Editors' Introduction

More than ten years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, which purported to bring an end to the conflict in the north of Ireland, the unresolved issue of the national question in Ireland remains central to Irish and British imperial history. As the failure of partition continues to influence the politics of both countries, its legacy and the historical legacy of colonialism that gave rise to it continue to have fundamental implications for the evolution of the modern world and the histories of colonialism and postcolonialism. Despite the fading of the conflict in the north from international news in recent years, history in Ireland remains a live issue. Competing claims to the nature of the recent conflict and how it is framed in the mainstream media and popular culture continue. Only recently the BBC ran an online poll to determine if the events of the past forty years in the north constitute definition as a "war" or the more ubiquitous characterizations of "security problem" or "terrorism." While this online poll remains an insignificant blip in the discourse surrounding recent Irish history, it serves to illustrate the broader battles for the interpretation of history waged not only in the realm of popular discourse but also in the political landscape north and south of the border and among academics and historians.

In the political realm, the competing claims to the interpretation of Irish history were recently highlighted very publicly by the furor over the celebration of the ninetieth anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising, the event that paved the way for the Irish war of independence, which in turn led to partition, civil war, and the creation of the modern Irish state. The Irish government decided to hold a military parade (the first since such parades were abandoned in the 1970s and the commemorations downgraded, lest they be seen to add support for, or legitimacy to, the then current upsurge in militant republicanism) and to claim the mantel of modern Irish republicanism and its origins for the governing party Fianna Fáil, taking it away from Sinn Féin, at the time making electoral gains in both parts of Ireland.

Radical History Review
Issue 104 (Spring 2009) DOI 10.1215/01636545-2008-064
© 2009 by MARHO: The Radical Historians' Organization, Inc.

Downloaded from https://read.dukeupress.edu/radical-history-review/article-pdf/2009/104/1/467643/RHR104-01_Intro.pdf
by guest
on 22 January 2019

While the main political parties in Ireland, including Sinn Féin, have their origins in the events leading up to and occurring after the Easter Rising, the debates raging in the Irish papers over the nature of the commemoration and the legacy of modern Irish republicanism are symptomatic of broad divisions within Ireland. At stake in many of these debates was the issue of whether or not the renewal of an official embracement of the 1916 Rising and armed insurrection against the British presence in Ireland would lend a new legitimacy to the perception of the struggle waged against British rule in the north by the modern IRA (Irish Republican Army). Historians in particular are divided over the interpretation and presentation of the histories of armed insurrection, guerrilla war, and the struggle for national liberation in Ireland.

Revisionism among Irish historians has contributed the problematic issue of the recognition of the legitimacy of the various forms taken by the struggle for national independence. The repositioning of British rule in Ireland in many works published by revisionist historians serves not only to dilute the key role played in Irish history by national and class struggle but also to legitimize British imperialism itself. Historical revisionism can be traced to the 1930s, when a number of Irish historians began to follow the lead of earlier British historians to create an objective, or "value-free," history of Ireland devoid of what they perceived as "nationalist myths." With the advent of the recent conflict, revisionism gained ground and reached its high point in the 1980s and 1990s with the publication of Roy Foster's *Modern Ireland: 1600–1972*.[1] Here Foster largely presents the struggle against British imperialism as driven by elaborate or exaggerated nationalist narratives based on a sense of victimhood and mythologizing and posits that British policy in Ireland, while often brutal, was not essentially a bad thing. Far from creating an objective or value-free historiography, revisionist arguments more often than not articulate partisan political alignments with a conservative agenda that seeks to neutralize and delegitimize all forms of rebellion, resistance, and radical politics in Ireland. The question must be asked of the revisionists and of historians in general, "What does it mean to deny the existence of a national revolution in Ireland, and what are the implications of this for historians overall?"

This issue of *Radical History Review* sharpens a focus on the so-called Irish question. The term "Irish question" itself was introduced by the British ruling establishment in the nineteenth century and was used in reference to the persistence of demands for Irish independence. Far from being a term confined to a previous epoch in Irish history, the Irish question, or the "national question" as it is also known, remains prevalent with regard to the legacy of postcolonialism in the modern Irish Republic and in the contested Northern Irish statelet. The features included in this issue not only contribute to our understanding of the shaping of contemporary Ireland but also speak to the broader relevance of the Irish experience for examining and understanding imperialism and resistance in a global context.

Downloaded from https://read.dukeupress.edu/radical-history-review/article-pdf/2009/104/1/467643/RHR104-01_Intro.pdf
by guest
on 22 January 2019

Features in this issue include contributions from Bill Kissane and Pauline Collombier-Lakeman, both of whom examine the issue of constitutional nationalism in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland. Kissane raises the question of how far Sinn Féin went in engaging with and learning from political cultures other than the British in terms of its constitutional radicalism. Collombier-Lakeman highlights the ambiguities of constitutional nationalism and the Home Rule movement's accommodation with and tacit criticism of British imperialism. Kerby Miller examines Protestant society and Unionist hegemony in nineteenth-century Ulster. In charting the trajectory of Unionist hegemony, he highlights how the radical politics of Presbyterians was largely transplanted overseas to the United States by mass emigration in the wake of the United Irishmen uprising and eventually replaced with a conservative Unionist outlook among Ulster's Protestants. The recent history of Irish Republicanism and its shifts in relation to the peace process in the north of Ireland are examined in a joint contribution by Mark Hayes and Kevin Bean. With the end of the IRA's war against Britain, the project for equality and justice in the face of dominance by the neoliberal model of capitalism can only really be delivered, the authors argue, by a republicanism that is explicitly socialist. John Corbally explores immigration and racism as experienced by the Irish in postwar Britain, while the historiography of race and racialization in Ireland is examined by Steve Garner. Both Corbally and Garner scrutinize the social structure of race as defined and contextualized by power relations in Britain and Ireland.

The period of the Irish war of independence and the civil war is examined in a reflection on Ken Loach's award-winning film, *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*, by the historical advisor for the film, Donal Ó Drisceoil. In light of the debates surrounding the commemoration of the Easter Rising, Loach's film also polarized critics and media pundits in its uncompromising examination of state violence, guerrilla war, and counterinsurgency in Ireland. In his acceptance speech for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, Loach remarked on the lack of understanding of British imperial history in Britain itself and on the lessons to be derived in understanding the situation in Iraq by examining it through the lens of the anticolonial struggle in Ireland.

Finally, book reviews by Diane F. George examine the topography of colonial Ireland, while Mary Conley reviews the parallels between the colonial experiences of Ireland and India. In this issue's "Curated Spaces" section, artist Kevin Noble features photographs of some of the men and women who formed the support network for the modern Irish Republican movement in the United States and Ireland.

—Van Gosse, Conor McGrady, and Donal Ó Drisceoil

Note

1. See Roy F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972* (London: Allen Lane, 1988).

Downloaded from https://read.dukeupress.edu/radical-history-review/article-pdf/2009/104/1/467643/RHR104-01_Intro.pdf
by guest
on 22 January 2019

Downloaded from https://read.dukeupress.edu/radical-history-review/article-pdf/2009/104/1/467643/RHR104-01_Intro.pdf
by guest
on 22 January 2019