



**S.J. Connolly, ed.** *Political Ideas in Eighteenth-Century Ireland*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000. 256 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85182-556-1.



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This volume on Irish political thought is based on a series of seminars held at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. in 1998, sponsored by the Folger Institute Center for the History of British Political Thought. As the Center's guiding force, J.G.A. Pocock asserts in the concluding essay, it thus forms a part of that admittedly problematic enterprise of constructing a "new British history," one that acknowledges the interlocking and interacting histories of all the peoples of the British Isles. Neither Pocock nor the editor and seminar director, S.J. Connolly, explore how the contributions to this volume constitute this historiographical new departure. The essays included here represent less a consistent methodological approach than a preliminary and rather empiricist sampling of a range of political ideas which defy any coherent generalization.

Connolly does identify three somewhat discontinuous themes within Irish political thought—British constitutionalism (the "ancient constitution" and its attendant rights and liberties), corporatism (the defense of traditional group privileges), and civic humanism—a trio that hardly distinguishes Irish political thinking from English thought, and which would lead us to think that all Irish political thought is merely derivative. Significantly, he refuses to acknowledge Ireland's political and economic subordination to Britain as a formative part of the mix.

What distinguishes Irish political ideas is that they are in fact pragmatic responses to real political situations and, as such, Irish political thought adapts these three ubiquitous political languages in opportunistic ways. Thus we should not look to Ireland for abstract political theorizing, but rather for the interplay between ideas and action. The fact of Ireland's dependency (whether described as colonial or otherwise) sits like the elephant in the living room in many of these essays—an elemental fact of Irish political and economic life that is either ignored or denied.

Connolly does assert an Atlantic significance to Irish political thinking that might acknowledge the elephant, but neither he nor any of the other contributors explore it. He and Jacqueline Hill prefer to situate Ireland as an *ancien régime* state in Europe, rather than a colonial dependency. This rejection of a colonial model certainly shapes the approach to Irish political thought represented here. The notion of Ireland as a colony has traditionally been integral to a teleological nationalist meta-narrative that privileges a continuous oppositional rhetoric and mutes the massive body of pro-establishment voices. Much of the scholarship on Irish political thought (and it is still a much neglected field) has sought to discredit this anti-colonial reading by emphasizing its discontinuities and its opportunistic appropri-

tion of self-serving, frustrated place-seekers. But given the obvious fact of Ireland's dependency (however labeled) it has been a difficult task. Even here, the two essays on political economy (one by Robert Mahony on Swift and another by Patrick Kelly) detect a decided anti-colonial critique that identifies the development of the British economy with the deliberate underdevelopment of the Irish economy.

The political ideas sampled reflect the political thought of the Anglo-Irish, Protestant elite. While acknowledged to exist, Catholic and Presbyterian thinking is dismissed. Indeed, Pocock seems to imply that Protestant Ireland is very much a part of the "new British history," while Catholic Ireland is not. The essays included instead focus on the debate within Protestant Ireland over the Glorious Revolution (Connolly), the resiliency and ubiquity of old regime corporatist institutions, practices, and ideology (Hill), Jonathan Swift and consumption (Mahony), political economy in the 1720s and 1730s (Patrick Kelly), critical reappraisal of the Patriot tradition (Connolly again), an historiographical review of republican United Irish thought (Ian McBride), and the emergence of an Irish neo-conservatism in the 1790s (James Kelly). Each of these essays can stand alone as excellent models of scholarship that point to areas of Irish political thinking which should be explored further. What the volume lacks is a framework or even a rationale that might link these contributions together. The rather unhelpful framing essays of Connolly and Pocock barely acknowledge the other contributors. Is Irish political thought merely the sum of what can be discerned from reviewing its copious pamphlet productions, themselves responses to unique political situations?

A review of Irish political thought could deal with

major Irish political thinkers, and here the list is expanding of those who were very much the product of an interlocking and interactive republic of letters. To the traditional list of Molyneux, Swift, Berkeley, and Burke, we can add John Toland, Francis Hutcheson and his association with Presbyterian Ireland, the Catholic Charles O'Connor, as well as engaged politicians like Charles Lucas, Henry Grattan, Theobald Wolfe Tone, and John Fitzgibbon. It could also deal movements and events that provoked widespread engagement with political ideas. Both approaches would certainly reveal a range of political ideas, ambiguities and tensions, and yet beneath it all we would be able to identify common concerns about questions of power, authority, dependency, civic competence, the scope and limits of imperial practices, all of which emerged in the specific situation of a dependent nation where power was monopolized by a privileged confessional minority. But while specific to Irish circumstances, the body of this kind of Irish political thinking (whiggish, radical, and conservative) resonated significantly elsewhere within an Atlantic, European, and British Isles framework, just as it imbibed so heavily from these other traditions. Here we uncover a truly interlocking and interacting history of Irish, British, and Atlantic political thought.

Recent efforts to reveal the Irish Burke, for example, make these connections between Burke's unique Irish experience and his constructions of Britishness, his anti-colonial sympathies with America and India, and his critical engagement with his own Whig past. It seems that here lies a model for an authentic "new British history," one that transcends the obvious and very cautious and limited approach to political thought (pragmatic responses to specific political situations) that Connolly advocates here.

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