Review: Towards a Radical Empiricism?

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Review by: Alan Finlayson

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Towards a Radical Empiricism?

Colin Graham and Richard Kirkland (eds.), *Ireland and Cultural Theory: The Mechanics of Authenticity*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999. ISBN 0-333-67596-7; 0-333-67597-5. Stg. £23.75 hbk; Stg. £17.99 pbk.

Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. ISBN 0-19-820825-1. Stg. £25.00 hbk.

Strictly speaking we Europeans are all bastards. We came here from nowhere in particular and everything that is best about us derives from the mongrelization of ourselves and our culture – be it Zadie Smith, Zinedine Zidane or James Joyce. Everything that is bad about us comes from our refusal to acknowledge the brute fact of our hybrid parentage and to act as if our nations have an existence in nature as well as in fantasy. The Austrians, in this context, are a portent as well as pariah. In the midst of constitutional upheaval and mass population movements, Europe seems ready to embrace its bastard nature only in order to affirm some myth of thoroughbred European parentage – sustained nightly by Italian shore patrols scouting for the offensively indigent, presumptuous enough to think they might be entitled to a share of our spoils. While we lecture the inhabitants of the Balkans on the errors of ethnicism and identity politics, Western Europe is lurching towards what the Hungarian philosopher G.M. Tamás has termed 'post-fascism': a situation in which the core political issue of what citizenship rights should be has been supplanted by efforts to fence off citizenship itself and define states by who is not allowed to be part of them. Indeed, a hiccup in the throat of the Celtic Tiger, combined with the steady inward drift of our friends from the East, is beginning to show that in Ireland too the powerful sense of nationality that can produce heroic politics and passionate poetry is also the source of dark chaos. It is right, therefore, that we analyse and criticize false histories and expose the ideological procedures by which the national myth is sustained. Surely the practice of European and American exclusivity, allied as it is to the forward march of global economic 'liberalization', must be the horizon within which studies of Ireland should be conducted.

Both of these books, directly and indirectly, raise questions about the horizon within which we study our Irelands and about the 'doing' of Irish studies – the

methods it might employ, the frameworks within which (and against which) it is conducted. They do not take as their horizon the geopolitical hegemony of American capitalism but perhaps suggest that this is the direction in which we ought to head. Both proceed by taking up, and taking on, one of the supposed paradigms within Irish studies, that of 'postcolonialism' or the 'colonial model', and ask if it represents the emergence of a new form and new object for Irish Studies.

What John Whyte did for political interpretations of Northern Ireland Stephen Howe undertakes for historical and cultural scholarship of the whole island, producing a lively polemic and a handy point of reference. In place of simplicity he emphasizes the complexity of the relations between Britain and Ireland from their earliest beginnings and the cultural syncretism and forms of hybridity that emerged in this relationship. Crucially, he is as attentive to variety and difference within Britain as within Ireland. The political manoeuvres played out on Irish soil by British actors were never simply the acts of unified interests from that country (which, in any case, only exist in the minds of paranoid Republicans and the few high Tories still in existence) and were never completely disassociated from internal Irish matters. Within these shifting relations, the discourse of colonialism has been reworked and reinvented in response to the perceived needs of the conjuncture.

For Howe, the search for an anti-colonial Irish nationalism is in large measure anachronistic: 'Most Irish nationalists before the 1960s did not use the colonialism–anticolonialism model in describing their situation.' He is deeply critical of Republican attempts to claim an anti-colonial context for their struggle, particularly that version whereby Ireland becomes the first (and last) of all colonies and the training ground both for oppressors and for those who will liberate the world of such oppressions. 'Such notions,' he writes, 'are very 1990s ones, extremely distant from the thought of earlier Irish patriots – as well as exhibiting a mildly megalomaniac evaluation of Irish nationalism's global importance.'

His argument is clear. The colonial model was not central to Irish nationalism or demands for independence until recently, and the history of nationalist thought is often mistreated so as to make it appear more radical and rooted in anti-imperialism than it really was. This is not to say that dissent did not exist, nor reason for it, or that there was not an inequitable relationship between parts of Britain and parts of Ireland. But when anti-colonial thought was developing within nationalism outside Europe, Irish radicals knew little of it, and assertions that thinkers like Connolly were sophisticated analysts ahead of their time are swiftly rebutted by Howe's marshalling of the facts.

