JOHN MITCHEL STATUE IN NEWRY & BLM 2020

We have been spared serious involvement by Sinn Fein in the current BLM controversies. The reason is their John Mitchel problem. He is not just an Irish nationalist icon but his views and writings form, and formed, a significant element of Republican separatist thinking. Without Mitchel and the cover he provided, they are Hibernians

Mitchel was notoriously prejudiced on race and skin colour. An open and unabashed advocate of the institution of slavery, he paid a high price with two of his sons dying for the Confederacy in the American Civil War. He then returned to Ireland and was elected to Westminster for Tipperary as an Independent Nationalist only to be disallowed twice for being a convicted felon. On the second occasion he died a week later and his opponent took the seat

Dudgeon book - ‘The greatest influence, in relation to Ireland, on both Bigger and Casement probably came from John Mitchel (1815-75). Directly or indirectly, this 1848 Young Irelander’s views moulded three generations of separatists, especially those of his fellow Ulster Protestants who came to share his hatred of England. Mitchel’s ideas can be traced through a line whose cultural apogee was Douglas Hyde. A contemporary and friend of Bigger and Casement, Hyde was resolutely non-political within the Gaelic League. However, with his 1892 address *On the Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland*, he lit a fire that was not to be quenched.

Mitchel was born in Limavady the son of a liberal Presbyterian minister. Educated in Newry, Co. Down he became a solicitor and was to be married in the famous Drumcree Parish Church. His inherited separatist instincts were sharpened by the famine. Mitchel had “a holy hatred” for English rule in Ireland. Some said he hated England more than he loved Ireland. True or not, he was so pathological on the matter that at times he could not even bring himself to name his foe, instead referring to it as The Thing.

Mitchel’s writings, which Casement loved to read and encourage others to read, indicate not a man who was selling out his own people but one who perhaps naively believed he could risk them not following where he led: “The Anglo-Irish and Scottish Ulstermen have now far too old a title to be questioned: they are a hardy race and fought stoutly for the pleasant valleys they dwell in.” In 1846, in a famous Dublin speech, he told his audience, “I am one of the Saxon Irishmen of the North, and you want that race of Irishmen in your ranks more than any other…Drive the Ulster Protestants away from your movement by needless tests and you perpetuate the degradation of both yourselves and them.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

He risked and they did not follow. His successor Protestant nationalists played out the consequences. The price his people paid was for Irish nationalism to be enabled to don and keep the non-sectarian Republican mantle.’

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/23994/summary>

John Mitchel: Ecumenical Nationalist in the Old South

Bryan McGovern

Historians have often portrayed John Mitchel as a radical and a dissident. They have contended that the virulent Anglophobia of this Irish nationalist and Ulster Protestant was the ideological foundation of his ardent republicanism. Cecil Woodham-Smith asserted that "John Mitchel possessed an extraordinary capacity for hatred directed at the British Government, and an equal talent for burning invective." 1 Malcolm Brown argued that Mitchel hated almost everything he came into contact with, from British society to the Jew. 2 These historians, as well as many others, condemn Mitchel in particular for his justification of slavery. Richard Davis, for instance, has maintained that racism and anti-Semitism accompanied John Mitchel's and the other Young Irelanders' brand of Romantic natioanlism in the mid-nineteenth century. 3 Others have pointed out the influences of Thomas Carlyle on Mitchel, including not only his style of writing, but also his contention of the black man's inferiority, as well as his disdain of progress. While these historians have astutely defined Mitchel in such a manner, they have yet to fully explain why Mitchel adopted a position favoring the South when he emigrated to New York in 1853, and why he eventually moved to the South and supported the Confederacy. While there is little doubt that Mitchel embraced the racism of Romantic nationalism, his proslavery stance cannot fully explain why he became such a staunch defender of the South. There were additional, and perhaps more profoundly significant reasons for Mitchel's embrace of the South. It was in the South that Mitchel's ideal of ecumenical nationalism could best be expressed because, by the middle of the nineteenth century, only in the South could an Irish Protestant also be a revolutionary Irish nationalist.

Mitchel initially received a warm welcome throughout the United States, yet he soon discovered that his ideals did not conform to Northern mores. After escaping in 1853 from his sentence of transportation to Tasmania for treason and felony, Mitchel sailed to San Francisco, but decided to settle in New York, where his mother and brother were then living. More important, Mitchel found New [End Page 99] York attractive because he believed the resident Irish expatriate population might support a further attempt to liberate Ireland. Mitchel published his Irish-American nationalist newspaper the Citizen there, but found himself embroiled in controversy. In 1855, he moved to Tucaleecheed Cove in eastern Tennessee, where by 1857 he established another newspaper, this one he titled Southern Citizen. In the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains, Mitchel found a society that embraced the ideals that he held dear. Mitchel saw in the South a society that resisted progress, where the Roman Catholic church remained a weak institution, where Irish nationalists remained beholden to the ideals of the United Irishmen, and where Irish nationalists could be radical, as well as Protestant. The South was also a place where Protestant evangelicals were not ideologically linked to Yankee abolitionists, who hypocritically dismissed Irish men and women as a grossly inferior race. The Protestant evangelicalism that was prevalent in the North and in Ulster, as well as the Catholic church's strident response to evangelicalism there, had also meant the rise of sectarian strife. This sectarian conflict that Mitchel so despised was not as prevalent in most areas of the South. Furthermore, Mitchel also drew parallels between the struggle of Ireland and that of the South.

Mitchel's brief tenure as a Tennessee journalist and farmer was tranquil compared to his tempestuous tenure in New York. Working as a journalist in New York, Mitchel had a number of conflicts with the Irish-American Roman Catholic community in the North. Part of this conflict stemmed from Mitchel's militancy and his espousal of republicanism. In his first issue of the Citizen, Mitchel endorsed Irish independence in connection with republicanism. The clerically dominated Irish-American press then unfairly portrayed Mitchel and other Young Irelanders as red republicans or socialists, associating them with the Italian nationalists...Mitchel felt that the Government would respond only to "armed opinion": "must the force of opinion always be legal? – always be peaceful? Does opinion then mean law? Does opinion cease to be opinion the moment it steps out of the trenches of the constitution? Why, sir, I hold that there is no opinion in Ireland worth a farthing which is not illegal. I hold that armed opinion is a thousand times stronger than unarmed – and further, that in a national struggle that opinion is the most potent whose sword is sharpest, and whose aim is surest. We are told it was opinion and sympathy, and other metaphysical entities that rescued Italy, and scared Austria back from Ferrara without a blow. Yes, but it was opinion with the helmet of a national guard on his head, and a long sword by his side; it was opinion, standing, match in hand, at the breech of a gun charged to the muzzle. Now, I say all this, not to vindicate myself, for I have nowhere recommended the Irish nation to attain legislative independence by force of arms in their present broken and divided condition (as [Mr O'Connell](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_O%27Connell)'s resolution imputes to me), not to vindicate myself, but to vindicate the original free constitution of our confederacy."

Mitchel's Irish nationalism went over the line into [Anglophobia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglophobia). According to [Malcolm Brown](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Malcolm_Brown_(historian)&action=edit&redlink=1), Mitchel hated almost everything he came across, including the Jews and Britain.[[29]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Mitchel#cite_note-FOOTNOTEMcGovern200199-29)

Transported to Tasmania for treason-felony in 1848, Mitchel escaped several years later and reached America. In one sense his Ulster Protestant frontiersman instincts survived, and resurfaced there, through his attitude to those he saw as less advanced peoples.

1. Quoted in Campbell p. 237 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)