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REVIEW ESSAY: SECTARIANISM, BIGOTRY AND ETHNICITY – THE GULF IN UNDERSTANDING

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Steve Bruce, Tony Glendinning, Iain Paterson and Michael Rosie,
Sectarianism in Scotland, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press,
2004, 224 pp, pb, £11.99, ISBN 0748619119.

Michael Rosie, **The Sectarian Myth in Scotland: Of Bitter Memory and
Bigotry**, Basingstoke: Palgrave. Macmillan, 2004, 256 pp, hb, £45,
ISBN 1403921679.

Joseph Bradley (ed.), **Celtic Minded. Essays on religion, politics, society,
identity ... and football**, Glendaruel: Argyll, 2004, 255 pp, pb, £10.99,
ISBN 1902831691.

INTRODUCTION

When James Macmillan made his impassioned statement about Scotland's 'sleep-walking bigotry', he stirred a response that revealed a gulf in understanding in Scottish academe. His claims of widespread, everyday hostility to Irish Catholicism were angrily denied by those who argued that sectarian discrimination no longer exists, but were supported by those who maintain that bigotry is still manifest. The most vocal protagonists were given space in the volume of essays edited by Scotland's leading historian, Tom Devine. He was led to comment:

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One of the most remarkable features of this collection of essays is the absence of a clear consensus on the central issue under debate. ... First the protagonists are often arguing about two different areas ... Secondly, there is the vital problem of incomplete and ambiguous evidence which inevitably produces contrasting and often conflicting results¹.

How far have we advanced in the five years since Macmillan's lecture? Some of the contributors to Devine's volume have now published books in which they further develop their arguments. Steve Bruce has co-authored **Sectarianism in Scotland** with Tony Glendinning, Iain Paterson and Michael Rosie; Michael Rosie has published his own research in **The Sectarian Myth in Scotland: Of Bitter Memory and Bigotry**; and Joseph Bradley has edited **Celtic Minded: Essays on religion, politics, society, identity ... and football**. In addition, Lindsay Paterson, Frank Bechhofer and David McCrone have addressed issues of denominational inequality in their review of Scotland's most recent population censuses, government statistics and social surveys².

In Scotland, a small country with a combative press, networks are short and interconnected, and so academics, including the writer of this review essay³, frequently get drawn into the fray of public debate and parliamentary lobbying, especially on issues relating to 'sectarianism'. The protagonists in Devine's book were allies in the cause of persuading the Scottish Parliament to include questions about religion in the 2001 Census. They were divided on the issue of whether there should be a new measure in criminal law dealing with 'aggravation by religious prejudice'.⁴ The capacity of academics to rise above the fray, to retain independence of thought, and to scrutinise evidence with a dispassionately critical eye is tested very severely in this field.⁵ Indeed, Brewer, writing from the perspective of Northern Ireland, has noted

¹ Devine, 2000, p.261

² Paterson et al, 2004

³ Kelly, 2003 also Bruce pp. 133-149

⁴ Bruce p.146 and Rosie pp.4 and 150

⁵ Bruce pp.153-4 refers to the lists of those who think Scotland is still an endemically sectarian society are led by a musician, a novelist and a professor of literature – all untouched by evidence beyond their personal experience.

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that by comparison with the analytical rigour that has been developed in studies of racism, analysts have put no great effort into defining the concept of sectarianism, which remains under theorised and meshed into lay notions of sectarianism.⁶

II

In **Sectarianism in Scotland**, Bruce et al make clear how irritated they have been by the public debate that was kick-started by Macmillan: 'This book was born out of frustration with the dreadful quality of public debate about the importance of religious identity in modern Scotland'.⁷ They then develop their theme:

What is dismaying about the quality of present debate is the lack of care taken by many of those who express trenchant opinions. ... We need to distinguish carefully the various forms and expressions of sectarianism and what might count as evidence. ... Throughout this book we have tried to distinguish between inherent disadvantage, effective discrimination and bigotry.⁸

There can be no dispute with such an aim – it is the essence of academic endeavour to develop conceptual clarity and to engage in rigorous analysis of the available data. But one of the major weaknesses in their analysis is their failure to clarify what they mean by 'bigotry', other than anti-Catholicism⁹. Their evidence points towards the diminution of both disadvantage and discrimination, but they leave 'bigotry' trailing without intellectual interest in its significance as a factor in Scotland today. It is curious that they do not take the trouble to subject 'bigotry' to close scrutiny because in fact their own definition of sectarianism is one that requires careful consideration of issues of prejudice and culture: 'We mean a widespread and shared culture of improperly treating people in terms of their religion'¹⁰.

