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0521651506 - Literature, Partition and the Nation-State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland,  
Israel and Palestine

Joe Cleary

Excerpt

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## Introduction

The idea for this book first began to take shape in New York towards the end of 1989 when I, like millions across the globe, watched the televised images of the extraordinary political upheavals sweeping across the Soviet Union and Central Europe, including the tearing down of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the German Democratic Republic. The intellectual climate of those months was quickened with a sense that one was watching the human equivalent of a tectonic shift in the settled political landscape of the late twentieth century. For someone like myself who had grown up in the Irish midlands, and who was keenly aware in 1989 that Northern Ireland was starting into the third decade of a long-running war, the sources of which lay in a partition settlement established in the 1920s, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the subsequent reunification of Germany, provoked a whole series of questions about nation and state formation, state division and the significance of partition. What are the conditions, I wondered then, that would explain why in some situations partitions collapse or prove reversible, while in others they appear to become permanent, and in others still the issue of division or reunification seems destined to remain a matter of constant contention? Is it only the 'Cold War' state divisions such as Vietnam, Germany and perhaps Korea that can ever be reversed while 'colonial' partitions in places such as the Republic of Ireland/Northern Ireland, India/Pakistan and Israel/Palestine are fated to remain immutable? Why, in some former British colonies such as these, did the end of imperial rule culminate in the break-up of the colonial state while in other situations – such as South Africa, say, where there were discontented White and Zulu minorities that might each have pressed for state division – this outcome was avoided?<sup>1</sup>

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To some, the topic of partition will seem essentially a matter for historians or political scientists, something that has little to do with literature and culture. As the remarkably bitter *Literaturstreit* (quarrel about literature) and *Historikerstreit* (historians debate) that raged in Germany at the time of unification attested, however, this is clearly not the case. As the German controversies illustrated, the empirical events of partition or reunification cannot be detached from the wider contest within German society to make sense of those events, to press them into various kinds of narrative, and literary and cultural production were clearly central to this broader struggle.<sup>2</sup> Nation- and state-building processes are never just political events in the narrow sense; they also entail the construction of national education systems and national literatures, and they always involve cultural struggles to define how national societies understand themselves and their place in the wider world system. In the case of partitioned societies, cultural narratives play a number of very important functions. They represent one of the media through which the trauma of partition is subsequently memorialised and understood by the peoples involved; they can also help either to ratify the state divisions produced by partition or to contest the partitionist mentalities generated by such divisions. Hence, I believe, any serious attempt to wrestle with the larger dynamics of nation- and state-building in partitioned contexts must engage with the ways in which partition is constructed and contested in cultural and historiographic narrative in the societies in question. The ways in which the traumatic events and legacies of partition acquire an imaginative truth for the peoples involved, through these cultural struggles, is the central topic of this book.

When I commenced this study in the early 1990s I was not to know then that the spectre of partition and state division would constantly haunt the years ahead. The nightly spectacle, watched vicariously from a television set, of the horrors involved in the dissolution of the state of Yugoslavia, the partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the ethnic conflict in Kosovo, served as a constant reminder of the dark side to both state-building and state-dividing projects. In the multinational environment of Columbia University, where I first began to work on this study, there were many teachers, friends, classmates and associates who came from places such as Palestine, India, Israel, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Germany and South Africa which had already been partitioned or which ran some risk of being so in the future. In this milieu, it quickly impressed itself on me that the Irish experience of partition belonged to a much wider twentieth-century history. Anyone

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familiar with the history of partition could not fail to be aware that the events then underway in a collapsing Yugoslavia – the massacre and rape, the exodus of terrorised populations across state borders, the creation of new national majorities and minorities by ethnic cleansing, the tented cities of refugees that were the inevitable by-product of the drive to create homogeneous national states – were uncannily similar to those that had attended the partition of places such as India and Palestine earlier in the century. In the 1980s, some academics in Northern Ireland, believing that the conflict there was too deeply entrenched to allow for any negotiated settlement, had outlined the case for a repartition that would divide the province into distinct Catholic and Protestant territorial zones.<sup>3</sup> In Ireland, as in other places such as Palestine, India or Israel, then, watching the debacle in Yugoslavia was to some extent like watching a grisly montage of past or possible versions of one's own national history.

