

Revisionism in Irish Historical Writing

The New Anti-Nationalist
School of
Historians

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I AM PARTICULARLY HONOURED to be asked to give this Desmond Greaves Memorial Lecture¹. In my opinion, it is very appropriate that this talk should be about the rise of what is popularly called "revisionism" in Irish historical writing. It was a subject which concerned Desmond Greaves very much during the months before his death. When I last saw Desmond, only a month or so before that tragic event, he was discussing the idea of a conference to draw attention to the changing attitudes in Irish historical writing...those attitudes have already been described by Desmond Fennell as "the historiography of the Irish counter-revolution".

Let me start by saying that I do not like the term "revisionism" as applied to historians. Revisionism means the act of revising, correcting, improving or reinterpreting from new materials. Thus all historians worth their salt are "revisionists". The label is meaningless. My own view is that the school we are dealing with is a neo-colonial one, an anti-nationalist school which in its

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mildest form apologises for English imperialism in Ireland, or, in its strongest form supports that imperialism. We could term those historians from the 26-County state, who are engaged in such writing, as 'Unionist fellow-travellers'.

We are not dealing with a new phenomenon. Until 1921, Irish history [we are confining ourselves to the 26 Counties] was in the hands of the Unionist school, just as in the 6 Counties Irish history has remained in those hands. Only after the emergence of the 26-county state did the nationalist interpretation become the generally accepted view of Irish history - which was based on the premise that the Irish people had a moral right to fight for their political, economic, social and cultural independence against the imperial ethics of their big neighbour - was the accepted view of history. Perhaps we can now call it the traditional view of Irish history.

The rise of the anti-nationalist school, the apologists for imperialism, into a preeminent role during this particular period is no accident. Anti-nationalist views of Irish history have surfaced during a time when the unfinished business of Ireland's struggle for political, economic, social and cultural independence has once more come to dominate the life of these islands. The rise of this school, with the obvious blessing of the 26-county government and political establishment, is symptomatic of the concerns felt by that establishment with regard to the problem of North-East Ulster.

We are witnessing one of those extraordinary contradictions which sometimes, and more frequently than is sup-

posed, appear in history. Successive 26-county governments, from 1921 to date, have claimed an inheritance from the national struggle for independence, and appeals have been made to the spirit of every uprising from 1798 to 1916. Irish governments have claimed to be the true inheritors of the Irish Struggle.

But the continuing struggle in the North of Ireland has placed the 26-county establishment in an invidious situation. To claim the historical validity of the cause of Irish nationalism, that is the independence struggle, is also to accept its validity in that part of Ireland which has been forcibly severed from the rest of the country. Time was when Irish governments refused to admit the morality and, therefore, legality of Partition; when they claimed jurisdiction over the entire island of Ireland (at least in the Constitution) and refused to accept the authority of Westminster enforcing Partition against the democratic will of the vast majority of Irish people. Time was, indeed, when they could claim that their goal was the reunification of Ireland. Well, that was before the shooting war broke out and Westminster started to apply pressure on Dublin.

The 26-county political establishment grew concerned; they feared for their own power-base, being rocked from the North, and so they felt that they had to reject the very traditions out of which the 26-county state was born. They are conservatives who wish to preserve the *de facto* status quo between the 26-county state and Westminster. Notice I say *de facto*, what is in actual fact; for the 26-county state has never been governed according to its constitution as a truly sovereign republic. Until Ireland went into Europe you would have been hard pressed to find Europeans who realised that Ireland, in some part least, was theoretically independent of Britain. If a minister in Westminster sneezed, a minister in the Dáil would obligingly blow their nose. At no time prior to 1969 did any Dublin government protest before international bodies at the lack of civil rights and the abuses of a corrupt system in the North. They were happy in their cosy home-rule statelet. Happy until 1969... the start of the current phrase of the struggle in the North. Then they began to worry and to consider ways as to how the reality of the relationship between Dublin and Westminster could be protected.

Their self-professed tradition, the claim to be the inheritors of the independence struggle in Ireland, placed them in an awkward position. The sham was clearly revealed. They therefore had to make some changes... and rather than change their position they simply went about changing their inheritance.

