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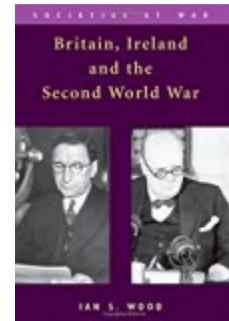
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ian S. Wood. *Britain, Ireland, and the Second World War*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010. ix + 238 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7486-2327-3.

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Ian S. Wood's *Britain, Ireland, and the Second World War* provides a valuable survey of the impact that the war had on Ireland and how it affected relations among the governments of Eire, Northern Ireland, and Great Britain. The author covers a number of major topics including the neutrality of Eire, the impact that the war had on Northern Ireland, the response of the IRA to the conflict, and Britain's relations with the Irish governments on both sides of the border.

Eamon de Valera's determination to keep Eire officially neutral is given a central place in Wood's study. "With our history, with our experience of the last war and with part of our country still unjustly severed from us, we felt that no other decision and no other policy was possible," de Valera announced to the Irish people on 3 September 1939 (quoted, p. 1). Wood provides the context of this quote with a clear review of the events leading up to the creation of the Irish Free State, the partition of the island, and de Valera's own rise to power which culminated in the new Irish constitution of 1937. Under this constitution, Eire, as the Irish Free State was now known, cut many of the symbolic ties that had bound it to the United Kingdom. Even before war broke out, de Valera was preparing for Irish neutrality by insisting on the return of the Treaty Ports to Eire, a policy that Wood characterizes as "an affirmation of full sovereignty" (p. 26).

Historians have long understood that Irish neutrality, or more accurately, nonbelligerence, tilted strongly in favor of the Allies. Dublin cooperated with Britain on intelligence matters, supplied the Allies with valuable weather information, and made secret military plans to coordinate with British forces in case of a German

invasion of Ireland. Irish cooperation with Britain reflected not just a policy of practical self-preservation but, as Wood points out, a genuine desire by de Valera and the majority of the population of Eire to see the Allies defeat Nazi Germany, albeit not at the cost of Irish neutrality. Indeed the formal neutrality of Eire was almost universally supported by the Irish people. Wood concludes that Eire's informal help, in particular intelligence cooperation, "was of no small importance to Britain and her allies, and was indeed the hidden side of the Irish state's neutrality" (p. 58). Irish citizens, with no interference from their own government, served the Allied cause directly as workers in war-related British industries or as volunteers in the British forces. Wood accepts the estimate that over 50,000 Irish citizens served with the British. Irish soldiers were numerous enough for the British army to organize an Irish Brigade. Wood expresses a great deal of admiration for these Irish volunteers whom he sees as having overlooked narrow Irish nationalist concerns to confront the evil of Nazism.

At home, the Irish state did its best to limit the impact of the war which was euphemistically referred to as the "Emergency." While wartime shortages and the need for an expanded defense force could not be ignored in Eire, official censorship kept news of the conflict to a bare minimum. Aside from the mistaken but deadly German bombing of Dublin in May 1941, and the bodies of dead sailors and airmen that washed up on Ireland's coast, the violence of the Second World War bypassed Eire. Dublin's studious adherence to the forms of neutrality, most famously displayed by de Valera's public trip to the German embassy to pay his respects on the death of Hitler, seem unnecessary to the author. Wood believes that the crimes of the Nazi regime warranted official con-

demnation even from a neutral state.

Wood also examines the impact of the war on the northern side of the border. Unlike Eire, Northern Ireland was formally at war along with the rest of the United Kingdom. However, as Wood ably demonstrates, the experience of the Second World War in Northern Ireland was distinct from that of the rest of the United Kingdom. One major difference was that Northern Ireland was exempt from military conscription. Despite attempts by Stormont's Unionist government to have the province included in the draft, London decided at the start of the war that the resistance that conscription would face from the nationalist community made the move counterproductive. In fact, Wood claims that sectarian divisions remained at the heart of life in Northern Ireland, despite the province's active participation in the Second World War. British and American servicemen stationed in Northern Ireland were often shocked by the pervasiveness of sectarian tensions. Wood provides a telling incident regarding BBC programming during the war. When a radio broadcast called the *Irish Half Hour* was introduced for the benefit of Irish nationalists serving in the British military, Northern Ireland's prime minister, Sir Basil Brooke, pushed for an *Ulster Half Hour* as a counterweight. When the new unionist-centered program played a traditional nationalist song the prime minister publicly protested. "In the midst of a global conflict consuming thousands of lives," Wood writes, "these exchanges vividly capture all of Northern Ireland's unresolved cultural and sectarian divisions" (p. 81).

