

Current Books

may. The neoconservative persuasion deserves a more searching examination than it gets here.

—ANDREW J. BACEVICH

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF IRELAND.

Edited by Brian Lalor. Yale Univ. Press. 1218 pp. \$65

The reference book sector of the publishing world has been hit especially hard by the advent of the electronic age. Encyclopedias, once available through a variety of channels, including the storied door-to-door salesmen, now struggle against cheaper, less bulky sources of information—everything from inexpensive CD-ROMs to Google searches.

But encyclopedias have hung on, and some, such as Yale University Press's monumental *Encyclopedia of the City of New York* (1995), have met with acclaim and success. Many readers, it seems, mistrust the newer platforms and still look to print for authoritative information. In size, shape, and feel, not to mention Yale's imprint (on the U.S. edition), *The Encyclopedia of Ireland* evokes its New York predecessor.

Befitting a book on the Emerald Isle, this volume includes much lavish color, set within a superbly designed grid of type and illustrations. Brian Lalor, the author of several books about Ireland, has recruited a first-rate cast of writers and scholars to, as he puts it, "open a door into the Irish version of [the] collective unattainable past" and "celebrate the gift to the culture of the world of a vibrant and irrepressible people." Established authorities such as Harry White, Fintan Vallely, George O'Brien, Eamonn Wall, and William H. A. Williams are among "almost a thousand people" who helped create the book. (Several important voices, particularly on Irish-American matters, are, however, noticeably absent, including Charles Fanning, Kerby Miller, and Timothy Meagher.) The book's 5,000 or so entries include a host of excellent miniessays, but none are so engaging as those by the Dublin traditional singer Frank Harte, who

reveals himself to be a master of short, vivid narratives. His entries on the Invincibles and the "Rebellion of 1798 in song," among others, are gems.

The book has an agenda, or perhaps I should call it an editorial slant, which isn't surprising in such a potentially influential project. The subcutaneous message seems to be: "We are a modern nation with a rich tradition." The sensibility behind the encyclopedia proposes an Ireland not of "40 shades of green" and nostalgic romanticism, but of the European Union and the "Celtic Tiger." The most striking instance of this occurs alongside the entry on "development aid," where a half-page is devoted to a photograph of three African beneficiaries of a community development project in Zimbabwe partly funded by the Irish government. Including this in a book on Ireland seems an extravagance.

Indeed, the criteria for inclusion aren't always clear. There is no entry on Kevin Barry, a famous early-20th-century boy rebel, for example, or on Nuala O'Faolain, a contemporary feminist novelist and journalist; yet "Australian politician" Peter Lalor (an ancestor of the editor?) is included. The book seems to stick to native-born Irish people for the most part, but not always: Guglielmo Marconi makes it in on slim pretenses (near Dublin, he transmitted "the first live wireless report on a sports event"). The 700 or so illustrations are often wonderful, yet few are given so much as an approximate date. Of the thousands of beautiful tunes and songs in the Irish tradition, why single out "The Mason's Apron" and "My Lagan Love" for entries? Why is the great traditional singer, known throughout the Irish diaspora as Joe Heaney, listed under the Irish spelling of his name only (Seosamh Ó hÉanaí)? Errors of fact, perilous in a reference book, crop up here and there, as in William Butler Yeats's death year being off by a decade.

Any book of this magnitude will have its quirks and flaws, and readers should be forgiving. In the end, *The Encyclopedia of Ireland* offers a great bounty of entertaining information and knowledge.

—TERENCE WINCH