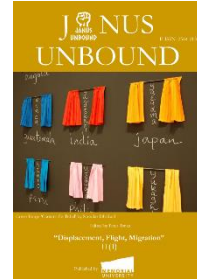


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Author(s): Liam Ó Ruairc

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Liam Ó Ruairc

McVeigh, Robbie and Bill Rolston. *Anois ar theacht an tSamhraidh. Ireland, Colonialism and the Unfinished Revolution*. (Belfast: Beyond The Pale Books, 2021), 462 pages.

Robbie McVeigh and Bill Rolston have written an important book: “its aim is to reclaim the concept of colonialism as the central frame in understanding Ireland past, present and future” (xiii). For the authors, Ireland today is “still struggling with the complex legacies of imperialism and colonialism” (198). England’s oldest colony is considered in the context of the history of colonization and anti-colonial politics throughout the world. The authors stand in solidarity with those who want to end colonialism and imperialism, not just in Ireland but globally: “there can be no such thing as anti-imperialism in one country” (406). While many studies that use a colonial and postcolonial framework to understand the Irish experience come from literary and cultural studies, this book focuses on political, historical, and socio-economic forces.

Most historians would accept that the conquest, plantation, and anglicization in early modern Ireland were colonial acts, but they would also stress that after 1801, Ireland was constitutionally part of the United Kingdom and therefore not formally treated as a colony, though it retained many of the features of such. The semi-detachment of the Irish Free State from the British Empire after 1921, and its exit from the Commonwealth in 1948, seem to indicate that the Republic of Ireland is a post-colonial state. For the authors, however, “the key issue is ... not whether Ireland was colonized but when or indeed if it was ever *decolonized*. Did this “‘first colony’ become ‘post-colonial,’ and if so when and how?” (7). They argue that Ireland still needs to be decolonized.

According to the book, in the period 1801-1921, “The Irish experience under the Union might be characterized as ‘hypercolonialism’ or ‘hyper-imperialism.’ ... The Union did not free Ireland from Empire *but rather locked the Irish people within it*” (134). Likewise, 100 years ago, partition was based on a border that held “neither democratic nor ethnic legitimacy” and represented an “expressly sectarian anti-democratic land grab” (139), which “created two state

formations without any organic political or ethnic *raison d'être*" (140). Northern Ireland represented "a truly reactionary, hyper-imperial offshoot symbolizing the antithesis of independence" (143). In the Republic, a faction within the revolutionary leadership settled for the position of a white dominion. McVeigh and Rolston conclude that the Irish state "remains as dependent as it ever was. It broke free from a classical colonial form of dependence only to embrace others, including the EU and transnational capital" (203). However, the authors believe Ireland's accession to European Community membership in 1972 "was the opportunity to cut the umbilical cord of colonialism—the connection with England" (174). It represented "the key disjuncture in the history of the 26-county state" (175) and enabled the Irish state to break up its dependent relationship with the UK. "This change *was* epochal in nature" (176).

Anthony Coughlan (an Irish critic of the European project) would likely dissent from this fairly positive view of the EC/EU being the beginning of the end of economic and ideological dependency on colonial power. In *Ireland, Colonialism and the Unfinished Revolution*, the authors warn that "there is a danger in turning an anti-imperialist gaze on a post-colonial project" (201), and they emphasize that the Republic of Ireland today is far from being a "failed state." This claim is open to potential challenge from people coming from minority traditionalist republican currents such as Republican Sinn Féin. But while the authors are stressing that the Republic of Ireland has been insufficiently decolonized, they do not discuss whether it can be characterized, as some people have, as a "neo-colony" for at least some stage of its history. While the book discusses colonialism and imperialism, neo-colonialism as a concept is absent from it.

The authors stress the "*structural* reality of empire" (14) and pay central attention to the state:

[it] is always an identifiable state structure doing something specific in its role of mediating between Englishness and Irishness, institutionalizing native/settler difference. However the character of English rule is formulated, the relationship is defined by English dominance and Irish subordination. In other words, it involves—definitely a colonial state structure. The core institutions of state—government, parliament, church and crown—all combine to make and keep Ireland institutionally subaltern. ... This colonial state structure holds across 800 years—it is not until 1922 that any part of Ireland can even pretend to be free.