Looking at some of the work being done today, I am reminded of George Orwell's 1984. You will recall Orwell's protagonist, Winston Graham, works in the Record Department of the Ministry of Truth. His job is to correct the newspapers and books and bring the accounts in line with the new political thinking and values. A hero or heroine of yesterday can become the villain of today. So the 26-county political establishment set up their own Ministry of Truth.

In 1972 two books paved the way for the new "revisionism". One was Garrett Fitzgerald's *Towards a New Ireland* and the other was Conor Cruise O'Brien's *States of Ireland*. Both books sought to negate the nationalist tradition in

¹ The following text was given as the 1989 C. Desmond Greaves Memorial Lecture, under the auspices of the Connolly Association, at the Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, on Tuesday, October 31, 1989.

Irish history, to attempt a sort of peace with English imperialism by maintaining that the real Irish independence tradition was the O'Connellite 'home-rule' philosophies. The lesson they attempted to hammer home was that separation from England was never a popular concept in Irish historical development, that the republican tradition was a minority view which made no significant impact on Irish political philosophy. The theme developed in both books was that all the Irish people ever wanted was a greater say in their domestic affairs within English colonial structures. Above all, these books developed the Unionist concept of 'two nations' existing in Ireland - a Catholic nation, which was Gaelic and nationalist, and a Protestant nation, which was English-speaking and Unionist. Both nations were recognised as having a valid claim to the label 'Irish'.

For Garrett Fitzgerald this reasoning must have taken a considerable amount of what Orwell would have called 'double-think' as his father had fought in the 1916 Rising, became a Sinn Féin MP in the 1918 General Election, while his mother was Mabel McConnell, an Ulster Protestant who was both a republican and an Irish language enthusiast. It has been said, with some justification, that Fitzgerald was 'spitting on his mother's grave'.

In endorsing the Unionist theory that Protestants in the North constituted a separate 'Ulster nation', Fitzgerald and O'Brien become partially responsible for paving the way for the 'Cruthin theory'. In 1974 Dr Ian Adamson, from Queen's University, Belfast, published a book entitled *The Cruthin* in which Ulster Protestants were given a new nationality.

We have seen that Ulster Protestant Unionists (to give them a full and clear definition) did not accept themselves as being Irish; they were also uncomfortable with the label 'British' since the term was synonymous with English; nor could they really justify the term 'Ulster' as three Ulster counties were outside the jurisdiction of the Six Counties regime. Dr Adamson came up with a new concept for them, a new nationality - the Cruthin or, as they are more popularly known, the Picts.

According to Dr Adamson, the Cruthin were the original inhabitants of Ireland, arriving long before the Gaels. Then the Gaels came and drove the Cruthin to Scotland but, during the 17th Century Plantations of Ulster, the Cruthin returned to take their rightful place in the Irish scheme of things. This, at one stroke, gave the Unionists a new justification for being in Ireland. They were the original inhabitants and not merely the descendants of the colonial settlements. It is rather like the philosophy of Zionism. They were no longer newcomers settling on the lands of the dispossessed natives but a 'chosen people' who had returned to their 'Promised Land'. Dr Adamson even tries to shore up his theory by examples of blood groupings to show that the Irish are composed of two nations - the nationalist Catholics (the Gaels) and the Ulster Protestants (the Cruthin).

Of course, Dr Adamson has done a tremendous amount of "revisionism" with what is known about the Picts, even to the point of simply ignoring it. The Cruthin is the Goidelic Celtic form of Preteni, which is a Brythonic Celtic name. The Preteni, known to the Romans as Picti, or 'the

painted people', were an offshoot of the Continental Celts who arrived in northern Scotland some centuries BC, according to Professor Kenneth Jackson, one of the leading Celtic scholars of this Century. There are no texts in the 'Pictish language' but some scanty recordings of personal names and place-names show them to be [according to Professor Jackson] "unquestionably Celtic, and moreover what is called P-Celtic, that is, sprung from the Continental Celtic milieu from which the Britons also came and not from the Q-Celtic, which was the source of Irish and Scottish Gaelic". Now this immediately sends Dr Adamson's theory slightly awry because, according to accepted Celtic scholarship, Q-Celtic (Goidelic) is the more archaic form of Celtic and speakers of this form were the first to reach these islands many centuries before the speakers of the P-Celtic (Brythonic) form. Moreover, in contradiction to Adamson's 'race theory', both his Cruthin and the Gaels shared a common Celtic inheritance.

