

REVIEW: THE IRISH IN THE WEST OF SCOTLAND

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Martin J. Mitchell, **The Irish in the West of Scotland, 1797-1848: Trade Unions, Strikes and Political Movements**, Edinburgh: John Donald, pb, , £20, ISBN 085976480X, pp. 286 +viii.

Today the debunking of long-cherished myths is out of fashion. Indifference to the historical record is the order of the day. Our knowledge about the past, it is claimed, is too fallible to actually say very much about the truth-content of myths. Better to stand back and vicariously observe the ways in which myths are mobilised to cement various 'ways of belonging' to national cultures.

Unless, that is, we are dealing with something like the mythology of the sectarian 'ghetto' in Scotland. Formed out of the lumpen bits of the male working class, the sectarian 'two tribes' dwell at a subterranean level. Surfacing intermittently to parade their Bigotian paraphernalia in the costumes, trinkets and strident melodies of their respective trashy sub-cultures, football is used as a surrogate for 'religio-ethnic' warfare. This is the myth official, civic Scotland likes to tell itself of its bigoted, half-ethnic 'other'.

Thus when sectarian murder occurs in Glasgow in 1999, 'one of Britain's most cosmopolitan cities' (Crichton 1999), civic values are affronted and folk-wisdom is paraded as profound insight. Yet, on the very same day as the murder, and two other attempted murders, Donald Findlay, a leading Conservative politician in Scotland with impeccable middle class credentials - a member of both the Faculty of Advocates and the board of Glasgow Rangers football club - was recorded leading the singing of 'We're up to our knees in Fenian [i.e. Catholic] blood/Surrender or you'll die'.

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How did civic Scotland respond? Some seemed more disappointed that the affair became a public *cause celebre* at all than with Finlay's sentiments. Meg Henderson effortlessly translated Finlay's disgrace into old-fashioned anti-Irish, pape-bashing. Writing in the Glasgow-based **Sunday Herald** (13 June 1999), she claimed that there is something about the Irish Catholic 'psyche' that revels in a 'strong victim mentality' and 'a terrible, debilitating melancholy'. In Scotland, local resentment against 'the Irish' was originally 'justified' because 'by under-cutting Scots workers, they were taking the bread out of the mouths of Scots children'. Prevented these days from making a biological 'race' argument for the evident lack of civic identity of the 'Irish/Catholic' - the two are indissoluble - Henderson instead employed a kind of 'cultural racism', stressing irreconcilable differences in group social and mental habits based on real or imagined relations of subordination.

Leaving aside her gift for fashioning melodrama out of social crisis, Henderson nevertheless draws on a more sophisticated and historically astute argument about the Irish Catholic ghetto. The nineteenth century, especially the period following the famine, is often taken to be formative for the setting-up and consolidation of a relatively homogeneous Irish Catholic 'ghetto' in Scotland, which has only recently begun to dissolve (Boyle and Lynch 1998). Built around the putative role of Irish Catholics as strike-breakers, with a fondness for lowering wages in competition with local labour, 'the walls of the ghetto were fortified with suspicion and distrust on both sides' (McCrone and Rosie 1998, p.68). Simply add-in the ingredients of an alien religion and national identity, portentously call this mix 'ethno-religious', rather than racism, and an even-handed explanation can be served-up for episodes of sectarian hatred.

Whether viewed as a last refuge against the forward march of an inclusive civic nation (Bruce 1988) or, as in the former Yugoslavia, a sleeping monster waiting to be kissed into existence by demagogues at moments of social crisis (Gallagher 1987), the 'two tribes' myth of endemic communal enmity is, of course, a highly selective account of relations between Catholics and Protestants in Scotland generally and the west-central lowlands in particular. Not the least part of the 'two tribe' mythology is its historical amnesia toward the record of shared class interests and activity between Protestants and Catholics in the west of Scotland.

Martin J. Mitchell's excellent study thus assumes added importance by exploding a number of myths about the Irish working class in the west of Scotland in the first half of the nineteenth century. Based on his PhD thesis, Mitchell's book is a fine example of the historian's craft, reflectively

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weighing-up the available evidence, making carefully measured inferences and acknowledging throughout gaps in what the sources do and do not reveal. There is no room here for half-baked folk (fake) mythology except, that is, as a subject for critical study.

Organized into four sections, the book begins by examining the role of Irish workers in trade unions and strikes. The other three parts deal with the role of the Irish in political movements in Scotland: first, the radical movements, the United Scotsmen at the turn of the eighteenth century and the radical agitations of 1816-20; second, campaigns for Catholic Emancipation and the Reform Bills; and, third, Chartism and the campaign for the repeal of the Act of Union of 1800.

