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## **Review Essay**

### **Irish America and the Ulster Conflict**

Wilson, Andrew J. *Irish America and the Ulster Conflict 1968-1995*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995.

From the early 1800s until the present numerous Irish-Americans have maintained interest in their ancestral homeland and some have been involved in attempting to change the course of Irish and British history. As Andrew J. Wilson demonstrates in his well written book, such interest and involvement have gone through a number of peaks and valleys. After the end of the Irish War of Independence in 1921 Irish-Americans' concerns about Irish affairs declined and interest diminished to an even greater extent by the end of World War II. However, after the start of the Ulster Troubles in the late 1960s and early 1970s, American interest as well as direct involvement quickly gained momentum.

Focusing primarily on the years 1968-95, Wilson discusses in detail the development and maintenance of militant American support organizations for the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) and its political wing Sinn Féin. Considerable attention is given to the Northern Aid Committee (Noraid), its fund raising efforts, internal disputes, members' involvement in gunrunning, and its alleged assistance to terrorists on the run in North America. The antics of such controversial Noraid leaders as Martin Galvin, whose visits to Northern Ireland in defiance of an "exclusion order" resulted in some major civil disturbances, are also discussed.

On another level the militant Irish National Caucus (INC) and its leading apologist for the PIRA, Father Sean McManus, functioned as a congressional lobbying group. The INC concentrated mainly on publicizing alleged human rights abuses by the security forces, securing US visas for republicans, and demanding a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland. Along with some more moderate organizations and individuals, the INC was also very active in the MacBride Principles (controversial proposed regulations designed to prevent discrimination in the work place) campaign. Such efforts had more of an impact on state and local governments than it did at the federal level. However, according to Wilson, MacBride Principles advocates "played a key role in pushing the British government toward reform of its fair employment legislation in 1989."

Wilson contrasts the approach taken by militant Irish-American supporters of Sinn Féin/IRA with that of constitutional nationalists who, more often than not, were guided in their thinking by Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) leader John Hume as well as by representatives of the southern Irish government. The author discusses the accomplishment of the leading constitutional nationalists (Edward M. Kennedy, Daniel P. Moynihan, Thomas P. O'Neill and Hugh Carey) and also analyzes their developing political maturity and knowledge of Irish affairs. While these Four Horsemen forcefully

condemned those Americans who supported the PIRA, they were strong advocates for supplying American economic support to troubled areas of the North. In 1981, the Four Horsemen established the congressional Friends of Ireland, which played a major role, in coordination with Taoiseach (Prime Minister of the Irish Republic) Garret FitzGerald and the SDLP, in bringing about the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985. The Friends of Ireland's influence in Congress resulted in continued financial contributions to the International Fund for Ireland, and their involvement in the 1994 peace negotiations, according to Wilson, proved to be fruitful.

If this reviewer had to use one word to characterize how Wilson presents his material it would be that he is objective. If he has a personal viewpoint that favors any particular players or organizations involved in the Ulster conflict (and one is tempted to assume that he, having grown up in Northern Ireland in a family of "mixed Protestant and Catholic ancestry," must have developed some significant political opinions) it is not apparent from his writing. While the words and behavior of some of the individuals that the author writes about will undoubtedly disturb and may even infuriate some readers, as they sometimes did this reviewer, Wilson, the academic, never loses control of his emotions and refrains from making any strong value judgments. If there are heroes and villains involved in the Ulster Troubles, and truthfully there are plenty of both, Wilson leaves it to his readers to pick and choose what category of good, evil or variants in between the players in the conflict should be placed. Be assured, however, that despite the author's rigorous objectivity, Irish America and the Ulster Conflict is still lively and, if one is interested in the subject at all, fascinating reading.

Again, Wilson provides food for thought but leaves it up to us, if we so choose, to place individuals into typologies. Determining who the good and bad guys are will, of course, depend on the reader's own personal and political viewpoints. Certainly if you can find no possible justification for PIRA violence, feel that it is the responsibility of the United States to fight against what it defines as terrorism on all fronts, or if you simply are of the opinion that the American government should not to any significant degree interfere in the internal affairs of another country (especially a valued ally) then you will not, after reading the book, find fault with the Reagan or Bush administrations' approach to the problems of Northern Ireland. President Reagan's steadfast resistance to being pressured by pro-Irish nationalist interest groups and his consistent efforts to prosecute and extradite republican terrorists who fled to the United States will draw praise in certain circles. Some, however, may want to consider whether or not the Reagan and Bush administrations were primarily concerned with the combating of world-wide terrorism or simply with maintaining the "special relationship" with the United Kingdom. You be the judge.

