

## Ronan Fanning (1941–2017): an appreciation

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John Ronan Fanning, colleague, friend, scholar, researcher, writer, teacher, frequent contributor to press, television and radio, was born on 6 December 1941, the son of an English Montessori teacher mother and an Irish doctor father. He was joint editor of this journal for twelve years, from 1976, representing the Irish Historical Society, and for ten of those years, from early 1978 to late 1987 (numbers 81–99), I had the pleasure of joining him, representing the Ulster Society for Irish Historical Studies.

As it happens, these were difficult years for the journal. We began behind schedule, financial problems having forced delays in publication. So these were embarrassing, catch-up years when subscribers were paying for the current year and receiving the previous year's numbers. We feared a falling-off of subscriptions and struggled hard to put things right, hampered by further printers' problems and the normal vicissitudes of a part-time operation. I do not think the quality of the journal suffered but we were unable to produce more than two numbers per year so that we had not succeeded in getting up to date when, with the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of *I.H.S.*, our terms of office ended.

I saw a lot of Ronan in those years, enjoying his wit and his often acerbic comments (he did not suffer fools gladly). We went together to record the papal visit in 1979, not out of any religious commitment but because we realised the Phoenix Park occasion would be as near as we were likely to get to an O'Connell monster meeting. Typically, Ronan brought Waterford wine glasses to accompany our picnic. I got to know his partner, Virginia, too: they visited us during my sabbatical year in Paris and on several occasions in Carlingford, where our small *maison secondaire* is located. They were always good company. Ronan, it should be recorded, had a slight speech hesitation which he never allowed to hold him back and which he overcame completely when lecturing.

I start a tribute to Ronan with this explanation of a relationship which we maintained thereafter until his untimely death. I had not known him in his early years, through schooling in Sandymount and Monkstown, and his undergraduate years at U.C.D., from which he emerged in 1963 with first class honours in history, to move on to Peterhouse, Cambridge, for his Ph.D. The subject he chose was 'Arthur Balfour and the leadership of the Unionist Party in opposition, 1906–1911: a study of the origins of unionist policy towards the Third Home Rule Bill'. This earned him his doctorate and served him well over the coming years, furnishing him with an essential insight into the sources

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so necessary for an understanding of British attitudes to Ireland in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

A year's tutoring at Exeter University, 1967–8, preceded his return to U.C.D. A college lecturer in 1968, he became a university statutory lecturer in 1980, and professor of modern history in 1986. This progression included a significant year (1976–7) as Fulbright Professor at Georgetown University, Washington, a post that brought him, through his friendship with Garret FitzGerald, then Irish minister for Foreign Affairs, into contact with Michael Lillis, then working in the Irish embassy. His immediate rapport with Lillis brought further connections with such figures as Speaker Thomas P. 'Tip' O'Neill, Senator Ted Kennedy, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Henry Kissinger and others involved in backstage negotiations to involve the U.S. in the Irish Government's efforts to resolve the deadlock in Northern Ireland. The 1976 efforts of John Hume in this regard, leading to President Carter's initiative in 1977, made possible the subsequent Anglo–Irish Agreement (1985) and Good Friday Agreement (1998). Throughout this period Ronan's advice and participation behind the scenes was much valued though he never talked of these matters. It was not until his funeral that Michael Lillis emphasised his quiet, enduring role.

Ronan became a member of the first National Archives Advisory Council in 1986 and, from there, he continued to push for the opening up of government papers. In 1989 he was elected to the Royal Irish Academy. There he was to co-edit ten volumes of *Documents on Irish foreign policy*, published between 1998 and 2016, and was on the editorial board of the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, to which he contributed several important entries. He was also an active and respected participant in the academy's affairs, as indeed he was in university politics, which he much enjoyed. As well as doing an earlier stint as secretary of the Irish Historical Society, he participated fully in the affairs of the International Committee of Historical Sciences, being in turn both secretary and president of the Irish affiliate of that world body. Throughout this period, too, he was a prolific contributor to the *Sunday Independent* and to the *Irish Times*. He brought the wider public into awareness of many topical issues and also influenced the governing authorities in the way they played down or celebrated significant anniversaries, not least the centenary of the passing of the Home Rule Act in 1914 and the 1916 Rising.

