

Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. His was a complicated and extraordinary character, highly talented and eccentric. He also emerges from this study as a likeable person. Eunan O'Hallpin therefore does him a great justice in this portrayal. He succeeds both in bringing together a mass of new information and shedding light on the person behind the title.

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Padraig O'Malley *Biting at the grave: the Irish hunger strikes and the politics of despair* Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1990; 320 pp; GBP9.95 pb
Padraig O'Malley *Northern Ireland: questions of nuance* Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1990; xv, 123 pp; GBP5.95

One of Thomas Hobbes's less well known insights into human nature is found in his *Elements of law*, to wit: "All signs which we shew to one another of hatred and contempt, provoke in the highest degree to quarrel and battle (inasmuch as life itself, with the conditions of enduring scorn, is not esteemed worth the enjoying...)" (Pl. I, ch. 16: 11). I read these words a few days after reading Padraig O'Malley's *Biting at the grave*. Hobbes's arguments helped me understand my dissatisfaction with this justly praised study of the Maze hunger strikes. O'Malley accounts for the hunger strikers' behaviour mainly through references to the motifs, traditions and dispositions in Irish Gaelic, Irish Catholic and Irish nationalist cultures. He regards these cultures as less than modern and less than praiseworthy. Indeed he suggests in what I take to be his core explanation that the prisoners did what they were supposed to do. *Their actions, ultimately, were not the actions of autonomous individuals*, but rather a reflexive embrace of the way in which political prisoners throughout Irish history were presumed to have behaved. Their self-images, reinforced by the chronicles of oppression on which they had been raised and the experiences of their young lives, impaired their ability to act independently and diminished their capacity to act on their own behalf. *In the end they were the victims of our myths (Biting at the grave, p. 117, emphasis added).*

The homily for the Irish public is clear: abandon those features of your culture which cause this mayhem and fuel the politics of antagonism in Northern Ireland. This tacit homily also presumably explains why the book has been warmly reviewed by commentators in British newspapers and magazines — whose reviewers are only too delighted to be informed that Irish cultures are at fault for deaths in Ireland.

I cannot speak Gaelic, am not a Catholic, and am regularly told that I am a "revisionist" on the subject of Irish nationalism. Therefore it is not because I want to defend these Irish cultures that I dislike O'Malley's explanation of the hunger strikes. It is the political scientist in me which rebels against his central argument. I believe that a neo-Hobbesian viewpoint on the hunger strikers provides a different and su-

perior explanation to that offered by O'Malley. Moreover, the information O'Malley provides is compatible with this alternative explanation.

In a neo-Hobbesian perspective the prisoners did act autonomously, albeit within a collective organization, inside and outside the prison. They had preferences and strategies. They hammered out a policy, and a contract with one another and their organization, whether that was the IRA or INLA. They waged a battle of endurance in which they were prepared to lose their own lives to strike back at their enemies. Having waged a "dirty protest" for four years they opted for the hunger strike because so many prisoners were losing heart at the lack of success of the dirty protest. Many nationalist prisoners were choosing "exit" rather than "loyalty". Thus the hunger strikes served a double purpose: solidarity amongst the prisoners and a political struggle outside the prison gates. A minority of the prisoners decided and publicly sought to win "political status" for all, or to die. They were prepared to examine compromises provided they did not appear to entail major climb-downs, i.e. provided the pay-offs from compromise were to their satisfaction. In semi-technical terms they were playing the game of "chicken" with the British state over the issue of their five demands.

The prisoners were not, *pace* O'Malley, victims of cultural myths, but self-conscious actors. They knew what they were doing. In some cases they seem to have literally weighed the benefits of political martyrdom (posthumous reputation plus damage to the enemy) against the costs of serving out a life-sentence. Each of the 10 who died seems to have miscalculated the prospects for compromise, and definitively miscalculated the willingness of the British authorities to alter the pay-offs in the game they had established. However, that is not the same thing as being a victim of your culture, unless it can be shown exactly why the culture promotes precisely those miscalculations which result in your death. I do not believe that O'Malley's book provides such evidence.

