

IRISH KULTURKAMPF

by
Arthur Aughey

Arthur Aughey is a Senior Lecturer in Politics
at the University of Ulster at Jordanstown.

He is the author of
'Under Siege : Ulster Unionism and the Anglo-Irish Agreement'(1989)

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FOREWORD

"The Young Unionist Committee on culture contends that for too long we have been content to neglect our culture while gaelic nationalism has made every effort and used every opportunity to propound Irish culture", so opened the Ulster Young Unionist Council discussion document entitled 'Cuchulain - The Lost Legend', published in 1986. The contention as it stood then, is just as valid today, if not more so.

In this booklet (first published as an article in *The Ulster Review*), Arthur Aughey asserts that it is not just our neglect of culture but the view of Irish culture as accepted by the wider world which is damaging. This view holds no place for cultural pluralism and Aughey brings this point to the fore when he examines the views of two commentators who support the popular view of Irish culture. Aughey succinctly points out the narrow-mindedness of their approach and then posits that what should be sought in culture is diversity and not exclusiveness. He goes on to indicate that the ideal of Unionism is the political identity which is comfortable within a multi-cultural society while Irish Nationalism is only content with promoting one culture, ie. that of gaelic/Irish.

It is clear that one of the most positive aspects of belonging to the United Kingdom is the cultural diversity that exists within it, as compared to notions of cultural and indeed religious supremacy present in Republic of Ireland society.

ARLENE KELLY

CHAIRMAN

Ulster Young Unionist Council

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Hermann Goering once said that whenever he heard the word culture he reached for his gun. A cultured man himself, Goering knew the rhetorical impact of this counterposition of the creative and the destructive, of the life-enhancing and the life-destroying. It has been one of the great achievements of contemporary nationalist Ireland to have contributed towards abolishing that distinction. On the one hand, some constitutional nationalists, despite all their professed concern for respecting 'two traditions' and according them parity of esteem, will turn Irish culture into a weapon with which to assault those 'hard headed', 'dour', 'philistine', 'sour faced' Prods who suffer from that one thing nationalists never seem to suffer from, a 'crisis of identity'. On the other hand, the IRA and its fellow-travellers have turned the gun into a culture of its own. This is a performance art which inflicts necessary suffering on its spectators - usually those same hard-headed, dour, philistine, sour-faced Prods - in the interest of a higher destiny. The IRA has proved a master of that art. And its devotees resemble that group of medieval theologians who believed that since there can be no repetition in human experience the righteous should commit the most infamous acts today so that these will not soil the future. The culture of the gun, it is claimed, brings dignity and self-respect to the Nationalist people.

Culture and Politics

This pervasive notion of general cultural superiority fulfils a vital psychological and political function in Irish Nationalism. Its day *must* come because what opposes it in Northern Ireland, though it may have the temporary support of the alien, external power of Britain, is ultimately inferior and insubstantial. The constant proclamation of the cultural superiority of the Irish "nationalist" people is designed to demoralise Ulster Protestants. This

is part of a broader triumphalist assertion that Unionist Ulster is in terminal decay, entrapped as it is within a decadent constitutional form ("failed political entity" according to Haughey; "unnatural political entity" according to Hume). Because all the virile elements of contemporary Irish life are held to be Catholic and Nationalist, the future belongs to them (and for a literal example of this triumphalism just look at the debate about the projections on fertility and demographic changes). The dull, uncultured Protestants clearly need the alien, external power to spell it out for them.

This is a familiar propagandist's tale, though it is one which some Protestants themselves have come to believe. It is also something which the makers of television documentaries appear to accept uncritically as well. This is surprising given the normal scepticism with which the media approach most other received wisdoms. The propaganda has become more believable than the truth. When Goering's colleague Joseph Goebbels was appointed to the post of Reich Minister for Information, Culture and Propaganda, even he had doubts about his title. As Rolf Hochhuth tells us in *A German Story*, Goebbels was enough of a scholar to know the difference between information, culture and propaganda. However, most of our present day apologists for Irish "nationalist" cultural superiority seem not to know the difference or if they do, not to care much about it. They now parade their ignorance in the columns of quality newspapers which ought to know better. A recent outrageous example was the article by Ronan Bennett which appeared in *The Guardian Weekend* on July 16 1994. Bennett has three targets of attack in this article - one to prove his radical credentials; one to prove his populist credentials; and one to prove his Republican credentials.

The Bennett View

The first target is the crass bourgeois culture of Belfast. It is both crass and bourgeois because it appreciates arts which are non-Irish (what would any self-respecting patriot be doing wasting his time with Shakespeare or Handel, for God's sake?). The greater sin in Bennett's eyes, however, is its attempt to ape the sort of thing that is common elsewhere in the United Kingdom - "Belfast masquerading as Bristol or Leicester" (if only it were true!). Being

bourgeois is bad enough but being *British* as well as bourgeois is a capital sin.