For the most part, the partitions mentioned here tend to be studied in isolation, and there has been little sustained or extended comparative analysis of such situations.<sup>4</sup> There are significant differences between all of these locations, of course, but there are many substantive continuities of experience as well that warrant attention. As Robert Schaeffer has noted, most of the major partitions in the twentieth century have occurred in territories previously subject to colonial rule.<sup>5</sup> Ireland, India, Palestine and Cyprus were British colonies; at the end of World War II Korea was a Japanese and Vietnam a French colony. The situations in Germany and China were in most respects quite different to these, but much of China had been annexed by Japan or was under Japanese rule in the period leading up to its division, and Germany was occupied by four military powers when it was sundered. As a general rule, then, it would seem that partitions are most likely to occur where – as a consequence of colonial rule or of total military collapse in times of war – societies have lost control over their own political destinies and are vulnerable to the wills of external superpowers.

This is not to suggest that partitions are simply attributable to the machinations of such superpowers. The partitions in Ireland, India and Palestine all took place at a specific historical conjuncture. In no case did they occur during the long period of imperial rule itself, though the communal antagonisms that would later lead to division were indeed whetted and nursed in the racialised structure of the colonial state, and were often cynically manipulated to maintain imperial rule. The actual partitions, however, materialised in all cases when

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the moment came for the imperial power to depart and to transfer power to a native élite. These transfers all took place in the immediate wake of major world wars (or inter-imperial wars) that weakened imperial power in the colonies concerned. Ireland, then, was divided in the wake of World War I; India and Palestine at the end of World War II. In each case, the impetus for partition stemmed from a minority community within the colonial state that feared that the anti-colonial national movements about to assume power would imperil their interests and identity. In none of these minority communities – Protestant Unionists in Ireland, Muslims in British India, Zionist Jews in Mandate Palestine – was the idea of partition universally embraced, but their leaderships were willing to contemplate state division where their preferred political goals could not be realised. In short, then, colonial political partitions, despite individual variables and specific circumstances, display elements of a common structural logic. They typically occur in circumstances of imperial decline or contraction, and at a moment that ought ideally to be a springtime of national emancipation. But in a situation where an imperial state, suffering from injured national pride and anxious to salvage as much international reputation as possible, comes into conflict with the antagonistic nationalisms of majority and minority communities within a colony, the political climate thus generated can prove an exceptionally lethal one. All sorts of catastrophe can occur in the veritable witches' brew of clashing nationalisms generated by such conjunctures.

The issue of partition, then, provokes a concatenation of issues directly relevant to the recent efflorescence of writings on colonial and postcolonial societies and on nationalism. Such issues include the nature of the colonial and postcolonial state, the construction of majorities and minorities, and the connections between literature and the nation, culture and the state. The aim of this book is to place the topic of partition on the agenda of these fields of scholarly inquiry, and in turn to draw on such scholarship to open up new ways to think about the contentious histories and legacies of partition.

Though I will refer occasionally to other partitions elsewhere, this book will concentrate, for several reasons, on the political and cultural legacies of partition in Ireland and Palestine. Firstly, in both of these cases the communal cleavages that were eventually to culminate in partition have their origins in longer histories of colonial settlement under British rule. In this respect at least, the histories of both Ireland and Palestine are closer, in some ways, to those of Algeria or South Africa than they are to that of India since the latter was what

