

Irish Foreign Policy 1919-1966: From Independence to Internationalism

Review Number:

204

Publish date:

Thursday, 31 May, 2001

Editor:

Michael Kennedy

Joseph Morrison Skelly

Date of Publication:

2000

Publisher:

Four Courts Press

Place of Publication:

Dublin

Reviewer:

Owen Dudley Edwards

The reviewer's first duty is easily accomplished. This is a feast of entertainment and instruction to the diplomatic historian (and even more to the undiplomatic historian) of Ireland, Britain, Europe, Israel, India, Burma, the British Commonwealth in general, South America, the U.S.A., and the United Nations. It is heavily based on multi-archival evidence, has many enlightening extracts wrested from outer darkness, is largely (if at times suspiciously) judicious in tone, and its errors are minor enough to retain the confidence of the reader without entirely vegetarianising the reviewer. The essays illuminate specific topics without exhausting either subject or onlooker - a few of them may have exhausted their authors, and one or two coast easily downhill - and there are several clusters of related research-products which supplement without over-endorsing one another.

Publishers do not much care for *Festschriften* these days, and if our authors speak of their contributions as 'chapters', vaguely suggesting a relay-race according to Actonian principles of indistinguishable objectivity, their magnetic poles vary: Skelly's publications do include editing an actual *Festschrift*, for Conor Cruise O'Brien; Deirdre MacMahon dedicates the longest, possibly the most valuable, and least Irish-centred, 'chapter' to one of its participants and a primary as well as secondary source, the great Commonwealth historian Nicholas Mansergh; and Ronan Fanning's 'Raison d'Etat and the Evolution of Irish Foreign Policy' began life as the 1995 Memorial Lecture to Ireland's pioneer diplomatic historian T. Desmond Williams (pioneer, *inter alia*, of A. J. P. Taylor's subsequent thesis on the origins of World War II). The political scientist Patrick Keatinge contributes a thin, pretentious, derivative and inaccurate Foreword, but he seems less obviously here as an *imprimatur*-wielding bishop than as captive dragged at the historians' chariot-wheels. Since all Irish metaphors need mixing, the collection may also appear a lying-in hospital awaiting its James Joyce: several items will win a fuller epiphany about ten times their present length, and Dr Troy Davis seems to imply that his essay, the weakest 'chapter', is a condensation of a section of his 1998 publication on Irish-American relations in the Truman era.

This should prove a first-class teaching volume, since its documentary quotations are numerous enough to give shrewd students the means of taking issue with the conclusions of some of the essayists. They will want to make good use of bibliographical information in the footnotes, which is far fuller than that supplied in the bibliography; the latter attempts to offset its *lacunae* by including separate entries under author for every single essay in the preceding pages, and an additional entry for the book itself. (Irish diplomatic historians live in Chinese boxes or Russian dolls.) The sharp-eyed student will also notice that Dr Gerard Keown and Mr. Robert Patterson begin with identical footnotes stressing that the views expressed are those of the authors alone, writing in personal capacities. The student should then whip to the helpful *curricula vitae*: the two authors are in the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, known as the Department of External Affairs until 1971. Neither Keown (on the Irish Free State's creation of its foreign policy in the 1920s) nor Patterson (on Irish relations with Vichy France) can be accused of softening their conclusions where historical reappraisal is appropriate, and if their choice of extracts hit harder than their judgments, that fortifies them as historians no less than as diplomats. We are treated without comment to the pro-Axis head of the Irish foreign service, Joe Walshe, complaining in June 1945 that liberated France's envoy entertained 'the most anti-Irish and the most collaborationist elements in the Ascendancy class'. It may indicate Walshe's phenomenal capacity for survival that he would purloin his invectives from his victorious adversaries without a tremor.

But the presence of the diplomats historicizing in their 'personal capacity' typifies something not discussed here: the personnel profile of the Irish diplomatic corps. The elegant professionalism of Keown's and Patterson's essays is characteristic of the most charming, most cultured, and most unscrupulous foreign service in Europe, perhaps in the world. Multi-archival history is all very well, but it needs fleshing out with the identities of its civil servants where possible: readers will need to examine Conor Cruise O'Brien's *Memoir* (1998) to get some substance to the crucial figures who from time to time formulated Irish policy with a ruthlessness to their elected nominal superiors which would stagger *Yes, Minister's* Sir Humphrey. And O'Brien himself, while atypical in his exceptional intellect and morality, is characteristic of the corps to which he belonged in the nature if not in the vast extent of his cultural range. His colleagues included the poets Val Iremonger and Denis Devlin, the razor-sharp *Irish Times* reviewer and columnist Tommy Woods, the celebrant of Lafcadio Hearn Séan Ronan, the foremost Irish-Gaelic poet of her time Máire Mhac a' tSaoi, the historian of Irish 1848 revolutionaries in Australia T. J. Kiernan (whose wife, Delia Murphy, was the most famous Irish folk-singer of the mid-century), the archaeologist Eoin MacWhite, the leading Irish lay theologian Séan M Réamoinn, few of them receiving index-able mention here.

