INTRODUCTION

History or Politics?

The decade that is now upon us – 2012 to 2022 – is a historically significant one for Ireland. It ushers in a host of centenaries: the Home Rule bill of 1912, the foundation of civilian armies in 1913, the experience of World War I, the 1916 Rising, the spiritual birth, as it were, of the republic, the meeting of the Irish Dáil for the first time in 1919, the Government of Ireland Act in 1920, the Anglo–Irish Treaty in 1921 and the outbreak of the Civil War in 1922. Two centuries ago, such possibilities were unimagined. It is thus a particularly good time to take stock. Perhaps the most outstanding feature of the period 1800–1922 is what could well be called its outright sensationalism. The magnitude of the Great Famine alone and the exodus of millions in subsequent decades would be enough in itself to substantiate such a claim. Furthermore, there was an endemic level of violence in society which ran the gamut from spontaneous rural outburst to organised insurrection.[1] Not only did large dramas play themselves out in small places but international crises also bore down at key moments and complicated matters – in the 1790s when Britain feared that revolutionary France would use Ireland as a base from which to launch an attack on the mainland, for example, and much later in World War I when British intelligence monitored Irish radicals who were flirting with the Germans in the hope of building some sort of anti-British alliance.

The sensationalism of Irish history and Anglo–Irish relations comes with its own forcefulness. It is not the kind of history about which it is easy to be dispassionate. Zealousness has often been the norm in Irish and Anglo–Irish relations and this has often coloured both history and historians. Even if partisanship is kept at bay, one has at least to be sensitive to the high emotions attending all political and social issues. There are great hatreds and little intellectual room in which to manoeuvre. Alvin Jackson wryly observes that

the divided communities of north and south are both alike in their consistent 'abuse of the past'.[2] The history of the period is also of some dramatic interest for the simple reason that it is not yet merely history, neatly archived. It is still, at root, political. 'The Irish have no history, only politics' runs the old cliché and it is true that history is nearer to the surface in public life than in some other countries. The question of Union with which this book begins is still with us albeit in a different form. Conflicts in Northern Ireland run close beneath the surface and sometimes not beneath the surface at all. In 2010, MI5 heightened the security alert surrounding dissident Irish Republican Army (IRA) groups to 'substantial'. This very sensationalism and the live political nature of some of the issues bring particular challenges for the historian.

Historiographical Strands

Four main strands in the historiography may be distinguished, in broad terms. Winston Churchill, as a cabinet minister in Lloyd George's ministry, said that 'nothing would annoy the Irish more than the conviction that they were not absorbing the minds of the people of Great Britain' and, traditionally, the attitude of British historians has been something along those lines. They have insisted that Irish affairs did not loom large in the British political mind, that its affairs were simply not absorbing over long periods and that there was much resort to crisis management. Examples of this sort of view are too found in the work of A. B. Cooke, John Vincent and Patricia Jalland.[3] Among the many useful aspects of their work is the insistence that the Irish Question was always enmeshed in larger contexts, not least the party political and the imperial. This is a useful corrective to the view that Irish history can be read 'on its own'. Not all British historians adopt a minimalist view of the subject, however; notable examples are the very fine studies of Charles Townshend and David Miller.[4]

Irish nationalist historiography, prominent in the first few decades after the achievement of a free state, sought to depict Irish history as a linear story from oppression and political slavery to freedom and independence. This is the history of the Irish *sonderweg* or special path and in it, events have already been assigned a meaning. Dorothy MacArdle and P. S. O'Hegarty were notable practitioners.[5] One of their central theses will be gleaned from the latter's description of the 'real Irish People' (i.e. Gaels and Catholics) who through 'indomitable tenacity' preserved a memory of their nation down through centuries of persecution.[6] The purpose of such history was pedagogic, celebratory, commemorative and explanatory. In a sense this was always more public than academic history, with a rhetorical emphasis on the 'Spirit of Ireland', and the narrative was predictably grandiose and politicised.