Northern Ireland was not untouched by the war as Belfast was bombed by the Luftwaffe, war-related industrial production almost eliminated unemployment, and nearly 50,000 volunteers served in the armed forces, but it remained fundamentally unchanged. Wood views the war and the postwar creation of the British welfare state as a missed opportunity to change the trajectory of the history of Northern Ireland. Wood criticizes Stormont for failing to push for some fundamental changes during this period. He characterizes the Unionist governments as "simply coasting along, averting their gaze from the chasm of misunderstanding and prejudice which partition, devolved government, and world war had failed to close" (p. 192).

Unlike Dublin's desire to avoid and ignore the war as much as possible, the Irish Republican Army welcomed the conflict as yet another episode of an English difficulty that could be made Ireland's opportunity. Although prewar divisions in the republican movement along left-

right lines continued, the IRA officially opened its war against Britain in January 1939, months before the invasion of Poland by Germany. The IRA of this period was focused on ending partition, not overthrowing Dublin's government. In a vain attempt to force the British to withdraw from Northern Ireland the IRA launched a bombing campaign in Britain. The attacks quickly sputtered out, but republicans were encouraged by the actual outbreak of the war in September to seek aid from Germany. Nazi aid never amounted to much, in large part because of informal but effective cooperation among the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the Garda Siochana, and British intelligence. In addition, the policy of interning known republicans that was introduced in both parts of Ireland reduced the effectiveness of the IRA. Despite the high degree of cooperation, Wood points out that dealing with the IRA remained a point of contention in public between Eire and the United Kingdom. While de Valera's government saw no problem with its own execution of two IRA members convicted of murdering an Irish detective, Dublin loudly protested the hanging of two IRA men convicted of playing a role in a fatal bombing in Britain and the execution of IRA volunteer Tom Williams for the killing of a member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

Wood examines in some detail the German sojourns of Sean Russell, the traditionalist IRA chief of staff, and Frank Ryan, a champion of the republican Left. Despite the policy differences between them, both men cooperated with the Germans to further the goal of Irish unification. Wood is harshly critical of the IRA for failing "to see any moral imperative in the need to destroy the Third Reich and its monstrous tyranny across Europe" (p. 117).

The last major topic covered by Wood is Britain's relations with both Irish governments. British sentiment was divided over Eire. Neville Chamberlain's government had pursued good relations with Dublin and had agreed to return the Treaty Ports to full Irish control in order to end the Economic War. Many British government and military officials, such as British representative to Dublin Sir John Maffey, continued to have a basically positive attitude toward Eire even after Dublin refused to enter the war. On the other hand, Prime Minister Winston Churchill was very bitter regarding Irish neutrality. Churchill's offers to Dublin to work for Irish unification if Eire declared war on Germany came to naught as de Valera recognized that Churchill did not have the backing of Stormont for his plans. In fact Anglo-Irish relations were so strained that the Irish military took the threat of British invasion every bit as seriously as that of German invasion. While Churchill was as aware as

anyone about the secret cooperation that Dublin offered to the Allies, Wood suggests that the prime minister, ever a staunch imperialist, had never come to terms with the desire of Irish nationalists to leave the British Empire. Churchill also did not trust de Valera. This mistrust must be linked to Churchill's direct involvement in the events of the Irish Revolution. Churchill's anger at Irish neutrality was not even assuaged by the Allied victory over Germany. He singled out Eire for criticism in his victory speech of May 13, 1945. In his response a few days later de Valera told his radio audience that if Britain had invaded Eire for its own purposes, as Churchill suggested it could have rightfully done during the war, than British policy would be no different from that of Nazi Germany. Ironically, as Wood points out, Churchill's attack, and de Valera's response, was a major political coup for the Irish leader as the exchange completely erased any negative feelings that the Irish public had over de Valera's condolence visit to German ambassador Hempel after Hitler's suicide. Like the policy of neutrality itself, de Valera's speech was almost universally hailed in Ireland.

