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The origins of contemporary Ireland: new perspectives on the recent past

Introduction

The contributions to this special issue of *Irish Historical Studies* are drawn from papers originally presented at a conference ‘Ireland since 1966: new perspectives’, which took place in November 2010.¹ The intention of the conference was to identify and explore themes that contributed to the emergence of contemporary Ireland. Recent research and the release of government and other archives in Ireland and elsewhere have provided the stimulus and the means to assess the recent past by the application of historical methodologies to periods that have until now been dominated by journalists and social scientists.² These articles provide new perspectives on specific topics and investigate themes and questions that emerge in the 1960s and 1970s.³ Surveying this period, Roy Foster concluded that we live in ‘contemporary history’, suggesting that Ireland since 1970 constitutes a separate and distinctive period for historical assessment. The contributors to this issue engage with Foster’s claim and provide new insights into that period.⁴

However, the notion of contemporary history as a distinctive period for historical study remains controversial. Many historians would accept Arthur Marwick’s view that the term ‘contemporary’ is merely a convenient label for the study of the most recent past. According to this view, ‘the contemporary historian employs the same concepts and the same methodology as any other historian’. Despite this, Marwick concedes that there are specific problems associated with such research: ‘often one simply does not know “what happened next”, and one finds difficulty in suppressing the influence of personal recollection.’⁵ Geoffrey

¹ The conference was held at University College Dublin and was jointly organised by the U.C.D. School of History and Archives and the Department of Politics, University of Glasgow.

² See Fintan O’Toole, *Meanwhile back at the ranch: the politics of Irish beef* (London, 1995); Stephen Collins, *The power game: Fianna Fáil since Lemass* (Dublin, 2000); Justin O’Brien, *The arms trial* (Dublin, 2000); Brian Nolan, Philip J. O’Connell and Christopher T. Whelan (eds), *Bust to boom? The Irish experience of growth and inequality* (Dublin, 2000).

³ Space and the unavailability of potential contributors excluded important topics, including the impact of television and membership of the E.E.C.

⁴ Roy Foster, *Luck and the Irish* (London, 2007), p. 3.

⁵ Arthur Marwick, *The nature of history* (London, 1970), p. 242; nor did the passage of time lead to a re-evaluation of these views: idem., *The new nature of history* (London, 2001).

Barracough provides a more radical and conceptually-nuanced analysis. He maintained that contemporary history needed to be treated in a distinctive fashion, that it involves a rupture with the methods employed when researching modern history. For Barracough, contemporary history focuses on the recent past, but it is not merely the study of the most recent period of history as Marwick maintains. This rupture between the modern and the contemporary is central to Barracough's claim that historians of the contemporary era have to take account of the substantive and subtle differences between the two eras. He also challenges the working assumptions of most historians that each successive period is 'the most recent phase of a continuous process', emphasising instead the disruptive and unstable aspects of the contemporary period.⁶ Peter Catterall revisited the question of distinctiveness and concluded cautiously that the methods, themes and sources employed in studying the recent past do set contemporary history apart from the modern period.⁷ More recently Spohr Readman reviewed the question extensively, concluding that while historians do not follow Barracough's specific periodisation they do treat the period 1945–90 as a distinctive period in their research.⁸

While it is difficult to fit individual cases into the macro-historical framework outlined by Barracough, it is possible to adopt his suggestion that 'contemporary history should be considered as a distinct period of time, with characteristics of its own which mark it off from the preceding period'.⁹ In the Irish case, it is arguable that the period from 1959, when Éamon de Valera retired as taoiseach, to the general election of 2011, when Fianna Fáil ceased to be the dominant party in the political system, can be treated as a distinctive period for the purposes of historical research. A change in leadership itself does not constitute a new era, nor does it necessarily announce a distinctive phase in history. However, the succession of Seán Lemass was in many ways a 'turning point' and a decisive moment in the emergence of contemporary Ireland, though it is better to see this as a process rather than a single moment in time.¹⁰ Care should be taken not to associate an entire period with a single individual and attention needs to be paid to the complex nature of continuity as well as change in the process being assessed.¹¹ Enda Delaney has applied the term 'late modernity' to this period

⁶ Geoffrey Barracough, *An introduction to contemporary history* (Harmondsworth, 1967; original edn, 1964), pp 1–20.

