

Ambiguous Republic: Ireland in the 1970s

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It is a rare thing for a reviewer to read a book which on its own terms, in its content and argument, leaves nothing open to serious criticism. Professor Diarmaid Ferriter's *Ambiguous Republic: Ireland in the 1970s* is one such book. In reading this excellent study, besides being struck by the many parallels made apparent between the political and economic state of the Republic of Ireland in the 1970s and in the second decade of the 21st century, one is struck by the sense that the 1970s were a foundational period for the Irish state, though it had been existence for five decades. A transitional period also, between the economic upturn of the 1960s and the crippling slump of the 1980s and long before the 'Celtic Tiger' began to roar. While old problems persisted, there was conspicuously less of a sense of angst about the worthiness of the independence project and the very existence of the Irish state than there had been in the 1950s, when 'half a million people left the country' (p. 8). While the 1970s was for most of the rest of democratic Europe a period of disillusionment after the heady days of the 1960s (though also one of far-ranging and far-reaching democratisation), in Ireland, in just about every area of political, economic, cultural, social and intellectual life, Irishmen, and increasingly Irishwomen, were thinking anew. With the passing of the certainties of an older generation of nationalists and the country's increasing involvement in international affairs and movement towards EEC membership, questions were inevitably raised about the 'identity' of the modern Irish state. If answers to the question were found, these were generally not the result of intensive intellectual reflection, but of actions and decisions made in the context of the immediate challenges facing the country, particularly the Northern situation and the economy. This is not to say, however, that the 1970s was a stagnant decade for Irish culture; quite the opposite was the case, as Ferriter shows, particularly in the area of music, and an Arts Council for Ireland was established in 1973 (p. 264). Even down to the level of

individual idiosyncrasies in the realm of high politics the parallels made apparent between 1970s Ireland and contemporary Ireland are striking: the ‘Lynch speak’ of Jack Lynch (p. 81), Irish Taoiseach between 1966 and 1973, and 1977 and 1979; can be set alongside the ‘Bertiespeak’ of Bertie Ahern, Taoiseach between 1997 and 2008, both of them Fianna Fáil prime ministers.

If the 1970s was a decade in which individual Irish citizens, intellectuals, academics and even civil servants were thinking anew, superficiality and short-termism seemed to characterize much governmental thinking during the period. That an Irish government committee deliberating in 1972 on, among other things, the role of a national flag in any united Ireland could consider this as ‘a relatively unimportant matter and negotiable’ (p. 189) seems, to say the least, remarkably myopic, especially to those of us looking back at the recent ‘flag protests’ in Northern Ireland of 2013. In reading the section in chapter 18 on the Dublin/Monaghan bombings of 1974, one is struck by the disconnect between popular sentiment and the Irish government’s reaction to what was by any definition a deliberate terrorist attack on the Irish state, and one which may have involved the military personnel of another state, a response which can be fairly characterised as lackadaisical and apathetic. In short, the government of Liam Cosgrave, as Ferriter makes clear, was prepared to excuse refusing to adequately investigate a terrorist attack that cost the lives of 31 Irish citizens on the grounds of political expediency and a belief that such an attack had been practically inevitable in the context of the violence in the North. (pp. 199–201) Though the Northern conflict had major effects on the politics of the Irish state and its political reputation, events such as the Dublin/Monaghan bombings and the response to them seem to underline the difficulties of Irish governments during the 1970s in trying to effect successful strategic influence on Northern affairs (the abortive Sunningdale Agreement notwithstanding). This was due to difficult relations with British governments, an unwillingness to confront the realities behind Ulster Unionism, and perhaps most of all the state’s fear of the possibility of internal subversion.

