



Ireland's History Troubles

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Trials of Irish History: Genesis and Evolution of a Reappraisal 1938–2000

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The writing of Irish history, as a professional or academic enterprise, has a complex history of its own, the subject of recurrent and sometimes rancorous controversy since the late 1980s. Although popular usage of the label 'revisionist' (generally as a term of opprobrium) dates from that decade, the origins of the 'new' history are usually traced back a further fifty years to the founding of the journal *Irish Historical Studies* (1938) by T. W. Moody and R. Dudley Edwards.

- 1 T. W. Moody, 'A New History of Ireland', reprinted in Ciaran Brady, ed., *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism 1938–1994* (Dublin, 1994), 38
- 2 T. W. Moody, 'Irish History and Irish Mythology' (1978), reprinted in Brady, ed., *Interpreting Irish History*, 71

Drawing primarily upon English models — both men had been trained in the seminars of the Institute of Historical Research in London — the editors encouraged articles based on 'scientific' research methods, selections of annotated documents, guides to published and manuscript sources and 'Historical Revisions', or essays devoted to the reinterpretation of received wisdom in the light of new evidence. Over the next three or four decades Moody and Edwards presided over an exponential boom in historical research, centred on the expanding history departments of the Irish universities and, to a lesser extent, their British and North American counterparts. It was, as Moody boasted in 1967, 'an era of remarkable advances in specialist research [and] in professional technique'.¹ From the beginning, moreover, the revolution in method was associated with a higher intellectual or even moral purpose. Faith in scientific research, for Moody in particular, was bound up with a 'mental war of liberation from servitude to myth'.² As a visit to any of the major bookshops in

Dublin or Belfast will quickly demonstrate, the history boom still shows no sign of faltering. Yet the self-assurance and sense of purpose that characterized its architects have been so severely shaken that they already seem to belong to a different world. The optimism with which Moody, Edwards and their students once defined their goals and measured their achievements has largely evaporated, along with the broad currents of liberal humanism that underpinned their approach to the past.

In de Valera's Ireland, of course, received wisdom meant the crude nationalism that underpinned the state. In itself this was not an unusual predicament. What else, after all, was the Whig interpretation of England's past if not nationalist complacency? In the later nineteenth century the English Civil War, for so long the test of party politics, was losing its divisive energy as the relationship between crown and parliament and the conflict between Church and Dissent were displaced by social concerns. Only the Irish question, which still shaped party

19 April 1976: British troops storming through the gates of Milltown Cemetery, Belfast, to disperse republicans who had gathered to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Easter Rising. Photograph: Keystone/Getty Images.

alignments at Westminster, continued to supply seventeenth-century conflicts with a contemporary edge: to write of Ireland, Thomas Macaulay warned, was to tread on a volcano on which the lava was still glowing. The success story celebrated by English Whigs, centred on the gradual achievement of moderated liberty and parliamentary government, was no longer marked by partisanship or sectarianism — unless it was, in John Burrow's matchless phrase, 'the sectarianism of English respectability'.³ Its force was still felt in Oxford and Cambridge, even as scholarship diversified; reading G. M. Trevelyan, for one recent critic, was rather like taking 'a tour of a beautiful country house conducted by one of the last surviving members of the family'.⁴ It was in this context that the brilliant young Cambridge historian Herbert Butterfield achieved widespread recognition with his iconoclastic tract, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), an attack not only on the story of English constitutional development, but all national teleologies, and all present-centred history.

