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# Ireland and the (ab)uses of history

Stephen Howe: *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2000)

Reviewed by Michael Steed

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I read this book during the autumn flowering of artificial red poppies, which this year seemed to start even earlier than usual amongst public figures on television. It was as if the sight of young men giving up their lives to the cause of a fundamentalist religion on 11th September had reinforced our leaders' need to conform to the British national myth that the young men brainwashed by patriotism into dying in the trenches had been 'giving their lives for their country'. It put into perspective this account by Stephen Howe of the role of a myth in Irish history, and particularly the use of that myth to legitimise violence in Northern Ireland.

Howe explores the myth that Ireland's problems and especially the Northern Ireland troubles, are a product of British/English colonialism. At least it is clear by the end of the book that he regards it essentially as myth, although as he ploughs through the various authors who take this view, he attempts to deal with them as if they were an academic school and he is maintaining a scholarly, detached stance. Yet, as time and again he exposes the lack of real historical evidence in so many 'anti-colonial' accounts, one senses his mounting frustration. Indeed, to adapt the colonial analogy, Howe is a political scientist mounting a resistance to the imperial attempt by cultural theorists to annex the study of British - Irish relations.

As a fellow political scientist I share Howe's irritation with the way that cultural theorists can get away with imagining their constructs rather than having to grub around documents, facts and figures. As he writes, adapting Peguy, 'In Ireland...it sometimes seems

as if everything begins with politics, becomes mystique and ends as literary theory' (pp 143-44).

The outcome is an academic's book. More than a quarter of it consists of an extensive bibliography and notes. Many of the best and most readable scholarly asides are buried in these often lengthy notes which makes it a pity that the publishers have placed them at the end of the book rather than as classic footnotes. Even more it is largely an account, in university lecturer's hand-out style, for those who wish or need to know the literature on 'Ireland as colony' published in the last three decades or so. To what end?

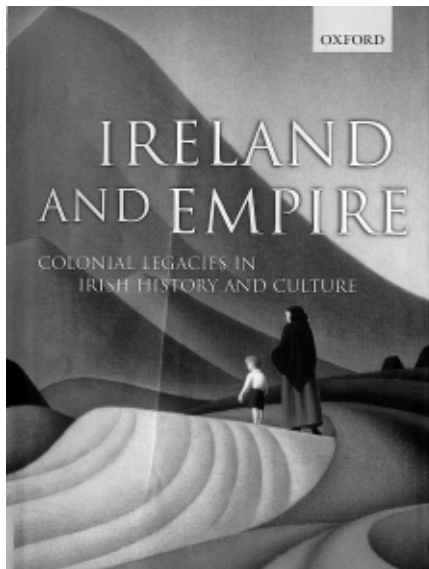
In his Introduction Howe sums up his achievement as 'largely negative judgements about the empirical, theoretical, and political adequacy of colonial and post-colonial frameworks for analysing contemporary Ireland' (I heartily concur) and goes on to claim that he 'attempts to place such analysis in a more appropriate European context' (p 4). Unfortunately he seems to have run out of time, or space, to do the latter properly.

He scatters throughout the book tantalising references to a comparative European perspective (e.g. the pregnant one sentence comparison between Ireland and Bohemia made on p 29). Disappointingly, the relevant penultimate chapter is one of the shortest in the book and reads as a hurriedly compiled list of apparently comparable cases around the world from New Brunswick to Mayotte. If Howe is to carry weight in the academic world this claim badly needs to be placed in an analytical framework. Furthermore, anyone concerned with why apparently religious violence has

persisted in Northern Ireland would benefit from some simplifying model to aid understanding. Otherwise what choice is there other than either the colonial model or the view that somehow people in (Northern) Ireland are peculiar and different?

Howe is not the first to put the colonial model under scrutiny and to find that it fails to fit the facts. Revisionism has been a major growth industry among Irish historians in the last two decades, as they have grappled with a guilty feeling that they might have some responsibility for terrorist violence. The case for such guilt is that allowing romantic nationalism to invent and propagate its version of Ireland's national history, especially in Catholic schools, has sustained recruitment into the IRA and legitimised the armed struggle - historians have a duty to expose such myths. But purely Irish history can only partially explain Ireland's particularity and anyway why should Ireland be peculiarly backward or especially prone to violence? The colonial model has many seductions besides offering a world-wide framework to explain away such puzzles. It suits the modern mood of victimology. It identifies a convenient guilty party and echoes the real experience of so much of the Third World. It is hardly surprising that it appeals as an intellectual belief system which regards scholars such as Howe as nit-picking.

