Ireland and Europe:
theoretical perspectives[1]

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The fidelity and fortitude with which the national ideal had been pursued would command admiration, even if the ideal itself where to be altogether abandoned, or if it were to be ultimately realised in a manner which showed that the methods by which its attainment had been sought were the cause of its long postponement. Whatever the future may have in store for the remnant of the Irish people at home, the continued pursuit of a separate national existence by a nation which is rapidly disappearing from the land of all its hopes, and the cherishing of these hopes, not only by those who stay but also by those who go, will stand as a monument to human constancy. (Sir Horace Plunkett)[2]

Nationalism is the most potent ideology in Europe since the eighteenth century.[3] It is an expression of the preoccupation with radical freedom in modernity and succeeds because of its ability to combine the political and cultural project of modernity with everyday life.[4] At the same time, nationalism influences notions of freedom and democracy. Once primarily identified with the ideals of emancipation and liberal ambitions of Risorgimento nationalism, it now has a largely negative perception, being associated with aggression, intolerance, violence and inhumanity.[5] In spite of the obvious relationship between nationalism and ethnicity in Ireland and Europe – especially its south-eastern and eastern regions – scholars of both areas have tended to treat the two regions in relative isolation. Theories of nationalism and ethnicity also have developed largely in separate compartments. In the 1980s and 90s, George Boyce and Tom Garvin made some telling connections; but until recently these have not been followed up.[6] Since Ireland and the United Kingdom joined the European

Economic Community (now the EU), there has been a growing interest in discovering connections with the Continent, though the number of works specifically devoted to placing Ireland in a European dimension is small. Nineteenth-century Irish history remains essentially centred in the British Isles and anglophone culture. This essay takes a slightly different direction: rather than illustrating the linkages between Ireland and Europe, it underlines the connections through reference to theoretical constructs of nationalism and ethnicity. Most works on nationalism in particular, focus on Continental examples; but a handful, notably those by Jim Mac Laughlin, and Gerard Delanty and Patrick O'Mahony, have broken the mould, by advancing the integration of the Irish and European experiences.

To date there is no agreed definition of nationalism: it possesses no clear boundaries or common agenda linking the various manifestations. A useful description is that it is 'a semantic space, that expresses through manifold discourses the many kinds of projects, identities, interests and ideologies that make it up' constituting the 'recombination of ever-shifting modalities of thinking and feeling about society'.[7] Nationalist ideas coordinate common interests among élites, mobilise support from groups hitherto excluded from the political process, and legitimize the goals of the movement.[8] Irish nationalism is typical of this process. Nationalists everywhere had to locate and then persuade people whom they wish to mobilize that distinctions between themselves and the dominant state were fundamental and more important than any common bonds. Irish nationalism has three fundamental components – a historic territory, a population 'entitled' to live in the national territory, and an aspiration to establish a separate political state coterminous with the land and people. Within this framework four aspects of the attainment of its goals are stressed by Garvin: the origins of political culture; development of popular political organization; growth of public opinion; and the development of the machinery of a state.[9] Irish nationalism was least effective in devising a satisfactory definition of what constituted the 'Irish people'.[10] In spite of a language resplendent with the terminology of 'race', nationalists never developed a 'blood' definition of what being 'Irish' meant. Religion was a partial and incomplete, though important, substitute: it served the function held by the language issue in much of Europe, being the quintessential entitlement issue.[11] Language was a late incursion into the Irish case and never gained assent as a definition of who were the legitimate inheritors of the island. Still, this did not create the divisions of the peoples of Ireland. Separations were instead between Protestants and Catholics and within the two communities, with the first proving easily the most decisive. In Europe lateral divisions within the ethnic community were more typical and significant. Early attempts to include all creeds and classes in Ireland ultimately dissolved in a nationalism focused by the mid-1880s

nationalism (Dublin, 1981). **7** Delanty and O'Mahony, p. xv. **8** See John Breuilly's argument in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (eds), *Nationalism* (Oxford, 1994), pp 166–7. **9** Garvin, p. 6. **10** Quoted in D.H. Greene and D.H. Lawrence, *The matter with Ireland* (London, 1962), p. 294. **11** See David Horowitz's argument in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (eds), *Ethnicity* (Oxford, 1996), p. 288.

on uniting Catholics alone, perhaps because forging a common secular identity proved discordant with Irish realities.[12]

