

## Perspectives on Ireland in the EEC — A Review Essay

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David Coombes (ed.), *Ireland and the European Communities: Ten Years of Membership* (Gill and Macmillan, 1983), 202 pp. IR£20.

P. J. Drudy and Dermot McAleese (eds.), *Ireland and the European Community (Irish Studies 3)* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 269 pp. £25.

Miriam Hederman, *The Road to Europe: Irish Attitudes 1948-61* (Institute of Public Administration, 1983), 172 pp. P/B IR£8.95.

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The muted tones in which the tenth anniversary of Irish accession to "Europe" was commemorated contrasted starkly with the euphoria of the entry celebrations in 1973, hardly surprisingly in view of the recent performance of the Community in general, and Ireland in particular. The anniversary did stimulate, however, two volumes of essays that contain much of enduring value for the Irish reader. The contributions in both volumes are distinguished to an unusual degree by clarity of organisation and expression. Despite the substantial overlap in subject matter, both repay careful reading and satisfy an obvious need. Nevertheless, both also left this reviewer with the feeling that, despite the professionalism of the individual contributions, the volumes added up to less than the sum of their parts. The problem is not one of technique, but of perspective.

How has membership affected Irish performance? Judgement on the quality of performance depends on assumptions about potential performance. Observers who feel, for instance, that there is no good reason why Ireland should not achieve at least the average *per capita* income of the EC will feel impatient with a growth performance that merely matches the Community average, in view of the distance that remains to be made up. Those who feel that it is objectively impossible to close the gap, or perhaps even narrow it, will

adopt a more indulgent approach. The notional trajectory of potential performance against which we compare actual performance so influences our perspective that it deserves far more explicit consideration in its own right than many of us have deigned to give it in our writings.

Thus, when Coombes (C) notes that his contributors believe that "there has been some failure at national level to seize what opportunities there were" (C, p. 25), at least two questions immediately arise. Is "some" failure quantifiable? What is the criterion? And was the "some failure" in the Community context worse than our "failure" at a more general level? Are we falling further below our potential in Community matters than in others, or may we even be climbing closer to our ceiling?

The individual contributors, it should be stressed, faced a daunting challenge in this regard. For this type of approach has rarely been explicitly adopted in Irish scholarship. We have, after all, no work for any decade since independence on the most intimate external relationship of all – the Anglo-Irish one – that extends beyond the merely diplomatic dimension and systematically covers the range of topics included in these volumes. The analogy is not perfect, in so far as Whitehall was not involved in quite the same manner as Brussels in decision-making processes affecting Ireland, but in view of the pervasive influence of English example on Dublin thinking, it is close enough for the point to stand. The attempt to assess systematically the influence of an external relationship on Ireland reminds us how little research we have on Ireland itself. While there have been several reviews of major economic issues, the only volume comparable in scope is the IPA survey, *Unequal Achievement*, which covers the longer period, 1957–82, and contains only a handful of references to the EC. The contributors to that collection apparently felt that the Irish experience, even after 1973, could be explained without extended reference to our membership of the Community. The present contributors therefore faced the problem of how precisely they should "situate" their specific enquiries into a more general framework, when in many cases that framework still remains to be constructed.

Several contributors explicitly recognised the problem of distinguishing the consequences of membership from more indigenous influences. Some take a firm stand on their relative importance. Alan Matthews bluntly concludes his survey of "The Economic Consequences of EEC Membership for Ireland" with the warning that "The solution to present economic difficulties in Ireland lies more in internal institutional and structural change than in tinkering with our relationships with the external world" (C, p. 132). Patrick Cox and Brendan Kearney conclude their survey of "The Impact of the Common Agricultural Policy" with the reminder that many of our fundamental agricultural difficulties "are essentially Irish problems largely requiring Irish solutions" (C, p. 181). These verdicts might seem to differ in emphasis from the conclusion of Drudy and McAleese's editorial summary, where they contend that:

Over the last ten years, membership of the EEC has had a profound effect on Ireland and its people . . . the commitment to Europe implied an increased willingness to compete, to participate and to cooperate with our new partners. In return, substantial net benefits were expected. In the event it would appear that the benefits and costs of membership have been rather more finely balanced than originally envisaged.

