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Irish Freedom: the History of Nationalism in Ireland

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Author:
Richard English
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Having extensively written on radical republicanism in 20th-century Ireland, Richard English approaches the subject of Irish nationalism with expertise. His latest book, *Irish Freedom: the History of Nationalism in Ireland*, follows closely on both his acclaimed study of the IRA, *Armed Struggle* (2003), and a sophisticated thematic biography, *Ernie O?Malley: IRA Intellectual* (1998). Coming in the Irish peace process?s wake *Irish Freedom?s* formidable 625 pages arrive at a time when the air surrounding contested Irish histories is beginning again to clear. Richard English?s ambition in his new study is to consolidate the most up-to-date research summarised in an impressively eclectic 40 page bibliography. In coming to a better understanding of what nationalism in Ireland means his stated objective is to marry the historian?s analytical precision to the social scientist?s practice of formulating general theory. Beyond this Richard English writes in the introduction, ?one of my hopes is that this book may provoke fruitful disagreement, debate and reflection concerning Irish and wider nationalist politics? (p. 10). Wisely this remark is prefaced by ?I cannot expect readers always to agree with my arguments?. Given that in Ireland and Britain the legitimisation of nations and states has long been contested it is unlikely this or any book on nationalism is going to receive consensual endorsement. And while Richard English?s combative approach forces reconsiderations about what nationalism in Ireland might mean, equally, on almost every page, *Irish Freedom* provokes critical reaction in response to the methodologies employed to force those same reconsiderations.

The immediate question confronting students of nationalism in Ireland is how many nations are there to be studied? And once identified, how can they be examined satisfactorily? Without doubt these are deceptively challenging problems, and the all too common response has been to treat ?Irish nationalism? as monolithic or sometimes monochromic where the separatist constitutional and physical-force traditions are seen as the joint conveyors of a singular ideology. Most commentators, Richard English among them, now argue this is wholly inadequate. The chief objection to any monolithic nationalism is that it cannot adequately deal with the diverse and competitive nationalisms present in Ireland. Among these it should be recognised is a unionist strain of British nationalism, which in the 20th century concentrated in the north-east of the island, inside the historic province of Ulster. There are further distinctions needing identification. For example, the southern and northern strains of Irish separatist nationalism, which in the 20th century constituted very separate, and, arguably, antithetical ideologies. But despite these rudimentary observations there persists, however, a tendency when treating ?nationalism in Ireland? to focus almost exclusively on what can be clearly identified as ?separatist nationalism? (here this encompasses extreme militarist-republicanism, federalism and home rule nationalism inside the Union, as well as two separate southern and northern variants), as opposed to ?unionist nationalism? in its many forms (pan-British nationalism across the islands, and after 1801, across the new Union including a southern Irish unionism, and a more familiar ?survivalist? Ulster unionism). Beyond these the historian is obliged to make careful adjustments for the protean qualities of nationalism. Unionist nationalism, whether in Belfast or Dublin, meant very different things on the eve of the Great War in 1914 than it had at the time of the first home rule crisis in 1885 or would again after the 1998 Belfast agreement. In Richard English?s approach to ?*the history of nationalism in Ireland?* for all the qualifications offered he imagines his subject to be ?separatist nationalism?.

To assuage the concerns of theorists of nationalism unfamiliar with the nuances of Irish practices it should be pointed out that in the vernacular ?nationalist? is generally (and inaccurately) used with reference to ?one community? in Ireland, but Richard English risks introducing a confusion when he refers to unionists as the ?non-nationalist community on the island? (p. 453, see also p. 9, p. 368). This is never fully explained in *Irish Freedom*, but elsewhere English has argued, ?it is the asymmetry rather than the symmetry which is striking when one pays serious consideration to unionism and nationalism in modern Ireland?. Contemporary unionism, English has contended, ?does not represent an alternative ethnic or religious nationalism, but argues for the reasonableness (indeed, the necessity) of maintaining Northern Ireland?s place within the multi-national, multi-faith, multi-ethnic UK state.?(1) The not infrequent appeals of Ulster?s unionists to a Protestant British national identity originating in the 17th century militates against this kind of argument. Moreover, it is argued in this review to study ?nationalists? in Ireland, meaning ?separatists?, is not the same as writing ?the history of nationalism in Ireland?. Some may say this observation amounts to a semantic quibble. However, in a book spanning a millennium, and the last 200 years in considerable detail, to relegate British nationalisms to a minor position in Ireland is to obfuscate a vital force and context, which gives separatist nationalism its meaning. It may also be to capitulate to a particular separatist idea of who are and are not ?true? nationalists or an equally particular unionist assertion that they are British citizens not British nationalists. Therefore the interpretative problem Richard English?s narrow definition of ?Irish nationalism? generates may be very great indeed.

Throughout Richard English?s focus is fixed on one historical community, and while not completely ignoring unionist identity in its British context he is not much concerned to discuss it. The term ?British nationalism? is used only once in this book, and is overlooked in the index (p. 369). What is presented, therefore, is a synthesis of recent writing on separatist nationalism along the way pointing out the inconsistencies, ironies, and absurdities to be found in its ideology. And Richard English takes this didactic role seriously. His is a work of public history concerned with the ?dismantling of popular myths?. Among them, ?the exceptional awfulness of the Cromwellian episode, [and] the ruthlessness of the Penal Laws? (p. 448). Others, perhaps less ?popular?, include the argument that the Great Famine was a product of a deliberate British genocide (p. 163, p. 449), and the recurring diversion that the oppression of Northern Ireland?s Catholics found equivalence with the victims of the Nazis, Afro-Americans in the southern states of the US or those who suffered under apartheid in South Africa (p. 376, p. 450, p. 366, p. 83). That these

and other polemics should receive a repost from the academy is no doubt what they richly deserve. But by pitching so much of the analysis against this level of argument there is a danger that the subtleties of separatist nationalism or any nationalism will be obscured.

