Cuttlefish, Cholesterol and *Saoirse*

Brendan O'Leary

He that uses many words for explaining any subject, doth,
like the cuttlefish, hide himself for the most part in his own ink.

John Ray, seventeenth-century naturalist

In sum, rather like cholesterol, there is good and bad revisionism,
and we have had too much of the latter in recent years.

Richard English, by his own account, has tried to do three things in a quarter of a million words: write the story of Irish nationalist history for the general reader, provide 'an authoritative but accessible up-to-date, single volume account of what scholars now think and know (or think that they know) about Irish nationalism', and, more ambitiously, 'explain' Irish nationalism.[2] *Irish Freedom* is partially successful in its first goal, and much more partisan than it presents itself. For that reason it is much less successful in achieving its second goal. It fails in its last goal.

1   L. Perry Curtis Jr.,
    'Comment: The Return
    of Revisionism', *Journal*
    of British Studies, 44
    (2005), 134–45, 145

2   Richard English, *Irish*
    Freedom: The History of
    Nationalism in Ireland
    (London, 2006), 4–5

3   Richard English, *Armed*
    Struggle: The History of
    the IRA (London, 2003).
    I wrote a favourable
    review of this book,
    'Lethal Mixture of
    Armalite and the Ballot
    Box', *Times Higher*
    Education Supplement,
    1609 (2003), 27–28,
    with some reservations,
    recently re-expressed in
    'Mission Accomplished?
    Looking Back at the
    IRA', *Field Day Review*,
    1 (2005), 216–46.

Professor English recently wrote a highly regarded history of the IRA.[3] Here his tone is often conciliatory but displays the high-handed conciliation that exasperates. He is widely read, cultured (especially in music), eclectic, and presents as generous and fair-minded in his readings. But he has blind spots. The most significant are linguistic, methodological, and ideological. He has also become garrulous. He, like others who imagine themselves to be radical, swims with the present tide of imperial historiography, which cleanses, and even celebrates, the British Empire, or at least accentuates its positive dimensions.[4] Yet Ireland's colonial treatment by Great Britain, before and after the Act of Union of 1801, remains a salutary reminder of negative entries in the ledger of Empire. In accounting for some present nationalist passions and arguments,

the 'catastrophic dimension' of the Irish historical experience in what we may call the 'far past' needs to be emphasized — violent conquest, expropriation, religious oppression, famine, immiseration and demographic collapse.[5] In the 'near past', what demands focus is the long denial of democratic autonomy, followed by an unjust partition, and the renewal of domination in one political unit by the historic beneficiaries of the colonial settlements. Such emphases are warranted not as a brief for present courtrooms, not for the joy of savouring past horrors, and not for wallowing in ancient grievances to the neglect of our ancestors' past pleasures and achievements. Quite simply, the catastrophic components of the past significantly explain Ireland's present, both its institutional outcomes and the present mentalities of its principal agents,

collective and individual. Richard English's book fails fully to appreciate these matters, but his failure is instructive.

Of course, neither Ireland's nor Northern Ireland's histories are unrelieved catalogues of disaster, and only the last stranded platoons of the Thirty-Two County Sovereignty Movement might argue otherwise. In fact, the island's current circumstances stem, in part, from catastrophes that did not happen. The Nazis or Stalinists, who homogenized Central and Eastern Europe under the cover of '*Nacht und Nebel*', never conquered Ireland. In the seventeenth century Ireland was not comprehensively 'cleansed' of its natives, nor was it religiously homogenized, though both enterprises were conceived and embarked upon before being abandoned for less spectacular forms of subordination. In a comparative perspective, it is the catastrophic past, with its long-term repercussions, that explains the emotional and intellectual wellsprings of Irish nationalism. And it is the current resolution of these repercussions that explains the diminution of hostility toward the British state and the peaceful accommodations that now prevail in both of Ireland's political entities.

Whose ancestral voices?

Nowhere does English admit incompetence in the Irish, Latin or French languages in Part One, 'Ireland before 1800'. This would seem a necessary acknowledgement by someone who has taken upon himself the task of appraising the existence (or non-existence) of national consciousness in Ireland's pre-modern past. Since no works in Irish, Latin or French are cited in the bibliography the reader may assume that English lacks these languages. This observation is not advanced in a spirit of ethnic or linguistic trumping — I have mostly forgotten Latin and French, and have but a few words of Irish. Nor does the observation imply that only those with the

relevant linguistic skills can have worthwhile opinions. Solid historical judgements can emerge from reading secondary interpretations of primary sources, provided there is a scholarly consensus that is not contested as partisan by reasonable persons.[6] But English's notes and bibliography convey no mastery of those historians, past or present, who have a full command of Irish, and who differ from their 'angloglot' colleagues — and among themselves — on questions pertinent to Irish national consciousness before the nineteenth century. So we must be sceptical that English can achieve his goal of assessing Gaelic Ireland's self-consciousness.

Like most of us, he is heavily dependent on anglophone secondary sources for readings of Ireland's Gaelic past. So it is incumbent upon him to show why we should take *his* word, rather than the word of others, for any reading of that past, where there is no consensus. This criticism, moreover, does not apply only to his treatment of the consciousness of the pre-modern Gaelic Irish. Consider the issue of how to name those who invaded Ireland in 1169, or, in the account English prefers, who were invited in by a locally dethroned pretender. He says there was no '"English" invasion at all'. Rather, Ireland was colonized 'by an international group', 'Anglo-Norman lords … and their hybrid followers'.[7] But at least one study of how the Normans became English, not cited, maintains that 'the Celtic Other served not only to draw Normans and English together [for security reasons], and to reinforce Englishness where it already existed, but … also helped to make the former [the Normans] adopt the identity of the latter [the English]'.[8] Hugh Thomas argues that the Normans acculturated very quickly into an English identity. Similarly, John Gillingham has persuaded me that John McGarry and I were wrong to write in one of our books of 'Anglo-Normans' invading Ireland, even though that label has been standard in Irish and British

4 Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Fall of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York, 2003). Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford, 2000)

5 Brendan Bradshaw, 'Nationalism and Historical Scholarship in Modern Ireland', *Irish Historical Studies*, 26, 104 (1989), 329–51

6 Ian Lustick has written of the difficulties political scientists (and historians) have in dealing scientifically with rival secondary readings of primary sources, and the resulting types of 'selection bias'; see his 'History, Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias', *American Political Science Review*, 90 (1996), 605–18.

