Green Dreams

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Mike Cronin and Daryl Adair
The Wearing of the Green:
A History of St Patrick’s Day
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EACH YEAR, around 17 March, someone asks, ‘What is St Patrick’s Day all about?’ and each year someone gives a different answer. This capacious book is a compendium of all the answers. There is no single answer to the question, because each celebrant has his or her own take on the day. Academics Mike Cronin and Daryl Adair have combined to produce a fact-filled study of how St Patrick’s Day has been celebrated in New York, Dublin, Sydney, Melbourne, and some British and Canadian cities. This is dedicated work, for writers and readers alike, as events, statistics, history, memories, comments and stories compete for attention. The authors achieve a lofty impartiality, allowing readers to make up their mind about what is being read, and not invading the telling of the stories too much. The book will be a trove for journalists who have to write one of those 17 March articles.

It is first of all, infamously, a day for drink. You don’t have to be Irish to be encouraged on that day to drown the shamrock. In recent years, the Guinness marketeers have got into the act in a big way. They supply pubs with bunting, posters, cut-outs, balloons, coasters and stickers, all linking the celebration of the day with the consumption of their product. The rest of the year is promoted as 364 practice days. The authors give their evidence is an 1890 St Patrick’s Day programme in Montreal: ‘It was booed. And booed.’

So, whatever else is said about St Patrick’s Day, first of all it is a party. Either a party to celebrate the goodness of life or to forget its harshness. The president of Ireland, Mary McAleese, picked up both themes last year when she said that the day was about both celebration and lamentation.

A party needs festive clothes, hence the colour of the day, chiefly green: the green line down Fifth Avenue, the green river in Chicago, green umbrellas on earlier days, green beer, green ribbons, green balloons, green badges. It is niggatory to complain about the ‘poor taste’ of this festival of excess. Poor taste is the point, like the blaring colours of a comic strip or a showground. The authors quote a wail by Malachy McCourt: ‘There comes into my heart a sense of dismay at the approach of St Patrick’s Day — our annual entry into the Green Ghetto.’ Spare me days, the house leprechaun of New York’s drinking classes, the prince of paddywhackery himself is coming over all refined.

If good taste is not the point, nevertheless, there are serious aspects to any folk festival that are worth exploring, as anthropologists well know. Apart from Irishness (whatever that is), one of the earliest strands of meaning to emerge was that of religious contestation. The authors quote a very funny Presbyterian sermon from mid-nineteenth-century Toronto to introduce the theme of contestation; and they follow it with loads of evidence to show how closely Catholic clerics welded St Patrick and his feast day to their own concerns. Among their evidence is an 1890 St Patrick’s Day programme in Montreal: ‘Our national saint was a votary of the Papacy … He was proud of being a subject of the sovereign Pontiff …’ Oh, sure.

In Australia, the Catholic Church had successfully captured St Patrick’s Day for its own purposes by the end of the nineteenth century. The St Patrick’s Day parades through Melbourne during the long episcopate of Daniel Mannix are the locus classicus of this, and the authors give them generous space. They argue that loyalist critics who tried to ban them were not anti-Catholic so much as anti-republican and pro-Empire. Up to a point. The parades came after the wartime conscription referendum, when our two main religious traditions squared off against each other over the question of what it meant to be an Australian. St Patrick’s Day in Melbourne was part of the cult of Mannix. His successor, Knox, closed down the parade not, as the authors suggest, because, after state aid, he didn’t need the (small) money it raised for Catholic schools, but because he wanted to move Melbourne on from Mannix.

The reinvention of St Patrick’s Day, in Australia as elsewhere, opens it up to new meanings. Irish Australians were our first ethnic. Today their parade is a salute to the sharing of a multicultural vision after decades of British triumphalism. Oliver MacDonagh, one of the wisest Australian historians, has suggested that the day is now a work of the imagination wherein celebrants may dream their very own dreams of a better world.