

found their appeal delimited by religious allegiance. Although in most Catholic countries nationalism was essentially secular, Polish nationalism – due to circumstances not dissimilar to those of the Irish – acquired a close identity with Catholicism. Serb nationalism, with its memory of an Islamic oppressor, the Turk, similarly claimed the historically Serb, and Serbo-Croat speaking, Bosnia as Serbian, but saw its local majority, the Bosnian Muslims, rather as Irish nationalists see Ulster Protestants – traitorous allies of the enemy. The partition of Yugoslavia is a more complex story than the partition of Ireland but still remarkably comparable. It is the product of the contingency of nationhood in a part of Europe like Ireland with a much more subtle and uncertain history of nation building than nationalism likes to admit. And wherever in Europe nationalism has become entwined with religious identity it is less understanding of other nationalisms and more prone to violence.

Obviously I find such a framework of political development and of critical junctures in history more useful for analysing European history than the colonial model, but then I am a political scientist with a historical bent. I am not sure where Howe really places himself. In the concluding paragraph of the book he finally lets slip his own very contemporary European social democratic perspective. I discern in him an instinctive dislike of the traditional nationalisms (not just Irish) which have kept violent conflicts going. That might be cheered on by many British Liberal Democrats as well as by most other civilised post-national modern people. However I doubt that this rationalist lack of empathy with the romance of nationalism enables him better to explain or understand its persistence.

Such a framework is much more interesting for the light it throws on British political history, and especially the role of the Liberal party in relationship to Ireland. The colonial model tends to support the superficial view that if Asquith had been more resolute, or Lloyd George less devious, then

Ireland need never have been partitioned. One needs no analytical framework, and only to read a little of Ulster's history, to realise that this view is unsustainable. But could the Gladstonian Liberal solution of a united Ireland within a United Kingdom have worked? I, for one, have sometimes argued that it could, insofar as Ulster Unionism dug its deep populist roots only after 1886. Could a common 'Irish-within-British' identity have grown up around a devolved Irish Parliament?

The comparative European framework however throws some doubt on that optimistic view. It pinpoints the critical juncture as the formative stage of nationhood and suggests that what was happening around 1800 and in the ensuing decades was determinative of later identities. This was a period of repressive Tory misrule throughout the British Isles. The conflict over Catholic emancipation and electoral reform separated profoundly different Whig and Tory views of what the new century's British citizenship was to mean. The longevity of the mad king and other short-term circumstances meant that the more inclusive Whig view only triumphed over Tory obscurantism later, when nationalist identities had become more set. Who can tell whether, if the Whigs had presided over British government in these critical years, a collective, pluralist identity for the unified but in due course decentralised British Isles would have developed?

The choice of analytical framework is also highly relevant to assessment of the current peace process in Northern Ireland. Howe argues that seeking a settlement by recognising two distinct communities or traditions in Northern Ireland offers little hope (pp 237–39). Yet if one acknowledges that both Irish Republican and Ulster Unionist traditions can be seen as victims of the way that their story played out in the aftermath of 1789, then such a bi-communitarian approach to enabling Northern Ireland to move forward in peace makes a lot of sense. It builds on a better understanding of Northern Ireland's history than either the colonial model or Howe's more empirical approach. It also suggests that Northern Ireland could benefit from a more European Union than the British/Irish constitutional framework. That said, it fits my own civic liberalism no better than Howe's social democratic viewpoint or our common humanism.

Whatever one's outlook, however, Stephen Howe has provided an erudite and thorough demolition text on the colonial model that still underpins the thinking of many who seek, unwittingly or not, to prolong the Northern Ireland conflict.

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1 A Celtic term for all of these islands that was widely used well before the creation of the British state, something I learnt from Howe, endnote p. 245

## Forgotten hero

Gordon Gillespie: *Albert H. McElroy: The Radical Minister* (Albert McElroy Memorial Fund, 1985)  
Reviewed by **Bob Bell**

In less than fifty pages Gordon Gillespie manages to provide a full and lively portrait of someone who should be celebrated as one of the great heroes of twentieth century

Liberalism and twentieth century Ireland. The truth is, however, that Albert McElroy is now largely forgotten except by the remaining handful of followers who were touched by his

enthusiasm in the years before the catastrophe of the Troubles. Yet both his religious and political beliefs were prophetic in every sense. He preached doctrines that would not be generally accepted for many decades and, as a result, had to put up with frustrations and abuse that would have deterred a lesser man. In and out of season he preached ecumenical Christianity, an end to sectarianism, political power-sharing, Irish reunification by consent and the uniting of Europe long before such ideas were even contemplated, let alone generally accepted, by most people in Northern Ireland.