Apart from the fact that "profound" is a peculiarly unquantifiable measure, and that some might hold that "an increased willingness to compete, to participate and to cooperate" is not a cost, but a benefit in its own right, whether or not we are members of the Community, the editors themselves recognise that none of the "costs" they list can be unequivocally attributed to membership (D & M, p. 12). Nevertheless, they seem inclined to attribute greater importance to the impact of the Community than do some contributors.

Dermot Scott, in a contribution enlivened by engagingly sardonic reflections on the instinctive dynamism of Irish administrators, appears to reinforce the Drudy and McAleese general position (if I interpret it correctly) when he concludes that "Public administration in general, like the country as a whole, found accession disruptive, stimulating, rewarding and perplexing" (C, p. 87). The balance sounds positive and significant. But is it not undeniable that the mood of the country, both with respect to the Community and in general, has become distinctly more despondent since entry, and that there appears to have been a certain loss of confidence not only in politicians but in the public service? Is this justified? How good is our public administration? Does it perform better than average on Community matters? How valid are the criticisms advanced by authorities like Barrington and Kenny?<sup>1</sup> Again, the answers depend on assumptions about our potential performance.

Membership has subjected the public service to a bit more exposure than hitherto. Many contributors expressed concern about what they consider the doubtful judgement of the official mind. Seamus Sheehy's insistence, in "The Common Agricultural Policy and Ireland" that the official mind failed to predict even the short-term consequences of membership for agriculture, and was saved from grossly exaggerating the benefits in both price and output terms only by unexpected green pound devaluations (D & M, pp. 80-82, 85), as well as his demonstration that we failed to anticipate the agricultural crises of 1979 and 1980 (p. 89) prompts sobering reflections about our capacity to predict even the short term. Brendan Walsh's analysis of "Ireland's Membership of the European Monetary System: Expectations, Out-Turn and Prospects" (D & M, pp. 173-190) suggests that the official mind failed to correctly anticipate,

1. Of all Tom Barrington's critiques, the most pungent seems to me to be "Government and Administration", in *Ireland in the Year 2000* (An Foras Forbartha, 1980), pp. 5-9. And see Ivor Kenny, "Planning and Process", in *Ireland in the Year 2000: Towards a National Strategy* (An Foras Forbartha, 1983), pp. 21-28.

admittedly in exceptionally difficult circumstances, the consequences of membership. When Patrick Keatinge suggests in "The Europeanisation of Irish Foreign Policy" that the shift in the Irish approach from a communautaire to a "more directly self-centred line" within the Community has been less the consequence of a thought-out policy than the result of "a disturbingly indifferent or even careless erosion of the original position" (D & M, pp. 43-44), he provokes doubt about our performance in the diplomatic arena. It may be the fate of the official mind to have attention focused more glaringly on its apparent errors than on its successes, and in the absence of a wider framework, it is difficult to know whether these are simply isolated lapses from an otherwise superior performance, or whether they are the tip of a happily concealed iceberg. As it may be assumed, however, that some of the very best minds in the public service are likely to have been involved in these matters, there must remain considerable scope for disquiet.

Membership of the Community has provided us with a painless, but perhaps to some extent misleading, criterion by which to evaluate our performance. Instead of the automatic comparison with Britain, Irish figures are now deployed in Community columns. This may be sensible for some purposes. But it seems doubtful that any Irish thinker who consciously sets out to devise the most illuminating comparative criteria for Irish socio-economic performance would have selected precisely the other nine member states. The level of aggregation involved in EEC averages, to say nothing of the variety of individual economic histories involved, may make the exercise analytically less helpful than comparison with carefully selected individual countries, either inside or outside the Community.<sup>2</sup> Some of the time spent on comparing Ireland with Community averages might be more fruitfully employed in pondering the problem of the most appropriate comparative criterion.

The problem of the criterion remains with us even at the relatively micro level. Drudy and McAleese feel that "One possibility which was realised *in full measure* (my emphasis) was the diversification of export markets" (p. 7). In his own survey of "Ireland and the European Community: the Changing Pattern of Trade", McAleese provides useful figures on the growth of Irish exports to certain EEC countries (D & M, p. 155). But does this growth justify the verdict "in full measure"? Is the Governor of the Central Bank correct in suggesting that "There is a large potential for our exports, particularly in the continental EEC countries, which we have only begun to exploit"?<sup>3</sup> We would need to know the realistic ceiling of the potential performance over that period in order to assess how close to the ceiling our exporters came.

