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Marcus Tanner. *Ireland's Holy Wars: The Struggle for a Nation's Soul, 1500-2000*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press. 2001. Pp. 498.

[1] Marcus Tanner, author of *Croatia: A Nation Forged in War*, a graduate of York and Cambridge Universities, a Balkan correspondent of the London *Independent* (1988-1994) and subsequently its assistant foreign editor, offers his readers a trip to the gloomy past of Ireland, spanning 500 years of religious fratricide recited in 500 pages of this great book. The length should not intimidate prospective readers, especially those interested in the history of Ireland. The book is indeed absorbing: at times poetic and funny, at times controversial and shocking, but above all an honest and objective account of the past of a country torn by hatred and violence, which is best known for the everlasting "Sunday, bloody Sunday" of 30 January 1972, as immortalized by a famous song of the Irish band U2.

[2] Critics could hardly blame the author (whose origins are half-Welsh, half-English) for any national bias, which is often the case in such contentious historical matters. Tanner's use of primary historical sources is enviable. Some of the materials cited in the book dates as early as 1586. As the author himself notes, much of his work was done "in libraries, museums, and exhibitions, poring over voluminous memoirs of the bishops, priests and ministers." And yet he spent as much time on the road crossing and re-crossing the thirty-two counties of Ireland, searching for ruined abbeys and cathedrals, talking to priests and their congregations, as well as the Apprentice Boys of Derry and housewives of the Garvaghy Road, trying to match places to dates. *Ireland's Holy Wars* is thus an impressive product of a journalist's interview habits coupled with a historian's documentary scrutiny.

[3] Tanner sets himself a rather ambitious goal: "to answer the questions the endless media coverage of Northern Ireland fails to address, in particular the role the churches have played in building up - and breaking down - confessional battle lines." His departure point is an assumption that it was religion rather than anything else that plunged the country into five centuries of continuous bloodshed. Protestantism forcefully imposed by the British fueled the Irish quest for national identity. A reckless, deviant practice of Catholicism drove the Irish Republican Army (IRA) to terrorize the protestant community of Ulster "in the cause of freedom." Through the eyes of an unprejudiced observer, Tanner leads his reader through

the years and centuries of the struggles, which he ironically refers to as "the holy wars." Page after page the author recaptures precise details of the religious fight for power, glory and wealth, sometimes even at the expense of articulating the most important events of Irish history. While the litany of years, places, names and titles may at times annoy the reader, Tanner's journalistic style makes the reading enjoyable.

[4] Tanner suggests that to understand this hatred one has to go beyond the partition of Ireland and the IRA campaigns to the failed attempt of the English authorities to impose the Protestant religion on Ireland in the sixteenth century. By linking Irishness with Catholicism and Protestantism with Britishness the author highlights the central and most important message of his book - it was Ireland's religious struggle more than anything else that forged the national identity of the Irish people, or peoples.

[5] Tanner begins his tale of Irish history with the early and largely unsuccessful English attempts to colonize the country in the sixteenth century, followed by the reformation and Cromwell's bloody campaigns of "transplantation that did away with seven-eighths of the population and left vast tracts of the country deserted" (145) in the middle of seventeenth century. The French revolution, which concluded the relatively peaceful eighteenth century, was echoed in Ireland, triggering a new wave of massive unrest and violence. In the nineteenth century, with the consolidating and growing power of the Catholic Church, unconditionally supported by the majority of Irish population, the country took an irreversible path towards independence. At the same time, Ulster province (which is now known as Northern Ireland) started to acquire its "orange" colors and "unionist" shape. "The struggle for the nation's soul" continued throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Finally, on 18 April 1919 Éire became the Republic of Ireland, free of any allegiance to the British crown and the Commonwealth of Nations. A month later, the British Parliament approved a bill continuing the status of Northern Ireland as a part of Great Britain, perpetuating the mutual religious hatred and violence between the Catholics and Protestants of Ulster well into the second half of the 20th century.

[6] Although history is *not* a very good teacher, the history of Ireland is worth reading as a lesson that should not be learned and even less so - repeated. An elderly man interviewed by Tanner in Dumree (one of the towns in the Northern Ireland), presented an "irrefutable" argument as to why Irish hate the British crown so much, maintaining that life was much better before the English invaded Ireland under Henry II in the twelfth century. In other words, Henry II is to be held responsible for Molotov cocktails and communal hatred that feature the annual protestant parades in Ulster instead of Guinness beer and folk songs. Similarly, Cromwell is to be blamed that the 1999 parade turned into a night of riot with 100 petrol bombs thrown, scores of innocent people injured, shops smashed and the Kentucky Fried Chicken - inexplicably - set on fire. As one Irish woman attending a Catholic church told the author, apart from religion, the Irish are a pretty friendly people. History may advise us why certain events take place, however it is the worst advisor when it comes to solving the problems that history itself raises. Only a future marked by multi-cultural, multi-racial and pluralist Irish society may end the "holy wars" between Catholics and Protestants "for a nation's soul" once and for all.

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