

Background answers to the Irish question

IN recent years the discipline of Irish historical writing has undergone something of a sea change. No longer was the proclamation of the Irish republic in 1916 to be seen as a warning shot across the bows of the British Empire. Instead the conspirators in Dublin were extremists with little popular support who foisted a reactionary Catholic nationalism on the Irish people.

In Ulster by contrast, unionists were no longer to be seen as bigots in bowler hats or as dupes of British imperialism. Instead, the troubles in the north of Ireland were an ethnic conflict animated by religious grievance or the search for self-determination. Attention was redirected to the divisions among Unionists and to the suppressed radical potential of the Protestant working class. Two new books take exception to this comforting (for Britain) version of Irish history.

In *The Cause of Ireland*, Liz Curtis provides an alternative history of the struggle for Irish independence. She shows the complicity of the British government in the famine of the 1840s when one adviser "feared" the famine would "not kill more than a million people and that would scarcely be enough to do much good". According to the best estimates, about 1.5 million people died in the famine and three million were exiled. On the 1916 rising Curtis quotes a Canadian journalist's account, which contradicts the accepted version that the rebels were bereft of popular support. In the "poorer districts" of Dublin, he wrote, "there was a vast amount of sympathy with the rebels".

The voices of women and ordinary people caught up in events or struggling to make history are included in a break from traditional "kings and battles" history. *The Cause of Ireland* is written in a fresh, clear style with vivid quotations that bring alive the struggle for decolonisation. The exploits of James Connolly and Maud Gonne make refreshing reading. For example, amid Queen Victoria's jubilee, Gonne conspired to have the



The Cause of Ireland: From the United Irishmen to Partition

By Liz Curtis

Beyond The Pale, Belfast, £12.95

Enemies and Passing Friends: Settler Ideologies in 20th Century Ulster

By Pamela Clayton

Pluto Press, £12.99

Irish America and the Ulster Conflict 1968-1995

By Andrew J Wilson

Blackstaff Press, £12.99

David Miller

Dublin power supply for celebratory illuminations cut. At the same time she arranged an alternative display to the "famine queen" in Parnell Square, which included photographs of evictions and of those who had been executed, and recorded the numbers of evictions, deaths and jailings during Victoria's reign. This is an enthralling account of the cause of Ireland.

Enemies and Passing Friends examines the development of Ulster Unionist ideology. Pamela Clayton demolishes the notion that Northern Ireland is an "ethnic conflict", as well as the traditional left case that the cause is British imperialism. Instead, in an impressive survey of literature, she argues that, rather than see the

Irish conflict as some weird deformation with little parallel elsewhere, Ulster unionism has significant similarities with settler populations in Algeria or Zimbabwe. Here, the key relationships are between the settlers, the natives and, crucially, the metropolis from which the settlers have come. The natives are seen as subhuman and disloyal and the metropolis in whose name the settlement has occurred is seen as a "passing friend", especially when the interests of the metropolis and the settlers clash over the rights of the natives. Clayton shows that Ulster Unionist attitudes towards Catholics at the start of the century were similar to the racism of white settlers in Africa. Furthermore, she argues, these attitudes have changed little.

Clayton argues that although the political status, economy and demography of Ulster has changed and that Unionist "moderates" have had an increasing influence, settler ideologies retain a grip on the majority of Protestants in Northern Ireland. Here is the core problem of Northern Ireland; the refusal of ultras to accept that Catholics should have an equal place in contemporary politics and society. When this is challenged by Britain the Ulster response is to dismiss her as a fickle and alien "passing friend". Incisive and insightful, *Enemies and Passing Friends* is a devastating critique of theories of ethnic conflict. Highly recommended.

Meanwhile, over the Atlantic, a rather different community of settlers is surveyed in *Irish America and the Ulster Conflict*. Andrew Wilson surveys the Irish-American activities on behalf of the Emerald Isle, from 1800, concentrating on the period since 1968. A wealth of detail establishes the twists and turns of Irish-American politics, although I would have preferred a less chronological approach to the issues. Nevertheless, a useful source on the nature and significance of Irish America that slays some of the myths that tend to emanate from British government sources and somehow find their way into the media on both sides of the Atlantic.