His origins lay in that interesting and largely unstudied population that regularly moved between the North of Ireland and Scotland. He was born in Glasgow of Ulster parents and even in his later years he still commuted there to help run a family newsagents. But in his mid-teens the family moved back to Ireland and settled in Toomebridge. He finished his secondary education at Rainey Endowed School in Magherafelt and then moved on to Trinity.

At first his political ideas were of a relatively orthodox Labour kind and he was a founder member with Conor Cruise O'Brien of the TCD Fabian Society. At home he joined the NILP and owing to an organisational blunder by the Unionists he suddenly found himself elected unopposed, as a very young councillor, to Magherafelt Rural District Council. But the war interrupted his political career and when he returned from the army he was drawn to the now largely forgotten Commonwealth Labour Party of Harry Midgley and saw great hope in 'Dominion status as a solution to the Irish problem'. But other influences began to move him away from a doctrinaire socialism that he saw as concentrating power in too few hands. In the army he had met many radical politicians from other parts of Europe and a visit to a small profit-sharing engineering works run by a Liberal councillor in Crewe seems to have had a crucial effect on his political development. In Dublin McElroy had also been greatly influenced by Ernest Savill Hicks, minister of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian

church in Stephen's Green, who not only influenced and deepened his religious beliefs but also made him aware of the links between Non-Subscribing Ministers and the United Irishmen during the Rising of 1798. McElroy was hooked. In a move which linked his political and his religious faith he trained as a minister and was appointed to the Non-Subscribing Church in Newtownards where he remained for another twenty years.

In the years that followed he was to preach a message that integrated his religious and his political faith. In particular, he fought sectarianism, using straightforward language that alienated many local Protestants – 'I have always been a Protestant of the Protestants (but) equally I have always regarded the Catholics as our fellow Christians...'

As the 1960s dawned he was optimistic. O'Neill and Lemass had met and there was a real hope that the two communities would draw closer together. The IRA bombing campaign of the late 1950s had done comparatively little damage and failed to ignite a revival of the old hatreds until the person whom McElroy saw as the arch-enemy of Northern Ireland began to stalk the land. He condemned the message of Paisley as 'a prostitution of Protestantism'. For him Paisleyism was no joke. 'It is a gospel of hate... which can only lead to bitterness and violence... This is the one thing that Paisleyism and Sinn Fein have in common but Paisleyism has succeeded where the IRA has failed.' And the subsequent reincarnation of the IRA as the Provisionals he always saw as the work of Paisley.

McElroy joined a small band attempting to revive the Ulster Liberal Association and soon became its leader, being described in a report by a visitor from Liberal Party Headquarters as 'an interesting character, not in the least one's idea of a Presbyterian divine... He has an engaging, jovial uninhibited personality, Rabelaisian in speech and manner...' and so people found him at many a subsequent Liberal Assembly where he rejoiced to mix with young and old, making it his only holiday and recharging his Liberal batteries.

With very meagre resources he set



about organising a party from among any liberal-minded people who expressed an interest, drawing them in by the warmth of his own personality. Soon the party was fighting elections, making it clear that its membership was both Protestant and Catholic. Eventually success came through the PR system that had been retained for electing the Queen's University representatives at Stormont and Sheelagh Murnaghan, McElroy's staunch Catholic lieutenant, was able to make a Liberal presence felt in parliament.

McElroy himself unsuccessfully fought many elections, sometimes getting as many as a third of the votes but always attracting the bitter attacks of the sectarians. In Fermanagh, during the 1950s things had been getting better. Nationalists, Republicans and even leading Unionists such as Lady Brookeborough, the wife of the Prime Minister, had joined together to found a convivial debating society and at the British General Election of 1964, when Evelyn Waugh's son-in-law, Giles FitzHerbert, stood as a Liberal, he faced formidable but not unreasonable opposition. But when Albert McElroy appeared there two years later in a Stormont General Election the violence became considerable. The great enemy of Paisley had to be defended by fifty policemen as a mob of over a hundred stormed the platform in Enniskillen Town Hall.

But nothing daunted he unsuccessfully attempted to establish a branch of the party in the Republic and personally fought another election in Fermanagh. Anti-sectarianism was now

commonly seen as a form of extremism. Yet he unashamedly conducted a service over the grave of Henry Joy McCracken and traditional unionists did not invite him to the Remembrance Day ceremonies in Newtownards even though he was the only ex-serviceman among the ministers of the town.

