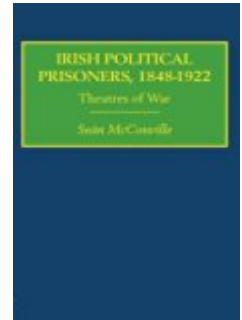


Seán McConville. *Irish Political Prisoners 1848-1922: Theatres of War*. London: Routledge, 2003. 832 pp. \$70.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-415-37866-6.



Reviewed by Niall Whelehan

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Irish Political Prisoners 1848-1922 is the third volume in Seán McConville's history of the British penal system. Previous volumes were published in 1981 and 1995, and another two are promised. This heavy volume is both timely and important. The topic of political prisoners frequently appears in Irish historiography but seldom has it been isolated as a separate category meriting particular study. This is surprising when the importance of political prisoners in shaping Anglo-Irish relations is considered. Indeed, since George Sigerson's *Political Prisoners at Home and Abroad* (1890), specific research on the subject, aside from enumeration, has not been abundant. Secondly, the book's publication comes at a time of substantial interest in the management and human rights of political prisoners. Practices of detention at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib are widely questioned while the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict underlines the central place of political prisoners, and their release, in the bargaining process between government and resistance. McConville's book makes for valuable reading beyond the walls of Irish and British history.

The narrative unfolds in matched chapters that alternate between surveys of nationalists' activities and analyses of their imprisonment. McConville successfully overcomes the problems associated with framing a topic where definition and categorization are difficult. His political prisoners are rarely pacifists or prisoners of conscience; they are largely militants who were determined to oppose British rule through the use of force. As noted in the introduction, this is a book on political violence as much as it is about imprisonment. McConville begins in 1848, when the question of political detention, and the potential for turning imprisonment to the prisoner's advantage, troubled several European governments in the aftermath of revolution. The British approach was initially one of leniency. The Young Irelanders were transported to Tasmania on the heel of arrests for seditious newspaper articles and the widow McCormack's cabbage-patch fiasco. Yet, both during the voyage and upon arrival each prisoner was treated as "a person of education and a gentleman" (p. 50). When compared to the later experiences of O'Donovan Rossa or John Daly, the Young Irelanders' taste of imprisonment

was one of luxury and relative freedom according to the accounts on which McConville draws.

In reaction to the Fenian conspiracy, official policy changed substantially. In 1865, the Fenians arrested for their involvement with the Irish people were imprisoned as criminals, as were the participants of the failed rising two years later. Sentencing was severe, and their harsh treatment in prison often exceeded that of common criminals. The majority were removed to the British prisons of Pentonville, Portland, and Millbank, where they were subject to poor diet, filthy conditions, and punishment on a quota basis, while they were forced to associate with sex offenders and were denied medicines (p. 176). The Manchester executions further underlined the severity of the times. McConville attributes this dramatic change in penal policy to class: the Young Irishmen were upper class and the Fenians were, in large part, artisans. Furthermore, he points to the sophistication of the Fenian conspiracy in comparison to that of their predecessors, and the growing influence of the Irish in postbellum United States, as factors that led the authorities to rethink their approach. Here, one could include the fears in the Home Office and Dublin Castle of Fenian associations with continental revolutionary organizations. Overall, officials overestimated the strength of the Fenians and the threat of large-scale rebellion, and responded with coercive measures.

Although this tough approach was successful to the degree that Fenianism was moribund for most of the 1870s, McConville accurately notes that the British refusal to grant political status was ultimately counterproductive. This is clearly illustrated by the case of Rossa. Arrested in 1865, Rossa was moved from one jail to another in the attempt to manage his stubborn opposition to captivity. His treatment (on one occasion, his hands were cuffed behind his back for thirty-five days) became a focal issue for the Amnesty Association, and his case garnered international sympathy

among radicals and moderates. By 1871, the scale of attention made the case awkward for the government and Gladstone agreed to a compromise on amnesty. Rossa along with several other Fenian leaders were released on condition they went into exile. Receiving a hero's welcome in the United States, Rossa's commitment to physical-force nationalism was hardened by his experience of prison. He would later go on to found the Skirmishing Fund, in order to finance dynamite attacks on political sites in Britain in the 1880s.

McConville carefully illustrates how Rossa's case underlined the difficulties in balancing coercion and conciliation, while being careful not to turn imprisonment into an opportunity for the nationalists. When Gladstone agreed to amnesty in 1871, he was accused of undermining the Irish government by both liberal and conservative newspapers, while the nationalist press in Ireland claimed that there was no amnesty. The Fenians were simply sent into indefinite exile. The question of political imprisonment became so contentious that government departments were reluctant to take responsibility for decision making. Fearful of political repercussions resulting from bad decisions, the Home Office and Dublin Castle often passed the parcel, refusing to comment on case files (p. 144). The lack of clear policy led to the mismanagement of several cases. In the 1890s, the Home Office scored an own-goal when it refused petitions for the release of the skirmishers Dr. Thomas Gallagher and James Murphy. When arrested in 1883, their case enlisted little sympathy as the majority of nationalists eagerly distanced themselves from the dynamite campaign. By the early 1890s, it was clear that the two had become insane in prison, yet repeated requests for their transfer, on humanitarian grounds, were refused. By the time the authorities agreed to their release, an amnesty campaign had attracted considerable support, where previously none existed, and served to draw constitutional and physical-force elements of nationalism together. The release of the men in such poor health "cast great

doubt upon the value of the repeated assurances of the Convict Service and the Home Office" (p. 394).

This analytical style continues throughout the following chapters on Roger Casement, the Easter Rising, and the War of Independence. McConville diligently examines particular cases and emphasizes the bureaucratic decisions that veered policy one way or another. Readers hoping to find an overall explanatory theory or the identification of larger processes at work will be frustrated. Throughout, the emphasis is on agency and how particular cases and individuals shaped policy. Rules were improvised and revised, and conditions varied between prisons and between prisoners. McConville may be accused of writing a conventional political history that ignores recent developments in the field: at times, the account is weighed down by the use of official sources that are not counterbalanced by alternative material from prisoners or nonstate actors. However, this approach is useful as it shows how the nuts and bolts of official policy came together. In addition, any comprehensive study of this nature will be unbalanced due to the sources available; in the next volume, that will treat political prisoners in the twentieth century, oral interviews should correct the imbalance.

As the repertoire of Irish nationalism experimented with tactics ranging from insurrection to dynamite attacks to guerrilla warfare, the official response was also a form of experimentation, an unscripted reaction to changing developments and, in this sense, was not always rationally thought out. *Irish Political Prisoners 1848-1922* demonstrates this point and is a welcome publication that will hopefully raise the banner for more work on the subject.

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