

Ireland, 1798–1998: Politics and War

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Professor Alvin Jackson's fine book was probably just about ready to hit the bookshops in the summer of 1999 when I was reminded, in a particularly personal way, about the intertwining of Irish and British history. When Martin McGartland, the former IRA informer and double agent, was shot and nearly killed (allegedly by IRA gunmen) my wife and two small children had only recently passed by the end of his street. This is a journey they make almost every day through Whitley Bay. The Unionism of the British public may be waning, but people here, as well as in Ireland, crave an equitable answer to what the Victorians once loftily dubbed the 'Irish question'. When men like Martin McGartland are gunned down in small seaside towns on the north-east coast of England then it should be apparent to all of us that the 'unfinished business' of Northern Ireland is also very much 'unfinished business' of Britain.

Perhaps this mixture of contemporary relevance and historical importance explains why the leading writers of Irish history produce books of such consistently high quality? Jackson's framework is the past two centuries; more precisely, the period between the United Irish Rising of 1798 and the hopeful period of 1998. These two hundred years appear, Jackson says, 'to represent a discrete phase within Irish political history.' The 1790s are cast, understandably, as the starting point of Irish history. With the demise of Wolfe Tone's non-sectarian aspirations for Irish freedom, the hardening Orangeism of the Irish administration in Dublin, and the passage into law of the Act of Union (1801), the key paradigms of Irish history do seem to have been set in these tempestuous times. If we look around Europe, with the French Revolution as our backdrop, it is easy enough to see why this particularly intense period of change should result in considerable drama in Ireland.

Jackson's later 1990s are also something of a watershed. The breaking of the sectarian logjam (which the author correctly foresaw) offered Ireland a chance to take a new turn. So great was the hope of this period that Jackson finds himself musing-in fascinating fashion-on an Irish version of Fukuyama's 'end of history'. This reviewer has doubts about historical endings and the value of Fukuyama's postmodernist vainglory. A decade on, the millennium seems to offer something of a stocktaking opportunity, for sure, but the shelves still groan with historical possibilities, good and bad. The Irish people's struggle for recognition remains in need of spadework work as well as fine-tuning. But there is no doubt that Jackson is right to see an

alternative path unfolding for Ireland, north and south. While the crossroads are hardly far behind, the first tottering steps have most definitely been taken.

Jackson places his work boldly in the contested territories of Irish history. Several important books have appeared in recent years to discuss the competing approaches to the Irish past (liberal, revisionist, nationalist, Marxist, and others that bridge divides and fit no particular style). Students and general readers will find much in Jackson's early musings, and in his coda, which will help prepare them for the vigorous debates in such works as Ciaran Brady's *Interpreting Irish History*. But what Jackson offers in his introduction is not merely a spin on the philosophy of history. This is not a book which substitutes 'rationalist aridity' for 'nationalist floridity': it is too pithy for that. The author also denies that it is a liberal document, distancing himself from the whiggish viewpoints of some of his predecessors. Jackson places himself in a philosophical position that owes more to E.H. Carr than to F.S.L Lyons. It is certainly far better for historians to assert fundamental principles than to follow fashions or wave sacred texts about their heads. Jackson thus acknowledges his debt to Marxist writings (when considering labour history issues) and to Roy Foster (when hoping for an inclusive, i.e. non-sectarian approach). But, in a modest claim for the value of his work (and thus for that of other historians) Jackson cites Peter Novick's claim that the best the historian can hope for is plausibility. However, Jackson's postmodernism is derived more from experience than from language—the experience, it can be presumed, of growing up in Ireland and of working, for many years, in Belfast. As he himself says: 'if post-modernist writing is a by-product of an age of crisis, then we in Ireland, and especially in Northern Ireland, are all post-modernists now.' The explanation of this standpoint is revealing:

'This book was written against a background of political and social fluidity, with the ostensibly marmoreal political attitudes and institutions of Ireland in flux; the book was begun in a post-Unionist Ulster, pursued in a post-nationalist Ireland, and completed in a post-industrial United States.'

Readers will find all they would expect to find in Jackson's study. Its framework is logical, chronological, sequential, and tightly organised. Within each of the larger chapters, covering key periods in Irish history, there are numerous themes and sub-themes. Following the opening and closing pronouncements, the book is light on historiographic interjection. That is not to say that Jackson has not rooted his work; but it does mean he leaves to footnotes that which belongs there. The result is smooth and free flowing. As a student text, this book is, therefore, excellent.

But Ireland, 1798-1998 is much more than just another textbook. For a start it synthesises secondary and original work. It is also a big book and this has left the author plenty of room to make his contribution. If I said the parts which cover the long, slow break-up of the Union were best, that would not be to say that the O'Connellite phase or the post-1945 sections, were weak. It's just that Jackson has a particularly acute sense of that which he has spent a lifetime working on. (And, like all reviewers, I alight on the things I am familiar with!)