Its history had clearly defined heroes and villains as well as moments of regression and progression. Much was omitted that did not quite fit into the tight straitjacket of the nationalist canon. Social, economic and cultural histories were made subservient to the main political narrative.

Launched by R. Dudley Edwards and T. W. Moody, the editors of *Irish Historical Studies*, revisionists began to chip away at this story from the 1930s on, but it was really from the 1960s onwards that the full onslaught came.[7] These 'new' historians eschewed the political assumptions and commitments of an earlier generation and sought to inject a great deal of scepticism into traditional accounts, which they saw as overly simplistic or downright false. Their preferred conceptualisation of their role has been one of 'de-mythicisation'. In the words of F. S. L. Lyons, they wished to deliver scholarship (and indeed the sadly misinformed public) 'from the false history that has for too long masqueraded as the real thing'.[8] One of their main claims is that there is no genuine evidence for a unitary nationalist story. They decry the fact that the past has been 'continually and ritually sacrificed to a caricature of the present'.[9] They have claimed that the nationalist account is often no more than a moral fable. Some have offered an apologia for the British government of Ireland. Many have also sought to open up the closed domains of social, economic and cultural history which tended to be downplayed previously and made subordinate to the overarching republican narrative. Historians like Lyons, himself, Ronan Fanning and Michael Laffan are all prominent in this regard. A classic presentation of the revisionist case is made by Roy Foster in his *Modern Ireland 1600–1972*.[10]

A post-revisionist case has also been made of more recent years with implications in multiple fields of research. As passions ebb, the very self-confident iconoclasm of the revisionists becomes suspect. Their new orthodoxies need shading, modification and even rebuttal. In a post-modern intellectual environment, it is remarkably easy to take issue with the inflated claims to produce a value-free history and to argue that the vaunted neutrality cannot be absolute. The attempt to do so looks naive to a later generation of historians. On a populist level, Desmond Fennell has made the criticism that revisionism is not a history which sustains and energises a nation but rather undercuts it.[11] But that criticism is a rather weak one, at least as far as professional historians are concerned. With more justice, Brendan Bradshaw, the most distinguished of the post-revisionists, claims that revisionists have been too dismissive of the genuinely 'catastrophic' dimension of Irish history, of the lived experience of oppression and hardship which did so much to define a collective sense of self.[12] Ciaran Brady sums this up with '[t]he fashionably sardonic tone, the narrow, calculating mode of argument and the cynical mode of assessment which the university history

schools had encouraged, had served to desensitise modern historical writing to the sufferings and injustices of Ireland's past'.[13] In conjunction with more general sociological and intellectual analyses, much more work has now been done on the politics of (official) violence and the systemic flaws of various policy choices which exacerbated Irish problems.[14] So the battle rages on, inside and outside the academy, as seems very fitting for a country whose past has been defined so very obviously by conflict.[15]

Setting the Scene

A study of the inhabitants of Ireland in the 1700s gives us an idea about how conflict was inherent in social, political and cultural relations. At the apex of the sociopolitical pyramid were the Ascendancy, a name given to elite Irish Protestants in 1782. English settlers had been given large shares of land at the time of the Protestant Reformation and thereafter; their shares became larger and more permanent after legislation in 1689 heavily penalised Catholics. In its eighteenth-century heyday, this small elite (15 per cent of the population) dominated land, politics and society. Although there was much variation within Protestant society, as T. C. Barnard has shown in detail,[16] there were certain common threads. Their strongholds were in the Pale region of Ireland, that is to say, around Leinster. Their cultural weight was felt through publications, education and the professions. Their dominance was expressed in stone – the 1700s witnessed an extraordinary building programme, Georgian in style, in Dublin and Limerick. The English architect, James Gandon, came over at the behest of the *ton* and built the Custom House, Four Courts and King's Inns – reflections of their sense of their country's civic stature and their own privileges within it. The Ascendancy clearly saw themselves and their capital city very much in the grand style. It was a Protestant century. Yet, for all those pretensions to greatness, they were in an ambiguous and vulnerable position. What were they but a small, unrepresentative elite, dependent on Britain despite all their fierce protestations of liberty?

