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**Irish and Protestant: Commitment and Acceptance in the Twentieth Century, a Review of *Protestant Nationalists in Ireland, 1900-1923*, by Conor Morrissey, and *Protestant and Irish: The Minority's Search for Place in Independent Ireland*, Edited by Ian d'Alton and Ida Milne**

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**IRISH AND PROTESTANT: COMMITMENT AND  
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*PROTESTANT AND IRISH: THE MINORITY'S  
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EDITED BY IAN D'ALTON AND IDA MILNE**

Conor Morrissey, *Protestant Nationalists in Ireland, 1900–1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 249. ISBN: 978-1-108-47386-6.  
Ian d'Alton and Ida Milne eds., *Protestant and Irish: The Minority's Search for Place in Independent Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019), pp. 371. ISBN: 978-1-78205-298-2.

*Reviewed by Feargal Whelan*

**I**n his survey of the impulses which drove the cultural revolution in Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century, Vivian Mercier makes a novel, somewhat outlandish claim that while:

it would be outrageous to suggest that the true purpose of the Irish Literary Revival was to provide alternative employment for the sons of clergymen after Disestablishment had reduced the number of livings provided by the Church of Ireland. Nevertheless, the Revival [. . .] did have this unintended side-effect.<sup>1</sup>

It is from a similar starting point that Conor Morrissey begins his hugely detailed, indispensable, and extremely readable survey of the role played by Irish Protestants in the development of Irish cultural and political life in its most formative period, from the beginning of the twentieth century to the foundation of the Free State, and slightly beyond. His monograph, *Protestant Nationalists in Ireland, 1900–1923*, details the engagement by Protestants of all hues in the broad movement of Irish nationalism as it developed to its endpoint of political independence in 1923.

Morrissey meticulously harvests data from the multifarious clubs and organizations associated with the broader movement at the time to map connections of networks. The sheer number of clubs, committees, and guilds, all with defined structures and governance, is difficult to fathom in a

contemporary context, particularly when their primary concern was debating in public and private meetings or social gatherings. What is revealed is a picture of a populace spending most of its leisure time in many rooms of varying sizes listening to similar discourses from a small number of voices. Given that the Protestant population was a minority and further, that a small minority of that group was actively involved in the movement, the picture of a tight core of individuals with an even smaller number of principal actors emerges, so that the dissemination of ideas becomes an obvious, organic process. Morrissey promotes viewing a nationalist Protestant grouping as a separate “counterculture,” distinct from their co-religionists and the majority view, while also carefully distinguishing between “advanced nationalism” (active involvement in the independence movement) and displays of cultural affinity with a Gaelic Ireland (2). In the process, he emphasizes the importance of the Gaelic League as an organization whose significance hugely outweighed its original ideal of promotion of the Irish language and Irish culture. Given its size and the diversity within its membership it becomes apparent that an inclusivity developed, affording a space for the development and encouragement of nationalism within the Protestant community. Morrissey details the movement of prominent Protestant individuals within the League and also draws attention to their disproportionate numbers holding senior positions, from time to time, in the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, as well as sketching in detail lesser-known wholly Protestant nationalist organizations such as the Irish Guild of the Church and the Independent Orange Order.

The common thread of the cross-pollination of ideas through exposure in debating clubs is encapsulated in the person of Bulmer Hobson, who is described here as “an inveterate joiner” (50). Indeed, Hobson personifies so many of the superficial contradictions of the age that he is a worthy choice of persona to follow as a key to it all. A Belfast Protestant and a republican nationalist who was hugely influenced by the 1798 Rising, as well as by the promotion of Irish separatism through public discourse in local debating circles, Hobson joined the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Irish Republican Brotherhood before moving to Dublin and continuing his influence on the revolution at a very high level (50). Yet, he was also central to the development of the Ulster Literary Theatre, modelled on Yeats and Lady Gregory’s counterpart in Dublin. Morrissey manages to amplify the resonances of Hobson not by focusing primarily on his political work but by providing a detailed biography, exposing the anomalies and contradictions in the subject’s biography, allowing for a fuller appreciation of the milieu. Morrissey’s attention to the individual participants is an enormous strength of the book, as he affords many the same space and detail as Hobson. Leading figures such as Erskine Childers, Constance Markievicz, Robert Barton, Kathleen Lynn, and Ernest Blythe naturally figure

frequently, but proper space is given to Albinia Brodrick, Mabel Fitzgerald, Robert Lindsay Crawford, and Alice Milligan among many other frequently ignored individuals, providing a particularly detailed and complex portrait of the community. In particular, there is a welcome emphasis on the crucial role played by Protestant women throughout the period, and to the particular intensity many of them displayed in their beliefs as witnessed by their frequent refusal to accept the Treaty and their enduring active republicanism.

