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Parnell Reconsidered, Pauric Travers & Donal McCartney (eds), UCD Press, 214 pp, €28, ISBN 978-1906359706

There is the man, Charles Stewart Parnell, and there is the movement, “Parnellism”. The majority of Irish opinion soon came to see the Union of 1800 as a failure, but no British opinion shared in that judgement, that is until Parnell. The combination of Parnell and Parnellism convinced the British prime minister, Gladstone, that the Union of 1800 had failed and that Ireland and Great Britain required a new relationship. Though Gladstone did not succeed in his endeavours to redefine that relationship, and though Parnell was brought low, the fact remained that the question of the Union became the great moral and political centre of British and Irish politics. Today, with the referendum on Scotland’s relationship to England approaching, some of the questions raised by Parnell and Parnellism are still to be answered. Parnell and Parnellism fascinated his contemporaries, and continue to fascinate historians today. The portrait of Parnell by Robert Ballagh was chosen to grace the IR£100 note of the pre-euro Irish currency. An estimate of his value to the nation perhaps!

Studies of Parnell, from the first by R Barry O’Brien in 1898 to the last by Paul Bew in 2011, have had to shape bricks with very little straw, due to the absence of a Parnell archive and Parnell’s own cultivation of secretiveness and inscrutability. Biographies therefore have to rely largely on the information supplied by his contemporaries. Parnellism suffers, though to a lesser degree, from the same disadvantage, though here at least we can trace, through the responses of those contemporaries, an evolving strategy that was both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary. The Parnell Society, founded in 1986 on the centenary of the first home rule bill, through its Parnell Summer School and Spring Days, has been to the forefront in debating the history and the legacy of Parnell and Parnellism. This volume is a collection of research papers delivered at a series of Parnell Society events through 2010 and 2011. The intent of the book is to “reconsider Parnell ‑ his political philosophy, his modus operandi and his legacy ‑ in the light of his own words, deeds and context”. The challenge of discussing Parnell in the light of his own words, deeds and contexts is therefore formidable and that this volume succeeds reflects the quality of the contributors and their research.

The essays may be considered as dealing primarily with either Parnell or with Parnellism. The former are dominated by the contributions of the editors, Pauric Travers and Donal McCartney. Both are exemplars of how a close reading of the thinnest historic textual sources, informed by deep insight into context, can produce interesting new interpretations. Travers, in two contributions, looks at Parnell’s religion and especially his Protestantism; and also Parnell’s triumphant “Ne Plus Ultra” speech of 1885. His finding that Parnell is best seen as a consistently tolerant and culturally liberal Protestant is elegantly argued, though this reviewer would quarrel with his assertion that the social and personal world of Irish nineteenth century Irish Protestantism is terra incognita. The 1885 speech, from its delivery to an ecstatic Cork meeting to the inscription of its key phrase on the 1911 monument to the lost leader, is forensically examined in its text, context and afterlife. Travers concludes that the speech was much more than the studied ambiguity that has become the standard interpretation, seeing in it the launch of a national movement the end of which remained full of potential. The speech captured Cork for Parnellism.

