

BOOKS IRELAND

Harnessing the Fire

Traitor-Patriots in the Great War: Casement and Masaryk with a Review of the Rise and Fall of Czechoslovakia by B. Clifford; The Casement Diary Dogmatists by B. Clifford

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Books Ireland, No. 272 (Dec., 2004), pp. 302-303

Published by: [Books Ireland](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20624095>

Accessed: 29/03/2013 19:56

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With more of this and less of the other, a much better work would have been written!

This is not a self-published book though one might think it so. Is the text double-spaced in an attempt to make more of so little? The stated purpose of the monograph is to present "a fresh and thought-provoking insight" into the nature of the pre-historic mound of the Brú na Bóinne at Newgrange. As the author proffers no credentials other than his residence in "the peaceful Irish countryside", one assumes he has none. This assumption is borne out by the work itself which has all the authority and quality of a poorly conceived and badly written school project. It is, in fact, a personal rant against the use of the term 'passage grave' for the Brugh. Much ado about nothing. At this point in time the term itself is merely taxonomic and Newgrange, along with its fellow mounds at Dowth and Knowth (which the author tellingly does not mention) are now generally accepted by experts to be ritual sites or centres. O'Callaghan is apparently unaware of this fact as he needlessly tilts with the windmills of nineteenth-century antiquarian opinion, no doubt because he has done little or no scholarly research. I won't go on about the irritating tone, anachronistic terms, absurd pronouncements, ridiculous reasoning, bad writing, and overall lack of knowledge. One might ask why this is in print. The cynical truth? Publishers know that anything they can pass off as 'Celtic' will sell. □

Harnessing the fire

W. J. McCormack

ONE ULSTER PROTESTANT poet of my acquaintance was used to declare, comically, that the paranoids were out to get him. Brendan Clifford is a simpler and even more alliterative case - he is dogged by dogmatists. Through BICO (the British and Irish Communist Organisation) or the Aubane Historical Society, as publisher of Athol Books or editor of *A Belfast Magazine*, as leader writer in the *Irish Political Review*, or back-row stalwart of the Roger Casement Foundation, Clifford is unquestionably the most voluble commentator on the Irish Left (the definition of 'left' to be left, of course, to him).

He is fond of invoking Karl Marx, but Clifford's Marxism is based on a Capital re-designed by M. C. Escher, the illusionist par excellence. Vicious circles are squared up to. The dialectic advances backwards, workers reach upwards for the Grundrisse, while the avant-garde musters at the rere. Truly important questions are never put on the back finger. Urging us all to support Sinn Féin (those well-known Marxist comrades) in their 'efforts to harness the fire to peaceful uses' (*Dogmatists* p. 34), Clifford has evolved a literary style perfectly to convey his political consciousness.

His grasp of history is no less sure. The Redemptorist Order (founded 1732) can be implicated in a publication 'written about 1600' (*Dogmatists* p. 11). The French, you will be glad to learn, started the tiff of 1870, doubtless by invading their own country Escher-style. These are mere facts; empathy is what really matters. So we note the final sentence of Clifford reviewing a Czech publication, "The

book is dated as 'Concluded June 1939'. Britain was then hatching another betrayal - of the Poles" (*Traitor-Patriots* p. 56).

Hard to trump that for a case of missing the bleeding obvious. But Clifford tries very hard. "Going over the events of 1939, one can hardly suppress the thought that Britain decided to aggravate Germany over the last national issue remaining from the Versailles arrangement, and make it an occasion for war, lest no further opportunity for war should present itself and the Munich Agreement should prove to be a settlement." (*Traitor-Patriots* p. 41).