7 *Irish Freedom*, 38

8 Hugh M. Thomas, *The English and the Normans: Ethnic Hostility, Assimilation and Identity 1066–c. 1220* (Oxford, 2003), 315

9 Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry, *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland*, 2nd expanded edn. (London and Atlantic Heights, 1996)

10 See John Gillingham's 'The Beginnings of English Imperialism', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 5, 4 (1992), 392–409; 'The English Invasion of Ireland', in Brendan Bradshaw, Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley, eds., *Representing Ireland: Literature and the Origins of Conflict, 1534–1660* (Cambridge, 1992), 24–42; and *The English in the Twelfth Century: Imperialism, National Identity and Political Values* (Woodbridge, 2003).

11 *Irish Historical Studies*, the professional journal for someone in English's field, contains an elegantly written article, which he does not cite, by a master of French, Latin, Irish and English sources, which shows that the Irish described the said 'Anglo-Normans' as 'English', and nicely suggests parallels between twentieth-century Ulster's divided peoples and those of late medieval Ireland; see Art Cosgrove, 'The Writing of Medieval History', *Irish Historical Studies*, 27, 106 (1990), 97–11.

12 *Irish Freedom*, 43

13 *Irish Freedom*, 26; my emphases

14 Some of the more egregious errors in Professor Elliott's book are a matter of record, see my review 'History of North's Catholics Riddled with Inaccuracies', *Sunday Business Post*, 22 October 2000.

15 Brian Sykes, *Saxons, Vikings and Celts: The Genetic Roots of Britain and Ireland* (New York, 2006)

historiography.[9] Rather, Gillingham insists, the native Irish were right to describe the relevant events, then and later, as the coming of the English. Gillingham has demonstrated that the 'incomers' had no such expression as 'Anglo-Norman' for themselves. This absence is supplementary evidence for a very fast assimilation of Normans into English identity between the 1120s and 1140s.[10] We might call this the '*Nous sommes les anglais*' thesis. So the (French-speaking) English, not the Normans, or Anglo-Normans, invaded Ireland, or, as English prefers, were invited in — and, of course, it was both.[11]

The expertise to adjudicate the interpretations of medieval documents is not among my accomplishments but I am able immediately to observe as the book begins that English has missed an important controversy in the ethnic history of these islands, and has instead replicated the old historiography. Has he done so through ignorance? Perhaps; no one can read everything, even on the scholarship relevant to a small country. Has he preferred the old historiography on empirically defensible grounds? Perhaps; but if so, he does not supply them. The suspicion arises that the old historiography is in this instance comforting: it enables him to emphasize 'hybridity' in Irish history, and to disparage traditional nationalist accounts of long-standing English and Irish animosity rooted in colonial relations. That is perhaps why he can later refer to 'the English in Ireland and the Irish in Ireland (as they might respectively be called)', without acknowledging that is what the respective groups called themselves, according to extant sources in each of their respective languages.[12]

On politically correct cosmopolitanism

Independent Ireland, thanks to prosperity and immigration, is now multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual in novel ways. Northern Ireland, thanks to the peace process, is also increasingly attractive to immigrants. Excellent. But it is an anachronism to read and celebrate this present back into the mists of time, whether the mists be deemed Celtic or otherwise. We are confidently told by English, without sources, that

> Different civilizations and peoples and groups were, from the earliest history of old Ireland, written into the story of its inhabitants; *so notions of a monochrome race, of any supposed racial 'purity' or homogeneity, are deeply misplaced. Since ancient times the Irish gene pool has been profoundly mixed* … There was no single, original Gaelic or Irish race, just as there were no discernible natives in the sense of an original people than whom all others and their descendants are less truly Irish [*Sic!*] … Even in the Iron Age, the people of Ireland were *genetically very mixed* …[13]

Readers may then expect to be told that there really were 'black Irish', or at least 'black and tan Irish', and anticipate tales of the skeletal remains of persons whose reconstructed phenotypes are not Caucasian. Instead, we get a quotation, and a citation. The quotation reads 'Prehistoric Ireland was a considerable racial mix.' The citation is to Marianne Elliott's *The Catholics of Ulster*. Now, whatever merits Professor Elliott may have as an historian, she is not notably distinguished as a geneticist.[14]

By contrast, Brian Sykes, professor of Human Genetics at Oxford University, arguably is.[15] In his recently published *Saxons, Vikings and Celts* (yes, he uses the 'C' word), he argues that the DNA evidence shows that the 'matrilineal history of the Isles is both ancient and continuous', and the strong evidence of 'exact and close matches between the maternal and western clans of western and northern Iberia and the western half of the Isles is very impressive, much more so than the poorer matches with continental Europe … On our maternal side, almost all of us

[British and Irish] are Celts'. Sykes confirms that the genetic data falsify the old notion that the Celts of Ireland originate from middle Europe. We Hibernians are Iberians: 'The Irish myths of the Milesians were right in one respect. The genetic evidence shows that a large proportion of Irish Celts, on both the male and the female side, did arrive from Iberia, at or about the same time as farming reached the Isles'.[16] The paternal Y-chromosome data also suggest Iberian origins for the males of the Isles, especially in Ireland. The recent discussion of the 'Uí Néill chromosome' enables Sykes to have some fun; it is said to be as an example of the 'Genghis effect', that is, very large numbers of men are descended from only a few genetically successful ancestors: 'the longer a clan has been in place like the Isles, the more similar the Y-chromosomes become'.[17] The Hibernian Genghis in question is Niall of the Nine Hostages.[18]

Before political panic sets in among readers of *Field Day Review* let me emphasize that Sykes's use of DNA data is not being deployed to confirm some primordial conception of the Irish nation, but merely to show that English's anti-primordialism is poorly founded. I lack the competence to adjudicate the validity of inferences from technical genetic research, and would want a lot of assurances about the representativeness of the relevant DNA samples from which major historical conclusions are being drawn, but what can be said without fear of rebuttal is that neither Professors Elliott nor English have the authority to pronounce confidently on pre-modern Ireland's genetic make-up. And, to the extent that we can rely on current scientific evaluations, pre-modern Ireland was rather ethnically (and genetically) homogeneous. We may suspect that for English the assertion, and it is no more than that, of a profoundly multi-cultural and multi-people 'far past' is intended to hide the largely dichotomous recent past or to sermonize for the present.

