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Past History and Present Politics: Roy Foster,
historian

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On 12 July 1933 it was reported that two members of the Scottish Protestant League were fined £65 each for defacing a painting in the Stormont Parliament building entitled ‘The Entry of William III into Ireland with Count Schomberg.’ Red paint was thrown all over the painting and the figure of a friar was slashed. It was no mindless attack. The perpetrators of the offense acted in sympathy with an earlier resolution of the Ulster Protestant League that the picture be withdrawn from Stormont as it ‘depicted King William III in association with the Pope.’ Despite the historical record showing that the Pope had supported William of Orange against James II, it was wrong to portray the Pope in the company of King William. Past history, or to be more precise the myth that they had fashioned from the past, certainly influenced this action in the present. Examples of similar historical perspectives are to be found in nationalist interpretations of history. We are introduced immediately to an important component of the contemporary historical debate: the existence of two past realities shaping the popular mind — one deriving from an accurate understanding of the past, the other residing in the world of myth in which there is no place either for accuracy or objectivity. The historian alone may not be able to influence the individual and group psyche that is nourished by a mythic veneration of the past, but, nevertheless, his main task must be to present as factually correct a picture of the past as possible. It is in that general context that Roy Foster’s *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (1988) should be judged.

One can agree, in part, with Foster’s sentiments expressed in the *Irish Review* of 1986 that “for the last twenty years academic audiences settling down before a historical lecture have muttered wearily to each other ‘Oh god, not more revisionism.’ ” I say agree in part because, while it has to be accepted that abstract discussion of revisionism is liable to induce feelings of boredom amongst academics and newspaper readers alike, his identification of a twenty year span of revisionist debate raises some questions. It may be thought that a continuum of revisionist thought has existed from 1966 to the present. Such is not the case. There is a marked difference of approach between the historians of the 1960’s and those of the present day. To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising historians of diverse backgrounds and traditions combined together to produce three major books about the Rising and its origins. They attempted, in the words of F.X. Martin, ‘to transfer the rising of 1916 from the realm of mythology to the sphere of history.’ Here we have an historical objective that most would be happy to embrace, but a change in methodology has emerged since the 1960’s. The outbreak of the ‘Troubles’ in the north in 1969 has changed things utterly. One is forcibly reminded that if the past can shape the present, so too present events may fashion our interpretation of the past. The writings of Conor Cruise O’Brien serve as a litmus paper to illustrate this point: in 1966 he could write of ‘The Embers of Easter’ that ‘it is quite proper and fitting that Dublin should have held commemoration’ of the Rising; he did not say the same for the seventy-fifth anniversary. Then he wrote (30 March 1991): ‘For the State to compete with the IRA in commemorating 1916, only allows them to charge the State with hypocrisy, in failing to follow the example of those whom they purport to honour ... in any case, and for the good of our democracy, the cult of 1916 is clearly in decline.’ Herein lies the origins of contemporary revisionism: on the one hand, historians have been reluctant to write anything that might sustain the republican, national/Irish view of history; on the other hand, they have endeavoured to promote a story of Ireland’s past which serves to undermine the IRA mandate. The story told may be sound politics but it not always sound history. Moreover, the telling of that story tends to be inimical to the traditional aspirations of Irish national

identity. It is in that particular context that the revisionism associated with Roy Foster should be located.