As the Troubles grew worse, McElroy's task became immensely harder and it began to tell on his health. Yet there can be no doubt that some of the constitutional proposals that he and his Liberal colleagues submitted were to influence the Heath government's plans for what eventually became the ill-fated Sunningdale Agreement.

The failure of the first power-sharing assembly had a very negative effect. Gradually the Ulster Liberal Association began to disintegrate. Some members, as Denis Loretto describes elsewhere in this issue,

became founding members of the SDLP. Others formed the nucleus of the Alliance Party. Yet Albert, like Sheelagh Murnaghan, never thought of joining them and there is no doubt that before his death at the early age of sixty in 1975, he was saddened by the London party's embracing of Alliance as the province's true Liberals. He saw the weakness of Alliance in what he said was its glib assumption that the majority of Northern Ireland people were moderates, and argued with great foresight that only 15 per cent of Ulster people would ever vote for a party that deliberately set out to be 'moderates'. For him Alliance members were not Liberals but 'decent Tories' who would be more use in the Unionist Party. At the same time, he said, 'civilised Tories (were) to be preferred to Tory Rednecks' among whom, no doubt, he included all those who supported Paisley. Certainly McElroy,

though always full of Christian charity, was never a moderate. He was always willing to tackle the ultra-Protestants who had given the IRA their chance and were determined to oppose all civilised measures of reform.

But he remained to the end a colourful figure, the same old Albert who had sipped a small mouthful of champagne at Sheelagh Murnaghan's victory party but had then insisted on buying fish and chips all round as his own contribution to the celebrations. No wonder figures as wide-ranging as Cardinal Conway and the maverick Unionist MP Jim Kilfedder were to send tributes to the funeral of this humane and liberal man

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## Gladstone and Ireland: The Legacy (continued from page 15)

ties of Ireland's Catholics, it addressed the far greater need to make the Union a reality, to show the peoples of the nation that they could successfully seek remedies from Parliament, and that the modern British state was able to incorporate differing religions, ethnicities and personal aspirations. It was fundamentally the same message Gladstone introduced more generally into Liberalism. His opponents were less confident that the nation could or even ought to make the leap to inclusiveness.

The Land Act [1870] likewise was something bigger in design than simply giving Irish tenants improved legal status. It did not have the practical outcome anticipated, especially by Irish tenant interest, but the measure, as Gladstone intended, increased the sense that all members of the community held rights and privileges, and so that ownership of wealth also carried responsibility.

Again in 1881 Gladstone approached the Irish land question not from a socially radical point of view, but saw legislation as the means to restore the interconnection between members of the community, a link that appeared to him to have been damaged. By releasing

Fenian prisoners Gladstone displayed mercy but more significantly, he sought to establish the principle that the state was sufficiently strong to be able to weather the torrent of discontent manifested in the Fenian movement, and come out the other end of the tunnel stronger than before. A strong commitment was also a just one.

Finally, Gladstone tried to resolve the thorny question of higher education for the rising Catholic middle classes. As always he had to work within political parameters but again he upheld a principle that in a modern society access to education should be extended more fully to groups previously on the margins.

His later governments amplified and extended the principles of the first years but they always owed a debt to this initial phase of Gladstone's Irish interest. But above all, it is the legacy of Gladstone's spirit that has continued to animate centre-left thinking in Britain on Irish affairs.

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- 1 I owe this reference to Dr Clare Hutton, Institute of English Studies, University of London, who has edited Fahy's memoir.
- 2 Quoted in E. D. Steele, 'Gladstone and Ireland', *Irish Historical Studies*, XVII, March, 1970, p. 58.
- 3 H.C.G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809–1874*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986, p. 192.
- 4 Quoted in John Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone*. London, Macmillan, 1903, Vol. III, p. 292.
- 5 Lewis Harcourt's Journal, 8 March 1886, Harcourt Papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS 377.
- 6 Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule 1867–1921*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1998, pp. 294–304.
- 7 Quoted in A.B. Cooke and A.P.W. Malcolmson (compl.), *The Ashbourne Papers, 1869–1918*. Belfast, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, 1974, p. 174.
- 8 Quoted in H.C.G. Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 266.
- 9 Quoted in Morley, *Life of Gladstone*, III, p. 437.
- 10 *Parliamentary Debates*, Fourth Series, 7, 1892, cc. 210–14.
- 11 Henry W. Lucy, *A Diary of the Home Rule Parliament 1892–1895*. London, Cassell, 1896, p. 55.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- 13 Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine*, p. 172.
- 14 D. George Boyce, *The Irish Question and British Politics 1869–1986*. London and Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1989, p. 62.
- 15 F.S.L. Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland 1890–1939*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979, p. 135.