


BOOK REVIEW

Feargal Cochrane. *Belfast: The Story of a City and its People*

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Feargal Cochrane is the author of several academic studies of the Northern Ireland conflict and its partial resolution in the so-called peace process. His new book, described as “a love letter of sorts” (xxi), is a more personal and loosely textured work. There are personal anecdotes, like the day in 1969 when the parents of the four-year old Feargal realized he could no longer be allowed to play outside with his beloved toy gun. Local references are glossed with mentions of *Blackadder* and *Line of Duty*. At times the rhetoric becomes positively fanciful: “if you grew up in Belfast during the 1970s or 1980s you were probably either a poet yourself, or you knew one who lived on your street” (19). But behind the informal tone lies a serious point. Irritated by outside observers who present the violence of recent years as the result of “some geographically specific psychosis” (2), Cochrane sets out to show instead that the violence of the last half century can be understood as a response to deep-rooted political, economic, and cultural forces.

Cochrane's desire to substitute historical context for superficial labels is commendable. The problem is that, offering to lead the reader through the city's history, he is a less than reliable guide. The Irish Parliament did not, in 1720, decide unregistered Catholic priests should not be castrated, but instead branded on the face (55). Castration was proposed by the Irish privy council as an alternative to branding—quite probably as part of a complicated parliamentary maneuver—and neither penalty was ever enacted. Protestants of the Church of Ireland were not “in effect the landed gentry” (55). As the late A.C. Hepburn established many years ago, Anglicans in Belfast were on average less prosperous than Presbyterians, and on some measurements of economic status were closer to the city's disadvantaged Catholic population. The sacramental test prevented Presbyterians holding an office of trust or profit under the crown. It did not deny them the right to vote (57). The claim that Presbyterian religion and ecclesiastical organization predisposed its adherents to democracy, making them “innately individualistic and suspicious of group-think” (53) ignores recent studies of the rigid discipline exercised by the kirk session. Presbyterian church government, as Ian McBride has pointed out, is in fact best seen as oligarchic rather than egalitarian. The violent and explicitly anti-Catholic preaching of the Presbyterian clergyman “roaring” Hugh Hanna was anything but “what we would now refer to as a form of ‘dog whistle’ politics” (93). The opening of the Crumlin Road gaol in 1845 was indeed a response to the growth of the town's population (137). But it was also a consequence of an important landmark in Belfast's history, its replacement of Carrickfergus as the county town.

These are specific points. But there is also a wider lack of understanding. Cochrane insists that Belfast's culture included a consistent radical strain. Dissent from authority, he says more than once, is in the city's DNA (53, 105, 125). His chapter on “The Radicalism,” however,

ends with the defeat of the United Irishmen in 1798. Thereafter, he suggests, “attention went elsewhere, notably into commerce, the linen industry and manufacturing” (78). This wholly ignores a large body of recent writing. Jonathan Wright’s *The Natural Leaders and their World* (2012) documents the continued involvement of Belfast Presbyterians in a succession of radical agitations in the first four decades of the nineteenth century. Gerald Hall’s *Ulster Liberalism* (2011), as well as earlier work by Frank Wright and Brian Walker, examines the central role in Ulster politics up to the 1880s of a Liberal party, drawing on the votes of both Catholics and Presbyterians. The Labour movement also gets short shrift. There is a brief discussion of the minority of Protestant socialists, the so-called rotten Prods, who were the target, alongside Catholics, of violent workplace expulsions during 1920–21. But there is nothing on the brief but impressive showing of the Independent Labour Party, and its champion William Walker, or on the parallel working-class revolt within Orangeism, in the years before World War I. Nor is there any discussion of what for a time looked like the promising rebirth of Labour politics in the 1960s. Cochrane seeks to rescue Belfast from the reductive labels imposed by supercilious outsiders. But his own account is a simplistic narrative in which, apart from a few years in the late eighteenth century, the binary conflict of Catholic and Protestant, nationalist and unionist, provides the sole theme across four centuries of history.

Cochrane is more at home with the events of the past half century. A discussion of “the Troubles,” focused on “a small number of iconic moments” (269), adds little to the mass of analysis already in print. A more useful chapter examines the transformation of Belfast’s traumatic recent history into a marketable commodity. “Dark tourism” (180) has contributed substantially to the city’s economy. But it has also brought the spectacle of walking tours guided by ex-prisoners, where the perpetrators of often sickening violence have a platform to construct their self-justificatory narratives, and inner-city coach trips where some of the city’s most deprived inhabitants become exhibits to be photographed by affluent outsiders.