⁶ *Brewer, 1992, p.352*

⁷ *p. vii*

⁸ *pp.3-5*

⁹ *pp.110-116*

¹⁰ *p.4*

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What is the evidence on which they draw in relation to disadvantage and discrimination? Fourteen tables of statistics are presented, dealing with religion and candidates for councils and the Scottish Parliament, national identity, political preference and voting, experience of crime, personal morality, views on homosexuality. Moreover, within the text, repeated reference is made to the issue of 'mixed marriages', that is, marriages between Catholics and Protestants. Such marriages are indicative, they state, of the decline of religious influence.

The key facts that they present are irrefutable. Church attendance and membership have declined, the number of Scots who claim 'No Religion' is higher than elsewhere within the United Kingdom, Catholics and Protestants are spread across all classes, no consistent differences are found between Catholics and Protestants in matters of national identity, political preference and attitudes to homosexuality. Indeed, as they argue, some of the most important indicators lie not *between*, but *inside* the statistical columns. They find marked differences among both Catholics and Protestants in terms of social mobility and attitudes.

If we accept Bruce et al's evidence that inequalities between Catholics and Protestants are not marked and there has been a sharp decline in religious observance and church membership, can we then accept their two-fold conclusion?

... we believe ... that Scotland's Catholics, most of whom are the descendants of Irish immigration, now enjoy social, political and economic parity with non-Catholics; and that religion (or the ethnicity of one's ancestors) is no longer a major consideration in the lives of most Scots.¹¹

The first point is substantiated, the second is not because it strays beyond the limits of what their evidence can support – it is interpretive and evaluative, not descriptive. When John Brewer wrote his illuminating article, he summarised the need for consideration of 'ethnicity' – the sense of boundary between people, deriving from belief in common culture, common descent and identification: the determination of actions, attitudes and practices by

¹¹ p.4

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beliefs about religious difference.¹² Exploration of ethnicity may begin with statistical measure, but requires more qualitative probing, and so Bruce et al's rejection of the possibility of Scottish Catholic ethnicity is puzzling: 'We find little evidence that Scots Catholics are now objectively distinctive or that many Scots treat them as if they were'.¹³ Their evidence does not substantiate such a conclusion.

Sadly, Bruce and his colleagues seem set on a stance of combative antagonism to the relevance of 'ethnicity' in discussion of sectarianism in Scotland: 'by what sort of logic can we argue that it is quite proper for an immigrant minority to maintain and promote its own culture even when, in its religious and political components, that culture is at odds with the views of most natives'¹⁴. This then may be the reason why they have not addressed the issue of 'bigotry'. Their interest in 'sectarianism' is primarily about the perpetuation, or otherwise, of denominational discrimination and inequality. Bigotry and its context of culture and prejudice remain unstudied.

Whatever its claims, this book appears to be less of a dispassionate weighing of available evidence about the differing forms that 'sectarianism' in Scotland has taken at various times, than a polemic aimed at Macmillan and the academics associated with his views. Polemic has an important, and legitimate, place in Scottish intellectual history. But does it take us forward in understanding of the issues that are developing within and between Catholics, Protestants and people of No Religion? The irony is that Bruce et al fail in their attempt to provide 'the best attempt to date to come to terms with the available social science evidence'¹⁵ because they go beyond the limits of their evidence to express controversial opinions. Moreover, they do not pursue the significance of some of the indicators that they uncover. They succeed in demolishing claims to continuing denominational inequality, that is between Catholics and Protestants, but they do not address contemporary variation among Catholics and Protestants nor the cultural role of people of No Religion. That task is taken forward by one of their co-authors, Michael Rosie.