Anthony Smith points to five conditions necessary for entrenching national identity among a significant section of a putative nation's inhabitants: historic territory or homeland; common myths and historic memories; a common, mass public culture; common legal rights and duties for all members; and a common economy with territorial mobility for members.[13] Catholics only realized these conditions fully around 1867. Ironically, Ireland's Protestants most completely met the criteria in the eighteenth century. Smith's description is appropriate at the point when nationalism reaches relative maturity; but other concepts are required to explain how and when it arrived at this juncture, and to determine when nationalism achieved its completed or 'post-mature' state. Miroslav Hroch, in *Social preconditions of national revival in Europe* (1985) identifies the intelligentsia as the prime agents in the process of creating the nation. Hroch constructs a threefold typology for national movements. In the initial stage, intellectuals develop an interest in the antiquities of the territory. This corresponds to the establishment of the (Royal) Dublin Society and the (Royal) Irish Academy in the eighteenth century. He notes that the purveyors of this culture lack a political programme at the outset, and do not seek to mobilize the masses until a further metamorphosis has taken place. In the second phase, the now numerically expanding intelligentsia develop a political programme and seek to incorporate the masses into their conception of the nation. Finally, his third stage is mass mobilization – that is, when a significant sector of the population is converted to, and pursues, political aspirations. In the case of Ireland these stages certainly existed, though not always in Hroch's sequence. His model highlights the core ingredient of leadership, and indirectly offers a framework for understanding different forms of its manifestation during phases of nationalism. The intelligentsia, according to Hroch, are superseded by moderate bourgeois leaders who in turn give way to politicians advocating more radical national goals. Nationalist appeals did not meet with unqualified acceptance, even from Catholics, who did not adopt them fully before the 1880s; the full-scale success of ethnic nationalism was delayed until the twentieth century, and even then never completed. As nationalist and ethnic nationalist appeals struck a responsive chord with Catholics, nearly all Protestants took up an anti-nationalist stance. John Hutchinson's explanation of blocked mobility – the rate of Catholic advancement did not keep pace with escalating expectations – helps to resolve the apparent contradiction in Hroch's scheme. He also demonstrates that this blockage became acute at the beginning of the twentieth century, inflaming a younger generation of the intelligentsia which vented its frustration against both the established state and the nationalists in control of patriotic organizations. This explanation affords a useful modification of Hroch's phases, thus explaining why further increments of cultural and literary nationalism bloom after mass mobilization as well as at the beginning of a national movement's unfolding, and become more assertive in its late form.

12 B.M. Walker, *Ulster politics: the formative years, 1868–86* (Belfast, 1989), pp 201–11.
13 Anthony D. Smith, *National identity* (London, 1991), p. 14.

Hroch shows the importance of a completed social structure for a political movement prioritizing political demands. He also suggests that until a late point in its progression, autonomy (not independence) is the focus of national movements. His emphasis upon the sequences and social composition accords with Ireland's experience and closes the loopholes between general theory and actual Irish experience.

Gellner muses on the question of what determined who did or did not subscribe to nationalist doctrine. He suggests that nationalism arises among groups who feel themselves disadvantaged during the upheaval of industrialisation; yet there are many exceptions, including, in part, Ireland. Protestants and Catholics, and the west of the country, entered the British industrial world at different rates of speed. Thomas Hylland Eriksen broadly supports Gellner's view though suggesting that ethnicity is constituted through social contact.[14] Ethnic identity, he maintains, becomes crucially important the moment it is perceived as threatened. Michael Hechter and Margaret Levi suggest that ethnic solidarity arises in regions developed as internal colonies where there is a hierarchical cultural division of labour determining life's chances.[15] Solidarity increases when members interact within the boundaries of their own group. They distinguish between regional and ethnoregional movements: the first couches claims solely in terms of material demands; the second bases its claim on ethnic distinctiveness. These propositions are germane to Ireland. At early moments, but most definitively during the Land War between 1879 and 1881, Catholics were mobilized by a collectively held notion of the land for the people in opposition to the 'alien' landowners – an idea imbued with the sense of 'native' dispossession. Linkage of the land and national demands gave nationalism its dynamic after 1879 though, in part, at the cost of making nationalism primarily a Catholic rural movement. Ulster Protestants reached a similar stage of mobilisation during the crisis of 1912 to 1914, after which it became increasingly difficult to construct a political state that appealed across the religious divide. Completion of the process of conversion to an ethnic concept of the nation was the final step in the transition of popular aspirations from a western European, territorially centred expansionist ideology of a dominant group to an central/eastern European nationalism based on ethnicity/religion, in which grievances directed against the dominant state/culture were the motivating ingredient.

