

## **REVIEW: POLITICAL AND CULTURAL INTERACTION BETWEEN SCOTLAND AND ULSTER**

*Steve Bruce*

Graham Walker (1995) **Intimate Strangers: Political and Cultural Interaction  
Between Scotland and Ulster in Modern Times** Edinburgh: John Donald,  
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The book cover shows a wall painting from the lower Shankill Road in Belfast. The Red Hand of Ulster is flanked by the Saltire and the Ulster flag. The slogan is: 'Ulster-Scotland. United We Stand'. The family resemblances are strong: peripheries of a complex state, sectarian conflict, anti-Catholic political parties, divided school systems, republican flute bands, the Orange Order. But so are the differences. The Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster founded by Dr Ian Paisley now has sixty congregations; the fundamentalist church founded in Glasgow by Pastor Jack Glass has just one. Paisley is elected to the European parliament and to Westminster with thumping majorities and his Democratic Unionist party is a major player in Ulster's politics. Jack Glass has failed to win any election and his various political movements have all fizzled out. Since 1966 more than 3000 people have been killed in Ulster's 'troubles'. There have been no shootings in Scotland and the only two explosions claimed no victims.

Opponents of censorship may be unhappy with the implications of this observation but there is an obvious coincidence between the decline of sectarian conflict in Scotland and what seems like a conspiracy of silence about such trouble as there has been. My own *No Pope of Rome* in 1985 was the first serious study of sectarianism in Scotland since Handley's *The Irish in Modern Scotland* in 1947. Gallagher's *Glasgow: the Uneasy Peace* and *Edinburgh Divided* followed in 1987 and 1988. The attitude of many Scottish opinion formers was inadvertently but neatly expressed in the early 1980s by a now rather famous media woman who, when I told her what I was

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working on, said: 'What do you want to write about that for? You'll just stir it up. You'll encourage them if you take them seriously.'

With the literature on the subject so small, any new work is welcome but this book would stand out in a crowded field. Graham Walker, a Glaswegian teaching at the Queen's University of Belfast, writes in a clear and measured way from a base of detailed research into elements of the recent past of Scotland and Ulster that are either common (for example 'Popular Unionist and Protestant Politics, c. 1920-1970') or might have been but were not ('Labour Politics in Scotland and Northern Ireland c. 1920-1970'). One might quibble that there is slightly too much concentration on institutional politics - parties, leading figures, voting, and public administration - and not enough on cultural and socio-economic considerations. But it is only a quibble about what will be the standard work in this area for many years.

Walker is particularly worth reading on two topical themes. With constitutional reform for Scotland moving from being remotely possible to being likely and with a glimmer of hope for an agreed future for Northern Ireland, the nature of a multi-national state is being seriously examined. To both devolutionists and strong unionists, the Stormont model of devolved government should offer some lessons. For example, can we regard the Government of Ireland Act as evidence that the 'West Lothian' question is trivial? Or should we take the view that devolving power from a multi-national state to its component parts only encourages ethnic identification and ethnic conflict? Whichever way one leans, Scots may learn from the Northern Ireland experience as they contemplate their future.

The other recent development which makes Walker's work topical is 'Monklandsgate'. After decades of reticence about sectarianism in Scotland, 1994 saw highly publicised accusations that Catholic members of the ruling Labour group on Monklands District Council operated sectarian policies in providing jobs for relatives and in concentrating public expenditure on the Catholic parts of the district. Radio and television investigations followed, most of a superficial and sensational nature. Although it was careful to concentrate on the unsavoury behaviour of football supporters (including its own) rather than make allegations about the policies of football clubs, Celtic's 1996 'Bhoys against bigotry' campaign gave further impetus to media interest in sectarianism.

One of the difficulties in responding to the Monklands accusations is that we do not know if we are dealing with enduring patterns of religio-ethnic discrimination or with the desire to blame someone else for one's problems leading to glib use of traditional insults. Sectarianism as a rhetoric for

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distributing blame is an interesting and important social phenomenon but it is not the same interesting and important social phenomenon as actual discrimination. It is quite possible for the former to endure long after the latter has gone. One of the most striking features of Monklandsgate has often been over-looked. Until now sectarianism has been short-hand for Protestants behaving badly towards Catholics. If there is a Monklands scandal (and the Scottish Office's investigation suggests not) it is the mirror image of traditional sectarianism. Is it really likely that the world would both change sufficiently to let the descendants of the Irish migrants acquire the power to systematically discriminate against their old superiors but at the same time leave the opportunity structure and the motivation for discrimination unchanged? In a brief war a reversal of fortunes may lead to atrocities being exchanged but here we have a century of slow change.

In theory it is a simple matter to determine if the descendants of the Catholic Irish are relatively disadvantaged (settling the causes of such disparities as one finds will be less straight-forward) but we simply do not have the necessary data. The undeniable salience of religio-ethnic identity in Northern Ireland led to a religion question being asked in the census and in every other major recurrent social survey. Scots preferred to avoid the issue. Back to the censorship point: this may have contributed to stability but it prevents us distinguishing the reality from the rhetoric. As in everything else, Walker in his comments on Monklands is sensible and cautious. He does not believe that there are any longer significant socio-economic differences between Protestants and Catholics in the central lowlands of Scotland. Against those who would exaggerate sectarianism, he notes that the arguments in Scotland take place between two populations who by and large support the same political party. This alone shows us the enormous difference from Northern Ireland.

The title 'Intimate Strangers' neatly captures the simultaneous closeness and distance between these two peripheral parts of the United Kingdom. There is much in this book which will repay frequent re-reading but perhaps its most important contribution to Scottish political life will be that it has been written. If Scotland is really about to acquire a significant increase in autonomy, it would be nice to think that one of its major internal divisions has now been healed to the extent that we can talk about it, openly, honestly and without rancour.

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