In the case of 'the Celts', English also strays from careful appraisal of the historical evidence, because of a keen determination to debunk Irish nationalist myths. He thereby misleads the general reader. The idea of a unified Celtic people — with a heartland in the former forests and mountains of Mitteleuropa — is indeed a recent construction, as certain archaeologists have loudly complained.[19] But English errs when he declares that 'If no racial or ethnic group in Ireland in the ancient or medieval period, was known, or identified itself as Celtic, then we should not pretend that they did so, and "the Celts" is a title which therefore should be rejected for Irish people from these centuries'.[20] Geoffrey of Monmouth's influential — if largely fictive — *The History of the Kings of Britain* has the Celts as one of the five nations of the larger island. So some labelling of people as Celts did occur in the twelfth century. More importantly, we can and should use the word 'Celtic', in agreement with the canonical classifications of linguistic branches, to refer to Gaelic speakers, and writers. Such speakers, and writers, preceded English speakers, in history and in residence, on the island of Ireland, and on the neighbouring island. One can neither explain the past accurately, nor improve the political temper of the present, by seeking to deny homogeneity in pre-English Ireland, or by trying to efface the cultural and linguistic distinctiveness of Ireland from eastern and southern Britain before the twelfth, and indeed before the seventeenth, century.

What is your methodological poison?

Two classes of canines roam in the social science jungle. They gather in packs which rarely mix. One growls, 'So what? What's the story? What does it tell us theoretically?' The other tends to bark, 'What's the method? How do you know what you know? Given that we know how difficult it is to know, why should

16 Sykes, *Saxons, Vikings and Celts*, 279, 280, 281, 282
17 Sykes, *Saxons, Vikings and Celts*, 285
18 Research conducted in the Smurfit Institute of Genetics at Trinity College suggests that 8 per cent of Irish men possess a particular Y-chromosome: see Laoise T. Moore, Brian McEvoy, Eleanor Cape, and Katharine Simms, and Daniel G. Bradley, 'A Y-Chromosome Signature of Hegemony in Gaelic Ireland', *American Journal of Human Genetics*, 78, 2 (2006), 334–38. This Y-chromosome has a cluster of concentration in the north-west running from Roscommon to Strabane, where 23 per cent of local males possess it. Genealogical evidence has subsequently suggested that Niall of the Nine Hostages is also Father Niall of near numberless descendants. The Uí Néill (and their affiliated families) really do have a common ancestor, though they may not yet have mixed their blood or DNA with Richard English or Marianne Elliott.
19 Simon James, *The Atlantic Celts: Ancient People or Modern Invention?* (London, 1999)
20 *Irish Freedom*, 28

ERIN'S VALENTINES.
Compliments of the Season from Ireland's old loves and new.

we accept your conclusions?' It is far easier to answer the growler than the barker. The barkers, like theologians, have many monists among them, and want to know whether an argument survives their tests. Methodologically, *Irish Freedom* is a disappointing mess, no matter how pluralist or lax one is on these matters. English deserves credit as a historian in a political science department for engaging in interdisciplinary reading. Such trespassing is still uncommon among Ireland's cohorts of political historians, who have remained until recently somewhat dismissive of the social

sciences, especially if educated in Cambridge or Dublin. But on anyone's sensible starting premises, explaining Irish nationalism requires a social-science-influenced historian to generate explicit hypotheses from the general theoretical literature, and to use these to account for the origins and development of Irish nationalism, its expression, and mobilization, and successes and failures. Secondary materials — and sometimes appropriate primary materials — should be used to appraise the merits or otherwise of these hypotheses. Such case-materials must be carefully selected to

test the relevant hypotheses fairly — and
are more compelling if treated through
comparative analysis. A long romp through
the history of Ireland, mildly touched over
as a history of Irish nationalism, with a
selection bias toward intellectuals, followed
by a general survey of the large social
science literature devoted to explaining
nationalism, with asides on Irish materials,
and polite unionist homilies, does not meet
the standards of either social science or of
rigorous evaluative historiography.

In short, one cannot sensibly present
an apparently detached 'story' of Irish
nationalism first, and then follow up
with a general literature survey of the
social science of nationalism, and leave
it at that. Either the 'story' is profoundly
influenced by the literature survey, in which
case it is theoretically 'saturated', as the
epistemologists say. Or it is not, in which

case the survey must be defended according
to some other clear principles of selection.
No such clear principles are proffered. In
fact, the story of Irish nationalist history
presented here is far from a detached
account; it is an account of Irish history
according to the currently conventional
wisdom of those who unfortunately are
called 'revisionists', married to a series
of rebuttals of extremist or foolish Irish
nationalist claims that are too often
undocumented.[21]

Let me submit some adjectival evidence
on the 'revisionist' bias. We are told that
Ian MacBride is 'the most authoritative
historian of eighteenth century Presbyterian
radicalism', and that Marianne Elliott is
Tone's 'most accomplished biographer'.[22]
We are informed of Paul Bew's 'important
series of books', of Roy Foster's 'magnificent
two-volume biography', of Senia Pašeta's

22 *Irish Freedom*, 95, 104
23 *Irish Freedom*, 526, 529, 530, 519 n. 20
24 David George Boyce and Alan O'Day, eds., *The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy* (London, 1996); Ciaran Brady, ed., *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism 1938–1994* (Dublin, 1994)
25 I have written detailed appraisals of Gellner and Kedourie's explanations of nationalism ('Gellner's Diagnoses of Nationalism: A Critical Overview *or* What is Living and What is Dead in Gellner's Philosophy of Nationalism?', in J. A. Hall, ed., *The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism* [Cambridge, 1998], 40–90; and 'In Praise of Empires Past: Myths and Method of Kedourie's *Nationalism*', *New Left Review*, 2nd series, 18 [2002], 106–30), and plan to do the same with Anthony Smith's work; the first was my doctoral examiner and friend, the second a former colleague and chair of my former department, and I co-taught an interdisciplinary seminar with the third for many years.