The integration of Unionism, Belfast and the Northern Irish dimension with Catholic, Irish, nationalist narratives is an exciting and laudable development. Jackson points to the earlier period, and (as O'Connell is enjoying his long period of fame), reminds us that the Scots-Irish tradition began hardening early on. It is instructive to be shown how Unionism—or at least the marshalling of sentiments which would later become Unionist—did not occur overnight in 1885-6, but that Saunderson, Carson and Craig were, like their nationalist opponents, inheritors of much older traditions. This does not always lead to new insights (though often it does). The point must be that, in an original general work, it is valuable to have existing ideas tested and reaffirmed in new ways as well as to see old nostrums challenged.

One of Jackson's most striking tools of analysis is his comparison of individuals. This is something I have noticed in his earlier work, but it comes together here, and occurs repeatedly, with particularly good effect. The closely argued description of Griffith's Parnellite inheritance, is one example. Parnell's and Edward Saunderson's shared penchant for 'eighteenth-century modes of thought and expression', is another. In a similar way, Jackson also likes to draw out connections between the past and present. In so doing, he

provides striking reminders of the repetitive nature of history. Individuals and actions may not be the same, but the desire to make such links is irresistible. There are, of course, problems with this exercise, as Jackson himself recognises.

Within this rapidly shifting scene the obvious historical analogies begin to break down. Gerry Adams becomes not so much the ideological heir of Liam Lynch, the republican military leader in the civil war, still less of Eamon de Valera, but rather of Michael Collins: Neil Jordan's film of Collins seems to make the point implicitly. John Hume becomes not so much a Parnell or a Redmond as a Daniel O'Connell or an Arthur Griffith, fighting a protracted-and broadly successful-battle for his vision of Ireland. And what of David Trimble? The comparison with Carson might be made, but scarcely works on either personal or strategic grounds. Carson was personally clubbable and a political integrationist: he was acutely concerned for the unity of his movement. But Trimble, an angry and remote Irish Protestant, has fought for his own version of a Home Rule assembly. He has, through his actions, broken his party in two: in the summer of 1998 he was preparing for a furious and deadly battle with his enemies.

But if history is, to some degree, a moral lesson with which present generations can envision a better future, then Jackson's analogies must have value.

Jackson is refreshingly critical of Irish icons. A man such as O'Connell is allotted his rightful place, but the obvious frailties of his approach are raised. Catholic Emancipation was O'Connell's greatest achievement; but his failure to win home rule, his retreat from Clontarf, the split with the new radical generation, and his hostility towards Chartism and other working-class movements, would not merit anything like as much praise. Jackson abhors the violence of the Irish past and criticises most of those who would loose the genie from the bottle. Jackson takes issue with Parnell over his claim (made after his imprisonment in Kilmainham Gaol) that Captain Moonlight would replace his the Parnellite constitutional approach, because his call for a rent strike made the prophecy self-fulfilling. Jackson sees Parnellism as more an exercise in political manipulation than some finely-crafted ideology-but he does recognise it as a 'magnificent, though fragile, achievement', and its leader as 'dazzling, though vulnerable'. In the tragic downfall that followed the O'Shea divorce case in 1890, Jackson draws, as other had done, on literary analogies to press home the nature of the events.

For the Victorian Unionist, Edward Dowden, Parnell was the fallen archangel Lucifer; for F.S.L. Lyons, Parnell was Macbeth, 'bear-like' fighting his course. But Parnell was also Shakespeare's Richard III: a ruthless political warrior who at the end fought because there was no alternative; a vicious technician of power whose personal and political sins were for long contained, but in the end combined to ensure his downfall.

Jackson's understanding is undoubtedly superior. Whereas Lyons describes the reaction to the O'Shea as 'hysterical', Jackson is more comprehending when he reminds us of the deeply religious moral overtone to many Liberals' support for home rule. Besides, even in our own times a politician who fathered several children by another politician's wife would surely earn a couple of columns and paparazzi snapshot on the inside pages of the News of World.

This is, in sum, a truly stimulating and erudite work. Professor Jackson's book deserves a place alongside the classics of Beckett, Lyons and Foster, even though his book is different in many ways from those of his predecessors. It has a sharp, critical edge, which some might recoil from. It is impossible to write Irish history for all of Ireland's constituencies, so when Jackson appears less than reverential about some of the heroes of Irish history, he is likely to meet with some criticism. Moreover, if Croce was right, and all 'History is Contemporary history', then Jackson's message that history 's endings are upon us is so heavily burdened by the weight of hope. As I finish this review, the Peace Process and the Good Friday Agreement are in jeopardy as the NI Assembly stands on the brink of suspension. I just hope that, in a couple of years, when Professor Jackson comes to write a second edition, he won't have to elongate his discrete period, 1798-1998. For if he does, then blood will have been shed - again.

The author waives his right of reply

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