As Hechter and Levi observe, when life-chances are seen as independent of inclusion in a particular ethnic group, the subjective significance of membership recedes or disappears. Their thesis helps to explain the very high degree of Catholic mobilization over a long time in Ireland, and its much more attenuated echo among the Irish diaspora. The concept of allegiance is vital to understanding why the national political project failed to achieve unanimity; there were tensions between peoples holding differing notions of the nation and the problem of dual allegiance. Those holding distinctly different and frequently incompatible aspirations often used the same or similar terminology, thus creating semantic confusion.

14 Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and nationalism: anthropological perspectives* (London, 1993), pp 18, 76. 15 See Michael Hechter and Margaret Levi's argument in Hutchinson and Smith (eds), *Nationalism*, pp 184–95.

In Ireland nationalism had four problems: how to define the 'nation'; how to define the ideological movement, 'nationalism'; how to explain the formation of the 'nation'; and how to foster the emergence of the nationalist movement.[16] Locating the beginnings of Irish nationalism is no simple matter. Three contrasting views – primordialist, modernist and ethnicist – have been advanced.[17] The primordial concept of the nation has two meanings. One is that nations have existed time out of mind, and thus are 'natural' and 'persistent'. This idea is open to the criticism that the nation is seen as a kind of perpetual, spiritual entity, disassociated from any social, political or economic change. But the more refined meaning is that given by Clifford Gertz, who argues that human beings classify themselves and others in accordance with primordial criteria; the family, the locality – one's own people (however defined) succour and protect us.[18] Thus people are prepared to sacrifice their lives for such support and protection. It is not a big step, therefore, for individuals to transfer such important allegiances – of kin, family, locality – to the nation and to the nation state. Thus, while class or economic interests threaten revolution, they rarely threaten the integrity of the state; but primordial attachments threaten partition, irredentism, and a redrawing of state boundaries. Hence the state needs to base itself on these primordial attachments (such as blood ties, language, race religion and custom) if it is to survive. Primordialism does not presuppose some eternal, fixed, unchanging ties, but rather emphasizes the importance of powers over our lives that are exercised by family, locality and one's own 'people' – that is, powers that make primordial attachments both powerful and enduring. Eoin Mac Neill articulates this position: as a cultural nationalist, he sees the past as a story of the nation embedded in human nature and a history revealed through an Irish way of life.[19] Marc Bloch and Hugh Seton-Watson espouse similar views, tracing the origin of nationalism back over centuries. Gellner dismisses such claims as accretions amounting to florid theories formulated by nationalists themselves. The influence of the primordialists has been eclipsed since 1945; for them a difference of kind exists between pre-modern 'patriotism' and the concept of the nation and nationalism, which is contingent upon industrialization, democracy, rationality and communal citizenship. Nationalism is portrayed as a response from traditional groups to the threat posed by the rush of modernity, bringing to their aid novel and non-traditional classes and strata. Benedict Anderson observes that ethnic communities are necessarily 'imagined' in the sense of linking groups of people together who have not had and can not anticipate having direct physical acquaintance with one another. This, he insists, only happens when modernization reaches the stage where communication allows disparate peoples to experience a common bond.[20] Ethnicists, such as Anthony Smith and John Anderson, accept the modernity of nationalism but locate its origins in the pre-

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16 Anthony D. Smith, *Theories of nationalism* (London, 1971), p. 148.   **17** This argument is based on John Hutchinson, *Modern nationalism* (London, 1994), pp 3–38.   **18** See Clifford Geertz's argument in Hutchinson and Smith (eds), *Nationalism*, pp 31–4; and *Ethnicity*, 41–5.   **19** See Eoin MacNeill, *Phases of Irish history* (Dublin, 1926).   **20** Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities; reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London, 1991).

existing ethno-cultural community shaped by shared myths about origins, history, culture and ideas of space, that give members identity and purpose. Smith's term *ethnie* describes a process which is only a difference of degree rather than of kind between pre-modern societies and modern nations. For Eriksen 'ethnicity can be non-modern, nationalist must be identified with the modern age'. He also notes that ethnically-based political organisations, as well as mass movements based on ethnic identity, are recent and a consequence of the modernization process.[21]