Modern historical revisionism of the genre of Roy Foster first manifested itself, I believe, with the Ford lectures of Professor F.S.L. Lyons at Oxford University in 1978 which were subsequently published as *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland, 1890-1939* (1979). This book which was far different in tone to other scholarly works of Lyons was deeply influenced by Patrick O'Farrell's *Ireland's English Question. Anglo-Irish Relations 1534-1970* (1971). The findings and sentiments expressed in O'Farrell and Lyons have been further elaborated and extended in Oliver MacDonagh's *States of Mind. A Study of Anglo-Irish conflict 1780-1980* (1983). It is these books that have, in large part, shaped the character of Foster's *Modern Ireland*. In the first paragraph of that book Foster declared that he had relied on 'some masterly books that are not general histories but present general arguments;' and in his very first footnote he identified the 'masterly books' as those of O'Farrell, Lyons and MacDonagh. By chance my doctoral thesis, completed in 1986, had centred on the source material used by these books, especially that of O'Farrell. I was aware that Lyons was 'much indebted' to him for his understanding of Gaelic and religious matters at the turn of this century; I was aware too that O'Farrell's fifteen or so citations of the *Lyceum* and the *Catholic Bulletin* were, almost without exception, either inaccurate or taken out of context — and it was these general references (no specific footnotes were given) that had won for him the indebtedness of Lyons! My concern at that time was voiced in an article in *Studies* in 1988 entitled 'The Canon of Irish Cultural History: Some Questions.' My contention now is that Roy Foster, by accepting the findings of these authors uncritically has incorporated into his work several erroneous uses of source material. His attempt, therefore, to write, as he puts it, 'a narrative with an interpretative level' is quite literally impaired at source. A faulty narrative has inevitably led to several false interpretations and these are affecting the present political debate. Vagueness is a complaint that Michael Laffin, in his contribution to *Revising the Rising* (1991) has quite rightly levelled against much anti-revisionist literature. My critique of Foster, therefore, will attempt to be as specific as possible, and will focus on his use of sources.

His treatment of the Gaelic League may serve as a suitable starting point for this examination. Foster's conclusion to his survey of the language movement is uncompromisingly critical. 'The emotions focused by cultural revivalism around the turn of the century', he declared, 'were fundamentally sectarian and even racialist.' To a high degree this strong, even strident judgment was based on an incident in 1906 involving Canon Hannay. Both MacDonagh and Foster relate that Hannay was illegally excluded from a Gaelic League Fheis after differences with a Catholic priest and from this they draw their sweeping conclusions.

Having uncovered the original minute book of the Gaelic League in the course of my research, it is necessary to record that Canon Hannay was elected to the League Executive in August 1906, and that in November of the same year he resolved his differences with the Executive. Indeed a Catholic priest resigned because more was not done to uphold the Catholic position! While these records were not available to Foster, the published writings of Canon Hannay were. In 1906, in a lecture entitled 'Is the Gaelic League Political?' Hannay stated that 'inside the Gaelic League there is no religious strife or religious bitterness. It is an amazing thing ... that here in Ireland there exists an organisation where men and women of different creeds meet in friendliness; where priest and parson love one another.'

The words speak for themselves and Hannay was to utter the same sentiments later in his life. So too did Douglas Hyde, the Protestant President of the League. In 1913 he told a gathering of Protestants in Dublin that : 'For 20 years he had been elected President of the Gaelic League, and never knew during that period the opinion of any member to be shaken or biased one iota by sectarian considerations.' The reality of the Gaelic League, as portrayed by the Protestants Hannay and Hyde, bears no relation to the 'sectarian' and 'racialist' language

movement depicted by Foster. In like manner the attempt by Foster to extend this pretended anti-Protestant character of the Gaelic League to embrace the character of the emerging Irish nationalist movement is also blemished at source.

Foster writes that 'to a strong element within the Gaelic League, literature in English was Protestant as well as anti-national; patriotism was Gaelicist and spiritually Catholic.' A line of contact may be traced linking this conclusion with Lyons and through him O'Farrell, where we find the observation that a Catholic priest joined the League because of 'the conviction that British literature was spiritually destructive.'

This judgment of O'Farrell was based on a quotation from the *Lyceum* of 1980 maintaining, and complaining, that 'The English literature which has come down to us is essentially Protestant.' Other passages from the same article are ignored by O'Farrell. In them we find such statements as 'with the English tongue comes too the English literature, more rich and varied than that of any modern European nation'; and 'we gladly recognise the elevated spiritual tone, the high literary morality of such Protestants as Burke and Grattan.'

