

SERVANTS OF EMPIRE: THE IRISH IN THE PUNJAB, 1881–1921 BY PATRICK O’LEARY. Pp 256. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2011. £65.

In the expanding historiography of the British Empire that seeks to explore how the different ethnic dimensions of Great Britain and Ireland impacted directly upon the imperial experience both at home and abroad, Patrick O’Leary’s book, *Servants of Empire: the Irish in the Punjab, 1881–1921* is a notable addition. In an attempt to contribute to this developing field of research, the author sets himself the admirable task of examining the historical role of the Irish in Punjab, presented here mostly as a collection of public servants, engineers and medical personnel. One of the primary objectives of the book, the author states, is to analyse these individuals ‘through a prism which will highlight ... their greenness, the way in which their Irishness affected the history of the British in Punjab, that of Punjab itself, as well as that of India’ (p. 8). The author has divided the book into four primary sections with each section arranged thematically and individual chapters addressing the specific ways in which the Irish influenced life in Punjab during a forty-year period between 1881 and 1921.

Clearly, O’Leary’s book is an accomplished piece of scholarship and is evidently the product of many years’ research and reflective reading. Part one provides important statistical and background information with regard to Irish recruitment to the Indian public services, as well as the less familiar narrative of Irish imperial involvement in the Straits Settlements, Malaya and Ceylon. Interestingly, O’Leary asserts that the degree in which Irishness was brought to bear on the professional attitudes and approach to the work of these individuals was largely dependent upon ‘the numbers [of Irish] involved and the extent to which its members shared a common social, religious and educational background’ (p. 34). Part two discusses British geopolitical and military involvement in Punjab and the north-west frontier in relation to the key roles played by the Irish from all parts of Ireland and from a variety of religious and social backgrounds. It is worth noting that while O’Leary discusses the important contributions of people such as Richard Isaac Bruce and Lucas White King to the administration of the Punjab, he concludes that ‘there is no suggestion that their Irishness had any bearing on their motivations in the dealings’ (p. 105) with the local population and rulers, a surprising assertion that is, in fact, repeated in several chapters throughout the book. Part three discusses the more familiar relationship between Ireland and India in relation to issues of land tenure, rural poverty and agrarian unrest. Here, O’Leary extends the argument used in earlier work on this topic by scholars such as Clive Dewey and S. B. Cook to focus on how Indian administrators, such as Michael Fenton and Louis William Dane, brought their first-hand experience of working on land-related projects in Ireland to bear on similar initiatives in Punjab. Significantly, Fenton and Dane, alongside more established Irish figures such as Lord Dufferin, were at the forefront of British attempts to build a succession of ‘canal colonies’ and irrigation works in Punjab during the early 1900s. As with Dewey and Cook, O’Leary maintains that the part Irishness played in these ‘administrators’ and viceroys’ outlook and decision-making was significant, and the effects that events in Ireland had in such matters was crucial’ (p. 149) to the type of land legislation and agricultural practices that were put into effect in Punjab at this time. Part four examines Irish contributions to the political life and government of Punjab, especially the contribution of Irish men such as Dennis Fitzpatrick, Lord Lansdowne and Michael O’Dwyer and how their attitudes to proposed legislation, maintenance of public order and policing were directly related to their earlier experiences in Ireland.

While this book is eloquently written and is full of fascinating stories, biographies of less-well known Irish figures in India, and insights into the administration and politics of Punjab as well as life on the north-west frontier, its principal aim to examine the way in which Irishness affected the experience of Empire in the context of Punjab is undermined by the book’s focus on Irish middle class professionals and elites only. Taking into account O’Leary’s own admission that the extent to which Irishness imposed itself on imperial

matters and on relations with both the wider 'British' and Indian community depended on the numbers involved and their proximity in relation to one another, a more inclusive discussion of the less privileged or 'subaltern' Irish in Punjab – the soldiers, railway, road and bridge construction workers – would surely have offered a greater opportunity to make more definitive judgements on the impact of 'the Irish in Punjab' as a whole, as well as on the different ways in which Irishness impacted upon the structures of colonial governance and on 'Anglo-Indian' society in general.

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JOHN BRIGHT: STATESMAN, ORATOR, AGITATOR. By Bill Cash. Pp xi, 328. London: I. B. Tauris. 2012. £25.

Virginia Woolf once complained that the subjects of most Victorian biographies 'are like the wax figures now preserved in Westminster Abbey, that were carried in funeral processions through the street – effigies that have only a smooth superficial likeness to the body in the coffin' (*Selected essays*, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 117). Unlike Woolf's effigies, John Bright, the subject of Bill Cash's biography, eschewed Westminster Abbey in favour of a small Quaker cemetery in Rochdale for his final resting place; but the hagiographical tradition that Bright inspired – and, indeed, collaborated with during his lifetime – ensured that a heroic image of the incorruptible and ethically-sound Radical survived for generations after his death in 1889. This new biography of Bright, the first in a generation, carries on in this tradition; it is, in spirit and form, a quintessentially Victorian biography rather than a modern biography of a Victorian. The biographical subject is treated uncritically and divorced from his intellectual and cultural contexts; the book also features an unhealthy blurring of autobiography and biography. This is the eleventh biographical study of Bright to appear since 1868, a chain of works that rather undermines Cash's claim that his subject matter is an almost forgotten figure (p. xix). Unfortunately, Cash repeats rather than revises the hagiographical tricks of the past, providing a very readable narrative of Bright's life but offering little in the way of critical context and psychological insight. It is, of course, somewhat unfair to assess Cash's biography as a work of scholarship: he is a sitting Conservative Member of Parliament with a background in law. The book reveals that Bright was a distant kinsman of Cash, but it quickly becomes clear that the biographer is keen to recover more than his family connections with his subject. Bright's brand of free market and democratic Radicalism, marked by a powerful independent streak that set him apart from the political establishment, appeals overtly to Cash's inner sense of modern day Conservatism: ethically-driven, suspicious of state encroachments into the lives of the people, and guided by Burkean caution in constitutional matters. Cash thus is interested in Bright's 'innate conservatism' (p. 284) – an interesting idea, but one that is approached on Cash's, not Bright's terms. Instead, ahistorical parallels are drawn, for example, between Bright's opposition to imperial federation and modern Euroscepticism. Cash asserts Bright's 'views would undoubtedly have led him to oppose the notion of anything like a Federal Europe' (p. 204). Indeed, there are frequent injections of presentism in the book that Bright is made to bear a weight that he cannot sustain, as his nineteenth-century liberal Radicalism is morphed – or rather forced – into a brand of modern day libertarian Toryism. Cash confidently states that Bright would have championed the twenty-first-century global free market (p. 38), disapproved of the Europeanisation of British judicial and legislative practices (p. xiv), and 'rejoiced' in the 'annihilation' of the alternative vote electoral system referendum in 2011 (p. 268). The dead, of course, can be made to support any cause, thus rendering such meditations nothing more than a parlour game. Using Bright