

Ireland: The Politics of Enmity 1789-2006

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Paul Bew has made an extraordinary contribution to Irish historiography over the past 30 years. With Peter Gibbon and Henry Patterson he co-authored a landmark study, *The State in Northern Ireland* (1979). Downplaying abstract notions of 'nation' or 'imperialism', Bew et al., attributed to the state a pragmatic concern with maintaining equilibrium through the balancing of class interests and political tendencies. Crises resulted as balances of power grew lopsided; sectarian conflict was often the result of Britain's well-intentioned but clumsy attempts to redress grievances. Updated frequently since, this book has proven to be one of the key texts on the Northern Ireland Troubles. In two further volumes a similar optic, focusing on the intersection of state governance, class interests and ideology, was applied to the politics of 20th-century independent Ireland. (1) Bew as an individual author composed what was in essence a trilogy tracking the social bases, material interests and ideological justifications of nationalists and unionists from 1858 to 1916. (2) He has produced a great number of shorter studies and articles ranging over the past 200 years.

Bew, therefore, is supremely qualified to write the Irish volume in Oxford's prestigious *History of Modern Europe* series. To those familiar with Bew's corpus, there's a considerable interest in revisiting with him past intellectual contributions and debates. While his earlier work bore the imprint of a sophisticated Marxism, Bew now claims no overarching generalisation other than the 'law of unintended consequences' (p. 118). (There is, however, an engaging nod to influences past in one footnote, which cites recondite theorising in a notoriously abstruse British Althusserian journal of the early 1970s) (p. 328). Edmund Burke is cited frequently. His 'Letter to Hercules Langrishe' (1792), says Bew, illuminates a key problem that faced the Irish polity as it pushed through into modernity. Why were the Protestant middle class and gentry unable to reconfigure themselves on non-sectarian lines, admitting Catholics of property and right thinking into a joint ruling class? The answer, said Burke, was to be found in the 'ascendancy's democratic tail' (p. 93). Plebeian

Protestants were naturally unwilling to go along with attempts to re-legitimize the Irish ruling class as a selfless, non-sectarian elite habituated by education and family tradition to the exercise of disinterested governance. (For Burke, such organic authority was the very definition of aristocracy; his 'natural' ruling class in the later 19th century melded with the liberal bourgeoisie, later still a technocratic 'meritocracy'). Burke's analysis Bew considers to be 'foundational' for an understanding of the entire period (p. 579) but he does not insist upon its uniform application at all times. As event follows event, he clearly considers an ample fund of 'human sympathy' to be the most important prerequisite in dealing with the foibles and obsessions of the fractious Irish (p. 144).

This investment pays amply. Bew has worked through numerous memoirs, manuscripts, newspapers and periodicals. He has always been a master of the revealing quotation and the reconstruction in all their integrity and knottiness of contemporary debates. This practised eye for turns of phrase and his respect for the seriousness of controversialists past make for a genuinely scintillating work. Historical actors are given their chance to argue for their convictions with passion, polemical skill, penetrating logic, and devastating facts. The cut and thrust of political argument as conveyed here is engrossing, Bew's dialectical skill in conducting the virtual debating chamber is sustained throughout.

The structure of Bew's book is broadly chronological rather than thematic. It is embedded, however, with fascinating digressions that amount to mini-essays. These discussions, based on archival research, range across a wide variety of topics: nationalist resentment of English alms during the Great Famine (1845-50), the apparition of the Virgin at Knock, the complex interplay of dirty war and secret negotiations during the War of Independence, southern Irish ambivalence during the Second World War, Harold Wilson's persistent hunt for a way out of the Irish imbroglio in the 1970s, and more besides.

However, tracing through these essays in miniature is a compelling narrative. In the late 18th century, English government was appreciative of the Protestant ascendancy's services as its 'garrison class' in Ireland, but was painfully aware that so long as the governing elite in Ireland were religiously defined, the Catholic masses would remain unreconciled and thus a potential security threat. The Act of Union, as Bew argues, was designed to convert a numerical Catholic majority in the Kingdom of Ireland into a permanent Catholic minority within the new United Kingdom (p. 55). With Protestant supremacy assured, Catholics could in theory be admitted as equals into the governing class. In practice, however, British governments failed utterly to integrate the Catholic elites. They balked at the necessary price: rapprochement with the priesthood (p. 562). The United Kingdom political classes refused even legal admission on the basis of equality to Catholics until 1829, and even then within Ireland itself governance remained 'implicitly authoritarian' (p. 65) rather than representative. The means by which Catholic Emancipation was wrested, via a mass civil rights campaign led by Daniel O'Connell, 'the Liberator', helped to embed a 'culture of agitation' (p. 122) that sidelined the nexus of country house and urban club so important in British politics. Bew is sharply critical of O'Connell for his failure to reach out to the liberal Protestant currents of Ulster, and his willingness to indulge a sectarianisation of national identity (pp. 132, 172).