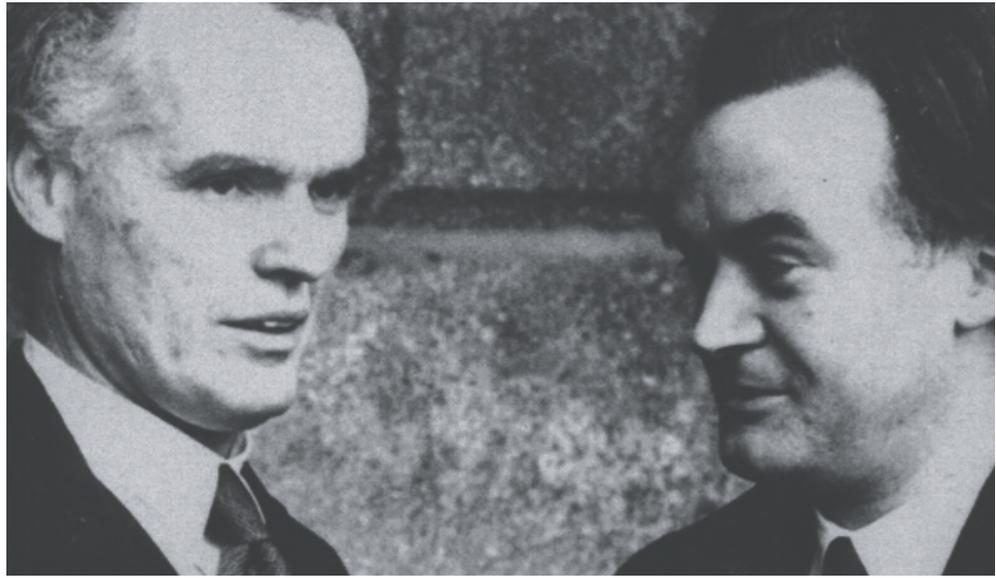
In Ireland, still feeling the tremors of yet more volcanic activity, the new historians found themselves in a peculiar situation. Both in public commemorations and in popular historical texts, the Southern state commemorated its revolutionary origins in the Easter Rising, launched by a militant vanguard without (or in advance of) what we would now call a democratic mandate. This rhetoric sat oddly with the Free State's very pragmatic acceptance both of the realities of Anglo-Irish relations and of the inequalities of traditional social hierarchies. Subsequently, of course, the revolution had received popular endorsement by a majority of voters, 'awakened' to national consciousness by the exemplary violence of Patrick Pearse or alienated by British repression. Either way, the democratic credentials of the Easter Rising were, to put it no more strongly, contestable. Free State governments fought hard to establish a monopoly on the graves of the patriot

dead at Glasnevin and Bodenstown, but neither W. T. Cosgrave nor Eamon de Valera succeeded in appropriating nationalist remembrance for themselves. They could not ignore the survival of revolutionary nationalism among the irreconcilable IRA in the South and, even more obviously, the continuity of republican sentiment in the North. In 1957 de Valera himself introduced internment, in parallel with the Stormont government, during the IRA border campaign. Although the path was far from smooth, intergovernmental co-operation would eventually triumph in the 1980s, also the highpoint of historical revisionism.

It was not until the late 1970s, following a decade of instability in Northern Ireland, that the antithesis between the new history and the old mythology was articulated with explicit force. In his well-known and much derided farewell to the Trinity College History Society, Moody contrasted the knowledge the historian acquired through 'the application of scientific methods to his evidence' with popular tradition. The opposition between history and mythology quickly became a standard trope as the historian's duty to address the causes of communal division in Ireland received greater prominence. By 1986, in his presidential address to the Irish History Society, Ronan Fanning was calling for the extension of the historiographical revolution into the twentieth century, where myth, defined as 'any historical narrative which is either imaginary or fictitious or both', could be found holed up in its final bastion.⁵ With their heads down in their archives, most of the professionals were too busy to notice the juggernaut heading towards them. Outside Ireland, Hayden White's argument that *all* historical narratives were essentially fictitious was making converts; at home, meanwhile, discontent with the sceptical assault upon the 'apostolic succession' of national heroes was escalating. Over the next decade these two trends would slowly become soldered together.