2. For some pointers in this direction, see Peter Neary, "The Failure of Economic Nationalism" in *Ireland: Dependence and Independence (The Crane Bag, 1984)*, p. 74 and Joseph Lee, *Reflections on Ireland in the EEC* (Irish Council of the European Movement, 1984), p. 45.

3. T. F. Cofaigh, "Competitiveness and Economic Growth", Central Bank of Ireland, *Annual Report*, February 1983, p. 93.

Policy recommendations obviously depend on assumptions about the nature and role of the state. This creates particular problems in the Irish case. We have singularly little scholarly analysis of "the state" in Ireland. Whereas most other members of the Community, even Britain, have a scholarly tradition devoted to the study of the state, we have none. It may have been our good fortune that we managed to dispense with this type of approach for so long. But it is surely extraordinary that a state that accounts for so high a proportion of national expenditure, and that plays so central a role in society, should remain, as an entity, almost immune from analysis. We therefore find ourselves in the position that scholarly explorations of particular aspects of state activity have to be placed in the context of implicit assumptions about the nature of the state. The contrast emerges fairly sharply between the contributions of Joan Hart and Brigid Laffan, on the one hand, writing on "Consequences of the Community's Regional and Social policies" in Coombes, and those of P. J. Drudy and Ann Wickham, writing respectively on "The Regional Implications of EEC Policies in Ireland" and 'Labour Training and Youth Employment: the Role of the European Social Fund' in Drudy and McAleese. Hart and Laffan tend to adopt a more benign, or at least non-committal, attitude towards the effectiveness of the funds. Their contention that "The designation of the country as one region reflects a certain consensus at national and Community level . . ." (p. 140) may be correct. But is the consensus itself correct? We are brought back once more to the quality of the official mind. Similarly, their tendency to evaluate the use of the Regional Fund to Ireland in terms of its growth as a proportion of the Public Capital Programme (pp. 140 ff.) raises further issues, given the huge questions that hang over the efficiency of the PCP itself. Drudy expresses strong reservations about the effectiveness of regional policy, while Wickham wonders whether the rhetoric of the bureaucracies relying on the European Social Fund accords with reality. The difference in emphasis between the contributors to the two volumes on these issues suggests there may be scope here for an informed debate that could cast light on an important but murky area of state activity.

Something of the same dilemma emerges in the editorial conclusion by Coombes. While warning that "increased Community expenditure is not the only, or always the most practical, means to more effective structural and social policies" (p. 189), he also argues that "A Common Market on its own is insufficient without coordinated and concerted public intervention". However attractive this sounds, there is little in these volumes to suggest that the public authorities in Ireland are capable of "coordinated and concerted" policy among themselves, much less in conjunction with other states. A discussion of alternative scenarios might have been fruitful here. Some of the glitter of the American performance in job creation may soon fade, but is there not scope for at least a hint of doubt about more state intervention in Ireland, when so much of that intervention has ignominiously failed in recent years? This is not a question of ideology. It is simply a question about the competence of the

bureaucracies to discharge the responsibilities that they have accumulated, a subject that has stimulated growing concern not only in Ireland, but in countries with a longer tradition of effective administrative performance, and where central government accounts for a smaller proportion of national expenditure. Here again, we cannot proceed much further without sustained analysis of the nature of our state.

Several contributors refer in passing to the question of motivation and attitudes as central to the quality of our performance. McAleese wonders if the failure of Irish-owned firms to exploit the European market may not require "more than economic analysis . . ." (D & M, p. 156). Walsh suspects that the decision to join the EMS failed to take adequate account of the role of attitudes (D & M, p. 177). Matthews crisply concludes that "Perhaps the greatest damage caused by EEC membership was psychological" (C, p. 131). Charles McCarthy and Ferdinand von Prondzynski, surveying "The Influence of the European Economic Community on Irish Industrial Relations" predict that "It is unlikely that our membership of the European Community will have any further effect on our collective bargaining institutions" (D & M, p. 259) because our attitudes to the role of law in industrial relations is British rather than continental. But it is nobody's responsibility, in either volume, to deal directly with the question of attitudes.

