

Review: Adapting Early Modern Ireland

Reviewed Work(s): Contested Island: Ireland, 1460-1630 by S.J. Connolly; Divided Kingdom: Ireland 1630-1800 by S.J. Connolly

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Source: *Eighteenth-Century Ireland / Iris an dá chultúr*, Vol. 24 (2009), pp. 164-175

Published by: Eighteenth-Century Ireland Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27806961>

Accessed: 23-11-2018 14:49 UTC

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REVIEW ARTICLES

Adapting Early Modern Ireland

S.J. Connolly, *Contested Island: Ireland, 1460-1630* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), x + 426pp. £37.00 (hardback); S.J. Connolly, *Divided Kingdom: Ireland 1630-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), x + 519pp. £35.00 (hardback).

Professor Sean Connolly is one of Ireland's leading historians. Among his many works are two exceptional monographs. His first book, *Priests and people in pre-famine Ireland 1780–1845* (Dublin, 1982), was a remarkable study of Irish Catholicism in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He followed this with the innovative and challenging *Religion, law and power: the making of Protestant Ireland 1660–1760* (Oxford, 1992). Connolly's stated purpose in that book was 'to look at the Protestant élite primarily in its own terms' and, in so doing, to clear away some of the negative stereotypes that had been associated with it in later Irish history writing.¹ Further work on the Irish Protestants, notably that of Toby Barnard, has ensured that this perspective is now commonplace.² However, a much bolder argument was annexed to Connolly's wish to understand and contextualise the behaviour of the Protestant elite. Connolly held that 'Ireland in the century or so following the Restoration is best seen as first and foremost a part of the European *ancien régime*', which did 'more to make sense of the central characteristics of post-Restoration Ireland than the alternative label of a colonial society, so casually yet so persistently applied.'³ Connolly was not alone in seeking a fresh model for understanding eighteenth-century Ireland. His work was, however, the strongest articulation of the *ancien régime* thesis and therefore it attracted most attention and sparked an invigorating and ongoing debate about the very nature of eighteenth-century Irish society.

Connolly's refreshing scepticism concerning received historical opinions is evident in his mammoth two volume history of early modern Ireland, *Contested Island* and *Divided Kingdom*. These mark a departure from the earlier, tightly argued, monographs and are exercises in 'a traditional genre, the general narrative survey'.⁴ The sheer scale of Connolly's latest works means that it is impossible to find suitable Irish points of reference. Indeed, the most appropriate comparison is with the only other work to appear in the series to which these two volumes belong (the Oxford History of Early Modern Europe), namely Jonathan Israel's *The Dutch Republic: its rise, greatness and fall, 1477-1806* (Oxford, 1995). As the title suggests, Israel adopted a well worn narrative trope. Readers familiar with Connolly's work will not be surprised that he has eschewed familiar nationalist frameworks for understanding his period and organising his material.

1 S.J. Connolly, *Religion, law and power: the making of Protestant Ireland, 1660-1760* (Oxford, 1992), p. 4.

2 Toby Barnard, *A new anatomy of Ireland: the Irish protestants, 1649-1770* (New Haven, 2003).

3 Connolly, *Religion, law and power*, p. 2.

4 Connolly, *Contested Island*, p. 3.

Instead, the themes around which both volumes coalesce are adaptation, contingency and pragmatism among 'the peoples who became the modern Irish'.⁵ *Contested Island* and *Divided Kingdom* tell the story of early modern Ireland along roughly chronological lines. The decision to end one volume and begin another at 1630, rather than 1603 or 1641, will raise some eyebrows. In fairness, this provides a neat chronological balance; both volumes cover exactly 170 years. More substantially, Connolly's argument is that the 1630s represented 'a new age of stability and peace' that contrasted with the unfinished business represented by the formal end of war in 1603 and the new cycle of violence unleashed in 1641. Each of the volumes have been written as stand-alone works and for readers of this journal *Divided Kingdom* can be profitably read as such, but the arguments of *Contested Island* will also demand the attention of any serious scholar of early modern Ireland.