The results may be seen in the Irish diplomatic performance in the EC, or in the transformation of Margaret Thatcher within a year from the screeching chauvinist 'OUT ... OUT ... OUT' to the signatory of Irish Agreement. Her fate was that of so many arrogant establishmentarians whether in British or other governments: the more vehement, the more vulnerable. The Anglo-Irish Agreement may have been a very bad thing: in the opinion of the present writer, it was. But it is impossible to withhold admiration for the skill with which the Mephistophelean Irish coldly marked and profited by every hostage to fortune their chosen Faustina delivered. And the making of that crack corps is the largely hidden music to which this book forms a libretto. The editors should really have chosen an epigraph from the passage in A. G. Macdonnell's *England, Their England* (1933) in which the proceedings of the League of Nations are interrupted by a burst of laughter from the New Zealand delegate, the Australian delegate, and the South African delegate to whom the Foreign Minister of the Irish Free State had just whispered a vulgar story. Thus we win our Irish victories.

Yet it was not a united corps. Ronan Fanning seeks to lend coherence to the history covered by the volume, as does the sub-title, in arguing that the period covers transfer from idealism to realism. The difficulty is that historians' packaging inevitably bruises the messy past, which sooner or later starts to seep through the parcel. Kennedy and Skelly open their introductory essay with a brilliant paradox: Irish diplomatic history is in its (precocious) infancy, but 'the history of Ireland since 1916 is, in many respects, the history of Irish foreign policy'. (p. 13) And Irish consensus remained in many respects a veneer, to intimidate the forces that had practically destroyed any form of rule, British or Irish.

The Irish diplomatic mandarins were playing for much bigger stakes, relatively speaking, than their foreign counterparts. The Department of External Affairs was presided over by a series of civil servants in the years under review, and of these, Joe Walshe (1923-46), was a right-wing clericist (hence more pro-Mussolini than pro-Hitler and more attuned to Pope Pius XII than either); and Freddie Boland (1946-50) was so pro-English that his accent seemed to make Whitehall, by comparison, sound Cockney; and Con Cremin (1958-64) was almost unquestioningly pro-American. Fanning derisively quotes the Anglophobe Séan MacBride entering office as Minister for External Affairs in 1948: "Mr. Boland, give me a list of all the British agents working in your department". (p. 320) But MacBride, for all of his exaggerated French accent, was no fool, and this sounds like an opening salvo against Boland himself, who was indeed secretly volunteering information on potential left-wing subversives to Whitehall at this time - as has been shown by British archival evidence in recent years. MacBride's question and Boland's intrigues are akin to the anti-Communist witch-hunt then under way in the U.S.A., much of it orchestrated by Irish-Americans. Troy Davis here tells us that "Whereas Irish Americans of the earlier era had so sympathised with the republican movement in Ireland that they had vigorously opposed what they interpreted as President Wilson's pro-British foreign policy, their post-war counterparts in the Irish American Community tended to base their foreign policy views more exclusively on their perceptions of American interest." (p. 201) But this is a meaningless distinction: anti-Wilson Irish-Americans wanted to show they had clout and insisted that American National interest was best served by deferring to them - as did their successors thirty years after. The best means of showing the wallop of their clout from 1945-55, was by denouncing Red revolutionaries (especially with suspiciously English accents) rather than Orange reactionaries. Dr. Davis shows that in a *volte-face* from earlier British policy, Northern Ireland premier Sir Basil Brooke was brought to the U.S.A. in 1950 with much success; in fact his domestic discriminatory rhetoric, warning Northern Ireland Protestants against employment of inevitably subversive Catholics, harmonised in nature, if not in victims, with Joe McCarthy's agitation against jobs for the Reds.