We might find such arguments very amusing, and very nonsensical, but Adamson's book has had an affect on some prominent sections of Unionist thought. More insidiously, Dr Roy Foster, the doyen of the anti-nationalist historians, in a recent lecture in Coleraine, singled out Adamson's work as being worthy of serious historical evaluation. In my opinion, not since Houston Stewart Chamberlain wrote his notorious *Die Grundlagen des Neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Foundations of the 19th Century), 1899, which was a view of European history and race ideology which became the basis of Nazi political philosophy in the Third Reich, has there been such a distorted racist mish-mash.

The philosophies of Fitzgerald and O'Brien were joyously taken up by certain 'academics'. One influential work was Leland Lyons' *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland 1890-1939* which started life as a series of lectures delivered at Oxford in 1978. Lyons depicted the current struggle, and I quote, as 'the battle of two civilisations'. One, he depicted, as being 'Anglo-Irish, pluralist, essentially non-sectarian, which is progressive and liberal' and the other was described as 'the heady resurgence of Gaelic separatist values'. There now came a veritable dawn-chorus of historians such as Professor Henry Patterson, Ronan Fanning, Roy Foster and others, emerging mainly from University College, Dublin, and all, lemming-like, rushing to stake their claims as leaders of the new school of historians.

In their hands, Irish history is now being brought into a compatibility with historical perceptions long preached by Unionist historians. Benjamin Franklin was right when he observed that historians relate not so much what is done as what they would have believed.

The current cause for concern is not that this anti-nationalist school of historians exists but the attempt to fool the

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public that they have been given a divine gift of historical interpretation, that they are producing neutral and unbiased histories, that they are somehow rising to the moral 'high-ground' above factions, above nationalists and Unionists. They use 'academic objectivity' as a watchword, a totem to disguise their partisanship.

And even more worrying is the role of the 26-county government in doing all in its power to promote the works of this school. Recently we have seen Roy Foster having his book *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* short-listed for the Irish Literary Award by the *Irish Times*, the first time a work of history has ever been short-listed. And we have also seen the Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, taking the very unusual step of personally launching another such book and using the offices of the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin. This was Dr Marianne Elliott's *Wolfe Tone, Prophet of Irish Independence*, in which Tone and the United Irishmen, founders of the Irish republican tradition, are dismissed as nothing more than dilettantes and poseurs.

In a brilliant review of this book, Dr Anthony Coughlan, of Trinity College, Dublin, comments: 'Sadiy this book, despite its impressive academic scholarship and the interesting new material it contains, is a fundamentally hostile interpretation of Tone. This stems from the fact that the author evidently has little sympathy with the ideal of an All Ireland Republic which Tone and his fellow Protestants

came to adopt in the 1790s, and which of course remains unattained. It is perhaps hard to write a sympathetic biography of a political figure if one does not to some extent share his views'. [*Irish Democrat*, December, 1989].

Dr Coughlan sums up Dr Elliott's method when he writes:

'She reveals her own political attitude when she writes of "Tone's tendency to raise Irish independence

from a domestic squabble to a key role in a new international order" (p.347). A 'domestic squabble' implied that the matter has little to do with English government policy. The cumulative effect of her pejorative and patronising characterisations of her subject shows how out of sympathy she is with his political purposes. The denigratory adjective tends to be chosen when the kinder one might just as validly for the circumstances. Thus Tone was 'a negligent husband and father', his republicanism was 'an accident of nature', he was 'converted by his own arguments', he was 'a young Whig careerist', 'no great initiator of ideas', 'prickly self-righteous', 'no democrat', 'temporarily unhinged in his mind', with 'an inflated sense of honour', 'not an original thinker'. She speaks of 'the characteristic Tone device of telling an audience what it wanted to hear'. 'Tone's thought processes were simplistic'. The oddness of her view of subsequent republicanism is conveyed in a comment she makes about Tone in France. 'This father of Irish republicanism could still long for a time

when he might see Sheridan's *School for Scandal* on an English stage.'

Before I deal with some detail of the differences between the nationalist, or traditional school of Irish history, and the new revisionism, I think I should make some general remarks about attitudes to history. I implied at the beginning of my talk that all historical writing was biased. You may have heard statements to the contrary, especially from the works now emanating from the anti-nationalist historian. Bias is only something in the history books with which they are disagreeing... not something in their own works. Well, such statements are nonsensical. Bias is inevitable. An honest historian would begin by stating their philosophical attitudes or making those attitudes known.