¹² *Brewer 1992, pp.356-8*

¹³ *p.172*

¹⁴ *p.168*

¹⁵ *p.174*

III

Michael Rosie's book clarifies the contribution that he is seeking to make through his own research. He structures his account around discussion of contemporary issues in Scotland and examination of religion and politics in inter-war Scotland. He develops the thesis that debate about religious division in Scotland has emerged in the context of, and responsive to, a wider debate about Scottishness in the post-devolution era – a watershed in Scottish history.

He reiterates that claims of both 'anti-Catholicism' and 'sectarianism' in contemporary Scotland offer little more than superficial analysis, and he suggests that their key weakness is the absence of any comparative framework. He also identifies a fundamental problem with the terminology with which the debate is conducted. Terms such as Protestant, Catholic and 'sectarian' are 'used without precision, taken as self-evident',¹⁶ and in his analysis of the past he demolishes the notion that Protestants were some kind of block – all of the same opinion, following the most extreme of the demagogues.

For instance, in his account of religion in Scotland between the wars, Rosie emphasises that

recognising the internal differences in Scottish Protestantism is absolutely crucial. ... We must be wary ... of pursuing a simplistic Protestant-Catholic dichotomy.¹⁷

He defines sectarianism 'as a social setting in which systematic discrimination affects the life chances of religious groups, and within which religious affiliation stands for much more than theological belief'. Like Bruce et al, he feels the need to reflect on whether contemporary Scotland is actually 'sectarian':

What passes for sectarianism in modern Scotland is better described as bigotry or prejudice – or perhaps 'secular incomprehension' – it is not

¹⁶ p.3

¹⁷ p.76

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systematic and it does not materially affect the life chances of entire religious groups.¹⁸

In pursuit of his thesis, Rosie surveys evidence for the present, re-examines the time of 'intra-Christian' conflict between 1918 and 1939, and discusses why controversy about religious division re-emerged at the end of the twentieth century. As he demonstrates, there is considerable evidence of growing secularisation in Scotland, measured by decline in protestant church membership and adult catholic mass attendance, rate of religious celebration of marriage and church attendance. He also examines whether there are differences in attitudes to selected topics between Catholics, Church of Scotland Presbyterians and people of No Religion. Whether the issue is the future of Northern Ireland, Catholic schools, voting in elections, or national identity, there are marked differences *within* as well as *between* the three categories.

In relation to opinions about Catholic schools, Rosie mentions two interesting points of detail. He found that Catholics are very much divided in their opinions about whether Catholic schools should be retained, with support for Catholic schools strongest among Catholics who attend church. He also considers that opposition to Catholic schools was strongest not among Protestants but among the Non-Religious.¹⁹ The possibility that polarisation in opinion in contemporary Scotland may lie not so much between Catholics and Protestants, as between observant Catholics and people of No Religion should be noted and pursued in later research.

Rosie's book has opened the possibility that the most revealing research does not lie in seeking evidence about inequalities between Catholics and Protestants, so much as exploration among people of No Religion, and in the variations inside Catholics and Protestants. The undoubted secularising of Scotland may have shifted the locus of hostility to Catholic schools, but it may also have sharpened that hostility.

¹⁸ p.3

¹⁹ p.45

IV

Bradley's book is, as its title suggests, focused on Celtic Football Club. He opens with a long essay²⁰ introducing five sections focused on Roots, Diaspora, Fandom, Facing Prejudice, and Faith and Social Consciousness, written by 23 different writers (including two women). Three contributors are academics, the others are creative artists (including James Macmillan) and 'Celtic Minded' people reflecting upon their individual and collective Celtic-related experiences. However, the intention is not to document the history of the club, but

to capture critical aspects of the story of Irish Catholics in Scotland. ... Using the cultural focus of 'their' club, these writers seek to examine and express important aspects of the experience of the Irish Catholic diaspora in Scotland, features and accounts that have a history of being misrepresented and marginalised. ... This book is partly about racism, bigotry, prejudice and 'sectarianism' in Scottish society. It also constitutes a reflection on Scottishness.²¹

In other words, the editor asserts, the book is both partisan and challenging. It has been initiated by an academic who is a specialist in ethnicity and football,²² who is frank about his own Catholicism, and who clearly feels as strongly as his contributors about being Irish and supporting 'their' football club. The issue of being marginalised within Scotland as Catholics and as Irish, experiencing exclusion and hostility, features strongly in his introductory essay and in many chapters by his contributors, each of whom makes a personal statement that is illuminating of a point of view, but must be questioned as 'research documentation'.

