

Revolution, Counter-Revolution and Union. Ireland in the 1790s

Review Number:

279

Publish date:

Sunday, 30 June, 2002

Editor:

Jim Smyth

ISBN:

9780521661096

Date of Publication:

2000

Price:

£64.00

Pages:

257pp.

Publisher:

Cambridge University Press

Publisher url:

<http://www.cambridge.org/uk/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521661096>

Place of Publication:

Cambridge

Reviewer:

Peter Jupp

The Irish rebellion of 1798 and, more particularly, the act of Union two years later, were significant events in British as well as Irish history and yet their bi-centenaries passed almost without notice in mainland Britain. In Ireland and the Irish diaspora, on the other hand, the number of exhibitions, conferences and publications was sufficient, if all had been absorbed, to have caused mental indigestion.

This volume consists of twelve essays, eleven of which are based on papers delivered at a conference on the rebellion held at the University of Notre Dame in 1998, the twelfth being a sparkling introduction by the editor. Their subject matter varies considerably, ranging from changes in the content of popular melodies to payments to 'suffering loyalists', but read together they all contribute to our knowledge and understanding of the causes and consequences of the rebellion and the Union, and therefore justify the all-embracing title. This is particularly so in the case of causes of the rebellion. In his sparkling introduction, Jim Smyth outlines four principal historiographical contexts in which eighteenth-century Ireland has been set - the suppressed Catholic 'nation', an improving Anglo-Irish hegemony wrecked by the impact of French revolutionary ideas, the *ancien regime* state, and a colonial dependency - but, finding that none of them provide an entirely satisfactory explanation of the rebellion, places the emphasis for its cause on growing politicisation following the 'transformation' of the economy after 1760. This is a theme that a number of the contributors explore in the 1790s and beyond. Daniel Gahan examines Wexford and south Wicklow in 1798 and tackles one of the key historiographical debates of the moment: how much the rebels of that area were motivated by political idealism and how much by sectarian hostility. He concludes that that the pattern of Protestant landownership and leasing policy, particularly in the north of the area where Protestant middlemen were

paramount, was a factor in generating rebel activity and giving it a sectarian edge but that French-style revolutionary ideals also played a part. Mary Helen Thuente considers four United Irish prose satires published in Belfast, 1793-96, and suggests that these helped to undermine the authorities and mobilise public opinion. Fintan Cullen examines the 1790s portraits of Lords Fitzgibbon and Edward Fitzgerald and Thomas Robinson's contemporary picture of the battle of Ballynahinch, and proposes that these provided a visualisation of ascendancy, republicanism and loyalism, which by implication also helped sharpen political awareness, especially as it is claimed that Hamilton's portrait and Horace Hone's miniatures of Fitzgerald were "the first official appropriation of the colour green as emblematic of the national cause" (p. 181). The 1790s also had a role to play in music, with the Irish Parliament's rejection of a proposal to develop the Arigna ironworks in Kilonan, County Roscommon, playing a part in drawing its owner, Charles O'Connor, into the United movement and coincidentally linking the memory of the harper, Turlough O'Carolan, with the United Irish cause. The upshot, in a story unravelled carefully by Luke Gibbons, was a radical theme being added to the "old Celtic notes of melancholia" (p. 237) in the nationalist popular music of the 1840s.

The impact of the 1790s on politicisation and political ideas is also tackled in two other essays. In a subtle essay, 'The politics of crisis and rebellion, 1792-1798', Louis Cullen suggests that the British government's Irish 'policy' was at its most inept in the 1790s and that it was this that stimulated the growth of a 'liberal' alliance of whigs, radicals and republicans which, if left to its own devices, might have made the concessions to Catholics that could have created a stable and enduring political system. More directly, and in a separate essay, the editor surveys the widespread debate on the union conducted in the press, in pamphlets and at public meetings. This leads him to the conclusion that contrary to the views of unspecified Namierites, 'public opinion' was of account and that the 1790s had indeed "witnessed unprecedented levels of popular politicisation in Irish society" (p. 158).

