

Current Books

affecting may be largely Reed's inventions.

When I first visited Shiloh, in the winter of 1997, the peach trees in the orchard stood barren against a leaden sky. When I returned last summer, the sun was blazing and the peach trees were gone, replaced by tiny saplings. It was a lesson in preservation. Unlike artifacts and buildings, battlefields are organic. They grow and die and evolve.

This Great Battlefield of Shiloh is a fascinating study of the institutional forces that created our battlefield parks, a social history of the era of their formation, and a meditation on time, change, and conservation.

—TIM MORRIS

THE LAST OF THE CELTS.

By Marcus Tanner. Yale Univ. Press.

398 pp. \$30

The Last of the Celts maps out the seemingly irrevocable decline of a great world culture. Calling upon a torrent of histories, facts, statistics, and anecdotes, Marcus Tanner, the author of *Ireland's Holy Wars* (2001), argues that the traditional cultures of the Celtic lands—Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, Brittany, and the Isle of Man, with Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Island and Argentina's Patagonia thrown in for extra weight—are very near extinction. Gloomy as this premise may be, Tanner tells the tale with considerable style and feeling, and backs it up with impressive research. The book is part ancient history, in which colorful characters from the past struggle over politics and religion, and part contemporary travelogue, in which today's Celts are examined for signs of cultural life.

"This is a book," Tanner tells us straight off, "about the disappearance of . . . the Celts." Don't be fooled by the seemingly worldwide interest in such attractions as Celtic music and dance: This "new-baked Celticism" is "a marketing device" that signifies nothing so much as "the community's death rattle."

More than anything, *The Last of the Celts* is a book about language. Although Tanner admits in his conclusion that "language is not the sum total of a culture,"

the bulk of his text does equate culture with language, suggesting in case after case that as language goes, so goes the culture. And the Celtic tongues are not doing well. The last Cornish speaker, one Dolly Pentreath, died in 1777, and "the last native-born Manx speaker, Ned Madrell, died in 1974." Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, the big three of the Celtic world, as well as Brittany, still have native-born speakers, but their ranks are dwindling in spite of language preservation measures. While Tanner doesn't dismiss these efforts, he is skeptical that any Celtic language will ever stage a serious comeback.

After language, only music emerges in *Last of the Celts* as a truly significant element in the composition of cultural identity. Tanner cites it, for example, as an important cultural marker in Cape Breton, a largely Scots island where fiddlers and traditional music abound. But though Tanner regards traditional music as a sign of hope in Cape Breton, he dismisses it as "homogenized" and "manufactured" in Ireland: "Most of what is called 'Celtic culture' is just junk, a marketing device re-playing to visitors the comforting images that they themselves have constructed." There is certainly plenty of schlock passing for Irish music these days, but there is also a vital and genuine music and dance tradition in Ireland and throughout the Irish diaspora that seems to have escaped Tanner's notice.

A few simple maps would have been helpful in a book that covers so much terrain, as would a comprehensive definition of the nature of culture and cultural identity. This book fits into a larger, passionate discussion of the global threats to smaller cultures and their languages. (In the United States, for example, the assault on Native American cultures since Columbus has brought about the loss of hundreds of Indian languages.) It remains to be seen whether Tanner's pessimistic vision will come to pass. Most of the world's peoples, Celts included, tend to resist the erosion of cultural identity and to negotiate new ways of defining themselves in the confrontation with the forces of mass culture.

—TERENCE WINCH