One of the book's most notable features is not misery, but the delight and pleasure of being part of Celtic football culture – organising family life around the football calendar, immersed in the intricate detail of past triumphs

²⁰ *'Background and Context: Celtic Football Club and the Irish in Scotland'*, pp.19-83

²¹ p.16

²² See for instance the multiple references to Bradley's publications in *Giulianotti 2004*

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and failures, singing the same songs, enjoying Irish bands in Irish pubs, proud that the club has become a beacon of Irishness for followers around the world, enjoying the thrill of the crowd. Bradley has achieved the rare feat of encouraging his contributors to write in ways that are relaxed and unselfconscious and thus give rich insights into life as Irish Catholic in Scotland. It is extraordinary that we know so little about the cultural life of Scotland's largest ethnic minority (it is even more extraordinary that we know so little about the cultural life of Protestants and people of No Religion).

But the other dominant theme is more sobering, exemplified by the contrast between the warmth of Spanish welcome for the thousands of Celtic fans who poured into Seville for the 2003 European Cup Final and the hostility they experience at home. Eddie Toner represented Celtic supporters in Switzerland when they won the FIFA 'Fair Play' Award. His comments give pause for thought:

My travels have taken me all over Britain and Europe. ... In Europe our fans are universally well received, we mix well with the locals who in turn seem happy to party with us. ... Sadly, for me, the same cannot be said closer to home when the reception more often than not is hostile. What is it with Celtic that the fans of other teams in Scotland find difficult to accept? ... We love to celebrate our culture, wave our flags and banners and sing our songs. But why should that be seen as a threat to anyone?²³

Toner's unhappy question is raised repeatedly in other chapters where contributors communicate unease, wariness, uncertainty, and sometimes anger, about the cultural milieu in which they live and work. They describe the chilling impact of being trained to keep quiet about their Catholicism and Irishness, to read the signs of who is who in the denominational landscape, to accept that Irish history should only be shared with other Irish. They are also weary of being accused of being 'sectarian', when they are celebrating their own culture, and passing no comment on any other denomination.

Bradley's contributors are not concerned about systematic discrimination, they know that the economic situation of Catholics today is greatly improved,

²³ p.132. Also see *Giulianotti 2004*

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there are no Catholic housing ghettos, there is no hint of political exclusion, Catholics frequently marry Protestants. In other words, these Irish Catholics know that are integrated into Scottish society. But that is precisely why they are so weary of their cultural exclusion, the everyday prejudice and bigotry that they experience in spite of all the radical changes that there have been across the generations.

V THE GULF IN UNDERSTANDING: DISCRIMINATION VERSUS BIGOTRY

This then is the gulf in understanding. On the one hand Bruce et al and Rosie align themselves with a definition of 'sectarianism' that rests on evidence of systematic discrimination against Catholics. On the other, Bradley and his contributors concentrate on the perpetuation of prejudice and bigotry. Indeed, they are arguing about two different areas. Does that mean there is no way forward? I think not.

There has been progress in knowledge about denominational inequalities today as a result of marked improvement in key Scottish social data – Census, government publications and large-scale social surveys. As Paterson et al state in their most recent book: 'Scotland has acquired a wealth of reliable, good-quality statistical information to a hitherto unprecedented degree'.²⁴ In their magisterial review of social and economic change, they cross-check religion as a variable in mainstream data, especially the Scottish Household Survey, generating nine tables dealing with health, mixed-religion households, occupation, industry, household income, socio-economic group, educational attainment and active membership of churches.²⁵