'fascinating article' and 'fine treatment', and of Stephen Howe's 'judicious' discussion of whether Ireland had a colonial experience.[23] No similar authoritativeness, accomplishment, importance, magnificence, fascination, fineness or judiciousness appear to attach to the works of Irish nationalists, their sympathizers, or empathizers, or those academics critical of revisionists. Now let me submit some bibliographical evidence. The collection on the revisionist controversy edited by George Boyce and Alan O'Day is frequently cited, whereas that edited by Ciaran Brady is not, period.[24] Would it be unjust to conclude that is because anti-revisionists are more vigorously present in one of these works?

As noted, English hoped to provide 'an authoritative but accessible up-to-date, single volume account of what scholars now think and know (or think that they know) about Irish nationalism'. That would lead one to expect regular passages, if only in his notes, that would be of the following type, 'historians A, B, and C once argued proposition x, but historians D, E and F have discredited these arguments *because* of the following considerations, a1, a2, and a3'. That style of argumentation happens fairly rarely. Instead, we are typically and presumptuously expected to believe that each professional historian drawn in support of English's story is an impartial expert, and, by inference, that those whom they criticize are mission-committed, blinkered, or old-fashioned nationalists. Rival views are simply dismissed, and where a controversy is noted, English has a consistent habit of selecting the position of the reasonable unionist in the relevant quarrel. That would be fine were it to be admitted, but instead the author presents himself as an objective a-nationalist rather than an anti-nationalist, let alone a British nationalist, that is, a unionist.

Explanations are answers to questions or puzzles. Surveys of explanations, what the psychologists call meta-reviews, can

be extremely valuable. The puzzle in *Irish Freedom* is to know what exactly is being explained.

1. Are the questions or puzzles being answered or resolved in English's book set by the general explanatory literature in the works of major theorists of nationalism, for example the London School of Economics' Elie Kedourie, Ernest Gellner and Anthony D. Smith?[25] Or Cornell's Benedict Anderson — or Benedict O'Gorman Anderson, to give him his fully hybrid Irish names? Apparently not, because these theorists are surveyed at the end. They are not used to marshal the story, or stories, or to resolve controversies. At best the survey tells us how important thinkers have explained the salience of nationalism in the modern world.
2. Are the questions being answered set by the political claims made by Irish nationalist historians about Ireland's past, for example Eoin MacNeill, whose books are not cited in the bibliography? Again, apparently not, though 'easy pickings' are sought against popular historians such as Alice Stopford Green, rather than engagements with tougher professional specimens such as J. J. Lee, L. Perry Curtis Jr., Emmet Larkin, or Eunan O'Halpin.
3. Are the questions being set by the claims of mobilized Irish nationalist activists, past and present, about their island's past, such as those of Irish Labour's James Connolly, Fianna Fáil's Frank Gallagher (some of whose books are cited), Sinn Féin's Gerry Adams, or the Social Democratic and Labour Party's John Hume? Yes, in part. (Indeed English manages to be generous toward Hume).
4. Lastly, do the questions flow from the political opponents of Irish nationalism, past and present, whether unionists, cosmopolitans or self-styled post-nationalists?

In fact, one can find elements of all four interrogative agendas in *Irish Freedom* — the social scientific, those of the (actual and presumed) nationalist historians, the beliefs of popular politicians, and those we may deem the Hibernophobes. But they are scattered rather than gathered and considered in sequence, and the general reader will be as perplexed as me. English never explicitly presents his explanatory agenda. Is the question, 'Why do Irish nationalists hold the beliefs that they do?', or 'How valid are the beliefs of Irish nationalists?', or 'Why do these typical nationalist beliefs resonate among some Irish people?'? Had these separate puzzles been distinguished and evaluated one might feel that some worthwhile explanation had been accomplished.

Instead, the book reads like a first draft, or a transcript of lectures. Not in the sense that the prose is uniformly weak; though it is careless, and wordy. Here is an example of carelessness. 'From earliest times the inhabitants of Ireland were racially mixed rather than joined by ties of blood …'[26] Now, *either*, the mixture resulted in interbreeding, in which case the inhabitants *were* joined by ties of blood, *or*, the mixture did not result in interbreeding — in which case, in what sense were they 'mixed', other than by residency of the same island? It is good to be against racism, an ideology, but it is not wise to confuse blood ties and kinship with racism. Here is an example of the need for pruning:

> Frequently, nationalism involves the enforcing of attempted reversal of power imbalances (imposing a national empire, liberating a colony from imperial control), *by means of the use of power as leverage. Much of the practical definition of nationalism — what it does, day to day; how it affects people's lives; why it appeals so much to people — involves questions of the deployment of power as attempted leverage.*[27]

Everything italicized could have been profitably cut.

The book, in short, has not been edited down to produce a fully coherent argument. The commendable aiming of the text at the general reader has a price: a lot of basic sociology, anthropology and indeed evolutionary psychology are presented clearly, but laboriously, and occasionally misleadingly. Parts Two and Three, the general history of the nineteenth and twentieth century, do not work, despite their length, because too much is taken for granted, and more care is devoted to treating famous leaders' personalities than narrating the political history of nationalist organizations. Part Four, the explanation of Irish nationalism, turns out to be an eighty-page guide to the general reader on recent anglophone literature on nationalism, in which accessibility leads to the sacrifice of rigour and depth. Instead of isolating a range of testable propositions on nationalism, and evaluating them against Irish case-materials, we are treated to an unobjectionable account of why nationalism has been so persistently dominant in many modern lives.

What might have been done?

Let me provide examples to illustrate methodological underachievement, lest my complaints seem peevish. In each of the five paragraphs that follow I take an agenda from one or more thinkers, whose works English has read, or might reasonably be expected to know. The exercise provides a synopsis of testable propositions and questions that could have been the focus of a proper evaluative historiographical survey of Irish nationalism.