Nonetheless, this is a formidable book of impressive scope and resource. Richard English sets himself to writing ?an historical tale? for the reader, and providing a general theory of nationalism derived from Irish experiences applying as his major themes ?power?, ?community?, and ?struggle?. It should be said that while *Irish Freedom* is presented as a history, arguably, its method is not always historical. Deployment of devices such as, ?[t]he next act in our drama? indicates this is a self-conscious literary enterprise (p. 260). And much of the ?story? is advanced through short studies of the individual psychologies of Edmund Burke, Maria Edgeworth, Theobald Wolfe Tone, Daniel O?Connell, Charles Stewart Parnell, Patrick Pearse, among others, who are used to articulate the national identities of their time. Engaging though this is the approach marginalises social forces not easily explained within biographical portraiture; for example, colonisation, modernisation, industrialisation, and economics, demography, and communal belief systems. The linking of individual psychologies into a historical narrative is also reminiscent of ?revisionist? writings from the 1970s, and these are perhaps a significant if unarticulated influence.

History as a branch of literature, as well as the enactment and understanding of history as ?drama?, are ideas particularly redolent of Conor Cruise O?Brien?s writing from the 1970s. It is impossible to read *Irish Freedom*, and this is not intended as a negative criticism, without being continually reminded of Cruise O?Brien. In particular two aspects of Cruise O?Brien?s thinking on historical understanding are summoned from an earlier historiography. The first is his belief, ?[p]oliticians are like other people in being the products of ? history, which is generally unknowable and unknown?. The second, that history ?in most times and places will be an inspirational myth, designed to unify the nation and inspire it with a sense of pride in its own past?.(2) Responses to these ideas greatly influenced history writing in Ireland in the last four decades. Arguably, they polarised the historical community into those who wished to undermine the ?inspirational myth? (?arch-revisionists?) or to modify it (?southern nationalists?) or defend the *status quo* whatever the consequences (?traditional nationalists?). All of these rival narratives placed strains on empirical method where they sought to privilege or refute one nationalist ideology or another.

Romanticism, Cruise O?Brien believed, in ?Irish literary-history? inspired nationalism through the mingling themes of predestination, blood sacrifice, martyrdom, and tragic failures. In a deeply reflective essay published in 1975, ?An unhelpful intersection?, Cruise O?Brien argued: ?The area where literature and politics overlap has, then, to be regarded with suspicion ? [i]t is suffused with romanticism, which in politics tends in the direction of fascism?.(3) For Cruise O?Brien then some strains of this ?literary-history? if not at the very root of Irish terrorism fostered its acceptance. It also happened to be the stuff they taught children in Irish schools, and here W. B. Yeats was identified as the chief ?literary-Fenian? inspiring the living generations to join the martyred dead. This interpretation still retains its attraction for those privileging cultural before material explanations for the recent Irish crisis, and I still think it would be unwise to dismiss it outright. However, the corollary of Cruise O?Brien?s thinking was a converse helpful intersection undermining the myths giving succour to physical-force republicanism in the 1970s and after. ?These versions have been taught, and therefore can be untaught?, Cruise O?Brien reflected at the time, and he went on to make his own inestimable contribution to that project.(4) In 1975 he called this ?eradicating the tragic heroic mode?, which was to be directed almost exclusively against the historical foundations of republican-nationalism in Ireland at some cost to the meaningful understanding of them.

Any major study of nationalism in Ireland cannot claim immunity from these contexts. It follows therefore, that what is of particular interest in *Irish Freedom* is the method, which distils a theory of nationalism from a history of nationalism. And mattering greatly is the makeup of the synthesis from which the theory ultimately is derived. For that part of the ?story? where he is not expert Richard English must trust to others. What, however, may better illuminate the method employed is an examination of the period and the sources with which Richard English is most familiar. Therefore, it is of interest when Richard English writes on the origins of the ?Irish Revolution?.

And so the celebrated Revolutionary turbulence of 1916?23 ? the famous story of rebellions and killings and imprisonment and adventure and dreams ? turns out on close inspection to have been an aberration from the normal, milder path of Irish nationalism. The Revolution was a deviation, necessary or otherwise, from a familiar and stable path of constitutional democracy (p. 327).

By August 1914, in response to the home rule act (1912), British constitutional democracy had conjured into existence two private armies in Ireland. Irish unionists with Tory support created the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), and imported German rifles to arm it. A rival body similarly equipped, the Irish Volunteers, was soon controlled by the Irish parliamentary nationalist party. These events grimly pointed toward the post-1801 United Kingdom?s first civil war, which the Great War?s outbreak postponed, but did not avert indefinitely as the events of 1920?2 later demonstrated. What Richard English juxtaposes are Irish revolutionism and a determined, Whiggish, interpretation of British constitutional advancement. And this starkly demonstrates an elemental problem to be found elsewhere in this study. It is fully impossible to understand Irish separatist nationalism under the Union, without comprehending the failures of British unionist nationalism for ultimately, it is contended here, they are of a piece when studying nationalism in Ireland.

Critical to this argument is an understanding of the British constitution?s development from the 17th century, its travails and successes, and its slow collapse in Ireland after 1912. The British constitution?s advances in 19th-century Ireland recorded Catholic emancipation, educational, land, and local government reforms, and an expanding franchise. But British nationalism produced no viable answer and the British constitution no adequate mechanism to deal with separatist aspirations buoyed by burgeoning democracy and the flowering of the national idea. The frustrations and delays associated with devolved home rule after 1885, followed by partition and government sanctioned repression (provided by the ?Black and Tans? and other special police forces in 1920?2), and a coerced settlement in 1922, identify the failures of the British constitution to defend the rights of Irish subjects against the interests of the state. Both before and after 1914, militarist loyalism and militarist republicanism were responses to the power vacuum the crumbling constitution had created. Studied in isolation, with the assumption of British constitutional stability somewhere in the background, separatist nationalism?s violence appears deviant and perhaps the unnecessary indulgence Richard English suggests. Studied within the wider constitutional context of the United Kingdom a richer, more plausible, view equally may emerge.

