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Ireland and India: Nationalism, Empire and Memory

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In a 2009 review article on the study of Ireland?s relationship with the British Empire, Stephen Howe lamented the polarity of historiographical opinion surrounding the problems of Irish identity in a British imperial context. Hitherto, he observed, scholars had tended to veer between the simplistic ?either-or-ism? of pro- and anti-imperial identities, or the ?almost helpless? dismissal of the Irish position as ?hybrid, ambivalent, exceptional [and] anomalous?.(1) The prevailing assumption within the historiography had long been that of a ?dominant strain of anti-imperialist solidarities among the Irish?, but this, Howe remarked, was fast becoming an outdated position, untenable in the face of recent research. A new historiography was rapidly developing which sought to tease out more fully the problems of Irish imperial identity, and prominent among its advocates was Michael Silvestri.

With *Ireland and India*, Michael Silvestri nuances the apparent contradiction between Irish imperial and anti-imperial identities during the 19th and 20th centuries. He does this in the specific context of British India, using both contemporary opinion and modern commemoration to analyse three separate, but related, aspects of Irish involvement with the British Empire: the relationships between Irish and Indian nationalists; the appropriation of individual Irishmen as British imperial and Irish nationalist heroes; and, finally, the divergent reactions to the mutiny of an Irish regiment, the Connaught Rangers, on the North-West Frontier of India during the summer of 1920.

The book?s arguments are advanced through the use of case studies which focus alternately on the experiences of notable individuals and the activities of broader groups within an imperial framework. Silvestri opens by outlining the chequered career of Westmeath native T. H. Kavanagh, who during his lifetime was transformed from a hero of the defence of Lucknow in 1857 to a destitute *persona non grata* at his death. Although Kavanagh had been a decorated imperial champion, he was also critical of the colonial state, and he particularly regretted the lack of social interaction between Indians and Britons in the tense, segregated environment of post-Rebellion India. By the middle of the 20th century, however, in so far as he was remembered at all, it was as neither an imperialist or a critic of empire, but as a figure of mockery, a ?great freckled Irish bumpkin? who served as a foil for the wit of George MacDonald Fraser?s eponymous anti-hero in -*Flashman and the Great Game* (p. 4). In this way Silvestri introduces the notion of Irish imperial identity as complex and multifaceted, rather than either vehemently partisan or nebulous and unquantifiable.

The opening two chapters move to examine a wider subject, that of the links between Irish and Indian nationalists in the 20th century. The first details the attitudes and activities of such groups in North America, particularly the Indian nationalist *Gadar* party and the reception accorded to their ambitions by Irish-Americans. The second focuses on India, culminating in the examination of the Bengali nationalist attempt in 1930 to replicate the Easter Rising in an event known as the Chittagong Armoury Raid. The third and fourth chapters then narrow their scope to an examination of the career, and posthumous significance, of a key player in the story of the 1857 Rebellion: Brigadier-General John Nicholson. Nicholson is a pivotal figure for Silvestri?s arguments, since as well as being ?an imperial hero and an exemplar of British masculinity?, he was also commemorated as ?an Ulsterman and as an Irish imperial hero? (p. 11). The final two chapters draw on the mutiny of the largely Irish-recruited British army regiment, the Connaught Rangers. This is an incident which neatly encapsulates the themes set up by the preceding chapters: both Irish service in the British Empire and the relationship between Indian and Irish nationalists. The penultimate chapter outlines the events of the mutiny and seeks to determine what lay behind the soldiers? conduct; whether it was motivated by nationalist fervour, discontent with the conditions of the British service, or a combination of both. In particular it takes up the story of James Joseph Daly, the only soldier to be executed for his part in the mutiny at Jullundur, and his appropriation by Irish nationalist groups as a martyr for their cause. The final chapter examines the broader imperial impact of the mutiny, particularly the fears of the colonial authorities concerning its possible impact on Britain?s Indian troops, and the encouragement which Indian nationalist groups could glean from the affair.

Silvestri?s avowed aim throughout the book is both ?to demonstrate how empire was an important expression of the global nature of modern Irish history? and also ?to demonstrate the continuing tension between Irish imperial service and anti-imperial activity? (p. 209). Certainly, he achieves both these aims. The first is a fairly modest one: a significant Irish contribution to the functioning of the British Empire is well established, both through the activities of key figures, such as John Nicholson, Frederick Roberts, or indeed Arthur Wellesley (whose Irish identity is, somewhat surprisingly, not interrogated in the book), as well as through Ireland?s importance as a key recruiting ground for labour and military personnel. The second aim, that of contrasting imperial service and anti-imperial militancy, is the more challenging of the two, and it is here that Silvestri contributes to a growing historiography which makes a nuanced assessment of Ireland?s multi-faceted relationship with the British Empire.

As was indicated at the start of this review, Silvestri is concerned not only with illustrating the complexities

of Irish imperial identities; he is also keen to monitor the cultural commemoration of empire in Ireland, and to draw conclusions about the impact and relevance of its imperial past for Irish society today, particularly with regard to its political and sectarian communities.

