Exploration of a nationalist narrative that lost its way

NON-FICTION

Young Ireland and the Writing of Irish History
By James Quinn
UCD Press, €34
Reviewed by **Diarmuid Francis Bolger**

The Famine monument on Dublin's quays: the Young Irelanders condemned England for its ruthless behaviour

As the Easter Rising centenary approaches, it is unsurprising to see a multitude of new books emerging from leading historians which seek to explore the genesis of this revolutionary generation.

Studies such as Diarmaid Ferriter's A Nation And Not A Rabble show how this decade of revolution has been reinterpreted by each successive generation. As the various claims to ownership of 1916 show us, the legacy of revolutionary movements will always be seized upon by political groupings which feel that they can usefully control that legacy.

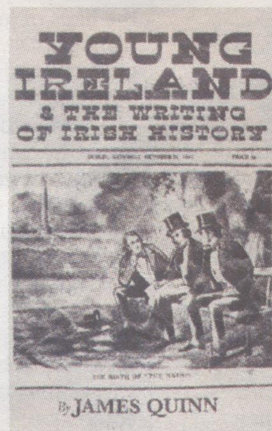
When Cumann na nGaedheal and Fianna Fáil sought to bed down patriotism in the new Free State, the movement to which they turned to provide an appropriate narrative of Irish history to be taught in schools was the Young Irelanders. This movement came into being at an inauspicious moment – the eve of the Great Famine – and attempted to kindle a renewed sense of nationhood when Ireland's population was about to be disseminated.

James Quinn's new book, Young Ireland and The Writing of Irish History, looks at how this small Irish nationalist group, established in 1842, sought to create a new, often crude and polemical version of Irish history, partly to counter the influence of British-controlled national schools. The Young Irelanders initially formed part of Daniel O'Connell's Repeal Association, which aimed to revoke the union between Britain and Ireland.

They determined that history should not be used to educate people with "exact dates, subtle plots, minute connexions and motives" but, rather, to create an openly propagandistic narrative to inflame nationalist sentiment.

In the malaise of the time, their message found a broad readership: the first issue of their newspaper, the Nation, sold out its 4,000 print run within hours.

The Young Irelanders are predominantly remembered for their split with Daniel O'Connell in 1846 and their failed rebellion in



1848, famously known as the Battle of the Widow McCormack's Cabbage Patch.

In focusing primarily on how their writing fostered a sense of nationhood for other movements to build on, Quinn does not go into an in-depth analysis of these two events, particularly the abortive insurrection, which he believes many Young Irelanders considered a foolish but necessary gesture.

He discusses the rebellion's primary consequence, which was that many Young Irelanders were deported or fled, with their acts and words inspiring the formation of the Fenians and the mindset of Pearse and others involved in Easter Week.

Quinn's focus is on the creation and control of this selective narrative of history that wished to highlight the cruelties of English rule in Ireland. But what emerges is how Irish society was too multifaceted to embrace the movement's ideals.

The Young Irelanders believed that their narrative would unite Catholics and Protestants. But John Dillon admitted in exile that instead of mending this fractured relationship, their work became "fuel to feed our animosities towards each other", with the militaristic nationalism of the Nation alienating the Protestant minority.

Their version of history focused on heroic battles lost more by Irish misfortune than English supremacy. But they were also keen to control how they themselves were perceived.

Quinn examines the lengths to which Michael Doheny and Charles Gavan Duffy – prominent Young Irelanders – went on to blame O'Connell for their split, claiming that he was dominated by his son John O'Connell.

Their treatment of the Famine is an interesting aspect of Quinn's book. Their writing aimed to build Irish pride, but it seemed impossible to make mass starvation sparked by the repeated failure of the potato crop appear heroic.

Most Young Irelanders blamed the catastrophe on England, with John Mitchell condemning the authorities for not providing proper relief, saying that their genocidal treatment of the Irish was "more ruthless than any Seven Years' War or Thirty Years' War that Europe ever saw".

But it was also important for Mitchell's heroic narrative to stress how the English plan was only partly successful; it "failed to quench Ireland's undying national spirit".

As the 19th century ended, other historians argued against the validity of this interpretation of history. Quinn, however, explores how the new Free State adopted the Young Ireland narrative, placing it at the core of the school curriculum. It was left to writers such as Sean O'Faolain (who called the curriculum "fairytale textbooks in history") to write more nuanced profiles of O'Connell and Hugh O'Neill, and historians such as TW Woody and RD Edwards to compose more factual accounts of Irish history.

Quinn has crafted an insightful and impartial examination into a movement which had little interest in impartiality; an exploration into why such history was written and how it was received. While his book will particularly appeal to students of the period, his style is accessible enough for anyone to enjoy.