Roundly this argues for the United Kingdom being a more appropriate unit for interpretation for nationalisms in Ireland, alongside, perhaps, a comparative analysis of identities in England, Scotland, and Wales. And this observation opens two promising vistas, not one. For when we study separatist nationalism we are studying not alone something of Ireland, but the failed variant of British nationalism too. That, it might be suggested, is a worthwhile proposition from both British and Irish perspectives. But this does not answer the question why any study of nationalism in Ireland would confine itself to one historical community, and the limits of the island itself? In part the answer to this is located in the historical method adopted. John Hutchinson observes historians of Ireland, as elsewhere, too often are ?methodologically nationalist? taking as their unit of analysis their preferred nation or nation state.(5) Cumulatively this approach may distort historical writing more particularly where the community of historians, their journals, associations, and conferences are not alone expressions of professionalisation, but nationalisation too. The smaller the country arguably the greater the problem this is likely to be. Richard English?s conception of ?nationalism in Ireland?, the methodology employed, and the geographical context in which it is for the most part deployed, provide examples of methodological nationalism albeit one employed by an avowed non-nationalist: ?This book ? is written by someone who is not, in fact, a nationalist of any variety or nation? (p. 10). The adoption of a nationalist interpretative model is therefore all the more fascinating for this revelation.

It is not that Richard English is unaware of these problems as he identifies in an unusually barbed footnote.

> It might ? seem rather avoidant for a scholar as rigorous and intelligent as David Miller to stress the beneficent aspects of nationality, and then to refuse engagement with that part of the United Kingdom in which it has displayed its most cruel nature: ?The Northern Irish raise special problems when British national identity is being discussed, and since I could not hope to do justice to these problems I shall simply set them to one side? (D. Millar, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 173) (n. 94, p. 549).

Conversely, British nationalism raises similar problems for students of Irish national identities. The ready solution in both cases too often is merely to acknowledge the problem before conveniently moving on. This of course is an argument for a ?new? British history encompassing the ?British isles? or the ?Atlantic archipelago? as preferred, which contemporary historians of Ireland as well as political scientists have been reluctant to engage. But quite apart from this, Richard English?s response to David Miller indicates an attitude unreceptive to nationalism as a positive force within society. And while this is a wholly justified position throughout *Irish Freedom* the reader is reminded that the weight of the historian?s criticism is directed toward one community, one set of mythologies, and one historical ?tale?.

This does not suggest *Irish Freedom* is an anti-nationalist rant. It is not. Richard English goes far to achieve balance in his approach as when he critiques Ulster unionism in Northern Ireland. And in fairness to his work it does attempt to acknowledge wider British contexts. Nevertheless, his fixation with the rhetoric of extreme separatism sometimes excuses observations, which do not advance his critique. ??Marxist? and ?homosexual? have not been among the most common terms used by Irish nationalists to describe themselves?, Richard English tells us, ?yet Connolly, Pearse, and Casement were three of the founding fathers of 1916? (p. 263). Following on from this level of analysis the language employed is needlessly reductive. A case in point is the use of ?zealous? and ?zealot? promiscuously applied to wide ranging activities and nationalists of different pallor: ?[f]or nationalist zealot [John] O?Leary emphatically was?, ?[D. P.] Moran was a talented if myopic zealot?, ?[z]ealous Irish nationalists required Irish names?, ?[w]as a Catholic Gaelic zealot necessarily more Irish than, say, a Protestant with little attachment to the ideas and images of the Gael?, and, ?while long-term preparation by zealots such as old-Fenian Tom Clarke?, and so, unprofitably, we might continue (p. 183, p. 237, p. 258, p. 260, p. 261. See also, p. 153, p. 443, p. 475). Some nationalists are fanatical, but the repeated use of ?zealot?? even perhaps when applied to the redoubtable Rev. Dr Ian Paisley ? is analytically lazy if not dismissive of individual textures and situations.

Such analysis because of its cumulative force (even where tempered by balanced conclusions) is weighed against separatist nationalism. But even apparently fair minded conclusions require close inspection. On the period 1919?22, which witnessed the IRA?s military campaign against the British crown in Ireland, Richard English asks the question: ?Was this brutality legitimate?? His answer appears a model of even handedness:

> Yes, said the republicans, and this has been the traditional nationalist view. Again, however, some qualifications might perhaps be mentioned. It was not the case that IRA violence was legitimated through popular mandate (it simply was not), nor even that it was particularly popular among the wider population (p. 291).

In the last forty years few issues have exercised modern political historians in Ireland more than the legitimacy of revolutionary republican violence. And with an eye to contemporary events the violence of 1919?21 has been of enhanced importance because it resulted in state formation led by armed republicans. Richard English is quite correct to identify that no plebiscite was held explicitly on the IRA?s armed struggle in 1919?21, and such was likely not as popular as propagandists claimed it to be. But neither were these matters quite as simple as he suggests. His interpretation would be more convincing had he acknowledged the urban and rural council elections held respectively in January and June 1920. Conducted under proportional representation the elections disadvantaged the big party winners of the 1918 general

election: the unionists in north east Ulster, and Sinn Fein almost everywhere else. Local electoral rolls also favoured property, the middle classes, and stronger farmers. In January Sinn Fein won 550 seats, Labour 394, unionists 355, constitutional nationalists 238, Independents 161, and municipal reformers 108.(6) The June electorate was three times larger, and in many counties Labour and Sinn Fein ran joint ?Republican? candidates. ?The election?, Michael Laffan reports, ?resulted in a Sinn Fein landslide?. He continues:

> In the provinces of Munster, and Connacht every single county council member was a member of Sinn Fein or the Labour Party. The Unionists lost control of Tyrone, and the *Belfast Newsletter* described the result as the most severe blow which the Unionists of the country had ever sustained.(7)

The historian of the IRA Peter Hart writes, ?[r]evolutionary casualties between January and March ? [1920] were three times those of the preceding three months. They doubled, then tripled again over the next six months?.(8) Was in 1920 a vote for Sinn Fein and Labour tacit endorsement of rapidly spreading republican violence too? Whatever the answer, both local elections must first be acknowledged before any assumption can be made about the relationship between republican violence and the absence of legitimacy.