The one frustration I felt with the book is its abrupt halt at the foundation of the Irish Free State, though this is mainly because I was hungry for more of Morrissey's excellent analysis. While some detail is given on the "afterlife," as it were, of individuals such as Hobson, Blythe, and the Gilmore Brothers (218–20), the complex engagements by Protestant nationalists in the initial years of the Free State, certainly until 1932, is ignored because of the study's scope. We are therefore robbed of any meditation on Jack Yeats's enduring republicanism and its effect on his aesthetic (brilliantly argued by David Lloyd in *Beckett's Thing*)<sup>2</sup> or the depiction of the withdrawal of republican Protestants from society, detailed in Mary Manning's novel *Mount Venus*<sup>3</sup> as they waited in a sulk until rescued by commitment to the Spanish Civil War. Equally, we miss out on the Protestant counterbalance of their vision of a new Ireland as viewed at the Gate Theatre in those years through MacLiammóir, Edwards, and Longford's representations of Ireland, seen most startlingly in Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says No!*<sup>4</sup> These examples from that formative period should have been fundamental, I would have thought, to Ian d'Alton and Ida Milne's collection *Protestant and Irish: The Minority's Search for Place in Independent Ireland*, and yet they are wholly absent, a flaw perhaps of heightened expectations following Morrissey's bravura performance.

In *Protestant and Irish*, maybe because of its form as a collection of essays, the focus is much more on the impact of the newly independent Ireland on individuals or specific groups within the community, and their reaction to it. For this reason, it is less a question of analyzing *commitment* and more an exercise in detailing *accommodation* or *acceptance*, to use d'Alton's coinage (20). Although many individual politicians are alluded to separately, I would have liked a more comprehensive analysis of the role of those Protestants who committed to national and local party politics throughout the development of the state, both in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, which might have provided a sketch of a continuation of the long historical thread of commitment.

The sense of a "state within a state" described by d'Alton (30), in which the Protestant community could continue almost as if nothing had changed bar the color of the post boxes—at least until 1948, when the Republic was declared and the state left the Commonwealth—describes a mixture of insouciance and paranoia which is highlighted at various stages throughout the book's

contributions. It is captured perfectly in Caleb Richardson's study of the humorist Patrick Campbell, grandson of and eventual heir to the hereditary title of Lord Glenavy. Campbell's grandfather became the first Cathaoirleach of the Seanad, while his father was departmental secretary, the highest ranking civil servant in the Department of Industry and Commerce, and a director of the Bank of Ireland. Despite this, the family was burned out of their house by republican forces on Christmas Eve, 1922. Outwardly committed to and successful in the fledgling state, we are told that Glenavy told his grandson that "Two little boys outside Doyle's cottage" (282) in Terenure would throw mud at his car because they had it in for him, demonstrating a combination of both his comfortable bravura and his lingering sense of siege in his environment. In various essays, reference is made to the siege mentality of the community and by reference to the *Ne Temere* decree of the Catholic Church, in which it was demanded that written consent must be given before marriage that all children of mixed unions would be brought up Catholic. The 1950 Tilson case saw the Supreme Court uphold the validity of the written undertakings, in effect enshrining the practice in law for all followers of both churches. The adoption of this decree as a simplistic bogeyman by the community is obvious, yet its status as such is queried in Catherine O'Connor's chapter on the infamous boycott of Protestant businesses in the town of Fethard-on-Sea in 1957, as she uses oral testimonies of local Protestant women to query the severity of the actions at the time, arguing that the event became more emblematic outside of its original location.

