

and the sense of Scottishness into their own politics and culture, the likes of Lord Aberdeen were simply Scotsmen gone wrong. The same sort of story emerges from a study of Presbyterian ministers from Scotland. They were resented as ‘outsiders’ and brought with them the long standing strand of liberalism which was part of Scottish Presbyterianism.

At one level this is a valuable addition to the growing literature devoted to that great puzzle: understanding Belfast. At another level this study is deeply unsatisfying. Maybe this is because being a Scot in Belfast during this period was deeply unsatisfying. It maybe that the discipline Kyle Hughes chose for this study placed too many limits on his curiosity. There is something here about the experience of being an ‘outsider’ in a culture which was dominant and threatened. There is something about the influence on Ulster of being so close to a Scotland which was the same but very different. What did the citizens of Belfast learn when they read Burns, the most borrowed poet from their public library in the 1890s?

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THE IRISH-AMERICAN DYNAMITE CAMPAIGN. By Joseph McKenna. Pp 216. Jefferson: McFarlane & Company. 2012. \$49.95.

THE FENIANS: IRISH REBELLION IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC WORLD, 1858–1876. Patrick Steward and Bryan McGovern. Pp 328. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press. 2013. \$45.

Writing the history of failure is difficult and if fenianism is to be judged by its declared aims, then to chronicle or analyse its heyday – rather than the extraordinarily powerful memory cultures it generated – is peculiarly difficult. It was not that the I.R.B. mounted a viable attempt at revolution only to be defeated by superior crown forces, but that it never achieved the organisational basis or the acquisition of sufficient materiel to make such an attempt remotely plausible. As such, to fully appreciate Patrick Steward and Bryan McGovern’s attempt to write a synoptic history of fenian activities on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, the reader has to see past their apparent assumption that fenianism was the default politics of any right-thinking Irish nationalist, if only practical political, social and economic considerations allowed. It is hard not to think that they needed to treat arguments made by Vincent Comerford in *The Fenians in context* (1985) more carefully, locating fenianism as one of several competing and not always clearly differentiated Irish nationalisms. Similarly, drawing on Marta Ramon’s 2007 biography of James Stephens – absent from their bibliography – might have led to a more sceptical treatment of the notion that 1865 could have been fenianism’s ‘year of action’. The promotion of this was in part a propagandistic effort to keep funds flowing across the Atlantic. Indeed, to speculate about the shortcomings of Stephens’s military leadership can smack a little of the armchair military strategist. It might be reasonable to ask, as the authors do, whether ordering a ‘series of small strikes against government outposts, whether successful or not,’ would ‘have precipitated a groundswell of grassroots military activity’. However, the authors chose to leave this question unanswered, consequently rendering this a polemical rather than genuinely analytical point (p. 84). To rephrase the question with a contrary polemical intent: were local fenian groups ready to attack isolated R.I.C. barracks in country districts had Stephens so ordered them? Was Ireland in 1865, as the authors imply, in a similar state to Ireland in 1798 or, for that matter, in 1919? Similarly, the idea that the failure of the feeble Fenian rebellion of 1867 ‘permanently eliminated any possibility that Irish nationalists would be able to establish a strategic alliance with the United States government’ seems a little far-fetched (p. 163). Greater distance needed to be placed between the authors

and how Irish nationalists thought in the post-Famine decades. This period saw them particularly prone to imagine geopolitical configurations that would serve their ends. They were seemingly convinced, for instance, that apparent ideological affinities between Irish nationalism and the French or the United States would override the Realpolitik of international diplomacy. P. J. Smyth might have believed that with 'the [American] Union restored' would come 'Irish freedom' (p. 46). He was, however, just as credulous with respect to the idea that inevitable conflict would arise between Britain and Louis Napoleon's Second Empire, another source of deliverance for Ireland. That illusion proved surprisingly resilient. It was weakened when the French failed to march for the Poles in 1863 and only properly finished off by Prussians in 1870.

When Steward and McGovern fix their gaze on the North American side of the story, the mix of social, political and migration history is more circumspect and it is here that there is much of interest. By referring throughout to the expat Irish, rather than Irish-Americans, the reader is reminded that assimilation to the hyphenated identities of life in the United States occurs over time. Irish-Americans were not born the moment their documents were stamped at Ellis Island. At the same time, the degree of insularity this implies needs to be offset, as the authors show, by an appreciation of how the experience of Irish expats mirrored the dilemmas and divisions shaping the wider society. For instance, with regard to the politics of the American Civil War, the evidence points towards the significance of O'Connell's abolitionist legacy but also how pro-Union Irish expats, in common with many pro-Union Americans, did not always welcome the Emancipation Proclamation. Steward and McGovern's evidence suggests Irish infantry often did not welcome free blacks into the ranks and the pro-Union Fenian Brotherhood might well have strengthened its position by pandering to this racist sentiment. The authors also suggest that Irish allegiances during the Civil War were as much determined by geography as ideology, citing evidence of Irish solidarity across the Union/Confederate divide. That said, a more systematic treatment is needed if this is to be attributed to nationalist sentiment rather than ethnicity, not least if the claim that the 'fraternal link' was 'indissoluble' is to be upheld (p. 58). Indeed, on reading the intriguing account of the Fenian invasions of Canada, it was hard not to think that the fashionable emphasis on the Atlantic world, the transnational and the global, has obscured the need for a big history of expat Irish politics and life in the United States in the post-Famine period.

