

James Quinn points out in this excellent and pioneering book, came closest to developing an explicit theory of history, John Mitchel, attacked Victorian historical complacency from precisely this angle, dismissing Macaulay as writing what amounted to self-congratulatory propaganda revolving around, as he put it in his *Jail Journal* of 1854, 'reverential flattery to British civilization, British prowess, honour, enlightenment, and all that, especially to the great nineteenth century and its astounding civilization'.

James Quinn shows that, while such ideas concerning the reading, uses, and writing of Irish history certainly pre-date the 1830s and 1840s, it was Young Ireland that shaped them into a distinct philosophy in which particular interpretations of the past could be used as weapons in contemporary political debates, a process which found a notable apotheosis in the 1916 Declaration of Independence's insistence that 'in every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty', that, indeed, 'six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms'.

None of this, however, meant, as Quinn makes clear, that the chief actors involved were either close or knowledgeable students of the past. Indeed, few Young Irelanders made any bones about the fact that their historical endeavours were designed to serve immediate political ends and were based on interpretations that were of a strongly 'present-centred, doctrinaire and determinist' character 'in which complexities, contradictions and discontinuities were ironed into a grand narrative of heroic resistance'. Those who wrote in the *Nation* thought it more important that works concerned with the past should be lively and inspire rather than that they should be 'comprehensively researched'. Quinn valuably analyses the reasons why this should have been so and why Young Ireland was, in this respect at least, by no means out of step with certain contemporary developments elsewhere in Europe where too were to be found writers intent on the creation of notably 'national' historical moods and dispositions among those who read their works. In this at least Davis and the others were at one with Macaulay and Carlyle, an identification they would undoubtedly have rejected with very considerable force.

The Young Ireland view of the past not only grew out of particular historical circumstances but was indeed part of a universal phenomenon enjoying a persistent and lengthy afterlife in which it became both common and even at times respectable to bend historical 'facts' to the requirements of ideologies of various, and by no means always beneficent, kinds. What lies at the centre of such developments is the plasticity of the very concept of what 'history' is and should be, whether a discipline with internal rules of procedure and propriety or a myth kitty from which to extract arguments attractive to contemporary political gladiators of various kinds. That the Young Irelanders, like so many of their English contemporaries, largely followed one of these paths is a reflection of the times in which they lived and of their very human inability to escape from its shackles and influences.

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WAR IN THE SHADOWS: THE IRISH-AMERICAN FENIANS WHO BOMBED VICTORIAN BRITAIN. By Shane Kenna. Pp xxx, 410. Sallins: Merrion. 2014.

Fenian violence and politics have been well scrutinized by scholars; research by Vincent Comerford, John Newsinger, Matthew Kelly, Niall Whelehan, Jonathan Gantt, and Owen McGee (among others) provides good examples of prior work. Shane Kenna's detailed and impressive monograph *War in the shadows* could have engaged more fully and historiographically than it does with such scholarship. But the depth of

work that has gone into Dr Kenna's study allows it to offer a valuable addition to the relevant shelves in the library.

The Fenians' aim of establishing through their violence an independent and secular government in Ireland was not realized. And the lengthy history of Irish nationalism suggests that most Irish nationalists have tended to be more positive than were many Fenians themselves about the political possibilities available through constitutional methods. The evidence presented in this book regarding 1880s Fenian bombings in Britain perhaps reinforces scepticism about the efficacy of violence. The Fenians were innovative in utilizing new technology (including the use of timer devices, as well as the deployment of dynamite); but tactical ingenuity was not matched by strategic achievement. Dr Kenna's book usefully details debates within the Fenian community about the most effective and justifiable methods to use in their struggle. His account makes clear that publicity and panic were generated more successfully by Fenian bombers than was the achievement of their ostensibly main objective, an independent Irish republic. In his words, there emerged a clear 'realization that the dynamite campaign had not, as predicted, brought the British government to terms on the Irish question' (p. 216).

Some of the rhetoric emerging from the people under scrutiny here tells its own vivid tale about the limitations of the bombers' thinking. So the politics of veteran activist Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, for example, evince a rather crass simplicity: 'England isn't the kind of country to ever give up anything until she is absolutely forced to do it ... I believe in destroying everything over which the flag of England floats until Ireland is free' (quoted, p. 39).

This book is riddled with informers and agents, as were the Fenians themselves. There is careful treatment from the author of the difficulties that this kind of counter-terrorism presented for the United Kingdom state. Intelligence-led policing could lead to successes against bombers; but it could also transgress the state's established processes and protections and, as Kenna points out, 'the idea of secret policing was controversial in Victorian Britain' (p. 77). Yet, despite the problems detailed here regarding the state's capacity to coordinate its counter-Fenian efforts, there is also considerable evidence in this book about how deeply compromised the Fenians were by treachery and espionage (as they also were by factionalism). In terms of the running of agents and informers, the sections of the book about U.K. spymaster Edward George Jenkinson are among the best. The demoralizing effects of informers upon a revolutionary movement are made clear; but so too is Jenkinson's recognition that Fenianism could be contained through policing, but not defeated by it. Politics would also need to be involved if violence was to end.