The Four Horsemen will, of course, win high praise from those who are advocates of the constitutional nationalist position. Unfortunately, Kennedy et al. may elicit similar reactions from those readers whose knowledge of the political situation in Northern Ireland does not go beyond what they have gained from reading Wilson's book. The author did not really examine John Hume's political background and the role that he plays in his own country. This reviewer is in no way suggesting that he should have. In fact, I

would argue that such an examination would be beyond the scope of the book. However, one must realize that John Hume is the Four Horsemen's chief mentor to the point that they seemingly are incapable of thinking Irish without calling on him for instructions, and Hume is indeed a controversial character. Some readers who know little more about Hume other than that he is the leader of the most popular predominantly Catholic political party and that he is a strong advocate of achieving political goals through peaceful means may be left with the impression that he is beyond reproach. It is then logical to conclude that his disciples, the Four Horsemen, will always do the right thing. However, as a proponent of a united Ireland and a critic of the British government, Hume ruffles more than a few unionist feathers. On the other hand, it is not uncommon to hear Sinn Féin/IRA supporters accuse him of being "pro-Brit." He has a number of critics in his own political party whose accusations against him range from the claim that he makes little attempt to understand the concerns of Protestants to the charge that by sitting down at the negotiating table with Gerry Adams he was solely responsible for providing a terror organization with a face of respectability and, by doing so, causing the SDLP to lose votes to Sinn Féin in recent elections. Most of those who choose to read Wilson's book will be sophisticated enough to already know that John Hume is a politician that stirs up controversy and by following his lead, the Four Horsemen will, at least in Ireland and the United Kingdom, do the same. The novice reader, however, might not understand this.

If you are a militant nationalist you will certainly be enthralled with the likes of the outspoken apologists for Sinn Féin/IRA Long Island councilman Peter King and Mario Biaggi, now deceased. Again, the author simply lays out the facts, does not attribute sinister motives to the words and actions of politicians and avoids moralizing. After reading his book, however, some may have reason to regard a few political figures as being, if not dupes of republican propagandists, shameless political opportunists who pander to Irish-American voters regardless of the international consequences. When thinking of those who have played the "green card," Edward Koch, Geraldine Ferraro, Mario Cuomo, and Alphonse D. Amato come to this reviewer's mind.

In his "Postscript," Wilson examines the Clinton administration's involvement in the Ulster situation. As a candidate Bill Clinton promised a gathering of Irish-Americans that he would appoint a "special envoy for Northern Ireland" and grant a visa to Gerry Adams. When he became president he did not act on these promises and, for some time, it did not appear that he would. However, as Wilson observed, "momentous political developments" began to take shape. Key players began to talk seriously with each other: Hume with Adams and John Major with Taoiseach Albert Reynolds. Believing that Gerry Adams was attempting to find a way for the PIRA to end its campaign of violence John Hume, Ted Kennedy, Daniel Moynahan, US Ambassador to Ireland Jean Kennedy-Smith and others persuaded the president to grant Adams a visa to enter the United States. By doing so Clinton was taking certain risks. As Wilson indicates: "In addition to opposing his own government agencies and antagonizing the British, he also ran the risk of the IRA greatly embarrassing him by committing a major act of violence." On the other hand, by taking a chance with Adams, he, more or less, obligated the Sinn Féin president to live up to his promise of "taking the gun out of politics." If Adams did not do just that, it

appeared that he had no hope of gaining further American cooperation, to say nothing of support for his political position.

Hopefully, concluding this review with a personal aside will not be out of order. As Wilson points out, President Clinton granted the visa over the objections of Attorney General Janet Reno, Secretary of State Warren Christopher, the FBI, the CIA and others. Wilson also mentions that US Consul-General in Belfast Valentino Martinez felt that Adams had not altered his views on violence enough to be deserving of a visa. It is this reviewer's firm belief, which is based on numerous discussions with political figures and activists of all stripes in Northern Ireland, that if key unionists and a number of other representatives of constitutional parties as well as members of certain rights organizations (such as Families Against Intimidation and Terror) had not found solace in knowing that "Val" Martinez was on their side in opposing the issuing of a visa to Adams, then relations between them and the Clinton administration would have been damaged beyond repair. Yet, for reasons that none can be absolutely sure of, Clinton did take risks when granting Gerry Adams a visa. However, while it has never, to this reviewer's knowledge, been discussed in the media, for the reasons mentioned above, the president was very lucky to have a man in Belfast who, unlike himself, was known to be understanding and appreciative of the concerns of all the law-abiding and decent people of Northern Ireland. Martinez no longer serves in Belfast.

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