A SHORT HISTORY OF IRELAND

This third edition of John O'Beirne Ranelagh's classic history of Ireland incorporates contemporary political and economic events as well as the latest archaeological and DNA discoveries. Comprehensively revised and updated throughout, it considers Irish history from the earliest times through the Celts, Cromwell, plantations, famine, Independence, the Omagh bomb, peace initiatives, and financial collapse. It profiles the key players in Irish history from Diarmuid MacMurrough to Gerry Adams and casts new light on the events, North and South, that have shaped Ireland today. Ireland's place in the modern world and its relationship with Britain, the US and Europe are also examined with a fresh and original eye. Worldwide interest in Ireland continues to increase, but whereas it once focused on violence in Northern Ireland, the tumultuous financial events in the South have opened fresh debates and drawn fresh interest. This is a new history for a new era.

JOHN O'BEIRNE RANELAGH is the author of *The Agency: the Rise and Decline of the CIA* (1986, a *New York Times* Notable Book and winner of the National Intelligence Book Prize) and *Thatcher's People* (1991, a *Financial Times* Best Book).

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THIRD EDITION

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Contents

Figures

Preface to the first edition

Ireland's history is distinguished by two special characteristics. First, a recognisable Irish nation, of course over time itself a conglomerate of many 'nations', distinct from a British nation, with its own language, customs and lore dating back to the Iron Age, survived right into the nineteenth century. This gave Irish nationalism a particular force. Second, over the centuries of increasingly powerful and centralised British government, ruling social and political pressures combined first to make Irish people feel and then to believe that they were inferior. This is one of the worst things that any nation or race can do to another. It results in the most terrible of paradoxes where in practical matters there is a desire equally to welcome and to oppose, thus ensuring that failure accompanies success, and despair and a sense of futility underlie the whole of life. As many Irishmen were government spies, agents and informers as were national heroes; emigration became almost the only way of escaping depression. To the present day many Irish writers find it somehow necessary to practise their art away from home.

In modern times the complexities of economic development, international arrangements and the rejection of Irish nationalism in Northern Ireland have begun to change traditional attitudes. The very concept of a unitary Irish nation has been challenged, and the reality of Ireland's connections with Britain has begun to be faced honestly for the first time by politicians. In the last quarter of the twentieth century we can, I think, say that Ireland's people are at last considering themselves in relation to an Irish world for which they themselves accept responsibility.

I would like to thank Charles Davidson, Sean Dowling, Susannah Johnson, Joseph Lee, Deirdre McMahon, Victor Price, David Rose,

Richard Rose, A. T. Q. Stewart and Norman Stone who have all helped me most generously with their knowledge and advice. I owe them all a great debt: my accuracies are their achievement; any inaccuracies are mine. To my wife, Elizabeth, I owe most thanks of all.

GRANTCHESTER, 1982

Preface to the second edition

Since I wrote this book twelve years ago, there has been a great change in mainstream Irish nationalism and in the awarenesses of the Republic. Roman Catholic moral and social teaching, militating against contraception, divorce, abortion, pushing Ireland apart from the liberal values at the heart of the European Union, have given way to a more secular sensibility. American Catholic attitudes have replaced traditional Irish ones: there is hostility to Church leadership and control. There is a general indifference to traditional Gaelic culture. Terror has become a way of life for malcontents in the North, of which terrorists are a part. They have confirmed their debasement of a struggle that was noble and have fundamentally conditioned Irish nationalism and unionism for most Irishmen. Very few of the men and women involved in the Irish fight for freedom in the 1916–21 period could identify with those who act in the name of the IRA and its splinter groups today. Unionists of the same period would undoubtedly reject those 'loyalists' who have also chosen terror as a weapon.