Where extremes of separatist nationalist behaviour are concerned an unfamiliar, sometimes implausible, picture is presented in *Irish Freedom*. ?In the 1930s?, comments Richard English, ?the pro-Treatyite wing of Irish nationalism spawned a quasi-fascist movement ? the Blueshirts ? which long remained effectively forgotten, but which a newer generation of scholars (9) has thankfully now restored to our memory? (p. 336). Though some in Irish party politics would dearly wish it were so, very few would agree that the Blueshirts disappeared from popular far less academic memories. But this alleged amnesia takes on greater significance later in the light of the statement, ?in 1933 the ACA (Army Comrades Association, later the Blueshirts) claimed to possess around 100,000 members? (p.337). Here ?claimed? is the operative word. As with similar paramilitary groupings elsewhere at the time it was not unheard to exaggerate membership for propaganda. But the generation of scholars whom Richard English applauds have busied themselves using sales of badges, muster returns, and police surveillance reports to flesh out a more realistic account. These sources place ACA membership at less than 20,000 in early 1933, rising to at most 47,000 in April 1934, following the adoption of female and juvenile sections. The active (turning out to parade) membership was likely a still formidable 11,500 prior to the Blueshirts? division in September 1934, when the organisation all but evaporated.(10)

For a country the size of the Free State 100,000 shirted ?quasi-fascists? indicates significant mobilisation, and the exaggerated membership statistic Richard English identifies may prejudice perceptions of southern Irish society. Again, this is not incidental to the developing argument:

> It might be embarrassing to acknowledge that nationalist Ireland backed fascism in Spain during 1936?9, and that it largely stood aside in the Second World War fight against Hitler, but this was the essential reality and its explanation is evident enough. A conservative Catholic nationalism had been dominant in Revolutionary Ireland, and so the struggle in Spain ? interpreted by many as one involving godless communism versus the Faith ? was easy enough to read (p. 338).

It is the case many Catholics supported the ?Nationalist? military coup against the Spanish Republic?s democratically elected government for the reasons Richard English indicates. And some volunteers went to fight alongside Franco?s forces with former Blueshirt leader General Eoin O?Duffy. However, if we take the Irish Free State?s government as being in someway representative of ?nationalist Ireland?, then we have to acknowledge that following other liberal democracies, including Britain and France, it too observed a strict non-intervention policy during Spain?s civil war. The same government, led by Eamon de Valera, was re-elected in 1937, and again in 1938, which may suggest ?nationalist Ireland?s? support for Francoist Spain

was qualified, complicated by national interests, and did not amount to backing ?fascism in Spain?. Alternatively, it could be argued, as many on the left have done since, that non-intervention supported the Francoist rebels by cutting supplies to the Spanish Republic?s defenders. That, however, is not Richard English?s argument. And such an interpretation would have to take account of the Irish government?s aspirations for a policy of neutrality during the late 1930s.

Responses to the Spanish war were more complex than Richard English allows, and a tendency to alternatively oversimplify or to exaggerate only lends to distorted interpretation the effect of which finds expression in the sentence: ?Eoin O?Duffy?s crusade reflected nationalist Ireland?s broad, Francoist instincts? (p. 339). That only 700 volunteers followed O?Duffy to Spain may give pause for reflection here. So too must the fact that tens of thousands of Spanish citizens were murdered in cold blood by Franco?s regime in the four decades after 1936. Had Irish separatist nationalists shared any such ?instincts?, likely these would have found expression in their own civil wars after 1919 or more directly in the republican-Blueshirt faction fights of the early 1930s. This was not the case. It is the relatively low level of violence and the ability of Irish communities to regulate themselves, which is of greater significance in this period. Richard English?s analogy seems still more inappropriate if the enduring success of southern Ireland?s liberal-democracy, as he identifies elsewhere, is juxtaposed with Spain?s cataclysm.

It is the attrition of this kind of analysis, which matters greatly. And Richard English determines to draw further parallels between continental fascism and separatist nationalism in Ireland as when he writes:

> given that some Irish nationalists have identified their own communal suffering (at the hands of Britain and of Northern Irish unionists) with that of the victims of Nazism there is some irony ? and no little disgrace ? in the fact that the IRA colluded with Hitler at a time when unionists (such as future Northern Ireland Prime Ministers Terrence O?Neill and James Chichester-Clark) and future victims of republican violence (such as Lord Mountbatten and Airey Neave) were fighting against him.
>
> Nor was it just the ongoing IRA which displayed such instincts. Many Irish nationalists (including Maud Gonne and Dan Breen) were sympathetic to the Nazis, and numerous other Irish nationalists were clearly anti-Jewish in their thinking. Northern nationalist politician Malachy Conlon had distasteful views of this kind ? and nor was he a trivial figure (p. 340).

There is no doubting that the IRA collaborated with the Nazis, and many other separatists supported Germany during the war. However, this, along with Irish support for Franco, and Irish wartime neutrality is presented as a moral issue, and this invites the question: what is a moral argument doing in a historical treatment?

Before attempting to answer the last question it seems necessary to outline why historians resist the application of moral argument to historical analysis. The first objection is that moral arguments offer nothing that is of historical value. To say the IRA, no more than the supporters of France?s Vichy regime or members of the German SS were a ?disgrace? for supporting Hitler tells us nothing of why these people acted in the way that they did. What such statements do tell us is something about the moral judgements of the writer, but this is irrelevant unless it is proposed that contemporary values are to be transposed to past societies when interpreting those societies. The Nazi regime, as nearly all will admit, poses particular problems for the historian because of the enormity of the Holocaust, which overshadows the decade before 1945.(11) However, we cannot interpret the actions of people with any reference to that event before it happened or otherwise was understood to have happened. But comparisons with the Nazis often confuse these fundamental principles of historical interpretation.