The relationship between England and Ireland "is defined by subjugation: this relationship is about 'conquering' and 'subjugating' and 'colonizing' 'Irish enemies'" (71), but there are problems with how the authors use the concepts of colonialism and imperialism. They broadly use the terms of colonialism and imperialism (like in the Irish republican song *Joe McDonnell*) to mean "plundered many nations, divided many lands, terrorized their peoples, ruled with an iron hand." But colonialism and imperialism, as the authors themselves are well aware, are conceptual minefields. The two words overlap and synergize, but never quite become synonymous. While for them the colonial relationship is

defined by English dominance and Irish subordination, the difference between colonialism and imperialism is identified as the former constituting the act of theft, the latter the reframing of that theft as a moral rather than an immoral act (12). Imperialism is an ideological project (theory), and colonialism is primarily a material project (practice) (13). The book does not develop enough the conceptual differences between colonialism and imperialism, or how these impact the history of Ireland.

From the perspective of historical materialism, imperialism today is a *general* structure and only some *specific* countries are or have been affected by colonialism. The first “imperial” Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland in the 12th century was part of a wider process of feudal expansion, not the result of imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism. When can the British conquest of Ireland be qualified as “imperial” rather than “colonial”? Other historical accounts of imperialism have started from the beginning of modernity and the capitalist world system in the 16th century to the present day. But even there, the authors quote the historian Nicholas Canny (1998 1) who pointed out in a discussion about the 16th and 17th centuries that the terms are far from exact: “The study of the British Empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries presents special difficulties because no empire, as the term subsequently came to be understood, then existed, while the adjective ‘British’ meant little to most inhabitants of Britain and Ireland.” There is the danger of projecting onto the past (say 12th or 16th centuries) the concept of imperialism as it was understood in the 19th or 20th century.

Similar problems occur in the book’s discussion of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism. Is Irish “resistance to colonization” in the 16th and 17th centuries, such as the Confederation of Kilkenny, a form of “Irish anti-imperialism” (332-6)? This is even more questionable than attempts to present Wolfe Tone as some kind of proto-socialist because of his references to “the men of no property” in a journal entry dated 11 March 1796. The danger, then, would be to classify Giraldus Cambrensis’s (Gerard of Wales) *Topographia Hibernica* (1187) and *Expugnatio Hibernica* (1189) as “imperialist propaganda” or Seathrún Céitinn (Geoffrey Keating) as some kind of 17th century Irish Edward W. Said; his 1634 history of Ireland *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* an anti-colonial classic.¹ Also, are there differences between “anti-colonial” and “anti-imperialist” positions? For example, leading academic Brendan O’Leary argues in his 2019 book *A Treatise on Northern Ireland. Volume 1: Colonialism. The Shackles of the State and Hereditary Animosities* that the Northern Ireland problem has colonial origins, but O’Leary explicitly rejects an anti-imperialist perspective. For the authors the choice that one must relate to is one single binary of “*empire versus republic*” (398), but bizarrely they do not mention Liam Mellows’ view in his prison notes of 1922 of the so-called 1921 treaty as being between “FREE STATE – Capitalism and Industrialism – EMPIRE. REPUBLIC – Workers – Labour.” The authors discuss John Mitchell’s support for slavery (343-4), but do not mention Wolfe Tone’s early project to colonize the Sandwich Islands (today’s Hawaii) or James Connolly publishing articles defending German colonialism in Africa and viewing the German empire as “a homogenous

empire of self-governing peoples,” which contained “in germ more of the possibilities of freedom and civilization” than the British (*Workers’ Republic*, 18 March 1916). There are a number of references to the “poetic” 1919 Democratic Programme of *Dáil Éireann* (e.g. 156), but without mentioning its deletion of any references to the abolition of classes and socialist rhetoric. But to their credit the authors discuss the internationalism of Irish republican militants and make the important point that: “In addition, in supporting anti-imperialist struggles elsewhere, Irish republicans were exploring a more sophisticated version of anti-imperialism in their own country beyond the slogan of ‘Brits Out’ ” (369). They struggled for global justice and not just for getting England out of Ireland.

