

## **REVIEW: IRISH ISSUES IN SCOTTISH POLITICS**

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E. W McFarland, **John Ferguson, 1836-1906: Irish Issues in Scottish Politics**, East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2003, 352pp, £20, ISBN 1 86232 1647.

James Connolly was a brave and tenacious man but his understanding of Protestant Ulster never went very deep. Famously, at the time of the 1912 Home Rule crisis, he ridiculed a Loyalist heckler in Belfast who held up a copy of the Ulster Covenant, signed in September of that year by a huge number of Protestants. Connolly told him that his children would grow up to laugh at it, not a very thoughtful prediction of future events, it has to be said.

The motley bunch of IRA apologists who take to Edinburgh's streets every summer to commemorate Connolly's birth, heavily protected by a police force most of them affect to despise, will not readily countenance much debate about the limitations of their hero's grasp of the Ulster question. Connolly did, however, have the excuse that he grew up within the intensely Catholic culture of the Cowgate's Irish immigrant community though he did later live in Belfast and sought to organise workers in its mills and docks.

John Ferguson, the subject of this very important study by Professor Elaine McFarland, was taken aback by his experience of the Home Rule riots of 1886 which took more than fifty lives in Belfast. Yet this was where he had been born and worked as a young man, though he would later call it 'a violent and feeble-thinking city'. He came of solidly Protestant stock in rural Antrim where he was raised, and only as an adult did he learn that some of his ancestors had been pikemen in the great 1798 United Irish rising.

By 1886, Ferguson, who had settled in Glasgow many years earlier to pursue a career in publishing, was an experienced political activist. He had committed himself to mobilising the immigrant Irish in Scotland behind the

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causes both of Home Rule and of radical land reform and worked hard to build bridges between these causes and an emerging Scottish labour movement. Partly because of what he saw when re-visiting Belfast in 1886, he came to see that a workable Home Rule policy had to be formulated in a way which could accommodate the loyalties of his home community.

Whether he succeeded in doing this will probably seem debatable to many readers of this book. In old age, he rejected total separatism and argued for an essentially imperial model of national development with a fully self-governing Ireland gaining from membership of a prospering British Empire which had made atonement for past wrongs done to the Irish. This was not a position which the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the 'Fenians', could ever have accepted. They outlived Ferguson and orchestrated the 1916 Easter rebellion, but early in his political life he had been close to some of their leaders in Scotland, though never as a member, as he told the 1888 commission of inquiry into political and agrarian crime in Ireland.

Ferguson's contacts and his activism emerge from this excellent book covering over four decades of Irish and radical politics in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Scotland. At almost every point of importance in Home Rule politics, Ferguson was there, as in December 1874, when a Glasgow Home Rule Association was formed and he was elected its president, and a year later when controversy over the form of celebrations of the centenary of Daniel O'Connell's birth divided the city's Irish community. Some priests used their pulpits to call for a safely non-political commemoration, but Ferguson opposed them, seeing the new opportunity to politicise his compatriots in Scotland.

He was at centre stage when Parnell emerged in place of Isaac Butt as leader of the Irish Home Rule members at Westminster, believing that this change provided the way to link the national cause to that of land reform. At Parnell's invitation, Ferguson addressed a huge meeting in Dublin in October 1878 to make the case for this, and in 1880 he chaired the new Land League's Dublin convention. He also brought to Glasgow Michael Davitt, the ex-Fenian prisoner and campaigner against landlordism, who galvanised audiences with his attacks on the structure of land ownership in Scotland as well as Ireland.

Ferguson became a convert to the 'single tax' doctrines of Henry George, who in his polemical classic, **Progress and Poverty**, called for incremental

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taxation of the full development value of both rural and urban land which, he argued, would expropriate rapacious and irresponsible owners and create revenues for the funding of social welfare. Parnell was very wary of all this, favouring instead legislation to secure fair rents and to protect tenure. He believed such a law could create a new class of Irish peasant proprietors, and in 1879 he entered into the *New Departure*, a tactical agreement between his party and the Land League to bring it about. The views of Ferguson and Davitt, he let it be known, were tantamount to support for land nationalisation.

