



**Robert John Lynch.** *The Partition of Ireland, 1918-1925.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 258 pp. GBP 59.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-00773-4.

**Reviewed by** Jason Knirck (Central Washington University)

**Published on** H-Albion (January, 2020)

**Commissioned by** Douglas Kanter (Florida Atlantic University)

Robert Lynch's new *The Partition of Ireland* promises to be the definitive history of a subject that has paradoxically been at the center of much of twentieth-century Irish history without frequently being analyzed in its own right. As has been extensively argued by John Regan, particularly in "Southern Irish Nationalism as a Historical Problem" (2007), the north was often written out of accounts of the Irish revolution by Sinn Féin and later historians in order to sanitize the revolutionary story of some of its violence and sectarianism. While works such as David Fitzpatrick's *The Two Irelands, 1912-39* (1998) took an all-Ireland focus and emphasized the parallel developments of the two Irish states, Lynch tells a more integrated story. He argues that partition was central and foundational to not just the development of the Irish states but also to twentieth-century Irish history as a whole. Lynch writes that "partition as a topic sits very much on the periphery of historical scholarship," but "seems to define the Irish experience in the twentieth century" (p. 5) and "remains the most vital and dynamic force in modern Ireland" (p. 227). His book aims to analyze partition from a variety of vantage points and establish the centrality of the topic to Irish history.

As Lynch notes, partition was not inevitable, despite how it has been written about subsequently. With hindsight, Ireland appears part of a trend

that continued with British India and Palestine, but viewed from 1919 the solution seemed less foreseeable. The partition of Bengal fifteen years earlier had been a marked failure and previous imperial policies had been geared more toward forcing disparate groups together (e.g., Canada, South Africa) than toward separating them. But the foundation narratives of and the historiographies about the two Irish states often made partition seem an inevitability, the result of two irreconcilable "nations" coexisting in adjacent spaces: "historians have scoured the pre-partition landscape for evidence to confirm the development of two nations in Ireland, both shaped by incompatible social, cultural, and political trajectories.... [A. T. Q.] Stewart and many subsequent historians presented a paradigm which saw Ulster as a place of enduring and endemic sectarian strife, and partition less its cause than its result" (pp. 7-8). Lynch contends, instead, that division into two warring camps was not the teleological result of decades of sectarian strife in Ulster, noting that it was historically contingent on several developments in the preceding decade and therefore "largely a historical accident" (p. 59). Throughout the book, Lynch mentions a number of factors that, taken together, led to partition. First, there was a fair amount of cowardice, bungling, and poor judgment at the level of elite politics. As has often been pointed out, no

elected Irish MP voted for a partitionist solution and none of the leaders involved in the intricate negotiations before and during the First World War wholeheartedly embraced partition as a permanent policy. Instead, “the partition solution ... [was] a rushed, messy, temporary expedient and based on a series of solutions which had already been rejected as unworkable” (p. 81). Although the “small ruling elites based in London, Dublin, and Belfast” each initially decried partition, the solution was ultimately put forward in the Government of Ireland Act—what Lynch calls “the forgotten Fourth Home Rule Bill” (p. 71),—continued by the Anglo-Irish Treaty, and cemented by the eventual breakdown of the Boundary Commission. In the end, partition was “pushed forward by a weary political establishment desperate to escape the political implosion of the country” (p. 59).

Second, partition was also caused by the reduction and simplification of what had been complex and overlapping Irish identities into a nationalist/unionist division. This eliminated socialist, feminist, rural, labor, and Home Ruler identities, but also reduced the importance of northern nationalists and southern unionists, neither of which had a clear place in the political systems of the partitioned island. Elites on all sides of the question began to speak of the Irish people in stark, dualistic terms: “certainly, religious division existed, but, as Ireland approached partition, the heterogeneous struggles between and within communities were engulfed with an all-consuming narrative of sectarian division.... There were a multitude of localized divisions based on class, religion, or region. The politics of partition drew these elements into a simple duality and plundered the past for myths to reinforce it” (p. 53).

This rhetoric ultimately affected the behavior of members of the communities themselves, who often responded with increased violence. This, then, is the third major explanatory factor identified by Lynch: the violence across the island that accompanied the discussions of partition at the

elite level. He states directly that “partition was, in a very real sense, brought about through violence and the threat of force” (p. 11). This violence started in Lisburn and Belfast in the summer of 1920 with communal riots ostensibly caused by IRA attacks against RIC members. In Lynch’s telling, it ended a period of relatively peaceful intercommunity relations in towns such as Lisburn. The change was brought about by anxiety among nationalists and unionists over the now very real threat of partition. Lynch writes, “in early 1920 there was very little sign on the surface that towns like Lisburn were powder kegs of sectarian animosity. However, the explosion of violence in Lisburn would demonstrate how deadly the divisions over partition would be when they arrived in Ulster” (p. 90). Ultimately, this led to nearly two years of frequent and deadly violence across the six counties, featuring urban riots, IRA action, and the creation of the counterinsurrectionary (and mostly Protestant) Specials. The violence was fueled by the threat of partition and the increasingly vitriolic, divisive, and exclusionary rhetoric advanced by Sinn Féin and Ulster Unionist leaders. This “was not simply the top-down manipulation of an innocent population at large. Propaganda did not try and create beliefs which hadn’t existed before, but rather played on well-rehearsed prejudices, myths and common stereotypes of the enemy” (p. 105). Eventually, this led to a significant refugee crisis, as southern unionists and northern nationalists fled deteriorating situations. Lynch estimates that between fifty thousand and eighty thousand Irish people left their homes due to the violent crisis over partition.