From the article it is evident that the main burden of complaint was levelled against the popular publications that were coming into Ireland from England. By following O'Farrell uncritically Foster, and incidentally Lyons, have distorted not only the native Irish approach to English literature, but also the character of Irish nationalism. For the same reason Foster has misjudged the character of the 1916 Rising.

Foster portrays the Rising as coloured by the 'strain of mystic Catholicism identifying the Irish soul as Catholic and Gaelic.' The linkage with O'Farrell is again manifest: he wrote of the insurrection of 1916 that 'the message was loud and clear, Catholic Ireland fought n Easter week; pious blood had been spilt for Ireland.' The source for this conclusion was the *Catholic Bulletin*. O'Farrell claimed that, after the Rising, there took place in its pages 'a kind of canonization — in its monthly featuring of brief biographies of the Irish rank and file who fell in the rebellion.' O'Farrell even gave examples such as George Geoghegan who was described as 'an earnest and almost lifelong member of the Dominick Street Sodality of the Holy Name,' who 'received Holy communion on Easter Sunday morning.'

At first glance there appears some justification for O'Farrell's claim of 'canonization', and for what Foster terms 'martyrology'. There is, however, a simple explanation for the contents of the *Catholic Bulletin*, which completely nullifies the use made of it by O'Farrell and Foster. The editors wrote as they did because the severe laws of censorship, imposed under martial law, prevented any other expression of opinion.

J.J. O'Kelly, the editor, wrote in the first number after the Rising that one 'has little option but to overlook the political and controversial features of the upheaval and confine comment almost entirely to the Catholic and social aspects of the lives and last moments of those who died.' Records of the censor's office show that O'Kelly acted with great skill and tenacity in order to present the public with any item of information at all. He was acutely aware of the need to preserve an historic record of the men of 1916. 'To prevent the scales of history from being weighed too heavily against them,' he wrote in 1917, 'the *Catholic Bulletin* has been able to put before its readers for the past twelve months the simple record of their lives ... When the heat and passion of today shall have subsided, the records left in the back files of the *Catholic Bulletin* will be searched by students of history for material which will enable them to place in its true perspective the lives and the methods and the motives of the men of Easter week.' By failing to detect the censor's hand behind the pronouncements of the *Catholic Bulletin*, Foster has not only misrepresented the journal but also the character of those involved in the Rising. Herein lies the real gravamen of the charge against Foster, and it must be said of many others who have simply followed O'Farrell, that instead of recognising the *Catholic Bulletin* as a valuable historical source — preserved in the most challenging of

circumstances — he has misrepresented it. He has, in fact, taken the side of the censor who did not wish the true history of Ireland's struggle to be recorded.

With this attitude, largely occasioned by his dependence on O'Farrell, Foster inevitably delineates the events leading up to 1916 with a jaundiced eye. 'The Irish nationalism that had developed by this date,' (the start of the Home Rule crisis of 1921) he writes, 'was Anglo-phobic and anti-Protestant, subscribing to a theory of the "Celtic Race" that denied the "true" Irishness of Irish Protestants and Ulster Unionists, but was prepared to incorporate them into a vision of "independent Ireland" whether they wanted it or not.' This Irish nationalism is also portrayed as having an underlying revolutionary dimension. While avoiding the worst excesses of O'Farrell, Lyons and MacDonagh who branded the Gaelic League as inherently revolutionary, Foster's final verdict on Pearse is that he and MacNeill were 'cultural revolutionaries' who 'remained tactical moderates until quite late in the day.' Once again there is clear evidence linking this discernment from about 1912 of an exclusively Catholic and revolutionary nationalism with the findings of Lyons and O'Farrell: and once again it is vitiated at source. O'Farrell quoted Bishop O'Swyer of Limerick to the effect that ' "had the healing influence of native rule been felt for even a year" the 1913 strike would not have occurred ... the lesson was obvious (O'Farrell adds) — the clergy should support and encourage true nationalism. This meant not the spiritually trustworthy Irish party, but nationalism in its Gaelic form.' Serious flaws exist in this interpretation: Bishop O'Dwyer did not utter the words attributed to him; they were written by Fr Peter Dwyer SJ: and for him 'native rule' meant Home Rule. The records that we do have of Bishop O'Dwyer show that he also was a strong supporter of Redmond and Home Rule until late 1913. Instead of supporting a revolutionary nationalism in the years before 1916, the Gaelic League and the Catholic Church were identified with the eminently constitutional policy of supporting the Irish Parliamentary Party of Redmond. This reality is denied by Foster.

