In this study, D.W. Hayton provides a concise and comprehensive study of Irish political history from the reign of James II through the ministry of Robert Walpole. A result of thirty years of scholarly endeavor, these selections examine the development, evolution, and complexities of the Irish political structure built within a British-designed complex. What makes Professor Hayton's work not only a valuable read but unique is its emphasis on the political players in Ireland as active rather than passive participants in the making and administration of British policy in governing Ireland. A shift from the traditional perspective and contextual grounding offers new answers to some old questions.

The first of eight chronologically arranged chapters examines the effects of the Jacobite and Williamite “revolutions” on Ireland. The outgoing king, James II, attempting to establish a base of operations and support, played to the interests of Catholics in Ireland much more so than in England. Not only did this result in an increasing alienation between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, but it also emphasized the importance of specific community interests in Ireland over monarchial and parliamentary goals. King William’s victory, however, destroyed “the Irish Catholic interest as a political force” (31). Irish Catholic interests did not disappear but the political emphasis had indeed shifted.

The evolution of party politics in Ireland from 1692-1704 constitutes the focus of the second chapter. Geography, alliances, and personal interest become the factors affecting a homogeneous political entity in Ireland, even among the protestant supporters of the new monarch, King William. Likewise, remaining Jacobites placed personal rather than collective interests at the forefront of their political maneuverings. Though the Treaty of Limerick acted as the catalyst in the development of Irish political parties (pro-treaty v. anti-treaty), to focus on this and ignore other factors, as most historians have done, is too simple an explanation. Professor Hayton reexamines and refutes the traditional interpretation of party development by shifting the perspective and acknowledging the complexities of Irish politics as the players in Ireland looked to their own needs and interests in lieu of those of the monarch or
English parliament. The power play between the Hon. Henry, 1st Baron, Capel, and Sir Charles Porter as well as the major players in this political drama are identified. At the end of the chapter a list of Irish MPs appears, and “the names of those members whose political allegiances seem . . . to have remained consistent since 1695” are highlighted. One must be careful to distinguish between Irish Whigs and English Whigs. The development of a Tory party in Ireland also has distinct characteristics. Not until the reign of Queen Anne were “Irish parties . . . indistinguishable from their English counterparts” (35).

Chapters three and four respectively examine the beginnings of the “under-taker system” and high churchmen in the Irish convocation. The “under-taker system” provided the English government with a means by which they could manage the Irish parliament. Irish politicians who provided “the government with a parliamentary majority in return for a voice in policy making and a substantial portion of official patronage for themselves and their dependants” came to be known as “undertakers” (106). Like with other chapters in this study, Professor Hayton’s examination of the “under-taker system” deviates from the norm. While the traditional view sees the system as “a reform devised and imposed form without,” this interpretation looks at it from inside, from an Irish perspective, once again presenting Irish politicians as active rather than passive players in the political process (107).

The high churchmen who met in convocation from 1704-1713, the “undocumented majority,” and their role in party politics provide the subject for chapter four. Once more Professor Hayton offers a different interpretation. “It would be misleading,” he writes, “to follow contemporary whig [sic] critics in representing the high church movement in Ireland as an infection brought into the country by English immigrants” (143). The history of the Church of Ireland differs significantly from that of its counterpart in England. Additionally, circumstances in Ireland affect the shaping of the church’s influence in the political process in ways that have no similarities in England. In other words, the “political and social realities” in Ireland should not be ignored in any study that proposes to examine how Ireland is governed. “Undoubtedly the most significant distinguishing characteristic of the Church of Ireland was its numerical inferiority” (146). With the Catholics in the South, the Scottish Presbyterians and other dissenters in the North, the Church of Ireland found itself in the minority; the same could not be said for the Church
of England. Different factors demand recognition and a reinterpretation based on those factors:

In secular politics, it was the relative importance accorded by each party to the Threats posed to the establishment by catholics and presbyterians which formed the basis of the divisions between whig and tory in Ireland. . . . The high churchmen were primarily party-political animals” (154; 157).

The next three chapters continue with the different perspective, alternate interpretation focus.

Decline of a tory ministry and the shift to a whig commitment with the ascension of George I finds its way into Irish politics. England reacts rather than acts regarding Ireland with its misperception that a jacobite conspiracy is in the makings. As more Scottish immigrants settle in Ireland, Anglican anxiety increases. Language issues (should proselytizing occur in Gaelic or English) and the fact that more privileges and opportunities exist in Ireland than in England for dissenters (especially Presbyterians) affect the political debate surrounding the question of the sacramental test. And British whig ministers handling of the Irish question tended to be superficial. “Soothing the Irish parliament . . . became the central purpose of policy after 1714” (214). But the need for strong leadership to access changing parliamentary politics in Ireland, for the most part, was not forthcoming. This inability or unwillingness to recognize Ireland in its own right would continue with the ministry of Sir Robert Walpole, whose administration is the subject of chapter eight.

The title of the last chapter, “A Remote Part of the King's Dominions,” expresses the attitude of the Walpole administration. The classic response to Irish grievances remained England’s insistence that all Irish problems stemmed from their determination “to ‘shake off’ the[ir] kingdom’s ‘dependency’ on England” (239). The flawed policy based on this insistence, according to Professor Hayton, should have been recognized and avoided. The so-called success of the Walpole administration did not penetrate below the surface; the stability that had indeed existed during this period under study, had shattered by the mid-1700s. What D.W. Hayton adeptly suggests and proves in Ruling Ireland is the importance of perspective, context, and the fact that stability does not constitute a stagnant political structure or history.