

Ireland, India and Empire: Indo-Irish Radical Connections, 1919–64

Review Number:

763

Publish date:

Sunday, 31 May, 2009

Author:

Kate O'Malley

ISBN:

9780719077517

Date of Publication:

2008

Price:

£50.00

Pages:

224pp.

Publisher:

Manchester University Press

Place of Publication:

Manchester

Reviewer:

Keith Jeffery

In this stimulating book (or 'thesis' as it is described on p. 2, rather betraying its origins), the author claims to meet four principal objectives. First, the book seeks to contribute to the process by which (in the words of Erskine Childers (as quoted in the *Irish Press*, 10 Aug. 1954)) the 'indirect influence from Irish nationalism on India's own freedom struggle ... must some day take its rightful place in the annals of the two nations' (p. 2). Second, it 'adds a further international dimension to the history of Irish republicanism, as well as contributing to a better understanding of the nature of republicanism and its self-perception in the post-colonial era' (pp. 3–4). Third, the study 'seeks to support a more general argument about British intelligence in the interwar period: that there was an over-emphasis on monitoring the actions of communist or Bolshevik suspects and organisations at the expense of other, perhaps more menacing, threats to Empire, such as the development of right-wing organisations, radical nationalism and anti-imperialist alliances of a non-communist variety' (p. 5). Fourth, and most ambitiously, the work 'will redefine accepted paradigms of decolonisation' (p. 10).

The structure of the book is primarily chronological. O'Malley begins with the perceived communist menace which afflicted not just Britain's rulers in the aftermath of the First World War. Here she introduces the first of a series of sometimes colourful radical activists who populate the book: Roddy Connolly, Sean MacBride, Frank Ryan and Peadar O'Donnell on the Irish side; M. N. Roy, Brajesh Singh, Shapurji Saklatvala on the Indian. In this chapter the links between Irish and Indian radicals are explored in such bodies as the 'League Against Imperialism' (LAI), which, according to Fenner Brockway, sought to create a unity between 'organisations representing the subject races of the world'. Among the Indo-Irish parallels observed here is

the distinctly fissiparous tendency of radical groups. In Indian, as in Irish, organisations it seems (in Brendan Behan's famous words) that the first thing on any the agenda was 'the split'. Why this should be so is easily explained, as when a meeting is called of passionate 'true believers', with strong and principled views about matters, consensus is never likely to be the outcome. Following on after the work and comparatively brief life of the LAI, O'Malley investigates V. J. Patel and the Indian-Irish Independence League (IIL), formed in 1932 'to help by every means possible to secure the complete national, social and economic independence of the people of India and Ireland'. The two chief methods proposed were the boycotting of British goods and a propaganda campaign by which an 'Indian Information Bureau' would 'spread the truth about the Indian struggle' (p. 77).

'By every means possible', however, implies that action might not, as in this case, be confined to non-violent methods. In an especially interesting chapter, O'Malley charts Subhas Chandra Bose's engagement with Ireland. Bose was a great admirer of Michael Collins, though evidently more for Collins's prowess as an Irish soldier of destiny than his clear political pragmatism. And, although Bose and Eamon de Valera apparently met in London in 1938, when asked in 1944 to offer support for Bose's 'National Provisional Government for India' which he had established in Japanese-occupied Rangoon, the late-flowering pragmatist Dev deftly ducked the question.