History is not simply about the enumeration of facts. It is about the moral interpretation of those facts. Indeed, the very form in which the historian relates the facts conveys judgment and prejudice.

For example, let me take what, on the surface, is a simple statement of fact.

The bottle is half-empty.

It is a quantifiable fact which surely cannot be argued. Yet if the same fact is put another way - The bottle is half-full - it provides us with an entirely different concept or interpretation of that very same fact from an entirely different angle.

History, more than most disciplines, is one in which the historian is thought to sit in splendid isolation as a judge, viewing the events which are paraded before them. The historian, so it is expected, will view the events objectively and dispassionately. But the historian is just as caught up, involved and biased, as any of the historical actors who parade before them. Consciously or sub-consciously, they will contribute to those historical characters something of themselves, giving their own values, judgments and reactions. Very few historians can empathise totally and fully understand what motivates the historical characters.

Often a history book will tell you more about the historian than it does about the historical facts. Historical narratives are full of the personal judgments of the historian.

As those here tonight would obviously adhere to the historical philosophies of James Connolly, who was one of the most brilliant interpreters of 'historical materialism', I will use this viewpoint as a means of explaining differences in historical approach. Connolly said that the use of Karl Marx's theory of 'historical materialism' provided 'the most reasonable explanation of history'.

This theory teaches that the ideas of human beings are derived from their material surroundings, and that the forces which make for historical changes and human progress have their roots in the development of the tools men and women use in their struggle for existence. We are using the word 'tools' in its broadest sense to include all the social forces of wealth-production. It teaches that since the break-up of common ownership and the tribal community, all human history has turned around the struggle of contending classes in society - one class striving to retain possession, first of the persons of the other class to hold them as chattel-slaves; and then to retain the possession of the tools of the other class, to hold them as wage-slaves. It teaches that all the politics of the world resolve themselves

'Dr Marianne Elliott dismisses Tone and the United Irishmen as nothing more than dilettantes and poseurs'

in the last analysis into a struggle for the possession of that portion of the fruits of labour which labour creates but does not enjoy... rent, interest and profit.

Therefore, Marx's theory gives an order and logic to historical interpretation. To sum up: - the key to this is that in very historical epoch the prevailing method of economic production and exchange, and the social organisation necessarily following from it, forms the basis upon which alone can be explained the political and intellectual history of the epoch. Now Marx's theory was simply a tool of interpretation, and that tool was no better nor worse than the individual who used it.

To illustrate just how Marxist history would differ from others, let me give you an example in the interpretation of the abolition of slavery.

The popular, non-Marxist view is that slavery was abolished because western society progressed to more humane attitudes and ideals. As we know, it was not until 1791 that Britain abolished her slave trade; not until 1807 that British ships were forbidden to transport slaves to other countries and, finally, not until 1833 that slavery was abolished in Britain as a legal institution. Now did the Establishment in this country suddenly become more humane and liberal in their outlook during the period 1791-1833. We know it was a period of tremendous reaction, of the suspension of Habeas Corpus, of press censorship and lack of civil liberties. And one of the oft propounded ideas is that Christian ethics changed the moral climate... well, that is demonstrably false. The Christian Church, in all its sects, lived quite comfortably with slavery for eighteen hundred years and often defended it as a Christian institution.

The Marxist historian would argue that slavery was, in fact, abolished because it was realised that it was cheaper for the owners to hire men and women, discharging them when the job was done, than it was to buy men and women and be compelled to feed them all the time, working or idle, sick or well. During the 17th Century many slave owners came to that realisation. That was why Irish indentured servants, forcibly transported from Ireland to the colonies and provided free by the English government to plantation owners, were ill-used, starved and worked to death. The owners had no financial responsibility for them. They could be replaced without charge. But slaves - well, slaves had to be bought and, as a financial investment, had to be treated in far better conditions than the indentured servants. To sum it up, slavery became immoral and was banned because slaves were more costlier than wage-labour.