Contested Island provides a detailed and erudite survey of Irish history between the late fifteenth and the early seventeenth centuries. Connolly draws on a vast printed primary and secondary literature, as he picks his way through the arguments of other historians to create his own lucid account of the period. The contingent nature of early modern Ireland is emphasised from the start. He begins with the political, social and religious situation in Ireland in the later fifteenth century 'in which cultural frontiers were clearly defined yet constantly crossed', before embarking on a chronological survey of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.⁶ The book is weighted more towards the period after the accession of Elizabeth (the period from 1460 to 1558 is covered by page 123 of 403 pages). For Connolly there was no deliberate or ideologically-driven colonial expansion in Ireland, rather successive English administrators engaged in pacification as a 'problem of government', which took on a momentum of its own.⁷ The activities of sixteenth century rebels were no less pragmatic. The Kildare rebellion was essentially a gamble that went wrong, the Geraldine League was motivated by self-interest and Shane O'Neill was acting out of interests rooted in his own Ulster powerbase. And yet even Connolly recognises that pragmatism can only explain so much. Drawing on recent research, he concludes that the activities of James Fitzmaurice Fitzgerald were borne out of 'a deeply felt hostility to the Protestant Reformation', even if the revolts of the 1560s and 1570s can be understood generally in response to central government encroachment on local privilege.⁸ On religion, Connolly paints a positive picture of a late medieval Christianity responsive to the needs of its adherents. The Reformation failed in Ireland for political and practical reasons, despite the ambiguous responses of those in the Pale to religious changes under Henry, Edward and during the early reign of Elizabeth. Indeed the growing recusancy of

5 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 263.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 160.

the later sixteenth century was not quite the same thing as a firm commitment to a continental style counter-reformation. The latter, argues Connolly, was a later development, and in any case was more concerned with reform of existing structures and practices than with combating heresy.⁹

While Connolly emphasises pragmatism over idealism, he leaves the reader in no doubt that there was an English ‘colonising enterprise’ in Ireland, one which was carried out with extreme violence.¹⁰ He notes, to take a few basic examples, that Sir Richard Bingham’s subjugation of Connacht involved bloody atrocity with the aim of self- and family aggrandizement, while Mountjoy’s campaign in Ulster a decade later involved the ‘indiscriminate ... slaughter’ of the local population to deprive Hugh O’Neill of his practical support base.¹¹ In other words, Connolly may not foreground conflict as the default setting by which sixteenth-century Ireland should be understood, but neither does he explain it away. Paradoxically, the uncontrolled freebooting witnessed in Munster and Connacht in the 1580s encouraged Hugh O’Neill into conflict with a state which was militarily too weak to deal easily with his challenge. For Connolly, O’Neill’s rebellion was yet another pragmatic response, this time led by a cultural and political chameleon (‘ruthless, calculating and devious ... with an apparent infinite capacity for duplicity’), who was fighting to prevent state encroachment into his Ulster heartland.¹² Connolly emphasises that the Ulster plantation of the early seventeenth century was a complex affair, which did not live up to the lofty social engineering imagined by its architects. However, he also recognises that rapacity and illegality, as well as pacification, drove the extensive land grabs witnessed during James I’s reign. By the end of *Contested Island* Ireland enters a short-lived peaceful period during the early years of Charles I’s reign. Connolly notes the mixed experience of the Gaelic Irish, which means that ‘military defeat and dispossession must be set against evidence of adaptation’.¹³ This is an important assessment, but it risks underplaying the scale of ‘military defeat and dispossession’ and makes it more difficult to explain the events of 1641 and subsequent years, which helps to account for Connolly’s surprise at the speed with which the 1641 rebellion spread.¹⁴

The exceptionally high standards of scholarship set by *Contested Island* are maintained in *Divided Kingdom* (which is just under 100 pages longer). Once again, Connolly adopts a broadly chronological approach. However, within this a more thematic treatment is observed between the Restoration and the American Revolution, roughly the period covered in *Religion, law and power*. Connolly’s

9 For Connolly’s thought provoking ideas on the historiography of Irish religion see: “‘The moving statute and the turtle dove’: approaches to the history of Irish religion”, *Irish Economic and Social History*, vol. xxxi (2004), 1-22.

