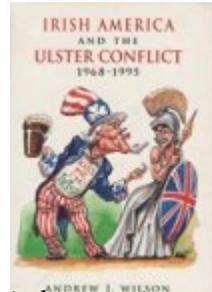


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andrew J. Wilson. *Irish America and the Ulster Conflict*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995. xi + 322. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8132-0835-0.

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Andrew J. Wilson's book provides a detailed history of Irish-American involvement in Northern Ireland over a period of almost thirty years. It takes the reader from the beginning of Northern Ireland's "Troubles" in 1968 to the apparent end of those "Troubles" in 1995. This even-handed and well-written account is prefaced with a brief historical summary of that involvement which serves to remind the reader that, in its own small way, the Irish conflict has been a global conflict for at least 150 years. As far back as the 1860s Irish Republican political networks linked activists in Ireland, Britain, Australia and the United States. In Irish terms Republicans are those who support the establishment of a united Irish Republic, independent of British rule. It is arguable that for much of this century and the last, Irish Republicanism has been better organised and better supported in the United States than in Ireland itself.

Irish America and the Ulster Conflict joins a short list of books devoted to the issue of Irish-American involvement in contemporary conflict in Northern Ireland and for that reason alone is a welcome addition to the literature on this topic.[1] The time span Wilson covers is long while the geographical reach of the book is wide. Of necessity then, the author deals with many issues in broad strokes. He is at his strongest when describing the development of political activity on the issue of Northern Ireland in Congress and in the U.S. administration from 1977 onwards, providing substantial detail which is new to the debate. Wilson has performed a valuable job in carrying out research into a wide range of U.S. newspapers, adding substantially to our knowledge of the topic. Probably the greatest weakness of the book is the lack of analysis. Most chapters end quite weakly and the conclusion disappoints.

Research on Irish-America's political connections to Ireland has tended to fall in two schools. Those in the United States interested in the conflict in Northern Ireland are interested in precisely that: they do not generally indulge in reflexive analysis of American involvement. Those in Ireland and Britain interested in the conflict have considered Irish-American connections primarily in the light of their effect in Ireland. On neither side of the Atlantic have researchers been particularly interested in exploring the relationship between Irish-American ethnic identity and Irish-American activism on Northern Ireland.

While Wilson does not engage directly with the issues which involvement on Northern Ireland raise in relation to Irish-American identity, his book provides glimpses of just how problematic the relationship between Irish-American identity and the real place which is Ireland can be. In recent years there have been a number of studies of the relationship between ethnic group identity in U.S. cities and political issues involving the "homelands" of these ethnic groups. It seems clear from these studies that activism around political issues in the "homeland" or concerning the "homeland" is related in a very complex way to politics in the U.S. and ethnic group identity in the U.S. Irish-American activism on Northern Ireland is intimately bound up with issues of Irish-American identity.

In Great Britain and, to a lesser degree, Ireland, public debate on Irish-American involvement has focused until recently on Irish-American support for the armed campaign of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Wilson's extensive discussion of several gunrunning cases in the 1980s in which American-based supporters of the IRA attempted to ship arms to Ireland, reflects this focus. For

years British newspapers have been printing editorials, several of them cited by Wilson, which furiously condemn Irish-American involvement in Northern Ireland. Irish-American involvement has been characterised in many such editorials as fundamentally illegitimate. It is argued that Irish-Americans contribute to the perpetuation of the conflict in Northern Ireland by contributing money with which the IRA can buy weapons; that such behaviour can only be explained by naiveté or ignorance and that both naiveté and ignorance are a product of distance from Ireland in both space and time. In this view the stereotypical Irish-American interested in Northern Ireland is a third or fourth generation American with little real contact with the Ireland of today. Implicit in this argument is the proposition that an overly sentimental view of Ireland allied to an ignorance of Ireland is, to a degree, inherent in Irish-American identity and that therefore this identity itself is a source of problems. In questioning the right of Irish-Americans to involve themselves in the political affairs of Ireland (on the grounds that they are ignorant of the situation), the argument also questions an important aspect of Irish-American identity: the connection to Ireland.

