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Steve Bruce. *The Edge of the Union: The Ulster Loyalist Political Vision*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. viii + 176 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-827975-4.

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Steve Bruce's latest work on Ulster loyalism is a concise and acerbic re-examination of themes from his previous sociological studies of the Democratic Unionist Party (*God Save Ulster: The Religion and Politics of Paisleyism*, Oxford University Press, 1986) and loyalist terrorism (*The Red Hand: Protestant Paramilitaries in Northern Ireland*, Oxford University Press, 1992) that places those works in the context of recent developments, particularly the dramatic upsurge in loyalist terrorism that began in 1992 and the Downing Street declaration of December 1993. The work espouses a variety of the internal-conflict interpretation of Northern Ireland that the late John Whyte described as the "dominant paradigm" (John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland*, Oxford University Press, 1990) rather than the colonial or post-colonial models that have been debated of late (see for example Liam Kennedy's "Modern Ireland: Post-Colonial Society or Post-Colonial Pretensions," *Irish Review*, 13, Winter 1992/1993). Specifically, Bruce believes that scholars have underestimated the increasing strength of ethnic division that has developed in Northern Ireland. Bruce contends that prior to the current "troubles" most unionists in Northern Ireland considered themselves Ulster British, emphasizing the British aspect of their identities. Now, however, an increasing number of unionists have become Ulster loyalists, defining themselves as "Ulster Protestants first and British second" (p. 1). This has made a difficult conflict more dangerous, and led Bruce, writing before the current ceasefire, to offer a "more realistically dismal portrayal of the Troubles" (p. 122).

The sources of Bruce's pessimism are simple enough. They come straight from the mouths of Ulster loyalists. After a brief description of the importance of loyalist terrorism and the Democratic Unionist Party within broader unionism, Bruce sets out, "to explain what the world

looks like to the 'gunmen and evangelicals.'" From his interviews with loyalists Bruce concludes that more and more Unionists view the attempts by British and Irish governments to cultivate a middle ground for moderate nationalists and moderate unionists as having failed. Efforts to redress the grievances of the Roman Catholic minority with regard to discrimination (the integrity of which an increasing number of unionists seem willing to admit) are seen as negatively affecting Protestants, sometimes unfairly, without substantially reducing IRA violence, gaining the clear allegiance of significant numbers of Catholics to the state or securing the majority Protestant community's place within the United Kingdom. For Bruce, the upsurge of loyalist terrorism after 1992 and the continued significant support for the Democratic Unionist Party are symptomatic of a profound sense of alienation that he describes as "the dismal vision" of Ulster loyalism. Ulster loyalists he interviewed:

had no faith in the mechanics of political negotiation, no faith in the honesty of most of the participants, no great confidence in their ability to predict the actions of other players, and little hope for a voice in future developments beyond the veto of violence (p. 109).

In his summary of loyalists' perceptions Bruce is at his best. His straightforward style sometimes echoes the often combative nature of loyalist discourse, an advantage of Bruce's preference for interviews rather than surveys. In addition Bruce does the general reader a considerable favor by cutting through the byzantine and sometimes ritualistic rhetoric of parties in Northern Ireland (for an illustration of the complexity of that rhetoric see Richard Davis's *Mirror Hate: The Convergent Ideology of Northern Ireland Paramilitaries, 1966-1992* [Brookfield, USA: Dartmouth, 1994]).



Bruce believes the pessimism of loyalists is founded on an increasing sense of insecurity. Unionists clearly understand that current demographic trends portend Roman Catholic majorities in more constituencies within Northern Ireland sometime in the next century. Bruce makes the important additional point that many loyalists believe those changes, which in other circumstances might be attributed to complicated socio-economic forces, are the direct result of IRA violence and intimidation that can be measured by streets in Belfast and farms along the border. Similarly, unionists recognize that the structural transformation from private, manufacturing enterprise to governmental, service-oriented employment schemes has weakened their economic position. Rather than ascribing these changes to broader social developments, loyalists blame this transformation on the IRA's campaign against economic targets and misguided policies of the British government that loyalists can not significantly affect.