- 3 J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge, 1981), 92–93
- 4 Stefan Collini, *English Pasts* (Oxford, 1999), 24
- 5 Ronan Fanning, "'The Great Enchantment': Uses and Abuses of Modern Irish History', reprinted in Brady, *Interpreting Irish History*, 147

R. D. Edwards and T. W. Moody outside the Four Courts, Dublin, during the Foyle Fisheries case, c. 1947.



6 Desmond Fennell, 'Against Revisionism', reprinted in Brady, *Interpreting Irish History*, 183–90

The accusation that professional historians operated as the propagandist adjunct of a series of reactionary governments was first made by journalists and political commentators like Desmond Fennell. It was an 'objective fact', he asserted, that the revisionist trend was 'the historiography of the counter-revolution' — a narrative capable of legitimizing the state's deviation from the nationalist doctrine of its founders and, in particular, the increasing co-operation with Britain in joint security measures against republican insurgency in the North. Academics were mocked as the 'servants' of the establishment.⁶ Within the academy, Brendan Bradshaw's unexpected assault on the value-free principle of the Moody/Edwards school, although it dominated the early debate, was something of a red herring. Bradshaw and his opponents, after all, were basically agreed on what was happening — revisionism had rinsed the heroism out of the Irish past, dismissed the concept of the aboriginal, all-absorbing Gael, and replaced the central dynamic of nationhood with an emphasis on complexity, ambiguity, and contingency — they merely differed on whether or not this was a good thing. Critics gleefully seized on Bradshaw's suggestion that the

'received version' of Irish history might after all constitute 'a beneficent legacy — its wrongness notwithstanding', and got back to their index cards and folders. It seemed that 'myth', after fifty years of giving ground to 'history', had the temerity to attempt a late, no doubt futile, comeback. The really subversive challenge, however, was the growing post-colonial direction of Irish literary criticism. Drawing eclectically on Michel Foucault, Edward Said, or Hayden White, a number of scholars associated with the Field Day enterprise had adopted positions that tended to dissolve the boundaries between historical narratives and literary fiction altogether. The distinction between scrupulous scholarship and self-conscious propaganda, between 'history' and 'mythology', was beginning to crumble.

One important straw in the wind, in this connection, was the eighteenth-century historical geographer Kevin Whelan, whose superb *annaliste* studies of Wexford had established his reputation as one of the most innovative and thought-provoking scholars of his generation. In 1992 Whelan had issued a manifesto for what he called post-revisionism, in which he appeared to endorse Bradshaw's objections to the

portrayal of the Irish nation as an ‘ethnic mongrel cocktail’. Like Bradshaw, he complained that revisionists had soft-pedalled on landlords, unionists, the Orange Order, and successive British governments. Worst of all, he objected to the close links between revisionist historians, the media, and the political establishment. ‘Caesar and Clio should not cohabit,’ he counselled in a notably infelicitous phrase, ‘otherwise, the muse could quickly become a prostitute.’⁷ So far, however, the *constructive* aspects of Whelan’s post-revisionist agenda — an openness to French historiographical models, more attention to popular *mentalités*, and greater use of Irish-language sources — were relatively uncontroversial; not very different, in fact, from Tom Dunne’s proposals for post-revisionism announced in the *Irish Review* around the same time.⁸ Equally uncontentious was Whelan’s prediction that more comparative scholarship, by setting Irish experiences against a wider European frame, would reveal them to be ‘normative’ rather than exceptional.

Four years later, Whelan’s sparkling collection of essays, *The Tree of Liberty*, was published, deservedly the most influential of the bicentenary crop of ’98 books. Like historians of France such as Lynn Hunt and Keith Baker, new research on the United Irishmen was now turning to the role of language, symbols and rituals in politicization, and Whelan was no exception. Both his distinctive take on the United Irish movement and his distinctive phraseology soon acquired semi-official status. Whelan provided the text panels and exhibition guide for the Fellowship of Freedom exhibition held at the National Museum of Ireland in Collins Barracks; he helped organize the 1798 Bicentenary Conference, whose published proceedings were subsequently structured around his own interpretative think-pieces; and he became adviser to the Government Commemoration Committee, in which capacity he supplied speeches for

