MICHAEL TOMKO


Reviewed by Maria LaMonaca

In her memoirs, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna recalls her fervent childhood wish—after becoming enamored with Foxe’s Acts and Monuments—to be martyred for her Protestant faith. In response, her father replied: “Why, Charlotte, if the government ever gives power to the Papists again, which they certainly talk of doing, you may probably live to be a martyr” (Tonna, Personal Recollections, 3rd ed. [M. W. Dodd, 1848] 22). Although Tonna survived the passage of Catholic Emancipation and its aftermath, she refers to 1829 as the “Most hateful year in the annals of England’s perfidy to her bounteous Lord!” (244). Hateful as it was, the issue of Catholic Emancipation, overshadowing Tonna’s life from the time of her strict Evangelical childhood, was the seedbed for Tonna’s remarkably prolific career as an anti-Catholic editor, pamphleteer, and novelist.
Although Michael Tomko does not discuss Tonna, his carefully crafted presentation of Catholic Emancipation as a hotbed issue in both politics and culture helps us, among other things, to understand later Victorian figures like Tonna and what made them tick. While research into Victorian anti-Catholicism has generated numerous titles of late, Tomko rightly points out that “Catholic Emancipation has often fallen between the purview of Victorian and Romantic studies” (2). Disciplinary boundaries aside, the sheer complexity of the politics surrounding Catholic Emancipation can be rather intimidating for those of us who perhaps feel more secure in our training as literary and cultural critics than as historians of politics or religion. The book’s cover image is a perfect case in point. Entitled “End of the Irish Farce of Catholic Emancipation,” this 1805 illustration by James [ANDY: PLEASE CLOSE UP THE SPACE HERE]
Gillray portrays three stern, beak-nosed gentlemen (English parliamentarians?) literally blowing back a giant, tangled pile of clerical figures, tattered parchments with cryptic messages, various liturgical instruments (recognizable to those of us with strict Catholic upbringings as a monstrance, thurifier, and altar bell), and one large, frightened animal (a papal bull, perhaps?). There is, in short, a whole lot going on here. Tomko’s book delves fearlessly into the fray, clarifying for us the
tangled mess of political, religious, and cultural issues surrounding Catholic Emancipation.

In untangling the messy history of the Catholic Question, however, the book’s most important contribution is to demonstrate “its central role in [shaping] how the romantics viewed themselves and . . . how we now view the romantics” (2). In short, it shows how the Catholic Question helped to frame and fracture the romantic “spirit of the age” (2). Most of the major romantic poets had pronounced if divergent views on the Catholic question; for example, as Tomko notes, “when John Keats came to visit Wordsworth in the Lake District in 1818, he was doubly disappointed. Not only was the bard out, he was stumping for Lord Lowther’s anti-Catholic candidate in the upcoming General Election” (2). The prospect of Catholic Emancipation was also a matter of grave concern to Southey and Coleridge, and even the positions of those who publicly voiced support for Emancipation—Shelley and Byron, for example—were far from unconflicted.

By showing us how concerns over the Catholic Question animated and inflected works by Wordsworth, Shelley, Scott, Inchbald and others, Tomko takes his cue from Robert Ryan’s account of romanticism as “a creative and effective engagement” (qtd. 5) with the political and religious issues of the day. At its widest scope, Tomko’s study links romantic engagements with the Catholic Question to the arduous project of modern nation-building. Apropos the building
of Britain itself, he aims to foreground “the moments in which aesthetic form reveal[s] anxiety about the possibility of the project of the Union, the stability of national identity and the continuity of the historical narrative that built them” (6). In the history of the Catholic Question he also finds lessons for the present. “The achievements as well as the shortfalls of the social transformations involved in Catholic Emancipation,” he writes, “can shed light on the historical roots of contemporary challenges involving religious difference and the plight of religious minorities, especially in areas such as India that have been shaped by the sectarian politics of the British Empire” (8).

In the first chapter, Tomko seeks to provide “the first overarching historical account of how the Catholic Emancipation debate troubled the sense of British national identity in the romantic era and become a battleground in…the period’s ‘culture wars’ ”(15). “The campaign for Catholic Emancipation,” he reminds us, was “a central issue in 1820’s national politics” (3), drawing upon “a cathection of issues ranging from nation-building, the formation of imperial identity, genre and literary politics…Irish-British relations…the abolition movement, women’s rights, the campaign for parliamentary reform and the role of religion in public life” (3). Casting a backward glance, however, this chapter traces the struggles of the 1820’s to their “roots in the romantic-period treatment of the Catholic Question stretching back at least to 1778,” the date of the first Catholic Relief Act, which led to the
Gordon Riots in 1780 (51). From that point on, Tomko explains, the Catholic Question was closely intertwined with major political, historical and cultural events of the Romantic era, such as the French Revolution, the Act of Union in 1800, the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, and the rise and fall of Napoleon. To reanimate for modern readers the urgency and centrality of the Catholic question in this period, Tomko brings together a variety of both political and literary discourses. He juxtaposes parliamentary speeches and political documents with literary texts that reflect and probe events relevant to the Catholic question, such as Sydney Owenson’s novel *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812), Coleridge’s “Apologetic Preface” to “Fire, Famine and Slaughter” (1817), and John Lingard’s *History of England* (1819).