Nationalism and the nation are related, but not identical, concepts. The term nationalism was first used by the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder in 1774 and did not enter the general vocabulary until the mid-nineteenth century. Nationalism displays a number of common components, typically including consciousness of the uniqueness or peculiarity of a group of people, particularly with respect to their ethnic, linguistic or religious homogeneity; stress upon shared social-cultural attitudes; a mutual historical past or sense of it; belief in a common mission; and a conception of who is the 'enemy', the counter-force seeking to deprive the 'nation' of its legitimate destiny. The collective grievances of, and the belief that, the country was a victim of British/English oppression were central propositions in Irish national cosmology and played a part in the anti-colonial rhetoric, if not invariably the practice, of popular politics.[22] In later national historiography the Great Famine of the 1840s assumed a special place in the construction of this idea of 'victimization', allowing for the diaspora to share perhaps even to be the standard-bearers for the collective sense of oppression. This obsession warrants Declan Kiberd's observation: 'if England had never existed, the Irish would have been rather lonely. Each nation badly need the other, for the purpose of defining itself'.[23] Much the same can be said of Ulster Unionism, which, in spite of its triumphalism, is based on a collective sense of 'virtual' victimization at the hands of an engrossing Catholicism, and a constant feeling of impending British betrayal. Nationalism is frequently associated with an even more recent term, 'ethnicity', which made its initial appearance in 1953; but nationalism differs by being broader and more inclusive. Whereas ethnicity applies to a specified group (whether it properly exists or not), nationalism can be a quality shared by a multiplicity of separate communities seeking a mutually desired end – that is, usually some degree of political autonomy. Ireland for the Irish is pregnant with contradictory meanings. To many it conveyed an ethnic message: either Ireland for the 'native', that is, Catholic Irish, or Ireland for the people who inhabited the country irrespective of origins. This, too, corresponds to Continental developments.

The term nation has two meanings. As applied in central and Eastern Europe it is a social group of people which as a consequence of historically evolved linguistic, cultural, religious or political relations, has become conscious of its coherence, political unity and particular interests. This exists irrespective of whether all or part of it becomes an autonomous nation–state; however, 'nations' of this type when they reach

21 Eriksen, pp 15, 79.   **22** Garvin perhaps assumes too blithely that rhetoric and practice are identical; see *Evolution of Irish nationalist politics*, p. 2.   **23** Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (London, 1995), p. 2.

a stage of maturity, usually demand the right to political self-determination. In English usage, a nation refers to the political apparatus known as the nation or state, expressed conveniently as nation–state. When this nation comes into existence, it is assigned a superior and more universal significance than other bodies of joint social action such as class, confession, community or the family. Nationalists and nationalism are, respectively, people and the movement seeking substantial political autonomy and more usually to create the nation–state. This definition ignores other forms of nationalism, including the German and Italian types in the twentieth century, American expansionism in the nineteenth century, European imperialism overseas, along with others found in the Third or Emergent World since 1945.[24] A restricted definition allows a lens to be focused on the quests of ethnic, religious and national groups in Europe to distinguish themselves from, and seek autonomy or concessions from, dominant ruling states. After a long gestation in which alternative options were possibilities, Irish nationalism emerged in this context as a species of peripheral nationalism rather than the state-building nationalism of the English, French, Italian or German variety, which were multi-ethnic, multi-confessional and expansionist.[25] It had, Garvin points out, the cultural trait of communal solidarity, generating a conformist consensus based on pragmatism with the development of the militant, pragmatic, disciplined mass political party as the characteristic political institution.[26] Nationality in one context describes the legal status of a person or collective of people. It confers no rights, though it may impose obligations; citizenship defines members and non-members becoming coeval with nationality.[27]

Ethnicity, too, has a plethora of interpretations. A satisfactory working description for current purposes is that it comprises a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members.[28] Abner Cohen injects a further ingredient, identifying ethnicity as 'a political phenomenon as traditional customs are used only as idioms, and as mechanisms for political alignment'.[29] David Horowitz supports political action as an essential element, and suggests that 'politics has a commanding position for determining group status … the state become[s] the focal point for ethnic claims'.[30] Ethnicity is distinguished from nationalism in two senses: nationalism *per se* is not predicated on a 'common ancestry' but only on 'uniqueness' and it presupposes the ambition to obtain a significant measure of political autonomy, whereas ethnicity does suppose 'common ancestry' (socio-biology) not just occupation of a specific territory and may seek merely to attain recognition of a degree of distinctiveness

