

## **REVIEW: SCOTLAND AND ULSTER**

*Robin Wilson*

Ian S. Wood (ed.) **Scotland and Ulster**, Edinburgh: Mercat Press, £12.99, pb, 1994, ISBN 1873644191

The dust-jacket of this volume makes the point dramatically: 'This, astonishingly, is the first book length study of the relations between Scotland and that debatable part of Ireland closest to it over the Irish Sea.' Astonishing it indeed is, and this important, pioneering collection can only mine somewhat unevenly a seam which would benefit considerably from further purposeful exploration.

'Ulster' is, of course, a debatable entity, and we are reminded that the area to which Scotland can be related is both larger and smaller than the contemporary Northern Ireland. Donegal, on the one hand, has its migrant labour connection, while, on the other, Antrim - the county where I grew up - has much closer cultural links than the west and south of the province/region/statelet. Familial resonances - my mother's liking for Burns, or her use of common dialect words like 'thrawn' - were evoked a number of times as I read this book.

Any Scottish or 'Ulster' reader tempted towards a backward-glancing sentimentalism would, however, be disabused by the sharpest, concluding, chapter, by Owen Dudley Edwards, who rightly takes a sideswipe at the selective historiography of Ian Adamson, the opening contributor and Belfast Unionist councillor.

Adamson delineates not a seam but seamlessness - from the first Scots settlements in Ulster circa 6,500 BC to the leading roles of 'Scots-Irish' settlers in America in the War of Independence and Civil War. This takes in his longstanding 'we were here first' rebuttal of nationalist historiography

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*Review: Scotland and Ulster*

based on the 17th-century plantation - on the grounds that his early 'Praetani' people were natives to the much later arriving Celts - which is the intellectual equivalent of the Northern Ireland politics of 'what-about-ery'.

Just two closing paragraphs of Adamson's chapter are devoted to the post-partition period. This is symptomatic of the admission of several contributors, tightly focused by Edwards, that, whatever the close links in the days of the primacy of sea travel, since the late 19th century the culture and politics of Scotland and 'Ulster' have diverged to a much greater degree than the view of the Mull of Kintyre from the Antrim coast on a fine day would suggest - or than many unionists would wish.

Indeed, in a typically humane piece of journalism, Sarah Nelson turns this into a call for understanding. Referring to the 'deep-rooted differences in our conception of politics even though Ulster is so close to Scotland geographically and has so many historic ties with it', she adds: 'It takes a long time to identify these differences and even longer to accept them, and many British people never do.'

One of the superficial similarities, is, of course, a product of the media focus on the 'Old Firm' in Scotland, given the sectarian soccer rivalries of Northern Ireland too. This in fact complex intertwining history is explored in detail by Gerry Finn, who notes not only the exclusionary popular Protestant pugilism that pushed Belfast Celtic out of football but also how the club itself symbolised the distinctively northern nature of the post-partition nationalist culture it embodied - as indeed how Glasgow Celtic's appeal in the Republic of Ireland today falls far short of Manchester United's.

Linde Lunney focuses on the view from the other end of the telescope to Nelson's, asking why the Scots heritage of 'Ulster' has so dissipated over time, given the intensity of the earlier traffic. Focusing on dialect poetry and Burns, she highlights the tensions in the 19th century, between traditionalists and modernisers, regionalists and metropolitans, around received-pronunciation (now 'BBC') English - still evident today in the affected home-counties argot of the north Down bourgeoisie. More significantly, she argues that 'the political history of Ulster in the last 150 years has diverted people's attention from a concern with their cultural roots: they have been forced to decide between the Irish or the wider British context for their economic and social aspirations and political ideals'. Pipe bands are a very attenuated residuum.

### *Scottish Affairs*

It is in relation to Orangeism that Elaine McFarland develops this theme. Her contribution, along with those on unionism, by Graham Walker, and on the Belfast socialist William Walker, by Bob Purdie - covering the same, crucial, later-19th through early 20th century period - represent the valuable core of the book.