As Ferriter shows, little really differentiated the Northern ‘policy’ of the Lynch and Cosgrave governments apart from the superficial nationalist rhetoric of the former, but this nonetheless reflected the feeling of the party base and Fianna Fáil’s self-image. The Irish government’s response to the Dublin/Monaghan bombings, and to any activism in the state that could be construed as lending succour to Republicanism, well bears out Ferriter’s contention that the state still possessed a ‘conservative, authoritarian governing culture, that seemed to prize the stability and endurance of the institutions of the state and created a very wide definition of dissent’ (p. 7). The particular hostility of Fine Gael politicians to Irish Republicanism was also no doubt a reflection of the party’s continued perception of itself as the builder of the Irish state and the one that had prevented it from being killed at birth (and since) by violent insurrectionary republicanism. Yet, as ever, Fine Gael governments presided over a state the constitution of which had been the ‘brainchild’ of their old enemy, the father of Fianna Fáil, Eámon de Valera. On the other hand, some Irish politicians who could not be described as sympathetic to Irish Republicanism were occasionally willing to utilise an overly simplistic nationalist historical narrative in order to convey a sense of pride in the independent role of the Irish state, in particular in the area of foreign affairs, as when Garret Fitzgerald (one of very few genuinely cerebral Irish politicians of the period) put forward the view that as a result of Ireland’s ‘colonial’ history the country was better placed to carve out an international role focused on a defence of human rights (p. 429). Or, as Ferriter puts it in his earlier Irish history *The Transformation of Ireland*, ‘In the conduct of foreign policy, the occasional desire to act differently from Britain may suggest that enthusiasm for Europe was partly bound up with the self-conscious need to be different from the former coloniser’ (p. 685). Similarly, in seeking to make a virtue of a necessity, politicians and governmental circles built a narrative around the state’s entry into the EEC in 1973 centred on the notion of Ireland re-joining the European community of nations after centuries of British rule, and five subsequent decades of economic dependence on Britain.

Yet however much Irish parliamentary politics, to the extent that ‘ideology’ figured in them, may have continued to have been structured along a ‘Civil War’ divide 50 years old, Ferriter makes a convincing case in chapter one that the actual day to day ‘cut and thrust’ of Irish politics was based more on ‘clientelism’ and constituency politics than anything else, influenced by the Irish system of multi-member constituencies, and expressed in typically salty terms in Charles Haughey’s advice to Bertie Ahern: ‘don’t worry about the old bullshit going on in Leinster House ... just concentrate on your constituency’ (p. 66). Irish politics also

continued to be dominated by personalities, even not particularly impressive ones such as Jack Lynch. Fairly or unfairly, neither Lynch nor Cosgrave (to say nothing of Charles J. Haughey) come off particularly well in Ferriter's estimation. Irish prime ministers were by now it seems, at least in the case of Lynch and Cosgrave, more amenable to government by committee and cabinet consensus than their revolutionary generation predecessors. In reading the chapters on 'Remembering the fight for freedom' and 'History wars' one is struck by the 'squeamishness' of the Irish state in the matter of commemorating the revolutionary period in any way that might possibly be construed as expressing even an implicitly 'permissive' attitude towards contemporary paramilitary violence. In the context of the Irish government's response to, for example, the Dublin/Monaghan bombings, there is nothing surprising about such 'squeamishness'. The fact of remembering that the Irish state had come into being as a result of a campaign of revolutionary or insurrectionary violence was sundered from historical context and became tied to contemporary politics. This 'rear-view mirror' sense of Irish history was also reflected, however, in the perspectives of some Irish academic historians. Nonetheless Ferriter draws a judicious balance between making clear the intellectual necessity of the revisionist agenda in historiography that was gaining ground in this period, while also conceding that revisionism for all its value to historians was as easily politicized as the old nationalist narrative (p. 247). Yet, however much revisionism may have been growing in importance in during the 1970s, it was the continuation of a process reaching back at least 30 years, and revisionism itself was no break with the past.