Although ignorance of events in Ireland can provide grounds for questioning the quality or authenticity of Irish-American identity, clearly many Irish-Americans have concerned themselves with the conflict in Northern Ireland precisely in order to assert a real connection with and concern for Ireland, and in part to assert an Irish identity in the U.S. In the early-1970s, as the conflict in Northern Ireland began to escalate, support for Irish Republican activist groups in the U.S. was concentrated strongly in working-class ethnic Irish neighborhoods at exactly the point in time when these districts were involved in opposing the racial integration of schools. For many people in these neighborhoods, activism on Northern Ireland was an aspect of a commitment to an Irish identity which was the defining characteristic of their neighborhood. In one important sense activism on Ireland was about expressing loyalty to the neighborhood and the ethnic Irish community in it. It is more than coincidental that some of the most senior anti-busing activists in South Boston in the early 1970s were active on the issue of Northern Ireland. In one sense Ireland, like the shamrock, was as much a symbol of the Irish-American neighborhood as it was a real place. Loyalty to Ireland was loyalty to a real place but ultimately that place was probably the Irish neighborhood rather than Ireland itself.[2]

Wilson shows that British opposition to Irish-

American involvement has become less pronounced in recent years, not least because of a perception that more “moderate” elements were gaining ground in Irish-America. Nonetheless the argument that Irish-American involvement is essentially illegitimate is still strong. The arguments which condemn Irish-American involvement of any kind in the politics of Northern Ireland are closely related to more general arguments against the involvement of “diaspora” communities in the affairs of their “homelands.” In several current situations of conflict the malevolent influence of diaspora communities is condemned as a significant factor in perpetuating conflict. These communities are characterised as poorly-informed, out of date and far more extreme than their ethnic compatriots in the conflict zone. Among the groups criticised are the Tamil supporters in Europe and North America of the Tamil Tigers; the Jewish-Americans who offer support to right-wing settlers in the West Bank (or settle there themselves); Irish-Americans who support the IRA; and Kurds in Germany who support the PKK in Turkey. The arguments in all of these cases are similar—that an ignorance born of distance reinforces an extremism that thrives at a distance, leading to the unhelpful involvement of those with no real stake in a conflict.

The internet is seen by many as facilitating the increased involvement of such diaspora communities in “homeland” conflicts. In Ireland, as in many other conflict situations around the world, the diaspora supporters of paramilitary anti-government organisations were among the first to use the internet to publicise their causes and to use it as an activist tool. This led to panic at the thought that extremists were “taking over” the internet. Intensive use of the internet is probably better interpreted however as a sign of weakness and of lack of access to the other more effective means of publicity: radio, television, and newspapers.

Criticism of Irish-American involvement in Northern Ireland relies heavily on the stereotype of the Irish-American activist as a third or fourth generation American. However Wilson’s book confirms something that is evident from Holland’s book and which I found myself when carrying out research on the topic. Far from being dominated by third or fourth generation Irish-Americans, activist organisations have tended to have a very high proportion of Irish-born immigrants or the children of immigrants.[3] In addition, the bulk of those involved in setting up activist organisations at the outbreak of the conflict in the late 1960s were Irish immigrants. Given the fact that Irish-born immigrants are

vastly outnumbered by Irish-Americans of previous generations, this fact also suggests that activism on the issue has not penetrated nearly as far into the Irish-American community as commentary on the issue has suggested. In fact, this weakness has been a constant refrain among Irish-American activists. In comparison with Jewish-American activism in support of Israel, a comparison often made enviously by Irish-American activists, Irish-American activism is extraordinarily weak. Wilson quotes one furious editorial from the principal Irish-American Republican newspaper in which the writer complained of Irish-American apathy on the issue of Northern Ireland: "The Irish don't care! The Irish don't want to know! The Irish are selfish!"[4]

This relative weakness in turn raises the question of just how much real political influence such activists wield in party politics in the U.S. Wilson outlines clearly how the influence of Irish-American politicians has had a significant influence on British policy in Northern Ireland. What is not at all clear is that this activity by Irish-American politicians is of any great benefit to them electorally.

At a time when the American government is deeply involved in the Peace Process in Northern Ireland, at a level unimaginable even a few years ago, Wilson's book is a useful addition to a very limited body of work on this topic. For those interested in Irish-American activism at the level of the neighborhood it doesn't offer that much.

For those interested in formal Irish-American political involvement, at the level of embassy dinners and congressional committees, this is an essential source.

Notes

[1]. Probably the best book on the topic is Jack Holland's *The American Connection: U.S. Guns, Money and Influence in Northern Ireland*, Swords, Co. Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1989 (also published in the U.S.). One of the very few earlier books entirely devoted to this topic was Dennis Clark's *Irish Blood: Northern Ireland and the American Conscience*, Port Washington N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1977.

[2]. See for example Ronald H. Bayor, *Neighbours in Conflict: The Irish, Germans, Jews and Italians of New York City, 1929-1941*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978; and John F. Stack, *International Conflict in an American City: Boston's Irish, Italians, and Jews, 1935-1944*, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979.

[3]. Niall O Dochartaigh, "'Sure it's Hard to Keep up with the Splits Here': Irish-American Responses to the Outbreak of Conflict in Northern Ireland, 1968-1974," in *Irish Political Studies* 10: 1995, pp. 138-160.

[4]. Cited in Wilson, p.171

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