paul Harron welcomes the publication of a landmark new urban history of the northern capital.



Launched at the end of last month, *Belfast 400: People, Place and History* is a remarkable and handsomely produced new book published to mark the 400th anniversary of Belfast's charter which was granted to the town in 1613. Three years in the preparation and writing, it has been produced by Liverpool University Press (which has a lively interest in publishing books of Irish interest) with contributions from a range of experts – historians, archaeologists, geographers and social scientists from QUB and NUI Maynooth – including Sean Connolly, Professor of Irish History at Queen's University, who is the book's editor and lead writer. Its aim is to present 'a new history of one of the world's most fascinating and most misunderstood cities'.

As I read the book and write this article, Belfast is in the throes of renewed community tensions with protests and distressing TV images of violence blighting some of the streets, the catalyst for which was a vote not to fly the Union flag every day of the year over that most potent and lavish of civic symbols, the City Hall, but only on certain designated days. The current unrest is a stark reminder that the city continues to be a complex, often volatile place – as this book states, 'one of the main theatres in which the conflicts of identity that have created modern Ireland were fought out'. The misunderstanding about Belfast – and the source of its fascination – the authors argue, arise out of the same

contradictions: 'Belfast was a significant part of the story of Great Britain's rise to industrial greatness but it was a city located not in Great Britain, but in Ireland ... yet both its politics and its industrial character set it wholly apart from other Irish towns. A central part of the history of both societies, it has never fitted neatly into the accepted narrative of either.' Yet Connolly is also clear in pointing out that 'the impetus behind the book is a strong sense, shared by all the contributors, that there is a great deal more to the history of Belfast than a zero-sum contest for possession between mutually hostile groups defined exclusively by their religious and political allegiance'.

Complexity

The book, therefore, seeks to get to the heart of Belfast's story in all its complexity. Professor Connolly and Gillian McIntosh provide an erudite opening overview entitled 'Imagining Belfast' which takes as its starting point an exchange at an enquiry of 1859 into the affairs of the municipal borough of Belfast with the rising architect Robert Young (founder of the firm of Young & Mackenzie which was responsible for designing much of the Victorian and Edwardian city's fabric) where he gave evidence concerning the development of Victoria Street and Corporation Street, arguing that 'it would have been better if the new thoroughfares had not been built sometimes under the high-water mark': in other words, there were good reasons to question why Belfast was

built where it was and why it prospered even though the foundations were (are) so watery. Even as a port, Belfast was initially unpromising, and it had no significant deposits of iron ore or coal – '... in all of these respects', say the writers, 'Belfast seemed, to many, a miracle of human achievement against the environmental odds'.

The authors of this opening chapter deserve particularly high praise for the nuanced and balanced way in which they present the history of the development of the city, having uncovered in their research fascinating gems of detail. The chapter is full of colour, the text organised into themes such as 'Belfast on display', 'The city as a stage', 'The city in decline' and 'Image and memory', all complemented well by old photographs, paintings and maps.

As an example of this kind of fresh detail, we find an assessment of Belfast's pervasive 'mixture of confidence and uncertainty', exemplified by David Patterson's publication of 1860, *The Provincialisms of Belfast and the Surrounding Districts Pointed out and Corrected*, in which he catalogued mispronunciations such as 'beg' for 'bag', slang such as 'oxthter' for armpit and 'throughother' for confused, and grammatical errors including the misuse of the past participle – 'I seen him' (could some of today's public figures still take note?!); Patterson, a teacher at the Institute for the Deaf



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and Dumb, wrote: 'Now that the continually increasing importance of our town has already brought us into communication and intercourse with most parts of the world ... it behoves us to look a little more sharply to our Ps and Qs'. What might he have made of the word 'fleg'?