British attitudes towards imperialism, colonialism and Ireland were not themselves uniform, consistent or clear. Many regarded Ireland as self-evidently a part of the Union and thus part of the imperial power rather than a subordinate component. Howe suggests that:

> especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Ireland was a sphere of ambiguity, tension, transition, hybridity, between 'national' and 'imperial' spheres . . . Canada and Cardiff, Auckland and Aberdeen, also partook of the blurred and shifting negotiations of identity and sovereignty

between a global Greater Britain and an insular but still compound Britishness.

The UK State did not, in any simple sense, conceive of its activity in Ireland as that of a colonial power but rather saw Ireland as part of the multinational UK state. When the Irish War of Independence was being fought, the British military were simultaneously using the RAF to bomb Iraqi villages and stem uprising. This was not a strategy employed in Ireland at the time. That it would have been unthinkable is clearly significant. As Howe concludes, 'State coercion and violence . . . were integral to colonial rule everywhere. Ireland was not unusual in this . . . what stood out was the extent of political integration and cultural assimilation extended to the "natives"'.

The underlying target of the book (as in his previous work on Afrocentrism) is cultural nationalism as such. With regard to Northern Ireland, he evinces a measured opposition to the 'two traditions' model on the well established (though not widely accepted) grounds that it 'freezes . . . the perception of there being two fixed, opposed blocs . . . with far more internal homogeneity and less permeable borders than is in fact the case'. He endorses, also tentatively, arguments that urge critical interrogation of such identities and is, therefore, scathing of the postcolonial turn in Irish literary studies (and particularly funny when tilting at Kiberd). These studies are built out of an inability or refusal to actually define colonialism and locate it within historical record. Postcolonialism, Howe argues, is culturally reductionist and too ready to attribute uniformity to the alleged colonizing powers. But he is generous enough to admit that postcolonial literary theory has opened up analyses of Ireland to a wider context even if it has done so in a misleading and half-hearted way. For while clearly damaging to nationalists, Howe's book is not pro-union. In its pleas for a wider and better founded framework within which one can make sense of Ireland, Howe really calls for the assertion of intellectual and scholarly values and some degree of recognition of our bastard selves.

He is not entirely opposed to postcolonial or post-structuralist theory which, he acknowledges towards the end in passing, may be 'genuinely valuable' when it 'posits the necessity for moving on from a "nationalist" to an "emancipatory" mode . . .'. But part of the problem with post colonial and post-structuralist approaches to Ireland is that often they aren't really either. Deconstruction does not advocate the unsettling of binary oppositions in order to replace the essentialism of the dominant term with an essentialism of the subordinate. It attempts to find a way of making visible the strategies by which such discourses make themselves possible (which means exposing that of which a discourse cannot speak but still requires to be spoken within it) in order to clear the space into which we might step if we are to think differently or anew. It is in this sense that post-structuralist approaches may have a place in developing a critical cultural and political analysis for Irish studies and from this perspective that Graham and Kirkland offer an approach to the employment of post colonial theory that is other than that of Field Day. For them, it is an essential element in a potential redirection of Irish studies but should not be taken to lead automatically to celebration of the nation. They want to complicate

the notion of Ireland and to do so are willing to deploy not only postcolonialism but the whole range of 'contemporary' cultural theory. They work within the 'anti-paradigm' of cultural studies where that abused label refers to work that is informed by Marxist and/or postmodern positions yet tries to open an analysis that maintains a focus on politics and power as imbricated with the cultural or literary.

With this approach, they have a project to bring to fruition. This is firstly a theoretical and methodological activity involving 'a sophisticated and contentious postcolonial analysis of Irish culture' emerging out of the introduction of various theorizations (including 'po-co', 'po-mo', 'de-co' and 'cult-studs') and opening up questions of identity and the relationship between place, locality and politics.

Irish studies as a discrete field of inquiry ought to feel threatened by this. The deployment of such theory and method may not be an introduction into, but a supplanting of, Irish studies. Graham and Kirkland want to bring 'cutting edge' cultural theory into Irish studies in order, they say, to destabilize, or at least question, conceptions of Irishness that treat it as an implicit or explicit unity. Hence the subtitle which, in addition to referencing Spivak, suggests an examination of the 'mechanics' by which an authentic Ireland is manufactured. This is potentially quite a different form of cultural theory to that taken apart by Howe.

In his own contribution to the book, Colin Graham examines the ways in which 'authenticity' achieves an ethical status and the processes by and through which it changes in relation to colonial structures, shifting from being the way to assert oneself against the colonizer to a new nationalistic dominance. Thus he aims to unsettle the teleological varieties of postcolonialism through showing how authenticity can take on different modes and different relationships to the colonial past. The methodological project is clear: 'authenticity [may function] . . . as a way for an Irish Cultural Studies to bind together its approaches to cultural events and texts'.

Kirkland takes on Field Day in a more head-on way, treating the strategies of authors such as Eagleton and Kiberd as just that – strategies that ironize totalizing assumptions as the only way in which to face off 'oppressive' readings – but at the same time (as with Kiberd and Gibbons) developing a teleological notion of hybridity that locates it as the end point of Irish cultural development. Thus a theoretical strategy that undermines aggrandizing teleologies (including that which renders Ireland the shining beacon on the path to a hybrid and plural society) becomes employed in their defence. On Kirkland's interpretation, the postcolonial framework in Irish studies has functioned to sustain certain sorts of academic critical practice, downplaying the epistemological implications of postcolonial thinking and reverting to another totalizing narrative insensitive to contexts. 'Po-co' thus takes its place within the framework of the institution of Irish studies rather than enabling the dismantling of those very structures.

A bold project then and one potentially less guilty of the charges made by Howe (except for the one of not adequately accounting for the meanings of colonialism in an Irish context). But if what you want to do is get away from 'the part for the whole logic of the use of "Irish"' then why do Irish studies at all? Why not do cultural studies or just get a different job? What could possibly be the *raison d'etre* of

an Irish studies that did not leave unquestioned the possibility of 'Irish' having a stable referent? This is a problem and the collection enacts it. It is, after all the programmatic statements, a collection on Ireland and Irishness – and not just on any Ireland. A lot of it is concerned with *that* Ireland, the one that exists in and for Irish studies and consists of novels, poems, the odd play and lots of things that happened in the nineteenth century. This is different to the Ireland of the economists (especially those economists who live in Frankfurt) or even, in a number of important respects, the Ireland of the sociologists (which is either full of rural crises amongst farming communities or people shopping at the Liffey Valley Centre). It is not about the Ireland that goes to see *The Matrix* and watches *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*?

But it is unfair of a reviewer to complain that a book is not the book he would have produced if he had the time, commitment and knowledge of the real authors. These are very worthwhile essays. In the hands of Eamonn Hughes, Tom Paulin becomes a poet trying to see beyond the absolutes of both state and community to the shifting sense of place in which we never quite find ourselves. Elsewhere we see 'cutting edge' theory employed to assist new readings, be it Foucault as a way into considering poetic constructions of the body or Gerry Smyth using Judith Butler (with a bit of a heavy hand) to criticize criticism for the role it has played in legitimating (and thus prescribing) forms of artistic activity that define the nation. All this offers many a claim about the sort of 'subverting' and 'destabilizing' of authentic notions of Irishness without which we would all have to give up critical theory and get jobs in advertising.

Elsewhere we do find newer cultural forms put under analysis – television drama (in Lance Pettit's study of an RTE/Thames co-production focusing on the 1921 signing) and even some political essays examining the nature of anti-Irish racism in Britain. But there is something of a frustration in reading these essays after reading Howe. The strength of Howe is that he draws on a range of scholarship that far exceeds the borders of Ireland. He is at his strongest when his book fails to read like a work of Irish studies and feels more like an analysis of colonialism with Ireland as just one case study to be fitted into a complex and differentiated picture (a reversal of the common procedure by which a writer takes some phenomenon or concept and then uses it as a case study to illustrate whatever universal truth about the Irish situation he/she always intended to assert). The essays in the Graham/Kirkland book regularly point outside of themselves (to the global practice of media studies whose own canon is insufficiently in evidence here) or to the economics of Adam Smith (usefully drawn on but under-exploited by Clare Connolly in a reading of *Castle Rackrent*).

When Jim Mac Laughlin documents the development of anti-Irish racism in nineteenth-century Britain, he shows how the Irish were racialized not because they were Irish but because of other non-ethnic (mostly economic) factors. Bronwen Walter usefully opens up gendered aspects to the racialization of the Irish in Britain but fails to locate this within the huge significance of race for English politics (far greater than Ireland alone) and Europe in general. Perhaps inadvertently, she renders the English a far more unified people than they have ever been – the

key to English racism is lack of a national identity, not pride in it (the curse placed on hegemonic powers as any Hegelian slave-master knows). But both of these chapters perhaps fulfil the demands of the wider Graham/Kirkland project in as much as they emphasize the constructedness of categories of identity and their embeddedness in places and locality and so take Irish studies out of itself, into specially sociological and political terrain.

Early in his book, Howe claims that he is examining 'an intellectual tradition and a discursive formation'. These are not the same thing. An intellectual tradition is easy to spot and tease out since it exists in more or less interesting relationships with other traditions. A discursive formation is an altogether more hidden thing. We can gaze upon a multitude of intellectual traditions yet never see the discursive formation that shapes the horizon within which they play. To conceive of intellectual traditions is to opt for the path of pluralist liberalism. To find only discursive formations is to pursue more radical roads and to seek the exposure of the obscured patterns that structure our thought and action. To find postcolonialism to be an intellectual tradition might be to grant it a place within the many rooms of the house of Irish studies. To find it a discursive formation would be to question the validity of the house by digging up the foundations. In the end, for all the critique, Howe establishes the intellectual tradition of the colonial model and, while finding it incoherent and wanting, does not see it as entirely useless so long as it is related to the wider traditions of scholarship on colonialism the world over. It is Graham and Kirkland who, while sympathetic to the enterprise, examine the discursive formation of Irish studies and the colonial model in particular, theoretically demonstrating and criticizing the uses to which it has been put. Howe produces facts and argumentation that unsettle the model without shaking the conceptual 'frame' (as Kirkland would call it). Graham et al. have subversive concepts and do kick against the 'frame' but lack the facts.

Maybe what is needed is indeed another different paradigm for Irish studies, a new object of study that emerges between the approaches and intentions of these two texts. Perhaps something like a kind of radical empiricism that seeks out the facts at the same time as it is aware that a truly empirical mindset undermines the very concepts that allow us to think of facts as speaking for themselves thus forcing us to be inventive with ourselves. We would then have to find out all the things that really happen in, to and from Ireland and would have to face the fact that geographically, symbolically and practically Ireland as an empirical reality has no existence other than the actual activity of actual people acting in ways premised on the notion that it does. We would have to be clear, with ourselves and each other, what sort of place we want to create. We would have to be political citizens of the various state and social structures we inhabit. As scholars we would have to ask those actual people what they think they are doing and make careful note of what they really are up to, even if it is only moving, speaking and dying in various ways (which, after all, is pretty much all there is). Rather than the constructed authenticity of texts and events as the binding frame for Irish studies, we would be faced by the ethical imperative forced on us by the actual. Althusser, a submerged presence in

the work of both Graham and Kirkland, suggested in his autobiography that his attachment to materialism came from a desire to have the courage not to tell lies to himself. Howe, Graham and Kirkland, in different ways, expose fictions and demand truth-telling. When the actuality with which we are faced involves brutality enacted at a global level, but simultaneously removed from our immediate perceptions because undertaken in our name, such honesty is the very least we can expect of our bastard selves.

ALAN FINLAYSON

A Union for Good?

T.M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation 1700–2000*. London: The Penguin Press, 1999. ISBN 0-713-99351-0. Stg. £25.00 hbk.

Christopher A. Whatley, *Scottish Society 1707–1830: Beyond Jacobitism, Towards Industrialisation*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000. ISBN 0-7190-4540-1; 0-7190-4541-X. Stg. £45.00 hbk; Stg. £14.95 pbk.

The thirty years since the publication of T.C. Smout's influential *A History of the Scottish People 1560–1830* have seen an unprecedented growth in Scottish historical research and publication. New areas of enquiry have been opened up, older historical models revised or rejected and new methodologies adopted. And nowhere has this been more apparent than in the study of early modern and modern Scotland and, in particular, Scotland since the union of 1707. In *The Scottish Nation*, T.M. Devine sets out to bridge the gap between this scholarly activity and popular historical consciousness and, in doing so, to provide a 'coherent account of the last 300 years of Scotland's past with the hope of developing a better understanding of the Scottish present'. In this respect, *The Scottish Nation* stands as an important and timely summation of the work of the past three decades. What sets Devine's work apart from other attempts to convey to the general reader the recent developments in Scottish historical studies, however, is the extent to which his analysis draws upon his own prolific and ground-breaking research. And although this research underpins much of what he terms his 'interpretative synthesis' employed throughout the work, this original and revisionary aspect is most evident in the central chapters, which form the core of his study and cover Scotland's economic and social transformation, from 1760 to 1914. Whereas recent historiography has tended to stress a gradualist and evolutionary model for the modernization of the English economy, Devine argues that the Scottish experience in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was nothing short of revolutionary – indeed, 'unparallelled among European societies of the time in its speed, scale and intensity'. The scale of this revolution, grounded in agricultural improvement and industrialization, is perhaps most strikingly illustrated by