

# IRELAND

A SHORT HISTORY

JOSEPH COOHILL



ONE WORLD

A Oneworld Book

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For Thomas Patrick Coohill

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The book is dedicated to my father, an Irish-American in the best sense of the word.

# Preface

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Ireland is fortunate to have had a great many excellent historians, and their work shows the deep complexity of its history. In addition to countless specialized studies and works concerned with the pre-1800 period, Irish history is well served by three outstanding modern histories. These are: Roy Foster's *Modern Ireland 1600–1972* (1989), Alvin Jackson's *Ireland 1789–1998: Politics and War* (1999), and Theodore Hoppen's *Ireland Since 1800: Conflict and Conformity* (second edition, 1999). Each of these books, however, presumes some knowledge of Irish history and is, as Alvin Jackson wrote, 'not a primer'. This book is a history of Ireland (concentrating on the post-1800 period) that will provide students and general readers with enough background to tackle these more sophisticated works. In addition to historians, social scientists have produced a great number of important works that students of Irish history should read. Some of these include Brian Graham's *In Search of Ireland: a Cultural Geography* (1997), Anthony Heath, Richard Breen, and Christopher Whelan's *Ireland North and South: Perspectives from Social Science* (1999), and Jörg Neuheiser and Stefan Wolff's *Peace at Last?: the Impact of the Good Friday Agreement on Northern Ireland* (2002). But history, and especially Irish history, is more than analysis of facts. Interpretations are at least as important, and historians of Ireland have been debating these interpretations for decades. Good recent discussions of interpretations of Irish history, which have influenced this book greatly, are Eberhard Bort's *Commemorating Ireland: History, Politics, Culture* (2004), Claire Connolly's *Theorizing Ireland* (2003), Lawrence McBride's *Reading Irish Histories* (2003), R.V. Comerford's *Ireland: Inventing the Nation* (2003), Clare Carroll

and Patricia King's *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory* (2003), Ian McBride's *History and Memory in Modern Ireland* (2001), Laurence Geary's *Rebellion and Remembrance in Modern Ireland* (2001), Stephen Howe's *Ireland and Empire* (2000), Patrick O'Mahony and Gerard Delanty's *Rethinking Irish History* (1998),

D. George Boyce and Alan O'Day's *The Making of Modern Irish History* (1996), Ciaran Brady's *Interpreting Irish History* (1994), John Whyte's *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (1989), Mark Williams and Stephen Paul Forrest's *Constructing the Past: Writing Irish History, 1600-1800* (2010), Mary McAuliffe, Katherine O'Donnell, and Leeann Lane's *Palgrave Advances in Irish History* (2009), Hugh Kearney's *Ireland: Contested Ideas of Nationalism and History* (2007), Evi Gkotzaridis's *Trials of Irish History: Genesis and Evolution of a Reappraisal 1938-2000* (2006); and Marianne Elliot's important and arresting *When God Took Sides: Religion and Identity in Ireland – Unfinished History* (2009), which has made me rethink many of my historical assumptions. It would be impossible to cover every issue of Irish history and its interpretation in a short book such as this. Choices have had to be made, and I knowingly sacrificed a few historical subjects in order to focus on those questions I thought most general readers would wish to have covered extensively. Accordingly, topics such as the Irish abroad (the Irish diaspora), Ireland as part of the 'celtic fringe' with Scotland and Wales, Ireland and the rest of Europe (except for very recent decades), and Ireland's place in the British Empire have received only oblique comment. This book, therefore, is admittedly insular, a true island history. I hope this focus proves acceptable.

In order to keep this book as accessible as possible, I have dispensed with traditional references in the main text, but the context should make clear the sources of my material and quotations. Full details of the books and articles mentioned in the text, as well as others of value, are listed in the Bibliography and Further Reading section at the end of this book. A close reading of the books mentioned above, however, should arm any interested person with everything needed to discuss Irish history confidently.

# Pronunciation Guide for Irish Words

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The Irish language is an important part of Irish history and Irish identity. It suffered a gradual demise following the English conquest of the island. A strong attempt at reviving and strengthening it started in the late nineteenth century, and it became the official first language of the Republic of Ireland in 1937. It is still taught in schools and still spoken in various regions of the country (mainly the west and south). Often referred to as ‘gaelic’, ‘Irish’ is a more accurate term because ‘gaelic’ covers a family of languages. A number of Irish words appear in this book, and this pronunciation guide gives phonetic help using ordinary English words and sounds rather than formal linguistic phonetics. For instance, Sinn Féin is listed here as pronounced ‘shin fain’, and Éire as ‘air-uh’. Words of more than one syllable have been divided by a hyphen where it is felt this will help good pronunciation. The full list of Irish words in this book follows, along with pronunciation guides. Phonetic guides are given when each word first appears in the text. English translations are given for both the literal meaning and the way in which the word is used today. For example, ‘taoiseach’ comes from the old Irish word meaning chieftain, but today refers to the Prime Minister of Éire.