For these and other historiographical reasons the IRA?s relationship with the Nazis, as with other nationalist groups, is difficult to unpack objectively. That, however, is the historian?s unforgiving burden. Nevertheless,

the decision to make the connection between fighting the Nazis with the opponents and victims of *future* republican violence is Richard English?s, and this reveals something important about his historical thinking. English conceives the struggle against militarist-republicanism and fascism as a continuum where he suggests there is some kind of equivalence and connection between fighting the Nazis in the 1940s and fighting republicans after 1970. Historically speaking this has to be unsatisfactory. But then Richard English is not engaged in making a historical argument here. For him the Second World War provided, ?the moral imperative to engage in an anti-Nazi war? (p. 330), and in this, in both the IRA and the independent Irish state, separatist nationalism was found wanting. It must be observed that satisfying though this conclusion might be for some ?the essential reality? was again more complex, and measurably more interesting.

Clearly Richard English sees nothing wrong with moralising about the past, and one may suspect many general readers (and a few historians besides) will sympathise with his sentiments. Alternatively, it should be argued in 1939 the only imperative that really mattered was the imperative to survive. This conditioned responses to threats, and subsequently created alliances. For Britain initially this meant standing alone, and for occupied France both collaboration and resistance. For Éire it meant neutrality. As for the IRA?s collaboration with the Nazis this had been prefigured in 1912?4, when first the UVF, and then the National Volunteers enlisted German help to import arms into Ireland. That the IRA was committed to Nazi ideology as opposed to a strategic alliance is debatable although there is incontrovertible evidence some individuals converted to National Socialism. But at least one of the leading Nazi collaborators in the 1940s Frank Ryan, as Richard English identifies, fought against Franco in Spain, and his biography, if nothing else, might suggest further inquiry into IRA ?interests? alongside the separatist?s ?disgrace?.

Had in 1939 the primary threat come alone from the Soviet army sweeping westwards instead of the Nazis, then different alliances might have been created. What would become the Cold War after 1945 just as easily could have begun in 1940, with the liberal democracies allied with the fascist powers against a Soviet invasion. Arguably, elements of this counterfactual alignment were anticipated during the Spanish Civil War, with some western governments preferring to see the fascists triumph there against the ?Reds?. In the real Cold War western powers supported (and installed) fascistic dictatorships in South and Central America, and propped-up the anti-communist apartheid regime in South Africa. The mundane point of this unavoidable diversion is that alongside national interests there is no absolute morality in international relations. It is of course not ?wrong? to interpret war against Irish militarist republicanism as the extension of the war against fascism or as indeed an extended conflict between ?good? and ?evil?. It is just not historical.

So why then do it? Cruise O?Brien offered a clue from 1981 when he wrote, ?those who want to oppose fascism in Ireland will start opposing it where it is really to be found: at the heart of the Republican Movement?.(12) The equation of fascism with extreme (and here not-so-extreme) separatist nationalism is a hangover from political interpretations framed in the war between militarist republicanism and the British state in Ireland after 1970. In that extraordinary context it suited some commentators to explain ?Irish violence? in terms of Irish irrationality of which the extreme nationalism of the Provisionals blithely approved of by some was but one expression. To adapt Cruise O?Brien?s favourite Maoist analogy of ?the water and the fish? (13) Richard English casts his net far and wide covering ?conservative Catholic nationalism? by suggesting it has supported (and may again) many more ?green fascists? than has in fact been the case.

Throughout Richard English?s extended essay runs the thread of a barely concealed moral argument, which seeks to undermine rather than to understand mainstream separatism. There is no doubt that much of the commentary is measured, sometimes impartial with flashes of insight occasionally illuminating the text. Although it is also true his attempts at balance for balance?s sake sometimes appear schematic. But lurking amid the interpretation there labours an obsession that separatist nationalism primarily should be understood as the agent of mobilised Catholicism predisposed to extreme acts and extreme ideas. ?In overwhelming composition, in terms of many of the goals pursued, in terms of the vision of what made the nation special, and in terms of identifying what you are not (Protestant, atheistic)?, Richard English tells us, ?in all these ways and despite rhetorical non-sectarianism, Irish nationalism has been deeply Catholic? (p. 442). In part

measure he is of course undoubtedly and unsurprisingly correct and one might feel willing to agree with more of what he says if the interpretation were impartially laid out: but it is not. For example, ?rhetorical non-sectarianism? implies (it is never quite made clear) separatist nationalism is inherently sectarian. There is a case to be made here, but it needs careful handling.

Levelled against diverse communities over two centuries ?rhetorical non-sectarianism? is another broad stroke. It has to be accepted elements of Irish separatists plainly were confessional, and sometimes overtly sectarian and xenophobic in their outlook. It is also true similar prejudices are common to all nationalisms in different degrees, which demand careful measurement. It is therefore useful to examine Richard English?s dissection of separatist nationalism and Catholicism, and in this respect the 1916 Easter week rebellion is instructive. The ?Rising?, Richard English emphatically tells us, ?was a Catholic affair? (p. 267). ?Catholicism was evident during the week itself?, he observes, ?the rebels recited the Rosary in the General Post Office ? during the Rising and were attended by Catholic priests? (p. 274). From this he extrapolates the rebels? religious observance turned rebellion into something interpreted as ?a moving and excluding intertwining of religion with politics, in an expressly Catholic version? (p. 274). But can the rebellion be so described? It is true the event?s later memorialisation borrowed heavily from Roman Catholic ritual, as Richard English identifies. But this also should warn against crude teleologies of the rebellion as the expression of one religious faith. The Irish Republican Brotherhood, which planned and executed the rebellion, was governed by a secular constitution, and within its ranks there were to be found ?free thinkers?, atheists, Jews, and some Protestants. Richard English insists the rebellion was a ?Catholic affair?, and alternatively it was a ?political event? (p. 273), all to deny its republican dimensions. And that seems to me to be a revision too far on the strength of both the evidence and argument presented. In his exegesis English makes no reference to that part of the rebel?s Proclamation stating: ?The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens?. Viewed retrospectively through the experience of the independent Irish state these aspirations may appear naive, but nothing is presented supporting an assumption they were merely rhetorical in 1916.