But such feelings did not draw them closer to the native Irish. Their patriotism did not, in most instances, take an inclusive turn – 'we Irish', as George Berkeley, the celebrated Anglo-Irish philosopher designated his kind, were content to exclude the Catholic masses, content with their elegant monopolies of politics, law and society. It was thus a deeply problematic identity partly because they knew their position was one of 'conscious but resented dependence' on Britain, as Foster says, and partly also because their claims to speak on behalf of the whole country were so seriously undermined by the realities.[17]

Numerically, the largest (75 per cent) and proportionately the most underprivileged group in Ireland were the Catholics.[18] Suffering under a range of legal disabilities (which affected everything from horse ownership to bearing arms and education), their position in Europe was quite unique. They were a religious majority suffering as if they were a minority. Enlightenment thinkers, in general so much in favour of oppressed groups, ignored their plight – most famously, Voltaire. Considered in popular stereotypes to be poor, feckless, ignorant and superstitious, Catholics were not exactly a chic *cause célèbre* of the day and, despite gradual emancipatory measures, prejudice against them remained strong. The conditions of life for Catholic peasantry were often extremely basic, especially in the west of the country where the majority lived in little more than mud cabins. Yet, the monolithic picture of poor, persecuted Catholics has been shown to be exaggerated.[19] A certain strand within the community was growing increasingly assertive and gaining in wealth and social status. A residual Catholic gentry had remained even after Cromwellian times and it was now joined by a growing middle class, educated, publishing and increasingly involved in trade and business. They were able to resist the worst effects of the penal laws and from the 1750s onwards they began to organise themselves and lobby for reform. It is true that only one-third of Dublin merchants were Catholic in the 1780s but this was a significant advance in itself. In the last two decades of the century, they achieved the right to purchase and bequeath land (except in parliamentary boroughs), the right to practice at the bar and finally the franchise for those financially in a position to qualify. In short, the picture that emerges is not all bleak and their consciousness of being a community on the rise undoubtedly enabled them to prosper further.

The other major community on the island was largely to be found in the northern province. Ulster was a land apart, in many ways. It is commonplace in some histories to talk in terms of two nations: the Catholic nation and the Protestant nation.[20] While the 'two nation' school of historiography may risk too emphatic a divide, the central points it makes are valid. Geographically, Ulster's proximity to Scotland – a mere 25 km at the nearest point – fostered a particular orientation east. This was compounded by a significant proportion of people with Scottish ancestry. Indeed its differentiation can, in part, be explained by this particular form of migration. Religiously, Presbyterians were in the majority, although in the island as a whole they counted for a mere 10 per cent. It is important to realise that Presbyterians started off in this period very much on the social periphery 'being neither part of a historic elite nor able to make common cause with the other outsiders, Catholics'.[21] Such difference as there was already increased with a distinct pattern of economic development, in particular as regards the linen industry and the

growth of Belfast as a hub of the nascent industrial revolution. Economic and religious identity meshed. The Catholics of Ulster, Foster notes, were very much on the 'periphery' and not to be found so much in the 'thriving commercial centres'.[22] The Presbyterians were not merely the manufacturers and traders, they were also increasingly politically aware. A distinctive kind of politicisation occurred in the north which owed much to its Protestant character, its urban and industrial development and also to the influence of the Ulstermen who had moved to North America in the past century and a half, the last generation of whom had witnessed the successful War of Independence against the imperial power.[23]

As well as the particular groups inhabiting Ireland, the relationship between Britain and Ireland is a fundamental point of entry into the subject. It could be said that from 1169 to 1922, 'Irish history is really a history of Anglo–Irish relations'.[24] How did Britain govern Ireland? It was an old problem. In contrast to Scotland which had been united with England in 1707, Ireland had remained a separate dependency under the Crown since Henry VIII's time. The royal representative was known as the Lord Lieutenant or viceroy. He was one of their own, most often a peer and a member of the cabinet. Ministers and officials conducted the business of executive government from Dublin Castle in the centre of the city. The most important man-on-the-spot was the chief secretary who was charged with getting government business through the Irish parliament. He was at the centre of a network of patronage and influence, which were necessary to oil the wheels of eighteenth-century politics. The Irish parliament, for its part, was a medieval institution but it was severely circumscribed in its capacity to act by Poynings' Law (1494) and the Declaratory Act (1719).[25]