There is, however, a rationale behind the glitched metaphors and cod-chronology. It consists in two propositions, one politico-moral, the other religious. The first starts from the axiom that Britain is always wrong, and always wronger than anyone else. The second manifests itself in Clifford's preoccupation with belief, his inability to resist digressions into the archives of the *Church of Ireland Gazette* or the niceties of Hussite doctrine. The first proposition is quickly taken as proving the superiority of German political aims in 1914 and 1939, while the second facilitates a 'two-nations' theory of Irish affairs. From the latter, Clifford makes a timely admission that his Campaign for Equal Citizenship failed totally. He still believes that, even before the American War of Independence, "Protestant Ulster had meaning for itself over the centuries as a vigorous contributor to the cause of civilising destruction around the world." Some hyper-academic types might label this essentialism, others would settle for tosh. The concept of nation eternally links religion and politics; forget your economics, Karl.

The Casement Diary Dogmatists squirming under this stringent analysis are Jeffrey Dudgeon and my bad self. At first I was flattered by the prospect of featuring as the subject, or half-subject, of an entire new pamphlet. Imagine my disappointment in discovering that *A Belfast Magazine* No. 22 is largely made up of material previously published elsewhere - in Clifford's *Irish Political Review* to be exact. Furthermore, these separate pieces incorporate large chunks of quotation without becoming anything like a critical selection. Philological nit-picking, interspersed with personal abuse (Dudgeon is accused of autism), contends with grandiose historical pronouncement.

Intriguing material lies secreted in these pages, most notably about BICO's history. I also liked an account of the launching of Dudgeon's edition of the Black Diaries, and some fragmentary autobiographical remarks. Clifford's is a strong mind vulnerable to what might seem impossible combinations of weakness - obsessiveness and lack of focus, restlessness and immovability. He is a self-publisher, but employs half a dozen imprints.

The Casement issue proved too strong a lure for so earnest a mind. Yet, in the Preface to *Dogmatists*, he declares that "this publication does not assert that the disputed Casement Diaries are forgeries or that they are authentic." A not unreasonable position, if a trifle cowardly in the circumstances. It is quite another matter, however, to accept W. J. Maloney's speculative theory of 1936 as having been reasonable in its day. And Clifford's quarrel with me about the extent to which Robert Lynd embraced James Connolly's socialism takes up matters surely less important than Maloney and Co.'s favouring blackmail (of Shane Leslie) and threats of murder (against J. W. Bigger), while also looking to use the propaganda machines of Fascist Italy and Hitlerite Germany.

Anxious to clear Sean Russell of any Nazi taint, Clifford sails perilously close to blaming Britain for the invasion of

Poland and the break-up of Czechoslovakia. And no one else. Reporting his part in the Dublin publication of 'biographical material on Karl Lueger, the reforming Mayor of Vienna' (*Dogmatists* p. 31), Clifford neglects to note the mayor's notorious anti-semitism, despite its satisfying so discriminating a pupil as Adolf Hitler.

The tragedy is that so helpful a project as the Campaign for Equal Citizenship was led by this Commissar from Sliabh Luacra (or Cuchulain of Plazatoro), now harnessing Gerry Adams' fire. Casement's diaries fuel the fire, hence Clifford's carefully agnostic opening remarks. These pamphlets, and their scores of predecessors, lack all sense of proportion, even the proportionality of extremism. □

Peacework

Tony Canavan

THIS BOOK is a curious read. Its opening section is a somewhat Boys' Own account of how the post-1918 UVF morphed into the Royal Ulster Constabulary and its closing one is a rose coloured view of the future for the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

The Fateful Split : Catholics and the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Chris Ryder. Methuen. 384 pp £17.99 hb 24 cm 0-413-77222-5.

The rest veers between detailed accounts of events, occasional passages critical of the RUC and unionism, and a chronicle of lost opportunities.

The book takes the position that the Catholic community could have been reconciled to the RUC and that many wished to join the force but were prevented on one side by intimidation within their own community and on the other by failures on the part of the Stormont establishment. He chronicles the wasted opportunities to reconcile the Catholic population to the RUC, beginning with the original one third quota of Catholic recruits up to more recent endeavours at reform. The book gets itself into something of a tangle in taking this approach as it presents ample evidence as to why Catholics could never be reconciled to the force. For example, the early quota system was soon abandoned and the places reserved for Catholics allotted to B specials, the Nixon affair clearly illustrated RUC involvement with Loyalist murder gangs from the very foundation of Northern Ireland, and successive Stormont ministers for home affairs made it clear that they would not have Catholics about the place. In other words the book fails to address the fundamental problem that Northern Ireland was established as a Protestant 'state' for the Protestant people.