ministers attending bicentenary occasions. Throughout 1998, Clio and Caesar flaunted their on-off affair with unprecedented openness — though we must assume that Whelan emerged with his scholarly virtue intact. Significantly, however, *The Tree of Liberty* and its spin-offs contained little about the *Annales* school (or, indeed, about Irish-language research); Whelan’s earlier theoretical co-ordinates had been succeeded by the citation of post-colonial critics, especially Seamus Deane, Luke Gibbons and David Lloyd. The difference could be felt less in the *substance* of the essays — on the social and cultural role of middlemen and the ‘underground gentry’, or on the United Irish propaganda machine — than in the intensely politicized critique of revisionism that now provided his interpretative frame.

What is most depressing about Ireland’s recent history wars is the frequency with which the historical scholarship of several generations is explained primarily — sometimes solely — in terms of the crude ideological function imputed to it. Recent accounts of the new history school, to paraphrase W. E. H. Lecky on James Froude, singularly lack *gradation*. For Whelan, revisionism was ‘a specific ideological response to the needs of the Southern state in coming to terms with the major political crisis’.⁹ This is undeniable. Disagreements between scholars are partly political disagreements; and that is partly why they remain interesting and relevant. No one really believes, for example, that the quarrel between those who see the Protestant Ascendancy as a species of colonialism and those who stress eighteenth-century Ireland’s fundamental similarities with *ancien régime* Europe is ever going to be resolved by more archival discoveries. The business of verifying and weighing up evidence does matter, of course, as David Irving discovered in the ‘Holocaust Denial’ libel case brought against Deborah Lipstadt and Penguin Books in 1999. Anthony Julius’s victorious defence team chose as their historical expert the bullish Richard Evans, whose popular primer

- 7 Kevin Whelan, ‘Come All You Staunch Revisionists: Towards a Post-Revisionist Agenda for Irish History’, *Irish Reporter*, 2 (1991), 23–26
- 8 Tom Dunne, ‘New Histories: Beyond “Revisionism”’, *Irish Review*, 12 (1992), 1–12
- 9 Whelan, ‘Towards a Post-Revisionist Agenda’, 26. See more recently, Kevin Whelan, ‘The Revisionist Debate in Ireland’, *boundary* 2, 31, 1 (2004), 179–206.

10 D. D. Guttenplan, *The Holocaust on Trial: History, Justice and the David Irving Libel Case* (London, 2001), 218

11 Mary Fulbrook, *Historical Theory* (London, 2002); Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown, 1997)

In Defence of History (1997) claims that the reconstruction of the past is, after all, a matter of sifting the empirical evidence and evaluating sources. In court, Evans succeeded in establishing that Irving's books were a 'knotted web of distortions, suppressions and manipulations' of the primary material.¹⁰ In the academy, however, Evans's rather sneering attempts to meet the challenge of post-modernist theory with reassertions of disciplinary practice have had a mixed reception. Statements can be falsified, documents can be misread or wrenched out of context, but the larger scale narratives, as we all know, rarely stand or fall on the basis of the evidence. Is it possible, then, for the professionals to distinguish historical knowledge from ideology without falling back on the old 'common sense' position that so often replicates, whether consciously or not, contemporary presuppositions and prejudices?

One aspect of historical writing notably missing from our recent historiographical skirmishes is something like the concept of the paradigm, as defined by the historian of science Thomas Kuhn. In his classic book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Kuhn presented an iconoclastic account of the ways in which scientific knowledge is produced. According to the traditional view, scientific progress depended upon the duplication of experimental knowledge by individual researchers whose task it was to isolate themselves from the social forces and political interests that otherwise produced distorted judgements or bias. Kuhn was intrigued by the cultural practices of scientific communities, which, like other cultural practices, were transmitted from one generation to the next through apprenticeship, processes of socialization, and established mechanisms of social control. Typical research, he argued, does not occur in a vacuum, but builds upon a specific, concrete, scientific achievement, an authoritative model — or 'paradigm' — which subsequent scholars are committed to elaborating and extending. The key point