The second target is those artists and intellectuals who have decided to be "above it all", to opt out of the people's struggle (not peoples', of course) in Northern Ireland. These artists and intellectuals just cannot face up to that regenerating wave of risen people power expressed in the culture of the gun. Nor do they subscribe to the single-minded culture of complaint which justifies Provo violence. By that simple-minded measure are they all compromised. If they are not for the (nationalist) people then they must be against them, engaged not in art but in British propaganda. Who are these elitist scoundrels? Well, there's Graham Reid; there's Deirdre Madden; there's Bernard MacLaverty; there's Benedict Kiely; there's Brian Moore; there's Robert MacLiam Wilson; there's Ciaran Carson and Derek Mahon; and then there are those awful revisionists, Roy Foster and Paul Bew.

The only cultural or intellectual life which Bennett acknowledges is that bounded by the confines of Republican West Belfast, the Bogside and the wire of the Maze Prison (Provisional Wing). His glittering array of artists include prisoner poets, community playwrights and wall muralists. This art is all about community self-esteem, the national democrat's answer to the betrayal of the artistic elite. However, one gets a sense of the ludicrous nature of art-as-propaganda when one compares those whom Bennett dismisses as worthless and those whose worth he celebrates. For instance, he points out for special mention that ludicrous play by Marie Jones (who is special for another reason which I'll mention below), *A Night in November*, which deals with a Protestant supporter of the Northern Ireland football team who discovers his true identity by rejecting Loyalist bigotry and throwing in his lot with Jack's Irish Army in the United States. In an excellent and honest review in *The Irish Times* of 17 August, Suzanne Breen describes this play as pandering to clichés and stereotypes, of playing to the lowest common denominator. "If the Catholic community had been subject to such base jibes," she reported, "the audience would have been screaming 'sectarianism'." Nationalist self-esteem, for Bennett, is only to be had by denying any self-esteem to Unionists. Sectarianism is only sectarian when it comes from the mouth or pen of a Protestant. Otherwise, it is freeing the mind from British colonialism. Bennett reveals the quality of his artistic judgement by the company he keeps.

The third target is rather predictable. It is the "intolerable mental world" of that community without esteem, the Protestants of Ulster. Writers and artists in this community exist in an atmosphere of suffocation which denies all creativity, spawning bigotry and paranoia. They can find only one way out. That way is to become a cultural guest of Irish nationalism. Stephen Rea, Van Morrison, James Galway, Marie Jones and anyone else worth a damn were nothing until they threw in their lot with the plain people of Ireland and began to celebrate their virtue. The alternative to this available exit is to remain trapped within the self-doubt and identity crisis of Unionism. "To remain", argues Bennett, "is to be enclosed in a world where culture is restricted to little more than flute bands, Orange marches and the chanting of sectarian songs at football matches." (It never occurs to Bennett that there might just be something wrong with a view of Protestantism which can only see flute bands, Oranges marches and sectarian songs).

Bennett would like to think of himself as a radical, populist Republican and he cannot but think of himself as anything other than thoroughly modern and thoroughly progressive. And yet what is remarkable is the absence of any sense that he is retailing the most hoary of nationalist dogmas, the most racist of nationalist perspectives. Most of what Bennett has to say was said more succinctly and with less bad faith by the Catholic Bulletin in 1924:

"The Irish nation is the Gaelic nation; its language and literature is the Gaelic language; its history is the history of the Gael. All other elements have no place in Irish national life, literature and tradition, save as far as they are assimilated into the very substance of Gaelic speech, life and thought."

All that Bennett argues is a contemporary gloss on the traditional assumption that it is the Gael who will absorb.

The Ballagh View

This style of narrow nationalism is of crucial importance for a tendency in

the Republic which has become more vocal in the last few years. It too appropriates the labels of radical, populist and Republican. Recently in London I took part in a debate with Robert Ballagh who is the spokesperson of this tendency. The debate was sponsored by the Revolutionary Communist Party and the Irish Freedom Movement. The theme was the question of identity in modern Ireland. Ballagh's presentation was a very revealing one, more revealing than he knew. His argument went something like this.

The Republic of Ireland is in cultural disarray. Its intelligentsia has lost touch with the dynamic power of the people. It has abandoned the project of constructing a truly Irish cultural identity and its understanding of Irish history has been corrupted by revisionism. It wants to look everywhere other than Ireland for artistic or intellectual inspiration. The Republic as a result has lost all self-confidence. It has developed the habit, fostered by critics such as Conor Cruise O'Brien, to blame nationalist attitudes for the violence in the North when, of course, that violence is produced by the British presence. For Ballagh this is a case of *trahison des clercs*. However, the character of the plain people of Ireland remains as sound as ever but the people are confused by the lies and obfuscations of those intellectuals who ought to give them a sense of dignity and of destiny.

