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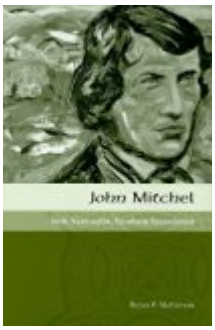

Bryan P. McGovern. *John Mitchel: Irish Nationalist, Southern Secessionist.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2009. xviii + 293 pp. $36.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57233-654-4.

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Bryan McGovern states at the outset of his biography of John Mitchel that he aims to uncover his subject's political and intellectual significance. Anyone the least bit familiar with Mitchel will immediately realize this is no small task for, as McGovern states, Mitchel "represented the tortuous relationship between industrialization, nationalism, imperialism, and racism" (p. xvii). Born to an Ulster Protestant family in 1815, Mitchel was by the age of thirty an important figure in Irish nationalism and, according to McGovern, perhaps the most influential Irish nationalist of the century by the time he died in 1875. His editorial rhetoric in 1848 led to exile in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), from which he escaped to America in 1853. There, he edited several newspapers, achieved fame as a defender of Irish Americans, and went down in infamy as a proponent of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. A zealous partisan of the South, he lost two sons fighting in the Confederate army and became a vocal critic of Jefferson Davis. Always at least tangentially involved in Irish nationalist organizations, Mitchel was elected MP for Tipperary in 1875, but died before he could refuse to take his seat.

McGovern is most concerned with why Mitchel wrote and spoke as he did and why his ideas were so influential in both Ireland and America. The book relies on Mitchel's words to analyze debates and events that influenced Mitchel's thinking or that were shaped by his pen. Among these were (in the order McGovern presents them) the dynamics of mid-nineteenth-century Irish nationalism, the Great Irish Potato Famine, Ireland's 1848 rebellion, antebellum debates over American slavery, the American Civil War, the Fenian movement, and Mitchel's election to Parliament. While the disparate nature of these events and what Mitchel said of them make it easy to poke holes in Mitchel's worldview, McGovern wants us to see the bigger picture, which he argues is Mitchel's unceasing effort to create an ideal republican nation, even as his vision of what precisely constituted that nation changed across time and space.

The first third of McGovern's book deals with Mitchel's life in Ireland, but readers interested in Mitchel as an Irish American, advocate of slavery, or Southern secessionist will fail to properly understand these issues by skipping over it. Mitchel's Irish background helped determine his views of American society, especially on subjects like immigrant identity, race, and nationality.

McGovern speculates that the tolerance and egalitarianism of Mitchel's father, a Unitarian minister, remained with John throughout his life, but he devotes substantially more attention to unpacking the influence of Thomas Carlyle on Mitchel's nationalism. Carlyle's disdain for the perceived individualism and immorality of the nineteenth century, along with his affinity for a structured, hierarchical society, meshed well with Mitchel's desire to create a culturally homogenous Irish republic ruled by a native intelligentsia. Carlyle's influence, along with that of the Irish romantic nationalist Thomas Davis, produced Mitchel's unique brand of nationalism that emphasized the cultural distinctiveness of Gaelic Ireland and the need to expel the Anglo-Saxon invaders who had forced the Irish into modernity. McGovern rightly avoids the urge to dwell immediately on how this framework for constructing an Irish nation translated into Mitchel's part in secession and the Confederacy, choosing instead to reveal how circumstances in Ireland continued to influence Mitchel's thinking before his arrival in America.

The Great Irish Potato Famine led Mitchel to embrace revolution as a means of bringing about his Irish nation. Convinced that officials in London and Ireland were using the potato blight to systematically wipe out the Irish people and completely anglicize Ireland, Mitchel's fierce anti-English rhetoric led to his arrest and dubious conviction of treason-felony. Given the tenacity with which subsequent generations of Irish nationalists clung to Mitchel's views on the genocidal nature of British relief policy, McGovern engages with recent scholarship on the famine to weigh Mitchel's views against the historical record. He explains how Mitchel's pre-famine ideas on English rule in Ireland and travels in the Irish countryside during the famine led him to his conclusions, drawing from a range of Mitchel's writings to demonstrate the thoughts behind them. Those familiar with the history and historiography of famine-era Ireland will find this part of the book particularly engaging. Readers more concerned with affairs across the Atlantic should keep in mind how prevalent Mitchel's interpretation of the famine was amongst Irish immigrants and, in turn, how it might have shaped their views on issues ranging from Anglo-American relations to chattel slavery in America.

The story of Mitchel's penal sentence and escape to America matter to McGovern only so much as it mattered to the Irish in America. Mitchel being forcibly removed from Ireland at the behest of a packed jury got together by English officials in Dublin allowed him to become the literal embodiment of the Irish exile forced from his home by English despotism. He was therefore a powerful symbol for Irish Americans who conceived of themselves as exiles rather than emigrants making a conscious choice to relocate. But McGovern obscures the differences between perception and reality, or perhaps overlooks critical issues like labor, class, and religion, when he argues that Mitchel's "experiences in America were not all that different from most Irish Americans" (p. 95).