for Kuhn was that scientific paradigms never establish themselves for logical reasons alone, nor are they abandoned simply because of the accumulation of anomalies (evidence that cannot be assimilated). Paradigm shifts occur when the community finds a new scientific achievement that can both assimilate anomalies and serve as a concrete model for future work, a realignment that Kuhn relates to the social psychology of the scientific community rather than logical justification. Historians, who generally aim to cultivate scepticism, originality and controversy, are not as dogmatic as Kuhn's scientists, nor do they engage primarily in collaborative research. But Kuhn's position has recently been adapted in Mary Fulbrook's *Historical Theory* (2002), and it is close in spirit to the widely admired work of Georg Iggers on twentieth-century historiography.¹¹ For Fulbrook in particular, it offers a middle way between the post-modernist view that historical accounts can really only be evaluated according to ethical or political criteria, and the traditional response of the historian that the documents, ultimately, speak for themselves. In some ways Evi Gkotszaridis pitches her *Trials of Irish History: Genesis and Evolution of a Reappraisal 1938–2000* (2006) towards this middle ground, though her central concerns are quite different.

Moody and Edwards, as they appear in *Trials of Irish History*, were human beings as well as historians. As such, they shared a whole series of assumptions about the nature of the individual and society, the nation and the state, Ireland and Europe, with their educated (and uneducated) contemporaries. Part of the Gkotszaridis's achievement is to bring to light new correspondence and occasional pieces that enable her to flesh out the intellectual careers of the new historians. One result is that their dissatisfaction with nationalism is presented not as an insular Irish concern but a broader European one. In 'History,

Politics and Partition', written for the *Leader* in March 1955, Edwards appears as an enthusiast for the Council of Europe, which had passed the European Convention on Human Rights in 1951 and which he hoped would some day be underpinned by a greater sense of a shared European identity. His warning that 'good propaganda can be bad history' sounds exactly like the sort of statement that gets us historians a bad reputation among the denouncers of naïve empiricism. But the statement was made in the same year that West Germany was admitted to NATO and the formation of the Warsaw Pact was announced. For most Europeans the memory of the Second World War was very fresh, and the possibility of a third was very real. Statesmen and historians were then more intimately connected (in 1940, just after the Finest Hour speech, G. M. Trevelyan had written to thank Winston Churchill for the mastership of Trinity College Cambridge, reminiscing about their schooldays together at Harrow).¹² In the years after the Nuremberg trials, both the gentlemen scholars and the gentlemen statesmen would ponder the failure of the Versailles settlement of 1919. Butterfield's first substantial book, *The Peace Tactics of Napoleon* (1929), which emphasized the role of accident and incompetence in the shaping of the Treaty of Tilsit rather than imperialist ambitions of Napoleon, should be viewed in this context.

As Gkotzaridis reminds us in one of her most interesting sections, T. Desmond Williams, a close associate of Edwards, had studied diplomatic history at Peterhouse (Butterfield's Cambridge college) before his appointment by the Foreign Office to a team of British, French and American historians to edit German Foreign Ministry papers from 1919 to 1945. Recommended by Butterfield as the most promising historian ever — 'no other contemporary historian was so aware of the traps and dangers in contemporary history' — Williams went on to dispute Lewis Namier's deterministic

view of German nationalism in a brilliant essay on the historiography of the Second World War, demonstrated that Neville Chamberlain's rejection of appeasement was a mixture of misinformation and miscalculation, and criticized the conduct of the Allied powers at the Nuremberg trials on the grounds that they had not permitted access to their own archives. In 1961, Geoffrey Barraclough's paper, 'German Unification: An Essay in Revisionism', a critique of present-centred history read to the Conference of Irish Historians, was enthusiastically welcomed by J. C. Beckett: 'Perhaps in the long run,' Beckett concluded, 'one of the strongest justifications for the serious study of history is the need for protecting the public from policies based on a false interpretation of the past.' Value-freedom, now so much derided, appears here in a rather different light.