Although there are points of detail in each of these particular essays over which I might take issue, there is no doubting that each of them provides useful information and insights on the politicisation theme. Moreover, when considered together, they suggest where there are significant gaps in our knowledge. In the case of the essays on prose satires and portraiture and history painting, the significance of what happened in the 1790s could be better assessed if we knew more about their history beforehand. In the case of the satires, for example, one of them - the 'Chinese Journal' - assumes some acquaintance with Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* and more generally, a knowledge of foreign courts and international diplomacy. Leaving aside the literary allusions, foreign news had been prominent on the front page of the *Belfast News Letter* since its foundation in the 1730s and we might assume that the satire's author was addressing his material to readers of such a newspaper. But how many other Irish newspapers gave such prominence to foreign news and by whom were they read? Similarly, Fintan Cullen makes a number of points about portraiture and history painting that merit greater contextualisation. For example, that the draped column behind Hamilton's portrait of Fitzgibbon symbolises "steadfastness" (as opposed to classical learning; p. 176); that an advertisement of Robinson's 'Battle of Ballynahinch' as "a faithful representation" of events (p. 187) should be taken as the painter's opinion (as opposed to attempting to attract viewers); and that Madden included engraved portraits in his 1840s history of the United Irishmen "to increase the emotional impact of his study" (as opposed to giving readers an impression of what his subjects looked like; p. 163). Cullen also raises the question (pp. 178-9) of who was the instigator of engraved versions of portraits in the late eighteenth century - the subject or the engraver - and less directly, of how popular that genre was earlier. A catalogue of one London print shop for 1775 (Sayer and Bennett's) lists hundreds of engraved portraits of royals, politicians and entertainers for sale at prices ranging from 3d upwards. It seems very unlikely that these or their equivalents were not also available in Dublin and elsewhere in Ireland and it would be interesting to know what stylistic and commercial conventions had evolved.

A fuller context would also help in two other essays. In the case of Gahan's study of the Wexford rebellion, there are several references to the rebels being influenced by the ideals of the French revolution and by Paine's *Rights of Man*. Despite the fact that evidence for this appears to be thin, the question arises of whether the rebels of 1798 had reflected on what had happened in France since 1789. As Gahan makes clear, some rebels were Protestants and some were men of property. It therefore seems likely that they would have

read of what had happened in Belgium, Holland, the Rhineland and in Italy and of the growing resistance to French rule by 1798. Can we therefore assume that the ideals of the French Revolution were still unquestioned? The same general point applies to the editor's essay on the Union and public opinion. Here it would be interesting to know the answers to such questions as: what proportion of the literature of various kinds that was published in Ireland at this time was not about the Union? How many Irish newspapers existed in 1799-1800 and what was their readership? How many British and foreign newspapers were in circulation? And how many county and civic meetings took place on other issues? Further, and more generally, we need to know much more about popular Protestant opinion - particularly in the north but also in the south. Most of these particular essays focus on the proponents of republicanism and reform who sought independence or a measure of independence from Britain. What we lack at the moment, as the editor recognises, is a full understanding of popular loyalism.

This raises the issue of the resistance to the rebellion and the countering of its after-effects. Three of the essays deal with this topic and very effectively too. In one of these Nancy J. Curtin examines the reaction of the magistracy in Ulster, 1795-98, and argues convincingly that a number of factors - the high rate of absenteeism amongst the propertied elite, the small number of effective magistrates that represented that elite, and the high-ish proportion of clerical magistrates - made it impossible for the elite as a whole, and the magistracy in particular, to carry out their traditional paternalistic and mediating roles. This, she suggests, played a part in convincing the British government that a Union was desirable and also helped to politicise the province. This raises the question of what happened to the magistracy in Ulster, and perhaps, elsewhere. A possible answer lies in one of the two other essays, both of which examine Cornwallis's policy of dealing with the aftermath and, in particular, the captured rebels and those who were their victims - the 'suffering loyalists'. In the case of the first, Michael Durey shows very clearly how Cornwallis pursued a policy of "measured severity" (to use Tom Bartlett's term; p. 107) by mitigating a proportion of the sentences of capital punishment to transportation or forcible enlistment into the British army in the West Indies and even, for diplomatic reasons, into the Prussian army. This, he argues, was a "sensible" policy from the point of view of Irish politics, given that he was dealing with genuine political subversives, but perhaps not so much from the point of view of Britain's interests abroad, given that the "Irish revolutionary contagion" was spread "throughout the world" (p. 129).

The other, by Tom Bartlett, does raise the question of the magistracy. The focus of his splendidly composed essay is the contrast between Cornwallis's 'leniency' and the demand by loyalists for retribution. How was the latter contained? An important part of the answer, Bartlett suggests, was that by 1805, more than £600,000 had been distributed amongst 6,630 claims from 'suffering loyalists'. This must have helped to reconcile some loyalists to the policy of leniency and to the Union - although to press this case too far might suggest, falsely, that loyalism was motivated solely by financial considerations. Further, although the government provided the money, the claims were assessed and dealt with largely by the magistrates in what appears to have been an efficient and effective manner. Here, perhaps, is an answer to the question raised by Curtin's essay. In 1798 the Ulster magistracy had been found wanting but in the immediate aftermath they seem to have found a role in assessing compensation on a very substantial scale. Admittedly, it is unlikely that this would have appealed to rebels and their sympathisers but it surely did to others in Ulster and perhaps elsewhere. At the very least, Curtin's and Bartlett's research suggests that an examination of the role of the magistracy in the aftermath of the rebellion might yield some interesting results.