The book also offers an interesting perspective on the advance of secularization in 1970s Ireland, noting that, moves were afoot earlier than has generally been thought to break the Catholic Church's near complete monopoly on education, and noting also the willingness of some Irish Catholic priests to countenance far-reaching change in religiously-influenced legislation to accommodate northern Protestant sensibilities in any speculative united Ireland. Ferriter also interestingly points out that the high-point of 1970s Ireland, the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1979, had been prompted more by a sense on the part of the Irish hierarchy that religious devotion was on the wane in Ireland than by an appreciation of the traditional devotion of the Irish to the Roman Catholic Church (p. 622). We see here in Ferriter's pages less the 'triumphal' Church of earlier decades than one increasingly concerned, albeit quietly, about its long-term future, though of course the deliberate and systematic covering-up of sexual abuse carried out by Catholic priests and religious institutions throughout the Republic draws the focus back on an institution that did not feel itself compelled to obey the law of the state over its own laws. Courageous figures such as the television presenter who announced on the highly popular *The Late Late Show* as early as 1967 that 'As I sit here tonight, the Irish Christian Brothers are abusing our children', were unfortunately rare exceptions in a society in which continued deference to the Church in many aspects of life prevailed (p. 380). At the very least, however, the Church's previously powerful claim to be the political and social conscience of the state became increasingly weakened during the 1970s. In other areas, however, prominent churchmen played more positive and popular roles, as in the 1976 campaign to prevent building on Wood Quay, an important archaeological site for the exploration of Dublin's medieval Norse history (p. 251).

The book, which is not a straightforward chronological narrative of the 1970s in Ireland, is divided thematically into sections on political and administrative culture, the effects of 'the Troubles' on the Republic (given the book's focus, the extent to which events in Northern Ireland are treated relate to their direct effect on the Irish state), commemoration and popular culture, Irish legal culture of the 1970s and policing, foreign affairs, the economy, social change, and change in the sphere of education and the rise of Irish feminism in the 1970s. The book certainly cannot be faulted for lack of detail or comprehensive breadth, and the thematic structuring prevents the evidence from overwhelming the reader and distracting from the underlying argument. If anything, there is perhaps too much evidence, too many sources for a kind of history that is primarily based on documents from political archives. The book is primarily based on state papers and files, the papers of various past political figures and civil servants, and the papers of the Fianna Fáil parliamentary party, but it also draws on various periodicals and magazines of the period. Ferriter's command of such a large body of sources, ranging from governmental files to popular magazines, is a model for any historian. He also quotes from a number of letters written by members of the Irish public and diaspora to Lynch and Cosgrave, which open a window on popular attitudes both at home and abroad. The

lack of a concluding chapter is one of the book's very few handicaps, though a fairly minor one. The reader is left to draw his or her own conclusions by the end of the book, but the weight of evidence largely speaks for itself. Regarding the relative importance of different factors in forcing popular and governmental re-evaluations of what Ireland was in the 1970s; the Northern conflict, the legacies of the struggle for independence, and of course, the ever present debate on the economy all seem to this reader to maintain a presence in each of the book's main sections.

Like Ferriter's previous books, in particular *The Transformation of Ireland, Ambiguous Republic* is intended for both academic and popular audiences, but it is quite simply a monumental piece of scholarship that will be a – if not *the* – standard work on Ireland in the 1970s for many years to come, written by one of Ireland's premier historians working today. Given the parallels between 1970s Ireland and Ireland today it would be easy to fall into the trap of adopting a 'rear-view mirror' perspective of the period. Ferriter, however, avoids this by underlining that Ireland during the 1970s was still undergoing modernization, albeit this was in its final stages. As he writes in *The Transformation of Ireland*, in the 1990s, 'Irish people were listening to and seeing things that would have found no outlet in the 1970s'.⁽¹⁾ This is a book that underlines the ways in which the Irish state of today remains an 'ambiguous republic': as the 1970's saw the fading of de Valera nationalism and the wide-ranging effects of the Northern conflict, the opening decades of the 21st century have seen equivalent changes in terms of a collapse in deference to the Catholic Church and a society forced to confront new problems raised by the spectacular death of the 'Celtic Tiger'.