Edwards and Williams both believed that Ireland's neutrality permitted them greater detachment on European matters than English historians could muster. At the same time, they believed that a comparative perspective gave them greater insight into the Irish past. In 1960, depressed by the poor performance of his students in a matriculation examination, Edwards deplored the faith-and-fatherland history taught in the schools, which, he thought, tended to drive young men into either the Church or the IRA: 'What is needed is a history of Ireland in its relations with civilisation in which the unity of Europe gets more influence and can be balanced against English aggression and Protestant bigotry.' The distinction between the true historian and the amateur, for Edwards, turned on the latter's identification with his subjects, which led to celebration rather than critical evaluation. It is worth recalling that the sort of books he had in mind were Frank Gallagher's polemic *The Indivisible Island* (1957), which began with a chapter entitled 'A Nation through the Centuries', or P. S. O'Hegarty's *Ireland*

12 David Cannadine, G. M. Trevelyan: *A Life in History* (London, 1992), 135

- 13 *Trials of Irish History*, ix
 14 *Trials of Irish History*, 1, 7, 11, 22
 15 Tom Dunne, *Rebellions: Memoir, Memory, and 1798* (Dublin, 2004), 48

under the Union (1952), with its 'story of Ireland in the last phase of her captivity'. Such transparent invitations to anachronism and emotive idealism had already become embarrassing. But professionalism was also, crucially, defined by source criticism. The amateur was merely 'a commentator on commentaries', whereas, for the genuine historical critic, contemporary documents were the 'real quarry' of research work. Once again, we have to remember that the distinction between historical scholarship and propaganda was formulated at a time when political history was largely based on memoirs and speeches.

Unfortunately, *Trials of Irish History* is structured around the author's 'ever-imposing' revelation that Irish revisionism and post-modern theory present 'an astonishing twin-ship in sensibility, spirit and method'. Gkotzaridis, a Greek scholar based at the European University Institute in Florence, charts this journey of discovery in a disarming, off-key kind of europrose: 'I mused it was like having a cryptic intelligence message in front of my eyes and feeling frustrated at not having found the means to break the code yet.'¹³ Her writing, sometimes baroque, sometimes almost spoof-Joycean, is marred by grammatical errors, half-sentences, and cumbersome locutions that a more attentive editor (or just *an* editor) might have corrected. There is of course little evidence, as she concedes with some understatement, that the new historians were acquainted with Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jean-François Lyotard or Jacques Derrida. Since the chronology is all wrong, Gkotzaridis argues instead on the basis of affinities. But can we really believe that the 'primeval rift in the entrails of Irish society' produced a generation of historians who were, as she puts it, 'stupendously precocious in divining the serious obstacle created by the intrusion of power in knowledge?' Her new historians appear as iconoclastic, sceptical and, above all, courageous, as a 'harried

minority', as 'champions of freedom' who empowered future generations with the ability 'to think for themselves'. Their opponents, meanwhile, are viewed as facile, opportunistic and mean; they are engaged in a kind of priestcraft; their 'righteous' and 'sermonising' polemics are designed to perpetuate 'the old naive infatuation' with the story of Ireland. This value-laden account, the sort of historical writing that Moody and Edwards deplored, does little to advance her case. 'From the perches of posterity's condescension,' she remarks, in another dizzying metaphorical flight, 'glib accusations of archaism in method and intention were vituperatively thrown at the faces of those trailblazer historians who dared to imagine the empowerment of the Irish intellect inside two regimes, which had instead thrived on its emasculation.'¹⁴