Origins

Ruairi O'Baoill's chapter 'Beneath our feet: the archaeological record' reminds the reader that while the book is primarily concerned with the past 400 years, there has actually been at least 9,000 years of settlement in the hills and high ground around Belfast and almost 800 years of nucleated settlement in what might be termed historic Belfast. Philip Macdonald follows by examining the medieval settlement; both stress the importance of and look forward to future archaeological excavations in order to shed more light on the settlement's origins.

Development

Raymond Gillespie's chapter, 'Making Belfast, 1600-1750', can call upon considerable material evidence

surrounding Belfast's emergent prosperity and the time during which it also became a centre of authority, with Sir Arthur Chichester as a central figure. In 1613 the granting of the town charter allowed for representation in parliament – the actual document is reproduced, as are several fine portraits of wealthy merchants of that time, including a striking one of Thomas Gregg and his family, an example of a family which had come from Scotland, was sworn free and able to establish a large and prosperous dynasty in this place, trading with North America.

One of Gregg's business partners was Waddell Cunningham (1729-97), a self-made man who was involved in Belfast's commerce, banking and manufacturing, becoming the first president of the town's chamber of commerce and who ended up with a sugar plantation in Dominica; he was also radical in his politics, challenging the Earl of Donegall's interest in Carrickfergus. Cunningham's story is one of many in Connolly's chapter on 'The Improving Town' of 1750-1820 – an era of extensive urban growth, cultural cultivation, economic development and the Enlightenment.

By the end of the century, Donegall's influence had waned – he was no longer Belfast's aristocratic proprietor – and 'it was well on its way to becoming Ireland's Manchester', in other words, the 'Workshop of the Empire', which is covered comprehensively in a chapter by Stephen A. Royle looking at the years from 1820 to 1914.

Appropriately, Royle's chapter opens with an image of Olympic and Titanic

in the Harland & Wolff shipyards. This is the city (from 1888, no longer a town) which Thomas Carnduff wrote about in *Songs from the Shipyard*: 'O city of sound and motion! O city of endless stir!' This was the period of Belfast's extraordinary physical transformation, wonderfully captured in John Adams' three-dimensional panorama of c.1900 which is reproduced across a double-page spread.

Insightful

Connolly and McIntosh again provide an insightful and thought-provoking chapter taking up the knotty themes of belonging and exclusion in this 'great age' of the city – for all the civic pride and progress, it was also a place of unequal rights and privileges, 'in other words, [a city] that belonged to some more than others'. The authors examine politics, religion and sectarian conflict, the role of women and newcomers in depth. Sean O'Connell follows with a rich social history covering the years from the First World War through to 1968 when 'sweeping cultural and economic changes transformed the tapestry of life' in an age of 'conservative modernity'.

Finally, Dominic Bryan concludes the book with a finely balanced chapter which takes the reader from 1968 through the years of bitter conflict to the present day city, rebranded as 'Titanic Town' – a space which is, he notes, 'divided and shared'. Bryan charts how the Troubles had a radical impact both in how people's experience of the city changed behaviour and how the people of the city adapted to the new environment: '... the population of Belfast shifted. Working-class residential areas became more single identity than at any time previously'. He continues, 'The landscape itself was not only altered by the nature of the violence but also symbolically marked through identity practices amplified by the conflict.' Meanwhile, as the city was carved up along lines of division – and, just as dramatically, by the road system – Belfast punk band Stiff Little Fingers dealt with the conflict in songs like 'Alternative Ulster' and 'Suspect Device'.

It is no mean feat to capture the story of Belfast in all its phases and to penetrate beneath the surface to explore the multiple issues which make the place what it is and record what it has been. *Belfast 400: People, Place and History* does so very effectively within (appropriately) just 400 pages – it is the urban history which the place deserves, going well beyond what has been generally known to date and doing so with an impressive evenness of tone. Compelling and engaging, the book achieves its ambitious aim – and some – shining new light into many new areas. Anyone with an interest in Belfast should be sure to get hold of a copy in this anniversary year and, indeed, against the recent backdrop of disruption.

Belfast 400: People, Place and History is published by Liverpool University Press: Hardback £35; Paperback £14.95



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