Richard English, if I understand him correctly, is trying to look at sectarianism in wider contexts than the ?event?. It can be argued, though Richard English does not do so explicitly, that *any* drive towards self-determination would bring separatist and unionist nationalisms into a sectarian conflict across Britain and Ireland, concentrating inside Ulster. Moving toward national self-determination, therefore, came with an analogous sectarian price: ?In time, the cost of this [Easter 1916] was to be felt in north-east Ireland where the largest concentration of Protestants lived? (p. 275). That mobilised separatist nationalism held within it the inescapable logic of sectarian violence seems to me a good argument, if not a historical fact. But this is only part of a picture, which requires viewing in its full panorama. If it is to be accepted that any mobilisation of separatist nationalism inevitably would lead to the alienation of Protestant unionists or worse, then the converse argument has also to be acknowledged. British nationalism used religion to hold Ireland (or part of it) within the Union often alienating Catholic communities in the process. Again Richard English is alive to some of this when he notes, ?[i]f the Catholic Ireland defined itself as the nation, then historically the process had also worked the other way, as a Protestant Britain had effectively defined itself in exclusive ways too?. But we are left at a loss to know what those ?exclusive ways? were or what their implications for separatist nationalism might have been. Citing Peter Hart?s *The IRA and its Enemies* (1998) and Fearghal McGarry?s biography *Eoin O?Duffy* (2005), Richard English continues: ?Thus it was that the 1919?21 IRA (and their enemies) on occasion exhibited an ugly sectarianism of word and deed? (p. 296). Fearghal McGarry for his part identifies among other things crude sectarian appeals to Ulster Catholics to support Eoin O?Duffy?s auctioneering business in 1920. (14) Peter Hart unpeels the layers of a more violent sectarian culture in west county Cork. But if ?Catholic? sectarianism is to be an integral ?part of the story? as Richard English protests then something more is required than citing two monographs relating to one short period. As for the sectarianism of IRA?s enemies (which appears to be an afterthought) this goes unarticulated and therefore unreferenced.

What is at issue here is not that separatists exhibited sectarian behaviour, but the limited confines in which this is explored and explained. So we may find some agreement with Richard English when he writes, ?what

we find is a nationalist rhetoric and vision of non-sectarian inclusiveness, complemented by a frequent enough sectarianism on the ground? (pp. 442?3). But the frequency and intensity of separatist sectarian culture is not explained by the evidence he adduces. Had Richard English dug deeper, and sifted through a finer mesh no doubt more evidence of Catholic sectarianism could have been found. But no amount of evidence would resolve the methodological problem of forensically examining one community on one island, while not adequately addressing its context. Instead what English appears to be doing is rebuking those separatists who would still claim their inheritance goes untarnished by religious prejudice. Denials like that, I think, may be dismissed in a few pages, but here it has become a book-length project. And the disproportionate response encourages English into adopting some uncomfortable contortions as for example when he writes: ?Many northern Protestants thought the [1920?2] IRA in the south to be engaged in what might now be termed the ethnic cleansing of Protestants there? (p. 315).

Applying the term ?ethnic cleansing? to 1920s southern Ireland is hotly contested in the literature and so the decision to do so has to be significant. To describe a thought or an event in the 1920s using a coinage from the 1990s Balkans? conflicts is of course an anachronism, and a very confusing one at that. The only professional historian seriously to suggest the term?s valid application, Peter Hart, in 2006 disassociated himself from it, ?I have never argued that ?ethnic cleansing? took place in Cork or elsewhere in the 1920s - in fact, quite the opposite?.(15) (Contradicting this in 1996, and again 2003, Peter Hart wrote: ?Similar campaigns of what might be termed ?ethnic cleansing? were waged in parts of King?s and Queen?s Counties, South Tipperary, Leitrim, Mayo, Limerick, Westmeath, Louth and Cork?.(16)) Excusing Hart for the moment, Richard English suggests that we should consider the interpretation of unserious historians. For example, Eoin Harris in 2005 writing on ?what happened to Protestants in the South between 1911 and 1980?, claimed, ?the ethnic cleansing of 50,000 [Protestant] farmers, shopkeepers and artisans in 1921?; or the Reverend Ian Paisley writing in 1999 on the same subject: ?what are the real facts [in the Republic]? More than 75 years of ethnic cleansing?.(17) Use of ahistorical and emotive conceptualisations ? even where attributed to a third party or to nobody ? serve to normalise them in the historical narrative where they are not carefully qualified. For some the historian?s endorsement alone will legitimise these terms ensuring that they become a kind of historical ?truth?.(18) Richard English is not wrong to suggest some people ?might? apply the term ?ethnic cleansing? to southern experiences in 1920, but only because some people ?might? say anything.