Mitchell's main contention is that landmark studies of the impact of the Irish on politics in Scotland, from James Handley's 1943 **The Irish In Modern Scotland** to more recent work by Tom Gallagher and others, have been almost uniformly dismissive of Irish political activism. Instead a dominant historical stereotype has been peddled, colouring historians' and social scientists' - and journalistic - views of relations between immigrant Irish and native Scots workers, namely, that Irish Catholic identity and native Scots hostility prevented Irish involvement in industrial and political action. In challenging this, Mitchell (1998, p.11) argues that 'the immigrant experience was somewhat different to the standard view and was in fact much like that of the Irish in England'.

Mitchell does not deny that Irish labour was used by Scots employers to break strikes, leading to violence between Scots and Irish workers. However, this occurs only towards the end of his period and was mainly confined to a couple of industries, coal and iron, in Ayrshire and Lanarkshire. In occupations where the Irish found themselves a large proportion of the workforce - principally cotton spinning and handloom weaving - they were just as likely as native Scots to join unions, play leading organizational roles, and take their full part in collective action. As Mitchell (1998, p.50) states, 'The Irish in the west of Scotland were not isolated from economic forces and, like Scottish workers, many of them acted to protect wages, conditions and living standards as best they could by collective action'. Furthermore, even in the most difficult conditions where Irish colliers were initially employed as strike-breakers, once they became an established part of the labour force they proved capable of organization and action, protesting and striking over pay and conditions. These are hardly the docile victims of ghetto melancholia.

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A great merit of Mitchell's study, although not his stated intention, is that it represents a long over-due corrective to the common sense usages of 'ethnicity' as a bedrock social identity. Naturally, the Catholic Irish were interested in religious and national issues that affected them. But the Irish 'community' in Glasgow were often riven with internal division over political and trade union agitation, while some native Scots, mainly Presbyterian reformers, supported Irish demands for religious and national liberation.

In the 1820s the Glasgow Catholic Association was established to support the reform movement pressing for equal civil and political rights for Catholics. However, the city's two Catholic priests, aided by a group of Catholic businessmen, saw this as a threat to their own power base and engineered the sacking of two brothers, both leading members of the GCA, from their posts as teachers. The result was 'a bitter, dirty and public conflict' (p.137). In the 1840s, Irish businessmen, described sarcastically by a 'Catholic Chartist' in 1841 as 'the respectables in the Bridgegate ... those conscientious men, the drunkard makers, the pawn brokers, and the rag merchants' (in p.205), along with the open hostility of the Catholic clergy, helped divide Irish Catholics from the Glasgow Chartists and cemented their loyalty to Daniel O'Connell's campaign for Repeal of the 1800 Union.

Native Scots were also split on the fundamental political questions of the day. During the reform agitation of the 1830s, Protestant reformers resisted efforts by Church of Scotland ministers to whip-up anti-Catholic feeling, 'to throw the apple of discord among us; but we will not be the dupes of deep-laid Tory machinations, under the guise of Religion', argued the **Reformers' Gazette** (in pp.165-6). And while Scots reformers revered Daniel O'Connell as 'the liberator of long misgoverned Ireland', at the time of his 1835 visit to Glasgow, Orange Tories warned ominously 'that in this Protestant and Covenanting City, it may be dangerous for any bloodthirsty and political agitator, like him, to approach it nearer than Camlachie or Tollcross' (in p.167). In the event, between 100,000 and 200,000 people attended the O'Connell demonstration on Glasgow Green, indicating how spurious appeals can be to 'ethno-religious' identities in the face of a common mobilisation to improve social, political and economic conditions.

This is the message that Mitchell quietly, but persistently, hammers out. His careful narrative advances a major re-interpretation of the Irish 'community' in Scotland, putting into question the idea of an impregnable Irish ghetto. Given their low social and economic status within Scottish society it is perhaps not surprising that the Catholic Irish working class identified with the main issues also confronting Scottish workers. Mitchell thus shows how

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Irish immigrants helped establish the revolutionary United Scotsmen in the 1790s, itself modelled on the United Irishmen, how both Protestant and Catholic Irish were involved with the secret radical societies of 1816-20, and how they again played a significant part in the pre-Chartist agitations of the 1830s.

However, the lack of significant Irish participation in Scottish Chartism until very late on also shows how religious and national identities can weaken mass movements from below. One major reason for this was O'Connell's exclusive concentration on an Irish Parliament, to which Irish Catholic demands should be subordinated. This was compounded by his outright hostility to Chartist leader Fergus O'Connor's support for 'physical force'. O'Connor, in turn, regarded O'Connell as a traitor for refusing to support the Charter, his opposition to trade unions and backing for the Poor Law. Yet, the majority of Irish Catholics in Glasgow appear to have remained loyal to O'Connell. Not until the 1848 revolution in France excited renewed agitation did the prospect of unity between the Irish Repeal movement and Scottish Chartism emerge. But by then it was too late. State repression did the rest.

We need to know a lot more about Irish/Catholic political activism and social integration in Scotland over the last two hundred years before the easy formulae of ghetto mythology and the ethno-centred assumptions of cultural racism can be stripped away. Mitchell's study is a serious starting point for all future work.

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