Now it is not my intention to discuss various philosophical views through which one may approach the understanding of history - simply to state that they exist. From the outset one should understand what motivates the individual historian rather than be misled by the nonsensical claims of 'academic objectivity'. Let's be entirely cynical about the subject and echo Paul Valery in *De l'histoire*: 'History justifies whatever we want it to.'

So, ignoring all the pseudo-academic justifications and cant with which our so-called 'revisionist' friends have bombarded us with in recent years, let us look at the viewpoints of the 'nationalist' and 'anti-nationalist' schools of history. I have already said that history was not

simply about the enumeration of facts - it is about the moral interpretation of those facts.

Let us, therefore, deal with the 'nationalist' historian. And perhaps in view of many people's problem with understanding the word 'nationalist' I should begin with an interpretation of that word. To English ears, and perhaps because of their imperialist traditions, nationalism conjures up ideas of Chauvinism and jingoism. But, in the context used in Ireland, it simply means a policy of securing national rights, the claim of Ireland to be an independent nation. It is the advocacy of the freedom of national communities from the political, economic, social and cultural exploitation of other nations. It is a moral stance and one, in my opinion, which goes hand in hand with a socialist view of history - for national and social freedoms are not two separate and unrelated issues. They are two sides of one great democratic principle, each being incomplete without the other. How can one have 'social freedom' in a state wherein a majority nation keeps a minority nation from exercising its right to decide its own affairs? Such a situation is neither democracy nor socialism.

The 'nationalist' historian, therefore, starts from basic moral premise - the premise that no nation has any defensible right to invade, conquer and seek to destroy the political, economic, social or cultural fabric or another country. Having assumed this view, that imperialism is wrong in all its forms, the historian can commence to interpret Irish history. That history then ceases to be a welter of unrelated facts, a hopeless chaos of sporadic outbreaks of violence, intrigues, massacres, treacheries, murders and purposeless warfare. With this moral historical key, all things become understandable and traceable to their primary origin - the attempt by an alien nation to conquer and dominate Ireland.

Then what of the anti-nationalist, our so-called 'revisionist' historian? Their standpoint is not so simple, for they have to perform several gymnastics to support what is, in my opinion at least, a morally indefensible position. Let me give you a few examples.

The most flagrant position is the acceptance, overt or implied, that England's invasion and conquest of Ireland is not a matter for moral judgment. The argument being that *force majeure* was merely the politics of the Middle Ages and everyone was indulging in it. The argument goes further; it is claimed that an Irish national consciousness did not exist, that Ireland was simply a land of divided warring factions and the arrival of one more such faction is not a matter of importance nor of moral speculation.

Without wasting much time in rebutting such an argument in detail, we can perhaps point to Donal O'Neill's famous remonstrance to Pope John XXII in 1317 AD which makes it quite clear that the Irish had a concept of a united

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nation fighting for the restoration of *national* rights, political, social, cultural and economic, from the interference of an imperial power. The text of the Remonstrance is found in Fordun's *Scotichronicon* (ed. Hearne) III, p. 908-26. It is excellently summed up by Edmund Curtis in *A History of Medieval Ireland*, Methuen, London, 1923, p.191-194.

The fallacious theory that an Irish national consciousness

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only evolved at a very late stage in Irish historical development [usually asserted as the late 18th Century, presumably to account for the 1798 uprising], is one of the most popular arguments of the 'anti-nationalist' school.

We have another standpoint: the view that English colonial rule in Ireland was beneficial to the Irish people and this is usually argued as a corollary to the historian pretending to take a moral 'high-ground', denouncing all factions as backward and war-mongering before coming to the 'conclusion' that, on the whole England had a lot to offer Ireland and that it was simply a matter of regret that she was just a

wee bit too brutal, at times, in imparting her civilising affects on the Irish.

Perhaps the most favourite stance taken by the 'anti-nationalists' is the plea to accept the current status quo as some sort of *fait accompli*. It is very much like the current English government and, indeed, the official view of the Opposition, talking about the will of the majority in Northern Ireland as some form of democratic totem. By so doing they totally ignore the undemocratic and bloody history of the birth of the Six Counties, how they were forcibly Partitioned in 1921 against the democratic will of the Irish people and were set up as an arbitrary and artificial unit. Democracy has no currency in the Six Counties. The same historians will also argue that the Unionists will never accepted a reunited nation so it is better to give in to their minority position while ignoring the fact that the people who comprise the bulk of Unionists, the Ulster Presbyterians, were the inspiration and mainspring of Irish republicanism during the 1798 uprising and many continued to play not insignificant roles in subsequent struggles for independence. Ulster Presbyterians were subsequently subverted by English propaganda in one of the most successful divide and rule campaigns ever devised. One of the great lessons of history in this respect is how easy it is to change people's political attitudes. So what was changed once may well be changed again.