Connections between revisionism and post-modernism are repeatedly asserted but never demonstrated in any detail. We are told that the new historians resembled Foucault's method because they questioned the notion of the Irish nation expressed in de Valera's 1937 Constitution, or that, like Derrida, they were anti-dogmatic; in one chapter Conor Cruise O'Brien metamorphoses into a French post-modernist philosopher, while Seamus Deane appears briefly as the French counter-revolutionary and monarchist Joseph de Maistre. Even by Anglo-American standards, however, Irish historians have been relatively averse to theoretical reflection on their trade. One suspects that Theo Moody's admission to Marnie Hughes-Warrington's crammer, *Fifty Key Thinkers on History*, is a testament to national inclusiveness rather than his originality. Tom Dunne, who was taught by Edwards at University College Dublin in the 1960s, recalls simply an emphasis on independence, critical thought, and the importance of deploying evidence. What stayed in the mind was the idea 'that history mattered, and each one of us was entitled, indeed expected, to have an opinion'.¹⁵ The

new historians have far more in common with the twentieth-century English scholars surveyed in John Kenyon's *The History Men* (1983) — where, incidentally, Butterfield is damned for his 'modest and rather random output' — or indeed with the emphasis on accident and contingency in Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys* (2004).¹⁶

That 'propaganda' was something that infected 'knowledge', but with the careful forensic skills of the historian might be surgically removed, was a basic assumption of the Anglo-American world in the decades after the Second World War. At the Conference of Irish Historians in 1945 Butterfield preached against xenophobia, national vanity and, above all, the failure 'to put ourselves in another's place'. In 1957 the English conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott presented a paper entitled 'The Activity of Being an Historian', warning that the common preoccupation with 'origins' produced a restricted history in which the past was read backwards and assimilated to subsequent events. In his conclusion, which would have warmed the heart of any Irish revisionist, he contrasted the detached writing of the historian with the 'obscene necromancy' of the journalist, who sought to resuscitate the dead and to dress them up in modern clothes so that they could be 'made to gesticulate again'.¹⁷ Academic historians everywhere justified their existence by separating scholarly history from communal memory. While the former was used to sanctify political institutions, social hierarchies or religious beliefs, the progress of the latter, according to the Cambridge historian Jack Plumb, would purge the human story of such 'deceiving visions'. Plumb's simplistic injunction to analyse what happened on its own terms, rather than in the service of religion or national destiny, was intended to facilitate 'a more extended, a more rational, a more detached sense of human destiny'.¹⁸ The common hope that historical research might contribute to the dismantling of prejudices

between neighbouring communities was shared by both Moody and Edwards — primarily, of course, preoccupied with the divisions on the island of Ireland. It is hard, however, to see this mission as part of a state-sponsored project. Certainly, Edwards's experience of collaboration with politicians and civil servants over the Bureau of Military History, an interesting episode reconstructed for the first time by Gkotzaridis, was not encouraging. In a *Sunday Independent* article entitled 'Fianna Fáil and Frankenstein', Edwards accused the government of treating its archives with the same defensiveness as Soviet Russia.

The other striking feature of the new history school, not properly addressed by Gkotzaridis, is related to the deep Christian convictions shared by its central practitioners. Moody, as one of his colleagues wrote, 'had a view of history as at once moral, rational and in a deep non-technical sense religious'.¹⁹ The major lesson of history, according to Williams, was 'the simple Christian truth of original sin and the simple Christian admonition not to cast the first stone'. In this respect, too, they resembled Butterfield, a Methodist lay preacher from Yorkshire who published widely on Christianity, history and science. In 1954, when Butterfield gave the first series of Wiles Lectures at Queen's University, Belfast, he chose 'Man on his Past' as the theme, evidence of his continuing preoccupation with historical scholarship; but he concluded with a summary of his own approach entitled 'The Idea of Providence' — almost unimaginable today. *Trials of Irish History* reinforces Alvin Jackson's study of J. C. Beckett's professional and private writings, which reveal him as moderate, liberal and, above all, Anglican in outlook.²⁰ Both Beckett and Moody were from a Northern Protestant background, as indeed was R. B. McDowell, the most influential eighteenth-century scholar of the period. Yet their strong sense of Irishness — inclusive, rather

