

BOOK REVIEW

Historical Dictionary of the Northern Ireland Conflict

By Gordon Gillespie

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The thought of reading a dictionary for review could perhaps seem quite a laborious task. This particular book however, provides easy to read summaries of significant players in a period of conflict to which many are familiar, though often through a particular community perspective or media bias. The author has achieved a reasonable balance in providing a work that could easily act as a useful reference to anyone with a passing interest or indeed anyone considering further research on the conflict. The book starts with a chronology, beginning in 1967, through the dark days of the early 1970s, the various attempts at reaching agreement of the 1980s, to the 'Peace Process' of the 1990s, and culminates with the 'official' ending of the high profile British army operation in support of the police on 31 July 2007. The focus chosen, to treat the aforementioned period as a discrete period in the island's history, can be seen as both a strength and a weakness of the book. In a sense, the author has optimistically produced a useful research tool that almost gives the dictionary a slightly surreal tone, as if it acts as a form of souvenir programme of the main actors of a forty year long TV show of a time of particularly intense and bitter conflict. However, there is a lack of context setting to ground those years as a culmination of centuries of political activity and social and economic strife, and since publication there have been a number of notable incidents that have acted as a stark reminder that there remains a British army presence in the region, and that sectarian tension in certain areas remains considerable. There have been attacks on police officers and the discovery of a 300 pound bomb in County Down, and also the killings of two British army personnel, Mark Quinsey and Patrick Azimkar, at the Massareene barracks in County Antrim in March 2009 and more recently still, community tensions resulted in the killing of a community worker, Kevin Brendan McDaid, by a mob in Coleraine, County Derry in May 2009. To be fair though, the book is well researched and easily digested, and it provides pointers to websites, books, arts and culture and statistics that could provide further background information. The author's chronology and introductory essay are concise and provide a good overview of recent decades. The main body of the dictionary gives some interesting insights, such as schools attended by politicians, without succumbing to the provision of superfluous detail. Whilst there are many academic works on the conflict in comparison with much larger conflicts in other parts of the world, the dictionary is a successful addition by way of its clarity and practical nature.