These, then, are just some of the viewpoints used by the 'anti-nationalist' historians.

I'll sum up the two main tenets of their approach.

Firstly: that the history must prepare the way for an

acceptance of a justification for the status quo in Ireland today, particularly in regard to the Six Counties. The Six Counties of North-East Ulster are depicted as a democratically formed unit in which the political majority is represented by the Unionists. Partition, imposed by bloodshed and violence, and threats of bloodshed and violence by Britain against the democratic wish of the Irish nation, is not considered in such histories. Partition is merely accepted and made morally binding on the people.

Secondly: to justify Partition, a two-nation theory is proposed in that it is argued there exists a Catholic-Gaelic nation, nationalist in politics, and a Protestant English-speaking nation, Unionist in politics. The cultural separation of the two main religious communities in Ireland is a key part of the 'anti-nationalist' approach. Not for them Wolf Tone's laudable ambition to unite Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter under the common name of Irishmen and Irishwomen.

Dr Roy Foster, at his recent lecture in Coleraine, tried [and I'll grant with some eloquence] to justify the 'anti-nationalist' school with the claim that it was simply presenting a new 'objective' way of considering Irish history. He dismissed what he called 'the over-used concept of historiographical revisionism' and he went on to tell his audience: 'In the last generation, path-breaking work has delineated a political map far less neatly demarcated than the landlord versus the tenant, the orange versus the green, patterns of the old textbooks (now adhered to only by wishful-thinking English and American observers)'.

I presume that this puts me in my proper academic place!

Foster claims that historians of his ilk want to indulge in 'the study of mentalities - not only those of the separatist nationalists...but the mind of the Castle Catholic also, and *a fortiori*, that of Protestant... The way people saw themselves as Irish deserves attention, rather than awarding or denying Irishness like a mark of good conduct'.

Well, one cannot disagree that it is as valid, and as essential, to deal with the mind of the Castle Catholic as with any other section of the Irish community... but what is being argued here is whether the Castle Catholic, supporting and acting as the middleman for English colonial rule, represented the spirit of the Irish nation and were a group to be approved of rather than to be shown as a group who betrayed their compatriots to the exploitation of a foreign colonial power.

A fascinating feature of Dr Elliott's biography of Wolfe Tone is her *apologia* for Dublin Castle. She is reluctant to criticise the actions of Dublin Castle and its London masters and takes refuge in sociological abstractions.

In another context, one can certainly understand a French historian wanting to examine the mind of Marshal Petain, or consider the Vichy regime of 1940-44. But it would be a matter of some astonishment if the historian depicted Vichy as a regime to be approved of and being representative of the true French democratic tradition and - even further - to see the current French government applauding such work and claiming their political antecedents from the Vichy regime. To take an even more extreme view... what would be our reaction if a Jewish Dr Foster emerged and, in the name of 'academic objectivity', began to argue the Nazi side of the Holocaust?

Let us clear up this business of 'academic objectivity' which, as I have said, is waved as the totem of the 'anti-nationalist' school and which Foster claims he uses. His texts are full of emotive juxtapositions that hardly support 'objectivity' in any form. A favourite phrase he uses is 'knee-jerk Fenianism' - meaning republicans had, and have, no political philosophy but reaction; then we have 'pious nationalism', 'exclusive nationalism' and 'Gaelic Catholic nationalism'. And take this little sentence from Foster: 'Fenianism and Anglophobia have given way to more mature politics'. The implications of these sort of phrases are obvious.

Dr Elliott's language is equally emotive and her biography is hardly a testimony to any form of balance - academic or otherwise.

I would like to end by giving a direct example of what 'anti-nationalist' history is really about. Seventy years ago, Dáil Éireann was established in Dublin. How do the 'anti-nationalists' view such an event? I'll quote one view: 'Throughout 1919 it [the Dáil that is] did its best to cripple the legitimate government of Ireland, which was direct rule from Westminster through Dublin Castle. Rival courts and local government bodies were set up and the ordinary machinery [of government] boycotted'. Think about what one is being asked to believe in these sentences. The Dáil miraculously appeared from nowhere and did its best to cripple the legitimate government of Ireland.

