H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bruce Nelson. *Irish Nationalists and the Making of the Irish Race.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. 348 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-15312-4.

Reviewed by Aaron Thornburg (Duke University)
Published on H-SAE (November, 2012)
Commissioned by Michael B. Munnik

Irish Nationalists and the Making of the Irish Race: Supporters of the Cause and the Socio-Cultural Complexity of Racial Solidarity

In this recent release, historian Bruce Nelson makes a transition from a scholarly concern with American labor, which was the focus of his previous two books, to one with Ireland. While even a cursory reading of Nelson's last book, *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality* (2001), reveals that these two areas of scholarship are not entirely unrelated, the change from one subject area to the other is notable, and Nelson has made the shift admirably.

The overall concern of Nelson's book reviewed here, with the exception of the first part, is less with the discursive construction of the Irish race than with claims of solidarity and/or common cause between Irish and Irish-American agitators seeking political gains in Ireland (whether in the form of Catholic emancipation, Home Rule, or an independent republic) and other repressed non-European peoples/groups.[1] Nelson chooses to "focus mainly on how Irish nationalists defined themselves in relation to the many other movements for emancipation that coexisted, and sometimes intersected, with the struggle for Irish freedom in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (p. 50). In taking this approach, Nelson offers a perspective that counters characterizations of the Irish nationalist tradition as ethnocentric, sectarian, and backward- or inward-looking that have been forwarded by several recent historians, journalists, and other writers (pp 49-50). In this regard, Nelson's work is a contribution in support of an historical perspective that has been in a long-standing debate with these so-called revisionists.

The book is made up of four parts of two substantive chapters each. The first part reviews the discursive constitution of the Irish race by British interests from the twelfth through nineteenth centuries, thus setting the broad historical context for the chapters to follow.

The remaining parts of the book are largely composed of intersecting biographical sketches in rough chronological order. Part 2 addresses the issue of slavery and abolition, with claims of solidarity between the Irish and enslaved people of African descent made in support of the antislavery movement. The first chapter focuses on the abolitionist outlook of Irish politician Daniel O'Connell, the Great Liberator, detailing his nineteenth-century statements against slavery around the globe (perhaps especially in the United States). The second chapter concentrates on the figure of Frederick Douglass, though a number of other men of African descent who also visited Ireland are also mentioned. The chapter details Douglass's statements reflecting solidarity with the cause of Ireland and the Irish, as well as statements that suggest race-based animosities between people of Irish and African descent in America. Each of these chapters provides quite a lot of contextualizing information about the variety of voices and political conditions in Britain, Ireland, and the United States that either supported or militated against statements of common interest between people of Irish and African descent.

Part 3 of the book looks at discourses of "racial" solidarity in the context of Britain's Boer Wars in South Africa, particularly in the context of the second Boer War (1899-1902). During these conflicts, some activists for Irish independence heralded the Boers as freedom fighters taking up arms against the oppression of the British Empire. Many glossed over the realities of race-based oppression inflicted on native Africans by the Boers. The first chapter in this section revolves around the figure of activist Michael Davitt, who often called for solidarity between Irish people and others he suggested were oppressed by colonial powers. However, in the context of the Boer Wars, Davitt painted a picture of the Boers as heroes in a struggle against imperialist forces in a manner that goes so far as to demonize the native inhabitants of

South Africa. The following chapter focuses on the lives of and statements by Irish republican Erskin Childers and South African Jan Christian Smuts to highlight their similar propensity to frame issues of rights and independence in terms of race and to justify calls for rights in terms of entitlement of the British Empire's white subjects.

The final part of the book returns to the American context to detail statements reflecting common cause between Irish republicans and non-European activists during and immediately following World War I. Chapter 7 concentrates on a number of African American rights activists–including Marcus Garvey, Claude McKay, Cyril Briggs, Asa Philip Randolph, and W. E. B. Du Bois–who at times drew inspiration from the political struggles of the Irish. Chapter 8 looks at the (at times inconsistent) rhetoric of Irish republicans, most rigorously Eamon de Valera, during time spent in the United States. This part of the book also includes a short epilogue that explores the language of debates surrounding the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which ultimately resulted in Ireland's independence and the Irish Civil War. The epilogue also provides some overarching conclusions for the work.

In producing this work, Nelson utilizes an impressively wide range of sources, including newspaper reports, public speeches, and published writings as well as personal correspondences and diaries. From a sociocultural anthropological perspective, what is interesting in the work is the complexity of the "outlook" of historical figures that Nelson presents. As one example, late in the book Nelson notes a difference in the discourse of Irish nationalists based on whether they were speaking/writing in Ireland or United States: "[T]here may have been a significant difference between the struggle for Irish independence in Dublin and in New York. In Dublin, and throughout Ireland, the leaders of Irish nationalism sought to build a wall between the national and social questions.... But the exiles and emissaries who carried the torch for Irish freedom in New York were operating in a context where they were bound to encounter and interact with socialists, labor militants, suffragists, pacifists, and Indian and African diaspora nationalists.... On this terrain carefully constructed walls between emancipatory movements proved to be porous, and the themes of class, race, and nation often converged" (pp. 216-217).

This line of analysis leads Nelson to discuss the "two poles" of Irish nationalist sensibility, the anticolonial and the white triumphalist, which were both available to and represented in the discourse of supporters of Irish nationalism (p. 237).[2] This attention paid to the social contexts that influenced the stated opinions of individuals hints at the ethnographic.

In its coverage of its subject matter, scope, and range of source material, Nelson's book is commendable. Further, throughout the book, there are many more historical figures addressed and contextualizing historical-political details presented than are suggested in the cursory overview provided here, making it a worthy read for Irish studies specialists and those with less knowledge of Irish history alike.

Notes

[1]. This concern with subject of cross-group solidarity is related to the major of themes of Nelson's *Divided We Stand.*

[2]. Nelson draws these "two poles" from the work of Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 259.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Aaron Thornburg. Review of Nelson, Bruce, *Irish Nationalists and the Making of the Irish Race.* H-SAE, H-Net Reviews. November, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37369

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.