This volume on Irish political thought is based on a series of seminars held at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. in 1998, sponsored by the Folger Institute Center for the History of British Political Thought. As the Center’s guiding force, J.G.A. Pocock asserts in the concluding essay, it thus forms a part of that admittedly problematic enterprise of constructing a “new British history,” one that acknowledges the interlocking and interacting histories of all the peoples of the British Isles. Neither Pocock nor the editor and seminar director, S.J. Connolly, explore how the contributions to this volume constitute this historiographical new departure. The essays included here represent less a consistent methodological approach than a preliminary and rather empiricist sampling of a range of political ideas which defy any coherent generalization.

Connolly does identify three somewhat discontinuous themes within Irish political thought—British constitutionalism (the “ancient constitution” and its attendant rights and liberties), corporatism (the defense of traditional group privileges), and civic humanism—a trio that hardly distinguishes Irish political thinking from English thought, and which would lead us to think that all Irish political thought is merely derivative. Significantly, he refuses to acknowledge Ireland’s political and economic subordination to Britain as a formative part of the mix. What distinguishes Irish political ideas is that they are in fact pragmatic responses to real political situations and, as such, Irish political thought adapts these three ubiquitous political languages in opportunistic ways. Thus we should not look to Ireland for abstract political theorizing, but rather for the interplay between ideas and action. The fact of Ireland’s dependency (whether described as colonial or otherwise) sits like the elephant in the living room in many of these essays—an elemental fact of Irish political and economic life that is either ignored or denied.

Connolly does assert an Atlantic significance to Irish political thinking that might acknowledge the elephant, but neither he nor any of the other contributors explore it. He and Jacqueline Hill prefer to situate Ireland as an ancien régime state in Europe, rather than a colonial dependency. This rejection of a colonial model certainly shapes the approach to Irish political thought represented here. The notion of Ireland as a colony has traditionally been integral to a teleological nationalist meta-narrative that privileges a continuous oppositional rhetoric and mutes the massive body of establishment voices. Much of the scholarship on Irish political thought (and it is still a much neglected field) has sought to discredit this anti-colonial reading by emphasizing its discontinuities and its opportunistic appropriation of self-serving, frustrated place-seekers. But given the obvious fact of Ireland’s dependency (however labeled) it has been a difficult task. Even here, the two essays on political economy (one by Robert Mahony on Swift and another by Patrick Kelly) detect a decided anti-colonial critique that identifies the development of the British economy with the deliberate underdevelopment of the Irish economy.

The political ideas sampled reflect the political thought of the Anglo-Irish, Protestant elite. While acknowledged to exist, Catholic and Presbyterian thinking is dismissed. Indeed, Pocock seems to imply that Protestant Ireland is very much a part of the “new British history,” while Catholic Ireland is not. The essays included instead focus on the debate within Protestant Ireland over the Glorious Revolution (Connolly), the resiliency and ubiquity of old regime corporatist institutions, prac-
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