Such was the state of the earlier historiographical tradition that in 1994 Hiram Morgan was able to remark that ?no history book records Irish involvement in the British Empire, largely because its memory is of little political value to modern Unionism or Nationalism?.(2) Silvestri argues that, as we enter the 2010s, this is no longer true, and that both academic and public history reflect a renewed interest in imperial matters. Since the early 1990s ?the historiography of Ireland and the British Empire has deepened, and popular perceptions in Ireland have also shown signs of shifting? (p. 213). That said, the significance of the imperial past is not felt generally, and it ?may have more relevance today to Irish nationalist rather than unionist identities? (p. 214). In other words, nationalists have been able to draw more strength from their feelings of revulsion towards the imperial past than unionists have been able to muster from any celebration of it. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Silvestri?s examples suggest that these reactions to Ireland?s imperial heritage have been pronounced since at least the middle of the 20th century, roughly mirroring the rejection over the same period of imperial values in Britain and among Europe?s former imperial powers more widely. An excellent example of this may be found in Silvestri?s comparison of the modern commemoration of John Nicholson and James Daly, respectively representing Irish imperial collaboration and anti-imperial Irish nationalism. Silvestri notes that during the Orange Day celebrations in Lisburn, Nicholson?s County Antrim birthplace, his statue is now excluded from any part in the events. While it still remains in the market square, no one sees fit to deck it with bunting or decorations of any sort. In other words, Nicholson, and through him, the British Empire, no longer forms a significant part of Ulster?s cultural identity. This impression is strengthened by the fate of the famous portrait of Nicholson which was habitually reproduced in imperial biographies and celebrations of empire, and which 40 years ago featured prominently in an exhibition of ?Great Irishmen?. It is now kept in storage at the Armagh County Museum. It has not featured in an exhibition for some years, and nor is there any intention that it should do so in the foreseeable future. Nicholson is not alone in being treated in this way, and nor is his fate the worst of the Irish ?imperial heroes?; those who were natives of what is now the Republic are, as Silvestri demonstrates, more likely to be vilified rather than simply ignored. The statue of Field Marshall Sir Hugh Gough, a native of County Limerick and a distinguished British military commander in India, was first damaged in an explosion in Phoenix Park, Dublin in 1957, and in the 1980s was sold for a nominal sum to a UK-based buyer on the condition it never be returned to Ireland.

Silvestri?s selection of the commemoration of the Connaught Rangers as an Irish nationalist counterpoint to this treatment is extremely effective, and goes some way to encapsulating the difficulty of disentangling an identity which contains both an adherence to and a rejection of imperial service. The regimental museum is a relatively recent innovation (it opened in Boyle, County Roscommon, in 1995), and its handling of the 1920 mutiny, and the characters of the individual mutineers themselves, suggests an enduring cultural relevance which is not felt for the Irish imperial champions. The exhibitions cover the regiment?s history in its entirety, from the formation of the 88th Foot in 1793 to its disbandment in 1922, and therefore include a great deal of material on Irish imperial service, but the focal point of the museum is a room devoted to the Jullundur mutiny. As Silvestri represents it, far from being a forgotten figure, or a distasteful reminder of an imperial past, the chief mutineer, James Daly, is celebrated: he is the subject of a life-sized representation in this final room, kneeling in prayer on the night before his execution. There is also much emphasis on the human qualities of the mutineers; the display stresses their concern for friends and family back in Ireland and their distress at being complicit in an imperial system, rather than their devotion to ?an abstract republican ideal? (p. 213). Even here, though, the tension is apparent between the two apparently irreconcilable traditions of imperial service and anti-imperialism. Alongside the material on Daly and the mutineers there are letters from the trenches, written by a Connaught Ranger serving on the Western Front during the First World War, as a well as a memorial plaque presented to the regiment by the people of Dover.

In conclusion, the book?s engagement with issues of Irish imperial identity is largely successful, and Silvestri?s selection of subjects for the case studies is both varied and interesting. There are, however, some

areas which could be revised or more fully developed. *Ireland and India*?s concern is overwhelmingly with Irish identity in an Indian/imperial context, and in this regard some of the material on Indian nationalist groups campaigning in North America comes across as a little overdone. Also, the chronological jumps between chapters and the shifts in focus can be rather disconcerting for the reader, although they are doubtless necessary when covering a large subject over such a long period of time. Perhaps more serious, though, is the under-interrogation of Irish imperial motives. John Nicholson is the subject of a full third of the chapters, yet there is relatively little indication of how he reconciled his Irishness with service to the British Empire. Given that the friction between these two concepts is the key theme of book, it would have been appropriate to bring out Nicholson?s self-justification more strongly, and perhaps to contrast it with the self-perception of some of the many other Irish imperial figures, such as Hugh Gough, Frederick Roberts, or Garnet Wolseley.

Overall, though, the book works well. In particular, Silvestri?s reflections on the links between Ireland?s imperial past and its reconciliation with modern cultural identities are original and convincingly argued. Such a book can only serve to promote continued interest and further research into the rich and complex relationship between Ireland and the British Empire.

Notes

1. S. Howe, ?Minding the gaps: new directions in the study of Ireland and Empire?, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 37, 1 (March 2009), 137.Back to (1)
2. H. Morgan, ?An unwelcome heritage: Ireland?s role in British empire-building?, *History of European Ideas*19, 4?6 (1994), 622, cited M. Silvestri, *Ireland and India*, p. 213.Back to (2)

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