The foregrounding of this violence is one of the strongest parts of the book. Lynch shows that violence was inherent in and endemic to the process of partition from 1920 forward. This played a key role in determining whether and how partition happened, and Lynch’s focus on violence returns the partition narrative’s locus to Ireland and away from London. This corrects two of the historiographical trends that Lynch criticizes: an exces-

sive focus on high politics, which “inadvertently led to a tendency to reduce partition to a dry and dusty act of administrative chicanery,” and the fact that the recent bottom-up investigations of the Irish revolution have not much affected the study of revolutionary Ulster (p. 10). Lynch’s book admirably takes a bottom-up approach that encompasses the whole island, allowing him to restore violence and its aftereffects to the narrative. His analysis of the refugee crisis is particularly effective in this context. While there has been a fair amount of discussion and debate regarding the population decline among southern Protestants, the story of Catholic refugees from the north and the partisan issues raised by their accommodation in the south have been less discussed. Its foregrounding in this book shows the benefits of looking at the revolution from the bottom up and the emphasis on violence and refugee crises connects the Irish story more closely to those of Palestine and India.

Another of Lynch’s goals is to find similarities between the effects of partition in the north and south. He notes early on that “the new settlements of 1922 saw the victory of the two most authoritarian parties in Ireland: Ulster unionists and pro-Treaty Sinn Féin” (p. 12). The reductionist identities that emerged from the struggle over partition motivated leaders in the Free State and Northern Ireland to identify and persecute enemies quickly: “violence had become hardwired into the state-building project and membership of a group espousing simple tribalistic messages a key right of passage to the levers of power” (p. 137). Partition enabled each state to create a narrative that emphasized its survival against long odds, with northern leaders accentuating their struggle against a nationalist ethos and southern leaders at various times defining themselves against British interference—including in the act of partition itself—and resistance to the Treaty.

What marks Lynch’s book as distinct and fresh is its seeking of such comparisons in the be-

havior of ordinary citizens as well as at the level of high politics. The latter is given less in-depth analysis than the former and this often leads to some rather sweeping statements that would have benefited from more evidence. For example, Lynch asserts that minorities were subjected to “state-sponsored coercion” in both states and “were treated at best with suspicion by their new hosts or at worst actively suppressed” (p. 166). While this probably is true of the north, Lynch needs to be more specific regarding the Free State, as even historians such as Peter Hart and Gemma Clark who have foregrounded violence against southern Protestants in the civil war have not alleged that such violence was state-sponsored. If the reference is to the anti-Treaty minority, they were unquestionably the objects of state-sponsored coercion, but further argumentation is required to establish that the differences of opinion over the Treaty revolved around partition, as the judgment of most historians has relegated this issue to a fairly minor role in the Treaty split.

Moreover, it is not immediately obvious that the Ulster Unionists and pro-Treaty Sinn Féiners were the two most authoritarian parties in Ireland, and Lynch’s claim, on which much of the subsequent comparison is based, could have been supported more extensively. In a similar vein, the connection between the narratives of partition and the ensuing violence could have been made clearer. Throughout the book Lynch downplays the sectarian nature of the violence and instead analyzes it as being fundamentally about reactions to and fears of partition. This is to avoid seeing the struggles of 1920-22 as just another example in a long line of sectarian struggles that teleologically led to two Irelands and partition. He also notes that politicians, when confronted with partition, pitched reductionist and false nationalist/unionist narratives to a population that tended at least in part to believe some of those tropes anyway, and that those two narratives trumped alternative definitions of Irishness in the period. This is all historiographically and historically very thought-provok-

ing and innovative, but it would have been nice to have more explanation of the transition from peace to violence. If communal relations in Lisburn had been relatively peaceful before the summer of 1920, why did the murder of a Protestant RIC inspector touch off such violence? Why did Belfast follow a similar pattern and, in Lynch's words, begin to partition itself in 1920? The assumption is that the fears created by the threat of partition, and politicians' virulent responses to that threat, somehow created the sectarian and political divisions at the street level that exploded into violence in 1920. The threat of partition and politicians' willingness to take advantage of that threat for political gain apparently is what made the violence more difficult to contain than ostensibly similar expulsions of nonwhite workers in Glasgow, Liverpool, London, and Cardiff (p. 93). While there are some compelling aspects of this argument, the connections between the contingent nature of partition, false and reductionist sectarian/political narratives, and the outbreak of sectarian/political violence could have been stated more clearly.

That said, those are minor concerns that recede in the face of the book's admirable focus on the ways in which partition affected the entire island, elites and nonelites alike. *The Partition of Ireland* is now a critical must-read work on the Irish revolution and goes a long way toward its goal of restoring partition to the center of modern Irish history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

**Citation:** Jason Knirck. Review of Lynch, Robert John. *The Partition of Ireland, 1918-1925*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2020.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54158>



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