O'Malley's explanation requires us to believe that those who have a Gaelic, Catholic and nationalist culture are more likely to starve themselves to death in political protests. There are multiple difficulties with this viewpoint, but I shall limit myself to five. First, starving oneself and killing oneself as a political protest are not unique to Irish cultures. Examples of similar phenomena can be found elsewhere in the world. Second, one of the relevant cultures, the Catholic religion, expressly prohibits suicide. The fact that certain Irish Catholic priests tried to argue that the hunger strikers were not threatening suicide is irrelevant. Insofar as they appeared to condone the actions of the hunger-strikers their reasons were not Catholic ones. (The fact that certain English Catholic priests thought the hunger strikers were suicidal may have been motivated by their English national status but the theological arguments were on their side.) Third, since the hunger strikers were nationalists it means that invoking nationalist culture as an explanation for their behaviour is close

to trivial – if they had not been nationalists they would not have been nationalist paramilitaries, and if they had not been nationalist paramilitaries they would have been much less likely to have been incarcerated. However, the explanation is also problematic. Why don't all nationalists engage in similar behaviour? Why are some more predisposed to imbibe the culture, become paramilitaries, and hunger-strikers? The evidence of O'Malley's own book suggests that perceived and actual oppression at the hands of sectarian Protestants or state authorities are the critical variables in accounting for such dispositions and preferences.

Fourth, consider the following thought-experiment. Imagine that just before Bobby Sands died the British authorities decided to make the concessions which they actually accepted after the hunger strikes were called off. I do not believe that this position is absurd. How would Sands and his colleagues have reacted to such a British offer? They could have accepted such a compromise. They could have rejected it and pressed for the full five demands. They could also have accepted the concessions, and then subsequently launched another hunger-strike in an act of "brinkmanship" designed to win full political status. The key question in this counterfactual story is this one: how would knowledge that the prisoners came from Gaelic, Catholic and nationalist cultures enable us to predict successfully how Sands and his colleagues would have reacted? My answer is that such knowledge would not help us much at all.

Finally, and most importantly, any rounded explanation of the hunger strikers' behaviour must account for the actions of the British authorities in response to the hunger strikes (and the dirty protest which preceded them). Would O'Malley suggest that the reactions of the British authorities are explicable through knowledge of English, Anglican/Methodist and imperial cultures? He nowhere does so, although he provides much evidence of the existence of such cultural motifs and dispositions in the hearts and minds of British policy-makers. However, rather than suggesting that the British authorities were trapped in the "reflexive embrace" of their cultural myths, is it not more reasonable to believe that their reactions, at least in this instance, were determined by Mrs Thatcher? It is possible to interpret Mrs Thatcher's stance, were determined by Mrs Thatcher? It is possible to interpret Mrs Thatcher's behaviour as an outcome of English cultural myths, and many intellectuals made a living in the 1980s doing precisely that, but is it not more lucid and parsimonious to invoke as our explanation of her behaviour that we know she tended to play the game of "chicken" in a particular way in any confrontations with adversaries? Note that I am not saying that the hunger strikers were "victims" of Mrs Thatcher. It is just as reasonable to argue that they miscalculated Mrs Thatcher's behaviour, and that she miscalculated what their's would be – a very typical outcome in "real-life" chicken games with particular pay-offs. Thatcher certainly miscalculated the consequences of her obstinacy: Sinn Féin were able to "widen the battlefield", and become an electoral force, and the British and Irish governments were pushed towards another

initiative, resulting in the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The hunger strikers also miscalculated: they died.