10 Connolly, *Contested Island*, p. 290.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 221-3, 254.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 234-5.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 393.

14 See, for instance, the comments in Connolly, *Divided Kingdom*, p. 51.

emphasis on shifting allegiances is eminently suitable for the challenging 1640s and 1650s, and he captures the complexity of these decades well. His assessments draw on (or tally with) the most recent scholarship. For instance, the ‘massacre’ at Drogheda ‘even by the standards of the day, went beyond what the circumstances warranted.’¹⁵ Connolly’s chapter on the Restoration moves him into the more familiar territory of *Religion, law and power* and his argument sometimes draws directly on that book. He describes Restoration Ireland as a ‘looking glass world’ in which the combatants of the 1640s and 1650s struggled for control in an uncertain political climate presided over by a king who was motivated primarily by pragmatism.¹⁶ This in turn fed into debates about Ireland’s constitutional status, whether it was a kingdom or colony, though Connolly leaves ambiguous the question of when the colony of the seventeenth century became the *ancien régime* kingdom of the eighteenth. It should, however, be noted that Connolly has already commented that the colony and *ancien régime* models should not be viewed as ‘mutually exclusive’. In fact, Ireland’s ‘ambiguous status’ meant that it had features of both.¹⁷

One of the more startling judgements of *Religion, law and power*, was that the penal laws were essentially ‘reasonable inconveniences’ which had to be viewed ‘within a wider structure of hierarchy and privilege that Ireland shared with other societies of the *ancien régime*’.¹⁸ *Divided Kingdom* makes a similar case (though without using the term ‘reasonable inconveniences’). The penal laws were not a systematic code, they changed over time, they were the by-product of a complex legislative process and they were subject to considerations of European diplomacy. The argument that Irish MPs legislated for prohibitions which had already existed in the Restoration period works well for some measures, notably in relation to the clergy, but perhaps not so well for others, such as the Act to Prevent the Further Growth of Popery. Another of the concerns of *Religion, law and power* was to shift the attention of eighteenth-century historians away from the allegedly overcrowded later period and back towards the less well understood early century. Few historians would claim today that the early eighteenth century lacks investigation and Connolly is able to provide an admirable survey of the political life of the period which draws not only on his own formidable researches, but also on those of his colleague at Queen’s University, David Hayton. While Connolly does not make his case for Ireland as an *ancien régime* as vocally in *Religion, law and power*, it surfaces in the course of his discussion of the rise of Irish Protestant patriotism.¹⁹

15 *Ibid.*, p. 95. This is, essentially, the argument of Micheál Ó Siochru, *God’s executioner: Oliver Cromwell and the conquest of Ireland* (London, 2008), pp. 77-105.

16 Connolly, *Divided Kingdom*, p. 149.

17 S.J. Connolly, ‘Eighteenth-century Ireland: colony or *ancien régime*?’, in D. George Boyce and Alan O’Day (eds), *The making of modern Irish history: revisionism and the revisionist controversy* (London, 1996), p. 26. See also Jacqueline Hill, ‘Convergence and conflict in eighteenth-century Ireland’, *Historical Journal*, vol. 44, no. 4 (2001), pp. 1052-3.