Following an extended quotation, which concludes, ?maintenance of local power by the dominant majority in each state [north and south after 1920] was not softened by respect for the freedom of individuals or dissident minorities?, Richard English continues, ?this situation continued for many years, creating both smugness and a hierarchy of communities in each jurisdiction? (p. 349). Following this English quotes the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein during Wittgenstein?s visit to Ireland in the late 1940s. ?I would much prefer to see a child educated by a decent Protestant pastor than a greasy Roman Catholic priest?, wrote the philosopher, ?[w]hen I look at the faces of the clergy here in Dublin, it seems to me that the Protestant ministers look less smug than the Roman priests?. The historical information contained in that statement amounts to little more than to Wittgenstein?s preference for Protestant over Catholic kindergartens leaving us to query what the quotation?s precise function is in the text? In the same paragraph Richard English goes on to quote as a ?nationalist? with ?republican sympathies?, the writer Sean O?Faolain. ?[I]t is a matter of common knowledge to those who care to enquire, or even observe?, wrote O?Faolain, ?that the Protestant in the south has as little chance of getting his fair share of public appointments as the Catholic in the north?. The implication is that as a ?nationalist? O?Faolain?s commentary may be taken as unprejudiced. But O?Faolain?s assertion that there was equivalence in the treatment of minorities north and south goes unqualified by Richard English leaving a misleading interpretation hanging in the wind. Some might agree with O?Faolain?s statement, but in any historical treatment, moreover one arguing for Catholic nationalism?s ?rhetorical non-sectarianism?, it surely begs careful critical evaluation. It is the interpretation not the existence of historical information that gives it value. Allowing contested evidence, here in the form of opinion, to speak for itself represents not alone the abandonment of the author?s responsibility to the reader, but examples too a rejection of historical method.

The besetting problem of *Irish Freedom* is overstatement and simplification in its case against separatist nationalism explained as essentially Catholic, exclusionary, and sectarian. It remains indisputable that from the late 18th-century mobilised separatist nationalism contained within it a strong Catholic ethos, which sometimes equated the ?Irish nation? exclusively with the ?Catholic people?. This, many will agree, is an unsurprising observation, but to reduce separatism to an expression of Catholic identity runs the risk of missing the textures of a complex phenomenon as well as the non-Catholics whom Richard English does not always identify as such. From the beginning of the 19th century it is true the Catholic Church provided structures and leadership around which separatist nationalism eventually mobilised. Here the Catholic Church often filled socio-political roles reneged on by the British state. But the sectarian organisation of Irish society was also an inheritance of the conquests and settlements of the 17th century, and one would be shocked not to find sectarianism expressed in later political life because it remained integral in muted form to the realities of daily life. The function of the failed Protestant reformation in Ireland, as with colonial plantations, the establishment of a Protestant ascendancy, and Ireland?s inclusion under the 1801 Union, were initiatives to protect Britain?s strategic defence interests, which lasted to the conclusion of the Cold War. Religious conformity for the confessional British state, was one among many strategic tools used to protect Britain from the danger of a hostile Ireland, and beyond it a hostile Europe. Sectarianism was therefore integral to making and keeping Ireland ?British?, and was also to be part of the attempt to reverse those policies. It is a truism of modern Irish history that religious discrimination associated with anti-Unionism is unintelligible without a meaningful appreciation of pro-Union sectarianism. And so a balanced approach to these issues demands consideration of the relationships existing between competing nationalisms and religions right across the United Kingdom. But since *Irish Freedom* is conceived as a methodologically ?Irish? project it cannot do justice to the problem, and Richard English therefore chooses simply to set it to one side.

Arguably, the major historiographical problem confronted when addressing Irish sectarianism is not proving it existed (that is incontestable), but rather to avoid using it as a weapon in contemporary ideological battles. If separatism was a form of mobilised Catholicism then it follows its republican ideology was merely a veneer covering uglier sectarian intentions. Richard English concludes the reality contradicted the rhetoric, and where proved correct this does more than almost any other argument to undermine a hitherto dominant interpretation of history, which has legitimised all shades of republicanism in Ireland. Almost any other, that is, except the argument Irish republicanism was essentially non-democratic, and contains within it a fascistic impulse. A significant problem for the historian addressing these concepts is the necessity to transcend their application in present centred arguments against the Provisional IRA. And, moreover, to see sectarianism, republicanism, and democracy in their historical context, rather than through the distorting lens of the recent Northern Ireland conflict. Where this has not happened it has often led to what can be understood as the ?Ulsterisation? of the Irish historical landscape the corollary of which is a more pessimistic interpretation of modern Ireland than is warranted. This may go some way toward explaining why some academic historians have been anxious to draw loose analogies between Ireland in the 1920s and Balkan massacres in our own time, and why others have stretched to accommodate this interpretation.

Whilst Irish republicanism was a reaction to Britain?s *ancien régime* (monarchy, aristocracy, and privilege connected to faith), it reflected too in its later constitutional objectives some of the reforming aspirations of the late Victorian and Edwardian British state. The republican aspiration toward religious tolerance coincided under the Union with the decline of institutionalised discrimination against non-conformists Catholics included. But Irish republicanism went further in the desire to dismantle the trappings of monarchy and empire and the patronage system associated with this. Meanwhile experience of government reforms, local democracy, and the political diminution of the minor-aristocracy had brought 19th-century Ireland closer to norms of British governance. These also helped inculcate a British political culture in Ireland to which separatist republican thought was not immune. The models of political institutions after independence, as has been long observed, were often innovations after British traditions. Not least among them an unarmed police force, the Garda Siochana (the Irish ?boys in blue? being much closer to British norms than the paramilitary Royal Irish Constabulary before 1922 or the Royal Ulster Constabulary after).

Whilst Catholicism infused separatist nationalism in Ireland it is also true a pervasive British constitutional culture enveloped it, which after 1922 helped set southern Irish democracy apart from Iberia, and most of the rest of Europe. Again Richard English recognises some of this as a ?sweet irony ? left by an opponent so long denounced as appalling evil?, but he too is very willing to see separatist political culture as something exotic opposing British norms and values. His raw instinct is to look toward ?fascistic? Spain rather than the burgeoning British democracy to explain the separatists? political culture. And in this context among the most striking omissions of the book is any attempt to discuss the consensus politics emerging under a constitutional republicanism, where separatists successfully accessed power. These successful separatists might then be best and most profitably be understood as the Union?s lost Britons rather than as essentially Catholic nationalists, which surely is too easy a reduction as Richard English has it.