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24 Delanty and O'Mahony distinguish ten types of nationalism: state patriotism, liberal nationalism, reconstructive nationalism, integral nationalism, irredentist nationalism, sucessionist nationalism, cultural nationalism, religious nationalism, transnationalism and new radical nationalism (*Nationalism and social theory*, p. 120). Other typologies can be found in Özkirimli, pp 12–63. **25** Michael Hechter, *Containing nationalism* (Oxford, 2000), pp 15–17. **26** Garvin, p. 7. **27** Delanty and O'Mahony, pp 9–10. **28** Hutchinson and Smith (eds), *Ethnicity*, p. 7. **29** Quoted in ibid., p. 84. **30** Horowitz, in ibid., p. 286.

rather than the erection of a state or sub-state. Ethnicity can restrict its demands to special rights for religious practice, language, education or a share of state offices rather than formal political autonomy. This formula felicitates incorporating the Irish Catholic diaspora into the ethnic community, while the Protestants in Ireland were left outside it. In orthodox Irish nationalist rhetoric two peoples or traditions existed in Ireland which, though separated by origins and religious affiliation, had a joint destiny in an Irish nation-state. However, mutual co-operation proved elusive, except for brief spells such as in the late eighteenth century. In nationalist rhetoric the divisions were deliberately fostered by Great Britain and therefore, as the century progressed, the British – or in common parlance, the English – connection had to be severed before Ireland (and innate Irishness) could flourish. On the ground, as Mac Laughlin demonstrates, the vast majority of nationalists viewed Irishness and Ulster Unionism in ethno-religious terms. However, the official nationalist view expressed in the Proclamation of an Irish Republic in 1916 ('The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman'), was wedded to a territorial dogma.

Ireland possessed characteristics generally present among those European nationalities that developed successful national movements forming nation-states.[31] Progression from people to nation to state is seen as a natural, legitimate and inevitable course of history. This can be expressed as thresholds on the road to statehood: patriotic to national agitation; agitation to mass appeal; and mass appeal to success for the goals.[32] Nationalists demanded self-determination and statehood as a historic right, an ideal given voice by John Redmond: 'the national demand, in plain and popular language, is simply this, that the government of every purely Irish affair shall be controlled by the public opinion of Ireland, and by that alone. We demand this self-government as a right'.[33] As O.P. Rafferty points out, 'nations, like individuals, are not simply the product of material circumstances. Often those at the extremes of society can, perhaps even in spite of themselves, provide a more penetrating understanding of the forces that shape public consciousness than individuals engaged in more convention pursuits.'[34] Mac Laughlin expresses it slightly differently: 'nations were not just "imagined communities" each with its own distinctive styles of living and thinking. They were also the building blocks of modernity and the territorial expressions of national capitalism'.[35] In this situation, Delanty and O'Mahony suggest, the process of collective identity-formation creates a new perception of structural and resource configuration.[36] According to them, a further dimension arises when collectivities set the requirements of cultural identification above material resources as a motive for action.

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31 See Hugh Seton-Watson's argument in Hutchinson and Smith (eds), *Nationalism*, p. 137. **32** Delanty and O'Mahony, p. 119. **33** R. Barry O'Brien (ed.), *Home rule speeches of John Redmond, MP* (London, 1910), pp 337–8. **34** Oliver P. Rafferty, *The church, the state and the Fenian threat, 1861–75* (Basingstoke, 1999), p. 157. **35** Jim Mac Laughlin, *Reimaging the nation-state: the contested terrains of nation-building* (London, 2001), p. 100. **36** Delanty and O'Mahony, pp 108–9.