Despite these disagreements, Ferguson worked hard to maintain a good relationship with Parnell while retaining his reservations about what an Irish alliance with Gladstone's Liberal party could deliver. This became less of an issue after the Grand Old Man's conversion to the moral case for Home Rule in 1886, but prior to that Ferguson came out openly against Parnell during the November 1885 General Election, when the Irish National League's London-based executive ordered all branches to call for a tactical Conservative vote as a way of putting pressure on Gladstone. Ferguson saw some merit in it as a tactic. He could not, however, accept the ruling being applied against Liberal and radical candidates with views on Irish and wider social questions acceptable to many National League branches in Scotland and to trade unions which Irish immigrant workers were starting to join.

Ferguson had enough status within the Irish community to survive this defiance. Parnell soon had occasion to value his support after the crises over the 1886 Home Rule Bill, when a concerted campaign, supported by the **Times** and many Conservatives, tried to destroy his leadership by linking it to agrarian crime in Ireland. Ferguson also supported Parnell over the even greater O'Shea divorce scandal, though he was appalled by some of his leader's more intemperate attacks on Gladstone. He had to accept that most of the National League's Scottish branches were with the majority of the Irish party in feeling that Parnell had to go, though always optimistic that the movement for Home Rule could survive the split.

After Parnell's death in 1891, Ferguson worked for reconciliation within a reconstituted United Irish League, some of whose branches were recruiting Young Socialists like John Wheatley by the end of the century. Wheatley may well have heard Ferguson speak since, until near his death in 1906, he maintained a formidable rate of activism, as an elected Glasgow councillor after 1893 and a patient worker for close and agreed relationships between

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Irish Home Rule supporters and an emerging political labour movement in Scotland. Proof of this commitment was apparent in this support for Keir Hardie's celebrated candidature in the 1888 Mid-Lanark by-election and for the new Scottish Labour party which was formed after it.

They were quick to come out in support of Scottish Home Rule, and Ferguson's support for full Irish self-government never blinded him to the reality that Scotland, too, had a strong case for the restoration of its national Parliament. When, in May 1905, a bill for land value taxation which he had helped draw up was killed off by Westminster after being carried at Second Reading, Ferguson reacted swiftly. The English majority's action, he declared, provided a 'Scotch argument for Home Rule' and he identified himself vocally with the growing campaign for it.

Professor McFarland has written elsewhere of tensions between Irish immigrants and the host community in nineteenth-century Scotland, but in this new book she shows how John Ferguson devoted his life to rising beyond them. He certainly knew of their corrosive potential as an active organiser of the O'Connell centenary commemoration in 1875 and must have witnessed the Partick riots. These were one of the worse spasms of sectarian violence in nineteenth-century Glasgow history which, perhaps oddly, are absent from the author's vivid narrative of the period.

This, then, is another seminal contribution to our understanding of modern Scotland and the Irish presence within it and a reviewer's first duty is to congratulate Professor McFarland for the industry and scholarship she has put into it. Sadly, however, the book must hold some sort of record for misprints and typographical errors. Sometimes these come at a rate of two or three within a single paragraph and, on one or two occasions, come close to making nonsense of the text. Important dates are casualties of this failure by the book's publishers. For example, the battle of Benburb, after which Ferguson names his house in Lenzie, and at which Owen Roe O'Neill's Irish troops defeated a Scottish Covenanting force, was fought in 1646, not 1580, the date given us in the text.

It is a matter for regret to have to finish a review of a fine book on this note. The Tuckwell Press has made an invaluable contribution to making Scottish historical scholarship available to readers over the years. If there is any chance of Professor McFarland's work going into a second print run, which it fully deserves to, these numerous errors must be dealt with.

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