Ernest Gellner's theory of nationalism has at least two testable implications: it predicts nationalism arising in conditions of unevenly developed industrialization; and it predicts

26 *Irish Freedom*, 495
27 *Irish Freedom*, 479
28 Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (London, 1964), and *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983)
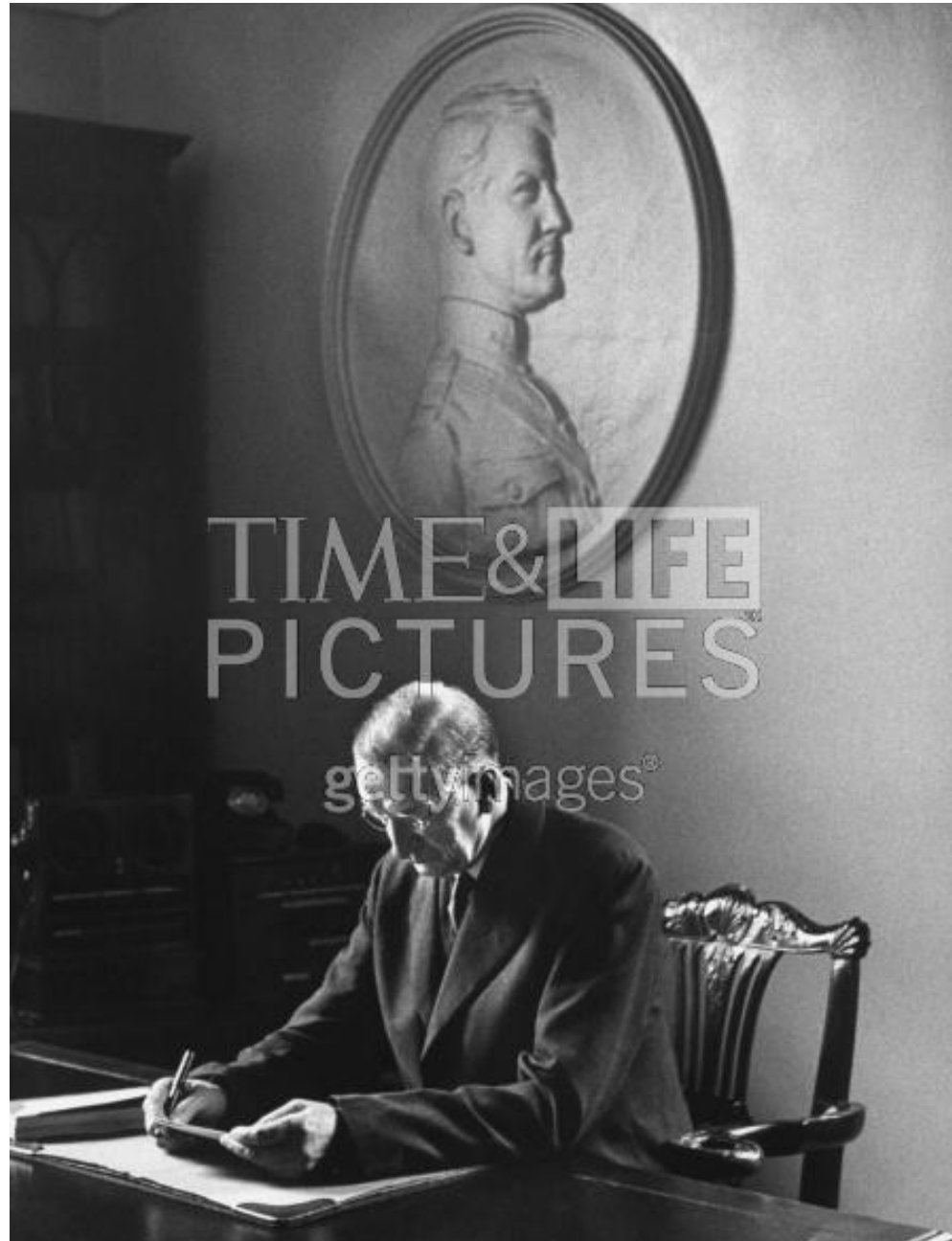
nationalist conflict over state-management of modern (generic) primary, secondary and university educational systems.[28] It also has a typology of 'nationalism-inducing' and 'nationalism-thwarting' situations, using three independent variables across two groups (access to political power, access to modern education, and access to a modern high culture). These testable implications, and the typology, could be explicitly evaluated, modified or falsified to appraise their merits in confrontation with Irish historiography. That would involve grappling with difficult questions, notably the meaning of 'high culture' (which is not a reference to atonal music and opera).

It would suggest, in particular, a detailed appraisal of research on the development of schooling and tertiary education systems, and the controversies to which they gave rise. That is not attempted. It is simply not enough to reject Gellner's approach by saying that Irish nationalism developed before industrialization developed in Great Britain — one needs to understand what Gellner meant by 'industrialization', which was more than smelting furnaces and smoking factories, and to consider Gellner's own responses to alleged cases of nationalism before industrialization, for example in the Balkans. It is also essential to consider what uneven development might mean, and to use census, demographic and economic data to evaluate matters. But not one table graces English's book, even though he has read many books with the relevant data on these matters.

Elie Kedourie's theory of nationalism claims — wrongly — that nationalism was 'invented' at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a claim refuted by any dispassionate reading of the later writings of Wolfe Tone and other members of the United Irishmen before 1798.[29] Kedourie's more interesting claim, elaborated in a later work on *Nationalism in Asia and Africa* and not directly considered by English, suggests that nationalism is spearheaded by 'marginal men', those situated between native and imperial cultures, at home in neither, and blocked from attaining the social mobility to which they think their education entitles them.[30] The 'blocked social mobility' thesis is partly investigated for late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland, notably in a quick survey of John Hutchinson's subsequently published doctoral thesis, some of which is cited by English, but not the census data.[31] Moreover, no consideration is given to applying these insights explicitly and rigorously to the situation of Northern Catholics after 1921.