The authors correctly “emphatically reject” Brendan O’Leary’s notion that the Belfast Agreement represents the “final decolonization” of Ireland (8). The authors argue that since the 1998 Belfast Agreement there “is certainly no sense in which (Northern Ireland) provides any kind of inspiration regarding outstanding questions around decolonization” (366). Decolonization in Ireland today for the authors remains unfinished business: “Our review of the two Irish states that emerged from partition clearly signals that the Irish anti-imperial revolution remains unfinished” (282). The book begins by giving readers a choice, “whether to stand in solidarity with other victims and survivors of colonialism and imperialism ... in 2020, as much as 1800 or 1918, we have to decide whether we should remain subjects or become citizens” (37). How does one finish the “unfinished revolution”? The authors propose to end partition, dismantle the two partition states in Ireland, and establish a democratic Republic as the way forward. What is required is “a bolder popular front strategy to take us towards reunification. As we have suggested, the historical model for this is there in the Parnellite ‘popular front’ (of 1879)” (404-5). This “bolder popular front” in the authors’ contemporary version, ranging from liberal journalist Fintan O’Toole to so-called “dissident” republicans (404-5), is too broad to be likely. The authors bizarrely conclude that “Ireland is in a revolutionary moment in 2020” (402). As Lenin wrote on the revolutionary situation: “For a revolution to take place, it is usually insufficient for the lower classes not to want to live in the old way; it is also necessary that the upper classes should be unable to live in the old way” (1964 213-4). However, the situation in Ireland 2020 or today—north and south—is far removed from that.

The title of the book uses the expression in Irish *Anois ar theacht an tSamhraidh*: “Now the summer is coming,” which its authors counterpose to the *Game of Thrones* well-known “winter is coming” (284). But I have a much more pessimistic view that we live in a Thermidorian period with the collapse of emancipatory projects and where the morbid symptoms are dominant. After all, even McVeigh and Rolston note that: “The attack on the World Trade Centre in New York in September 2001 spelt the death knell for anti-imperialist struggle ... now there was little space for claiming anti-imperialism as one’s political motivation” (ix). Only practice and history will prove if McVeigh and Rolston are right about what Lukács (1970 13), writing about Lenin, called “the actuality of revolution.”

The book is an ambitious attempt to rethink Irishness. What is Irishness? The authors quote Conor Cruise O'Brien who famously debunked more traditional accounts of Irishness: "Irishness is not primarily a question of birth or blood or language; it is the condition of being involved in the Irish situation and usually of being mauled by it. On that definition, Swift is more Irish than Goldsmith or Sheridan, although by the usual tests they are Irish and he is pure English." For McVeigh and Rolston this characterization "retains the virtue of de-essentialising the subject—it is an invitation to engage with Irishness and Ireland dialectically" (27). In their project to decolonize Ireland, the authors intend not only to dismantle the opposition between settler and native, Planter and Gael, but also to carry out a critical deconstruction of Irishness and whiteness through what they call "*mestizaje*" ("pronounced mess-tease-ach-ay") (25-7). This is their more materialist take on what postcolonial theory calls "hybridity" (382). The authors have been heavily influenced by the work of Noel Ignatiev on "how the Irish became white," and the book is a serious attempt to continue his project (there are many references to the "Black Irish" and the Irishness of colour). The authors could have boosted their argument by mentioning that most remarkably, by 1916 Roger Casement (the greatest Irish person that ever lived in this reviewer's opinion) stated that: "I had come to look upon myself as an African" (Brief to Counsel, 8 June 1916).

This book should be welcomed for putting questions of empire, colonialism, racism, and decolonization at the heart of the debate about Ireland and also to rethink what it is to be Irish. While this review had a number of critical points to raise against the book, this should not detract from the fact that this is essential reading which is to be recommended to a wide public.

Biography

Liam Ó Ruairc is a widely published writer and author of *Edward W. Said as Critical Intellectual: Speaking Truth in the Face of Power* (2020) and *Peace or Pacification?: Northern Ireland After the Defeat of the IRA* (2019).

Notes

1. For example, Declan Kiberd (1995 14) noted that C itinn sounded "at time like the Edward Said of his era."

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