It is a great pity that Howe does not explore the literature on political development and nation building in Europe. This provides an analytical model within which the nature of the competing nationalisms in Northern Ireland makes more sense. However British history, as well as Irish, is mostly told without the benefit of such a perspective. The paucity of a wider understanding of the European-ness of the British Isles' has sustained the 'Irish are peculiar' attitude within Great Britain, and so the appeal of the colonial model. In that sense those British historians who have helped to perpetuate national myths about Britain's glorious history, and its naval/military island story, could also have some responsibility for the historical ideology that has sustained IRA



terrorism, as could those British politicians whose current rhetoric still echoes such myths.

Ireland's history is certainly part and parcel of Europe's history. Unlike Great Britain it escaped the original, direct impact of the Roman empire but so did a large northern zone of the continent. Soon afterwards it became part of Western, Roman Christendom which framed its identity and politico-religious belief system for 1,000 years. During that period it also experienced the European history of movements of peoples, or of elites and dynastic conquest within that common framework. The oddity of mediaeval Irish history is not that a gang of Anglo-Norman robber-barons under Strongbow invaded in 1170, owing feudal allegiance to a culturally French Plantagenet king. It is the way that this incursion, one of the everyday violent adventures of the European Middle Ages, has become mythologised by modern nationalism into uniquely an English colonial act. If a colonial model helps to explain this bit of history then every part of Europe has from time to time been a colony of another part and we are all victims of one another.

Nor when we turn to the crucial sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that are so well remembered in Ireland today was Irish history outside the European mainstream. Like much of the rest of Europe it was rent asunder by the Reformation, or one could say that the British Isles were so rent asunder. The religious atrocities and wars that

followed were no worse in Ireland than in France, Germany or the Netherlands. After 1558 of course England and Wales were treated more mercifully, although the memory of Mary I's rule led to the deep-rooted anti-Catholic sentiments that in turn affected popular British attitudes to Irish Catholics for another couple of centuries. Once again, the peculiarity is why memories of the 1641 Catholic massacre of Protestants or the dark stain of Drogheda on Cromwell's reputation have lasted so much longer and have been so exaggerated by modern nationalists. French, German or Dutch national consciousness had turned its back on similar contemporary events by the early nineteenth century.

By then the whole of Europe had been struck by the political lightning of 1789, from which came the power of the new secular doctrines of nationalism and democracy. France, made in 1689 a purely Catholic kingdom, became a secular republic (where it is easier for a Protestant such as Lionel Jospin to become prime minister and perhaps President than for a British Catholic to become prime minister or monarch). French nationality successfully embraced the German-speaking Alsatians and Catalan-speaking Roussillonais, both of whom had only been annexed to France after Cromwell was dead.

The Germans, who suffered a particularly murderous war for a thirty-year period spanning the 1641 massacre, learned to forget the Catholic/Protestant killings of their war and developed a language-based common identity which failed to incorporate Germans speakers in Switzerland or Alsace. The Dutch created a new political system embracing Catholics despite the fact that the sixteenth century Dutch war of independence had essentially been a Protestant war against the Catholic emperor. In most of Europe the new sense of democratic nationhood was built either on existing state boundaries or, *a la Herder*, on language. So why was it different in Ireland and in Britain?

British nationalism followed, half-heartedly, the French course of seeking to incorporate as part of the polity all

living within the boundaries established by dynasty and conquest. Hence a common parliament was set up for the whole British Isles (except the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands). But George III and the ruling Tories refused to accept the Catholic emancipation that followed logically. Alsatians and Roussillonais were treated as fully French citizens, and came to think of themselves as such, despite history and language. Irish Catholics within the new wider British polity were not, and did not. The circumstances of 1801 did not favour a fresh, secular start in the British Isles.

Furthermore the lightning of 1789 struck Ireland differently. Initially in the 1798 uprising it seemed to spark a modern Irish nationalism that embraced both Catholic and Protestant denominations. But as, in the ensuing three decades, an impressively effective Irish popular movement was built up under the leadership of Daniel O'Connell (a highly innovative political organiser and moderniser), it came fatally to confuse Catholic grievances with the task of creating the new national sentiment. Just as most European nationalisms were discovering a new language-based sense of identity and/or were being endowed with other invented traditions, nascent Irish nationalism was resurrecting the Reformation division of Europe. Meanwhile British nationalism did succeed in incorporating a minority of the inhabitants of Ireland, mainly clustered in the north-east.