The balance of this book is weighted to the period after 1800 in which modern Ireland has been formed. Terrorism and its attendant horrors in Northern Ireland, spilling at times into England and the Republic – and even occasionally further afield – have forced the Republic effectively to moderate its claims to the whole island of Ireland. At the same time, the less organic, federal and provisional nature of the union between Northern Ireland and Britain (i.e., England, Scotland and Wales) has become steadily clear as United Kingdom (i.e., Britain and Northern Ireland) governments have committed themselves to observe only majority verdicts by voters within the North on the future of the province, and not to

consider the views of British voters on the matter. Indeed, Westminster governments and the people of Britain by no means crave possession of Northern Ireland: unionists in the North are acutely conscious of this. Assertions to the contrary are a combination of misrepresentation and misappreciation that now suits terrorists and their supporters. Similarly, in the Republic, people are conscious that Irish unity will involve terrible costs that they are by no means certain they wish to pay. The fact that IRA terror has not been applied in the Republic indicates that the IRA knows that they cannot play with politics in the South, and that any tolerance they may enjoy there would be jeopardised by the least activity. The United Kingdom's resolve to combat terrorism and, with some exceptions, the tempered way in which the resolve has been discharged, consistently demonstrated by successive governments and the security forces over the last quarter-century, commands respect, not least in the South.

I am conscious of sometimes using the terms Catholic and Protestant to distinguish between the two principal communities in Northern Ireland. In doing this, I am in line with journalists and commentators over the last twenty-five years who have formed the appreciation of most people. And it has been the case that local politics in the North have reflected religious divisions more than anything else. But to promote religious background as *the* dividing element in the North is inaccurate. It is certainly one of the main classifications, but economic, social and political distinctions are equally important and cut across religion: a religious war is not taking place in the North. About 40 per cent of the population of Northern Ireland is Catholic; about 33 per cent of Northern Ireland Roman Catholic voters support Sinn Féin, the political arm of the IRA: the rest vote for anti-Sinn Féin parties; some vote for unionists. The probability is that there would have to be much more than a simple Catholic majority in the North before a majority of voters would endorse unification with the Republic: being Catholic does not mean being a supporter of immediate unity with the South. It is the case today that Northern Protestants are overwhelmingly unionist, but some have been among Ireland's foremost nationalists and radicals. Michael Farrell, one of the founders of the People's Democracy movement in the late 1960s that energised the civil rights campaign beginning the present troubles, was a Protestant.

Neither the United Kingdom nor the United States fills the imagination of Irish people any more. The other countries of Europe are ever more real to them today. They see the United Kingdom as a clapped-out old place, and not a threatening imperial presence: Charles Haughey, Irish taoiseach in the 1980s, was the last political leader who perceived the United Kingdom in imperial terms. Irish people have recognised that they cannot live off memories forever.

Finally, it should be remembered that politicians, whom we elect yet love to disparage, have been called by terrorism to put their safety, their families' safety, and their lives on the line time and again. The Conservative Party spokesman on Northern Ireland, Airey Neave, was killed by a bomb in his car at the House of Commons in 1979. Anne Wakeham, the wife of the Conservative chief whip, and Sir Anthony Berry, MP, were killed in a bomb explosion in the Grand Hotel, Brighton, during the Conservative Party conference in 1984. In the same explosion, Norman Tebbit, a cabinet minister, was severely injured and his wife, Margaret, was permanently crippled. Ian Gow, MP, who had been a junior minister in Northern Ireland, was killed by a bomb in his car at his home in 1990. The men and women in the security forces and many individuals in all walks of life in Northern Ireland have been called constantly to risk injury, and their lives, every day. Near the end of Chapter 7, I have provided a table of some of the deaths terrorism has inflicted in the North: space prevents a full account.

I am indebted to all those who made suggestions and corrections to the first edition of this book; for any mistakes that remain and any that may be new, I am responsible.

