

## Book Review

# **Brigid Laffan & Jane O'Mahony (2008)** ***Ireland and the European Union***

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

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Ireland and the European Union? It's been a rollercoaster ride – with dizzying highs and crashing lows, Ireland's progress over the course of membership has been marked successively by plunging the depths of economic crisis in the 1980s, followed by the rapid and spectacular rise of the Celtic Tiger period before the dizzying descent into the current morass of exponential deficit and borrowing. Once hailed as the economic success story of integration in Europe, this small, peripheral state is now derided as the equivalent of an Icelandic-type financial collapse, give or take a spelling error or two. At times the home of the most positive of Europeans (when Eurobarometer asks whether membership has been a 'good thing', the Irish habitually return positive ratings in the 70-80% range as the transfers from CAP and Structural Funds flowed in), Ireland has more recently returned not one but two negative referenda results on crucial European treaties. It's a fascinating story and an intriguing case study of small state Europeanization, and this publication tells it exceptionally well. Indeed, *Ireland and the European Union* will become *the* core text for practically all political and international relations modules at Irish universities for some years to come.

Brigid Laffan and Jane O'Mahony firmly place their study in the theoretical framework of Europeanization and do so in an easy manner, well structured and, as usual with these authors, with a perceptive and analytical rigour that is a benchmark for other small state studies in the canon. Tracing the path from independence from the UK in the 1920s, through the conservatism of the mid-century, to the preparation for and negotiation of accession to the EU, the authors initially lay down a useful contextual framework for the modernization and move toward Europe by a society that had seriously lagged behind its continental counterparts in terms of prosperity and societal change. For Ireland, as the authors explain, 'embracing international liberalization and economic growth would carry with it the seeds of deep societal change and challenge' (p14).

Chapters range from how successive Irish administrations 'managed' Europe; effects on political parties and parliament; referenda and Irish attitudes to treaty changes; various policy sector discussions, including a sharply focused, incisive chapter on foreign policy and notions of Irish neutrality; and the effects of membership on the British-Irish dynamic, as Ireland moved from dependence on the UK for economic trade as well as policy frameworks, toward a wider and much healthier interdependence with a broader range of economic and political partners within the growing EU. The final two chapters are as neat an encapsulation as one can find on whether Ireland can be considered a model for small states within a larger union, as well as what the Irish experience tells us about the EU itself.

While Laffan & O'Mahony note the difficulty in isolating 'EU' effects in a definitive manner, their analysis of the complex interaction between Ireland and the EU through a period of heightened globalization of the international economy is as effective as can be found on the academic text market. In the final chapter, they explore the notion of the EU as a geopolitical framework or 'scaffolding' for the Irish state, mediating this island nation's relationship with the global political economy and, in particular, bridging its strategic ties to both the United Kingdom and the United States. These core relations were approached, not in an ideological or philosophical manner, but in a pragmatic, adaptable style by the Irish state elite illustrating the 'tactical wizardry' (according to former Commissioner Chris Patten) of the Irish in its attitude to the opportunities afforded to a small state in a large union.

More so than any other previous publication on Ireland and Europe, Laffan and O'Mahony offer an articulate, coherent, comprehensive, analytical yet readable account of the complex relationship between a small state in the throes of rapid modernization and societal change on the one hand and an emerging, evolving multi-level governance entity on the other. Its core value as a case study is in its illustration of how the process of Europeanization is not 'an all-pervasive and powerful process that squeezes member-state institutions, national identities and domestic choice of all meaning. The obligations of membership, the ties that bind, are thick enough to enfold the member states, but thin enough to allow for considerable domestic choice and latitude' (p.263). They argue that notwithstanding the tangible benefits in terms of economic development, financial transfers and geopolitical positioning, the EU remains a distant and little understood entity for the majority of people.

The authors note that the text was completed in the aftermath of the negative referendum on the Lisbon Treaty in 2008. Whereas successive Irish governments had positioned the state as a committed member of the Union, and the Union itself providing a strong anchor in a rapidly changing world, they note that 'the anchor is now loose of its moorings' and that Ireland's long-standing consensus on the EU is over.

Thus this publication comes at what might be a tipping point in Ireland's relationship with the European Union – the indulgence of an electorate biting the hand that feeds in successive European referenda may well be seen as flagrant hubris before the economic crash which brought home the realisation of where our interests truly lie. Thankfully, this period has also seen publication of Laffan & O'Mahony's text which can help our students and citizens reflect on the evolution a relationship which has many twists and turns in the tale still to be told. It is a major study, and destined to become the classic study, of Ireland's most vital relationship for many years to come.

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