Joseph McKenna's sketchy yet enjoyable account of the dynamite campaign suffers from a more pronounced lack of originality. The revelation that the British state, through E. G. Jenkinson's shadowy, short-lived and for a time unaccountable operation, deployed agent provocateurs in order to ensnare dynamiters is not new. McKenna boasts of gaining access to sensitive Home Office papers not yet freely available at the National Archives. These, however, appear to be much the same papers used in a redacted form by Christy Campbell. Indeed, Campbell, in his *Fenian fire* (2002), has already made reference to the most significant piece of evidence McKenna quotes from the Althorp Papers. This work, and most notably, K. R. M. Short's classic study *The dynamite war* (1979) are unaccountably absent from McKenna's bibliography.

The rise of terrorism studies has focused attention on the dynamite campaign, and recent work by Niall Whelehan (2012) brings a particularly sophisticated transnational perspective to bear on the subject. Nonetheless, how these studies should be integrated into broader histories of Irish nationalism or the British state is yet to be worked out. Jenkinson's outfit was certainly an anomaly, but his prior experience in the wider empire might provide new ways of contextualising his activities. Moreover, as McKenna observes, the R.I.C. officers posted to the U.K. in response to the dynamite threat probably thought differently to their British counterparts, in part thanks to their semi-military training, as work by Elizabeth Malcolm (2006) and a growing slew of comparative studies on colonial policing suggests. This raises some interesting questions. Did their activities in Liverpool and elsewhere shed light on what was particular about how Ireland itself was policed? Given how noisy were Liberal

objections to ‘continental abuses’, how scrupulous were they when it came to Irish political crime? And were Irish or Irish-American dynamitards made subject to dubious judicial proceedings and particularly harsh treatment in British prisons, as many Irish nationalists believed? Home Rule M.P.s, particularly Parnellites, made much of these controversies in the 1890s. Doubtless, the activities of the British state can be analysed in ways that tells us something fresh about the late nineteenth century world, but the approach now needed is less that of exposé and instead more of an engagement with the difficulties faced by the liberal state under fire. It might be that the best new evidence is not to be winkled out of much combed-over police and intelligence files but from the great volume of material generated by the strangely neglected Special Commission into ‘Parnellism and Crime’. This, in itself, a grotesque abuse of state power by the sitting Tory government, is where a genuinely fresh insight into the subterranean dimensions of late nineteenth-century Irish nationalism is most likely to be found.

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KEVIN O'SHIEL: TYRONE NATIONALIST AND IRISH STATE-BUILDER. By Eda Sagarra. Pp xvi, 334. Dublin: Irish Academic Press. 2013. €65.

Amongst government and private papers dating from the early years of the Irish Free State one regularly finds the often lengthy memoranda of Kevin O'Shiel (1891–1970). He was one of a group of ‘back room boys’ advising ministers and senior civil servants in the early Cosgrave years. His brief covered a wide range of constitutional, legal, political and international relations matters, including the 1922 Constitution, Ireland's membership of the League of Nations and the vexed question of Northern Ireland and the Boundary Commission.

O'Shiel lived in interesting times and left a lengthy 1,100-page account of his activities in the revolutionary years to 1921. He was not shy in putting pen to paper. But then he had already lived a full life by the date his personal memoir concluded. Age and memories of the trials of partition and civil war made the task of continuing difficult to the point of impossibility.

Eda Sagarra uses this autobiographical material effectively, augmenting it with detailed research. She brings a unique personal insight to her account as she is O'Shiel's daughter. The result covers the eight decades of O'Shiel's life, though the focus is on 1917 to 1923 with chapters covering his activities during the rise of Sinn Féin and the 1918 general election, involvement in the Dáil Éireann courts, the establishment of the Irish Free State and the North-Eastern Boundary Bureau. A final chapter looks at O'Shiel's life and career after 1923 as a land commissioner. O'Shiel's Tyrone background is emphasised; he was one of a group of northern nationalists including Ernest Blythe, Seán Lester and Patrick McGilligan who built the Irish Free State only to see their birthplaces remain in Northern Ireland. However O'Shiel did not emerge full-formed in 1917 and his ‘formation’ and ‘transformation’ in Tyrone and Dublin into a Sinn Féin supporter are covered in two early chapters. These remind the reader of the influences and outlooks that created independent Ireland's first generation of bureaucrats and the nature of the generational shift in outlook from Irish Parliamentary Party to Sinn Féin.

From the concluding sentences of the introduction it is clear that Sagarra is aware that her blood relationship with her subject imposes special obligations not to sentimentalise. She explains that in writing this biography she in fact met her father again as a stranger. The result is not a vanity project, but a rigorous account of a man and his times. Perhaps the one missing component is a complete critical assessment by way of a comprehensive conclusion. The text stops as O'Shiel stops: on his death on 12 July 1970.