The political implications for the present are again momentous. By projecting a revolutionary dimension on Irish nationalism, it becomes reasonable for Unionists to distance themselves from the national movement. An argument for separation and partition is again advanced. Once the constitutional character of Irish nationalism is recognised, a different scenario emerges — partition is seen as less justifiable, and unity based on the constitutional process is seen as more reasonable. Foster's final verdict on Irish nationalism that it was 'prepared to incorporate' Unionists into a 'vision of 'independent Ireland' whether they wanted it or not,' is revealed not only as partial history, but also as a highly political statement. The image is skillfully conveyed of a majority racial group, inspired by sectarian motives, forcing a smaller racial unit to submit to its revolutionary diktat. Many questions are begged in this analysis: apart from the distorted image conveyed of religious sentiments, it should be recorded that the political wishes of Ulster had been expressed in democratic fashion to the extent that in 1916 there were 17 Home Rule MPs as opposed to 16 Unionists; and the 'independent Ireland' to which Unionists were asked to give their allegiance was committed to recognise the British King as head of the State. Neither of these important realities are put before the reader by Foster. His charges of 'sectarianism', 'racialist', 'anti-Protestant', and 'anglo-phobic', despite their flawed historical authenticity, would appear to have gained some degree of acceptability. The cumulative effect of Foster's conclusions and those of his mentors has been immense: by arguing in a subliminal manner for the separateness of the Unionists and the 'two nations theory', they have constructed an argument for partition. Some consideration of the 'two nations theory' is, therefore, both necessary and instructive.

No greater testimony to the efficacy of Foster and his mentors can be found than in the assertion of the late John Whyte, made in his *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (1990), that 'scarcely anyone ... writing in a scholarly manner on the problem now stands over the one nation theory.' Despite beginning his comprehensive survey of literature on the subject at the

start of the 'Troubles', it is of interest that Whyte makes no reference to the works of O'Farrell, Lyons and MacDonagh. He stresses instead the influence of two books published in 1972 as first questioning the nationalist ideal that the people of Ireland form one nation. Those books were Conor Cruise O'Brien's *States of Ireland*, and Garret Fitzgerald's *Towards a New Ireland*. While Whyte is quite correct to highlight the importance of these books, the authors who have fashioned the inheritance of Foster cannot be ignored. Foster's own attitude to the 'two nations theory' is revealing. He observed in a detached manner that at the time of the Home Rule crisis 'the question of whether Ireland was one nation or two hung in the air;' but he made no attempt to address the question. Alice Stopford Green, who did, is dismissed as 'a zealot', despite the recognition of her work by such varied and distinguished contemporaries as James Connolly, Eoin MacNeill and George Russell. This hasty and ill-tempered rejection betrays a choice of historical approach which is instructive. In the historical climate of the time Green's book, *The Making of Ireland and its Undoing* (1908) was seen as significant: more, it was seen as dangerous. It was banned from the library of the RDS. As a reviewer of the time put it, she had 'set herself the agreeable task of demolishing a political myth.' That myth was the superiority of English over Irish culture and institutions. She was critical of Sir Horace Plunkett's *Ireland in the New Century* as being coloured by his 'ascendancy prejudices'; and was even more hostile to Provost Mahaffy's denial of Irish values, observing that 'in any other history than that of Ireland it would be unfair to heap up these comprehensive accusations, taken from hostile sources.'