There are frequent stylistic and spelling slips in the book, which is unfortunate. More seriously, there is less of an overarching argument than would be ideal from someone so immersed in the primary material. Dr Kenna engages more thoroughly with archival and newspaper sources than he does with the arguments of existing scholars on the subject that he studies. His book deals with a transnational movement: of the 1880s bombings he observes that, 'The impetus for a Fenian dynamite campaign was distinctly American rather than Irish' (p. 326), that behind this lay Irish-American resentment at what was perceived to have been forced exile, and that 'Irish-American nationalism was both a reaction to British policy in Ireland and the realities of life as an immigrant' (p. 15). But there is no discussion of the ways in which his arguments on this subject alter the view that one might gain from, say, Niall Whelehan's 2012 monograph *The Dynamiters: Irish nationalism and political violence in the wider world, 1867–1900* (the latter book not even being listed in the bibliography). So fuller engagement with a wider literature would have enriched further an already valuable account. It would have allowed us to assess more clearly the ways in which this detailed study alters our broader reading of an important topic.

Despite this, the detailed narrative is impressive. And we do gain a vivid understanding of the ways in which 1880s Britain experienced what would become an enduring part of the country's life: committed bombers, increased security,

popular and media panic, an exaggeration of the actual level of threat involved, the challenges of coordinating intelligence-led policing and of doing this securely within the law. It remains an important story, and it is addressed with admirable diligence here.

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HESITANT COMRADES: THE IRISH REVOLUTION AND THE BRITISH LABOUR MOVEMENT.
 By Geoffrey Bell. Pp xii, 273. London: Pluto. 2016. £18.99 paperback.

Hesitant comrades reviews the response of the British left – including the Labour Party, the Independent Labour Party, the Fabians, the British Socialist Party, the Socialist Labour Party, the Pankhursts and related feminists, the Communist Party of Great Britain, and the trade unions – to the national revolution in Ireland. The focus is mainly on the period between 1916 and 1921, but there are also sections that reach back to the late-nineteenth century. Aside from bookends on the Easter Rising and the Anglo–Irish Treaty, the approach is thematic, with chapters devoted to the Labour Party, the Trades Union Congress, and the far left ‘alternatives’. The Ulster question, as distinct from the Irish question, looms large in the proceedings, and two chapters deal with the debate on socialism and nationalism in Ireland, and the left in Ulster. The one obvious missing piece in the jigsaw is the Irish Labour Party; a common omission which has usually reflected an Anglo-centric and colonial mindset. In discussing *The making of the English working class*, E. P. Thompson liked to remind historians that the working class was present at its own making. As we consider the reasons for the post-1916 marginalisation of the Irish left in our decade of centenaries, it’s worth bearing in mind that Irish Labour had a hand in its own unmaking.

Born and raised in Belfast, Geoffrey Bell has already published with Pluto on Northern Ireland, notably *The Protestants of Ulster* (1976) and *Troublesome business: the Labour Party and the Irish question* (1982). Based on a Ph.D. *Hesitant comrades* is a less polemical work, deeper and rounder. Bell’s method is to let events or quotations make the point for him. Of course, these are selected, and the underlying argument is the same as in the earlier volumes. Essentially, Bell’s case is that the mainstream British Labour movement always had an ambiguous attitude towards Ireland. On the one hand it took the view that as a movement for democracy, Labour could not oppose the democratic demand for home rule. On the other, there were many in the movement who qualified that view with a belief that the quest for home rule was deluded as it would not lead to the better government of Ireland or that the Irish did not have the right to things – like armed revolt or separation – which might damage British or imperial interests. Always, there was the hope that the Irish question would just go away. Similarly on Ulster, the prevailing view was that Labour could not endorse partition as the unionists were reactionaries, hand-in-glove with the Tories in opposing the Liberal government’s social reforms, and partition would institutionalise sectarianism in Ulster, if not in Ireland as a whole. At the same time, once the British government supported partition, most Labourites were willing to accept it as inevitable. The ‘alternatives’ were more consistent and forthright in their standpoints, but here too there were a variety of perspectives, ranging from the anti-nationalist Fabians to the anti-imperialist communists and feminists.

Much of the ground has already been covered in bits and pieces here and there, and the thematic format does leave the bones of contention well chewed by the conclusion, but never before has the topic been addressed in so concise, coherent, and