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HOME AND ABROAD

THE PROTESTANT IRISH

TWO BIRTH ANNOUNCEMENTS

After my mother's death in 1987, I returned to Ireland to sort out her house. There, in a bureau in the attic, I found clippings from two very different newspapers from two very different places: the *Irish Times* in Dublin and the *Khartoum Times* in Sudan. Apart from noting my arrival on July 26, 1935, at Hatch Street Hospital in Dublin, I found on the back of each clipping various items of news. In an interview with the *Khartoum Times*, Air Marshal Italo Balbo (1896–1940), the creator of the Italian air force, insisted that air power was the best guarantee of world peace. No nation would dare to go to war, knowing that its women and children, its wives and mothers, would face destruction from the air. And, in a speech reported in the *Irish Times*, Éamon de Valera (1882–1975), the great nationalist leader, declared that within fifty years the Irish people would all be speaking Irish. They would have forgotten whether they were Catholics or Protestants.

Balbo died in 1940, in the first year of the Second World War, shot from the sky outside Tobruk, but not before suffocating entire villages with poison gas in the course of Mussolini's conquest of Ethiopia. He did not live to know of the London Blitz, still less to know of the dropping of the atomic bomb. As for de Valera: relations between Protestants and Catholics have, indeed, improved in the Republic; but little Irish is spoken in the streets of Dublin.

Sitting in the empty attic of my mother's house, in 1987, fifty-two years after my birth, I was touched by the primal sadness of all historians. I was reading about people who knew as little of their future as I knew of my own.

HOME AND ABROAD

As the two birth announcements showed, at the time of my birth and for many years afterward, the life of my parents was divided between two places: “home,” in Ireland, and “abroad,” in Sudan, where my father, James Lamont Brown, worked as a traffic manager in the Sudan Railways from 1930 to 1947.

As a small child I lived between two worlds, spending the summer in Ireland and the winter in Sudan. A little later, during the war, from 1939 to 1944 (until the Mediterranean was opened again to civilian traffic) my mother and I lived in Ireland while my father stayed at his job abroad. Our only links to him were airmail letters, bearing exotic stamps of camel-riders and date palms, silhouetted against a sepia desert dawn, calculated to fire the imagination of a young boy. This experience established “abroad”—Egypt and Sudan—as a strong imaginative pole for me and my family.

“OUR CROWD”: THE PROTESTANT IRISH

We were a Protestant family. This meant that I grew up in Ireland very aware that I was a member of a religious minority. Foreigners often assume that the Republic of Ireland is an entirely Catholic country, and that Protestantism is limited to the British enclave in Ulster, known as Northern Ireland. But we were there in the South. Reduced to a minority of about 5 percent by the 1940s, Protestants were well established in Dublin, though they were no longer a presence in much of the countryside. In a society where religious differences still mattered, Protestants thought of themselves as a group apart, clearly defined against the Catholic majority. Walking around Dublin as a boy, I was expected to know, instinctively, to which people I should take off my cap: well-to-do or distinctly seedy, they were “our crowd.”

This meant that Protestant society in Dublin (as I viewed it through the memories of my parents and my aunts) was surprisingly interconnected. Among other links, its members shared a respect for books. Literary talent was appreciated and was often set to work in eloquent letters to the editor of the *Irish Times* on topics as diverse as the evils of censorship (a constant grievance) and the proper care of dogs. Until his very last days, my father would always cut out these letters, as specimens of homegrown rhetoric, to send to me, alongside any mention of any achievement by any Irish man or woman anywhere in the world.

My aunts remembered that W. B. Yeats (1865–1939)—the cousin of a cousin—would sit in the front row at their school performance of *Deirdre of the Sorrows* by John Millington Synge (1871–1909). Another cousin of Yeats, William Monk Gibbon (1896–1987)—known to us schoolboys as Gubb-Gubb—notably failed to teach me Latin at school. He later rose to fame as the Grand Old Man of Irish Letters, and was, perhaps, best known for his perpetual grudge against Yeats for having refused to include any of his poems in the famous *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*.

Emily and Ellen Synge, first cousins of the dramatist John Millicent Synge, were friends (maybe even distant relatives) of my mother's mother. They would occasionally come to Dublin from Annamoe in the Wicklow Mountains to attend the opera. They would bring a large box of chocolates, which they opened, with much rustling of paper, as the overture began, to the great annoyance of their neighbors. "Ada," Emily would say in a loud stage whisper, "If looks could kill!"