In the ensuing chapters, Tomko examines “four case studies of major literary figures embodying the main positions on Catholic Emancipation.” First of all, in Elizabeth Inchbald’s *A Simple Story* (1791), a novel by an English Catholic, Tomko finds “a proto-national tale…that explores the difficulty of union across religious and historical divides” (11). The failed marriage of the Catholic Dorriforth and the Protestant Miss Milner symbolizes this difficulty, but Inchbald’s novel, Tomko contends, “also offers a tentative model of gendered sympathy and radical forgiveness that seeks to promote dialogue and proximity as a means to reconciliation” (11).
From Inchbald Tomko turns to Wordsworth, a “conservative opponent of Catholic Emancipation” (11), and in particular to his *Excursion, Essays on Epitaphs*, and *Ecclesiastical Sketches* (1822). As Tomko presents him, Wordsworth treats Catholicism with some ambivalence. In obsessively writing about monastic ruins, the sites of religious and historical fracturing, he charts a *via media* for England, a middle way between the “enthusiasm” of the French Revolution and the “superstition” of the nation’s Catholic past. By this means, Tomko argues, Wordsworth “recuperate[s]” a superstition that “serves the needs of the present by providing…a basis for community and society” (91). For Wordsworth this was an “irresistible” but also “perpetually troubled” solution to the Catholic Question (118).

Tomko’s remaining two chapters take up, respectively, Percy Shelley and Sir Walter Scott. Unlike Wordsworth, both supported Catholic Emancipation, but to differing degrees. Whereas Shelley was a “radical proponent of Catholic Emancipation” (119), Scott, a conservative Tory, only with reluctance supported the bill when, as Tomko speculates, he realized that “the penal laws were no longer a realistic option” for containing the threat of Rome (12). Like Wordsworth, Shelley and Scott “offer powerful [literary] models that regulate the place of a religious minority within the modern public sphere” (12)—models that are, like Wordsworth’s again, no less fraught with ambivalence and contradiction. Even
Shelley’s advocacy on behalf of Irish Catholics was hampered by what Tomko calls “condescension and residual sectarianism” (128). Reading *The Cenci* as, “a drama about the lingering issues surrounding Catholic Emancipation” (12), Tomko finds Shelley casting the blame for Ireland’s plight back on the Irish themselves. “Trapped in a cycle of violence,” writes Tomko, “Beatrice re-enacts the struggles of Irish Catholics who cannot, in Shelley’s view, rid themselves of the wounds of their past in order to participate in modernity” (122). *Ivanhoe*’s engagement in the Catholic question, however, yields something more hopeful: “a model for accommodating difference in which sectarian parties can be reconciled under a national union, a model that can apply to a range of ‘internal others’ ” (152). Yet this reconciliation comes with a price. The novel’s final “union between Rowena and Ivanhoe prescribes a national identity—that of the self-regulated middling characters” (177). But those who cling too tightly to their religious and historical origins, as does the Jewess Rebecca, “cannot find a place in the national community formed at the novel’s end” (177).

In his conclusion, Tomko briefly sketches the immediate literary and artistic responses to the actual passage of Emancipation in 1829. Here the figures cited include not only Southey, Coleridge, and J. M. W. Turner, but also John Henry Newman (who, I was interested to learn, actually opposed Catholic Emancipation in the 1820’s). While anxieties over accommodations for Catholics would persist
in the nineteenth century, Tomko reminds us that “a parallel power in the romantic period’s treatment of superstition . . . could point the way to alternate forms of collective identities” (193).

This is a rich and rewarding study, if a rather densely written one. On most fronts, the book keeps the promise made by its full title. The reader comes away with a refreshed, more complicated picture of nineteenth-century romanticism, a thorough understanding of the “Catholic Question” and its controversial nature, and much encouragement to consider the role of religious identity in the formation of nation-states. However, despite the author’s extensive research into history and politics and the absence of any reference to literature in its title, the book is first and foremost a literary study. And while its discussions of literature are valuable and important, Tomko’s reliance on the hidebound structure of the classic four-author study feels somewhat constraining. At times he overstates his claims about the literary works in question. When he asserts, for instance, that the Cenci is “a drama about…Catholic emancipation,” it would have been sufficient (and less reductive) merely to trace some suggestive associations between them. Also, in focusing so much on the close reading of literature he tends to slight the wider cultural scope that a book of this kind should provide. Besides the parliamentary reports and political documents mentioned above, the overlapping stories of romanticism and Catholic Emancipation could have been told more fully with
other primary sources such as sermons, both Catholic and Protestant; personal correspondence and memoirs; more cartoons and other visual texts; and particularly, the kinds of popular media that likely were being consumed by the majority of British citizens who—while no less troubled by the Catholic Question—were not immersed in Southey and Wordsworth.

Finally, despite a brief discussion of Owenson and a chapter devoted to Inchbald, the voices of women (notwithstanding their crucial roles in nineteenth-century religious practice and literary production) seem curiously absent, as does the larger question of gender. Tomko mentions “women’s rights” as one of the issues implicated in debates over the Catholic question, but gender difference comes into play only by implication, such as when he contrasts Inchbald’s more tolerant and conciliatory vision of “multiconfessional” community (12) with the opinions of romantic male writers.

Nevertheless, despite its somewhat “top-down,” hyper-literary presentation of the Catholic Question and the anxieties it generated, this study is of great practical value. While it is not the sort of book one assigns to undergraduates, its reassessment of romantic writers can and should influence how we present them to our students. For all their championing of the rights of man, as it turns out, most major romantic writers were deeply troubled by the proposal to grant full civil rights to Catholics.
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