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is termed a colony of exploitation rather than a colony of settlement.<sup>6</sup> The heartland of modern Unionism in Ireland was in Ulster, a region planted and settled in the early modern period by Scottish and English Protestants loyal to the British crown. Confronted with the rise of Irish nationalism in the late nineteenth century, Unionists there identified themselves as the now desperately hard-pressed defenders of British rule in Ireland, and Unionism, as an ideology designed to keep Ireland within the United Kingdom and Empire, was strongly pro-imperialist. Zionist settlers in Palestine depended on the British Mandate to secure their place in that country before 1948. Early Zionist leaders deliberately courted first Ottoman and then British imperial support by arguing that a Jewish state in Palestine would serve Western imperial interests in the region. Although neither Irish Unionist nor Zionist identities can be seen as undifferentiated, both groups were, therefore, much more closely affiliated with the British imperial enterprise in their respective regions than were Indian Muslims. Both perceived themselves as frontier peoples of empire, as chosen peoples who had already made or who would make the wilderness regions they inherited bloom; both were also consistently anxious about their demographic insufficiency vis-à-vis what they deemed the civilisationally backward majority communities that inhabited the same territory as they.<sup>7</sup> Such imaginings shaped a deeply hostile attitude in both communities towards the prospect of sharing a state with the numerically larger Irish Catholic and Palestinian Arab populations, something which, unlike the Muslim League in India, they were unwilling to consider in any circumstances.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, despite their close ties with and considerable dependence on the British establishment, both Northern Irish Unionists and Zionists showed themselves willing to go to war with the British rather than to chance their fortunes in independent states controlled by the majority communities in the respective colonial units. This in itself seems a telling indication that, in some ways at any rate, the structural dynamics of majority and minority relationships in Ireland and Palestine were somewhat different to those that obtained in India.

Since this book will concentrate on the contemporary legacies and cultural politics of partition, its focus on Ireland and Palestine is motivated also by the fact that these two situations are increasingly associated with each other in both domestic and international perceptions. This is partly attributable to the more or less concurrent development in the 1990s of the respective 'peace processes' in each region under United States stewardship. But identifications and analogies

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between the two sites have in fact been in circulation for some considerable time and they pre-date these recent developments. The experience of diaspora is absolutely central to Irish, Israeli and Palestinian nationalisms. In each case, moreover, the diaspora communities are indelibly associated with major historical traumas: the Great Famine in Ireland in the 1840s; the Jewish Holocaust during World War II; the Palestinian *nakbah* or 'catastrophe' of 1948. The political weight exercised by the Irish and Jewish communities in America, and by the Palestinian exiles in the Arab and Islamic world, means that these all represent extremely significant versions of what Benedict Anderson has recently termed 'long-distance nationalism'.<sup>9</sup> One of the consequences of these diasporas is that they have helped to keep the profile of the Northern Irish and the Israeli–Palestinian conflicts high on the international agenda, a phenomenon which has, if anything, become even more significant in recent decades.

Within the academic world, the associations between Ireland and Palestine often take the form of specialised counter-insurgency discourses on 'terrorism'. That association has also been disseminated in mass culture works such as Tom Clancy's *Patriot Games*, in which Irish republican and Middle Eastern 'terrorisms' are closely identified, or in newspaper cartoons such as Gene Bassett's 'Who Said There's Nothing to Evolution?', in which IRA and Palestinian militants are constructed as tree-swinging simians that have evolved from their primate ancestors only to the extent that they have now learned to meddle with explosives.<sup>10</sup> Not all of the identifications between the two regions, however, are mediated through external agencies such as these. Republican wall murals in Northern Ireland, for example, have shown Irish and Palestinian guerrillas as comrades in arms. These murals attempt to counter more hostile discourses by representing Irish and Palestinian armed struggles not as kindred 'terrorisms' but as parallel anti-imperialist struggles.<sup>11</sup> In the early twentieth century especially, Israeli Zionists maintained a complex and contradictory identification with both white settler and anti-colonial nationalisms. Zionists watched Irish nationalism, in particular, with considerable interest and frequently asserted similarities between the plight of the Irish under British rule and that of Jews under imperial rule in Mandate Palestine. An early Israeli film, made in 1955, called *Hill 24 doesn't Answer* (*Giv'a 24 Eina Ona*), is set during the 1948 war, and tells the story of four fighters – an American Jew, an Israeli-born Sabra, a Sephardi Jew, and an Irishman – assigned to defend a strategic hill outside Jerusalem. The apparently anomalous presence of the Irishman

