

## **King Dan: the rise of Daniel O'Connell, 1775-1829.**

**By Patrick M. Geoghegan. Pp xii, 337, illus. Dublin:**

**Gill and Macmillan. 2008. €24.99.**

### **Maura Cronin**

This very readable work is the first volume of a proposed two-volume study of the life and political career of Daniel O'Connell, concentrating on his career up to the granting of Catholic emancipation in 1829. One might ask whether there was any need for such a work given the range of similar studies, from that by O'Faolain in 1938 through those of O'Ferrall (1985) and MacDonagh (1988), as well as edited volumes by MacCartney (1980), and Nowlan and O'Connell (1991). Many of the themes dealt with in Geoghegan's first volume have already been given considerable attention in these earlier works. For example, O'Connell's ebullient personality and his straddling of the Gaelic and Anglicised worlds form the core of O'Faolain's aptly entitled *King of the Beggars*, O'Ferrall's *Daniel O'Connell and the birth of Irish democracy* has teased out the mechanics and dynamics of the emancipation campaign - and especially the role of the Waterford clergy - in laying the foundation of O'Connell's political machine; and MacDonagh's *Hereditary bondsman: Daniel O'Connell 1775-1829* has explored the impact of family and locality on O'Connell's political evolution, as well as the tensions in his public personality between statesman and popular agitator. The essay collections have further extended the examination of O'Connell's career to cover such issues as his position as a folk hero, his social and economic beliefs, his impact, and his reputation in the wider European context.

One also gets a sense of *déjà vu* when identifying the primary-source material used by Geoghegan. There is a major (and understandable) reliance on the O'Connell correspondence, on the O'Connell journals edited by Houston in the early twentieth century, and on the memoirs of O'Connell's contemporaries, William Fagan, Daniel Owen Maddyn and O'Neill Daunt. At the same time, there is a decided underuse of contemporary newspaper material in analysing elite and popular reaction to O'Connell's legal and political performance, and in contextualising contemporary events, such as the Waterford election of 1826, the Doneraile trials of 1829, and the Carrickshock incident of 1831-2. Similarly, in view of the fact that Geoghegan's work focuses on the contemporary government reaction to O'Connell's rising prominence, it is to be regretted that there is insufficient attention given to the records of the Dublin Castle administration.

On the other hand, some of those features that first appear as shortcomings emerge on closer reading as strengths. There is no doubt that Geoghegan's reworking of familiar themes and sources serves to emphasise a number of vital issues. He reminds us of just how adamant was the official opposition to emancipation in the decades before the 'age of reform', and how divided was the opinion of reformers in relation to the issue of Catholic relief. He also - and this comes largely from his combing of the correspondence - stresses the importance in the broader political context of O'Connell's personal resentment against that glass ceiling that prevented his 'taking silk' and, thus, excluded him from the highest levels of his profession. Geoghegan's delving into the correspondence also gives insights into O'Connell's complex personality, tracing the evolution of his private and public character from the erratic, indolent and self-obsessed young man (apparently as upset in 1797 by his bad head cold as by the danger of an upcoming rebellion) to the (at least publicly) more measured fifty-year-old of the later 1820s. The work also successfully explores the complex mixture of apparent rashness and underlying caution in O'Connell's approach to public affairs, and his astute

sense of timing in both the courtroom and in the political arena. Indeed, the link between O'Connell's legal expertise and his growing effectiveness as a popular politician is possibly the issue most successfully explored in Geoghegan's work. The comprehensive (and sometimes excessive) quoting of speeches throughout the book, and the attention given to O'Connell's assessment of his own speeches and those of others, from Pitt to Lawless, together underline the importance of oratory in the development of O'Connell's public political persona. Indeed, one is left with the impression that Geoghegan's primary assessment in this first volume is, firstly, of O'Connell the lawyer, and, secondly, of O'Connell the orator - no inaccurate portrayal of a highly manipulative and successful public man at the end of the long eighteenth century.