As a result of their search, they demonstrate important findings. They detect few signs of denominational inequality in education and employment. Catholics and Protestants are found in all occupational sectors, and there is now a substantial middle-class among Catholics. Moreover, there has been decline in church membership in both denominations, and three in ten Catholics have 'mixed' marriages, often with Church of Scotland partners. Nonetheless, there is still a need for caution about the meaning of mass

²⁴ 2004, p.1

²⁵ See their tables A2.5; A3.6; A4.18; A4.19; A5.7; A6.6; A7.8; A8.19

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statistical data. For instance, the complex interplay of age, social class and disadvantage does not allow any simplistic conclusion about causal connections between religion, ethnicity and health. Medical researchers remain as concerned about the persistence of poor health among Irish Catholics in Scotland as elsewhere in Britain.²⁶ Large-scale statistical analysis may miss some pockets of remaining inequality.

However, if we have now reached the point where we can state that there is no evidence of denominational inequalities in the forms of data that can be captured in large-scale surveys, then we have arrived at an important moment in Scottish social analysis. Instead of devoting our energies to whether there is, or is not, evidence of inequality impacting to the disadvantage of Irish Catholics, we can turn our research attentions elsewhere. We can start to deconstruct the columns in the statistical tables, delving below their surface, and study the varieties of experience that lie within the populations that have been grouped together as categories.

Interestingly Bruce et al and Rosie point in this direction, by making repeated reference to the proportion of the population who state they are of 'No Religion' and also to the proportion of Catholics and Protestants who have revealed independence of opinion on key issues. Rather than put aside the proportion of Scottish people who have demonstrated their capacity to decide for themselves in spite of denominational allegiance, and use them as proof of Scotland's 'secularism', maybe it is time to explore the ways in which Scots respond to a wider range of moral and ethical issues.

Clearly such a deconstruction is incomplete without qualitative data of some form. Bradley's collection of anecdotal accounts does not claim research validity, and should not be viewed as such. However, it does reveal something of what will be gained when researchers turn to ethnographic research within the statistical columns. The heartfelt sentiments of Celtic fans published in Bradley's book cannot be tested for reliability or validity, but they do give us insight. Also, they raise questions about whether analogous passionate sentiments are to be found elsewhere – beyond the bounds of football, in the wider population of Catholics, and, equally importantly, among Protestants and Secularists.

²⁶ *Abbotts et al 1997*

VI CONCLUSIONS

The three books that I have reviewed illuminate the ways in which debates about religion, sectarianism and bigotry are being developed by Scottish academics. Bruce and his co-authors, Rosie and Bradley have proven track records in their respective research and should be given credit for the contribution that they have made. However, they remain introverted, concentrated on rebutting the claims made by other Scottish academics, rather than widening debate about today, in the context of the greater world of which Scotland is part. This introversion is the central theoretical and evidential fault within the three books.

Sectarianism, bigotry, religious intolerance and ethnic conflict are facts of life for growing numbers of the people of Europe and the Middle East. In a world where ethnic, religious and sectarian strife have become so murderously common, and small cells of terrorists have penetrated the heartlands of the mightiest of states, Scotland's capacity to deal with the remnants of its indigenous history of denominational strife has new salience. Intellectual rigour and dispassionate analysis are essential requirements, especially when it comes to drawing conclusions about issues on which politicians and the media freely express their opinions.

We can be thankful that Scotland has now generated the forms of social data that allow us to be assured that macro inequalities between Catholics and Protestants have been eliminated. But this is only stage one of the task that lies ahead. Other key forms of data, such as criminal justice statistics, where we should be able to detect the impact of religious prejudice as an aggravating factor in crime,²⁷ are primitive in the extreme. If the Scottish authorities are incapable of generating criminal justice data of the same calibre as the social and economic data on which Bruce et al, Rosie, and Paterson et al have drawn, then we must seek other ways to explore the connections between prejudice and the forms of behaviour that comprise 'bigotry', whether it is religious or secular.

If we wish to explore the connections between prejudice and hostile behaviour, then we must consider the use of ethnographic data in the deconstruction of the statistical columns. Intellectual curiosity must not shut

²⁷ See Kelly et al, 2004

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down at precisely the point where we can put aside some of the questions about denominational inequality in order to dig more deeply.

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