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in this narrative is explained by the desire of those who made the film to suggest that the Zionism was not a regressive colonial settler nationalism but a revolutionary anti-colonial national liberation struggle which, like its Irish counterpart, deserved international sympathy and support.<sup>12</sup> There are, moreover, important parallels between Northern Irish loyalist and Israeli Zionist communities, both of whom see themselves as beleaguered peoples living under a constant state of siege in a territory where the Irish or Arab enemy vastly outnumbers them.<sup>13</sup> Both peoples also see themselves as threatened, Troy-like, by 'the enemy within': that is, by those untrustworthy Northern Irish nationalist or Israeli–Palestinian minorities whose real allegiances are presumed to be with the enemy-states or enemy-peoples across the border. And in both instances these threats are conceptualised not simply in political but also in demographic terms.

While cross-cultural identifications such as those mentioned above are sometimes rhetorically manipulative, designed to represent a particular community as 'progressive' and its antagonists as 'reactionary', there are still, despite manifest differences between the two regions, sufficient structural similarities between the situations to give some weight to the analogies. In different but connected ways, the histories of modern Ireland and Palestine belong to a wider history of British imperial expansion and contraction. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was the most conservative and most pro-imperialist sections within the British establishment that expressed the strongest opposition to Irish Home Rule. For this section of the British ruling élite, in which individuals such as Lord Salisbury and Arthur Balfour were leading figures, Irish nationalism constituted a threat not only to the territorial integrity of the British state but to the long-term stability of Empire. The close kinship and political ties between the Ulster Unionist leadership and the pro-imperialist wings in both the British Conservative and Liberal parties secured Unionism invaluable political support within the most influential circles in the British administration. This support was to prove crucial not only to the eventual implementation of partition in Ireland in the 1920s, but to helping Unionists secure the military and financial support that made the new Northern Irish state viable. It was to this same pro-imperialist cohort in the upper echelons of the British establishment that the Zionist movement would appeal to secure British backing for its ambitions in Palestine. The Balfour Declaration of November 1917, with its promise that Britain 'views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people',<sup>14</sup> was

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to become the charter for Zionist settlement in Palestine under the British Mandate, putting Jewish and Arab national ambitions on a collision course that would also culminate in partition. Moreover, as the military historian Keith Jeffrey has noted, after 1907 the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) Depot in Dublin was a training centre for colonial police in the British Empire, a function later taken over by Northern Ireland's Royal Ulster Constabulary after partition. When the RIC were disbanded in 1922 after the Irish War of Independence, significant numbers of that force (including the Irish Chief of Police, General Sir Henry Tudor), transferred to the Palestinian Gendarmerie. In the autumn of 1922, General Tudor, having assumed command in Jerusalem, reported to his old friend and new political master, Winston Churchill, that Palestine was 'a rest cure after Ireland'.<sup>15</sup>

In more recent times, possibly the most significant structural parallel is the virtual collapse of the original partition settlements in both Ireland and Palestine since the end of the 1960s. These settlements disintegrated for very different reasons. Israel's seizure of the West Bank and Gaza after the 1967 War effectively abolished the division of historic Palestine established after the 1948 War. In Northern Ireland, the state borders remained in place, but the civil rights movement and the subsequent republican paramilitary struggle led to the collapse of the Unionist state established by partition and compelled the British government to resume direct control of the province. In both instances, the breakdown of the original partition settlements gave impetus to a protracted new stage of inter-communal contest, to the struggles generally referred to nowadays as the Northern Irish 'Troubles' and the 'Israeli-Palestinian' conflict.

Since it deals with quite recent materials, one of the challenges with which the present project has had to contend is that the situations in Northern Ireland and Israel/Palestine have been changing rapidly in recent times, and indeed are still evolving at some pace. Antonio Gramsci's concept of the 'interregnum' is possibly one of the more useful ways in which to conceptualise the long decades of uninterrupted turmoil in each region since the late 1960s. For Gramsci, the concept of the interregnum refers to those periods in which 'the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer "leading" but only "dominant", exercising coercive force alone'. In such periods, Gramsci argues, 'the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously'. What constitutes the crisis in such periods, he continues, is the fact that 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great



