

Brendan O'Leary on a magisterial survey of a continuing conflict

Disentangling the Northern knot

book is the posthumous work of the foremost Irish social scientist of his generation and the former professor of social science at QUB and some ten years in the making. *Interpreting Northern Ireland* is a masterly survey of the major contributions to the Northern Ireland conflict. Together with his studies *Catholics in Western Democracies*, and *Church and State in Modern Ireland*, this book guarantees that John Whyte will continue to be read long after he has passed on.

Whyte was an exceptionally able and objective scholar, and with young and old, and he never to caricature an argument with which he disagreed. He never indulged in the temptation to prove that men and women of straw have no weight. None the less, when he tried to do so, he could provide a convincing destruction of an argument but would deliver it without flourish or pretension. He wrote in an unadorned and simple style. These admirable traits are brought through in *Interpreting Northern Ireland*, a subject to which his calm academic style is perfectly adapted. In future, the academic or journalist should be able to read Northern Ireland without having to digested this text.

The book presumes that the reader has a basic familiarity with the historical evolution of the conflict in Northern Ireland. It is divided into three parts. The first

reviews the research carried out by academics on the nature of the divisions between the communities in Northern Ireland. It examines studies of religious, economic and political divisions as well as the literature produced by psychologists.

In his analysis of economic divisions between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland he comes down firmly in favour of the arguments advanced by David Smith and articulated by the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights in 1987. Smith's studies showed that the scale of the inequalities suffered by Catholics could only reasonably be accounted for by direct and indirect discrimination. According to Whyte the counter-arguments, which seek to explain the scale of the inferior position of Catholics in the labour market on different employment chances based on residential location, lack of educational qualifications and large family-size, are not compelling. He does think that the black economy, Catholic unwillingness to join the security forces, and the "chill factor" are more important than Smith allowed, but these factors are directly connected to the history and structure of Northern Ireland's political system, and to my mind can be understood as by-products of indirect discrimination.

Whyte's review of the literature in the first part of the book in effect counteracts some of the

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arguments he had advanced earlier in an article entitled "How much discrimination was there under the Unionist regime, 1921-68?" The scale of Catholic economic disadvantage in Northern Ireland, before and after direct rule, was much underestimated in the earliest academic and government-sponsored research.

The second section of the book reviews traditional Nationalist, traditional Unionist, Marxist and internal-conflict explanations of the conflict. He focuses upon the explanations of the causes of conflict within these literatures, rather than upon their analyses of violence or of British public policy making before and after 1972. He carries out effective but fair-minded executions of the Nationalist, Unionist and Marxist literature and comes down firmly in favour of the merits of internal explanations of the Northern Ireland conflict.

Here I disagree with his conclusion. He is of course right that the traditional external explanations of the conflict — which blame it on British imperialism (if the author is Nationalist) or Irish intransigence (if the author is Unionist) — are lamentably

inadequate. However, it is not possible to understand the evolution and development of the conflict without an understanding of how British and Irish state- and nation-building processes have created and maintained conflict in Northern Ireland. These critical external variables in the conflict are occluded in John Whyte's otherwise superb exposition of the literature — which is not to imply that he was uncritical of either British or Irish governments.

Naturally, even with his restricted focus, Whyte had to be selective in what he reviewed, given the existence of some 7,000 extensive publications on Northern Ireland in the last twenty years, but he missed precious little of value, and indeed if he is to be criticised at all it is for occasionally lingering too long on material that scarcely justified his consideration.

The third part of the book both provides an evaluation of the various solutions canvassed for Northern Ireland and the impact and worth of academic research into this antagonistic region. On solutions, Whyte writes:

I consider myself to be near the centre of the spectrum of Northern Ireland. I would be happy with any solution that would bring peace. If some form of united Ireland is likeliest to do that, then I would favour it. If some structure within the United Kingdom is likeliest to do it,

then I would favour that. If some fresh structure, neither Irish nor simply British, were to give the best chance of promoting peace then I would prefer that instead.

He provides what he thought was necessary: a "vigorous, unemotional investigation" of some favoured panaceas. He is caustic and correct about traditional Nationalist and Unionist prescriptions, and reserves some of his sharpest criticism for the new British romantics, those who prescribe electoral integration as the solvent for sectarianism. In correspondence with me before his death he indicated that he thought the electoral integrationists simply wanted to wish the conflict away, and that they represented a regrettable reluctance on the part of liberal Protestants even to recognise the national sentiments of the Northern Ireland minority.

The only thing I found strange in Whyte's review of the possible solutions is that he should have thought of himself as near the centre of a spectrum of opinion. What is characteristic of both analysing and prescribing for Northern Ireland is that there is no stable central position because there is no uni-dimensional spectrum of opinion on the subject. Perhaps what he meant by his "centrist" affirmations was his willingness to split the differences on national identity, and to consider bi-national political institutions as a way of transcending

Northern Ireland's zero-sum conflict.

The final part of the book is addressed to the academic community. It considers whether or not research on Northern Ireland has proven worthwhile. Whyte was more sanguine in his final appraisal than he had been earlier in his life. In so far as academic research has provided greater objective information about the scale of inequalities in Northern Ireland, and has unravelled the multiple, complex and interacting variables that sustain conflict, my own answer would be an unhesitating "yes". And in so far as academic research led to this great book, Professor Whyte more than justified the role of the social scientist as a researcher, interpreter and critic of his own society. Whyte's book is a permanent resource, which will alert readers, in Ireland and in other countries, to insights about national conflicts which would otherwise pass us by.

This book is a fitting tribute to a great teacher, and is all the more unusual in that the author presents self-critical judgments on his own interpretations. Not many scholars have been so committed to scholarly ideals both in theory and practice. *Interpreting Northern Ireland* should be read by anyone with the remotest concern about Northern Ireland, and the slightest willingness to have their prejudices on the subject challenged by argument and evidence.

CONTRIBUTORS

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