Yet, over the long haul, Irish nationalists devoted far fewer words to questions of abstract rights, the primordial basis of the nation or the uniqueness of Irish culture; nevertheless this theme, with its language of 'historical wrongs', peppered their rhetoric. Emphasis upon 'wrongs' offered the widest common denominator, and provided a unifying principle capable of binding together peoples, including potentially a significant segment of Protestants. Its limitation was that such appeals were primarily materialistic – that is, they were based on concrete grievances. It was Daniel O'Connell who held out the temptation that if the British state met Catholic grievances fairly, his co-religionists would become loyal, contented subjects. Though, as Rafferty notes, while the Catholic Church's reformist proclivities augured a desire to place 'institutional Catholicism in much the same position, socially, as the established Church of Ireland', this ambition was superseded when Fenianism radicalized political thinking by pushing the goal of political autonomy to the forefront.[37] Aspiring, upwardly mobile Catholics, who found a niche in the British community by the late nineteenth century, discovered themselves straddling two worlds: that visualized by O'Connell and the Church, and an increasingly militant but by no means consistent nationalism, which lauded their achievements on the one hand, yet frequently labelled them dupes seduced by the plums of the dominant alien culture on the other. The problem reflected a dichotomy generally present in parallel movements: social and economic elevation necessitated penetration of the state bureaucracy; but this also meant that those who made the jump were often lost to the national cause. These 'Castle Catholics' came to occupy an uncertain portal in their native land. The language of 'wrongs' handed tempting alternative possibilities to the dominant and flexible British state which could, and did, respond with policies directed towards remedying grievances or at the very least to drive a wedge in the potential solidarity of the country's people. A section of Britain's leadership preferred to believe in O'Connell's recipe; Gladstone was its most articulate proponent, but it should not be overlooked that an earlier Conservative, Sir Robert Peel and then late in the century, Arthur Balfour, were anxious to promote the resolution of grievances. In Ireland itself, Horace Plunkett became the most prominent apostle of social and economic remedies as a means to undermine support for political nationalism, thereby rendering himself anathema to many of his own order.

The unfolding of nationalism in Ireland and elsewhere always took place against the backdrop of opposition of the dominant political community, which in the case of Great Britain had immense resources to mount the counter-attack. Imperial states had three strategies: assimilation, domination/segregation, and an ideology of multiculturalism; these were often pursued simultaneously. Indeed Great Britain resorted to all three, and the application of these moulded Irish national responses.[38] As was true for other national minorities in Europe, the Irish had three options: to express loyalty to the dominant state, to voice specific grievances demanding redress and to seek to break the bonds with the larger community. In spite of state counter-

37 Rafferty, pp xi, xiii.   **38** Eriksen, pp 123–4.

strategies, Irish nationalists over time proved remarkably capable of mobilizing and retaining the loyalty of most Catholics for the patriotic platform. Nationalists were able to override regional, economic, class and cultural distinctions despite concessions that granted the substance of their material claims. Delanty and O'Mahony suggest the need for 'consideration of the social context of nationalism as a movement of resistance to differentiation and to certain aspects of the modern form of integration. The social logic of the nationalist movement in Ireland was to call for a different kind of integration that in fact amounted to a certain kind of de-differentiation'.[39]

Elie Kedourie points out that a nation must have a past and, no less fundamentally, a future, the two being irrevocably linked. Possession of the past therefore is fundamental to all national movements; but establishing an 'approved' version is never uncontested, for inevitably there are other competing interpretations of the same history. Historical memory is vital to how the national mission is understood, both by the Irish and by outsiders. Irish nationalism scored an impressive success in dictating the historical agenda; but like the vast majority of similar movements across Europe, achievement of the full programme proved tantalisingly elusive, an agonising outcome finding expression in the derisory republican song:

> God save the southern part of Ireland
> Three quarters of a nation once again.[40]

Yet if nationalists were less than completely successful in their political struggle, they did much better in winning over posterity. Historians, politicians and popular consciousness subscribe to a version of the Irish past mainly fashioned by the hands of nationalists – a history that may contain elements of invention or be an imagined community[41] – but is no less pervasive for all that.