Most of these people had limited means. They did not own many books—but they read what they had. Works of poetry, fiction, and scholarship were expected to resonate among "our crowd." There was a strong sense that high ideas and serious learning did not need to be confined to academe. As a writer, I have always felt an obligation to "the folk of few books"—to use the phrase of Yeats. To write well, to spread knowledge, and to widen sympathies by the use of the pen has always been a top priority for me.

AFFINITIES

This background may explain certain affinities between what I picked up in the Ireland of my boyhood and the issues on which I have concentrated in the study of late antiquity.

Respect for the power of religion was the most obvious of them. I remember being puzzled, in my first years at school in England and in subsequent years as an undergraduate and teacher at Oxford, by the polite indifference of so many of my English friends to the role of religion as a social force. Such indifference was unthinkable in Ireland. In a world characterized by dignified poverty, both Protestant and Catholic churches offered to their members something to be proud of. This confessional mentality provided a social map with clearly delineated boundaries. Altogether, I expected religious ideas to be powerful and to have an impact on society—often, alas, in the form of intolerance: a sad topic that I came to study early in my life as a scholar.

A PAST WITHOUT A FUTURE

I am also struck by the way in which I appear to have been drawn to study unfamiliar tracts of history, often buried beneath a mound of modern prejudice. To rehabilitate lost centuries has been my particular joy. This is not, perhaps, so surprising: after all, I grew up in a country that, for centuries, had been denied a future. Its Golden Age lay in the distant past, in the “Isle of Saints and Scholars” of the early Middle Ages, followed by tragic centuries of invasion and submission to alien rule.

By contrast, when I went to school in England as a boy, the history textbooks that I used still radiated confidence, even in a battered postwar Britain. Firm lines of progress seemed to run from the distant past—from Magna Carta and the origins of Parliament, through the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the Reform Bill of 1832, the expansion of the British Empire, and—it was now hoped by many—the new Britain of the welfare state. The history books that I read and the teaching that I received for much of the time stressed, with admirable robustness, the power of progressive institutions and the supreme virtue of common sense.

But where were those virtues to be seen in the history of Ireland? Where were they during the Irish Famine of 1845 to 1849? Charles Trevelyan (1807–1886), the English minister in charge of relief for the famine, was a pillar of progressive views. He was a Cornishman, who praised his countrymen as improved Celts—“Celts who by long habits of intercourse with the Anglo-Saxons have learned at last to be practical men.”¹ His first notion of practical measures was to leave Ireland to its fate, so as to allow “the operation of natural causes” to rectify the shortage of food according to strict laws of laissez-faire commerce.² As a result, one million Irish men, women, and children died of starvation. Trevelyan, the “practical man,” the free-market economist and impeccable administrator, had no regrets. The Irish, the unimproved Celts, were to blame:

The great evil with which we have to contend [is] not the physical evil of the famine, but the moral evil of the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the people.³

1. Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 59.

2. Woodham-Smith, *Great Hunger*, 374.

3. Woodham-Smith, *Great Hunger*, 156.

Not surprisingly with such a past, a growing boy in Ireland (whether Protestant or Catholic) did not pick up the respect for common sense and for the beneficent power of institutions that was taken for granted, across the sea, in England.

Altogether, the history of Ireland could not be presented as a steady progress. It was punctuated by catastrophes and by all too many examples of decline and fall. In the past four centuries, Ireland had witnessed the collapse not of one ruling class, but of two. The traditional Irish aristocracy had been ruthlessly pushed aside by Protestant adventurers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, largely (though not invariably) newcomers from Britain. But no sooner were these families established than they also began to decline. The agricultural depression after 1815, the catastrophe of the Great Famine of the 1840s, and the mobilization of the Land League of the 1880s scythed their income and severed their links to the land. By 1940, their fine houses littered the countryside as empty shells, some of them burned out in times of civil war.

So I grew up among people dressed in shabby tweed coats. Many of them, and their families, had seen better times. But most of them lived with good cheer and a sense of dignity. Even as a boy, I picked up a prevailing mood. I learned that a lively and imaginative culture could coexist with constrained political and economic circumstances. It was, perhaps, a good start with which to approach the world of late antiquity—a period of history that seemed, at first sight, to be going nowhere, but which would prove, on closer inspection, to be the making of both Europe and the Middle East.

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