

Ulsterised Broadcasting David Miller

The Trouble with Reporting Northern Ireland

David Butler
Avebury, £35.00

Here is a welcome new addition to the literature on the media and Northern Ireland which has tended to be something of a Cinderella speciality in media studies. Although Northern Ireland has clearly had a profound impact on both British broadcasting and society over the last three decades, there is a clear reluctance among journalists and social scientists to tackle the uncomfortable debates which it throws up. This reluctance is, if anything, heightened in the British publishing industry, most of which seems to regard books on Northern Ireland as unpublishable. Meanwhile, text books on all aspects of the "post-modern" media flourish. It is a disgrace that books such as Butler's cannot find a niche with mainstream publishers and have to rely on small publishers such as Avebury which publish only in hardback at unaffordable prices.

Five chapters cover the history of the relations between broadcasting, the state and Northern Ireland, cultural identity and news, current affairs and documentary coverage of the conflict. Chapter 1 provides very little new material. Butler has attempted to bring together the literature on the British state and broadcasting with material on the history of Northern Ireland and its relationship with the media. At times he loses sight of the question of Northern Ireland for a little too long.

There is a significantly new argument in chapter 2 which may be the most important contribution of this volume. In the mid-1970s the British government adopted a strategy of Ulsterisation, in which political status for prisoners was to be withdrawn, and the police were to be given the lead rôle in the struggle with the IRA. Meanwhile, the Army presence was scaled down. In parallel, Butler argues, the BBC Ulsterised broadcasting. No longer

was there an attempt to build consensus, but a recognition that conflict was the norm in Northern Ireland. This meant that the BBC in Northern Ireland instituted a policy of what David Butler calls "balanced sectarianism", in which the BBC tried to act as honest broker. This allowed the broadcasters to reflect (in the words of Richard Francis of the BBC) "the significant voices of the people, including subversives", although not in the same way as "constitutional" politicians. Thus broadcasting in Northern Ireland reflected a wider range of views than network broadcasting and was implicitly critical of the official (networked) view that terrorism was the cause of the conflict. Following their election to council seats in the early 1980s, Sinn Féin representatives appeared routinely on local television, whereas on the network their appearance, as the case of *Real Lives* shows, was prone to official and tabloid displeasure. This is an important argument which fits with the empirical evidence of local news reporting and acknowledges that Sinn Féin were still subject to the hostile interview technique reserved for political outlaws.

However Butler then goes further, arguing that local coverage conveys a "full and accurate" description of contemporary events (p.160). Does he seriously expect any regular viewer of *Inside Ulster* or *Spotlight* to recognise this description of local broadcasting? Certainly he provides precious little evidence for such a claim here. There appears to be some sort of slippage between the earlier argument and the later apologia for local broadcasting. Furthermore his unreflexive use of the TV shorthand term "constitutional parties" (signifying the political parties which the broadcasters regard as legitimate — i.e. not Sinn Féin) is also indicative of slippage from the earlier analysis.

A second key theme is the representation of unionism. Too often, he says, unionism is portrayed negatively, as "a politics founded on negation, belligerent refusal to countenance compromise and a history of ugly exclusivism and violence; as seen regularly on British television these are not endearing qualities". Ul-

ster Protestants are, he says, shown as a homogenous group of bigots in bowler hats. Furthermore, he extends the argument to apply to critical writing on the subject. The famed inarticulacy of Ulster Unionism is not due, says Butler, to the poverty of the unionist political case, but to the fact that liberal nationalist assumptions underpin academic and media discourse. There is much to recommend this argument, but David Butler goes on to argue that unionism should not be regarded as an illegitimate ideology. It is preferable to, or at least no worse than, Irish nationalism. Yet he appears to move here onto the uncertain terrain of cultural relativism. Is it really the case that we can or should see no difference between differing/conflicting cultures or ideologies? Presumably, the argument that all cultures are legitimate wouldn't be made in relation to the culture of the apartheid regime. This is not to suggest that Northern Ireland is like South Africa, but it is to say that the descent into relativism deprives the analyst of the ability to make any meaningful comment on matters of politics and culture.

The book concentrates on the state, broadcasting institutions and television content. David Butler does not attempt to investigate the relationship between the media strategies of the various participants to the conflict nor does he examine questions of media impact. Perhaps not coincidentally, he also prefers structuralist models of explanation, rather than those which seek to accommodate the agency of participants to the conflict. His account remains "media-centric". Although textual analysis is his main form of evidence, as a corrective to speculative readings, Butler does seem to have conducted a small number of interviews with programme makers. Additionally, he shows an awareness of the limitations of textual analysis by repeatedly drawing attention to the insecurity of his statements on producers' intentions or public reactions, made on the basis of examining the news. But this reviewer couldn't help feeling that it would not have been too difficult to check with the programme makers.

In criticism of Liz Curtis's *Ireland: The Propa-*

ganda War, Butler complains that the "conceptual bases of the argument remain untheorized". Yet the conceptualisation of the Northern Ireland conflict underlying Butler's work is itself never clarified or openly stated. Butler's acknowledgement that an axe is being ground in this book (p.4) should have led on to a discussion of the brand and model of axe, rather than oblique hints of the explanatory framework and the occasional glint of steel showing through the text.

The book is short at 170 pages, and would have benefited from the inclusion of more of the empirical material on which the analysis was based. Nevertheless, *The Trouble with Reporting Northern Ireland* is a useful addition to a shockingly minimal literature on the media and Northern Ireland.

Mapping the Myths Colin H. Williams

Pleasant the Scholar's Life
M. Goldring
Serif, £11.99

Maurice Goldring has taken as his theme the rôle of Irish intellectuals and the construction of the nation state. In an intriguing and absorbing account he demonstrates how the development of Irish nationhood forged the identity of the Irish people, but at the cost of excluding both women and Protestants in the political experiment.

Activists within the Irish Literary Revival at the turn of the century perceived Irish cultural models of nationality as less of a political movement, and more of a spiritual force. In searching for a cultural basis to contemporary Irishness they took their cues from the myths and legends of a Gaelic Ireland. No matter how inappropriate or irrelevant these legends were in combating an increasingly materialist European view of political life, the literary intelligentsia ransacked Irish/Celtic history for