18 Connolly, *Religion, law and power*, p. 313.

Between chapter 6 ('Metropolitan Province') and chapter 10 ('Imperial Crisis'), Connolly detours to undertake a thematic review of mid-eighteenth-century Ireland. Chapter 7 ('New Lights and Old Faiths') deals with religion. The arguments will be familiar to readers of *Religion, law and power*, for example that the impact of the penal laws has been 'easily overestimated' though they undoubtedly represented 'multiple petty tyrannies'.²⁰ If the heat has gone out of the debates about the churches in the eighteenth century, there is plenty to keep historians going. Chapter 8 ('Rulers and Ruled') treats some of the more controversial topics of recent years: Jacobitism, agrarian disturbances, the exercise of law and justice, and language. In *Religion, law and power*, Connolly was one of the few Irish historians writing at the time to take Jacobitism seriously.²¹ In the meantime, the detailed work of Breandán Ó Buachalla, Éamonn Ó Ciardha and Vincent Morley, who have all drawn on the surviving corpus of Irish language texts as well as copious English language material, has illustrated that Jacobite ideology, support and activity in Ireland was much stronger than previously appreciated.²² As the new scholarship appeared Connolly was drawn into an extended debate about how to understand Irish Jacobitism.²³ *Divided Kingdom* re-asserts his argument that the recent re-appraisal has oversimplified Irish Jacobitism. While it expressed the real grievances of Catholics in a form of Hobsbawm-esque proto-nationalism, Irish Jacobitism was also 'a characteristic part of an *ancien régime* world of dynastic and religious loyalties.'²⁴ Vincent Morley's attempt to push a politically realistic Irish Jacobitism into the later eighteenth century is firmly rejected. Connolly asserts that familiarity with national and international politics in the 1770s and 1780s is not proof that Irish Jacobitism should be taken seriously as a political or military force. Against the 'dubious evidence of the poetry' he pitches the reality of agrarian disturbance.²⁵ The ongoing debates about Jacobitism are intimately connected to discussions about language in eighteenth-century Ireland and Connolly provides an extended section on this topic. He argues that in spite of the growing political unreality of Gaelic

19 Connolly, *Divided Kingdom*, p. 277, fn 33.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 258-9.

21 Connolly, *Religion, law and power*, pp. 233-48.

22 Breandán Ó Buachalla, *Aisling ghéar: na Stiobhartaigh agus an t-aos léinn* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1996); Éamonn Ó Ciardha, *Ireland and the Jacobite cause, 1685-1766: a fatal attachment* (Dublin, 2002); Vincent Morley, *Irish opinion and the American Revolution, 1760-1783* (Cambridge, 2002).

23 Vincent Morley, 'The continuity of disaffection in eighteenth century Ireland', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, vol. 22 (2007), 189-205; S.J. Connolly, 'Jacobites, Whiteboys and Republicans: Varieties of Disaffection in Eighteenth-Century Ireland', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, vol. 18 (2003), 63-79; Vincent Morley, "'Tá an Cruatan ar Sheoirse" – Folklore or Politics?', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, vol. 13 (1998), 112-20. The latter was a critique of Connolly's interpretation of a poem by Eoghan Ruadh Ó Súilleabháin in *Religion, Law and Power*. See also Connolly's review of O'Ciardha's *Ireland and the Jacobite Cause* in *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/paper/connollySJ.html>) as well as the author's response (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/paper/ociardha.html>).

24 Connolly, *Divided Kingdom*, p. 290.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 304.

Irish literature in the second half of the eighteenth century, 'Irish remained ... not just a peasant vernacular but the medium for a sophisticated literary culture.'²⁶ Connolly links the decline of Irish to the lack of a strong print culture, in a period during which the demand for education and literacy were rapidly increasing.

Chapter 9 ('Atlantic Island') continues the thematic approach. It covers economic development, improvement, Enlightenment and migration. If scholarship on Irish economic history in the early modern period has stagnated in recent years, part of the explanation can be found in the growth of cultural histories, broadly speaking.²⁷ The rise of a consumer culture, outlined in Toby Barnard's *Making the grand figure: lives and possessions in Ireland, 1641-1770* (New Haven, 2004), is touched on, but not developed in detail. The section on 'improvement and Enlightenment' makes more of the former than the latter. Connolly duly notes the circulation of Enlightenment ideas in Ireland, but is dismissive of what we could call an Irish Enlightenment. John Toland, rescued in recent decades from relative neglect (at least in the English speaking world), is written off with surprising haste. The dismissive attitude even follows Toland to the index, where he is listed as 'Toland, John, heretic'.²⁸ Connolly is not the only historian to define Toland as a heretic (and Toland might even have approved), but it is a curious choice in the wake of sustained recent interest to choose this rather than one of the many other options (deist, pantheist, freethinker, pamphleteer).²⁹ It is also clear that Toland had more significance for Ireland than Connolly is willing to grant, not only as a philosopher (even if one does not accept the arguments of David Berman in full), but also in antiquarian and historical studies.³⁰ The contribution of a number of mainly Church of Ireland writers to an 'Irish Enlightenment' also deserves more attention.³¹ Connolly points to alternative venues for Enlightenment: the Dublin Philosophical Society, the Physico-Historical Society and the Dublin Society, as well as the influence of foreign education in Scotland (Presbyterians) and on the continent (Catholics). On the latter Luke Joseph Hooke provides the outstanding example, but we still

26 *Ibid.*, p. 332.