In three contributions McCartney examines the meaning of “Home Rule” for Parnell; sexual scandals and Parnell; and Parnell’s last “To the People of Ireland” manifesto of 1890. Reviewing the many possible interpretations available to Parnell’s contemporaries of that potent phrase “Home Rule” and the key question as to whether it meant the exclusion of Irish representation from Westminster, McCartney, in a close and deeply informed reading of Parnell’s own uttering, dismisses the view that Parnell’s final support for inclusion within an imperialist parliament was bought by Cecil Rhodes. Instead he suggests that for Parnell “Home Rule” was a battle cry encapsulating all Irish grievances but ambiguous as to in what precise parliamentary form those grievances would receive remedy. The battle cry of Home Rule was not a constitution, but it did form “Parnellism”. In his essay on Parnell and sexual scandal, of which there were more than the famous one with Mrs O’Shea, McCartney comes to the surprising conclusion that Timothy Healy may actually have been telling the plain truth about at least one of these scandals. In his essay on the final manifesto “To the People of Ireland”, McCartney forensically examines the manifesto, the context in which it was issued and the consequences that followed. He shows Parnell failing in his attempt to shape the public understanding of the divorce scandal as political, in the manner of a modern “spin doctor”, with Gladstone’s and the Catholic bishops’ insistence on a moral interpretation of the crisis winning out. His elegantly written conclusion is inescapable; that the deposition of Parnell in the expectation that the sacrifice would secure home rule, lost Ireland a great leader and left in his place a myth of the tragic and romantic hero. Pat Power’s essay on the Paris connection places the Parnell family and Charles Stewart in an unfamiliar context; that of the cosmopolitan upper class at ease in the “capital of Europe”. Here Parnell found romance, met with the Fenians and deposited the treasure of the National League. Parnellism, the creation of the disciplined party, informs the contributions of Felix Larkin, Myles Dungan and Fionnuala Waldron. Larkin examines the relationship between Parnellism and the press in an era when it was crucial to the development of mass politics. Larkin shows the political nature of journalism in the Ireland of Parnellism and the extent to which journalists were politiciens manqués ‑ and in many cases ended up as politicians. The rise and fall of the nationalist press mirrors the fall and rise of the various expressions of nationalism. Larkin, in taking the long view of 1875 to 1924, throws a deep shaft of light on the legacy of Parnell and Parnellism for independent Ireland. Also taking up the subject of the press and Parnellism, Dungan looks at the United Ireland newspaper as the most partisan, successful and aggressive newspaper of Parnellism. Described by the editor, William O’Brien, as “a weekly insurrection in print”, its colour cartoons are a rich resource for historians today and were in their day a vivid expression of a defiant nationalism. Dungan, arguing that this was the moment when the press replaced the platform, is convincing in suggesting the United Ireland was more effective in the campaign for the land than in the campaign for Parnell. Waldron offers a close analysis of the still unsavoury relationship between the drink interest and politicians, in this case the Irish publicans and Parnellism. Navigating between the temperance wing of Liberalism, the Irish Catholic and Protestant campaigners, and the powerful and often Fenian publicans, Parnell managed to keep the publicans on his side of the table. Part of his success reflects the ability of the publicans to use a nationalist discourse to underpin their own sectional interests. “Arthur’s Day” perhaps suggests that the drink trade has not lost that ability.

George Boyce, in a sustained and fluent analysis, explores the relationship between Gladstone and Parnell, the two most extraordinary leaders of the nineteenth century. This is territory that has been explored earlier by Theodore Hoppen and by Catherine Shannon. Grounded in a deep knowledge of the Gladstone diaries, Gladstone’s own words, and of the historical sources and readings, the paper is a thoughtful evaluation of Gladstone’s faith that the British parliamentary tradition had the resources to offer Ireland a stable political future based on gradualism and pragmatism. The question Boyce raises ‑ has the British parliament the ability to govern a multinational state? ‑ may well be finally answered in the forthcoming Scottish referendum. In Ireland the pragmatic decision that Parnell could be abandoned, precisely because Gladstone had committed to Home Rule, was a mistaken overestimation of the value of pragmatism for the weak.

In her paper on Anna Parnell, Margaret Ward returns to Anna Parnell’s own writings to offer a searing insight into the frustrations of a genuine radical confronted by the essentially conservative and cubbish world of the Irish National League. The women did what the men threatened but would not do and therefore were never forgiven by Parnell and his acolytes. It is another and very unattractive side to the man mourned by Yeats for “Parnell loved his country / And Parnell loved his lass.”

For Parnellites ‑ and who is not a Parnellite today? ‑ this is a highly recommended collection of essays by some of the leading historians of today’s Ireland, a country once again in search of “Home Rule” though now from international finance capitalism.