Michael Hechter's recent work, *Containing Nationalism*, is more innovative than his better-known earlier work on *Internal Colonialism* — the latter is not considered by English, though it produced some interesting debates.[32] *Containing Nationalism* is cited, but simply among those numerous books that treat nationalism as a modern belief system. *Containing Nationalism* is more original than that, and could have been a fertile source of testable hypotheses, which seem to fit well with some of the materials that English presents. Part of Hechter's problematic is to explain attempted secession (the departure of an existing territory and its respective persons from a state to create a new sovereign nation-state), *and* the containment of secession. Secession is political, and has to be explained politically, he argues. His key idea is that secessionism is a strategic response to 'direct rule', that is, to a political centre's displacement of traditional élites who have enjoyed some degree of provincial autonomy. 'Indirect rule' or 'autonomy', especially if applied early, and maintained with flexibility, staunches secessionist dispositions through the incorporation of key political élites. An obvious agenda suggests itself: a comparative assessment of the Welsh, Scottish and Irish disposition to secede from the United Kingdom. The successful 'containing of nationalism' was in fact the norm in agrarian empires in which systems of indirect rule or 'dual polities' were technological necessities. By contrast, the modern centralized and penetrative state, facilitated by the resources of industrialization and modern militarism, disrupts older modes of autonomy and is therefore more likely to provoke nationalist responses in the periphery. This theoretical lens is suggestive for Irish history. It treats nationalism as a dependent variable, and central state activity as the independent variable. Its key hypotheses are that attempts to conquer Ireland and to accompany them with direct rule from London provoke nationalist responses — whether in the reactions of Gaelic lords unhappy with metropolitan efforts to monopolize political patronage, or those of eighteenth-century

29 Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (London, 1960); O'Leary, 'Myths and Method of Kedourie's *Nationalism*'

30 Elie Kedourie, ed., *Nationalism in Asia and Africa* (London, 1971)

31 John Hutchinson, 'Cultural Nationalism, Elite Mobility and Nation-Building: Communitarian Politics in Modern Ireland', *British Journal of Sociology*, 38, 4 (1987), 482–501; *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State* (London, 1987); 'Moral Innovators and the Politics of Regeneration: The Distinctive Role of Cultural Nationalists in Nation-Building', *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 23, 1–2 (1992), 101–17

32 Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1966* (London, 1975)

33 Ian S. Lustick, *State-Building Failure in British Ireland and French Algeria*, Research Series, Number 63 (Berkeley, 1985); *Unsettled States, Disputed Lands: Britain and Ireland, France and Algeria, Israel and the West Bank-Gaza* (Ithaca, 1993)

Anglo-Irish Protestant Patriots seeking to govern Ireland without reference to London. Hechter's lens suggests that accompanying centralization with novel settler élites (and the importing of massively disruptive whole settler societies) is even more likely to provoke nationalist responses. The approach suggests that the break-up of the Union was the predictable consequence of refusing a home rule settlement early and flexibly. It suggests that we should read the Act of Union as an act of centralization; and the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 as a belated effort to 'contain nationalism' by creating two local Irish forms of home rule. Explaining the failure to deliver a home rule settlement before 1920 in turn requires a focus on Irish Protestants (especially Ulster Protestants), not as Protestants *per se*, but rather in their historic formation as privileged settlers. Hechter, like Gellner and Kedourie, in short, is not mined for explanation in the way he could be. Even though English has read all three authors, and summarized part of what they say, he has not used them for explanatory purposes.

Secession may also be conceived as the end-point of a régime's failure to render a territory's status 'hegemonic', that is, unquestionably part of the 'natural' order. Political scientist Ian Lustick's *Unsettled States, Disputed Lands*, not cited, is a major effort to explain why Britain, France and Israel respectively failed to render the incorporation of Ireland, Algeria and the West Bank and Gaza as 'hegemonic'.[33] His answer lies in régime actions, in particular the fateful decision in each case to build settlements displacing native élites and some native populations but without entirely expelling or exterminating the natives. The existence of colonial entities within parliamentary régimes posed a simple dilemma: democratization and the expansion of full citizenship would unwind the respective conquests and damage the interests of the descendants of settlers. Variations on this thesis lie at the heart of many recent accounts of conflict in Northern Ireland. English does not explore this thesis directly, perhaps because he has not read Lustick's version, or perhaps because he has made his mind up that settler colonialism has no role to play in explaining the blockage of home rule, partition or the development and mobilization of (Northern) Irish nationalism.

A fifth source of explanatory review could have arisen from considering why Irish nationalist secessionist movements have failed (most have), and why only one has (partly) succeeded. In the wider world the number of failed secessions always exceeds the number of successful secessions, and we need to explore both failures and successes. That secessions frequently fail testifies to the strength of states, and the difficulties faced by secessionists. Should we seek uniform explanations of all attempted secessions (or successful secessions, or the failures?). Is geopolitics what matters? — that is, whether the relevant territory is controlled or contested by great powers. Are geography and topography important? Is the potentially secessionist territory mountainous, insular, contiguous? Is it the military strategy of the nationalists that is decisive for their chances? Or the régime's counter-insurgency strategy? Does democratization — through the formation of new élites and followings — precipitate the conditions for secessionist success? Do material factors matter? Is the region backward or advanced? The analytical questions continue without pause. When are secessions contested? When are they accepted? In contested cases, secessionists are called 'separatists' or 'traitorous', by 'unionists' (or 'federalists'). The language suggests betrayal within the family. Are such unionist claims 'nationalist'? Materialist theories of secession emphasize exploitation. The secessionists may claim they are being taxed without representation. They may claim the land system is exploitative, that it benefits settlers, or that the tariff system benefits the metropolis. The secessionists may argue that secession is in

their collective material self-interest. There is an abundance of Irish historiography to test such claims. Materialist explanations have problems: How do we judge their comparative importance, as motivations, or as causes? 'Group pride' and 'group self-esteem' may relate to economic variables in non-linear ways — that is, groups may seek self-government even when it is neither objectively nor subjectively in their material self-interest. 'Ethno-nationalism' may matter more than 'eco-nationalism', as Walker Connor has crisply put it.[34] The Irish data, properly evaluated, may sustain Connor's thesis. Cultural theories of secession, by contrast, emphasize cultural differences. These theories conform with nationalists'

self-conceptions of their mobilizations; and they are what English tends to accept. Yet secessionists may have significantly acculturated into the culture of the dominant group before they secede. Irish nationalists had become more like the English before the War of Independence; Northern Irish nationalists, it is widely agreed, had become more like the British before the civil rights movement and the launch of the Provisional IRA. The disposition to secede within a state may *not* be strongly related to cultural differences between potential secessionists and the dominant culture: Welsh speakers are far more culturally differentiated from Westminster than working-class Belfast Catholics. Political theories of secession,

34 Walker Connor, 'Eco- or Ethno-Nationalism?', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 7 (1984), 342–59

35   *Irish Freedom*, 62–63

by contrast, generally suggest that three variables matter in explaining nationalist support among (prospective) citizens of a secessionist state. They are *fear* (for their nation/group — which may include cultural fears, but may also be a response to past or anticipated repression); expectations of prospects for *prosperity*; and, lastly, *recognition* (of identity or status), that is, is the group in question respected as an equal, or not? The 'strong democracy thesis' suggests that democracies stop secessions because they reduce fear, enhance prosperity and settle recognition disputes (as optimistic Castilian unionists say of modern Spain). The converse implication is that Irish nationalism became secessionist because the United Kingdom was not democratic in the right ways. Explaining Irish nationalism therefore requires a rigorous appraisal of the British state and its public policies since … at least 1798. That is not provided in this book.