In due course Great Britain abandoned the ideal that its Britishness embraced the whole British Isles leaving the bereft Ulster unionists with a confused identity and without a modern terminology in which to express their fears and aspirations. By then Irish nationalism had belatedly added Gladstone to its armoury of symbols but too late to avoid the indelible association with Rome. The result is two completing nationalisms, both identified with religion, one not wanting to be a nationalism and the other not wanting its religious identity.

This is unusual but not unique in Europe. Several other nationalisms have, despite their leaders' wishes,

found their appeal delimited by religious allegiance. Although in most Catholic countries nationalism was essentially secular, Polish nationalism – due to circumstances not dissimilar to those of the Irish – acquired a close identity with Catholicism. Serb nationalism, with its memory of an Islamic oppressor, the Turk, similarly claimed the historically Serb, and Serbo-Croat speaking, Bosnia as Serbian, but saw its local majority, the Bosnian Muslims, rather as Irish nationalists see Ulster Protestants – traitorous allies of the enemy. The partition of Yugoslavia is a more complex story than the partition of Ireland but still remarkably comparable. It is the product of the contingency of nationhood in a part of Europe like Ireland with a much more subtle and uncertain history of nation building than nationalism likes to admit. And wherever in Europe nationalism has become entwined with religious identity it is less understanding of other nationalisms and more prone to violence.

Obviously I find such a framework of political development and of critical junctures in history more useful for analysing European history than the colonial model, but then I am a political scientist with a historical bent. I am not sure where Howe really places himself. In the concluding paragraph of the book he finally lets slip his own very contemporary European social democratic perspective. I discern in him an instinctive dislike of the traditional nationalisms (not just Irish) which have kept violent conflicts going. That might be cheered on by many British Liberal Democrats as well as by most other civilised post-national modern people. However I doubt that this rationalist lack of empathy with the romance of nationalism enables him better to explain or understand its persistence.

Such a framework is much more interesting for the light it throws on British political history, and especially the role of the Liberal party in relationship to Ireland. The colonial model tends to support the superficial view that if Asquith had been more resolute, or Lloyd George less devious, then

Ireland need never have been partitioned. One needs no analytical framework, and only to read a little of Ulster's history, to realise that this view is unsustainable. But could the Gladstonian Liberal solution of a united Ireland within a United Kingdom have worked? I, for one, have sometimes argued that it could, insofar as Ulster Unionism dug its deep populist roots only after 1886. Could a common 'Irish-within-British' identity have grown up around a devolved Irish Parliament?

The comparative European framework however throws some doubt on that optimistic view. It pinpoints the critical juncture as the formative stage of nationhood and suggests that what was happening around 1800 and in the ensuing decades was determinative of later identities. This was a period of repressive Tory misrule throughout the British Isles. The conflict over Catholic emancipation and electoral reform separated profoundly different Whig and Tory views of what the new century's British citizenship was to mean. The longevity of the mad king and other short-term circumstances meant that the more inclusive Whig view only triumphed over Tory obscurantism later, when nationalist identities had become more set. Who can tell whether, if the Whigs had presided over British government in these critical years, a collective, pluralist identity for the unified but in due course decentralised British Isles would have developed?

The choice of analytical framework is also highly relevant to assessment of the current peace process in Northern Ireland. Howe argues that seeking a settlement by recognising two distinct communities or traditions in Northern Ireland offers little hope (pp 237–39). Yet if one acknowledges that both Irish Republican and Ulster Unionist traditions can be seen as victims of the way that their story played out in the aftermath of 1789, then such a bi-communitarian approach to enabling Northern Ireland to move forward in peace makes a lot of sense. It builds on a better understanding of Northern Ireland's history than either the colonial model or Howe's more empirical approach. It also suggests that Northern Ireland could benefit from a more European Union than the British/Irish constitutional framework. That said, it fits my own civic liberalism no better than Howe's social democratic viewpoint or our common humanism.

Whatever one's outlook, however, Stephen Howe has provided an erudite and thorough demolition text on the colonial model that still underpins the thinking of many who seek, unwittingly or not, to prolong the Northern Ireland conflict.

*Michael Steed is an honorary lecturer of the University of Kent at Canterbury and a former President of the Liberal Party.*

1 A Celtic term for all of these islands that was widely used well before the creation of the British state, something I learnt from Howe, endnote p. 245

## Forgotten hero

Gordon Gillespie: *Albert H. McElroy: The Radical Minister* (Albert McElroy Memorial Fund, 1985)  
Reviewed by **Bob Bell**

In less than fifty pages Gordon Gillespie manages to provide a full and lively portrait of someone who should be celebrated as one of the great heroes of twentieth century

Liberalism and twentieth century Ireland. The truth is, however, that Albert McElroy is now largely forgotten except by the remaining handful of followers who were touched by his