27 There are, of course, important exceptions to this, notably David Dickson, *Old world colony: Cork and south Munster, 1630-1830* (Cork, 2005).

28 Connolly, *Divided Kingdom*, pp. 372, 517. For recent reappraisals of Toland: *John Toland's Christianity not mysterious: text, associated works and critical essays*, ed. by Philip McGuinness, Alan Harrison and Richard Kearney (Dublin, 1997); Justin Champion, *Republican learning: John Toland and the crisis of Christian culture, 1696-1722* (Manchester, 2003).

29 J. G. Simms, 'John Toland (1670-1722), a Donegal heretic', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 16, no. 63 (1969), 304-20.

30 Berman's case was outlined in his seminal articles: 'Enlightenment and counter-enlightenment in Irish philosophy', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. 64, no. 2 (1982), 148-65; 'The culmination and causation of Irish philosophy', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. 64, no. 3 (1982), 257-79. For Toland: Alan Harrison, 'John Toland's Celtic background', in *John Toland's Christianity not mysterious*, pp. 243-60.

31 In addition to Berman's work, see also Thomas Duddy, *A history of Irish thought* (London, 2002), pp. 68-213; Michael Brown, 'Was there an Irish Enlightenment? The case of the Anglicans', in Richard Butterwick, Simon Davies and Gabriel Sánchez Espinola (eds), *Peripheries of the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 49-63.

know far too little to conclude, as Connolly does, that the Irish community abroad avoided the Enlightenment in preference to 'the dynastic loyalties and confessional exclusivities of the *ancien régime*'.³² The book collections of leading priests among the Irish communities in France throw up plenty of the expected religious content, but also reveal Enlightenment staples.³³

There are also other ways to think about the Enlightenment in Ireland. Jürgen Habermas' rise of a 'public sphere' may not commend universal approbation, but his work continues to inform debates about ideas and their contexts in the eighteenth century and could profitably be applied to Ireland. Connolly is certainly alert to the development of public opinion and print culture, but touches on these subjects only briefly.³⁴ Other historians are beginning to place more emphasis on the emergence of an Irish public sphere and on venues of contact and sociability associated with it.³⁵ It is interesting, for example, that at least sixteen coffee houses were advertised in Dublin newspapers between 1697 and 1710.³⁶ The need for more research is, however, especially marked for provincial Ireland. It is striking that a modestly sized Irish town like Limerick could sustain the local re-packaging of a high brow periodical, the *Magazine of Magazines*, in the middle of the eighteenth century.³⁷ Of course, given the current state of research, Connolly is quite right to be sceptical about an Irish Enlightenment. Further investigation is necessary before we can pronounce, one way or the other, on the social history of ideas in eighteenth-century Ireland.

One of the other scholarly growth areas of recent years has been migration and Connolly devotes a welcome and well-informed section to this subject. A problem with much of the new research is that it continues to sit slightly outside the mainstream of Irish history. Indeed, Connolly's dismissal of Toland as 'a marginal figure ... *who made his career mainly outside Ireland*' illustrates just this point.³⁸ Therefore an important challenge facing those who engage with the Irish abroad, as well as those involved in synthesising research into general surveys, is to integrate appropriately the history of the Irish abroad into Irish history. Most obviously (but by no means exclusively) for the eighteenth century this will have an impact on the history of Irish Catholics. Irish historians of

32 Connolly, *Divided Kingdom*, p. 375.

33 For example: *Catalogue de livres de théologies, de droit, littérature, sciences, arts, belles-lettres & autres, délaissés par M. Luc Mackiernan, prêtre & président du Séminaire des Irlandois* (Douai, 1785).