GRANTCHESTER AND BERGEN, November 1993

Preface to the updated edition

This edition has been written as the prospects for more peace in Northern Ireland, and a consequent drop in terrorism, seem bright. The terrorism of the past thirty years, however, is not the culmination of Irish history. Nor has it been the inevitable outcome of government policies or socio-economic conditions. It is a result of generations of romanticising Irish nationalism which, with few exceptions, and in common with nationalism everywhere, has been the passion of idealistic but narrow-minded and limited men and women. The important Irish history of the last part of the twentieth century is how the people of the country have moved away from historical positions and assumptions, have been more interested in making money and enjoying life, have broadened their horizons, and have affirmed democratic principles. Ireland is certainly not 'the most distressful country'.

People in Northern Ireland have sensed that the violence that has afflicted them has meant that the benefits of membership of the European Union, so clear in the Republic, have passed them by. They sense that a great opportunity of the past fifty years has been denied them.

Irish people generally, along with most people in the developed world, have recognised that the end of the Cold War has meant that power is no longer vested in politicians and attention-seekers. The disgracing of President Clinton, the ineffectiveness of individual politicians, the surrendering of responsibility to public opinion through referendums and government-by-press-leak, have accelerated this process. Engineers, entrepreneurs, administrators are more important in practical ways, and are understood to be so. The key to the 1993–8 peace process in Northern Ireland has been the expression of popular will, coupled with the resolution of ordinary people to

live full lives despite bombings, beatings and killings all around. Politicians have, of course, played an important part, but they have been following democratic impulses, not forming them.

Terrorism has been the expression of a handful of malcontented men and women determined to indulge the most vile activities because democratic activity would confirm their relegation to the fringes of society. No democratic person could be opposed to the peace process; the only anti-peace constituency was a sectarian one. The process therefore in itself acted to highlight the real nature of people and groups, forcing extremists down its path. Indeed, the horrors perpetrated by opponents of the process only forced their submission to it as they came to understand that they might be able to go on killing, but that would be all that they would ever achieve, and that they would lose all respect in their own communities.

The process that brought this about saw a better understanding of the issues involved, with notable – and brave – political compromises being made by men and women on all sides (although not by all on all sides). Perhaps most important for the long-term prospects for peace was the realisation in the professional Irish community overseas that the Irish Republic was not what their imaginations, coloured by history and mythology, had held it to be. It was no longer the old sod. It was – is – an independent country with its own agenda, no longer dependent upon foreign remittances. President Clinton, by opening the White House to representatives of the IRA and 'loyalist' (to distinguish them from the unionist mainstream, asserting loyalty to the British Crown) terror groups willing to discuss peace prospects, forced them to account to a wider world for their actions, and made support for terror more problematic among Irish-Americans. The United States, a future-oriented country, has a future-oriented Irish community that now feels somewhat freer of ancestral obligations. It has been able to revert to its standard role as a friend to humane impulses.

After thirty years of terrorism, IRA and 'loyalist' terror acts no longer serve to rend emotions. Terrorism is seen as completely base. IRA and 'loyalist' terrorists have merged in the minds of outsiders. No real distinction is made between their acts either at home or internationally. They both do things that all terrorists do. Exhaustion has set in about them, and within their own ranks. The hopelessness of their actions has come to be recognised even by their own activists.

Eamon Collins, a member of the IRA for twelve years from 1975, expressed all this well:

> I had come to ditch almost everything and everybody not connected in some way to the IRA. It had become my whole life, and I was beginning to ask myself what sort of life I had. I went through the motions of enjoying myself, but how could I live happily when I spent most of my time in the company of people whose business was death? And I was one of them. Always looking for people to kill, finding people to do the killing, constantly exposing myself to danger, more and more danger. There was no respite . . . I had become addicted to the struggle: operations became my fix. But I often asked myself: when will my final fix arrive? The one that will kill me, put me in prison, or break me? . . . I had been involved in a great many IRA operations which I now regarded as pointless and meaningless.[1]

The success of security forces in the United Kingdom and the Republic in combating terror over decades, the weakening of support abroad, and the refusal of the political establishments to be coerced by terror, meant that the IRA and 'loyalist' terrorists were being beaten. The peace process provided them with a face-saving way out. Terrorists are seen as the unsuccessful Irish.