⁷ Peter Catterall, 'What (if anything) is distinctive about contemporary history?' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, xxxii, no. 4 (Oct. 1997), pp 441–52; Brian Brivati, Julia Buxton and Anthony Seldon (eds), *The contemporary history handbook* (Manchester, 1996).

⁸ Kristina Spohr Readman, 'Contemporary history in Europe: from mastering national pasts to the future of writing the world' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, xlvi, no. 3 (July 2011), pp 506–30.

⁹ Barracough, *Introduction*, p. 12.

¹⁰ T. E. Hachey, 'Introduction' in T. E. Hachey (ed.) *Turning points in twentieth-century Irish history* (Dublin, 2011), pp 1–3.

¹¹ Fergal Tobin, *The best of decades: Ireland in the 1960s* (Dublin, 1984); Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy, 'Whose Ireland? The Lemass Era' in Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy (eds) *The Lemass era: politics and society in the Ireland of Seán Lemass* (Dublin, 2005), pp 1–11; for a recent critical reinterpretation of Lemass and his influence, see Bryce Evans, *Seán Lemass: democratic dictator* (Cork, 2011), pp 207–59.

when, as he puts it, Ireland ‘became self-consciously “modern”’. He cautions against a one-dimensional or determinist framework for analysing the period, suggesting that continuity overlaps and coexists with change.¹² Notwithstanding this, it is possible to argue that the ‘Lemass era’ is a distinctive one and its break with the previous period influenced the direction Ireland took for the next fifty years. His leadership is associated with economic change, a dramatic shift in Irish diplomatic priorities and institutional innovation in government and public life. These changes were reinforced by educational reform, the introduction of a national television service and the appearance of new ideas and attitudes.¹³

That this is a period of change is uncontroversial and contributors tackle this question from different perspectives. The nature of the change is more complicated as are countervailing trends that highlight continuity. In politics, continuity seems strong, yet as Ciara Meehan shows, Fine Gael re-positioned itself as a reformist party in response to internal pressures and changes in the electorate. One vivid example of this appeared in 1974 when the majority of Fine Gael T.D.s voted to legalise contraception.¹⁴ Change is more clearly evident in the phenomenon of youth culture as described by Carole Holohan. Yet here too there was a subtle reworking of domestic influences with those imported from Britain and the United States. Continuity was more clearly evident in the reluctance to change the Irish constitution, despite Lemass’s commitment to a radical reform of the fundamental document. Nevertheless, the constitution was amended in 1972 for the first time and subsequently became the focus for debate and controversy. Kevin O’Sullivan’s discussion of Ireland’s foreign aid programme neatly shows how a distinctly new policy domain can acquire a specifically national form due to the collective memory of the Famine and the Irish missionary experience. Further ambiguities appear in Sarah Campbell’s examination of the origins of the S.D.L.P. On the surface Northern Ireland experienced dramatic changes between 1968 and 1971, yet even radical responses are often constrained by traditional political identities and values. Brian Hanley tackles one of the most controversial issues to confront contemporary Ireland, the legitimacy of the I.R.A.’s military campaign against the British state in Northern Ireland. Both the I.R.A. and their nationalist critics drew on the past, seeking to influence public opinion through their interpretation of violence in the Irish political tradition.

What each of these contributions suggests, if from very different perspectives, is that new issues and questions appear in the 1960s and 1970s that contribute to

¹² Enda Delaney, ‘Modernity, the past and politics in post-war Ireland’, in Hachey, *Turning points*, pp 103–18; Brian Girvin, ‘Continuity, change and crisis in Ireland: an introduction and discussion’ in *Irish Political Studies*, xxiii, no. 4 (Dec. 2008), pp 457–74.

¹³ Robert Savage, *A loss of innocence? Television and Irish society 1960–72* (Manchester, 2010); John Walsh, *The politics of expansion: the transformation of educational policy in the Republic of Ireland, 1957–72* (Manchester, 2009); Michael J. Geary, *An inconvenient wait: Ireland’s quest for membership of the E.E.C., 1957–73* (Dublin, 2009); Martin Wall, ‘Ireland and the European Economic Community, 1973–1977: a small state and European integration’ (Ph.D. thesis, University College, Cork, 2011).

¹⁴ Attention is usually given to the decision of the taoiseach, Liam Cosgrave, to vote against his own government’s legislation, yet Fine Gael deputies continued to support reform in this controversial area during the following decade.

the making of contemporary Ireland. These contributions also allow the reader to consider additional questions and alternative explanations through further research.

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