- 16 John Kenyon, *The History Men* (London, 1983), 261
- 17 Michael Oakeshott, 'The Activity of Being an Historian', in T. Desmond Williams, ed., *Historical Studies*, 1 (London, 1958), 17–18
- 18 J. H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past* (Basingstoke, 1969), 13, 17, 144
- 19 F. S. L. Lyons, quoted in Thomas Bartlett, 'Review Article: A New History of Ireland', *Past and Present*, 116 (1987), 207.
- 20 Alvin Jackson, 'J. C. Beckett: Politics, Faith, Scholarship', *Irish Historical Studies*, 33, 130 (2002), 129–50

- 21 Fanning, 'Uses and Abuses of Modern Irish History', 156
- 22 John M. Regan, 'Southern Irish Nationalism as a Historical Problem', *Historical Journal*, 50, 1 (2007), 1–27. I am grateful to the author for an advance copy of the article.

patrician, 32-county Irishness — precluded any genuine identification with the Stormont régime, or indeed its Southern counterpart. It also helps to explain their faith in the integrative, conciliatory potential of the historian, and their optimistic belief that a scientific approach to the evidence would gradually erode dangerous popular traditions, whether Orange or Green. Beckett's political ruminations, recorded in his diaries, were often interesting, but never profound or systematic. His central conviction, that the Anglo-Irish tradition (or an idealized version of it) offered a *via media* between the sectarian excesses of Gaelic nationalism and Ulster loyalism, is easily mocked. Yet the greatest testament to the 32-county nationalism of the new historians is the survival — in the face of some hostility at Stormont — of the journal *Irish Historical Studies* itself. The unity they achieved was not the unity of the 1916 Republic, or even the second Republic of 1937, but of the 1920 Government of Ireland Act: two distinct historical societies for North and South, united by the journal and by the umbrella organization, the Irish Committee for Historical Sciences (and, their critics might add, ultimately dependent on London).

Almost a decade into the third Republic — the one ratified on 23 May 1998 — the partition of Ireland seems paradoxically more stubbornly entrenched and yet more futile than ever. It is becoming clear, however, that the intellectual climate in which historians conduct their research has been rapidly transformed. 'Nowhere else in the European, North American or Antipodean democracies,' Ronan Fanning declared in 1986, 'does the writing of twentieth-century history demand so constant a confrontation with mythologies designed to legitimise

violence as a political weapon in a bid to overthrow the state.'²¹ Future undergraduates are unlikely to feel the pressures of unfinished business in the same way as recent generations. As the polarizing issues presented by the Troubles begin to fade, what remains of the Moody/Edwards project? Professionalization, if anything, has intensified, and nowhere more so than among the highly specialized circles of literary critics who have laid siege to traditional historiography. The historians, though somewhat chastened, seem set to maintain their traditional vigilance against propaganda, however complex and problematic their commitment to objectivity may be. In the current issue of the *Historical Journal*, John Regan develops a detailed critique of revisionist accounts of the Civil War (1922–23), which, he contends, have been structured around the implicit assumptions of a hidden Southern or 26-county nationalism.²² Once again, the renewal of communal violence and republican insurrection after 1969, which Regan emphatically calls the Northern 'war', provides the essential backdrop. Since Regan confesses that his earlier research was restricted by a kind of self-censorship, his argument that revisionism was a 'conscious, or perhaps unconscious, enterprise between intellectuals and the state' has the unusual distinction of being a conspiracy theory in which the theorist himself was formerly complicit. Ultimately, however, his critique of revisionist historiography is tied to a closely argued reinterpretation of state formation in 1922, recovering the 'uncomfortable, challenging, or inexpedient' aspects occluded, he contends, by the pervasive assumptions of Southern nationalism. Surely Moody and Edwards would have approved? ■