Unfortunately, losers have long memories, and that will be the everlasting problem. Terrorism will not leave Irish history: it is embedded in it. For the past two hundred years, terror and peace have come and gone as memories of terror fade. The Irish Republic was formed because of terrorist activity. The IRA's entry into peace negotiations, despite public relations successes, came about because its leaders recognised that their killings and bombings and beatings were futile: it did not come about because they became democrats overnight. Peace in Northern Ireland in 1998, ominously, was accelerated by the IRA threatening to kill dissidents intent on continuing a terror campaign. On 15 August 1998 a car bomb in Omagh resulted in the immediate deaths of twenty-eight people: the largest number of dead in any single incident. The best that can be hoped for is that terrorism may be quiescent for long periods. It will not go away.

GRANTCHESTER AND BERGEN, September 1998

[1] Eamon Collins with Mick McGovern, *Killing Rage*, London 1997, pp. 157–8, 277.

Preface to the third edition

One of the greatest upheavals in financial history was unfolding as this edition was being written. Ireland was in the spotlight, its economy devastated. Every year from 2010, the national debt was set to increase by about €3,200 for each man, woman and child. Interest payments alone on the debt amounted to about €1,000 per capita per year. Nevertheless, the strength of the Irish wealth achievement during 1988–2007 – the 'Celtic tiger' – was such that Ireland had a surplus balance of trade throughout the disaster. But confidence, based on real economic performance, became hubris. Ireland is now in uncharted seas, without excuses for its failures.

While this is a short history, I cover the confrontation between terrorism and constitutional government at some length. The slow wearing down of the IRA – a combination of ruthless terror, counter-terror and ever-growing exhaustion – is instructive to a wider world, not least in its combination of resolution and compromise. The process has already taken on the hue of another era.

The flow of Irish history has been of a country big enough to maintain a rich identity, but too small to defend itself. From the twelfth-century English invasion of Strongbow there was a gradual erosion of Irish prosperity, intensified by the seventeenth-century Protestant settlements and confiscations, followed in the eighteenth century by the rise of an extraordinary Anglo-Irish aristocracy (as Yeats was famously to point out), ruling a people forbidden education and squeezed into peasantry, brooding and apart, caricatured as protohumans. The terrible famine of the 1840s produced an agonising reinvention through the death and flight of millions and an intense enraging memory rekindling deep national passions. Irish died as a language, but the passions lived in English – and in America.

Irish emigrants proved to be great achievers and gave Ireland international presence. Independence from Britain, still perceived as the greatest empire the world had ever seen, was a disappointment as emigration figures attested until the end of the twentieth century. Then came the tiger and the Irish, from being a great achieving people only abroad, were now great achievers at home too.

The passage into a future-oriented world-connected tiger country took Irish people away from their history. From an exaggerated preoccupation with the past as an explanation of the present, people cut loose and floated into hyper-prosperity. By 2004 most people in the Republic saw Northern Ireland as outdated. Desire for unification enjoyed lip service but had no mass appeal. The North had turned from being the modern part of Ireland to being the oldest part. Religion had probably been the greatest single vital force of the Irish nation, but the tiger converged with a secular world remarkably fast. From the 1990s, if not before, no Irish archbishop had the standing of the Reverend Dr Ian Paisley, created Lord Bannside.

Contemporary Ireland is not the country that Tom Clarke, Patrick Pearse, James Connolly, Eamon de Valera or the men of 1916–21 envisaged. None of them were modernisers (had he lived, the buccaneer and bureaucrat Michael Collins might have been): they were either intellectuals or rural fundamentalists. It is not the country that the IRA or Gerry Adams or Martin McGuinness claimed they wanted. It has left them all behind. It is not a self-sufficient and self-preoccupied united Gaelic state. For five hundred years, England was the most important factor in Ireland. In the second half of the twentieth century, the United States came to dominate Irish aspiration.

