

Can Ireland Have Peace?

Caroline Kennedy-Pipe

Volume 20, numéro 1, spring 2000

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs20_01re02

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Kennedy-Pipe, C. (2000). Can Ireland Have Peace? *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 20(1), 176–181.

Can Ireland Have Peace?

Crotty, William J., and David E. Schmitt. *Ireland and the Politics of Change*. London: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998.

Bew, Paul, Henry Patterson and Paul Teague. *Between War and Peace The Political Future of Northern Ireland*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1997.

In 1996, the Oxford historian, Roy Foster, described Ireland as "defined by an absence of peace."¹ The quest for a durable settlement in Northern Ireland has eluded politicians throughout the British Isles since the outbreak of "the Troubles" in 1968. Scholars too have been fascinated by the potent brew of ethnicity, violence and paramilitary activity, which has disfigured inter-communal relations in the region, soured the connection between Belfast and Dublin and inspired deep resentment within Anglo-Irish relations. Indeed, John Whyte once suggested that in proportion to its size, Northern Ireland has been the most heavily researched area on earth.²

The peace process of the 1990s has engendered a further proliferation of books and articles. Much of the current debate is stimulated by two questions: first, who or what has been responsible for the delicate peace which now characterizes Northern Irish politics; and second, a question that addresses an issue which dominates the political as well as the scholarly arena - can the fragile peace be made permanent?

William Crotty and David E. Schmitt's edited collection provides something of an answer to the first of these questions by examining change within the island of Ireland. The focus of the first part of this volume is on the Irish Republic and the "quiet" revolution which has irrevocably transformed its political, religious and social structures allowing for a rethinking of its historic and constitutional claim to the North.

This is, in itself, an intriguing story: the Ireland of saints and scholars, of priests and patriarchy, has emerged from the margins of Western Europe to become, at least economically a "Celtic tiger." (p.6) Indeed, the historic stranglehold of institutions dominated by the Catholic church appears to have been broken by the twin engines of economic prosperity and a willing engagement with a wider world, most notably by membership of the European Community. As Tom Garvin points out in his stimulating chapter, "Patriots and Republicans: An Irish evolution," Ireland is now four times as rich per head as it was at the time of independence. (p.154) This former peasant country, in which a large number of people lived at subsistence level, is now relatively rich.

Part at least of this narrative is the erosion of the influence of the Catholic church and the old political order which, in some ways, according to Garvin, had repressed much social and cultural energy after independence. (p.155) It was only in the 1960s, as the northern part of the island strove for civil rights, that a new generation in the South, motivated by a combination of demographic and social change, engendered the creation of a more liberal and progressive political culture.

As Tony Fahey argues in his chapter on demographic change, Ireland has in some ways broken away from its past; (p.64) and old certainties such as the prohibition of divorce and disapproval of sex before marriage have disappeared. Indeed, one indicator of change in the Republic is the increasing role of women in the public sphere. Yvonne Galligan, in a detailed and well argued chapter on women, points to the partial emergence for women away from a concentration solely upon the family and into a modern and well educated labor market. There is, as Galligan demonstrates, a long way to go before "traditional" attitudes toward women working outside the home are extinguished in either the South or the North. Indeed, a distinction between private and public roles for women still persists in all parts of the island. Women have, despite some high profile appointments in the South, failed to achieve anything like equal representation in political life. (p.120)

Yet changes in the Catholic nature of the Republic have had numerous consequences, many of which have not until now been fully appreciated. In a stimulating and perceptive chapter, John Coakley examines the manner in which changes in Catholicism have impacted upon the fate of the "forgotten" (p.87) minority in the South - the Protestants left south of the border after partition. In a provocative critique, Coakley argues that although the Protestant minority has shifted from a British to Irish ethnic allegiance, this has occurred precisely because of what we might term the secularization of Catholic beliefs. As the social and political significance of Catholicism declines so too do the barriers that helped sustain a separate Protestant identity and community in the Republic. This has, according to Coakley, a number of consequences. Of particular relevance to the situation in the North appears to be a weakening of the links between Catholics in the North and South of the island. While at the beginning of the twentieth century, Catholics throughout Ireland might have constituted a single community, there is little to suggest that this pattern has endured. (p.104) This is one factor which has already allowed for a softening of the official Southern Irish line on the historic claims to sovereignty in the North.