It did not take long for Mitchel to excite controversy in his new country, and many readers will likely be familiar with his well-known advocacy of racial slavery and the reopening of the transatlantic slave trade. In explaining Mitchel's ideas on race, McGovern focuses on how the romantic nationalism Mitchel espoused as an Irish nationalist (especially his belief that nations arose from natural, inevitable differences between groups of people) "transferred easily to the racial

ideals and mores of the United States" (p. 123). Because he shifts the analysis back and forth between Mitchel's writings on race and culture during his days in Ireland and his views of America's racial hierarchy and slavery in the mid-1850s, McGovern's conclusions are less clear on this issue. In arguing that Mitchel's racism was partially the result of his experiences in Ireland, however, McGovern makes an important contribution to broader questions regarding Irish immigrants and race in the antebellum period.

McGovern is especially helpful in clarifying one of Mitchel's best known but little understood editorials, in which he wished for a "good plantation well-stocked with healthy negroes in Alabama" (p. 129). Used by contemporaries and historians alike to prove Mitchel's advocacy of racial slavery, the quotation, as McGovern observes, has rarely been situated in its proper context. It came from an 1853 letter Mitchel wrote to the Dublin abolitionist James Haughton where, aside from the aforementioned quote, Mitchel accused Haughton of having hoarded corn during the famine to raise its value and placed the welfare of African American slaves above that of Irish people. McGovern quotes nearly the entire letter, and, without excusing Mitchel's ugliest views, shows that Mitchel's support for slavery was more than the result of a simplistic racism and stemmed at least in part from his memories of famine-era Ireland.

Yet to say that Mitchel's views on race and slavery were entirely unconnected to the actual time he spent in the South would be grossly inaccurate, as McGovern proceeds to show. Mitchel's oft-expressed affinity for slavery as it existed in America was also part of his more general admiration for Southern society, where he believed religious tolerance, paternalistic elites, and harmonious class relations made for an ideal republican nation. Even when he relocated his family from New York City to Tucaleechee Cove, Tennessee and discovered that the local "mean whites" were not so deferential, and that he missed the comforts of bourgeois urban living, Mitchel continued to push for an independent South. He did so, according to McGovern, not just as a Southern partisan, but also as an Irish nationalist, believing that secession would ultimately foment an Anglo-American war and open the door to a final successful Irish rebellion.

McGovern's treatment of John Mitchel's Civil War experiences and those of the Irish American communities he is supposed to have been so influential with, will frustrate readers familiar with the work of David Gleeson, Susannah Ural, and Christian Samito in this field.[1] McGovern claims the Draft Riots of 1863 show that Irish Americans in the North subscribed to Mitchel's "pro-Southern/anti-Northern (or at least anti-Republican) views," revealing a tendency to over-generalize when discussing Mitchel's influence on Irish Americans and overlooking the nuances in Irish America these scholars have identified (p. 175). Mitchel edited two Richmond newspapers during the war and grew increasingly disenchanted with Jefferson Davis's administration while remaining committed to the Confederate cause. Yet McGovern opts not to explore how Mitchel's views of Confederate war policy were dictated by his longer term vision of republican society, which comes as a surprise given how critical this theme is throughout the rest of the book.

Perhaps the reason for this short shrift is, as McGovern argues, that Mitchel's devotion to Ireland outweighed his Confederate commitment. The last quarter of the book examines Mitchel's part in the rebirth of Irish nationalism in America and Ireland. McGovern correctly concludes that as an editor, organizer, and speaker, Mitchel's influence "confirmed a fanaticism that has been evident in Irish physical-force nationalist movements since the mid-nineteenth century" (p. 229). Mitchel's election to Parliament weeks before his death in 1875 served as an ironic capstone to a lifetime of anti-British activity.

McGovern is at his best when he is able to show how Mitchel's unending quest for nationhood (both Irish and Southern) helped him carve out seemingly incongruous positions on subjects like immigration, slavery, liberty, and class. While in the introduction and conclusion, McGovern argues Mitchel "reflected the opinion of a wide spectrum of Irish immigrants" and that amongst Irish Americans his "ideas were closer to typical than previous historians might have us believe," he needs to supplement this intellectual biography of Mitchel with a social history of Irish Americans to make a convincing point (pp. xi, 234). But, as McGovern's biography allows us to see, John Mitchel illustrates where ideas on nationhood, race, and freedom both dovetailed and clashed in the mid-nineteenth-century Atlantic world.

Note

[1]. David Gleeson, ***The Irish in the South*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 121-78; Susannah J. Ural, ***The Harp and the Eagle: Irish American Volunteers in the Union Army, 1861-1865*** (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Christian Samito, ***Becoming American Under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship during the Civil War Era*** (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).