The fact that Sinn Féin had just won, in overwhelming terms, the 1918 General Election in Ireland, and on a clear mandate for its MPs to withdraw, if they held the majority of seats, and establish a separate parliament - the Dáil - in Dublin, is not even considered. The Dáil had been set up by the democratically expressed will of the Irish people and therefore was it not the legitimate government of Ireland? What makes a government legitimate if not by democratic will? Yet the 'anti-nationalist' would appear to have us believe that legitimacy can only be conferred by a foreign occupying power who held control only by force of arms.

Let us examine this 1918 General Election. At the dissolution of Parliament in 1918, the Irish Party held 68 seats; there were 10 Independent Nationalists and 7 seats were held by Sinn Féin. Unionists held 18 seats.

In the General Election Sinn Féin won 73 seats out of the 105 total. The Irish Party were reduced to 6 seats while the Unionists managed an increase to 26 seats. This increase was explained by the fact that several Unionists were able to claim seats on a split vote between Sinn Féin and the Irish Party.

The 1918 election result was a landslide for Sinn Féin in anyone's vocabulary ... anyone, that is, except the 'anti-nationalist' historians. These historians are now denigrating the significance of that election result. Their arguments are fascinating. Let me quote:

'Sinn Féin was not at all particular in its methods. Intimidation of rival candidates and voters was rife'. And again: 'Although it had much genuine support, Sinn Féin depended a great deal upon intimidation for its success'.

If, as the 'anti-nationalists' claim, Sinn Féin obtained such a result by intimidating the Irish electorate, then the party's power and organisation would have been unparalleled in

history ... it would make the Nazi Party and their electoral gains in 1930 and 1932 look like the work of a pack of bungling amateurs.

But adopting this view, the 'anti-nationalist' can even absolve the British government from any moral dilemma when it ignored the democratic will of the Irish nation, attempted to arrest all Sinn Féin elected representatives and poured troops into the country in an attempt to coerce the Irish people into withdrawing the moral authority which they have given to the Dáil.

In one recent work I find another astonishing view of the 1918 General Election: 'It was not clear what the Irish had voted for in this election. In contested constituencies in Ireland only 69 per cent of the electors had voted; and of these only 47 per cent had voted Sinn Féin. Independence, then, was the wish only of a minority of Irishmen'.

Needless to say, our 'academically objective' historian, failed to add to this figure the percentages accruing from the 26 constituencies where Sinn Féin MPs were elected without opposition which would have added substantially to that 47 per cent total. But if one even took 47 per cent at its face value, accepting this myopic equation, then surely the 'anti-nationalists' are walking on some thin ice? Very few western democratic governments have come to power with more than 47 per cent of the votes in an election. The logical conclusion of their argument in claiming that Sinn Féin was not representative of the will of the Irish people would be to claim that Margaret Thatcher's government has no legal validity because she has pursued her autocratic regime in this country with only an endorsement of 42 per cent of the electorate.

As with most of their arguments, the 'academically objective' historians have been extremely selective

with election figures to support their claims. And talking of the 1918 period we find subsequent election figures are glossed over because they do not endorse the point they are making.

I refer to the January, 1920, municipal elections in which Sinn Féin won 72 town and city councils, with a coalition of Sinn Féin and the Irish Party taking a further 26 town and city councils - making 98 out of 127 town and city councils controlled by republicans.

And glossed over are the June, 1920, elections for the county and rural district councils and the boards of guardians. Sinn Féin won 28 out of the 32 county councils; they won 186 out of the 206 rural district councils; and they won 138 out of the 154 boards of guardians. And this during a time when the English military were controlling Ireland with an iron fist, when the excesses of the 'Black and Tans' and the Auxiliaries were causing public opinion throughout the world to denounce England's role.