All of these changes, arguably, are rooted in an increasing (after all since independence Southern Ireland has always been a parliamentary democracy) democratization of the Southern Irish state. As both Crotty, in the introduction to this work, and Schmitt, in the conclusion, maintain, the patterns of broader representation in Southern political life, the ending of the hierarchical patterns of decision-making and the modernization of a traditional way of doing politics meant that many leaders and intellectuals in the Republic had rejected inward-looking values and embraced economic and political change brought about not only by the demands of the Irish people themselves but also by the world economy.

This is not to say that all is entirely rosy in the Southern Irish house. Significant problems have accompanied the program of modernization. Tony Fahey points to higher rates of marital breakdown, (p. 51) and the "Celtic tiger," despite its astounding economic success, does as outlined in the chapter by Niamh Hardiman, which examines the issue of inequality in the Republic, suffer unemployment, inflation and unequal levels of poverty produced by economic change as well as uneven access to education. (p. 142) The continuing struggle over the legalization of abortion is a Leif motif of the tensions

between the forces of "modernization" and the more traditional ways of life. The complex and conflicting patterns of shifting values within the Republic is a theme addressed in the chapter jointly authored by both Niamh Hardiman and Christopher Whelen. It is not yet exactly clear, for example, at what level participation in the Catholic Church might stabilize nor indeed if the practise of Catholic rites will become increasingly a private not a public act. (p. 84)

The overall shift to more liberal and secular leanings in the South has been accompanied by a moderation of the more virulent forms of nationalism, not least on the issue of unification with the North, and has allowed Southern Irish elites to adopt a more pragmatic and, some might argue, more constructive line in relation to the problems of the North. Secularization and modernization should make increased Southern Irish involvement in the North more acceptable to the Unionist majority in the province. Yet as Jennifer Todd and Joseph Ruane point out in their thoughtful essay centred around the peace process, despite multiple and complex changes within both Nationalism and Unionism, for many Unionists, remaining within the United Kingdom is the very essence of their identity. Polarization on the constitutional position continues to dog the Northern Irish political discourse.

But much has changed in Northern Ireland; not least, despite objections from some quarters of Unionism, an increasing inclusion of the Republic in the politics of the province. In his chapter, Adrian Guelke, as well as providing a useful perspective on the internationalization of the Northern Irish peace process after the end of the Cold War, discusses the ambiguous attitudes of the Southern leadership toward Northern Ireland. While seeking greater political engagement with the British over the North there was also, according to Guelke, a tendency to see the commitment to Northern Ireland as a "burden." (p. 197)

It is this issue of how far north-south institutions and cooperation should evolve that remains one of the most contentious issues of the current peace process. How far can and will Dublin be engaged in the politics of the North? From the analysis presented in this volume the question remains whether, in fact, the transformation of the South has made it increasingly wary of involvement in the North. Burgeoning economic prosperity and a finely tuned sense of self-interest might go a long way to explaining the relinquishing of Southern Irish constitutional claims to the North. This question of Southern Irish engagement is crucial, not least because of the position of the Nationalist minority living in the North and the enduring desire by Unionists to focus not on the politics of Ireland but on the authority and ideas of the United Kingdom.