| <i>Irish words</i>  | <i>Pronunciation</i>     | <i>English translation</i>  |
|---------------------|--------------------------|---|
| Connacht            | conn-uckt                | (western province of Ireland)   |
| Connradh na Gaeilge | conn-rah nah gale-geh    | Gaelic League   |
| Cuchulainn          | coo-cullen               | the mythic warrior and ‘defender of Ulster’   |
| Cumann na nGaedheal | cummann nah gale         | party [or group, society, circle] of the Irish  |
| Dáil Éireann        | dawl air-un              | council [or gathering] of Ireland (the lower house of the parliament of Éire)             |
| Éire                | air-uh                   | Ireland   |
| Fianna Fáil         | feena foil               | warriors of destiny [or soldiers of Ireland] (political party in the Republic of Ireland) |
| fine                | finna                    | family [or group, race]   |
| Fine Gael           | finna gale               | tribe of the Irish [or Irish race] (political party in the Republic of Ireland)           |
| Gárda Síochána      | garda shee-eh-caw-nah    | guardians of the peace (the police)   |
| Leinster            | lenn-ster                | (eastern province of Ireland)   |
| Munster             | mun-ster                 | (southern province of Ireland)  |
| Sinn Féin           | shin fain                | ourselves (political party in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland)               |
| taoiseach           | tee-shook [or tee-shock] | chieftain [or leader] (Prime Minister)  |
| tuath               | too-ah                   | people or community   |
| Ulster              | ull-ster                 | (northern province of Ireland)  |



# Introduction

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History is important to most societies, and nowhere is this more true than in Ireland. Irish history gives us more than the story of an island off the western European coast: its interpretations have provided various groups of people living there with justification for their ideas of nationality and identity. One of the most important things this book attempts to show is how diverse Irish history and culture is, but also how starkly different readings of that history have shaped its politics and society. Perhaps in no other country has the work of historians gained such importance in the popular mind. Interpretations of Irish history, from whatever period, ancient or modern, seem to have an immediate relevance to modern Irish society. This is because the issues raised by that history, particularly those issues raised by Ireland's relations with Britain, run in parallel with contemporary questions about the political and cultural make-up of Ireland, and what it means to be Irish. There are several reasons why interpretations of Irish history have been so different. One is that history has often been used to bolster political ideologies. Another is that, as in many countries, the writing of history became more professional in the twentieth century. But perhaps the main reason is that Irish history is very complex, and is so compelling, and historians have never ceased to find new avenues for exploration and interpretation. *Ireland: A Short History* tries to present both a general narrative of Irish history (concentrating on the modern period) and a guide to the interpretations of major historians and commentators. If this book shows how difficult it is to make solid generalizations about Ireland, the Irish and Irish history, then it will have accomplished its main goal.

## 2 *Ireland: A Short History*

Chapters one and two provide brief histories of Ireland before 1800, chapters three to eight examine specific periods and events in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and chapters nine and ten complete the history to the present day. Chapters one through nine contain sections entitled 'Interpretations', in which the main arguments of historians and other writers are discussed. These interpretative sections cannot hope to be comprehensive, but try to address some of the major and most interesting questions from each chapter. The discussion of various interpretations is necessarily brief and the definition of the schools of thought cannot be considered strict.

These interpretative discussions may also give the impression that historical arguments change with every generation, and there is some truth to that. A very broad generalization of interpretations of Irish history would point to three major schools – the traditional, revisionist and post-revisionist. Traditional interpretations are generally those produced from the late 1800s to the end of the 1940s; revisionists took over from the early 1950s until the early 1990s, when a group of post-revisionists started to question both the motives and the conclusions of the revisionists. With the new century, the traditionalist-revisionist-post-revisionist scheme has been set aside by many Irish historians who have been looking at entirely new questions, especially those dealing with Ireland's part in the British empire (and the attending questions relating to colonialism and post-colonial theory), memory and commemoration, and the construction of Irish identities outside the realm of political history.

This explanation of schools of thought is, of course, an oversimplification, but it is a reasonable one. Histories written in the 'traditional' period did share many characteristics. They were generally not the work of professional historians (partly because that profession, at least in Ireland, appeared slowly in the twentieth century), they often had a strong underlying political agenda and they did not use historical sources in an extensive and sophisticated way (as later twentieth-century historians would claim to). To many traditionalists, Irish history was either the noble and tragic struggle of the long-suffering Irish against their British oppressors (which is the nationalist version), or an equally strong struggle of Protestants in Ulster to retain their separate identity from the rest of the Irish population (which is the unionist version). The traditional nationalist interpretation has generally received more attention than the traditional unionist interpretation, partly because it was propagated

through nationalist writings published in Ireland, Britain and the United States.