In her final chapter, 'A Commonwealth republic', O'Malley moves away from the central theme promised in the title of her book. Rather than 'radical connections', there are different encounters, with the 1948 visit of de Valera (no longer a revolutionary of any sort; now a 'statesman') to newly-independent India, where Jawaharlal Nehru and fellow moderate nationalists were in power, embodying in their careful constitutionalism an Indian political tradition which downplayed the radicalism of Gandhi and Bose alike. The parallels drawn here – which certainly deserve exploration – are more of shared partition than any shared radicalism. In this chapter, covering the years up to 1964, we get assertions of a shared radical past which sit a little uneasily with the complacent conservatism of (at least) independent Ireland in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Kate O'Malley's book undoubtedly contributes to the process articulated by Erskine Childers as quoted at the start of this review. The subject-matter itself and the author's assiduous identification of points of contact and comparison between Ireland and India reinforce the argument that Irish nationalism and India's freedom struggle were linked in some significant ways. The linkages were not by any means confined to radicals. O'Malley observes that 'in the first half of the twentieth century British, Indian and Irish elites alike believed that fundamental parallels between the two countries' historical experiences formed the basis of a developing Indo-Irish political nexus' (p. 2). 'Nexus' or not, parallels between Ireland and India were commonplace in government, reflecting the 'interconnectedness' of Ireland (and India) in the British imperial world.⁽¹⁾ But the question which we might pose, however, is whether the Irish experience actually made any difference to the Indian? Simply preparing a catalogue of Indian admirers of, say, Collins or de Valera (and, of course, noting that Irish independence preceded Indian), does not necessarily prove any significant causal relationship between the two nationalist movements. Indeed, extracting only Irish references from Indian memoirs might actually *over-emphasise* the importance of Ireland. Assessing the impact of Irish precedents on Indian nationalists surely requires a wider examination of the multiplicity of influences acting upon the latter – domestic, foreign, imperial, spiritual, ideological, personal, and so on – to see how salient any particular factor might have been. O'Malley demonstrates the *plausibility* of the argument that Ireland made an important contribution, but, for the meantime, a more definitive verdict requires further research at the Indian end, and the verdict on this issue must remain 'not proven', as they say in Scottish law courts.

O'Malley achieves her second objective more successfully than her first. We find Irish republicans and anti-imperialists alike living off 'Moscow gold'. In 1922 Roddy Connolly was apparently funded by the Soviet emissary Mikhail Borodin to travel to Berlin to make contact with the Comintern's Indian representative, M. N. Roy. The League Against Imperialism, too, was a front organisation, 'established essentially by two prominent communists who were in regular contact with Moscow' (p. 31). The fact that Irish republicans (like nationalists in India and other parts of the world) were prepared to accept subsidies from communists

sources does not, of course, mean that they were themselves communist, but it does help explain the perception of British security and intelligence agencies in the 1920s and 30s that Soviet communism was the principal global challenge the empire faced—the ‘over-emphasis’ which O’Malley identifies at the very start of her book. The argument here is not that communism was *not* a threat, for it surely was, but that, in context, it was not so paramount a threat as many believed. In these cases, placing the affairs of Irish and Indian radicals in their wider context is imperative to give perspective to both their activities and the actual challenge they posed.

One of the praiseworthy features of this book is the author’s extremely productive use of the Indian Political Intelligence (IPI) papers in the India Office Records at the British Library. Although a number of scholars have worked on the topic of Indian revolutionaries and their international networks—most notably Richard Popplewell and Tom Fraser in his important and pioneering unpublished PhD thesis (2) – and some use has already been made of these papers (which comprise the records of the Indian government’s security and intelligence department), O’Malley identifies IPI files as ‘a crucial aspect’ of her study (p. 8). Among other things, they underpin her general argument about the ‘overemphasis ... placed on Indians with communist leanings at the expense of those driven by purely separatist ideals’ (p. 180). This is uncontested, but care needs to be taken in exploiting the undoubted riches of the IPI papers, as with those of any security and intelligence-related archive. Above all, is the problem of perspective. A kind of implicit ‘mutual admiration society’ exists between radicals and their official adversaries. On the one side, the doings of even tiny schismatic radical groups were powerfully magnified in importance by their own self-belief, a solipsistic confidence that, as keepers of the precious revolutionary flame, they possessed the answers to the world’s (or, at the very least, the nation’s) ills. On the other side were squadrons of policemen and intelligence officers who took these miniscule and unrepresentative groups all-too-seriously, charting their movements, fastidiously recording their table talk and creating in their imagination the very world-wide web of subversion which the subversives themselves might only dream about. Scholars have to be careful about simultaneously being sceptical about the intelligence agencies’ world-view (in this case, of the ubiquity and power of communism) and taking seriously their painstakingly-assembled records, themselves inevitably informed and suffused with that apparently skewed perception. This is not a specific criticism of O’Malley, but a general ‘health warning’ about expecting to find the ‘truth’ in security and intelligence records, a sometimes over-seductive source. Like any other sources, such records need carefully to be interrogated, weighed, assessed and contextualised.

