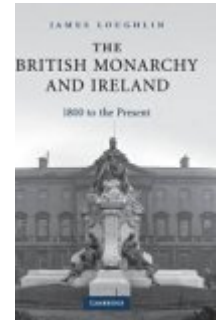


James Loughlin. *The British Monarchy and Ireland, 1800 to the Present.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xv + 398 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-84372-0.



Reviewed by James H. Murphy

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The topic of the relationship between Ireland and the British monarchy in recent centuries is a most important one but has only recently become the subject for sustained academic study. This may be because it has been presumed to be a story of undying hostility towards the monarchy by Irish nationalists and of devoted loyalty by Irish, and latterly Ulster, Unionists. And yet at various times the visits of George IV, Victoria, Edward VII and George V to southern, and supposedly nationalist, Ireland, were met by the enthusiasm of enormous crowds. It is the central challenge of any study of the topic to explain both that enthusiasm and the visceral hatred of the monarchy which at times has also been manifest in public and which remains, even in these days of British-Irish amity, still present in certain strata of Irish society. The most famous manifestation of such hatred of course was in the demonization of Queen Victoria as the "Famine Queen." It is a hatred, moreover, which is all the more perplexing for it concerns an institution without any real political power.

Professor James Loughlin's *The British Monarchy and Ireland 1800 to the Present* is the second major account of the topic in recent years, the first, as he notes, being my own *Abject Loyalty: Nationalism and Monarchy in Ireland during the Reign of Queen Victoria* (2001). Professor Loughlin is a highly regarded historian and author of a number of important books on the Irish Home Rule movement during the Gladstone era and on Ulster Unionism. Perhaps surprisingly, the relationship between unionism and monarchy only really features in the last seventy pages (chapters 14 and 15) of this 398-page work. This part deals with the period after (southern) Irish independence and has many illuminating insights, not least concerning the sympathy of George V for Home Rule and the keen enthusiasm of the present monarch, Elizabeth II, for Ulster Unionism, at least in the first part of her reign.

The first thirteen chapters of Loughlin's book, though divided into five sections, seem to me to fall into two parts in terms of scope and style. Chapters 1 to 5, occupying the first third of the book, deal with the period from the union of Ire-

land and Britain in 1801 to the advent of Gladstone and travel along roughly similar lines to my own work on the subject. Chapters 6 to 13, taking up half the book, cover the period from Gladstone to Irish independence. It is here that Loughlin's work really comes into its own and takes on its own special slant. It becomes a meticulous and fascinating study of the formulation and reformulation of British policy as it related to the possible role of the monarchy in an overall solution to the Irish question. For Loughlin Gladstone's premierships were the only time during the union when a prime minister systematically planned to combine Irish reforms with enthusiasm for the monarchy and to translate them "into constitutional loyalty" (p. 166). Many of the schemes debated by Gladstone and Lord Spencer, the Irish Lord Lieutenant, for a role for the Prince of Wales in Ireland and for an Irish royal residence never actually saw the light of day. Worse, when attempting to calm the country during the second Gladstone government, Spencer, as both royal and governmental representative in Ireland, performed "a role emblematic of the integration of coercive and monarchical symbolism" (p. 179). Loughlin follows these machinations and those of subsequent Conservative and Liberal governments with exacting detail, with a deep knowledge of the individuals involved and a profound grasp of the political implications of what was happening.

Loughlin's book sets out to be both a political and a social history of the role of the monarchy in Ireland. On the social side of the issue, that is, an analysis of the popular reaction towards monarchy, his work sustains an important thesis, that whereas nationalist agitation was generally robustly successful, royal visits needed the congruence of particularly favorable circumstances to succeed. Yet Loughlin's social history of the topic is not quite as strong as his political account and a sense of the intensity of feelings that the monarchy generated is somewhat muted. Two issues stand out. The first has to do with the great diffi-

culty of interpreting the significance of the public reaction to monarchy, whether enthusiastic or antagonistic, at any particular moment. At times Professor Loughlin interprets events and attitudes in perhaps too easy a manner. Thus continuing to use royal post boxes, though painted green, suggests "the absence of popular anti-monarchical feeling" (p. 320) in the Irish Free State. Earlier on he dismisses any significant Catholic-nationalist element in the positive reception that greeted the prince and princess of Wales in Dublin during their 1885 visit (pp. 194-195). He suggests that the enthusiasm was that merely of Dublin loyalists and railway travelers from Protestant Belfast. It would have been interesting had he quoted from oppositional nationalist newspapers in support particularly of the latter point.

The second issue has to do with his model of popular and personal politicization. He tells us in his conclusion that his approach in accounting for "the contrast between great demonstrations of 'organic' unity between the Irish people and royal personages as against periodic mass nationalist agitation" has been to "abandon the notion of one 'people' and think instead of multiple constituencies called into existence by diverse issues and mobilisations" (p. 387). And, indeed, his approach throughout is in terms of government and monarchy negotiating alliances with a variety of politicized groupings at particular times. Yet this approach downplays underlying trends which were certainly moving in an antagonistic direction as far as monarchy was concerned from the last third of the nineteenth century. It almost leads, too, to suggestions that at times Irish support for monarchy could be turned on or off depending on the political scheme on offer. Thus "[h]ad the Home Rule bill of 1886 been enacted, the basic conditions envisaged by Gladstone for the symbiotic development in Ireland of loyalty to the monarchy and the British state together with Irish nationality would have been established" (p. 217).

In my own view the problem of the paradoxical reactions of enthusiasm and hostility to monarchy requires a view that sees not only a variety of politicized groups jostling together but finds within the individual varying degrees of politicization and non-politicization, of seriousness and pleasure-seeking, of allegiance and counter-allegiance, confusingly at work. Thus the individual who might go to a nationalist Parnellite meeting of an evening might watch a royal procession the next day because everyone loves to see a prince. It was this surely that really perplexed and infuriated some nationalists concerning the monarchy, particularly when celebrity-gazing was portrayed as loyalty.

Professor Loughlin's book may not offer a complete view of all aspects of his topic, but then that is an unrealistic expectation of any author, no matter how good. What it does do superbly well, though, is to give an account of the formulation of British policy towards Ireland, and of the fate of attempts to implement that policy, as it related to the role of the monarchy in any settlement of the "Irish question."

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