While Anglo-Irish tensions were bound to happen London also had difficulties with the government of Northern Ireland. Wood argues that Northern Ireland never fully lived up to its potential as part of the British war effort. Each of Northern Ireland's three wartime prime ministers urged London to extend conscription to the province but the British never took the step and voluntary recruitment was disappointing. Among the unionist community, memories of the slaughter of the Great War were fresh and there was the added concern that veterans would return to find that their jobs had been taken by men who has not served. Nationalists in the North were understandably reluctant to join the British forces in great numbers. Industrial production in Northern Ireland was also somewhat disappointing and labor disputes were more common in the province than in other parts of the United Kingdom. However, in general Wood argues that Stormont cooperated with London to try to promote the maximum war effort from the people of Northern Ireland and the British were grateful for the strategic bases that the North provided.

Taken as a whole, Wood's study stresses two basic facts about the Second World War and the British Isles. The first is that the relations among the two Irish governments and the British government were very much dominated by the continuing effects of the Irish Revolution and partition. Eire did not stay out of the war due to any sympathy for Germany or any antipathy to the Allied cause but rather because de Valera and the great

mass of the Irish people believed that it was inappropriate to fight side by side with Britain as long as Northern Ireland remained a part of the United Kingdom. The government in Stormont, while dedicated to fighting the war, never flagged in its devotion to maintaining Unionist domination in Northern Ireland. London understood that partition had had a profound impact on Irish politics and treated Northern Ireland differently from the rest of the United Kingdom, while using the possibility of reunification to tempt Dublin into the war. Many British officials, Churchill being a notable exception, accepted that Eire's informal cooperation was the best outcome that London could reasonably hope for as long as Ireland was divided. The second fact that Wood illuminates is that, despite near universal support for the policy of formal neutrality, many Irish citizens were directly involved in the war as military volunteers and industrial laborers in the United Kingdom. Thus, a true history of the period needs to acknowledge that while Eire avoided the full rigors of war, tens of thousands of its people experienced the conflict firsthand.

Wood expresses a great deal of respect for the Irish people from both sides of the border who fought against Hitler. He is critical of the fact that for a half-century after the end of the war Ireland studiously ignored the memory of its citizens who were veterans of the conflict. It has only been since the beginning of the peace process in Northern Ireland that Dublin has felt comfortable celebrating their service. While Wood's revulsion at the Nazi regime is warranted, it is perhaps naïve of him to expect that the IRA should have rejected cooperating with Germany out of moral compunction. The IRA was primarily interested in ending partition and even left-wing republicans stood by the maxim: "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." To Irish republicans the ultimate enemy was British imperialism, not fascism. Likewise, Wood questions the morality of Ireland's neutrality in the face of Nazi barbarism. While he gives Eire full credit for unofficially helping the Allies, he fails to compare its pro-Allied nonbelligerence to the neutrality of other democratic states like Switzerland and Sweden.

Britain, Ireland and the Second World War is an admirable introduction to the history of the topic. As the author admits in his acknowledgments, the historiography on Ireland and the war is extensive, of high quality, and constantly expanding and he could not include everything. For instance, volumes 6 and 7 of the Documents on Irish Foreign Policy series published by the Royal Irish Academy now cover the whole period from 1939 to 1945. However, Wood makes no claim to have written a defini-

tive history and his book has value for a general reader or for students in a course on Irish history. Aside from a few copy-editing errors, the book is well written and conveniently organized by topic. Wood also provides more than adequate background material for readers who are not specialists. While Wood focuses mostly on Ireland, as his book makes clear, it is impossible to separate the Irish experience of the war from that of Great Britain. Wood clearly demonstrates that even as Eire publicly trumpeted

its sovereignty, its ties to Britain were extraordinarily close, and indeed inescapable. While most of the book is a summary of existing literature, Wood does contribute a good deal of primary research on Northern Ireland. His suggestion that the Second World War and its immediate aftermath constituted a missed opportunity for reform in Northern Ireland is certainly worthy of further investigation by historians.

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