This, in turn, highlights another part of the equation; raised by Adrian Guelke but not wholly addressed by the Crotty/Schmitt collection, and that is the role of the British in Ireland. If Southern Ireland has divested itself of its traditional past, and is willing to rethink the relationship with the North, part surely of that process must be the story of the reformulation of the relationship with Westminster. Perhaps the British are of decreasing importance to an Ireland engaged with global trade and the politics of the European Union; yet, as Guelke has indicated, for a full understanding of the complexities of the

North, the legacies of the Anglo-Irish past or at least the more recent bits should be addressed.

This is where the book by Paul Bew, Henry Patterson and Paul Teague is a perfect complement to the analysis presented by Crotty and Schmitt. The book is a self confessed attempt to outline the future shape of a political settlement in Northern Ireland; the methodology is both historical and economic. It is the historical story that initially beguiles. An account of Anglo-Irish relations is provided that argues that convergence not contradiction provided the basis for attitudes toward Northern Ireland both during the 1960s before the onset of the Troubles and since the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Bew, et al, argue that, ironically, the crisis of the late 1960s came at a time when Anglo-Irish relations had "never been better" and the British government sought to persuade the Unionist regime to respond positively to Southern overtures for north-south cooperation. As the authors point out, this is not to argue, as radical Unionists might, that the British were preparing to extract themselves from the province, but to point to attempts by the British to improve relations with Dublin in a bid to stabilize relations over the North. In this version of history, the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement was an attempt through the involvement of Dublin to minimize the costs to the British of its engagement in Ireland. (p. 35)

While there will be many who will pick over the historical bones of this version of events, no one could question the linkage established by the authors between political conflict and economic context. Much of the book is concerned with analyzing trading relations between the United Kingdom and the Republic, the problems of the regional economy, including the issue of labor market discrimination, and the development of future economic cooperation between North and South. On this latter issue, the authors warn against seeing these future economic links as the harbingers of what they term a "new island economy." (p. 198) Yet it is to north-south cooperation that the authors turn in a bid to reconcile the conflicting ambitions of the two communities in the North and to establish a longer term peace. The authors also make the case for joint measures to improve social and economic conditions in areas along the Irish border.

They maintain that while Nationalists must recognize that unification, even over the longer term is not an option, the Unionists must expect a wearing away of their traditional dominance within the province. Compromise is the order of the day. Despite the persuasive analysis, this begs the question of how to move the two sides in the North to give up their beliefs and ambitions to achieve compromise. What should/can be done? Here the authors argue that north-south collaboration is crucial in providing some form of expression for Irish nationalists in the North just so long as it does not threaten the position of the province inside the United Kingdom. This is the squaring of the circle between Nationalists and Unionists. (p. 199)

The advocacy of improved north-south links in the form presented here is important and it is timely. Because this book appears to have gone to press before or around the time of the election of the Labour government in 1997 the authors did not get the chance in this volume to provide an extended analysis of what difference Tony Blair's New Labour

might have on the politics of Ireland. In this respect the book might be regarded as superseded by the new emphasis on regionalism, local governance and devolution within the United Kingdom which characterize the Blair agenda.

Precisely because of these shifts, the views put forward by Bew and his colleagues have a greater resonance than at the beginning of 1997. If Ireland is to have peace it will be achieved through movement in three dimensions of Irish politics. First, by a British government committed to devolution within Northern Ireland. Second, by a Southern Irish government wedded to a renunciation of constitutional claims to the North; and third, acceptance by the two traditions within the province of both growing links with the South but also a recognition that Northern Ireland lies within the United Kingdom. Compromise between the two traditions in the North is the prerequisite for lasting peace in Ireland. As both these books in their different ways make clear we have seen shifts in the first two dimensions, although we might disagree as to why the positions of the British and Southern Irish have altered. It is the intractability of the third element that will prove the most prone to bringing about a renewed absence of peace.

Caroline Kennedy-Pipe

Durham University

Endnotes

1. Roy Foster, "Defined by the absence of peace," A review of Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffrey, *A Military History of Ireland*, *The Times*, 22 February 1996.
2. John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Paperbacks, 1990), p.viii.