There are two other essays to be considered. Tommy Graham tackles the question of why the leadership of the United Irish movement shifted from Belfast to Dublin, 1796-98, and proposes that the answer lies in the incapacity of the Belfast leaders and the comparatively sparse troop levels in the Dublin area. He also provides some useful information on the Dublin membership. The other essay, by David Miller, is in several ways the most challenging of all, for it confronts directly the question of whether the events of the 1790s led to a revolution - by which he means, "a fundamental and lasting redistribution of power in the political system" (p. 210). He concludes that they did and that this was brought about by the enfranchisement of Catholics on the same terms as Protestants in 1793, and by the enforced Union which abolished 'the borough system' - the bastion of a Protestant ascendancy - and diluted the influence of the Irish landed class by their

absorption into the United Parliament. He then considers whether this revolution had any impact on the three principal religious communities and concludes that it did, but only in the case of the proselytising undertaken by the Church of Ireland in the 1830s, which he construes as "a defensive institutional strategy" (p. 207). In short the '98 was not a failed rising but a component of a partially successful revolution.

Although Miller is careful to refer to his revolution as one with a small 'r', the thesis is open to question. The Irish landed class had never been masters in their own house and it is doubtful that more than a small minority wanted to be. All the Union did was to diminish its share of responsibility. Second, in the case of the political system, it is important to note that the Union did not abolish all close boroughs and, more importantly, that the influence of property over numbers was restored in 1829 and confirmed in 1832. Third, it is also important to note that the British government and the Westminster Parliament did not attempt to treat Ireland as part of a unitary state. The Lord Lieutenantcy was retained with full reserves of patronage at his disposal along with the Dublin Castle administration. It was not until the war had finished that financial and revenue matters were brought under the control of Whitehall departments of State, leaving the Castle and the local authorities still responsible for law, order, education and welfare. Further, Ireland continued to be legislated for as a separate, as opposed to an incorporated, kingdom. The proportion of United Kingdom legislation does increase but there was still separate Irish legislation in the 1840s. For this and other reasons, his case seems overstated.

Finally, there is the question of the more general context in which these events might be set. In his introduction, the editor contrasts Irish separatism with Scottish unionism and British loyalism which, he says, sustained "ruling class hegemony" (p. 13); and in the course of outlining a European context, subscribes to the view that the French revolution was a catalyst for the various forms that radicalism took in Ireland. In addition, all these essays left me with the impression that eighteenth-century Ireland and Britain were totally distinct with little in common between them.

With regard to Smyth's contextualisation, there are some points that may be worth considering. His description of the British state as in the hands of a "ruling class hegemony" seems to ignore the work of a number of scholars such as Langford who have argued for a much more plutocratic and participatory form of government than that term suggests. (In this regard, the recent emphasis on the importance of local government in Britain might repay consideration as far as Ireland is concerned.) Further, the work of Cookson and others has raised questions about the both Scottish unionism and British loyalism and has begun to unpack Colley's all-embracing thesis about cultural state formation. There is now some doubt about whether large numbers of Scots were happy to see themselves as 'North Britons' and a plausible case has been made that rather than developing a sense of Britishness, their war effort strengthened the view that Scotland had become a more equal 'sister Kingdom'. Further, distinctions now have to be drawn between the loyalism of the early 1790s and the 'national defence patriotism' of the later 1790s and early 1800s while there seems little doubt that neither extinguished popular radicalism. Loyalism, patriotism and radicalism could and did coexist. Perhaps this was the case in Ireland too.

As for the European context, many of the essays, including the editor's, assume it to be provided by the French Revolution of 1789, which acted as a catalyst to reformist and radical thinking in Ireland. This seems too limited a view. As we know, the French Revolution was a lengthy process with various stages. We also know that the rebellion took place in Ireland just at the time when the revolutionary ideals of 1789 and 1791 were being re-thought in the interests of the management of *la grande nation* in France, management which had given the French government and bureaucracy considerable experience of collaborators and resisters. Here, perhaps, is a broader context into which Irish events may be set. If so, several interesting questions come to mind. What impact did the development of the French Revolution in France have upon Irish public opinion? How did Irish reformers and radicals react to the French subjugation and exploitation of other states? What was the reaction in Ireland to Napoleon's view that empire was a force for progress? What similarities and differences are there between those who collaborated with, or resisted French government in, say Italy, and those who did the same in Ireland for or against Britain - particularly on the question of Union?

As for the differences between Ireland and Britain, I remain to be convinced that they were as great as are

implied here. Trade, travel, migration, enlistment in the army and navy, the consumer revolution - all suggest greater and greater ties. Perhaps it is time that these are given as much attention as the origins of independence.

Other reviews:

History Ireland

<http://www.historyireland.com/volumes/volume9/issue2/reviews/> [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/279>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2601>

[2] <http://www.historyireland.com/volumes/volume9/issue2/reviews/?id=113557>