Politically, the seeds of doubt have been cultivated by three developments. First, according to Bruce the joint declaration issued in April 1993 by the Social Democratic and Labour Party, representing the majority of Catholics, and Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, was perceived as the creation of a "pan-nationalist front" that intended to bypass and marginalize Unionists. In Bruce's words, by rejecting any internal solution the joint declaration "takes for granted what is at the heart of the Ulster problem by making all the residents of Ireland part of the Irish nation, whether they like it or not" (p. 79). Second, loyalist fears of a unified nationalist front were compounded by the revelation of secret talks between the British government and the IRA, despite previous vociferous public denials. Aside from considerable annoyance at being deceived, loyalists were troubled by differing accounts of those talks – the Major government claiming the talks were predicated on IRA communications tantamount to offers of surrender and the IRA conversely claiming that the British government was tiring of the struggle. Third, in this context of uncertainty the Downing Street Declaration was announced in December 1993. Unionists wonder whether the British government's denial of any "selfish, strategic interest in Northern Ireland," the apparent adoption of an all-Ireland perspective by the words "among all the people who inhabit the island", and the offer to admit Sinn Fein to talks after an IRA renunciation of violence contained in the declaration, are not all the hidden fruits of secret talks. During the course of all of these developments, loyalist gunmen, after a period of relative inactivity, began to react with increasing ferocity

and even greater indiscriminate to IRA attacks.

It is difficult to find fault with Bruce's well-written summary of the loyalists' "dismal vision," or his trenchant observation that, "in so far as the reader finds elements of that vision distorted, the reader's argument is with Ulster loyalists" (p. vi). Bruce contends that the fact that sometimes the loyalist vision is surprisingly insightful is "a useful corrective to the widespread assumption that unionists are merely paranoid bigots" (p. vii). Furthermore, when that vision is distorted it is useful to consider why. Some of Bruce's premises and evaluations are open to question. To this reviewer it seems that Bruce may have overstated loyalists' current importance within unionism. Bruce himself provides evidence for the economic and political emasculation of the workers, shopkeepers and farmers who form the backbone of loyalism. In an increasing service-oriented economy more power may be accruing to middle class professionals. With that said, other writers have commented on the increasing number of writers and associations emphasizing "Ulsterness" (see John Wilson Foster, *Colonial Consequences: Essays in Irish Literature and Culture* [Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1991], p. 258). Is it possible that not only loyalists but Ulster Unionists as a whole are beginning to imagine themselves something more than a community? More irritating than troubling is the manner Bruce sometimes uses *ex parte* sources in his evaluation of loyalists' perspectives. The partisan nature of these sources is generally clear from Bruce's text and ultimately revealed in his end notes. Unfortunately, on at least two occasions the distinction between reporting and evaluating loyalists' perceptions seemed momentarily blurred.

If Bruce has overestimated the strength of the "gunmen and evangelicals" within Ulster unionism, his recognition of the corrosive effects of ethnic violence on civil society mitigate that error. Bruce reminds us that from the beginning the violence has been communal. Symbols of culture and community (chapels, churches, Gaelic Athletic Association clubs, Orange halls, monuments and libraries) have been damaged or destroyed. People are driven from their homes on account of their creed and the threnody of sectarian slaughter can be recited by both communities. If loyalists are not dominant within unionism, ethnic conflicts create circumstances, "which make people go further than they want to go" (p. 118). For Bruce the statistics make it clear that the responsibility for mayhem and murder by loyalist and republicans alike cannot be laid solely on the 4,000 or 5,000 people directly involved. Many thousands more have colluded in violence in varying degrees. Believing ethnicity to

be the root of the matter, Bruce's prognosis is itself dismal. Bruce believes that almost all Unionists are willing to accept practically any form of internal solution. Unfortunately Bruce also believes that many more Unionists than the "gunmen and evangelicals" are willing to take extreme, even violent, measures against Irish unification. Bruce forecasts that any chance of a negotiated settlement will depend upon a continued cessation of violence or the diminution of ethnic sentiments in the con-

text of European integration. He is not sanguine in either case. Bruce's predictions, however, are not the strength of this work. Bruce has made a valuable contribution to the study of Northern Ireland by providing a brief and blunt description of the problem as viewed by Ulster loyalists. It is a useful reminder that, "if the people of Northern Ireland were as moderate, tolerant, and forgiving as they often appear in print, there would not have been more than 3,000 dead bodies" (p. viii).

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