The 1916 Rising, celebrated annually into the 1970s, was then disregarded by the state until 2006. The revolutionary antecedents of the Republic are seen by many as an embarrassment, not least in light of terrorism in Northern Ireland in the name of Irish nationalism. Ireland today is disillusioned and resigned, coming to terms with dashed dreams and ruinous self-deception.

My family, the O'Beirnes ('ei': there is no 'y' in Irish) of Ranelagh in Wicklow can with some imagination trace its lineage back to the sixth century. The O'Neills can go a birth or two further: our two families are among the oldest recorded in Europe and we have both

been active for Ireland. For generations we were tied to each other through fosterage. My father took part in the 1916 Rising and fought against the Treaty but was never enamoured of Eamon de Valera or Fianna Fáil. For him, Michael Collins's death was the country's great loss. He came to believe that the Republic did not warrant the sacrifices he and so many others had made. When the Provisional IRA was formed, he opposed them and so received one of the first letter bombs ever sent in Ireland. Recognising that it was a bomb, he demonstrated great dexterity in his seventies, throwing it into the kitchen sink where it exploded. My Ph.D. research was into the Irish Republican Brotherhood 1914–24. I interviewed many men and women from that period. Robert Barton, a signatory of the 1921 Treaty, remembered playing cricket with Parnell and having tea with Gladstone in No. 10 Downing Street. Joe O'Doherty, on the governing body of the Irish Volunteers and later the IRA, told me of sitting on his aged grandfather's knee and listening to his tale of taking part in the 1798 Rising, escaping a government agent's provocation when, bent over cutting hay, he saw that the man behind him was wearing boots: rebels could not afford any. And de Valera, President of Ireland in his nineties, explained that he was almost blind but could see something from the corner of his left eye, so I sat where he might see as he recalled hearing news of the Treaty in Limerick and being driven to Dublin to hear more.

Despite proddings, I have maintained the spelling Connaught. It is not used so much today because it is Anglo, but I like the look and warm feel of the spelling in preference to the hardness of Connacht.

Deirdre McMahon has been wonderful as ever with help and advice, sharing her insights and knowledge unstintingly. Timothy Dickinson and David Rose distributed their linguistic corrections and judgments with kindness. Michael Jones commented on the text frequently and astutely. Tony Craig scythed the chapter on the North. Michael Watson at Cambridge University Press guided and shaped this edition, and I am grateful to the production and design team for their support, diligence, corrections and suggestions: Chloe Howell, Joanna Breeze, Patricia Harper, Mike Leach, David Cox and Philip Riley. I owe them much.

Finally, a brief note is in order on the cover painting, *Night's Candles Are Burnt Out* by Sean Keating, RHA (1889–1977), whose title is a quotation from *Romeo and Juliet* (Act 3, Scene 5), where Romeo tells Juliet that dawn is breaking. It is probably Keating's most important painting, with the Ardnacrusha Dam on the River Shannon as the backdrop. He described it as welcoming 'the dawn of a new Ireland' and provided this explanation:

> The title suggests that the dawn has come, when the dim candlelight of surviving medievalism in Ireland is fading before the rising sun of scientific progress, exemplified by the Shannon electricity works, which form the background of my picture.
>
> The stage Ireland and the stage Irishman are typified by the skeletons hanging on the left from one of the steel towers, which support the electric transmission lines. Beneath are the types of Irish workmen. In the centre of the foreground are two men. One represents the capitalist, who carries under his arms plans for industrial development.
>
> A gunman confronts him menacingly. The two symbolise the constant antagonism between the business elements and the extremists, which hinders the material progress of the State. The priest, reading, represents the unchanging Church ever present when spiritual guidance is needed but concerning itself only with a kingdom that is not of this world. In short, my picture depicts the transition of Ireland from a country of ancient stagnation to a state of freedom and progress.

Ireland: The Pale and the Irish plantations