For O'Malley the hunger strikes are a psychological/cultural saga: the politics of despair pitted against the indomitable spirit of Mrs Thatcher. While not wishing to deny that entirely, it is, I submit, much better, and more consonant with O'Malley's evidence, to see the hunger strikers and the authorities as engaged in a war of manoeuvre in a long term war of position. The conflict was more rational and political and less shrouded by psychology and culture than he suggests. Indeed O'Malley allows us to see that the hunger strikers were self-consciously using the cultures they had very recently mastered within prison walls to wage a political struggle, to humiliate and shame their enemies, and to win public support amongst Irish nationalists in both parts of Ireland. Far from being victims of Ireland's cultural myths they were exploiting them as part of a tactical battle in what their colleagues call the "long war". Indeed, as O'Malley shows, most of them arrived in prison with very little culture of any kind – unless experiences of humiliation, sectarianism and oppression are deemed cultural. He shows that they learned Gaelic, and in some cases their Catholicism, in prison. Incidentally, O'Malley confirms that the learning of Gaelic served an instrumental function (facilitating communication which cannot be understood by Protestant guards) as well as cultural and recreational functions – and it also sharpened the prisoners' ethnic differentiation from "the enemy". O'Malley also affirms that some of the hunger-strikers read a lot of political literature which was neither Gaelic, nor Catholic, nor nationalist. Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara and Camilo Torres are not part of "our myths" – with due apologies to non-Irish readers. Having disagreed with what I take to be O'Malley's central explanatory endeavour I let me acknowledge the virtues in *Biting at the grave* recognized by other reviewers. Aside from some minor errors – the only one worth mentioning is that Frank Maguire is confused with Frank McMannus – *Biting at the grave* is extremely well written and was obviously painstakingly researched. It grips the reader, and together with David Beresford's *Ten men dead* (1987) it will be definitive reading for this episode in the history of Northern Ireland.

Few political scientists can write as well as good journalists. O'Malley is one of the exceptions, and in *Questions of nuance* he shows his ability to write up-to-the minute contemporary history with flair, insight and logic. *Questions of nuance* updates his well known *The unruly wars* (1983). The same technique, in-depth elite interviewing, is used to bring out the complex antagonisms, evasions and suspicions amongst Northern Ireland's key political actors as well as those of senior British and Irish policy-makers. The book should be read by all political scientists and students of Irish politics as background material when watching the Brooke talks – if they get under way. *Questions of nuance* will not make readers optimistic, but that is be-

cause the central questions at stake in the conflict are not ones of "nuance" but fundamental differences in aspirations, values and interests.

Readers of *Irish Political Studies* should be warned that O'Malley does not employ analytical political science in *Questions of nuance or Biting at the grave*. However, perhaps that is why Padraig O'Malley's books are read, and why he is therefore not a victim of the culture of political science.

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John Whyte *Interpreting Northern Ireland* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990; 308 pp; GBP35.00

John Whyte's posthumously-published book, a magisterial and thorough appraisal of the vast literature on Northern Ireland, which was recently awarded the prestigious Christopher Ewart-Biggs Memorial Prize, was 10 years in the making, and its appearance marks the fruit of over 20 years' study of the area. The style of the book mirrors that of the man. Even if one does not agree absolutely with every judgement it contains, one cannot doubt that each has been reached only after careful reflection, scrupulous attention to detail and with an academic integrity that reflects a more positive and active commitment to fairness than is conveyed by the rather anodyne word "objectivity".

The book falls into two parts. Part I summarises the research conducted in religious, economic, political and psychological aspects of the problem. The role of religion in keeping the two communities apart is examined, and the two most significant factors seem to be endogamy and separate education. However, as Whyte notes, since other societies exist in which groups that are segregated from each other co-exist without violence, religiously-based segregation in Northern Ireland can at most exacerbate conflict whose roots need to be sought elsewhere. In discussing economic aspects, Whyte reasonably observes that different and persisting perceptions among Northern Ireland people as to the extent of discrimination are more important politically than the final verdict of any researchers. While Catholics continue to believe that they have been discriminated against since 1920, and Protestants maintain (at least in public) that this is untrue, the issue will continue to affect the two communities' evaluations of the options for the North.

Whyte turns to the literature on psychological aspects in order to answer the question of why, within both communities, the strength of feeling goes beyond what the conflict of interests would seem to require. It is suggested that this manifests itself in an obsession with identity, especially on the Protestant side, where identity is less secure. Here, perhaps, the claim that the interests at stake do not justify such strong feelings needed more supporting argument; even if it is true, the people of