One cannot but be struck by the similarity with today's historical debate: then, as now, 'myth' was at the heart of the discussion, focusing on the same issue of difference and Protestant superiority; and those engaged in defending such ascendancy were charged with using 'hostile sources'. Foster identifies with those writers at the turn of the century who championed the ascendancy cause: he has sympathy, as did Lyons, for 'the invigorating text' of Sir Horace Plunkett's *Ireland in the New Century*, making no reference either to the criticism of Alice Green or to the major hostile critique of Mgr Michael O'Riordain — O'Farrell does make reference to O'Riordain's book. The recent *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* pays fitting cognisance of the Plunkett/O'Riordain debate and includes extracts from their major works. As Seamus Deane expressed it: 'No critique of Plunkett and O'Riordain can deny the historical importance of their dispute. Their terms survive the present day.' By omitting any reference to O'Riordain, Foster paints an inadequate picture of the past and brings the to present a partial version of history. This trend is furthered by the benign recognition accorded to Provost John Pentland Mahaffy of Trinity. Despite his well-known attacks on the Irish language and literature, which were exposed as baseless by European scholars, and his publicly expressed view that the British in Ireland 'did not destroy anything either in religion or in society that would have produced any real civilisation,' Foster simply lists his scholarly publications. It is not surprising that sympathy with the mentality of Plunkett and Mahaffy should fashion Foster's view of modern Ireland in the way that it has; nor is it surprising, indeed, it is eminently understandable, that he should incline towards a 'two-nations theory'.

Most commentators in the early years of the century, it should be recorded, were opposed to the theory. Alice Green, writing in 1912, agreed that two races, two religions, two factions existed in Ireland but of two nations she wrote: 'this new term seems to find favour as a convenient means of adding discredit to the notion of nationality, and thus by indirect means weakening the claim of any and every nation.' 'What,' she added pertinently, 'is the name of that other nation in Ireland?' John Redmond totally rejected the theory as an 'abomination and a blasphemy'. George Russell (AE), a northern Ireland Protestant, maintained that the theory was deliberately fostered by the British government. Writing at the height of the debate on the Government of Ireland Act in 1920 he stated that 'it was not the policy of the British Government that one section of the Irish people should trust the other section; and Mr Lloyd

George invented the ‘two nations’ theory to keep Ireland divided.’ This suggestion has recently found some support in the findings of David Miller in his book *Queen’s Rebels* where he makes it plain that the theory ‘seems to have been introduced by British rather than Irish Unionists.’ Foster is silent on this major issue, and the silence is significant.

The option for Sir Horace Plunkett and the rejection of Alice Green tell us much about Foster’s historical pedigree. In the past it would have been simple to brand him a Trinity historian, but that is too facile, and too unfair on the current school of Trinity historians. R.B. McDowell’s life of *Alice Stopford Green. A Passionate historian* (1967) provides ample evidence that there is more than one historical school at Trinity — as does the recent collection of essays edited by Ciaran Brady — but regrettably this book is not referred to by Foster. (He only admits two valuable biographies, those of Edwards *Pearse*; and of Inglis *Casement*). Perceptively, McDowell lists the ascendancy historians with whom Green took issue, Froude, Lecky, Falkiner, Bagwell and Orpen; and elucidates her complaint that these writers were ‘fundamentally wrong’ and creating a ‘political myth’. Their writings were characterised, she maintained, by critical hostility to things Irish and by a highly selective use of source material. Foster’s historical pedigree stands four-square with these writers. Possibly it is not too far-fetched to detect a connecting thread, however vestigial, with Foster and the English historians of the Tudor and Stuart era. Sir John Davies, Edmund Spenser, William Camden and others revived the ill-founded myths of Giraldus Cambrensis to justify conquest and colonisation; Froude and Lecky, in their disparate ways, wrote in the same vein to justify ascendancy; and in our own time the effect of the writings of Foster, Lyons, MacDonagh and O’Farrell is to enhance the standing of the majority in Northern Ireland, and by so doing to justify partition. The method of approach has not changed: difference is highlighted; native Catholic Irish inferiority and hostility are stressed: Protestant English superiority and civility are emphasised. The use of sources to justify such assertions is as suspect and highly selective in the twentieth century as it was in the sixteenth.