Unsurprisingly, 'history', for both nationalists and unionists, has a major place in contemporary discourse. Brian Walker's discussion of the use and abuse of history in Ireland today offers a perceptive account of these practices.[42] He notes that the constant reference to the past in Ireland merits close attention because it is so frequently used to explain '"unresolved" historical problems, which are part of a special deterministic history going back, in many unionists' views to the seventeenth century, or in many nationalists' views, to the twelfth century'.[43]

Herbert Butterfield points out that 'our knowledge of the past is seriously affected if we learn how that knowledge came into existence'.[44] He was not referring to Irish history at this juncture, but rather to the recent role of historians in the construction of the German past. His comment is of particular importance for an investigation of Irish nationalism, especially in the light of the controversy in the last two decades over 'revisionism'. New evidence, fresh perspectives, cross-fertilization

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39 Delanty and O'Mahony, p. 80, n. 3.   **40** See Boyce, p. 22.   **41** Ibid., pp 15, 177–84.   **42** Brian Walker, *Dancing to history's tune: history, myth and politics in Ireland* (Belfast, 1996), pp 37–74; Walker extends this theme in *Past and present: history, identity and politics in Ireland* (Belfast, 2000).   **43** Ibid., p. 58.   **44** *Man on his past* (New York, 1962), p. 26.

with other disciplines, changes in methodology and technology are the stuff of the historians' trade, and re-interpreting past events an inevitable outcome. In the Irish context, however, 'revisionism' has a more specific and often pejorative connotation: it has come to mean, in the words of one of its leading critics, Desmond Fennell:

> A retelling of Irish history which seeks to show that British rule of Ireland was not, as we have believed a bad thing, but a mixture of necessity, good intentions and bungling, and that Irish resistance to it was not as we have believed a good thing, but a mixture of wrong-headed idealism and unnecessary, often cruel violence. The underlying message is that in our relations with Britain on the Irish question the Irish have been very much at fault. This is the popular image of historical revisionism.[45]

While it is assuredly true that interpretations of Irish nationalism shifted during the past three decades with a greater tendency to take a cold-eyed appraisal of its claims, tactics and consistency, this has not undermined, but rather re-enforced its centrality, underlining Butterfield's observation that it is vital to establish how a particular view has come into existence, and how it has been perpetuated and modified.

History is part of literate culture, and thus a facet of modernization. Only when people could read and communicate efficiently did written history take on universal significance. Until this level was achieved, history was the product of a small cultural élite which drew upon the well of existing histories and myths. History had three crucial purposes: as an analytical tool, allowing nations to discover their existence, their innate personalities or souls which had been obscured earlier; to create solidarity; and point to the future, and to inspire a resurrected people.[46] From the mid-eighteenth century, history increasingly employed the techniques of science, thereby facilitating its legitimacy as a true reflection of the past. Emphasis upon historic legal systems (in Ireland's case, the Brehon laws) differentiated the national community from the dominant imperial state, and the Ordnance Survey maps were influential in creating a sense of physical place. History provided an ideological nucleus, presenting the past as a series of conflicts with the dominant society, also pointing to a 'golden age' that had once existed. This history reflected the social origin of the leaders and social affiliation of the people who were being addressed. Over time in Irish historical writing this spelt a shift from an élite patriot historiography, to a largely though not exclusively Catholic bourgeois posture and finally an emphasis on the suffering and dignity of the Catholic peasants. Historians were the generals leading the charge to national consciousness and, though initially they lacked an army, in time they created their own foot-soldiers.

45 'Against revisionism' in Ciaran Brady (ed), *Interpreting Irish history: the debate on historical revisionism* (Dublin, 1994), pp 184–5. 46 Gerhard Brunn, 'Historical consciousness and historical myths', in Andreas Kappeler, Firket Adanir and Alan O'Day (eds), *The formation of national elites: comparative studies on governments and non-dominant ethnic groups in Europe, 1850–1940* (Aldershot and New York, 1992), vol. 6, pp 327–38.

No less important was the role of historic memory. Jack Magee observes that the Irish imbibe the past through largely sectarian mythologies acquired as part of their political or religious experience.[47] This, he points out, often came through popular legends and songs learned in the home. Many of these sentiments have ancient roots and in Catholic Ireland contempt for Protestantism was endemic, just as Protestant myths were its mirror image. A Swiss, Georges-Denis Zimmerman, provides a treasure-trove of political street ballads which give vent to this popular imagery.[48] Popular or folk 'history', like its written counterpart was, in part, a creation and had an ulterior purpose. Mac Laughlin suggests that as the chief cultural/political entrepreneurs, the clergy, with the aid of school teachers, invested the entire landscape with Catholic nationalist symbolism.[49] According to him, the priests were engaged in Christianizing places, and claiming them for nationalist rule; in this environment nationalism should be seen as 'a political ideology and social movement that literally developed out of the country's socio-economic and ethnic geography'.[50] Nationalism became a vehicle for the advancement and hegemony of an increasingly self-confident church and its secular allies: teachers, minor bureaucrats, well-off farmers and shopkeepers. Mac Laughlin contends:

