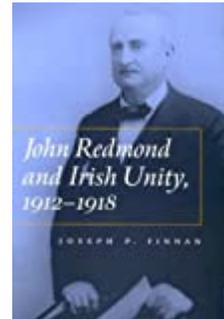




Joseph P. Finnan. *John Redmond and Irish Unity, 1912-1918.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004. xxi + 307 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-3043-2.



Reviewed by Michael Hopkinson (University of Stirling)

Published on H-Albion (July, 2006)

New Approaches to the Career of John Redmond.

It has long been apparent that the life of the Irish Parliamentary Party leader John Redmond has been due for substantial re-evaluation. There has been no major biography published for several decades and Redmond has been all too easily stereotyped as one of Irish history's losers, as a leader progressively out of step with his times and overtaken by more charismatic and relevant leaders. As Joseph Finnan points out in this study, there are few memorials to Redmond outside his native Wexford. The recent change in the Irish context, involving talk of conciliation and respect between traditions within Ireland, and between Britain and Ireland, has been accompanied by a new-found respect for Redmond and the moderate, constitutional position. The questioning of previous republican certainties has led many to take another look at the Home Rule tradition, and with that the life of Redmond, and to ask whether a severing of all constitutional ties with Britain and the implementation of partition was inevitable. This is particularly apparent in the recent work of Paul Bew and Alvin Jackson. The authors of the Good Friday Agreement were aware of the Redmond legacy. Nowadays some are even plucking up enough courage to call themselves Redmondites. Such changes in historical perspective have been accompanied by work on a wide range of sources, many of them freshly

tapped.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Finnan has chosen to work on Redmond. Finnan's book is solidly researched and clearly written and argued. He is clearly a promising and determined scholar. There is little to quarrel with in most of the soundly based conclusions. The book suffers, however, from three weaknesses. First, it is only a partial biography covering the latter part of Redmond's career—the family background and the Parnellite and post-Parnellite periods are reviewed far too quickly. This necessarily involves a concentration on weakness and failure, and prevents consideration of how far Redmond can be interpreted from different, more complex, perspectives. It also limits sufficient consideration of Redmond's character and background. Insufficient account can be given of the importance of Redmond's stays in Australia and the United States. Second, Finnan has not used or included in his bibliography some recent important works which have opened up fresh views on important aspects of Redmond's career. No mention is made of Patrick Maume's work, and particularly his *The Long Gestation: Irish Nationalist Life, 1891-1918* (2000). Strangely, Finnan refers to Michael Laffan's review of Paul Bew's *Ideology and the Irish Question: Ulster Unionism, 1912-1916* (1998) without including Bew's book in the bibliography. Laffan's essential *The Resurrection of*

Ireland: the Sinn Fein Party, 1916-1923 (2005) is also ignored, together with Fergus Campbell's *Land and Revolution: Nationalist Politics in the West of Ireland 1891-1921* (2005). The continuing significance of the land question is generally underplayed. Third, the book's range is somewhat narrowly concentrated on high politics. The recent stress on regions and localities in Irish historiography is ignored. Matthew Kelly's published work, too recent for Finnan to consider, illustrates how much Redmond pandered to Fenian interests in the 1890s, particularly on the prison amnesty question, and that the divide between constitutional and physical force nationalism was often not as wide as usually depicted.[1]

Finnan gives a sympathetic account of Redmond's motivation, considering at some length whether a more aggressive leader could have won more concessions from the British Government. It is difficult to contest Finnan's argument that Redmond was the victim of external circumstances, notably the Ulster Crisis and the length and unpopularity of the First World War, over which he had no control. It is well to be reminded that Redmond appeared as a popular hero for much of the Third Home Rule Bill's passage. Redmond's tragedy was that, far from being a means to bring Nationalist and Unionist together and reconciling Nationalist Ireland with Britain, the war intensified all Irish divisions and destroyed his party. His party suffered from the complacency that went with its single-party dominance and also from its

dependence on British politicians. Nonetheless Redmond chronically failed to come to terms with the depth of Ulster Loyalist resistance to Home Rule, frequently reassuring the British Government that it was all a big bluff, and he could surely have won more concessions from the Liberal Government as a price for his support for Britain in the war. It is difficult to believe that Parnell would have proved so quiescent. Redmond did not show the determination in dealing with Westminster between 1912 and 1917 as he did in ruthlessly taking over the leadership of the Irish Volunteers in June 1914. It may well be true, however, that the period between 1910 and 1914 had only seen a temporary revival in the Nationalist Party's fortunes and that the party's problems were deep-seated and long-lasting. Analysis of this, however, goes into territory far beyond the confines of this book. Finnan ends with somewhat forced and awkward comparisons between Redmond's views and career and those of John Hume, Tomas Masaryk and Ehud Barak. There are still dangers in Irish history of being so present-minded.

In sum this is a useful and promising study. We await, however, a full-scale biography of Redmond which may well contest the traditional, somewhat patronizing, approach.

Note

[1]. M. J. Kelly, *The Fenian Ideal and Irish Nationalism, 1882-1916* (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2006).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Michael Hopkinson. Review of Finnan, Joseph P., *John Redmond and Irish Unity, 1912-1918*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. July, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12055>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.