

Donnacha Ó Beacháin (2019). *From partition to Brexit: The Irish government and Northern Ireland*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 328pp, pbk. ISBN: 978-1-5261-3295-6. GBP£22.99.

As Donnacha Ó Beacháin states in the preface to his new book, this is the first study to offer a comprehensive treatment of Irish government policy towards Northern Ireland. Despite the vast literature devoted to Northern Ireland and the conflict therein, Dublin's policy towards its neighbour has previously been covered in a piecemeal fashion, with books on particular aspects, such as the northern policies of Fianna Fáil. Another factor common to earlier studies is that they have tended either to conclude or to begin in 1969 – the year that witnessed the outbreak of Northern Ireland's 'Troubles'.

Ó Beacháin's book, on the other hand, discusses the entire period since the foundation of Northern Ireland in 1920. Understandably, Fianna Fáil is central to the study, since the party was the dominant force in the Republic of Ireland's political system, being in government for 54 of the 79 years between 1932 and 2011. As such, the party was enormously influential in forming official policy towards Northern Ireland and in framing the attitudes of the Irish public towards the northern state. However, Ó Beacháin's book gives a detailed account of how every Irish government, and their constituent parties, has approached Northern Ireland. It is this long view that makes the book an important addition to the historiography of both modern Ireland and of Irish nationalism.

If, as Tony Judt once argued, 'History is a story, a story needs a narrator, and a narrator needs to be standing somewhere', then Ó Beacháin has chosen to position himself within the upper echelons of the Irish and British governments and to compose a narrative of high politics. He explains his goal, as follows: 'This book explores the gap between the rhetorical objective of Irish unity and actual priorities, such as stability within Northern Ireland and the security of the Irish state.' To further his exploration, Ó Beacháin has made good use of governmental papers and political party archives and he has conducted interviews with a wide range of Irish and British politicians. He has marshalled these sources into a text that is admirably clear and informative. The resulting narrative is divided chronologically rather than thematically, with the first three chapters covering the period from 1920 to the late 1960s. The remaining four chapters begin with the outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland during 1969 and conclude shortly after the United Kingdom's European Union membership referendum of June 2016.

Of course, the book was written in the shadow of that referendum. The result was, in Ó Beacháin's words, the 'nightmare scenario' for the Irish government, threatening to undermine, perhaps completely, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and to disrupt the relationship with its British counterpart – a relationship in which Dublin had been 'transformed from spurned supplicant to vital partner' in matters relating to Northern Ireland. For most of the period covered in Ó Beacháin's book, that relationship was characterised by an asymmetry of power, with successive London governments seeing little need to engage with Dublin. This was particularly frustrating for Irish governments, since there was a widely shared belief among Irish politicians that the solution to partition lay in London and that only direct negotiations with the British government could bring about change. That belief in the primacy of London also played a part in the inability of Irish governments, for much of the 20th century, to focus international attention on partition. For example, between entry to the League of Nations in 1923 and that organisation's dissolution in 1946, successive Irish governments decided not to raise partition and Northern Ireland with the Assembly.

Ó Beacháin also charts the ‘failed campaigns’ between 1948 and 1969 when Irish governments and opposition parties launched a series of international diplomatic and propaganda efforts designed to raise awareness of partition. This period was brought to an abrupt end by the violence in Northern Ireland and Dublin’s reactions to the conflict are described across the final four chapters. The concluding chapters, which discuss the 1980s and onwards, are particularly strong, with figures such as Garret Fitzgerald, leader of Fine Gael and Irish Taoiseach (prime minister) for much the 1980s, and Fianna Fáil’s Albert Reynolds, Taoiseach from 1992-1994, coming to the fore.

Fitzgerald signed the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, a significant development, although one whose importance was vastly overstated by his government. While the agreement acknowledged that the Irish government had a legitimate interest in the affairs of Northern Ireland, there was no mechanism by which it could enact its policies. As Ó Beacháin puts it, ‘the Irish government could only propose whereas it was the British that would decide’. Yet the Agreement marked the beginning of a period when Irish governments would play a more proactive role with regard to Northern Ireland and Ó Beacháin demonstrates how the government of Albert Reynolds was instrumental in guiding the then-nascent peace process, through collaboration with John Hume and Gerry Adams and by successfully engaging with the governments of the UK and the USA. These efforts were taken further by Fianna Fáil’s Bertie Ahern, Taoiseach from 1997 to 2008, and by UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, paving the way for the all-party talks that culminated in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

Ó Beacháin’s narrative ends with Brexit, although he devotes a mere eight pages to the topic. It is a justifiable decision: Brexit as a process remains unresolved and with consequences that remain unknown; however, it provides ample evidence that the UK political establishment and mainstream media have little knowledge of Irish history and politics. Consequently, they misjudge the aims and motivations of Irish governments with regard to Northern Ireland.

Yet, whatever the manner of the UK’s departure from the EU – if, indeed, it does leave – it is probable that Northern Ireland will dominate relations between the Irish and British governments for many years. From an Irish perspective, Brexit has raised profound questions regarding the relationship between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, as well as the relationship between Ireland and Britain. How the Irish government attempts to answer these questions will play a part in shaping the futures of both Ireland and the United Kingdom. Given the fine manner in which Ó Beacháin has explained the Northern Ireland policies of successive Irish governments, he would be ideally placed to write the next chapter of that history.

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