> In ethnically divided nations, nationalists and national separatists also emphasised the dangers of cultural miscegenation and stressed the centrality of nation-building to the preservation and accumulation of individual aptitudes. This was particularly the case in early twentieth-century Ulster where nationalism, as in Irish nationalism and national separatism, and unionism as in Ulster unionism, reflected the political and economic concerns of regionally-based social blocs and contending ethnic collectivities.[51]

Historical memory was reinforced with a myriad of festivals, commemorations and the erection of monuments.[52] St Patrick's Day, for instance, took on the functions of a national celebration: a Catholic religious event and a nationalist political commemoration rolled into one.

Later history – or more properly historiography – is a further dimension. From Young Ireland pamphlets onward, there emerged a vigorous tradition of recounting Irish history as a nationalist allegory. By the 1880s writers such as Justin McCarthy, R. Barry O'Brien and T.P. O'Connor created a virtual sub-industry of popular nationalist history, though curiously these men belonged to an anglicized literary culture garrisoned in London. The success of Young Ireland and subsequent efforts

47 See Walker, *Dancing to history's tune*, p. 59. **48** Georges-Denis Zimmermann, *Songs of Irish rebellion: political street ballads and rebel songs, 1780–1900* (Dublin, 1967). **49** Jim Mac Laughlin, 'The politics of nation-building in post-famine Donegal' in William Nolan, Liam Ronayne and Mairead Dunlevy (eds), *Donegal, history and society: interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish county* (Dublin, 1995), pp 583–624. **50** Ibid., pp 585–6. **51** Ibid., p. 597. **52** For a useful discussion of commemorations after 1920 see, Walker, *Past and present*, pp 78–100.

can be measured by Gladstone's public recognition of an Irish past filled with wrongs and grievances. In his introduction of the land bill in 1870 he insisted that 'old Irish ideas and customs were never supplanted except by the rude hand of violence and by laws written in the statute book, but never entering into the heart of the Irish people'.[53] Then in 1886 he treated the first home rule debates as a giant national tutorial on Irish history, in which the morality tale of English wrongs became the pre-eminent theme. Gladstone accepted the existence of two Irish peoples but believed that 'history' showed that the Protestants, relieved of the baleful influence of British intervention, would revert to their eighteenth-century patriotism. Grattan's Parliament then had 'the spark, at least, and the spirit of true patriotism'.[54] 'There was', he declared, 'a spirit there which, if free scope had been left to it, would in all probability have been enabled to work out a happy solution to every Irish problem and difficulty, and would have saved to the coming generation an infinity of controversy and trouble'. This verdict spared him the complicating problem of grappling with claims to distinct treatment of Protestants, particularly Ulster Protestants, and, above all, nonconformists.[55] More tellingly, this 'history' created a blockage for Protestants, a few of whom, if they might attempt to share it intellectually, were largely excluded in actuality.

With the creation of the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland, historians in both states busied themselves with outfitting them with suitable histories. This division into two 'historic' Irelands was not simply an intellectual genuflection to the existence of separate political statues but rooted in a now ethnically divided land where communal tension and violence was a reality. Yet overall a nationalist interpretation of history retains primacy in the face of sometimes stubborn counter-claims.

This short survey reveals the complexity of Irish identity, nationalism and ethnicity along with the continuing difficulty of explaining the same; however, it points to the need to integrate Ireland into conceptual models and to place them in wider European and possibly extra-European context. Ireland in Europe has many possible linkages; the one proposed here differs slightly from the usual, and is meant to suggest fresh and intriguing possibilities.

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53 *Parliamentary debates*, Third Series, 199 (15 February 1870), cc. 378–9. **54** Ibid., 304 (8 April 1886), c. 1054. **55** D. George Boyce, 'In the front rank of the nation: Gladstone and the Unionists of Ireland, 1868–1893', in D. Bebbington and R. Swift (eds), *Gladstone centenary essays* (Liverpool, 2000), pp 184–201. For some reflections on the historiography of Gladstone's Irish reputation, see Alan O'Day, 'Gladstone and Irish nationalism: achievement and reputation' in ibid., pp 163–83.