Another problem about using police and intelligence reports, which also applies generally to the study of clandestine activity (whether by state agencies or subversive groups, or both), is that of speculation. Intelligence officers are sometimes prone to ‘filling in the gaps’ between apparently ‘hard’ information with suppositions about where their targets were going, who they were meeting and even what they were thinking. This is extremely contagious and historians can catch the disease too. At times O’Malley is a little inclined to hypothesise. A few ‘perhapses’ and verbs in the conditional voice are unavoidable, but the temptation to speculate must ruthlessly be resisted. One test of this tendency is simply to do what the signals intelligence people call ‘traffic analysis’ and count instances of problematical words or usages. On p. 61 it is ‘more than likely’ that Maud Gonne MacBride ‘played a large part in fuelling the idea of the IIL’. Other instances of ‘more than likely’ occur on pages 88, 136, 149 (twice) and 165. ‘Probably’ crops up on pages 62 and 166; ‘seems quite probable that’ (p. 70); ‘seems clear’ (p. 74); ‘it was possible’ (p. 76); ‘it seems possible’ and ‘it is quite possible’ (both p. 151); ‘it is believed that’ (p. 79). From the cumulative affluence of these usages, one ‘is forced to conclude’ (p. 81) that at times O’Malley is more speculative than is absolutely desirable.

I am not quite sure if O’Malley successfully meets her final objective, to ‘redefine accepted paradigms of decolonisation’, since I am not quite sure what this means. The matter is not addressed in her all-too-short conclusion (just over three pages long), and it is not clear whether these ‘accepted paradigms’ relate to Ireland and India separately or together. That anti-imperialists across the British empire sought, and found, encouragement in each other’s activities is neither surprising nor a new finding. Years ago, Jack Gallagher (not cited by O’Malley) identified the interconnectedness of imperial policy and imperial challenges in,

among other places, his celebrated 1974 Ford Lectures.⁽³⁾ If the ‘accepted paradigms’ concern the methods adopted by nationalists across the empire, then there is a real problem – which O’Malley recognises – in comparing Ireland and India, and that problem is Gandhi, who is largely absent from this book. O’Malley correctly observes that ‘Gandhi did not think that Ireland was a useful, or indeed a healthy model for India’s struggle for independence, and he had dismissed Sinn Féin as an example after the party’s adoption of violent methods’ (p. 3). Under Arthur Griffith, indeed, Sinn Féin had begun as a non-violent party, though it did not remain so for very long. For the purposes of her book, O’Malley’s definition of ‘radical’ is that the figures she deals with ‘were radical in the physical force they were prepared to use’. But not only does this exclude Gandhi and his very special variety of non-violent political campaigning, but it also excludes constitutionalist Irish republicans, radical in political ambition, but not (following O’Malley’s definition) apparently radical in method. The visit of V. J. Patel and Jamnadas Mehta to Britain and Ireland (North and South) in the spring and summer of 1927, which O’Malley mentions, suggests that there might be a productive line of enquiry to be pursued about constitutionalist parallels between nationalists across the empire. But the evidence for this might not be so conveniently assembled in security and intelligence archives. ‘It is perhaps surprising’, she writes, ‘that little of note was recorded by IPI in relation to his [Patel’s] visit to Ireland’. She answers her own question. IPI’s neglect ‘was most likely due to the apparently official purpose of his stay in Britain, to study democratic procedures’ (p. 57). So, not surprising at all and demonstrating that if one concentrates excessively on IPI themselves, who were only interested in ‘radical’ (violent) challenges, then the potentially very considerable significance of non-‘radical’ elements might be *under-emphasised*.