There is one part of the Irish nation which has been immune to this cultural decadence. It happens to be that part of the Irish nation which Bennett also celebrates. Northern nationalists are now in the vanguard of Irish language learning. They have no doubts about their cultural identity. They have no time for historical revisionism. They have carried on the good fight against the enemies of the Irish people. This northern nationalism will become the inspiration for the regeneration of the Irish people as a whole, sweeping away the corruption which has infected the twenty six counties. It will redeem history.

Both Bennett and Ballagh sincerely believe all this and as ideologues no reasoned argument can change that belief. What is astonishing about their nonsense is the assumption that this view is somehow progressive, radical or liberating. Even a passing familiarity with the history of political argument ought to have alerted them to the fact that the substance of their position is

profoundly reactionary. For the idea that there is, as Ballagh assumes there is, a great gulf between an *official* Ireland, represented by its established academic, cultural and political institutions, and a *real* Ireland, alive in the hearts of its plain people and its authentic spokesmen, has been part of the stock in trade of dispossessed conservatism since the time of the French Revolution. It involves the positing of some unnatural usurpation of authority by an unrepresentative (mostly liberal) group whose aim is to weaken the patriotic fibre of the nation. All corruption lies with this group and all virtue lies with the "true" sentiments of the people. And the truth is as the natural (because virtuous) tribunes of the people define it.

Insofar as the Irish nation is not fully at one with the demands of northern nationalism; insofar as it demurs from unequivocal support for the demands of the truest of the true then it is labelled "Indo-Unionism", "West-Britonism", "cultural cringe" or whatever other pejorative comes to mind.

Of course what is really at issue is not the real nation struggling against the false nation. It is one vision of the nation in combat with other visions of the nation. And the vision of Bennett and Ballagh, for all its bravado and cockiness, is not only narrow but also backward looking. Ballagh, seeking to eroticise a decadent Republic by coupling with the spirit of (Sinn Fein) West Belfast, advocates cultural necrophilia. Bennett, seeking to distinguish between the real art of the Nationalist people and the dead hand of bourgeois culture, confuses culture with political propaganda. What is common to both is the attempt to give artistic respectability to anti-Protestant bigotry. But who is more claustrophobic, paranoid or inward-looking than Gerry Adams who pronounced at the City Hall rally on 14 August 1994 his people's independence from "the British, the Irish Government, the Irish establishment, the church leaders, the unionists [and] those pro-unionists in Dublin." West Belfast says no.

The Key Fallacy of Cultural Nationalism

Bennett and Ballagh fail to make any distinction between community, politics, religion and culture. Culture in their eyes becomes but one functional

aspect of a total commitment to the greater cause of Irish national unity. This puts them in error whenever they turn their attention to any cultural expression which does not fall within that totallising though narrow understanding. They cannot appreciate that there might be a valid distinction between (what they take to be) Irish culture and cultural life in Ireland, North and South. For them there can only be one, single, authentic Irish national(ist) culture and it ought to be the beginning and the end of artistic life in Ireland. (Thus for Bennett, Gogol's play *The Government Inspector* is fine only so long as the drama has been "relocated from Tsarist Russia to pre-Partition Ireland, and reworked as a bitter critique of the Irish middle-classes' dependency on Britain.") Since both of them seem incapable of making these distinctions about cultural life in general, they are doubly incapable of comprehending the character of cultural life amongst Protestants.

Their great error is to fail to distinguish what is distinctive from what is representative. Since culture for both Bennett and Ballagh is really *cultural nationalism* they can see no difference between what might be distinctively Irish - a sort of nativism - and what might be representative of contemporary cultural life in Ireland. Cultural nationalism only celebrates the distinctive - Gaelic sports, Irish language, folk music and so on - because the distinction can be recruited to the cause of political separation (and only the distinctive is *real*). What may be representative of cultural life in all its diversity - Carson's poetry, Reid's plays, Bew's history - is either ignored as peripheral or denounced as a great betrayal. This failure of the cultural nationalist imagination is then elevated into the index against which "Protestant" or "Unionist" culture is also measured. What is distinctive of political Protestantism - its Orange marches, its flute bands, its lodge banners, its sectarian songs - is taken to be the sum of all cultural life in that community. This is like taking the Free Presbyterian Church to be the sum total of Protestant religious life. What might be representative of that community - cultural life which bears a great resemblance to what goes on elsewhere in the British Isles from brass bands to jazz groups to amateur dramatics to choral societies to creative writing classes - is invisible to a cultural nationalist precisely because it is not exclusively Irish. And if it is not Irish it is not real. Ironically, cultural nationalists actually do appreciate Orangeism for it allows them, through the good offices of televisual imagery, to show firstly, how very Irish, though uncreatively Irish, the Protestants really are and secondly, how very

un-British these uncreative people really are.