On building bridges between one's eyes

Having suggested the linguistic and methodological blind spots of *Irish Freedom*, let me turn to the ideological failings, where objective appraisal is necessarily more difficult. English criticizes Gerald of Wales for seeing 'history writing as involving a moral dimension', but he has morals of his own which he regularly imparts. He wishes to emphasize the permanently hybrid character of Ireland's population. He prefers to emphasize interaction, exchange and diffusion in British–Irish relations rather than conquest, colonization and control. He isolates and mocks weak points in Irish nationalist hagiography and political propaganda rather than properly addressing the catastrophic dimensions in Irish history that provided Irish nationalists with their well-documented and non-mythical resentments against British rule. He perhaps concentrates too much on politically radical Irish nationalists — the United Irishmen, the Fenians, the IRA — and

not enough on moderate Irish nationalist organizations — the Repeal movement, the Irish Parliamentary Party, the parties of independent Ireland and of Northern nationalists. The ideas of Irish liberals and non-socialist republicans are treated with less scrutiny than those of leftists, socialists, and fascists — whose tastes have always been those of demographic minorities; and Ireland's nationalist feminists, as always, are rather neglected. Data on clerics per person among Protestants compared with clerics per person among Catholics are not provided. Personal jibes are occasionally odd: Erskine Childers's use of cocaine is remarked on; it is not remarked that it did not stop him from being a first-class analyst of legal materials. And so on.

Rather than engage in tedious questioning of every normative judgement of the work, it is better to assess its ideological content by considering what it deals with brusquely — or ignores. It treats Oliver Cromwell's conquest of Ireland over one page.[35] No estimates are provided of the total death tolls this deeply unpleasant man and his henchmen produced, both in war and through laying waste fields. William Petty, a pioneering demographer, suggested one-third of Ireland's population died as a result of massacre, disease and deliberately induced famine in Cromwell's reconquest of Ireland. No reference is made to Cromwell's partially implemented expulsion programmes, offering Hell as an alternative condominium to residency in Connaught. A statue of this man — whom Irish nationalists typically consider a genocidal murderer or an ethnic cleanser, or both — stands outside the House of Commons of the Westminster parliament. No contrast better represents the rival narratives of English and Irish nation-building. Perhaps we can put matters in a different comparative perspective. What would one think of a 625-page of Zionism that minimally referenced expulsions and mass slaughter of Jews at the hands of European rulers? Or a 625-page history

of Palestinian nationalism that dealt with the suppression of the Arab Revolt and the expulsion of the Palestinians over one long paragraph, without data? The Cromwellian massacres are locally and internationally 'contextualized' by English. He observes that they occurred after the 1641 massacres of Protestant settlers in Ulster, for which a figure of 4,000 dead is provided (but with no citation); and, more obscurely, after the slaughter of Protestants in Magdeburg in 1631. English does not believe that to explain all is to excuse all, but this type of 'contextualization' veers toward apologetics.

The neglect of major colonial settlements and moments of conquest and their long-term repercussions is consistent. There is method here. The Statutes of Kilkenny (which are not quoted), we are told, 'said much more than just that the Englishness of the English in Ireland should be preserved from corrupting Gaelic influences, but it is for this that they tend to be remembered'.[36] The Penal Laws are treated over a page and half, with most words deployed there to suggest their non-implementation.[37] One can only expect some two centuries hence that an Afrikaner historian will emphasize that the apartheid laws were often not applied, and fell into desuetude. I say this in response to English's unexplained and unjustified aside that 'comparisons between the Irish Penal Laws and the twentieth century South African apartheid system are *utterly misconceived*'.[38]

He wants to emphasize the centrality of religion in the eighteenth century, and here the method reveals itself. If religion rather than colonialism is analytically primary, then Irish nationalism can be presented as collective — he prefers 'communal' — sectarianism, rather than as movements to reverse the conquest(s). The argument is this: Protestants fought and displaced Catholics from power in the seventeenth century; the Catholic population was not ethnically homogeneous, because it was a

fusion of the Old English and the Irish; ergo, it was not — then — an ethnic conflict, but a religious conflict. Yet the very fact that we can talk of the New English, the Old English and the Irish, and that English himself does so, shows the fact of ethnic differentiation, and conflict. That new settlers displaced previous settlers from power does not mean there was no distinction drawn between colonizer and colonized. Rather, the new conquest and settlement meant that the Old English who had acculturated with the Irish were reclassified as Irish Catholics, and as political inferiors. Geoffrey Keating's work, not cited, foundational for Irish nationalism, deliberately sought to incorporate the Old English into a shared Gaelic national past in opposition to the imperial New English.[39]

The allegation that religion was the great divide — rather than the major marker of the distinction between colonizer and the colonized — is said by English to demolish 'any neat sense that Irish nationalism-versus-unionism involved a native-settler division: not only were many modern Irish unionists not descended from the Plantation [*sic!*], but many of the supposed nationalist "natives" were themselves drawn from comparatively recent waves of immigration'.[40] This statement is most revealing. Settlers accompanying conquests are conflated with voluntary economic immigrants. English assumes, without citation, that 'many' modern Irish unionists are not descended from the Plantation settlers. Such statements are typical, but I have never seen them statistically verified, or documented, either by demographers or geneticists. They may be true, depending on what we mean by 'many'. If they are true, that means there must either be extensive evidence of conversion, intermarriage or illicit sex across the religious boundary, or extensive evidence of immigration of Protestants into Ireland since the eighteenth century, or some conjunction of such phenomena, which, peculiarly, escaped the attention of contemporaries and subsequent historians.