This book has been published in Manchester University Press’s excellent ‘Studies in Imperialism’ series, and, as always, there is a short, stimulating introduction from the general editor, John M. Mackenzie. In it he makes the point, now a commonplace (not least through his own efforts), that ‘it is increasingly apparent that scholars should be adopting a “four nation” approach not only to the pasts of the British and Hibernian [*sic*] Isles, but also to the history of the so-called British Empire’ (p. ix). Quite so, but it does prompt the reflection that while the history of ‘Britain’ and the ‘so-called British empire’ is being disaggregated nationally (and perhaps regionally and ethnically too), that of India, at least as it is demonstrated in this book, is *not* (or not yet). There is not much Pakistan, only one mention of a princely state (Hyderabad on pp 165–6) and nothing at all regarding Burma. It could be argued that both Ireland and ‘British India’ owed their unity – apparently ‘national’ in character, and certainly accepted as such by the nationalist movements which began to flourish in both places in the 19th century – to the imposition of common British imperial rule across the whole geographical territory, a rule which, to a certain extent and admittedly with varying intensity, suppressed regional, sectarian and ethnic differences. ‘India’ might be as ‘imagined’ a concept as ‘Ireland’, ‘Britain’ or even ‘the British empire’. As with Gandhi, there is not much Jinnah in O’Malley’s book, though she does not miss the delicious irony of de Valera visiting India (but not Pakistan) on his ‘anti-partition tour’ of 1948.

As for other parallels between Ireland and India, the idea that Ireland might have contributed its own measure of imperialism to the British empire (a suggestion to which I plead guilty in the title of my own contribution to the ‘Studies of Imperialism’ series ⁽⁴⁾), might be compared with the notion that there was an ‘Indian Empire’ too, and that India might have contributed in similar ways to imperial (or ‘sub-imperial’) expansion, a topic stimulatingly explored by Robert J. Blyth.⁽⁵⁾ And on the matter of parallels, perhaps India is not the place at all for comparing with Ireland. Remarking that ‘the Burmese have often been called the “Irish of the East”’, D. G. Hall went on to assert not only that ‘certainly sentiment weighs far more with them than reason’, but also that ‘their awakening nationalism in the twentieth century made them more acutely conscious than any other people in the East of their long history as an independent power’.⁽⁶⁾ Beyond Hall’s culturally-conditioned potential national libel about alleged Irish and Burmese over-sentimentality, there are perhaps suggestive parallels here between the two states: each experiencing troubled relations with a powerful and dominant neighbour; each securing ‘home rule’ of a sort; each declaring a republic in 1948, signalling a final and definitive break from what had become the ‘British Commonwealth’; and each thereafter enjoying a mixed experience (politically and economically) of independent existence, including violence arising from secessionist minorities within the ‘national territory’.

Now there, surely, is a productive subject for comparative study.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further

Notes

1. As argued (for example) in my ‘The road to Asia, and the Grafton Hotel, Dublin: Ireland in the “British world”’, *Irish Historical Studies*, 36 (2008), 243–56.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Richard Popplewell, *Intelligence and Imperial Defence: British Intelligence and the Defence of the Indian Empire, 1904–1924* (London, 1995); T. G. Fraser, ‘The intrigues of the German government and the Ghadr Party against British rule in India, 1914–1918’ (PhD, University of London, 1974).
[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Published (posthumously) in J. A. Gallagher, *The Decline, Revival and Fall of the British Empire*, ed. Anil Seal (Cambridge, 1982).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. ‘An Irish Empire’? *Aspects of Ireland and the British Empire*, ed. Keith Jeffery (Manchester, 1996).
[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Robert J. Blyth, *The Empire of the Raj: India, Eastern Africa and the Middle East, 1858–1947* (Basingstoke, 2003).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. D. G. Hall, *Burma* (London, 1950), pp. 175–6.[Back to \(6\)](#)

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/763>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3741>