This myopic view of what constitutes cultural life further allows nationalists to claim that Protestants suffer from a crisis of cultural identity. They are Irish but not the right sort of Irish. They are British but not British enough. That identity crisis can only be resolved when Protestants do become the right sort of Irish. And cultural commissars like Bennett and Ballagh will be on hand to ensure that they either shape up or ship out. Now this is where the politics of culture become very interesting. What presents itself as an "anti-imperialist struggle" to rid Ireland of alien influences actually finds common cause with those in British politics who are old-fashioned or even new fangled imperialists. Why, for instance, do Conservatives like Peter Temple-Morris seem so in tune with the Republican political project? They do so because they have a colonial attitude towards Northern Ireland and feel that its status is purely contingent upon the self-interested calculations of London. Why, amid all the abandoned policies of Labour politics in the last two decades, can someone like MacNamara still be allowed to pursue the good old cause of Irish unity? Because ditching Northern Ireland permits the descendents of Attlee and Bevin to think that they are carrying on the mission of de-colonisation. On both counts, the demands of nationalists and the attitudes of post-imperial Britain fit hand in glove. All of this might seem very depressing. The experience of cultural humiliation and communal disparagement has been so common for Protestants that they have almost come to take it for granted. For their own self-esteem they need to challenge this systematic cultural attack. How is this to be done?

A Unionist Response

It ought *not* to be done by playing the same game and disparaging the distinctive practices of "the other side". This is a fruitless, counterproductive and ultimately demeaning exercise. For it begins by narrowing the world of cultural activity in the absurdly nativist manner of cultural nationalism. And it begins by conceding ground which ought to be contested. Take the Irish language for example. Though this has become a nationalist fetish there is nothing to prevent Protestants subverting the cultural enclosure of the lan-

guage issue in a positive way. No cultured person in Northern Ireland ought to be ignorant of the linguistic influences - in place-names, in figures of speech - of their own land. This will mean some familiarity with the Irish language, not as a badge of separatism, but as a means to cultural enrichment. Why should Protestants be deprived of that cultural resource? For there is nothing in their political commitment to the Union which would deny it. Unionism is not a totalising way of life. As a political identity it has room for any manner of cultural expressions. Challenging the stereotype allows the Unionist to assert a devastating argument which disorders the senses of cultural nationalism: that one can be Irish without being a separatist. To cultivate seriously the political idea of the "greater number", a phrase which is now part of the lexicon of Unionism, seems to imply such a disposition.

Equally, the "greater number" is as British as anyone in Finchley since those who live in Finchley are not *just* British, for Britishness is a political artefact of the Union, but English-British, Jewish-British, Pakistani-British, Scots-British and so on. Just as no one who lives in Northern Ireland needs to pass any Tebbit-test to prove their Britishness. Just because the person on the Clapham omnibus thinks that Northern Ireland isn't somehow British does not justify expelling one and a half million citizens from the United Kingdom. That is an absolutely monstrous proposition. The person on the omnibus possibly has the same idea about blacks, Asians and Arabs. Yet we all agree that that gives no mandate for denying the rights of any citizen.

Further, Unionists have much to learn from the arguments currently being developed by intelligent advocates of minority rights in the United Kingdom. This might at first sight seem an unusual point since Unionists traditionally think of themselves as *the* majority. That remains still the democratic basis of Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom. But the value of that place depends as well on the respect and dignity which go along with it. The last respectable form of bigotry in Britain today is anti-Unionist bigotry (often formented, of course, by Irish nationalists) and Unionists have suffered from it too long. They should take their cue from books like Tariq Modood's *Not Easy Being British*. Modood explores - though not in those terms - the relationship between the distinctive and representative aspects of ethnic communities in multi-cultural Britain, the way in which distinctive cultural forms nest within a wider cultural style. One is neither a member of an ethnic minority nor an assimilated British citizen but both.

Conclusion

This is the Protestant condition in Northern Ireland. It is also the Catholic condition. If both Protestants and Catholics can come to see themselves as cultural minorities then perhaps some common ground can be worked and not just, as the Cultural Traditions programme would have it, their differences acknowledged.

Nothing is going to prevent Irish nationalists like Bennett and Ballagh trying to ridicule Protestants for their lack of culture. As I have tried to show, their arguments are not only insulting but entirely misconceived. Protestants ought to respond in the manner I have indicated: namely, by stating that their cultural life is not cramped by the tired nostrums of nativism but is healthily diverse; that culture and art die when they become the creatures of politics; that ignorance is not understanding. And they should have the confidence to broaden the diversity of their cultural life by contesting what cultural nationalists have tried to appropriate.

Note

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