34 Connolly, *Divided Kingdom*, pp. 248, 331, 338, 371.

35 Martyn Powell, *The politics of consumption in eighteenth-century Ireland* (Basingstoke, 2005), pp. 75-145; Mary O'Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland, 1500-1800* (Harlow, 2005), pp. 49-55; Ultán Gillen, 'Varieties of Enlightenment: the Enlightenment in Irish political culture in the age of revolutions', in Butterwick et al (eds), *Peripheries of the Enlightenment*, pp. 180-1.

36 Colm Lennon, *Dublin part II, 1610-1756* (Irish Historic Towns Atlas No. 19) (Dublin, 2009), p. 35.

37 See Graham Gargett and Geraldine Sheridan (eds), *Ireland and the French Enlightenment, 1700-1800* (Basingstoke, 1999), p. 239.

38 Connolly, *Divided Kingdom*, p. 372. My italics.

Jacobitism have correctly stressed the significance of a continental dimension, though they have sometimes done so in the absence of modern studies based on extensive archival research. Fortunately, important new work is appearing on this subject, including recent books by Patrick Clarke de Dromantin and Nathalie Genet Rouffiac (both originated in groundbreaking doctoral theses).³⁹ Their work emphasises the significance of Jacobitism, but in tandem with ongoing research on the Irish in Europe it should also allow us to interrogate more critically assumptions about the Jacobitism of Irish migrants on the continent. How Jacobite, for instance, was the migrant Dillon family in the eighteenth century?⁴⁰ Further work on the Irish in Europe will also re-shape our understanding of the Catholic Church in eighteenth-century Ireland. This is becoming more evident for the seventeenth century, but few historians have, as yet, followed the leads offered by the rich archival history evident in Hugh Fenning's remarkable study *The undoing of the friars of Ireland: a study of the novitiate question in the eighteenth century* (Louvain, 1972).

The final two chapters of *Divided Kingdom* take Connolly beyond the limits of *Religion, law and power*. Chapter 10 ('Imperial Crisis') provides a lucid survey of events in the 1760s, 1770s and 1780s, as well as a very interesting discussion of Irish antiquarianism in the second half of the eighteenth century. Chapter 11 ('Revolution Contained') deals with the 1790s, a decade that Connolly recognises as crucial not just to understanding the eighteenth century, but also the whole of early modern and modern Irish history. *Divided Kingdom* is the first major narrative survey to appear since the huge interest in the 1790s generated around the bicentenary of the 1798 rebellion. Connolly draws fully on the most recent scholarship to present a lively account of the decade, the rebellion and the act of union which followed. He argues that the radicalisation of Irish politics, especially manifest in the rise of the Defenders and the United Irishmen, occurred for a variety of reasons. One of the most important was politicisation: 'The propaganda and organizational efforts of the United Irishmen undoubtedly furthered the dissemination at popular level of a political ideology that combined democratic republican principles with commitment to the ideal of an independent Ireland.'⁴¹ However, he is quick to point out that this existed in tandem with 'the articulation of more immediate economic and social grievances, and also with a

39 Patrick Clarke de Dromantin, *Les réfugiés jacobites dans la France du XVIIIe siècle: l'exode de toute une noblesse pour cause de religion* (Pessac, 2005); Nathalie Genet Rouffiac, *Le grand exil: les jacobites en France, 1690-1715* (Mercurès, 2007). For a recent sample of research on the Irish in Spain and elsewhere see the relevant chapters in Enrique García Hernán y Óscar Recio Morales (Coords.), *Extranjeros en el ejército: militares irlandeses en la sociedad española, 1580-1818 (Essays on the Irish military presence in early modern Spain, 1580-1818)* (Madrid, 2007). See also the important work of Toby Barnard, coming from a different perspective, on Irish travel abroad in *Making the grand figure*, pp. 310-44.

40 On this question see: Colm James Ó Conaill, 'Conversion and family identity in eighteenth century Europe: the Dillons of Costello-Gallen', in Michael Brown, Charles I. McGrath and Thomas P. Power (eds), *Converts and conversion in Ireland, 1650-1850* (Dublin, 2005), pp. 278, 289.

strong sense of sectarian solidarity.⁴² In addition, he argues that state repression fuelled the growing polarization evident especially from 1795.

