

# An outbreak of a cold peace

BY STEVE BRUCE

EXPLAINING NORTHERN IRELAND

BY JOHN MCGARRY AND BRENDAN O'LEARY

Blackwell, 538pp, £45.00 and £12.99  
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This is three books in one. The first dissects a large number of explanations of the Northern Ireland conflict. The second, intertwined with the first, judges the moral rectitude of the political choices embodied in some of the accounts. The third presents the authors' explanation and their solution.

A comprehensive analysis of the vast literature on Northern Ireland was never going to be easy. Each item discussed has to be taken out of its original context and given a new meaning by being set alongside others in combinations that the original authors may think misrepresent their intentions. To succeed such a review must persuade us that it is taking each item at its strongest, not at its weakest. John Whyte's impressive *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (1990) carries it off; this book does not.

The literature review is sensibly organised, the discussions detailed, and some of the commentary insightful. The analysis of various nationalist views of Northern Ireland is especially strong. But the book is tainted by an unpleasant aside tone. Naturally John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary believe that everyone who has previously written about Northern Ireland is wrong but they betray a unnecessarily nasty streak when they augment their primary criticisms with cheap digs at the character or supposed sexual politics of those whose social science does not persuade them.

They insert the sneering *sic* and, for the truly awful — *sic!* — into quotations. To give two examples, they find a 19th-century author's neglect of women as political actors "sufficiently surprising and offensive to warrant a *sic* after that writer's reference to "Ulstermen". In trying to explain why many Protestants who are not committed evangelicals voted for Ian Paisley, I wrote, "Many of the working-class urban Protestant men who do not attend church ... retain enough of a commitment to the Protestant faith to encourage their wives and children to attend church". McGarry and O'Leary report this as "retain sufficient commitment to persuade their wives (*sic*) and children to attend church", which simultaneously exaggerates my original claim, shifts the sexism from the people I was writing about to me, and implies I am a fool.

Unlike Whyte, McGarry and O'Leary are patently partial in their judgements. They are rightly sceptical about the significance, reliability and validity of statistical data

deployed by others. But they do not draw the reader's attention to similar weaknesses in material which suits their case. For example, they resist important arguments about social identity and political preferences on comparisons of results from a number of attitude survey data sets, each of which has its own weakness.

They report that members of the Ulster Defence Regiment were one and a half times more likely to be convicted of terrorism than the public they were supposed to protect. That figure is arrived at by comparing the UDR (mostly young men) with the entire civilian population aged 16 to 65. Most terrorist crime is committed by young men. The average UDR man is far more likely to be bent than the average elderly woman but is less than half as likely as the average young man to be convicted of terrorism. For McGarry and O'Leary to report only the first conclusion without raising even the possibility of the second does not encourage confidence in the quality of their judgment.

Also worrying is their readiness to attach blunt and possibly misleading labels to the authors they discuss. One is a "conservative unionist intellectual" (is that two adjectives and a noun or an adjectival phrase and a noun?). Others are "left-wing nationalist sympathisers". Yet others belong to a "notorious school of American economists".

When it comes, the authors' own explanation of the conflict is hardly novel. Indeed the ordinariness of the claim that "the conflict in Northern Ireland is ethnically national, a systematic quarrel between the political organizations of two communities who want their state to be ruled by their nation, or who want what they perceive as 'their' state to protect their 'nation'" may explain why so much of the critical discussion seems slightly to distort the views being analysed. Without first bending the originals, the McGarry and O'Leary alternative would not seem at all distinctive.

What of their solution? Essentially they offer an academic elaboration of the Downing Street declaration and

the Anglo-Irish framework document. The solution lies in recognising the existence and claims of both national groups. A novel constitutional status would be created which would make Northern Ireland both British and Irish. National symbols would be accorded parity of display or non-display. Cross-border institutions would be created for matters of mutual interest. A power-sharing government for Northern Ireland would be based on proportionally and the Irish and British governments would each have the right to veto legislation unacceptable to either side. The RUC would be replaced by a Northern Ireland police service, the court system would be de-Royalist.

Like constitutional nationalists, the authors have moderated their earlier view that the entire civilian population of Northern Ireland but they hope that changes in demography, changes in the economy, the increasing role of the European Union, and "persuasion" in place of imposition will do the trick.

It may well do but as McGarry and O'Leary note at the very end, most ethnic conflicts rise, subside and recur. The move from terrorism to what they nicely term "cold peace" requires all those involved to moderate their desires. In discussing the social, political and economic changes most likely to foster that transition, they make it clear that Ulster Protestants will have to do more moderating than Irish nationalists.

It is a mark of the bad-tempered nature of this book that even at the close the authors cannot resist being rude. They are vituperative about those who argue either that there is no solution or that a solution will involve losers and winners. Yet, though their very last paragraph speaks of grounds for hope, in the sentence before they approvingly quote John M. Richardson and Jianxin Wang offering just the conclusions they have so robustly denounced: "genocide, military defeat, exile or enforced separation of contending parties are more likely to mark the end of violent ethnic conflicts than negotiated peace accords".

For a fair-minded review of the conflict read John Whyte's *Interpreting Northern Ireland*. Anyone who has written about Northern Ireland and wants to be noticed at should read McGarry and O'Leary.

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Sight set on peace: A British soldier on patrol in Northern Ireland

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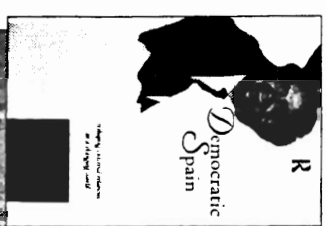
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