Ambiguous Republic is a study of Irish history and it is hard to fault the book on any level as such. However, the book's focus reminds the reader of the extent to which, for numerous reasons, Irish history, as with that of any country, continues to be shaped by the national paradigm, and perhaps more than that, by a received wisdom found in much of the historiography of the 20th century, and one that still retains some currency: that of the 'special path' of national histories. This idea has strongly influenced Irish historiography both of the old nationalist style and of the revisionist 'school', and holds appeal to this day in controversies over such questions as the 'colonial' nature (or not) of early modern and modern Irish history. Where does *Ambiguous Republic* stand in relation to writing on the 'Sonderweg' of Irish history? I should firstly say that I am not 'accusing' Professor Ferriter of writing a 'Sonderweg' history: he is far too sophisticated a historian to accept such a commonplace notion. However, one can argue that many histories like *Ambiguous Republic* perhaps exaggerate the extent to which Ireland's 'distinctive' problems really were 'distinctive'. Though Ferriter notes the international dimension of some Irish events and problems, and while he hints at the possibility of a comparative subtext in relation to other European countries in the introduction, this is not sustained in the text. Given the extent to which the problems which shaped Ireland's 1970s were pan-European ones, for this reviewer, as a comparative historian, the apparent absence of a real comparative perspective is hard to ignore. Without meaning to suggest that good comparative history is a simple matter that can be dealt with in a few pages here and there, or that Professor Ferriter should have in effect written a different book to this one, the absence of a comparative perspective in some of the book's sections is perhaps problematic insofar as Ferriter argues that Ireland's 'distinctive' problems were central not just to the distinctiveness of Ireland's 1970s but also to the general shortcomings and failings of Irish government, politics, society and economy during that period. This book is, after all, written with an eye on the Ireland of today, and the crises which have beset the Irish state since 2008 are *European* ones.

Like Ireland, Greece, Spain, and Portugal (for example) were undergoing far-reaching changes in the 1970s with their transitions from dictatorship to democracy, and also with respect to the latter's withdrawal from its colonial empire. On a level closer to Ireland's, Belgium too was undergoing far-reaching political and constitutional change. Reading Ferriter's comments on the excessively 'localist' and 'macho' and worse yet 'machine', 'clientelist' and anti-intellectual character of Irish politics one would be forgiven for thinking that such masculine and 'parish pump' politics were distinctively Irish when in fact they were not. Ferriter quotes one contemporary Irish commentator that 'the real legislative influence of [Irish] deputies is marginal' (p. 15), this is a comment that could be applied to numerous parliamentary democracies of the same period with centralised political parties, and, for some, powerful labour movements aligned with left-wing parties whose electoral bases were concentrated in certain areas and communities. It is difficult to imagine that on the

island of Ireland ‘parish pump’ politics were limited only to ‘the south’, either, at any rate before the Northern Irish Parliament was dissolved by the British government. Ferriter’s appraisal of Fianna Fáil as ‘one of the most successful [political parties] in the world’ (p. 16) hints at the possibility of comparison, without pursuing it. Certainly there was nothing distinctively Irish about one party seeing itself as the ‘natural’ party of government. Though ‘the Troubles’ were certainly something distinctive in Europe, Ireland was still not the only country whose politics, government and apparatuses of justice and law enforcement were deeply affected by the threat of violent internal subversion, as we know from the examples of Italy and West Germany, where the Red Army Faction’s campaign (albeit a very minor one compared to those of Irish paramilitaries) led to a national crisis in 1977. Even in the section of the book most appropriate for comparison, on ‘foreign affairs’, which deals largely with the state’s changing relationship to the European Community and the implications of this for national sovereignty, as well as the reasons behind and context for Irish pro-EC arguments and sentiments, there is no real attempt to engage in comparison, except perhaps for asides in chapters 35 and 37. These are perhaps unfair criticisms given the stated focus of *Ambiguous Republic*; the book does not aim to set out a comparative perspective and then fail to offer one. Perhaps it would be better to say that these criticisms are more an appeal for some future Irish historian to build on the work of Ferriter in *Ambiguous Republic* with a comparative study of Ireland’s 1970s. When he or she does so, *Ambiguous Republic* will be an invaluable guide.

Notes

1. Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland* (Dublin, 2005), pp. 664–5. [Back to \(1\)](#)

Other reviews:

Irish Times

<http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/ambiguous-republic-ireland-in-the-1970s-by-diarmaid-ferriter-1.1643345> [2]

Dublin Review of Books

<http://www.drb.ie/essays/challenging-the-state> [3]

Irish Independent

<http://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books-arts/the-turbulent-decade-that-still-casts-its-shadow-over-us-28821714.html> [4]

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