Brooke's American success had at least one antecedent from his Anglo-Irish squire-archival origins whom he was unlikely to cite: Charles Stewart Parnell, the great Home Rule leader whose tour of the United States from January to March 1880 enlisted so much financial and moral support from Americans, many of whom had little Irish blood. Parnell used American restlessness against isolation to bring pressure to bear on Britain, and his own status as grandson and namesake of the American Naval War Hero of 1812 Admiral Charles Stewart, helped him to exploit an Irish dimension in British-American diplomacy. However Brooke might deplore that history, it gave enormous confidence to twentieth-century Irish nationalists. The Kennedy-Skelly thesis on Irish history as the history of Irish foreign policy is at times as true before 1916 as after it, especially if we accept Emmet Larkin's notion of a kind of Irish state taking shape from the mid-1880s under U.K. rule. And Irish nationalist conditioning by history would dominate the thought of many founders of the post-Treaty Irish Free State as well as of their opponents and heirs such as Éamon de Valera. Thus our welcome for Michael Kennedy's fascinating discussion of Dáil Éireann's Latin American diplomacy would be the greater had its Chilean discussion been augmented by the dramatic role of an Irish nationalist in Chilean history - Parnell's one-time close confederate Patrick Egan. Only seven years after emigration, he became the U.S. Minister to Chile under the Harrison administration in 1889, and carried matters with so high a hand that Irish envoys, thirty years later, would have found Chileans affected by his memory adversely or amicably. Kennedy makes the excellent point that Dublin's thinking about Irish emigrant communities and loyalties, was frequently self-deceptively solipsistic. But his readers would be the wiser for more data on the Irish-Argentine and Irish-Chilean peoples to whose factions his allusions are at times tantalisingly vague. Irish writers on the host countries of their fellow-countrymen overseas should adopt a little of the voracious enthusiasm with which they seem invariably ready to discuss English data. No English historian can fail to benefit from Eunan O'Halpin on the poverty of British intelligence 1932-33 or (above all) from Deirdre McMahon on the limits of British governmental intellect in citing Irish precedents of possible relevance to India and Burma. Whitehall may be less than grateful, but if it cannot learn from its own past, what good is it to the future? The same is true of the frankness with which Irish official blunders and bêtises are treated here. In fact, the British official mind in these pages seems at its sharpest in commentary on constitutional questions, and at its flabbiest in assessing public opinion. Irish historians in

performance here occasionally, neo-colonially, show similar imbalance. Bernadette Whelan's sparkling, multilateral discussion of Ireland and the invitation to join the Marshall Plan cites an American poll of 1944 favouring a US declaration of War on Éire. It is well for complacent Irish chauvinists to remember that fact, but we all must remember that an American poll - indeed all American polls - four years later were to assert that at the ensuing Presidential election Governor Thomas E. Dewey would defeat President Harry S. Truman.

The need for Irish diplomatic history to root itself in the study of Irish social history and popular attitudes is nowhere more evident than in the otherwise admirable four essays on Ireland's diplomatic origins of present-day involvement in the EC. The archival work shown here is fascinating, and carries us a long way from tourist vanities. Yet however absurd the Irish self-congratulation on Irish European consciousness going all the way back through the past millennium and a half to the days of St Columbanus and St. Killian (duly commemorated on the bows of present-day Irish aircraft), it is a key heritage and unlocks many gates other than Heaven's. Ireland's success, and the UK's failure, in Europe has everything to do with the Irish sounding as if they wanted to be thought European and the English (not the British) sounding as if they didn't. Catholic Ireland, time and again, saw its salvation coming *from* Europe, even if it was only the economic salvation obtained by eighteenth-century smuggling; England saved the world in Summer 1940 by resisting destruction coming *from* Europe. Irish Catholicism might be famous for banning 1984 and Graham Greene's *Heart of the Matter*; but Irish Catholicism in the library knew its France from François Mauriac and Georges Bernanos, its Italy from Ignazio Silone and Giovanni ('Don Camillo') Guareschi. The politically acute insistence that Irish diplomats cheer as enthusiastically as Xenophon's ten thousand whenever Irish foreign policy caught sight of the Holy See, may seem ludicrous today (consider the IRA in 1929: 'prostrate at your feet, Most Holy Father' - while otherwise defying all the world). Ludicrous or not, it meant that the Irish were thinking European, irrespective of the century they might imaginatively inhabit while thinking it. Thus with Europe, peripheral Ireland became cosmopolitan; metropolitan Whitehall became parochial. Amid a percussion of their pratfalls, Irish diplomats acquired a European sense if only by originating in a people which at least thought it had one. Ireland therefore made its mileage at the League of Nations, at the United Nations, and in the European Community, at the expense of British isolationism (while, as Ronan Fanning incisively notes, secure under the British imperial umbrella unless the umbrella decided to spike Ireland in some wild moment).

The Irish independence within interdependence had its counterpart among the big powers in de Gaulle; and here even the giants of twentieth-century Irish historiography, Dermot Keogh and Ronan Fanning, become trapped in the Whiggish from-independence-to-internationalism formula. (Progress was always an Irish dirty word.)

Up to 1961, Ireland relied on partition to keep it out of war, out of NATO, and out of anything else politically, economically or theologically inconvenient. Fanning does good work in showing how far this thinking was first established by de Valera himself when a Dáil Éireann envoy seeking recognition and funds from the United States 1919-20. But Lemass as 'a foreign policy realist' writes Keogh 'went very far towards dismantling the country's traditional opposition to membership of military alliances'.