'Revisionists' were those historians who trained more professionally in the twentieth century, analysed more sources and treated them more critically than some previous historians had done. They often came to the conclusion that Irish history was much more complicated than either traditional school would have it. Further, they argued, the actions of the British government towards Ireland were not universally hostile and oppressive, and their motives were not always wicked. An important strain of the revisionist interpretation has been known as the 'liberal' or 'inclusivist' interpretation. These liberals and inclusivists have stressed the broad sweep of Irish culture and the diversity of Irish identity, as well as the deep complexities of the Irish past. 'Post-revisionists', however, generally think that the revisionists have gone too far in their willingness to relieve the British of blame for Irish problems. Since the post-revisionists share the same degree of historical professionalization and critical methodology as the revisionists, they do not see a need to reinterpret the previous generation's work simply on the basis of higher-quality analysis. This, they would argue, has freed them from a reluctance to analyse the motives and morals of historical actors. And, although the historians who have moved into newer areas of inquiry since the mid-1990s (those dealing with questions outside the traditionalist-revisionist-post-revisionist paradigms) have not been given an interpretative label (or 'school' designation), they clearly represent a new departure from the battle over the interpretation of Irish history. In many ways, their studies on the new issues in Irish history, such as memory and commemoration, material culture, and transnational studies are more in line with much of the work that is being done in western history generally in the twenty-first century.

Again, these are generalizations, and would not stand up to detailed scrutiny. The first problem is that all historians can claim to be 'revisionists', in that they constantly reinterpret the past as well as the work of other historians. 'Revisionist history' can also mean history that is politically motivated or has a social or cultural agenda to advance. Holocaust deniers and other disreputable commentators are often branded 'revisionists'. This type of mindless extremism is entirely different from the serious and scholarly work done by the revisionist school in Irish history. Readers should avoid applying guilt by association with the pejorative use of 'revisionist'. Secondly, not all members of each of the schools mentioned above

#### 4 *Ireland: A Short History*

would agree with all the other members of that school. Revisionists quarrelled with each other as much as they did with traditionalists. Third, the newest set of historians have not rejected the very real contributions that historians before them have made to the overall field of Irish history. Finally, the generational divisions in this explanation of interpretations are too sharply drawn, even if the long lens does seem to reveal a generational tendency.

Irish history has attracted a great deal of public notice, especially since the beginning of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Much of what Irish, British and American politicians and commentators have to say about contemporary Irish problems has been given a historical gloss. The problem, however, is that the work of professional historians has not received adequate attention in these quarters. In many countries there is a great difference between popular and professional ideas about history. In Ireland, however, some popular ideas about history have been used to justify political extremism and even violence. Many myths and misunderstandings have become solidified into different conceptions of history that can be used to justify contemporary actions and attitudes.

Finally, as if the issue of interpretation were not complicated enough, there needs to be some clarification of geography before embarking on chapter one. Ireland has been traditionally made up of four provinces: Ulster [ull-ster] in the north, Leinster [lenn-ster] in the east, Munster [munn-ster] in the south and Connacht [conn-uct] in the west. At present, the island is divided politically between Éire [air-uh] (literally 'Ireland') and Northern Ireland. Ireland (often referred to as 'The Republic' in order to distinguish it from Northern Ireland) is an independent country made up of Leinster, Munster, Connacht and three counties from Ulster (to make twenty-six counties in total). Northern Ireland comprises the six north-eastern-most counties of Ulster and is part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain, and is governed by its own Assembly for domestic matters, and by the British parliament for broader UK matters.

There are several terms that appear throughout this book which need to be explained here. They relate mainly to politics and religion, but it is essential that they are understood. 'Nationalist' refers to someone who desired independence (in varying degrees) from Britain. Nationalists have ranged in opinion from those who wanted Ireland to have control of its domestic affairs but share the monarchy with Great Britain, to those who wanted an Irish republic, completely independent from Britain. Those with the latter view are called 'republicans'. 'Unionist' refers to someone who wanted to

retain the link with Great Britain, but even here there were different opinions about how strong that connection should be. ‘Loyalist’ refers to someone who was loyal to the English crown as the monarch of Ireland as well. Loyalists are now also unionist in political opinion, but this has not always been the case. Generally speaking, ‘loyalist’ is used today when referring to extremist groups who oppose a united Ireland. ‘Catholic’ refers to someone who believes in the Catholic religion. Many Catholics were nationalist as well, but some were not, and it is very important not to assume that these two words are synonymous in Irish history and society. For instance, even the *New York Times* refers to the nationalist Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) in Northern Ireland as ‘the Catholic SDLP’. While it is certainly true that most SDLP members are Catholics, and that the SDLP has fought for equal rights for Catholics in Northern Ireland, it is not a religious party. That is, it does not seek to make Catholic doctrine part of public policy. ‘Protestant’ refers to a member of a Protestant religion. While many Protestants (especially those in Northern Ireland) were unionists, this was not universally the case. In fact, many of the most important Irish nationalists from the late eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century were Protestants. Recognizing this subtlety in politics and religion is not just a historical concern. The popular perception of the Troubles in Northern Ireland as a religious conflict is inaccurate because it can give the impression that the two main groups there are fighting over theology and religious doctrine. While religion has played an important part in Northern Ireland’s difficulties, the situation is much more complex than that. Politics and culture are at least as important (perhaps more so) in explaining the divisions there, as the Interpretations section of chapter nine makes clear. Finally, the ‘Church of Ireland’ referred to in chapters one to seven is not the Catholic Church (the majority religion in Ireland), but the Anglican Church of Ireland, allied to the Church of England since 1536.