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variety of morbid symptoms appear'. For Gramsci, the disruptive energies of the interregnum have positive as well as negative potential. Indeed, the crucial question, as he sees it, to be asked of such periods is: 'Will the interregnum, the crisis whose historically normal solution is blocked in this way, necessarily be resolved in favour of a restoration of the old?' His somewhat hesitant answer to this question is that while a complete restitution of the old order is unlikely (the clock, so to speak, cannot simply be reset to exactly where it was before the interregnum), its general reconstruction cannot be ruled out. It is always possible, he surmises, that 'a "new arrangement" will be found' that reconstitutes the old order, even if in a reformed or some more 'jesuitical' manner.<sup>16</sup>

The respective 'peace processes' advanced in Northern Ireland and the Middle East since the early 1990s clearly constitute a watershed development; they represent an attempt to bring an end to the preceding interregnum by constructing new arrangements. The ambition, in other words, is to move towards the establishment of new state arrangements that will secure sufficient consensus from the two antagonistic communities to enable an exercise of power less dependent on military force and repression. The historical test that will be posed to these new arrangements is: To what extent will they enable new and more emancipatory political relationships to emerge between the peoples involved? Or will they simply amount to elaborate and, to recall Gramsci's terms, more 'jesuitical' reconstructions of the old order that serve only to maintain the old imbalances of communal power that obtained before the interregnum?

A comparatist study such as this has its inevitable restrictions. The subject of partition is always bitterly controversial; the scholarship on it is sometimes intensely polemical and always connected to some extent to wider political struggles within the societies in question. Moreover, the collateral issues that bear on the topic are manifold, and the literatures on partition are in numerous different languages. Hence no individual can expect to master all of the sets of issues involved, and a comprehensive comparative cultural analysis of partition in several different sites is a task that would properly require a whole team of researchers. While I suggested earlier that the situations in Ireland and Palestine may correspond more closely in some respects to each other than they do to India, this is not to say that the differences between these situations and India's are in any way categorical or absolute. The dilemmas that led to and have followed from the partition of India can help scholars to rethink the Irish or Israeli-Palestinian situations

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in instructive ways, and it would be useful to add India to the compass of this study were there but 'world enough and time'. Some of the finest literature on partition, and some of the most innovative historical research on the topic, has been written by writers and scholars of the Indian subcontinent. While Irish and Middle Eastern historiography continues to be dominated by the 'high' politics of partition, South Asian historians have begun to investigate the issue from the perspective of those 'below' as well. In so doing, critical new insights on the communal violence that accompanied partition, on the specific experiences of women, and on the role of literature in constructing collective understandings and representations of the traumas involved have been opened up. This South Asian scholarship is immensely suggestive to those interested in the history of partition anywhere, and, it is my hope that this study can contribute to the wider debates that that scholarship has stimulated.<sup>17</sup>

With regard to the question of language, the most obvious restriction to this study is my own lack of proficiency in Arabic and Hebrew. This has required me to work with these literatures in translation, something that inevitably places many matters beyond my competence. Nevertheless, a very considerable body of scholarship on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict exists in English, and English frequently serves in the region as a neutral language through which Arabic and Hebrew speakers and scholars communicate with each other. It is also the case that in Israel/Palestine, as in Ireland, a considerable body of literary and intellectual work is written not only with domestic national audiences in mind but out of a concern to explicate the crises in these regions to wider diaspora and international audiences. English is the medium through which much of this cultural traffic and exchange usually passes, and it is therefore a revealing medium in its own right. While there are many ways in which a general work such as this must yield to the specialist in individual national literatures, the value and justification of the broader perspective adopted here is that it can help to open up wider sets of theoretical issues and relationships. Comparative literary studies in the humanities is one of the few ways through which literary developments can be studied in a manner not restricted to or determined by a national frame. Yet comparative literary study in the modern university has also always had a decidedly Eurocentric bias, with the unfortunate consequence that the scholarly infrastructure available for conducting comparative cultural analyses across 'postcolonial' countries in different geo-cultural regions such as Ireland and Palestine is still rudimentary. But a start,