Ireland's vibrant 'outdoor politics' rested upon an assertive populace: 'There is an air of vivacity, restlessness, of intelligence and perhaps of mischief ... totally unlike the contented ignorance of the English lower classes', remarked one 1811 observer (p. 86). The cataclysm of the Great Famine, however, devastated this sub-stratum of egalitarian, self-contained rural communities. It gave way to commercial farmers jealously protective of their petit-bourgeois respectability. Irish nationalists were stricken by an anxious suspicion that the Famine exploded their central thesis of an Ireland capable of self-government. The British government, however, was sufficiently cold-hearted to allow an Anglophobic narrative to credibly explain Ireland's systemic failure. Bew's own view is that an initially generous British response to Irish famine succumbed to 'compassion fatigue' (p. 210). Certainly, the United Kingdom government was disinclined to treat Ireland as its own. Lord John Russell in the later 1840s insisted that the English working class should not have to pay to relieve famine distress. This was a charge on the Irish landlords, implicitly because they were the trustees and beneficiaries of the Union (p. 193).

Bew glimpses a hopeful moment in the aftermath of the Famine, when a 'remarkably ecumenical'

combination of farmers in the Catholic south and the Protestant north campaigned to secure their tenurial rights. This was aborted, however, by Lord John Russell's 'ignit[ing] the fires of political Protestantism' in 1850, when he launched a campaign against the re-establishment of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in Great Britain (p. 235). Nevertheless, the question of land tenure remorselessly moved centre-stage. Bew delineates with great panache, and very convincingly, that anxious passion for security which motivated the militancy of the Irish farming classes in the latter half of the 19th century (p. 251).

Nationalist radicals were convinced that Westminster, as a landlord parliament, would never meet the aspirations of tenant farmers in Ireland. Mobilising the Irish tenantry on transitional demands for land reform would expose the baleful class bias of the Union and highlight the need for Irish separation. The constitutionalist nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell (himself a Protestant landowner) believed, however, that Westminster could be induced to introduce reform in the tenants' interests. By reconciling the class interests of tenant farmers and landlords, Parnell hoped to wean the latter off their dependence upon Britain, and have them accepted as rightful leaders of the Irish nation (pp. 313, 322). Parnell, indeed, came to be recognised as a "hero of the bourgeoisie" (p. 341). In Ulster, however, burgeoning economic success was attributed to the virtues of Protestant liberty (p. 565), and all classes of the Protestant majority here cleaved yet closer to the Union.

Parnell was right to believe that Britain could legislate for peasant proprietorship in Ireland. The Protestant gentry, however, showed little capacity to take command of the Catholic democracy. Indeed the new 'kulak' class of small farmers were even less enamoured of the Union when it appeared, with the development of New Liberalism and Labour, that property would be expected to contribute to the maintenance of insecure wage-workers in British cities (p. 386). With its substantial urban proletariat, north-east Ulster, in contrast, had the social demography to benefit from such 'welfare unionism' (p. 543). Both in prosperity and recession, Ulster's socio-economic profile suited the economies of scale and transfers of wealth possible in the large United Kingdom.

While majority Irish 'political culture' by the 20th century was characterised by 'patriarchal Catholicism, nationalism ... and, hardly surprisingly in a nation of peasant proprietors, property right' (p. 455), Irish Protestantism in its democratic heartland of Ulster had fundamentally veered off:

In the eighteenth century it was possible for a significant section of the Protestant political class in the north to have a natural primary identity with Ireland. Yet, all the key developments of the nineteenth century had weakened that identification: the development under O'Connell of a form of Catholic nationalism which disregarded the concerns of Protestant liberals; the dramatic industrialization of Belfast, locked into a Belfast-Glasgow-Liverpool triangle of economic interconnectedness ... and last but not least, the willingness of the British state until, at least, the 1880s to regard the Protestants as at least a potential garrison against Catholic revolt (p. 369).