It was an imaginative editorial decision by Drudy and McAleese to invite Gearóid MacNiocaill and Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh to contribute a survey on 'Ireland and Continental Europe: the Historical Dimension'. For one thing, its inclusion permits, for a fleeting moment, the volumes to escape from a wholly Hibernocentric perspective, as we glimpse something of an Irish contribution to Europe in earlier centuries. The chapter raises issues, however, that are not taken up in any systematic manner in other contributions, with the result that it is rather left dangling as if the matters raised belonged solely to a dead past, where many are central to the living present. The pungent description of the blinkers imposed by Anglicisation on the nineteenth century Irish mind (pp. 22–23) remains highly relevant to our contemporary condition. Only Bryan McMahon's account of the growing deanglicisation of our legal system in his survey of "EEC membership and the Irish Legal System" (D & M) takes up this theme in any sustained manner. (Coombes is also to be congratulated on the welcome inclusion of "The European Community and the Irish Legal System" by Finbarr Murphy.) Indeed, the fact that the historical chapter stops at 1921, whereas the contemporary chapters rarely venture back more than a few years before 1973, leaves a vacuum for the intervening fifty years which are generally passed over as if our performance during that period is wholly irrelevant to analysis of the subsequent period – though our assumptions about our potential must presumably be coloured by our view of our experience before entry! John Coakley, it is true, does not confine himself to the dates of his title in a wide-ranging survey of "The European Dimension in Irish Public Opinion

1972–82”. (C) and Keatinge incorporates as much information on pre-1973 as his space permitted in his survey of foreign policy (D & M), though Brigid Laffan adopts a sterner attitude towards the past, taking the pre-1973 world as given, in “The Consequences for Irish Foreign Policy” (C).

Miriam Hederman’s study fills part of the missing fifty years. Hederman’s task was different from that of the contributors to the essay volumes, in that she deals with the growth of consciousness concerning Europe, rather than with the consequences of membership. An element of repetition indicates a degree of haste in composition that suggests it had to be written in less than ideal circumstances.<sup>4</sup> If her text is less chiselled, and the organisation less tidy, it is also in some respects more intellectually ambitious, and more challenging in the range of topics tackled. Hederman includes, for instance, extensive discussion of two questions, the role of the media and of pressure groups, that are missing almost entirely from the essay collections, central though they would seem to be to our experience of membership. She even includes a section on the universities which, though brief, reminds us of the absence of any treatment of the impact of membership on the organisation of our knowledge industry. The most fruitful approach to the impact of the Community on Ireland cannot neglect the Hederman route, which is problem oriented, whereas the contributions in the essay volumes tend, in the first instance, to be subject based. If academia is to provide the support the official mind needs and deserves, research must be enabled to transcend the departmental divisions within the knowledge sector. Editors at present are obliged to select subjects as much on the basis of the internal organisation of university departments as on the objective importance of the topic to be investigated. There are no traditional departments of the media, or of pressure groups, or of attitudes. There is therefore a real danger that these subjects will fall between departments, and that some big questions will not be asked, however central to policy studies they may be. There may be a conflict here between the need to satisfy the international peer group in individual subjects, and the national need for effective policy studies. The “Inter-disciplinary *Irish Studies Series*”, so enterprisingly initiated by Dr Drudy, has already earned a notable niche in Irish scholarship. But the present volume is “inter-disciplinary” only in the sense that it contains chapters by specialists in various disciplines. They all stick closely to their specialisms. It may be doubted that a small country, in Irish circumstances, can afford the luxury of the same division of intellectual labour as more economically advanced, and more intellectually endowed, societies. The return on our intellectual investment should be engaging our minds quite as much as the return on our physical investment. If we believe that superior policy formulation is one way to narrow the economic gap, to say nothing about social and cultural gaps, between the Community and ourselves, then

4. I can claim to pronounce with some authority on the subject of hasty composition, as any reader of my booklet, *Reflections on Ireland in the EEC*, can confirm!

academia must review the manner in which it can most effectively contribute to policy studies. It seems to be nobody's responsibility within the current world of scholarship to think explicitly about this problem. There is no department of the intellectual infrastructure! We have wantonly inflicted on ourselves the diseconomies of small scale in this sector, where I suspect we fall even further below our potential than in some more conspicuous areas. It is doubtful if a country that has to live largely on its wits, and that must rely on quality of mind to recompense for sundry other deficiencies, should continue for much longer to indulge the luxury of an intellectually fragmented approach to the issues involved.