

San Francisco Book Review

ClanDonnell: A Storied History of Ireland

By David McDonnell

Burrowing Owl Press, \$34.95, 928 pages, Format: Trade

Star Rating: 4.5 out of 5

David McDonnell tells Ireland's history through a unique lens, tracing the history of the original Clan Donnell (Donald in Scotland) and offshoot clans (McDonnells, McDonalds, O'Donnells, etc.) that dominated the Hebrides Islands, Highland Scotland, and much of Ireland, until the English subjugated the island in the 17th century.

McDonnell has a story-teller's voice, though his richly textured and layered 900-plus-page book is factual. Familiar historic figures star in this story, but the author shows a Donnell, a Donald, or a McDonnell on the scene at every turn, including "The Troubles" of the 1900s. It's a mesmerizing book that feels like a personal journey through Ireland's history.

In the Clan Era, there was much travel between Scotland and what was Ireland at that time: not a nation, but an amalgam of small kingdoms headed by clan leaders chosen by their clan members and associated clans. The McDonnell clan was predominant in the north but migrated south as well. "Redshanks" and "Gallowglass warriors" (well-trained Scots mercenaries loyal to McDonnell clan in Northern Ireland) could be rented out to other clans in both places, which gave the McDonnells more power and land for their clans. (The English were terrified of these warriors.)

Early Scots who immigrated assimilated easily into the Irish clans. Viking invasions of the 8th and 10th centuries also assimilated into Celtic clans. The Celtic clan culture worked for more than a thousand years, and author McDonnell raises a good question: Who really is Irish? Ireland was invaded over centuries by many different groups — all of whom wove themselves into the culture and became part of the Ireland we know today.

A clan leader's first concern was to provide what was best for the clan. That changed with the Norman and English invasions in the late 12th century. Clan leaders who made peace with the invaders became earls instead; their clan members became tenants. Later, English colonizers turned this to their own advantage: when these Irish earls were recalcitrant, they were replaced with English landlords, most of them absentee landlords. The subjugation of Ireland became complete under Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, James I (who encouraged Protestants from the Scottish lowlands to immigrate into what is now Ulster), and Cromwell, whose system of forfeiture reduced most Irish to subsistence or homelessness long before the potato blight of the 1840s. James I and Cromwell set the scenes for "The Hunger" and Diaspora of the 1840s, and the horrendous "Troubles" in the 20th century. At every event in this absorbing book, one meets a McDonnell or two — some on one side, some on the other. There were McDonnell landlords and earls, McDonnell members of the IRA. Some fought for England in WWI.

As promised, McDonnell doesn't litter pages with footnotes, claiming they make for a tedious read. I do think the book could have benefitted from appendices in the back with more timelines and maps. An index would have been helpful, too. I had to do a lot of re-reading and page-turning to keep track of events. That said, this is a treasure trove of information for anyone interested in Irish history.