Partition of some sort, it seems clear for Bew, was likely from the 1880s. Partition within the United Kingdom might have better protected northern nationalists, as their southern compatriots would have retained clout at Westminster (p. 383). As it happened, the steep decline of Protestants as a percentage of the southern Irish state's citizenry after partition reduced any incentive for the Unionist government in Belfast to treat its Catholic nationalist minority with generosity (p. 458). In post-partition Ireland, governing parties on both sides of the border adopted 'populist' rhetoric and clientelist systems of patronage the better to wield together pan-class alliances around the 'national question' (pp. 449, 458). While this mode of populism inhibited the Republic's economic modernisation, its consequences were politically far more explosive in Northern Ireland.

The great mistake in the early Troubles, Bew suggests, was the failure to dissolve the devolved, Unionist government when British troops took over the main weight of security in 1969. Britain was seen by Catholics as attempting to maintain a Protestant ascendancy (p. 496). By the mid-1970s, sections of the

British political elite were considering withdrawal from Northern Ireland. The government of the Irish Republic made clear its opposition of any such Pontius Pilate swerve, and nothing came of it. The Provisional IRA understandably felt that it had been conned and strung along. For over a decade afterwards any movement towards a peace process was hobbled by its suspicions of British perfidy (p. 522). By the early 1990s, however, Britain consciously abandoned its ambition of marginalising the republican movement (p. 539).

While the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement of 1998, in its constitutional architecture, owed little to republican initiative or goals, Sinn Féin, with 'great tactical brilliance' (p. 549) positioned itself as the champion of Catholic nationalist ethnic pride in the new dispensation. The result was a renewed round of inter-communal competition, and the emergence of Sinn Féin and Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party as the largest political parties within their respective communities. The Republic of Ireland, invigorated and self-consciously modern after its brush in the 1970s and 1980s with political dysfunction, looked upon the north with a proprietary interest, but also an anxiety that the compromises required of conflict resolution might in time undermine its own political integrity.

This is an impressive and compelling survey of Irish history, notable in particular for its deft integration of narratives north and south. As ever, the reviewer has certain caveats. Bew's emphasis is firmly political, and there is not the attention paid to social, economic or gender history that one would like. We do find intimations of an international contextualisation - Fenianism in the 1850s and 1860s, for example, is admitted as 'a formidable mass nationalism by any serious comparative European criteria' (p. 262) - but these leave us wishing for more. Bew quotes the Liberal politician Lord Spencer, writing in 1887 of the literate, internationally-aware peasantry, particularly conscious of the norms and expectations of the United States's proprietor farmers. The Irish peasantry's 'social condition', he thought, '[was] a hundred years behind their state of political and mental culture' (p. 300). This kind of combined and uneven development could well have been explored more directly by the historian.

While the tiny minorities that were ever violent revolutionaries or serious paramilitants are ascribed considerable, at times primary agency (pp. 394, 499, 579), these cadres remain in something of a black box. The anthropology and ideology of political violence is little examined. Bew does generalise about the War of Independence in a manner of evidently wider applicability:

violence on a large scale creates an emotional context, because of the investment of those involved on both sides, which inclines in its early phases towards the defeat of the peace process. It is only when a moment has been reached when the combatants know for sure that further violence is unlikely to vindicate their project, and may even lead to dreadful defeat and demoralization, that the negotiators can gain the upper hand over the militarists (p. 411).

This is likely very true, but I would have liked more exploration. The voice of the gunman, however, remains mostly silent.

Still, one is not left frustrated by such inevitable lacunae; rather, the reader is hooked as Bew seizes onto each fresh topic or conundrum with relish, verve, and at times, controversialist daring. There is not easy settling on bland consensus or received wisdom in this volume. Bew takes us with him though an engaged, questing and ongoing exploration. The journey is exhilarating, and the book indispensable.

Notes

1. With H. Patterson, *Sean Lemass and the Making of Modern Ireland, 1945-66* (Dublin, 1982); with H. Patterson and E. Hazelkorn, *The Dynamics of Irish Politics* (London, 1989). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Land and the National Question, 1858-82* (Dublin, 1978); *Conflict and Conciliation in Ireland, 1890 - 1919* (Oxford, 1987), *Ideology and the Irish Question, 1912-16* (Oxford, 1994). [Back to \(2\)](#)

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