

History, Patriotism, and the Poor

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A review of

Mark Williams and S. P. Forest (eds.) *Constructing the Past: Writing Irish History 1600-1800*

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It is perhaps surprising that the chief message of this valuable essay collection is that the history of nationalism is largely the history of the elite's changing attitudes to the poor. Emerging from a conference organised by Oxford graduate students, the volume's declared intention is to explore the political ideologies underlying Irish history writing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The tone is set when Roy Foster discriminates between civic nationalism (French, revolutionary, and a good thing) and ethnic nationalism (German, reactionary, and a bad thing), and also distinguishes between both of these and patriotism, though without explaining the difference to his readers. The civic/ethnic distinction has been popularized by Michael Ignatieff, but, as Foster hints, it is of questionable utility for historians. Much more useful is the distinction between patriotism and nationalism. There was a long tradition in Europe, with a strong classical basis, of seeing the *patria* or fatherland as the proper object of service for a gentleman; this tradition was a central part of political discourse in both seventeenth and eighteenth-century Ireland, certainly among Catholics and as time went on also among Protestants. These Catholic and Protestant elites were united in their disdain for the poor: Geoffrey Keating's patriotic defence of Ireland's honour, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, condemned those foreign writers who came to Ireland and gathered information about the country from plebeians. This was madness, Keating insisted, one might as well roll in a dunghill; the proper study of any historian was a country's gentry and nobility. The radical innovation of the early nineteenth-century romantics, developing a tradition founded by Johann Gottfried Herder, was to see a particular political authenticity in the lives of poor men and women; to see them as the repository of a pure national spirit. The romantics gave secular political agency to men and women without wealth or education for the first time. Thus, the elite's attitude to the poor is crucial in identifying modern nationalism, not whether or not some vernacular variant of the Latin word *natio* was in use. One of the most fascinating things about Daniel O'Connell was his own hostility to key aspects of the romantic political programme, such as the empowerment of the poor and their vernacular, despite becoming himself a symbol of that programme throughout Europe. This is the traditional narrative of the birth of modern nationalism in the history of ideas, expressed most ably by Isaiah Berlin and Elie Kedourie (though the latter saw Immanuel Kant as the tradition's true founder), and the subject of much useful reflection by J. T. Leerssen.

Although the authors in this volume decline to engage with this traditional narrative directly, it provides an intriguing counter current to their arguments. Bernadette Cunningham's excellent article on Catholic histories of the kingdom of Ireland in the seventeenth century, a synthesis of her earlier work on Keating's *Foras Feasa* and the *Annals of the Four Masters*, is directly concerned with the relationship of patriotism to kingship, though Cunningham prefers to orientate her article not towards analysis of nationalism by political scientists and sociologists (as in her earlier work), but towards Richard Helgerson's *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (1995).

Helgerson, a literary critic, championed the promotion of the vernacular in Renaissance England by Edmund Spenser and others as an index of English nationalism. Pursuing Helgerson's approach for Ireland would mean a close investigation of the Gaelic elite's attitudes to the Classical languages in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Cunningham does not attempt that here, instead restricting herself to some subtle and enlightening analysis of the attitudes of Keating and the annalists to Stuart monarchy. It is also noteworthy that Cunningham is the only author in this book

to mention even in passing John Pocock's ancient constitution, a distinctively anti-historical form of political discourse based, Pocock argued, on English common law concepts of precedent.

The distinction between patriotism and nationalism is also prominent in Mark Williams' article on the neglected histories published in the 1650s by Daniel O'Daly, Gerard Boate, and Sir James Ware. While Williams foregrounds the translation from Latin into English of O'Daly's *Initium, incrementa, et exitus familiae Geraldinorum* of 1655 in the second half of the nineteenth century by romantic nationalists, he does not attempt an analysis of the process by which O'Daly's Latin-language confessional patriotism was translated into English-language romantic nationalism. Williams does present some very interesting analysis of Ware's surprisingly positive account of the civilisation of pre-Christian Ireland, in which Ware seemed anxious to leave behind the dichotomy between civility and barbarism, and almost to approach Enlightenment stadialism, in which the slow transition from pastoral to manorial agriculture was an honourable one common to all humankind. Stadialism in its full grown form is the subject of Ultán Gillen in his account of the history writing of the Ascendancy ideologue Charles Francis Sheridan, one of four types of late eighteenth-century counter revolutionary Gillen offers up for analysis. Martyn Powell identifies a variety of Irish patriotisms in the late eighteenth century, seeing the *Volunteer Evening Post* as the embodiment of a patriotic political culture alternative to that of the *Volunteer's Journal*.

The importance of distinguishing between the political experience of the elite and the poor provides the theme of Scott Spurlock's essay comparing the experiences of Irish and Scottish Catholics under the English regimes of the 1650s. Inspired by the apparently positive experience of Scottish Catholics in the 1650s, Spurlock argues that while the Irish Catholic clergy, gentry and nobility experienced vigorous persecution, the great mass of the population were not worse off under the Cromwellians than under most other sorts of English government. Spurlock's interesting argument is limited by a lack of hard facts about the effects of Cromwellian government in the 1650s, a lack forthcoming studies by John Cunningham and Ian Gentles will hopefully remedy. Moreover, Spurlock implies that the large section of the Irish poor, radically Catholic and radically patriotic, which took the kingdom's law into its own hands in October 1641 (and whose sentiments can be deduced, to an extent, from the 1641 Depositions) had become largely de-politicised over the ensuing decade, which seems unlikely. The place of the poor in the Irish polity is also raised by Raymond Gillespie in a dense and fascinating article on the concepts of nature and history in the seventeenth century. Gillespie points out examples of poor men who did consider themselves part of the polity, whatever the opinions of their betters, and took risks in expressing their views on the monarchy. Gillespie rightly insists on the importance of nature as a political category in the seventeenth century; indeed, books on politics by Aristotelian philosophers like John Case, the Oxford contemporary of Richard Stanihurst, generally began with a discussion of whether the city or political community was natural to man. Gillespie quotes the Douai-trained David Rothe on nature and the polity; perhaps engagement with Annabel Brett's *Liberty, Right, and Nature: Individual Rights in Late Scholastic Thought* (2003) which examines the concept of nature in the early modern universities would have opened up Rothe's arguments further. This volume also contains erudite essays by Alan Ford on James Ussher's afterlife and Richard Ansell on the connection between the 1641 massacre and Protestant property rights, as well as a witty essay by Toby Barnard on eighteenth-century history publishing, which contains lessons modern historians of Ireland would do well to heed. Overall this is a most useful and stimulating collection, which contributes substantially to the history of early modern Irish political discourse.