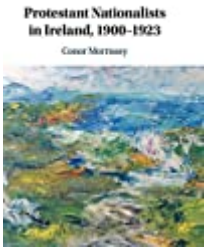
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Conor Morrissey. *Protestant Nationalists in Ireland, 1900-1923.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 260 pp. $99.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-108-47386-6.



Reviewed by Colin Reid (University of Sheffield)

Published on H-Albion (May, 2021)

Commissioned by Douglas Kanter (Florida Atlantic University)

John Dillon, one of the leaders of the Home Rule Party in Edwardian Ireland, was not above some casual sectarianism. He gave a speech during the fractious Galway City by-election in 1906, condemning John Shawe-Taylor, who was standing for the centrist Irish Reform Association. Shawe-Taylor was from a Protestant gentry background but had played an important role in organizing the land conference of 1902, which contributed to the transformative Land Act of the following year. Dillon, however, told the hustings that Shawe-Taylor "has in his veins some of the worst blood in Galway"—the crowd responded with a "hear, hear"—before proclaiming that "a man with the black blood of Clan Cromwell in his veins" would always be "an enemy of Ireland." It was Dillon at his insensitive best, but given the vitriol of his comments, some among the Galway crowd might have been confused when he introduced the Home Rule candidate, Stephen Gwynn, as "the concentrated essence of everything that was Irish, good and noble."[1] Like Shawe-Taylor, Gwynn was a Protestant. Moreover, his mother's family were landowners; his father's people came to Ireland with Cromwell. Why was Shawe-Taylor's bloodline tainted but Gwynn's was not?

The answer lies in their political preferences. Gwynn, as a Home Ruler, was in tune with the national aspiration of self-government; Shawe-Taylor, on the other hand, was not. In Dillon's eyes, Gwynn had managed to overcome the prejudice of his bloodline (although the fact that he was a grandson of William Smith O'Brien, the unlikely aristocratic leader of the 1848 rebellion, undoubtedly helped). In the 1940s, Gwynn told F. S. L. Lyons, then a young doctoral student researching the Irish Parliamentary Party, that being a Protestant opened doors within nationalist parliamentary politics, as the Home Rule organization was eager to display its nonsectarian credentials.[2] But the unavoidable truth was that Protestants were a rare breed within the Home Rule network: politics by the 1880s had solidified into a polarized state, mirroring a society divided by religious denomination. Whether because of "black blood" or political preference, the overwhelming number of

Protestants in Ireland clearly identified as unionists.

Given their rarefied status, what was it like to be a Protestant in an overwhelmingly Catholic nationalist movement? This is the focus of Conor Morrissey's book. Morrissey frames his study of Protestant nationalists in Ireland during the first quarter of the twentieth century as a "story of a counterculture" (p. 2). He is interested not in Home Rulers but in Protestants involved within "advanced nationalist" circles. While the book charts the lives of individual Protestant nationalists, Morrissey is particularly acute in his assessment of the associational culture of his subject matter. To this end, he provides an overview of various organizations, such as the Irish Guild of the Church (a radical faction within the Church of Ireland body) and an explicitly Protestant Gaelic League, which was set up in 1907. The literary revival appears to have been a path into advanced nationalism for many Protestants. Once involved politically, Protestant nationalists were often marginalized from their wider religious cohort; the appeal of organizational networks was perhaps driven by the survival strategy of safety in numbers.

Many of the Protestant nationalists that the book examines will be familiar to readers well versed in the revolutionary period in Ireland (circa 1912-22). Roger Casement, Alice Stopford Green, and Bulmer Hobson, for example, are naturally unavoidable figures in this "counterculture" story. But it is welcome to see several characters who do not receive as much attention these days, such as Robert Lindsay Crawford, a key advocate of a progressively minded Orangeism and an early advocate of independent unionism in Ulster. Another fascinating yet largely unknown figure is George Berkeley, an English-born minor aristocrat, who became the most unlikely officer commanding of the Irish Volunteers in Belfast. Had sectarian warfare broken out in Belfast on the eve of the First World War, as many feared, an Oxford-educated squire would have been directing operations against the Ulster Volunteer Force.

It took courage for an Irish Protestant to become involved in advanced nationalist circles. Morrissey notes that in several cases, social and familial contacts were shattered because of political activism. Kathleen Lynn was one notable example: she was banned from her family home because she refused to disavow nationalist politics. Such was the impact of the political choice that some, like Albinia Broderick and Rosamond Jacob, could not broach the idea of political compromise. Their political journey had separated them from their largely unionist backgrounds; once this sacrifice was taken, it was unthinkable not to achieve the dream of the Republic. In addition, every Protestant nationalist was forced into a reckoning with Catholicism and the Catholic Church. Most quietly made their peace with the power of the church within nationalism and preached the virtues of nonsectarianism. There were some high-profile conversions to Catholicism, but Morrissey demonstrates that this was rare. That said, some Protestant nationalists displayed the same instinctive mistrust of the Catholic Church as their unionist counterparts. Alice Milligan's childhood was marked by her parents' terror of an imminent Catholic uprising, resulting in a massacre of Protestants in the same vein of 1641. She remained a devout Protestant throughout her nationalist career, and a vehement anticlericalism found expression in her later poetic works.

Morrissey frames Protestant nationalism as a distinct "tradition" and even floats the ideas of "two Irish nationalisms" based on religious identity (p. 8). That assertion perhaps implies a hegemony that was often not visible within the subject matter, but it does raise the question how Protestants within the nationalist movement were viewed by their Catholic counterparts. The ever-quotable D. P. Moran, editor of the *Leader*, is used as evidence of Catholic disdain for the smugness of some Protestant nationalists, but what about

other perspectives? Did others think, like Dillon, that the prejudices of "black blood" could be overridden through an embrace of nationalism? Éamon de Valera may have displayed a lack of enthusiasm in depicting a religiously inclusive vision of the Irish nation, but there is surely more to say on Protestant nationalist-Catholic relations and assumptions.

There are also a few moments in the book where a lighter touch would have been beneficial. The Young Irelanders were not a "Protestant nationalist movement" (p. 15). Unionism and conservatism should not be conflated, as to do so is to erase the liberal contribution to unionist thought. And who were the unnamed "elderly Protestant Fenian relics" that Denis McCullough met in rural Ulster (p. 53)? Their names would have been useful in recovering the scale of the Protestant contribution to Irish separatism in an earlier period.

The individuals who gravitated to the Protestant nationalist milieu tended to be independently minded, talented, and slightly eccentric (at the least). They are appealing characters for the historian, and Morrissey deserves credit for teasing out the complexities of some within his ensemble cast and uncovering the associational culture that underpinned Protestant nationalism during a turbulent period of Irish history.

Notes

[1]. Colin W. Reid, ***The Lost Ireland of Stephen Gwynn: Irish Constitutional Nationalism and Cultural Politics, 1864-1950*** (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011, 2015), 74-75.

[2]. F. S. L. Lyons, ***The Irish Parliamentary Party, 1890-1910*** (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 166-67n2.

Citation: Colin Reid. Review of Morrissey, Conor. ***Protestant Nationalists in Ireland, 1900-1923.*** H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. May, 2021.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55026