



Review of the recently published history of the Church of Ireland by Dr Robert McCarthy

Dean Robert McCarthy was invited by The Irish Times to review the recently published history of The Church of Ireland.

Dr McCarthy writes - *The [Church of Ireland](#) – An Illustrated History* begins with a number of essays. Those on architecture and stained glass by Michael O'Neill and [David Lawrence](#) respectively are, as one would expect, magisterial.

Raymond Refausse's chapter on the Church of [Ireland](#) archives points out that the church, by an accident of history, has custody of the largest collection of medieval cartularies (deeds or charters) in Ireland.



His comment on the widely held view that all the archives were destroyed by fire in the [Public Record Office](#) in 1922 is interesting. He says that many records were never in the office and so survived, while of those that were destroyed,

more have survived in copy and extract form than was initially thought. He concludes there exists ample primary resource material to satisfy the needs of the research community, local, national and international.

Surprising choice

Bishop [Harold Miller](#) was a surprising choice to write about church liturgy, and the picture of him laying a wreath on the large stone outside Down Cathedral (which dates only from 1900) perpetuates the “fond fable” that St Patrick is



buried beneath it. JF Rankin, in his recent history of the cathedral, wrote that “we will never know the correct location” of Patrick’s grave.

A page is devoted to St Patrick’s Cathedral, Dublin, by [Andrew Smith](#) and [Gavin Woods](#). It is unfortunate the name of the sculptor of the modern sculpture of St Patrick there is given incorrectly. It was Melanie LeBrocqy.

The second part of the book is a gazetteer of all the churches with introductions by bishops. Information about benefices seems to have been supplied by incumbents and there are some errors and omissions. The fact that the entire tower of Donaghpatrick Church in Co Meath is medieval is ignored. At [Littleton](#), Co [Tipperary](#), the principal feature, its possession of twin pulpits, is ignored.

There is no such title as “Earl of Knocklofty” and [Tullameelan Church](#) was not originally an estate church and it dates from 1780. In Co [Waterford](#), the pulpit in Kilmeaden church came from Tallow church not Lismore Cathedral. In the

chapter by [Adrian Empey](#), he states [Robert Wyse](#) Jackson was dean of Kilkenny. In fact he was dean of Cashel before becoming bishop of [Limerick](#). But these are small quibbles.

Amazing collection

We have here an amazing collection of fine and varied buildings. But for how long can this network be maintained? The Church of Ireland has always been a minority church but the census paints a grim picture of approaching dissolution. The sparsely populated areas commission of the 1950s closed 144 churches and many more have been closed since then. In the second half of the 20th century, no fewer than six churches were closed in [Cork](#) city and five in Limerick city.

There is only one church open in Emly diocese and one in the diocese of Kilmacduagh.

In the Republic there were 338,719 members of the Church of Ireland at disestablishment (1871). By 1981 this figure had fallen to 95,366 and although it had increased to 125,585 in 2006 the Bishop of Cork, in his introduction, has shown that this may not be of great significance.

Recently a new factor has arrived: the huge growth in non-attendance. A generation ago, almost every church member in the Republic was a regular churchgoer.



But members of the Roman [Catholic Church](#) and Church of Ireland in the Republic are no longer churchgoers as previously. A layman said to me recently that the Catholic Church still has enough people at Mass to keep the show on the road but that the Church of Ireland has been decimated.

This past year I took services in a church in Co Tipperary where the average attendance is

about 10, yet there are 55 Anglicans in the parish.

But whatever the future holds, this book is a splendidly designed and illustrated evocation of the Church of Ireland, past and present. But it is not a history.

Very Rev Robert MacCarthy is a former dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin