

Review of *Isaac Butt and Home Rule* by David Thornley

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Isaac Butt has garnered the reputation of an understudied man. He is, it has been remarked, awkwardly sandwiched between two giants of the Irish constitutional nationalist tradition. Perhaps it is fitting that Butt's Dublin monument is a bridge for bridge building between Parnell and O'Connell is the historiographical project the majority of those who study him have undertaken. The most significant and enduring effort of Buttology is David Thornley's *Isaac Butt and Home Rule*, a broad and meticulous study of high politics whose analyses continue to directly inform modern studies of the period and is the foundation which subsequent reappraisals have sought to nuance or disprove. Now past its 60th birthday *Isaac Butt and Home Rule* remains an ideal entrance point into the politics of the 1870s. Its relationship to the man himself, however, is less straightforward. This aspect of the book received attention in contemporary reviews and has informed critical later works (which in reality amount to a book chapter and an article published 10 years apart but in the micro-industry of Buttite history this is monumental).¹

¹Colin W. Reid, "'An Experiment in Constructive Unionism': Isaac Butt, Home Rule and Federalist Political Thought during the 1870s," *The English Historical Review* 129, no. 537 (2014); David George Boyce, ed., *Defenders of the Union: A Survey of British and Irish Unionism since 1801* (London New York: Routledge, 2001).

Thornley begins with a brief outline of Butt's life prior to 1868, moving quickly over the well trod territory of his Orange beginnings, to his horror at the famine and his defence of Fenian prisoners. Thornley indulges briefly in a picturesque nationalism with this line from O'Connell: "Isaac, you are young and I am old. I will fail in winning back the parliament, but you will do it when I shall have passed away".² This is the most he will try to tug nationalist heartstrings as after the introduction the book is sober political analysis all the way through. Thornley's claim that previous studies on Butt had elided him to a pre-Parnell footnote is corroborated by his reviewers who invariably commented on the sparse secondary literature.³ Two previous works which gave significant attention to Butt were Terrence de Vere White's 1946 book *The Road of Excess* and Frank Hugh O'Donald's 1910 *History of the Irish Parliamentary Party*.⁴ The former was a valuable contribution, rich with anecdotes but without much political analysis to speak of. The latter is an interesting, embittered and not totally reliable first hand account whose vision of Butt's leadership is told mostly to further various grudges.

Working from this backdrop, Thornley builds from a mass of primary source material, marshalling newspapers, Hansard and the correspondences of Irish political figures to give a rich account of the beginnings of Home Rule which distinguishes itself significantly from previous work through the depth of its political analysis.

²David Thornley, *Isaac Butt and Home Rule* (Westport: Greenwood Pr, 1964), 16.

³W. L. Burn, "Review of Isaac Butt and Home Rule," *The English Historical Review* 81, no. 321 (1966); Joseph M. Hernon, "Review of Isaac Butt and Home Rule," *The American Historical Review* 70, no. 2 (1965); Nicholas Mansergh, "Review of Isaac Butt and Home Rule," *Irish Historical Studies* 14, no. 54 (1964); J. H. Whyte, "Review of Isaac Butt and Home Rule," *Studia Hibernica*, no. 5 (1965): These were the contemporary reviews studied but only after reading the book myself as to not colour my opinion too much.

⁴Terence de Vere White, *The Road of Excess* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1946); F. Hugh (Frank Hugh) O'Donnell, *History of the Irish Parliamentary Party* (London: Longmans, 1910).

Broadly speaking there are two complimentary strands of analysis taken up by Thornley: an in-depth study of Irish electoral politics between 1868 and 1874, and an account of the Home Ruler's parliamentary struggles. The tensions he outlines in the first half which covers the origins of the Home Rule movement reach breaking point in the second when the Home Rule members returned in 1874 take their seats in parliament. Thornley follows a straight chronology which narrows in focus with parliamentary activity taking precedent over Irish electoral politics after 1874. In the early chapters, the scope is wide and Butt features only as one among many political actors, by the final chapters, we are close reading his desperate correspondences as he tries to hold onto power.

This almost exclusive political focus is the books greatest strength but also the aspect which has opened it up to reappraisal and light criticism from later historians. In fact, the absence of a fully realised exploration of Butt as a political thinker or leader was remarked upon by contemporary reviewers. Time has born these criticisms well. Later critical examinations of Butt tend to display two characteristics: they give more weight to Butt's political thought, as in Colin Reid's article on Constructive Nationalism or Joseph Spence's chapter on Unionism, and they follow Thornley's analysis of the electoral origins of Home Rule.⁵ Said reappraisals of Butt critique Thornley for the things he did not do rather than faults in his account. Reid notes that the choice of 1868 as beginning is arbitrary in respect to Butt who cannot be fully understood starting from this point.

However this shortcoming is as much the product of methodology as the time period chosen. In the introduction, Thornley outlines the simple political model

⁵James Kelly, ed., *The Cambridge History of Ireland: Volume 3: 1730–1880*, The Cambridge History of Ireland, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), ch26.

which informs his analysis, writing that land, religion and nationalism are “the three great forces” of Irish history.⁶ The rest of the book is an account of how these forces play in politics. Butt tries to break the liberal alliance with the clergy all the while convincing farmers that Home Rule did not supersede tenant’s rights and keeping advanced nationalists on board. Thornley concludes that Butt’s failure to wrangle these forces was his undoing.⁷ But the forces themselves are abstracted, this is not a study of the land nor the university question. Naturally both feature in the account but as cards in the great game of politics. Regarding land and religion, this is not an issue, there is ample work to read alongside. In fact, Thornley’s contemporary Lawrence McCaffrey’s study of the same period gives much more attention to dynamic between the League and Tenant’s rights which he described as a “cold war”.⁸ However when it comes to nationalism, specifically the rather idiosyncratic constructive nationalism/unionism of Butt, Thornley’s methodology did not create space for a proper exploration. Which is exactly why this aspect of Butt has been given attention in subsequent works. This should not be taken as a major flaw in the work, far from it. Only that as with all works of history, the reader needs to be aware of the things which are happening just out of frame (or page).

In fact, the book has held up unusually well for its age. A quick read of the bibliography of the Cambridge History of Ireland’s chapter on post-famine politics (1850-1879) shows that not only is *Isaac Butt and Home Rule* the oldest work

⁶Thornley, *Isaac Butt and Home Rule*, 13.

⁷Thornley, *Isaac Butt and Home Rule*, 383.

⁸Lawrence John McCaffrey, *Irish Federalism in the 1870’s: A Study in Conservative Nationalism* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1962), 36.

listed, it is the oldest by a decade.⁹ And the average year of release for the other cited works was 2000. Although it is more difficult to discern whether this is due to the period being understudied compelling historians to work from the most comprehensive study available or the endurance of the book entirely on its own merits. There is certainly still a sense that Butt is a charming little secret in Irish history. So much so that when Butt's name came up incidentally in an interview, historian Roy Foster seized upon the moment to call Butt "one of the great neglected figures of Irish history".¹⁰ In this regard, Thornley partially failed to achieve his objective. He provided a lasting analysis of the politics of the 1870s but he left Butt a neglected figure. And if this criticism feels impertinent coming from an undergraduate, here are Nicholas Mansergh's sharper words: "Dr Thornley has entitled his book as though the man was more important than the movement; his book, however, has demonstrated the reverse".¹¹

Other criticisms, however, are less well founded than Mansergh's. Reid's contention that Thornley distorts Butt's political mindset by calling it a "curious imperial nationalism" is slightly unfair.¹² While Reid is correct that Thornley did not fully address the Butt's intellectual development, he does consider the half-life of Butt's thinking with an open mind to how it can be fit into nationalist and unionist traditions. Admittedly he traces the latter of these two trajectories with

⁹Kelly, *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, 806.

¹⁰Roy Foster on Ireland's Many Unmade Futures (Full) — Conversations with Tyler, April 6, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dx56kyMdQD88:45>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dx56kyMdQD8>.

¹¹Nicholas Mansergh, "Review of Isaac Butt and Home Rule," *Irish Historical Studies* 14, no. 54 (1964): 184.

¹²Colin W. Reid, "'An Experiment in Constructive Unionism': Isaac Butt, Home Rule and Federalist Political Thought during the 1870s," *The English Historical Review* 129, no. 537 (2014): 337.

extreme brevity via a mention of Butt's prefiguring of Commonwealth thought.¹³ Thornley is certainly not among the most guilty of trying to fit Butt into a simple nationalist narrative.¹⁴ And his conclusion that Butt's activities had set a new baseline for any future constitutional settlement has significance for unionism and nationalism.¹⁵ In this respect, without ever directly stating it, Thornley implies that Butt represents a watershed in Irish history which constitutional unionists and nationalists were in a largely unconscious debt to. A rare occasion where Butt was owed a debt rather than the other way round. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that while Thornley was not unaware of the differing legacies of Butt, he placed these legacies in a distinct hierarchy and it is clear from the closing chapters that Butt's primary legacy, as he saw it, was nationalist.

In the conclusion, Thornley uses the verb “canalise” twice. “the home rule party of Butt canalised the feelings of the Irish people for at most four years”.¹⁶ “He canalised the emotional nationalism of the people in the Amnesty Association”.¹⁷ Aside from its antiquated ring, the word sums up the book's argument better than its final line. Butt, as depicted here, is the conduit for nationalism rather than a charismatic leader. In an impressive and detailed political narrative which in prose and analysis has aged gracefully, Thornley, despite a conclusion extolling Butt's leadership, gives the lasting impression of a man through whom outside forces acted. Whether there is more to this story remains to be seen.

¹³Thornley, *Isaac Butt and Home Rule*, 381.

¹⁴Alvin Jackson, *Home Rule : An Irish History, 1800-2000* (n.p.: New York : Oxford University Press, 2003), ch3.

¹⁵Thornley, *Isaac Butt and Home Rule*, 387.

¹⁶Thornley, *Isaac Butt and Home Rule*, 379.

¹⁷Thornley, *Isaac Butt and Home Rule*, 387.

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