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judgments where they do not wish to follow his. Most biographers, even when not uncritical, tend to be champions of their subject and this is no exception. However it is surely time to acknowledge the important contribution Redmond's leadership of nationalism between 1900 and 1916 made to Ireland's development, without abandoning one's critical faculties.

SEAN KEATING: Art, Politics and Building the Irish Nation
by EIMEAR O'CONNOR
Irish Academic Press €39.95

This is a beautifully illustrated piece of research that focuses on the public persona of Seán Keating and his chronicling of the emerging Irish state. Eimear O'Connor is particularly good on the artist's roles in the entwined institutions of the Royal Hibernian Academy and the National College of Art. Making no grand claims for her work – in the introduction she calls it a “monograph” – she also disarms any expectations of the reader for a warts-and-all picture of the man. No such picture emerges – he remains opaque. However, O'Connor fights a worthwhile rearguard action on Keating's behalf, suggesting that his antipathy to modernism was overstated.

THE TRAGEDY OF LIBERATION: A History of the Chinese Revolution 1945-1957
by FRANK DIKOTTER
Bloomsbury £25/ebook £21.99

Having won the 2011 Samuel

Johnson prize for his blistering indictment of Mao's Great Leap Forward in the early 1960s, Dikotter now turns his attentions to the first years of Chinese communist rule, a period often seen as relatively peaceful compared with what followed. But by the end of Dikotter's shocking book, you are in no doubt about the dreadful murderousness of the communist leadership, whose land reforms and modernisation plans exacted a terrible toll on China's rural population. In this nightmarish world, not even leper colonies were safe. “If the masses want to burn them,” one communist official remarked, “let's burn them.” So they did.

THE WAR THAT ENDED PEACE: How Europe Abandoned Peace for the First World War
by MARGARET MACMILLAN
Profile £25/ebook £25

Few historical subjects are more hotly debated than the origins of the First World War, and the Oxford historian Margaret Macmillan's book asks how, in an age of moving pictures and telephones, Europe's statesmen could plunge the world into a conflict that left millions dead, the world's economy on the floor and its greatest empires in ruins. Taking us from the Paris Universal Exposition of 1900 to Britain's fateful declaration of war, her thoughtful, moving and smoothly written narrative is full of extraordinary characters. Above all, she indicts the “failure of imagination” of Europe's leaders, none of whom really understood the horrors they were unleashing.

THE RESTORATION OF ROME by PETER HEATHER
Macmillan £30/ebook £16

Heather is that rare beast, an academic medievalist with the ability to reach a wider audience. In *The Restoration of Rome*, he explores the lives of three men – the Gothic ruler Theoderic, the Byzantine emperor Justinian and the Frankish emperor Charlemagne – who tried to revive the Roman empire in the four centuries after its western half collapsed in 476. Heather's style is sometimes aggressively populist: Justinian, he writes, was “an autocratic bastard”. But underlying this rollicking narrative of sieges, sea battles and palace coups is a clever argument about the enduring dream of a universal European realm, combining Roman traditions with militant Christian orthodoxy.

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