Ronan wrote many learned articles and chapters of books, but it was his books that established his stature as an historian and revealed his mastery of style.<sup>1</sup> In 1978 he published his magisterial, *The Irish Department of Finance, 1922–58*. Commissioned in 1970 by Charles Murray, secretary to the department, this ground-breaking study lays bare the innermost preoccupations of the new Irish state over its first four decades, supplying as well an excellent survey of more recent times, a full discussion of departmental responsibilities and of the more significant personnel, the department's relations with successive governments and the tensions between bureaucracy and democracy. The processes of the transfer of power from one state to another, the establishment of stability during the Cosgrave years and the further peaceful transfer to de Valera's Fianna Fáil – all fundamental to an

<sup>1</sup> A full bibliography of Ronan Fanning's writings pertaining to Irish history can be extracted from Irish History Online ([www.irishhistoryonline.ie](http://www.irishhistoryonline.ie)).

understanding of how the Irish state evolved, from the era of Joseph Brennan and J. J. McElligott to that of T. K. Whitaker – are set out coherently and in detail. It was a remarkable achievement for a young historian. It was during our *I.H.S.* years that we were both asked to conclude the Helicon History of Ireland, he tackling the independent state, I the remainder of the island. On a recent re-read of *Independent Ireland*, published in 1983, I was struck by how much the departmental history had informed his understanding of his subject and perhaps, too, dictated the structure of his text. It is a wise, informed and succinct account in four chapters and an epilogue: ‘Independence, Civil War and Partition’; ‘The Irish Free State’; ‘De Valera’s Ireland’; ‘A New Republic’; and an epilogue carrying the story briefly from 1951 to 1974. It remains the best short account of those years.

Ronan’s outstanding book, however, was published after his retirement in 2007. *The fatal path: British government and the Irish Revolution, 1910–1922* (London, 2013) marked the culmination of his research and scholarship over his entire career. I could not believe there was so much new to be said about this period, but Ronan’s familiarity with British cabinet sources and thorough knowledge of Irish detail provides brilliant insights into events as they unfolded. The book contains much new research, expressed, as Joe Lee has observed, ‘with superb command of his material, not least in decoding the significance of what is not said as well as what is said in the innumerable documents he fillets, making it a joy to savour the brushwork of a master of his craft at the top of his form’.<sup>2</sup> And that form continued when he published, a mere two years later, his absorbing biography, *Eamon de Valera: a will to power* (London, 2015). Clear, authoritative, often supportive, but highly critical of Dev’s stance over the Civil War, this too is stylishly written. It was noted by Roy Foster as ‘a deeply thought-provoking biography’ and it is in full accord with Joe Lee’s earlier praise, when he compared Ronan’s work to ‘such masters of the political historian’s craft as Nicholas Mansergh or Maurice Cowling, indeed surpassing both in literary style’.<sup>3</sup>

Two other books should be mentioned. Ronan edited, with Judith Devlin, *Religion and rebellion: Historical Studies XX* (Dublin, 1997), the proceedings of the Irish Conference of Historians in 1995, and co-authored, with his close friend Michael Lillis, *The lives of Eliza Lynch: scandal and courage* (Dublin, 2009).<sup>4</sup> This book, researched and written over ten serendipitous years, took the two friends to Paraguay and through endless false trails written by the victors after the disastrous war which pitched Paraguay against the combined forces of Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay. The war ended in 1870 with the death of the Paraguayan dictator Francisco Solano Lopez and the bulk of his country’s population. Eliza, who was born in Charleville in 1833, but had moved on to England and then France, had, by the time of this catastrophe, accompanied Lopez to Paraguay as his mistress after meeting him in Paris in 1854 and had borne him seven children. She was a beautiful, glamorous and intelligent woman and made a big impact on the Paraguay of her day. Hers is an astonishing story and this book, the brainchild, one supposes, of diplomat Lillis, has been made into a well-received film, thus retrieving her story and

<sup>2</sup> *Irish Times*, 17 Oct. 2013.

<sup>3</sup> *The Spectator*, 14 Nov. 2015; *Irish Times*, 17 Oct. 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Published in paperback as: *Eliza Lynch: queen of Paraguay* (Dublin, 2014).

reputation. She survived thanks to her British passport until her death in 1886 and her life makes a fascinating read.

It is not given to every historian to have the pleasure of such a well-acclaimed exercise so far, in many ways, from his normal scholarly pursuits. Nor is it given to many to receive the tributes and recognition afforded by his country's president and from its minister for Foreign Affairs on the news of his death. President Higgins referred to Ronan as an 'admired and respected historian whose extensive research has left a rich legacy to Irish Scholarship', while Charles Flanagan called him an 'important public intellectual'. Ronan's death was marked, too, by many further tributes, from university colleagues and from many fellow historians within and without the country: Maurice Manning, historian and chancellor of the National University of Ireland, specifically emphasised his eminent colleague's inspirational teaching, while historian and former president of U.C.D., Art Cosgrove, spoke of his many contributions to both university and society, sentiments echoed by long-term colleague and successor as joint editor of *I.H.S.*, James McGuire. Joe Lee, Michael Laffan, Diarmaid Ferriter and David McCullough are but four more historians who publicly expressed in print their sadness and appreciation, as also did R.I.A. chief executive, Laura Mahony, and the history-trained Irish ambassador to Britain, Daniel Mulhall.<sup>5</sup>

Ronan Fanning, who died on 18 January 2017, aged seventy-five, was the outstanding modern Irish historian of his generation and the one with the greatest impact on his country.

<sup>5</sup> *Irish Times*, 18 Jan. 2017.