In Northern Ireland, where the British constitution has recently recovered lost ground, again separatist nationalists ? among them the potent strain found in the Provisional IRA ? have made accommodations with British unionist nationalism as Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley?s metaphorical embrace bears testament. And this suggests that *inter*-nationalist relations are in no small measure determined by the health of the constitution under which they exist. Alongside these recent developments the theories of sectarianism and exclusivism Richard English advances could usefully have been tested against the experiences of Poles, Lithuanians, Russians, and Nigerians, to name some of the migrants and settlers transforming the island since the mid-1990s. But about these ?new? Irish there is not a word in this history of nationalism.

In making the case weighted against separatist nationalism Richard English exaggerates in order to undermine older interpretations. On many issues there is a lot to agree with, but the excesses and oversimplifications he indulges ultimately detract from his argument?s force. One of the major achievements of so called ?revisionist? historical writing in recent decades has been its articulation of diversities teasing out the subtleties of Irish identities. Where Richard English addresses separatist nationalism he abandons that innovation in favour of a crude analysis replete with generalities, and unfounded assumption. Terms such as ?sectarianism?, ?ethnic cleansing?, ?anti-Semitism?, and not least ?nationalism? are employed not as analytical categories to be rigorously tested, but rather as moralising projectiles thrown in all directions, but aimed only in one. The approach owes its debts to a historiographical mode framed in response to the Northern Ireland crisis, and the threat from resurgent separatism carried within it. That war thankfully is now over. With its passing should go too the moral imperative to see any species of nationalism as something primarily to be undermined, rather than understood.

Notes

1. Richard English, ?The same people with different relatives? Modern scholarship, unionists and the Irish nation?, in *Unionism in Modern Ireland: New Perspectives on Politics and Culture*, ed. Richard English and Graham Walker (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 230. For the proposition Unionism rests on the concept of citizenship inside the union not nationalism (?There is no such thing as the British nation. There are only British citizens?.), which English cites in support of his analysis see Arthur Aughey, ?Unionism and self-determination?, in *The Northern Ireland Question: Myth and Reality*, ed. Patrick J. Roche and Brian Barton (Aldershot, 1991), p. 6.Back to (1)
2. Conor Cruise O?Brien, ?An unhealthy intersection?, *New Review*, 2, 16 (1975), 5.Back to (2)
3. ibid, 7.Back to (3)
4. ibid, 7.Back to (4)
5. John Hutchinson, ?Irish nationalism?, in *The Making of Modern Irish History*, ed. D. G. Boyce and Alan O?Day (London, 1996), p. 101.Back to (5)
6. Michael Laffan, *The Resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Fein Party 1916?1923* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 327.Back to (6)
7. ibid, p. 329.Back to (7)
8. Peter Hart, *The IRA at War 1916 ?1923* (Oxford, 2003), p. 71.Back to (8)
9. The historians cited are Mike Cronin, Fearghal McGarry, R. A. Stradling, and John M. Regan.Back to (9)

10. Mike Cronin writes, ?This figure [100,000] is misleading as the actual peak of Blueshirt membership is less than half of this. The figure ? is General O?Duffy?s own estimate of the membership and must be seen in the context of a politician exaggerating the importance of his own organisation?. John M. Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution* (Dublin, 1999), pp. 329 ?32; pp. 354 ?5; Mike Cronin, *The Blueshirts and Irish Politics* (Dublin, 1997), p. 113, pp 114 ?7; Fearghal McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War* (Cork, 1999), p. 34.Back to (10)
11. In January 2005, Irish President Mary McAleese, a Roman Catholic from Northern Ireland, during a live radio interview in advance of attending a commemoration at Auschwitz concentration camp, said of the Nazis that: ?They gave to their children an irrational hatred of Jews in the same way that people in Northern Ireland transmitted to their children an irrational hatred, for example, of Catholics, in the same way that people give to their children an outrageous and irrational hatred of those who are of different colour and all of those things?? President McAleese later apologised for her failure to mention Protestants as victims of hatred in Northern Ireland. *Irish Times*, 29 January 2005.Back to (11)
12. Conor Cruise O?Brien, ?Blueshirts and Quislings?, *Magill*, (14 June 1981), 25.Back to (12)
13. See Conor Cruise O?Brien, *States of Ireland* (Dublin, 1972), pp. 281?303.Back to (13)
14. Fearghal McGarry, *Eoin O?Duffy: a Self-Made Hero* (Oxford, 2005), p. 44.Back to (14)
15. *Irish Times*, 28 June 2006.Back to (15)
16. Peter Hart, ?The Protestant experience of revolution in southern Ireland?, in *Unionism in Modern Ireland*, ed. Richard English (Dublin, 1996), p. 92; Peter Hart, *The IRA at War 1916 ?1923* (Oxford, 2003), p. 237.Back to (16)
17. Eoghan Harris, *Sunday Independent (Dublin)*, 16 October 2005; Ian Paisley, ?The treatment of Protestants in the Republic of Ireland? 1 January 1999 <Back to (17)
18. Robin Bury writes in a letter originally posted in March 2003 on the Reform Movement website, ?I have already quoted extensively from two books that make the indisputable case that between 1920 and 1924 there was a mass exodus of Protestants, particularly in Munster and Connaught, caused by the activity of the IRA ?Peter Hart writes in, "The Protestant Experience of Revolution in Southern Ireland" in Unionism in Modern Ireland, MacMillan Press Ltd 1996, that there was "what might be called ethnic cleansing in parts of King's and Queen's counties, South Tipperary, Leitrim, Mayo, Limerick, Westmeath, Louth and Cork." Hart is a professional historian and would not use the words "ethnic cleansing" lightly.? [viewed 9 May 2008]; see also Gerry Moriarty interview with Orange Order Grand Secretary Drew Nelson, *Irish Times*, 17 June 2006.Back to (18)

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