36 *Irish Freedom*, 44–45
37 *Irish Freedom*, 84–86
38 *Irish Freedom*, 83; my emphases
39 There are old and new guides to Keating: Geoffrey Keating, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn: The History of Ireland*, 4 vols., ed. D. Comyn and P. S. Dineen (London, 1902–14); Bernadette Cunningham, *The World of Geoffrey Keating: History, Myth and Religion in Seventeenth Century Ireland* (Dublin, 2000). 'Foundation of Knowledge of Ireland' is a better translation of *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* than 'History of Ireland', say those who know.
40 *Irish Freedom*, 64–65
41 *Irish Freedom*, 65

As for the assimilation of the Old English and the Gaelic Irish, this is well attested, and denied by none, and was celebrated by Geoffrey Keating (*c.* 1569–1644), but this assimilation occurred outside of Ulster, because the latter was conquered late.

English's ideological perspective is plain: let us not code the recent conflict as a settler–native conflict. As he puts it, 'can people born in a country, and possessing ancestors there who date back very many years, really be delegitimized as inauthentic settlers? Would this be an argument to deploy against Americans with Irish, or Polish, or German, or Italian ancestry, or against Pakistanis or West Indians in contemporary England?'[41] The rhetoric is revealing, but the moral

heat leads to loss of intellectual control. If there is any 'delegitimizing' going on, it is presumably because people are alleged to be authentic rather than inauthentic settlers — or descendants of such settlers. The argument conflates voluntary immigrants (the Irish and Poles in America and the Pakistanis and West Indians in England) with settler colonialists who dispossessed natives. Most importantly, the slippage reveals how politically important it is for him to code the key conflicts of recent times as religious rather than as rooted in a past settler–native confrontation. The former coding suggests that the Catholics of Ireland become the historical problem; the latter coding suggests that the British state and its settlers become the historical focus. These respective ways of framing Irish history are not likely to be resolved by empirical evidence, as English's cavalier approach to evidence on this crucial matter suggests. But both framings should be evaluated properly in any large scale explanatory evaluation.[42] It does not occur to English that to use settler colonialism as a key factor in explaining Irish nationalism's strength has no necessary consequence for political prescription. It does not follow that any settlers' descendants should be expelled. It does not follow that their presence in Ireland is now politically illegitimate, even if some say so. Explanation and prescription are not always tightly coupled.

For English, the key question of modern Irish history is 'Why did the Reformation fail in Ireland?' The assumption is that had it not failed, there would have been almost no Irish Catholics, and ergo, no Irish nationalism. He reviews a range of explanations for this failure, including: the lack of royal will (including closet Catholic kings); the lack of state capacity; the strength of reformed Catholic institutions; and 'the lack of guile, craft and subtlety involved in the attempted Protestant implementation'. He says that 'Numerous mistakes were made. Rather than dealing with the relevant Irish elites … as allies, the Tudor régime

increasingly relied instead on the policy of plantation or settlement'.[43] And they preached Protestantism in English rather than Gaelic. These 'mistakes', as we are to call them, made Protestantism seem foreign, and 'the Reformation came to be seen as an English, foreign imposition … In contrast … Catholicism came to be seen as native and indigenous' — even though, as he has spent time trying to establish, Irish Catholicism (via St. Patrick) was a British import.[44] The Tudors, like any other policymakers, were capable of errors, but they embarked upon colonial settlements for a reason. They wanted to secure Ireland. The failure of the new Protestants to preach extensively in Irish may also have been no mistake: seeking conversion across the linguistic boundary would have removed the barriers between the new colonists and the Irish.

A last reflection. No history of Irish nationalism can avoid evaluation of violence, including insurgent violence, state repression and paramilitary brutality. English has an entirely commendable distaste for violence. But he is not impartial between his state and Irish nationalists. He cites Michael Davitt for the view that 'England's rule of Ireland is government by physical force, and not by constitutional methods', and observes that such views could legitimate 'cruel and awful acts'.[45] Yet he does not directly engage Davitt's thesis with arguments. There is a consistent underemphasis in his book on the repressive and illiberal nature of British rule in Ireland — a judgement that is not intended to justify a single killing by any Irish nationalist, past or present. General Lake's coercion of Ulster before the 1798 uprising, the police surveillance of nineteenth-century republicans, the undemocratic nature of the Union in Ireland, internment without trial in 1971, to name but a few examples, are not given their appropriate historical weight and impact.

He writes of Robert Emmet that 'in truth the notion that Irish freedom could be won and

42 John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland: Broken Images* (Oxford, 1995)
43 *Irish Freedom*, 52
44 *Irish Freedom*, 53
45 *Irish Freedom*, 213

46 *Irish Freedom*, 123

Irish differences resolved through violence remains as questionable now as it was in 1803'.[46] Independent Ireland obtained its freedom through both democratic and violent means. Its independence was resisted both by coercion and undemocratic means. After a very long period of violence, Northern Ireland now has an admirable political settlement. It would be pleasant to conclude that both of Ireland's current political régimes could have materialized without violence by Irish nationalists, but, regrettably, nothing in English's book compels this conclusion.

Spinoza, the first modern secular democratic republican, declared that the purpose of the state is political freedom. The typical mobilizing purpose of political nationalism is freedom from an empire or from a state that blocks collective self-government or otherwise maltreats a nation. Ireland's nationalists did not win self-government from the British state by exclusively peaceful means. It is unclear that they could have done so. Ireland's history within the Union of Great Britain and Ireland, and Northern Ireland's subsequent history within the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, is a reproach to those who favour regulating national, ethnic and religious differences through integrationist and unitary government. Integration has its place with immigrant minorities; but it cannot settle national minorities. The prospective resolution of the Northern Ireland conflict shows the merits of consociational and federal philosophies, institutions, policies and norms. A more flexible British state might have been able to deliver a federal reconstruction of the Isles in the nineteenth century, which would have left Ireland associated with but not subordinated to the British state. It did not do so partly because it was in the grip of an imperialist unionism — a British nationalism. Yet Robert Emmet's epitaph may be written because his country has taken its place among the free nations of the earth. ■