Apart from these major errors of accuracy and judgment there are many smaller, but significant, factual errors. But sufficient evidence has been offered to indicate that the book is hardly reliable for reference purposes. This failing together with a lack of comprehensiveness, marked especially by his treatment of such diverse themes as the Catholic Church and women, militates against the book’s value as a general survey. Margaret Ward, provoked by a slighting reference to her own book, has made a case for women — that is, has made it clear that they have not been adequately treated by Foster. Possibly, as Ward suggests, there may be some political implication behind the omissions of such women as Albina Brodrick, Charlotte Despard, Kate O’Callagan and Mary MacSwiney. In this regard it should be noted that Lyons, a formative influence on Foster, has the same dismissive attitude to women who sympathised with the nationalist cause, especially to those who were of the Anglo-Irish tradition. He even linked Countess Markievicz’s and Maud Gonne’s loss of personal beauty to their deracination — the abandonment of their caste. While avoiding this extreme position of Lyons, Foster’s own manner and methodology in regard to women leaves much to be desired. The Catholic Church has also been poorly served by Foster’s lack of objectivity. The omission of Mgr O’Riordain is compounded by the lack of mention of Archbishops Walsh and Mannix, Bishops O’Wyer and Fogarty, and Fathers O’Growney, O’Hickey, O’Flanagan, Finlay — to list but a few. Inevitably Foster’s judgments about the Catholic Church have suffered by neglecting these figures who were, in their various ways, leading figures in the language movement, the cultural revival, and in politics. Possibly of even greater importance is the fact that Foster fails to delineate the major areas in which the Catholic Church intervened in religious and political matters in the years before the creation of the Irish Free State. The *Ne Temere* marriage decree of 1908 is not mentioned in the context of the 1912 Home Rule Bill; the reluctance of the Catholic hierarchy to support the 1916 Rising is not stressed; the

opposition of the hierarchy to the Democratic Programme is not mentioned; it is not adverted to that Fr O'Flanagan was a suspended priest when he was chaplain to Dail Eireann in 1919; the explicit rejection by the hierarchy of de Valera's request to recognise the Irish Republic is ignored; and the cooperation of some members of the hierarchy with British officials to facilitate the passing of the Treaty is not revealed. In short Foster's history neither recognises the positive achievements of Catholic churchmen, nor does it reveal the grounds for genuine grievance that Unionists, Republicans and socialists had for their treatment by the Church.

Two conclusions may be made: one, historical; the other, political. In historical terms it may safely be said that Foster, by relying uncritically on the 'masterly works' of O'Farrell, Lyons and MacDonagh, has unwittingly been led away from the path of accuracy. The masters have let the master down. Foster's attempt, therefore, to write 'a narrative with an interpretative level' has been impaired: the narrative is unreliable and the interpretations are unsound.

The political implications are no less momentous. As Foster himself said in 1984, in an article on 'The Problem of Writing Irish History', history has an 'active and continuing role as actor in current political events.' While no political purpose may be ascribed to Foster's *Modern Ireland*, his own testimony indicates that it must have political effects.

These effects are both profound and relevant. By branding the native Irish as sectarian and racist, Foster has constructed a subliminal argument for separation — for an acceptance of the 'two nations' theory and of a partitioned Ireland. In short, one has an argument for an acceptance of the Government of Ireland Act of 1920, and for the abolition of Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution.

One cannot but feel that a finer regard for source material would result in entirely different conclusions: unity amidst diversity rather than separation and partition would appear to be indicated by the historical evidence. The 'two nations' theory would stand rejected and doubts cast upon the authenticity of partition. Respect for the two races, two cultures and the two religions that exist on the island of Ireland would be matched by a recognition that these differences were best reconciled within the perimeter of one country.