In face of the evidence he himself presents to the contrary, Ryder attempts to portray the RUC as a professional force who were unwilling tools of Unionism. He often refers to the notoriously sectarian B Specials as if they were a separate force while in fact they were an integral part of the RUC. His account of events after 1968 is the view from the RUC landrover. There is an over reliance on official accounts and he paints a picture of this heavily armed constabulary as helpless victims caught between extremes while in fact they were protagonists in the conflict.

This book is, however, an insight into the liberal unionist mentality and its view of the RUC. Ryder is willing to admit that all was not perfect with the force (although little space is given to the shoot-to-kill policy or collusion with paramilitary unionists) but is keen to emphasise its positive aspects. He implies what I call the 'good apple' argument, that is that we should not throw out a barrel of bad apples because it contains some good ones. Hence his enthusiastic

support for the renamed police service. Yet he is blind to the underlying problems that kept Catholics out of the RUC. In the first place, if they were to be treated equally and welcomed then the *raison d'être* for Northern Ireland would disappear. Secondly, the RUC was never an ordinary police force but a paramilitary body whose primary function was the suppression of dissent. One has only to look at the dust jacket to see this. If this photograph were to be shown to the proverbial passenger on the Clapham omnibus he would never identify these heavily armed men as British bobbies.

Dean Godson presents David Trimble as a contradictory character and the same might be said about the book itself in that it is both a good and bad biography of Trimble. The good aspects first. Godson clearly charts how a maverick rose to become leader of mainstream unionism. From his

Himself Alone : David Trimble and the ordeal of unionism. Dean Godson. HarperCollins. 1002 pp + 32 of photos £35 hb 24 cm 0-00-257098-x.

earliest days, Trimble was always on the extreme of Ulster Unionism and was associated with a number of 'unconventional' groups such as the British and Irish Communist Organisation, Vanguard, the Ulster Clubs and even the UDA. Godson shows that far from being an anonymous backroom boy, Trimble was a recognised protagonist in the Ulster Workers Council 'strike' in 1974. Nevertheless his academic background and ability to articulate unionist arguments brought him to prominence and it was only a matter of time before he became an MP. He continued to pursue an at times maverick course but in the changed circumstances of the IRA ceasefire his stance struck a chord with ordinary unionists and Godson explains how Trimble's participation in the siege (sic) of Drumcree catapulted him into being a real contender for the leadership of the UUP after Molyneux's resignation.

Much of the book is devoted to the Peace Process and the Good Friday Agreement which Godson charts as one pyrrhic victory after another. Trimble and the UUP argued over the detail of such issues as IRA decommissioning or the workings of a proposed assembly but at the expense of the big picture. Godson cites RUC reform as an instance where Trimble was outmanoeuvred. On the big picture, the author is good in explaining how British and American politics influenced events and is much better than many English based commentators in understanding politics in the Republic – unlike most unionists, for example, he comprehends the affinity between the positions of Trimble and Proinsias de Rossa, leader of Democratic Left (as he was then). The book brings us more or less up to date with the eclipse of the UUP by the DUP in the recent elections and Trimble's position as leader of a party in decline.

Despite its good points the book has its faults. It is rather a dense read and, much like Trimble in the negotiations, it often concentrates on details at the expense of the big picture. We are given blow-by-blow accounts of various meetings or events which hindsight shows to have been unimportant. This makes it a tedious read unless one is new to the subject or obsessed with the minutiae of unionist politics. It overemphasises the importance of certain aspects of Trimble's career, such as the voluntary coalition with the SDLP proposed by Vanguard 1974 which was no more than a chimera, or the Ulster Society for the Promotion of Ulster-British Heritage and Culture (which Trimble founded). If the Ulster Society represents the apogee of intellectual unionism then God help them! In some aspects the book is formulaic in its repetition of unionist shibboleths which detract from the otherwise