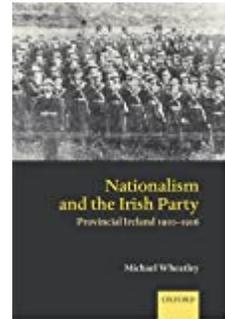




Michael Wheatley. *Nationalism and the Irish Party: Provincial Ireland, 1910-1916.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. x + 295 pp. \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-927357-7.



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Just How Redmondite Was the Irish Party?

Over the last decade a succession of high-quality, scholarly works exploring the Irish revolutionary period through a localist approach have been published. The trend began with breakthrough studies by Joost Augusteijn, on nationalist development from “public defiance” to “guerrilla warfare” after 1916 (1996), and Peter Hart’s study of revolutionary Cork (1998). Work soon followed by Michael Farry on Sligo (2000), Marie Coleman on Longford (2001), Fergus Campbell on Galway (2005), and Robert Lynch on “the North” (2006). Collectively, these works have done much to revitalize the study of revolutionary Ireland, which I take to encompass the period stretching from the mobilization of unionist and nationalist militias in 1912-13 to the end of the Irish civil war in 1923. With the possible exception of Lynch’s work, all have had to contend with the long shadow cast by David Fitzpatrick’s remarkable study of County Clare, *Politics and Irish Life, 1913-1921: Provincial Experience of War and Revolution* (1977). And though the oedipal complex has gripped some of these new writers more than others, it is worth remembering that, when first published, Fitzpatrick’s monograph was also the work of a young historian developing Ph.D. findings. In recent

years, Fitzpatrick has defended his conclusions, engaging rigorously through reviews with some of these recent works, including that under consideration here.[1]

Michael Wheatley’s fine study fits neatly into this trend, though in covering five counties—Leitrim, Longford, Roscommon, Sligo, and Westmeath—he offers a regional rather than a county approach. The idea that these counties constitute a distinct region is not self-evident and much of Wheatley’s research reinforces the particular character of individual counties and their county towns. Central chapters, for example, explore localist factionalism in Roscommon and Westmeath or the unusual significance of class and labor politics in Sligo Town. Mainly working through local newspapers, Wheatley makes it clear that having significant control over a local newspaper was an essential prerequisite to a successful career in Irish politics and he convincingly demonstrates the crucial role such newspapers played as personal platforms for their owners. Nonetheless, his regionalist approach is strengthened by his useful summaries of the distribution of these newspapers, demonstrating the extent to which their individual readership

was not confined by county or constituency borders, just as the politics they reported and editorialized on were not. Nonetheless, K. T. Hoppen's localist analysis of mid-Victorian Irish politics pertains to a significant extent to 1910-16, despite the existence of long-established, mass-membership national political organizations.[2]

Much is revealed through Wheatley's case studies. In Roscommon the Tully brothers kept up a relentless campaign against the Irish party and the liberal connection through their newspaper the *Midland Reporter*. Jasper Tully, the more public of the two, was a law unto himself, pursuing a personal vendetta against John Hayden MP, the local party power-broker and owner of the *Westmeath Examiner*. Though Wheatley attributes little ideological significance to Tully's journalism, his editorializing on international affairs and the rhetoric of perfidious Albion had strong Mitchelite undertones, echoing the tone and preoccupations of the nationalist press of the 1850s and 1860s. Consequently, though politically non-aligned, Tully's rumbustious journalism reflected a tradition within Irish nationalist discourse that was familiar to many Irish nationalists. Laurence Ginnell's "revolt" in Westmeath (supported by Tully), in which his leadership of a radical land agitation eventually provoked his expulsion from the party, provides Wheatley another example of local division and factionalism. Wheatley argues that Ginnell's well-documented and precocious connections with Sinn Féin were of little real ideological significance to his support base, among which "small farmers and landless men" predominated. Class, it seems, was more significant than ideology, and this argument might be compared to Fergus Campbell's analysis of agrarian radicalism in Galway and his similar argument regarding the radicalization of social groups who had not benefited from forty years of land legislation. Labor politics in Sligo Town provide perhaps Wheatley's most fascinating case study. Following the democratization of local government and under the local leadership of the belligerent P. A. McHugh (d. 1909), nationalist politics in Sligo had a distinct flavor. Sligo's geographical location ensured that sectarian tensions were more marked than elsewhere, and were enhanced by McHugh's determination to use newly acquired nationalist control over local legal structures to advantage Catholics at the expense of Protestant property owners, a tendency which could be exploited by Unionists.[3] Most significant, however, was the town's highly developed trade union movement, which successfully lobbied for improved employment conditions of the Sligo working man. Tumultuous though the course of this labor politics was, Wheatley demonstrates that a

broad nationalist front evolved, culminating in the transport workers' strike of March to May 1913. The outcome decisively determined the balance of power between "the town's Catholic nationalism and Protestant capital" (p. 145). The crucial point, contrary to arguments made by earlier historians, is that Sligo labor and the local Irish party (through the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the United Irish League) were able to evolve a *modus operandi* rooted in local political interests. And this unity was reinforced by the establishment of the Irish Volunteers, which attracted the support of nearly all nationalists. Again, Wheatley sees this as reflecting a generalized and none-too-ideologically-precise localism, though his argument would have benefited from a sustained discussion of the sectarian dimension of Sligo politics.