McFarland, while not denying the strength of the Orange Institution in Scotland, demonstrates how its comparatively limited expansion was, much to the chagrin of its proponents, in large measure due to the perception of the order as rooted in 'Irish issues and quarrels', with the associated stereotypes of disorder and drunkenness. More soberly, it was also identified with its Irish episcopalian roots - themselves reflecting the difference between the conservative Co Armagh of its formation and the progressive Presbyterianism of Antrim and Down - highlighting the often glossed yet contrasting religious cultures of 'Protestant' Scotland and Ulster.

Politically, McFarland notes, the popular Protestant resistance to Home Rule in Ulster was bound to give Orangeism much more influence within Unionism there than within Scottish Toryism. And Walker similarly shows a sensitive historian's touch in teasing out the differences between British 'patriotism' in the two places. While in Ulster this entailed rejection of nationalism - except in the form of a stultifying provincial particularism - and a deference to the central institutions of the British state, in Scotland 'imperial patriotism' was perfectly consistent with a self-confident expression of a Scottish identity, as evidenced by the Scottish regiments. Thus Scottish home rulers could endorse the 'home rule all round' idea which gained some currency at the time - an idea unattractive to Ulster Unionism, which of course resisted a parliament, even in the six counties, till the last.

Such differences of nuance were to weaken the solidarity unionists sought from Scotland during the home rule crisis of 1912: their image was too Orange and too patrician for a radical Presbyterian audience.

In 1910, William Walker brought a different, Belfast Labourist, tradition to Scotland - unsuccessfully fighting a by-election for Labour in Leith Burghs, having failed on successive previous outings in North Belfast. But Purdie's focus on Walker's Scottish campaign casts a more sympathetic light upon a figure normally portrayed by Irish nationalists simply as a turncoat, due to his concessions to Protestant fundamentalism in his 1905 Belfast contest.

Purdie stresses how the labour movement into which Walker was socialised had a strong Scottish dimension - for example, his famous debate with the

*Review: Scotland and Ulster*

(Edinburgh-born) Irish socialist-republican James Connolly in 1911 was carried in the pages of the Scottish socialist paper *Forward* - and argues that he is better seen as 'an orthodox British socialist' than as 'a left-wing Ulster Unionist'. But he highlights the key weakness of Walker's self-styled 'internationalist' stance, limiting its appeal to a wider Irish labour audience, more receptive to Connolly's message.

Whereas at the 1911 Irish Trade Union Congress meeting, Walker's support for the British Labour party had prevailed, the following year Connolly successfully moved a motion calling for the establishment of an Irish Labour party. As Purdie tellingly encapsulates the problem, 'The relationship of Irish and Scottish trade unionism to the British movement was an analogue of the United Kingdom: Scotland was a junior partner, Ireland was a tenant-at-will.'

Tours of duty in the opposite direction represent the theme of the chapters by Robbie Dinwoodie and the editor, Ian Wood, who is to be congratulated for putting together such an intriguing collection. Dinwoodie's account of 'fire-fighting' crisis coverage of the 'troubles' carries the same strong strand of ethical journalistic commitment (not always evinced by my profession) as Nelson's, attacking in the process the 'Lisburn Lie Machine' of the British army.

Wood, interviewing Scottish soldiers who have served in Northern Ireland, presents a much more honest picture than the exercising-unparalleled-restraint-under-incredible-provocation image which Lisburn purveyed over the years. The tales of gratuitous brutality, as well as of insecurity and incomprehension, are perhaps best summed up in a commando's comment: 'But the trouble was that nothing in our training taught us to think of it as a political or moral problem.'

But then soldiers have no monopoly on misunderstanding in the Northern Ireland conflict. If there is ever to be a political settlement there - if the recently-established peace is ever to be more than the absence of violence - then, as a number of contributors to this fine volume imply, the traditional British/Irish zero-sum game of the protagonists must be replaced by a more rounded conception on both sides of the interdependence of the archipelago and a more differentiated understanding of its component parts. Exploration not only of Scotland's 'Irish dimension' but also of Ulster's Scottish one can only assist that Gestalt shift.

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