

That Neutral Island – A Cultural History of Ireland during the
Second World War by Clair Wills.
Faber and Faber 2007.

This is a timely and fascinating history of Ireland during the 1930s and 40s, and particularly the years of the Second World War. Ireland was a neutral country, a fact that did not sit well with its larger neighbour to the east.

Clair Wills book is about the impact of that neutrality on Irish society, and especially on the way the rifts and tensions in Ireland caused by the World War manifested themselves in different parts of that society. Some Irish citizens, especially those whose support for the Republican cause was the fiercest, supported Germany, seeing in the defeat of Great Britain the unification of Ireland, but many Irish citizens left to join the Allied forces and some made a major contribution to the war effort.

That Neutral Island is divided into 11 chapters, setting Ireland and its neutrality in their context in the years in question at its start and concluding with details of the price Ireland paid for its neutrality and the difficulties in which it became entangled, epitomised by de Valera's condolence visit to the German Envoy after news of Hitler's death became public.

Clair Wills also writes of Ireland's response to the plight of the Jews of Europe, the Irish refusal to believe the facts about the camps once they were liberated because of the view that this was propaganda, and the shameful detail that only 60 Jewish refugees from war torn Europe were admitted to Ireland.

That Neutral Island is a vivid and commendably detailed description of a crucial period in Irish history; it serves as a reminder of the impact that centuries of bad blood between Britain and Ireland had on Irish society at a time of the greatest possible danger for the free world; and it also provides examples of the nobility of the Irish spirit, its guts, determination and humour.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh