HISTORY: DISCIPLINE OR INSTRUMENT?

DUBLIN REVIEW OF BOOKS, ISSUE 56, 19 MAY 2014.

Myth and the Irish State, by John M Regan, Irish Academic Press, 296 pp, €25.25, ISBN: 978-07165315 8

This book collects together a series of twelve articles and book reviews, accompanied by an introduction summarising the development of Regan’s own analysis of the historiography of Irish state formation over the last the last five decades. As these were formerly discrete and separate essays in which the same analysis, arguments and references were cited, the collection reads in places as repetitive. These essays have been published in academic journals mostly, in the period 1997-2013, and so have been difficult for non-academics to access. Yet despite having being aired in mostly academic journals, what has been referred to as the Regan-Hart debate has generated an extraordinary amount of public interest. Regan’s charge is that some historians have written history for public consumption and that in so doing they have abandoned acceptable scholarly methods through selective use of sources, elision of evidence that contradicts their pre-conceptions and denying problematic evidence. The debate has, at times, been personalised, acrimonious and offensive, this most so on the response of Regan and others to Hart’s suggestion that the IRA campaign in the War of Independence was a sectarian one of ethnic cleansing directed against Protestants, especially in the Bandon area. Hart also suggested that the Kilmichael ambush ended in the brutal murder of the Auxiliaries after they had surrendered. These aspects of the Regan-Hart debate have attracted camp-followers, most loudly the former senator and newspaper columnist Eoghan Harris, but they have also provoked significant and scholarly contributions from major figures in the current generation of historians, including Professor David Fitzpatrick of Trinity College Dublin, who was the PhD supervisor of Peter Hart. The “ethnic cleansing” allegation is one that Hart was retreating from before his untimely death but why it generated so much heat is a question that this review will return to. Regan includes in his footnotes references to further response articles by other historians, so the debate can be followed in minute detail. He has also written a substantial introduction to the book in which he contextualises this debate of the historians within the relationship between myth and the history of the state in Ireland and what he sees as the complicity of historians in simplifying Irish history in response to the outbreak of the Troubles in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s. Irish Academic Press is therefore to be congratulated in gathering these articles and publishing them in a single volume and the academic journals in which they first appeared are to be thanked for allowing their republication. These essays have generated considerable heat, but have also generated light. This reviewer seeks to follow the light.

There are three intertwining themes within these essays, which can be considered as a complex developing argument; first, the state in Ireland; second, violence and the state; and third, writing the history of the state and violence. Regan identifies three myths of the Irish state; that the independent Irish state emerged from popular nationalist struggle and not as an imposed British settlement; that the legal provenance of the independent state originates from a revolutionary constitution and not from British parliamentary statute; and finally, that adherence to constitutional democratic politics remained constant among the founders of the state. These three themes are the foundations of what Regan terms Southern nationalism, in which the independent southern Irish state that emerged out of the war of independence and civil war is centrally positioned as the institutional expression of democratic nationalism. By focusing on the state, Regan sheds light on the revolutionary era from an unfamiliar angle. The revolutionary transition from a sharply divided state-society to a merged state-society (in independent Ireland), in which the state became normalised, is subject to forensic analysis. He examines the role of historians in the emergence of a sense of ownership of the state in Irish society, suggesting that they have been complicit in treating the emergence of the independent state as a legitimising project rather than an historical subject. This required a history that maintained continuity between the revolutionary state, the Provisional Government, and the Irish Free State. Regan, in an analysis densely argued over many years and carried through the articles and essays gathered together in this book disrupts this statist history of the emergence of independent Ireland and questions the willingness of historians to indulge it.

The state is a mysterious entity, and in the context of Ireland in the twentieth century a troubling one. The interaction between the state and society is a dynamic process of mutual transformation in which the state confers identity and values and society responds with consent. A fundamental claim of the state is legitimacy, which confers on it the exclusive legal use of violence and the authority to do undesirable things. The British state in nineteenth century Ireland was never considered legitimate by the mass of the people. As Barry O’Brien put it, “Britain’s rule in Ireland was founded on the bayonets of 30,000 soldiers”. Gladstonian home rule, as an attempt to create a popular government in Dublin, was in part an admission of that truth. Conservative Unionists accepted that the British presence in Ireland required constant though varying levels of oppression. The only political group that regarded the British state in Ireland as fully and uncomplicatedly legitimate were the Liberal Unionists. For them the good the state did for Irish society conferred sufficient legitimacy.

Historically, nationalism in Ireland was experienced and expressed as the will to rebel against the illegitimate British state in Ireland. The genius of Arthur Griffith was to mobilise the will to govern, and not merely to rebel, in the policy of Sinn Féin; seizing the state through self-rule. The first Dáil Éireann, meeting in January 1919, following the Sinn Féin strategy, determined to act as the legitimate state authority of the Irish Republic as proclaimed in Easter 1916. Therefore it developed all the apparatus of a state: a parliament, an executive answerable to that parliament, government departments, a judiciary, courts system and a police force. There also developed, separately but in parallel, an army that claimed to be the army of the Irish Republic proclaimed in 1916. The success of the revolutionary state lay in its apparent “stateness”. It was accepted as legitimate by nationalist Ireland and, by August 1920, its claim to an exclusive legal use of violence was accepted by the IRA. It was also given de facto recognition within the more intelligent levels of Whitehall civil servants where, as Warren Fisher warned Lloyd George, declaring illegal the assembly that represented majority opinion in Ireland was simply stupid. The second Dáil, elected in May 1921, maintained that legitimacy up to the Treaty. It is with the Treaty that the precise location of the legitimate state becomes troubling and where Regan begins to apply a sceptical and “state-agnostic” analysis.

For those opposed to the Treaty the split was one within the ruling Sinn Féin party and government of the state, but this division could not dissolve the “stateness” of the Republic. De Valera resigned and was replaced by Arthur Griffith as president of the Dáil ministry, or was it as president of the Republic? The debates in Dáil Éireann on January 9th and 10th, 1922 show that question was neither clear nor agreed. Griffith then created a new Dáil ministry, therefore claiming continuity of the state. In March 1922 the IRA executive repudiated the authority of that ministry and its minister for defence, Richard Mulcahy, along with its chief of staff, Eoin O’Duffy. The IRA now claimed to maintain its allegiance to the Republic whilst awaiting the restoration of the republican state by Dáil Éireann. In October 1922 de Valera recognised belatedly the constitutional void created by the IRA’s exclusively military opposition to the treatyite state but failed in his attempt to persuade the IRA set up a government to represent the republican state. The anti-treaty republicans therefore had an army but no state whose legitimacy they recognised. As De Valera recognised, this made the Republic a military dictatorship. That remained the IRA analysis until December 1938 when the remaining members of the Second Dáil Éireann met and transferred the government of the Republic to the IRA executive.

The Treaty required that the “Parliament of Southern Ireland” created by the 1920 Government of Ireland Act should be assembled to approve the creation of a provisional government to oversee the withdrawal of the British forces, to take over the administration, and to write a constitution for the Irish Free State. The Parliament of Southern Ireland assembled for one day, on January 14th, 1922, and approved the Provisional Government establishing, in British eyes, the legitimate state authority. Therefore there now existed two state authorities: the ministry elected by Dáil Éireann led by Arthur Griffith, and the Provisional Government approved by the British and drawn from the Dáil ministry, led by Michael Collins, with executive but not legislative authority. Griffith’s and Collins’s subtle statecraft proposed that the Dáil ministry should also create the Provisional Government, so that its State authority derived equally from Dublin as from Westminster. The Provisional Government would ensure there was no resurgence of the British state by isolating the Castle administration and feeding all business to the Dáil Éireann administration. On completion of its work the Dáil could then absorb the Provisional Government back into itself, maintaining continuity of the state. The developing civil war prevented this and the Dáil ceased to meet from April 1922. The Provisional Government was merged into the Dáil ministry and the pretence of dual power was ended. Regan argues that in fact the state, at this point, had become a dictatorship under Michael Collins as the Provisional Government was militarised and a national army assembled, trained and armed. Michael Collins as commander-in-chief, along with Joe McGrath, Kevin O’Higgins, Diarmaid O’Hegarty and Fionan Lynch, were transferred from civil government to the army. Gavan Duffy warned Mulcahy of the danger lying in the public impression that the men who matter were all gone to army headquarters in Portobello Barracks, leaving a feeble residue in the government offices in Merrion street. On June 16th, 1922 there was an election to what was referred to as the Third Dáil Éireann, but the assembly of the Dáil was repeatedly postponed until September 19th, by which time both Griffith and Collins were dead and the civil war won. Regan argues that in the period between April and September 1922 the state was represented in fact by the military and not by the Provisional Government, a dictatorship in fact of the IRB. The Dáil that assembled in September debated and approved the Constitution of the Irish Free State, allowing it to assume full state legitimacy with executive and legislative authority on the anniversary of the Treaty, December 6th, 1922. Regan’s argument that there was no continuity in the state and that for a crucial period there was a military dictatorship dominated by a Collins-led cabal of the IRB, in which the national army did not answer to any state authority, successfully disrupts the narrative of a seamless transition of state legitimacy from the 1919 Dáil to the Free State and therefore questions the legitimacy of the state under what he has termed in another place the counter-revolution. The view that the civil war was between democrats and dictators is clearly simplistic. The state was shaped by the civil war: making war is the most state-defining activity of all. However the legitimacy of the Irish Free State continued to be contested until, it could be argued, the Second World War. The experience of sustaining neutrality through a war in which Britain and Northern Ireland were deeply engaged did more to establish the legitimacy of the independent twenty-six-county state than any constitutional text. Regan’s challenge to the dominant statist narrative of the revolutionary period may be given added weight by the Marian Lyons and Daithí Ó Corráin edited series of county-based histories of the Irish revolution of which the first volume by Michael Farry on Co Sligo has been published.

Violence was central to the British-Irish relationship, as Ronan Fanning has shown in his recent Fatal Path: British Government and Irish Revolution 1910-1922, and not an aberration. The violence threatened by the Ulster Unionists, the violence inflicted by the IRA, the violence of the British state forces and the threatened violence of the Treaty negotiations were not incidental to constitutional change. A statist history validates state violence and condemns anti-state violence. State violence is democratic and anti-state violence is anarchic. Violence is at the heart of the historiography of the revolution and also the Regan-Hart debate. The reason that Hart’s “ethnic cleansing” charge generated such heat is that it de-legitimised revolutionary republican violence and made it irrational and atavistic, driven by primitive hatred and greed. His inadequately researched and tendentious history of the IRA of the War of Independence was seized upon and used as an analogy to the IRA campaign in the Northern Ireland Troubles, so that the latter could be stripped of ideology and portrayed as a recrudescence of an ancient and atavistic hate. What added to the heat, and also the light, was Regan’s contention that the historians have, since the 1960s, colluded in creating a public history that validates this propagandist interpretation.

Traditionally, Irish nationalist history was a tragic-comic recurring narrative in which the “happy end” of national independence was repeatedly thwarted by tragic interventions but triumphed eventually in the creation of the independent state. Properly academic and professional history developed from the 1930s as a concentration on method. This history was written within and for the academy, emphasising archival research and faithfulness to the sources with sufficient evidence presented to allow for being proved wrong in interpretation. Regan argues that in the 1960s professional history was replaced by a public history more interested in reception than in method. Driving this shift was the developing Troubles and the emergence of the Provisional IRA. Historians took on the role of legitimising the Irish twenty-six-county state, and the border, as the expression of democratic forces rather than republican violence. Those who opposed the Treaty, and by extension the state, were delegitimised as irredentist fanatics. Proving the legitimacy of the state exercised a mesmeric influence that required a Manichean division between violence and constitutionalism in order that the Provisional IRA could be safely relegated to the irrational depths. In support of Regan, though it is not an argument he himself makes, is the curious growth in history as an ironic discourse. As Irish history took an ironic turn it discovered that the War of Independence was an unfortunate waste as the British were going to grant independence in any case; that the Irish revolution was never really revolutionary and only returned to the point of departure; that independent Ireland was never really independent. Much of what became known as revisionist history was public history written in an ironic voice. One example will suffice: Roy Foster’s practice of using ironic quotes on the title Fianna Fáil “Soldiers of Destiny” is never matched by equally ironic quotes for Fine Gael “Family of the Gael”.

Regan prefaces his book with a quote from the 1949 address to the American Historical Association by the Cold War warrior Professor Conyers Read calling on historians to abandon neutrality and take their part in the total war against Moscow. Regan, by implication, sees Irish historians enlisting in a statist history that waged ideological war on violent republicanism. In a phrase of EP Thompson (though not one used by Regan) historians have been complicit in “reducing a discipline to a propaganda”. On finishing this provocative and necessary book another reflection came to mind. In his last year, fleeing the Nazi terror, Walter Benjamin wrote: “The only writer of history with the gift of setting alight the sparks of hope in the past, is the one who is convinced of this: that not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.”