'If Sinn Féin had depended on intimidation for the 1918 landslide, the party's power would have been unparalleled in history'

If one is bandying about election figures to prove a point, perhaps we should also remind ourselves of the May, 1921, General Election, following the enforcement of Partition and the partition parliaments. In this election Westminster introduced proportional representation into Ireland, not because the Westminster government believed in it as a better system of voting [indeed, even today Westminster is wary about proportional representation]. PR was introduced into Ireland in a desperate attempt by Westminster to decrease the support given to Sinn Féin. So if one takes that 1921 result as an all-Ireland total we find that Sinn Féin had won 130 seats out of 180, the Irish Party had won 6 seats and the Unionists had won 44 seats.

But our 'anti-nationalist' historian can calmly remark: 'it

was not clear what the Irish had voted for'.

[During questions, after delivering this paper, I half-jokingly suggested that among future 'revisionist' works we might find that the 'Great Hunger' (1845-9) was self-induced by the Irish and that English absentee landlords and the government did not contribute at all to what was, when all is said and done, an artificially-induced famine. Well,

'The work of these "anti-nationalist" historians is the historiography of the Irish counter revolution'

the revisionists are an industrious crew. Recently published is Cormac O Grada's *The Great Irish Famine* (Gill & Macmillan). He says he is merely presenting an overview of the historiography and urges a fresh appraisal for, he says, no one was to blame for the 'famine'. The Irish, he argues, were simply 'unlucky'! Yes, the loss of two-and-a-half million population (by death and migration) was merely a question of luck.

Curiously, he argues that had the famine occurred 20 years earlier, people would have been less dependent on potatoes and the government less hidebound by economic dogma. And 40 years later, the population would have been smaller (yes, 2.5 million smaller!) and the philosophy of the government towards poor relief different. Also, he suggests, an antidote to the blight would have been available. What peculiar arguments for an historian to make. The point is about as irrelevant as arguing that had Hitler been assassinated in 1938 then there would have been no war in 1939. It is an interesting speculation but not pertinent.

Christine Kinealy, writing in *Fortnight*, April 1990, sings a paean of praise over O Grada's book, dismissing Cecil Woodham-Smith's classic *The Great Hunger* (1962), which stands as the major work on the period, a product of nine years research by the Oxford-trained historian, as 'populist and simplistic to academics'. 'Revisionists' all seem to suffer academic snobbery. We are back to 'academic objectivity'; only 'academics' possess this and, for 'revisionist' purposes, only those who work in the history departments of universities can be deemed 'serious historians'.

The new work, delights Christine Kinealy, will go some way to correcting 'the prevalence of myths and misunder-

standings - stories of ships full of grain leaving Ireland, of overcrowded famine graveyards, of callous landlords'. In fact, all these 'myths and misunderstandings' are well-documented facts. I have had the moving experience of visiting an overcrowded famine graveyard where it has been estimated up to 100,000 Irishmen, women and children lay in mass graves. That experience was no myth or misunderstanding. I would suggest a reading of 'Grosse-Ile: The Holocaust Revisited' by Pádraic O Laighin (*The Irish in Canada*, edited by Robert O'Driscoll & Lorna Reynolds, Vol I, Celtic Arts of Canada, 1988) for an extremely well-documented essay of facts in this regard.

Christine Kinealy is not so subtle as others of the school she follows because, in her view of O Grada's work, she lets the 'revisionist' cat out of the bag. She writes: "Yet the famine has been the subject of little serious research - perhaps because it can be used by nationalists to fit their view of history and most serious historians would not wish to contribute to this interpretation" (my italics). I can hardly believe she admits their purpose so flagrantly or proudly. So 'serious historians' (only 'revisionists' apparently fit this title) will not tackle those areas of Irish history which might be seen as contributing to nationalist interpretation? My, oh my! That's 700 years of Irish history which should be ignored for a start.]

I agree with Desmond Fennell when he recently remarked that the work of these 'anti-nationalist' historians was 'the historiography of the Irish counter-revolution'.

To sum up: G.K. Chesterton once marked: 'The disadvantage of men not knowing the past is that they do not know the present. History is a hill or high point of vantage, from which alone men see the town in which they live or the age in which they are living'. But to see the town or the age clearly, people need a perspective, a means of interpretation. Unless they know the fallibility or the bias of the tool they are viewing through - the historical interpreter or historian - then great damage will be done. We must beware of our 'academically objective' colleagues. We must make ourselves aware of the new 'anti-nationalist' school and challenge their assumptions and interpretations at every opportunity.

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