

lough O'Carolan (1670–1738), and Oliver Goldsmith (c. 1730–74), author of the still-treasured poem “The Deserted Village.”

Most of Ginna's book, however, is not so colorful and memorable as these sporadic history lessons. Noting the recent economic prosperity that has made Ireland the “Celtic Tiger,” he tells us early on that “I wanted to learn in just what ways this new affluence had affected the land and the people I'd long known. . . . I was eager to see what the Irish had accomplished, what they had gained for themselves and perhaps had lost, and what they had preserved from a rich and tumultuous past.” The problem is that this quest too often leads him into the realm of the ephemeral and dull. Instead of, say, an incisive interview with Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams or even Unionist leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner David Trimble, we get platitudinous blather from the Lord Mayor of Cork: “He emphasized the resources and opportunities Cork offers to its youth: ‘Each can become an engineer or a window cleaner,’ he said. ‘Each one of these children can become whatever he or she wants to be. The opportunities are there.’” Ginna never digs under the façades. Everything the various entrepreneurs, politicians, and military men tell him is taken at face value.

What we learn about our author/traveling companion over the course of the book must be extracted from passing comments—he's 74 when he decides to embark upon this walking tour of Ireland, he “loved toy soldiers as a lad,” he's “reasonably” religious, he's originally from the vicinity of Fifth Avenue and 50th Street in Manhattan, he was a university teacher, and he “had become close” with playwright Sean O'Casey. But these little details are parsimoniously distributed, and one can't help but feel that the book would have been far more engrossing if its author had shared more of his own history and interior life. The most inexplicable instance of Ginna's holding back, especially in a book like this, is a passing reference to “County Cavan, whence my maternal grandmother hailed.” And that's it for poor, nameless granny. A bit of research resulting in a paragraph or two for her is the sort of touch that would have given this book more soul.

—TERENCE WINCH

***THE LAST REVOLUTIONARIES:
German Communists
and Their Century.***

By Catherine Epstein. Harvard Univ. Press. 322 pp. \$29.95

The truly remarkable revelation at the heart of *The Last Revolutionaries* is how little the German Communists changed over the course of the 20th century. While the world around them was transformed—by war, politics, culture, the growth of a complex interdependence—the pre-1933 radicals who became the dictators and propagandists of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) hewed to a static worldview. This rigidity, the Communists maintained, was the only way East Germany could steel itself against the capitalist, imperialist West. In the end, though, their refusal to change hastened the unraveling of the corrupt and backward GDR regime.

A history professor at Amherst College, Catherine Epstein puts this changelessness into sharp relief by tracing the rises and falls of some of the most prominent German Communists, from the Weimar Republic to the Third Reich to the Cold War to the post-Cold War era. These include the only two men to rule the GDR during its four-decade existence (1949–89), Walter Ulbricht and Erich Honecker, as well as lesser-known figures such as Karl Schirdewan, Gerhart Eisler, Franz Dahlem, and Emmy Koenen. Their stories—which feature Nazi concentration camps, forced exile, the Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Gulag, and the ruthless autocritiques that became a hallmark of communist life—provide deep insights into socialist totalitarianism.

Particularly helpful is Epstein's discussion of the complicated interplay of personal and political forces. How, for example, could Marxists reconcile their ideology with the Hitler-Stalin Nonaggression Pact of 1939? Or the 1953 workers' strikes? Or a party that from the beginning impugned, imprisoned, and in some cases murdered many of its most committed backers, all in the name of the proletariat?

Unfortunately, Epstein doesn't really plumb the underlying psychology here. She piques our interest by pointing to the

unavoidable conflict of collective versus individual interests, but she never moves beyond, or below, the obvious. Veteran Communists, she writes, had invested their whole lives in the workers' struggle; they feared what might happen if they were suspected of "arrogance," "individuality," or other bourgeois tendencies; and they genuinely believed that Marxism-Leninism, despite its dictatorships and food shortages, was superior to free-market democracy. "Communism was their *raison d'être*; to break with their faith would have dissolved the master narrative of their lives into countless meaningless episodes."

That's fine, but it reads a bit thin. The power of the totalitarian idea, as Milan Kundera and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, among others, have articulated, is the power to dissolve the sense of self and to corrode the fabric of society until there are no relations, no freely feeling and freely thinking human beings—indeed, no community—but only atoms tethered to the state. This is a rich and complicated topic, layered with thought, myth, and emotion, and it deserves deeper probing.

The Last Revolutionaries is well written, intelligent, and, unlike much of what is called history nowadays, devoid of postmodernist lingo and other academic fashion statements. But by the end, one is still left to wonder what exactly compelled these people to stay faithful to a regime and a politics that had wrought so much devastation.

—PETER SAVODNIK

**GRAND OLD PARTY:
*A History of the Republicans.***

By Lewis L. Gould. Random House.
602 pp. \$35

This much-needed history of the Republican Party takes as its theme America's partisan fluctuations during the past century and a half. Lewis L. Gould, a professor emeritus of histo-



With Calvin Coolidge directing it, the GOP elephant stamps out the snake of radicalism in this 1924 cartoon.

ry at the University of Texas at Austin, argues that the positions of the two major American parties have been almost interchangeable on a wide variety of issues, especially those relating to foreign policy and the division of labor between federal and state government.

What, he asks, does the Grand Old Party actually stand for? The Whigs, Know-Nothings, and others who formed the Republican Party in 1854 seized the initiative to become, in effect, America's party, the party of Union and patriotism. The Republican Party presided over the Civil War and Reconstruction, during which it intimidated opponents by waving the bloody shirt and taking the "patriotic" offensive. For all the cultural and political twists and turns in the years since, for all the contradictions brought about by shifting centers of power and interest, the Republicans have retained this position in the mainstream of national identity. Witness the Democrats' ongoing difficulty contending with, in Gould's words, the "sense of innate social harmony as the central fact of American political and economic life [that] remains a key element in Republican thought."

The Republicans' seminal contributions to modern American democracy, the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, did much to define a system of values for multira-