In the course of the 1700s, a belief in independence grew among the Ascendancy elite. These were Protestant nationalists – patriots, as they styled themselves – very much in the style of the American colonists. Brought to prominence by Henry Grattan, a talented orator in parliament, inspired by the War of Independence and given muscle by a Volunteer movement, the patriots wrung concessions out of a reforming Whig government and, in 1782, a constitution was granted whereby Ireland was given due measure of legislative independence. They had, in effect, forced the British government to repeal Poynings' Law, thus giving the Irish parliament, for the first time in its history, legislative initiative. 'Ireland is now a nation', Grattan had announced satisfactorily to the new Commons. It seemed to herald a new dawn in Irish history but change was rather more superficial than it seemed. The Crown still had the possibility of vetoing legislation and Dublin Castle, with the viceroy acting as the king's representative, remained in control of government. The executive was thus still very firmly in British hands and they had no intention of letting real control slip away.

It was in this context that international catastrophe bore down upon the heads of the Irish patriots. The French Revolution broke out in 1789 and subsequently the revolutionary wars which engulfed continental Europe and, from 1793 onwards, Britain.[26] Suddenly all was called into question: arbitrary privileges, Protestant exclusiveness, religion itself, and the cherished political shibboleths of a 'respectable' generation. France was America gone mad. Ireland, as R. B. McDowell makes clear, was awash with books and prints of contemporary French radical texts.[27] New forces with novel ideas began to emerge and threaten the very fabric of British rule in Ireland. Most notable was the Society of United Irishmen of 1791, a movement which originated in Ulster and became steadily more radical in its agenda, from the relatively mild demands for parliamentary reform and Catholic emancipation to out-and-out republican separatism.[28] This in turn bred a reaction, not so much among Anglicans, some of whom were leaders in the movement, but among doughty Ulster Presbyterians who set up the Orange Order in 1795 to mount a defence of Protestantism and the connection with the British Crown. A grand lodge ran the movement from 1797 onwards.[29] Violence on both sides began to be institutionalised. The neurotic response of William Pitt's government – overly repressive, according to some – only served to radicalise the rebels still further and, with plotting a revolution the most chic activity of the 1790s, plotting is accordingly what the society did, with a vengeance.

But the government was already one step ahead and, having infiltrated society networks by means of an elaborate spy system (one of the most fascinating developments of Pitt's time), the rebellion that did eventually occur in 1798 was doomed for lack of coherent leadership as well as a lack of coordination, the absence of a general enthusiasm for armed conflict and, of course, the inevitable *soupçon* of bad luck, the last owing to a botched French attempt to lend aid. When they did arrive, with 1,000 men from the Grande Armée, it was pretty much already over. A later expedition was captured and the leader of the society, Wolfe Tone, condemned to death.[30] The episode was a paroxysm of naive enthusiasm and misplaced belief in the revolutionary impulse of the masses and as such a very complete failure. Yet, it was a failure with important consequences. First it set up a basic divide that would be perpetuated to this day. The society adopted green as their colour; the order identified itself by Protestant hero William of Orange's colour. Significant identities in history are often captured by symbols which seem relatively superficial but quickly acquire an importance all their own. From now on, identities would be colour coded. Secondly, the myths of noble resistance and heroic gestures were once more renewed in 1798 – the belief that it was better to resist and die rather than to tolerate the intolerable. A political culture of violence had

re-emerged and, via song and story, was engrained ever more deeply in the annals of national consciousness. Most importantly, for our purposes just now, was the response the rebellion called for from Britain – the Act of Union, the first modern legislative 'solution' to Ireland's manifest problems.