Oral histories are among rich and novel sources mined to good effect throughout the collection. Deirdre Nutall's contribution focuses on the marginalization of working-class and poor Protestants, viewing their erasure as an intimate loss. Recounting their gathered oral testimonies she depicts a strong sense of ill-comprehended dislocation, as individuals found themselves "suddenly vulnerable and lost, even when nothing happened and nobody even looked at them; they were not necessarily resented, but simply irrelevant" (87). It is a deeply affecting story of those disregarded within an already marginalized community, which also skewers the frequently mentioned misconception among the Catholic population that their Protestant counterparts were always wealthy. Another novel source for study is Brian Hughes's trawl of the Irish Grants Committee, set up by the British Government to compensate for losses to "loyalist" subjects during the latter part of the war of independence and the whole of the Civil War, which led to the direct confrontation of modes of commitment and loyalty for all those who made claims.

Counterbalancing studies of forgotten individuals and monolithic institutions yield insights of varying importance. While the biographical sketches of Bolton C. Waller by Conor Morrissey and Edward Richards-Orpen by Philip Bull manage to describe a traceable impact on their own and their

wider community, Miriam Moffit's study of the great national debate in the Church of Ireland over the Prayers of Allegiance, and Tomás Irish's portrait of Trinity College Dublin's engagement with the state in its infancy, tell us little about the impact outside of the individual institutions. This is not a criticism of the authors or their excellent work but is probably a reflection of the unease within monumental organizations. Richards-Orpen became an influential individual in Fine Gael and a central, though now forgotten, figure within industrial and agricultural discourse, as well as being crucial to general rural development through his work with the rural organization Muinitir na Tíre. In much the way that Morrissey allows Bulmer Hobson to carry his narrative in his monograph, Bull deftly allows Richards-Orpen the opportunity to offer a commentary on wider national development and its impact on all communities within it.

It is no coincidence that Yeats's contribution to the 1925 Seanad debate, in which he grandiloquently referred to his Protestant counterparts as "no petty people" (268), should be referred to on more than one occasion in this collection, and also in Morrissey's book. Indeed, it is possible that rather than articulate the voice of his people in the hope of making a space for its continued appearance, the actual effect of Yeats's phrase was to silence that voice, resulting in years of virtual invisibility. The aim of d'Alton and Milne's collection, as articulated in their introduction, is to "uncover a southern Irish Protestant story more nuanced and complex than a Dostoyevskian dystopia of unhappiness and alienation" (1), and it certainly succeeds in providing a much more complete depiction of its subject, although it is difficult to make out to whom they attribute the assumption of a grim, poorly functioning group. Is the dystopian grimness a truism for an ill-informed Catholic nation, or is it the shared imagining of a Protestant community under siege? The use of the grating term "southern" to denote independent Ireland here and later in d'Alton's solo contribution injects an unnecessary sense of condescension, albeit one which is gaining currency as witnessed by the title of Robin Bury's *Buried Lives: The Protestants of Southern Ireland*<sup>5</sup> as it (unintentionally?) implies a trivialization of Irish political legitimacy by merely naming the state as a geographical entity rather than as a sovereign country. Nonetheless, the collection will add to the thankfully growing list of works belatedly addressing the role of the Protestant experience in the bringing into being and the shaping of the nation, which includes Bury's volume, Heather Crawford's *Outside the Glow*<sup>6</sup>, Brian Walker's *A Political History of the Two Irelands*<sup>7</sup> and Kurt Bowen's earlier *Protestants in a Catholic State*.<sup>8</sup> As a result, both Morrissey's and d'Alton and Mills's contributions should help to provide a richer and more positive engagement with Protestant Irish history. As Morrissey notes, the "Protestant

nationalists did not achieve their aims. However, [. . .] they reward our scrutiny and prompt us to reconsider the era from which they came” (222).

NOTES

- 1 Vivian Mercier, “Evangelical Revival in the Church of Ireland, 1800–69,” *Modern Irish Literature: Sources and Founders* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 64.
- 2 David Lloyd, *Beckett’s Thing: Painting and Theatre*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).
- 3 Mary Manning, *Mount Venus*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938).
- 4 Denis Johnston, *The Old Lady Says No!* (1929), (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1992).
- 5 Robin Bury, *Buried Lives: The Protestants of Southern Ireland*, (Dublin: The History Press of Ireland, 2017).
- 6 Heather Crawford, *Outside the Glow: Protestants and Irishness in Independent Ireland*, (Dublin: UCD Press, 2010).
- 7 Brian Walker, *A Political History of the Two Irelands: From Partition to Peace*, (London: Palgrave, 2021).
- 8 Kurt Bowen, *Protestants in a Catholic State: Ireland’s Privileged Minority*, (Montreal: McGill—Queen’s University Press, 1983).