Fanning concludes the book with the words:

What, then, is the significance of the events of 1961-2? Simply this: that although Ireland did not finally accede to the EEC until 1 January 1973, the evidence now available reveals that, notwithstanding the Euroscepticism of Éamon de Valera and Frank Aiken, the debate within the Irish foreign policy establishment about the tension between the independence enshrined in neutrality and the interdependence enshrined in the EEC had by then been effectively resolved. Irish foreign policy has since remained wedded to the realism of interdependence. (p. 285)

Here Fanning, and, more cautiously, Keogh, ignore what actually happened; de Gaulle vetoed Britain's entry and the Irish revolution in foreign policy went abegging. De Gaulle vetoed on the unquestionable grounds that the UK sought entry under US urging, and would be an American stooge in Europe. Lemass had thrown

away the obvious advantage of holding de Gaulle's respect as an independent, nationally-conscious, Catholic minor power, and had hitch-hiked a lift on British subservience to the U.S.A. Modern jargon like 'Euroscepticism' is perilously imposed on the past: de Valera could justly claim that his policy at the League, for instance, had been far less Eurosceptic than Britain's had. Whatever else he was, he was no mid-twentieth-century Teresa Gorman or Hague (or even, however ethnically linked, no Portillo), as elsewhere Messrs Keogh and Fanning would agree. On the strength of Keogh's evidence it is even doubtful if the Americans were that anxious to win Irish membership in NATO. Keogh thinks they were, but he simply shows that one hard-bitten career diplomat, in Washington D.C., Joseph Sweeney, may have hoodwinked the usual hoodwinkers, into believing that Under-Secretary George Ball, and behind him President John Kennedy, demanded Irish presence in NATO. But, as with Irish presence in the EEC in the 1960s, the historian, to be realistic, must look at the thing that really happens. After Lemass had plumped against neutrality, and de Gaulle vetoed British Entry into the EEC, Ireland did not pursue entry into NATO. Keogh notes a meeting between Ball and Aiken in November 1961, but makes little of it. The most obvious (if unrecorded) point of mutual interest at that stage would have been the Congo crisis and Conor Cruise O'Brien's recall from Katanga, unmentioned by Keogh but the key question in Irish-US-UK-French affairs at that moment. It is difficult to believe that Aiken and Ball would not have talked about that; it is equally clear that they would not want to tell the UK or France - or some of their own subordinates - that they had. (Boland was currently intriguing with Britain to have O'Brien removed.)

If Kennedy had wanted Ireland to join NATO his most obvious ploy would have been to have said so during his visit there in Summer 1963: at that point, the Irish people would have carried him shoulder-high through the portals of NATO, Inferno, Purgatorio or Paradiso. He did nothing of the kind. He was apparently concerned about rights for American planes to land at Shannon, i.e. with commercial, not military, questions. Within three years Irish public opinion was becoming very uneasy about US military alliances, and External Affairs was once again courageously announcing itself in full agreement with the Pope. As for interdependence, the flea is interdependent on its large prey but its well-being requires agility more than subservience. The archival historian must always remember the world is not covered in available archives: Skelly on Ireland's UN manoeuvres in 1960-61, anent the South Tirol, attempts less and thus achieves more on surer feet covering wider terrain. But to say all this is to reassert the great value of this collection: Keogh and Skelly's discovery of the Sweeneyad, whether or not Sweeney spoke only in his personal capacity, helps to show how much de Gaulle's veto was justified by New Frontier treatment of the British and Irish EEC candidatures as though they were U.S. stooges.

To turn to another group of essays, Katrina Goldstone's discussion of Ireland's failure to help save Jewish refugees from Hitler's Europe is a welcome if grim reminder that a small power could prove as contemptible as big ones, and that critics of Israel should remember how universal is the western guilt which made Zionism the only alternative to the Final Solution. Equally, Irish equivocation on the recognition of Israel is all too well charted by Dermot Keogh's graduate student Paula Wylie (and what a pleasure to salute a volume mingling scholars of such eminence as Keogh with inspired 'prentice hands deserving recognition). Joe Walshe may be very funny in retrospect with his advice to Boland on 5th February 1949, that "the Arabs have always believed and advocated [sic!] the Immaculate Conception of our Lady [i.e. the mother of Jesus], whereas the Jews [who include Jesus and His mother] have always adopted the most insulting attitude towards this doctrine. That is one of the strongest reasons why the Holy See hates to have any truck with the Jews." But if this was the impression that Pius XII's Vatican left on one of its most devout diplomatic votaries, its successor governments must consider the depths and extent of spiritual responsibility for acts in urgent need of atonement.

And perhaps we had better stop here before the Irish and all other governments are led to burn all unopened archives at the stake, insofar as they have not already done so.

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/204>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1211>