Saying that Wheatley minimizes the role of ideology needs to be finessed if we are to get to heart of his argument as made *and* what it seems to imply. Underpinning his work is the vital question of how Redmondite was the Irish parliamentary party and its grassroots organizations, notably the United Irish League and the Ancient Order of Hibernians. It is becoming clear that Redmondism, that particular amalgam of federalist imperialism and constitutional nationalism, can be best understood as the political doctrine of a leadership faction within the party rather than a broadly accepted set of principles characteristic of mainstream Irish nationalism.[4] As Wheatley shows in a crucial chapter exploring nationalist political language, Irish nationalists framed their commentaries through a distinctly non-Redmondite Anglophobic rhetoric: "The passive 'background noise' of day-to-day nationalist political rhetoric was suffused with a vocabulary of heroic struggle, suffering, grievance, injustice, and enemies. Almost any dispute could arouse hostility to England" (p. 94). Such rhetoric provided nationalist factions a shared set of attitudes within which localist politics functioned. This, it might be argued, situated localist politics in a nationalist context: the national and nationalist context could be taken for granted. It should be noted also that this generalized nationalist rhetoric blurred the distinctions between "advanced" and constitutional nationalism—much to the frustration of Irish separatists[5]—rendering Redmondite constitutional subtleties an irrelevance to much nationalist commitment. This raises a series of crucial questions concerning the nature of support for home rule. Given the emotional satisfaction derived from anti-English polemic and given how habitual it was despite loyalty to Redmond's party leadership, can it be supposed that home rule would have made it go away? Would it be

right to argue, as Unionists did in more forthright terms, that Irish nationalism tended towards secession, albeit—to put it one way—in a loose Fenian sense rather than the IRB’s precise commitment to an Irish republic? Answering such questions requires that account be taken of the emphasis Wheatley places on Irish nationalist “apathy,” particularly in the face of the third home rule bill. It might, therefore, be asked whether intense hostility to the English connection was a matter of political ritual, reflecting a *mentalité* formed through a set of discourses which offered a formulaic explanation of any tension or political crisis, rather than a lived day-to-day reality, particularly during this period of rising agricultural incomes. (To raise this question is not to deny the possible explanatory legitimacy of these discourses.)

Consequently, making sense of the extraordinary transformation in Irish politics between 1914 and 1918 demands an exploration of the ways British behavior fulfilled these discourse expectations. The reluctance of Irish MPs (apart from professing Redmondites) to encourage Irish enlistment in the early stages of the war tells us much about their understanding of Irish (dis)loyalty, particularly in the aftermath of the Ulster crisis and the government’s shift towards partition as an answer to the Irish question. This sense of British betrayal—perfidious Albion, once again—was reinforced by the government’s response to the 1916 rebellion. Among other things, 1916 was intended as a provocation that would expose the realities of British rule. The British reaction, from the executions through to internment, confirmed not only several generations’ Fenian polemic but also, as

can be demonstrated through Wheatley’s research, mainstream nationalist thinking. As the risk of severe reduction, the threat of conscription transformed this passive, almost instinctive disloyalty to the British state into an active politics. What this schema suggests, is that in order to explain the extraordinary shift that took place in Irish politics between 1914 and 1918, historians need to pay greater attention to these discourses. It will be fascinating to see how Wheatley tells the next part of his story in the planned follow-up to this excellent book.

Notes

[1]. David Fitzpatrick, Review *Nationalism and the Irish Party: Provincial Ireland, 1910-1916*, by Michael Wheatley, *English Historical Review* 121 (April 2006): 563-565.

[2]. K. T. Hoppen, *Elections, Politics, and Society in Ireland, 1832-1885* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

[3]. For example, see Matthew Kelly, “The Politics of Protestant Street Preaching in 1890s Ireland,” *Historical Journal* 48, no. 1 (2005): 101-125.

[4]. Redmond’s federalism, often neglected by his detractors, was central to his imperialism: in time, he hoped, the constituent parts of the British Empire would become a Commonwealth of self-governing states, increasingly equal in status, and bound by liberal, democratic principles.

[5]. See Matthew Kelly, *The Fenian Ideal and Irish Nationalism, 1822-1916* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006).

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