If it is undoubtedly the case that sectarianism was a factor in the events of the 1790s, assessing its place is difficult.⁴³ One event, cited by Connolly, will illustrate this.⁴⁴ Thomas Frederick Knipe, a Church of Ireland clergyman who resided at Clonard in south County Meath, explained to Thomas Pelham in February 1797 that Protestants in his area were singled out for assassination by the 'French Militia as they now stile [*sic*] themselves'.⁴⁵ Knipe's evidence should at least be treated with some caution.⁴⁶ Indeed, Connolly comments himself on 'the dangers of relying too heavily on the evidence of informers and the allegations of political opponents.'⁴⁷ When George Knipe, a clergyman at Castle Rickard, near Clonard, and a brother of Thomas Frederick Knipe, was murdered in April 1797, sectarianism was an obvious motive, but how much of a motive is open to question. John Coghlan, the chief prosecution witness at the trial of John Tuite (known as Captain Fearnought) for Knipe's murder, stated that after he had fired the final shot to Knipe's head, Tuite had said: 'There lies the body of a heretic, which I hope to have the nation quelled of in short.'⁴⁸ Cross-examination revealed a more complex picture. Coghlan asserted that 'The reason assigned for the death of Mr. Knipe, was, that he was a heretic', but he also noted other motives: revenge for the killing of a man who had died at Knipe's house (the man's brother was present during the attack); local rumours about the Knipes' membership of the Orange Order; further local rumours that they were to lead an army from the 'north' on a sectarian rampage; a reward offered for killing either of the Knipes.⁴⁹ On the meaning of the word heretic, Coghlan was surprisingly ambivalent:

41 Connolly, *Divided Kingdom*, p. 469.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 469.

43 See, for example, the discussion in Marianne Elliott, 'Religious polarization and sectarianism in the Ulster rebellion', in Thomas Bartlett, David Dickson, Dáire Keogh, Kevin Whelan, (eds), *1798: A Bicentenary Perspective* (Dublin, 2003), pp. 279-298.

44 Connolly, *Divided Kingdom*, p. 469.

45 Thomas Frederick Knipe to Thomas Pelham, 23 February 1797 (National Archives of Ireland [NAI], Rebellion Papers, 620/28/292). For the quotation and some context see Liam Chambers, *Rebellion in Kildare, 1790-1803* (Dublin, 1998), p. 43.

46 Thomas Frederick Knipe was an early member of the Dublin Orange Order Lodge 176. My thanks to Eoin Kinsella for assistance with this reference. See: Copy of a list of members of Orange Lodge 176, Dublin, 1798 (National Library of Ireland, MS. 5398).

47 Connolly, *Divided Kingdom*, p. 475, footnote 83.

48 This is the version provided in the published report of the trial: *The trial of John Tuite, otherwise Captain Fearnought, for the murder of the Reverend George Knipe, before the Hon. Judge Chamberlain, at Trim, Summer Assizes, 1799* (Dublin, 1799), p. 6. Connolly cites a slightly different version used at the trial of John Kelly, another of the attackers: 'There lies the body of a heretic, which I hope to have the nation shortly quelled of and become republicans.' (*Divided Kingdom*, p. 469 citing trial of John Kelly, NAI, Rebellion Papers, 620/5/61/12).

Mr Knipe was a protestant clergyman – I do not know whether that was the reason he was considered a heretic or not ... I understood by what they said, that they meant by heretic a Protestant; a person not of the Catholic religion. I was sworn two years before this transaction. I was sworn to both Acts – to the Defenders and the United Irishmen. I have heard their articles read – all different persuasions were welcome to the United Oath – But the oath which Tuite took first, was ‘to quell the nation of heresy dithrone all kings, and plant the tree of liberty in Ireland and become a republic like America.’ The United Oath was taken afterwards. It was their intention to imitate France; for they were sworn to the United States of France and Ireland. I heard it was a principle of the French to destroy all who would not go with them, no matter what religion they were of. *We counted a Roman Catholic as big a heretic as any other, if he did not join.*⁵⁰

So, why was George Knipe murdered? Coghlan’s evidence suggests a whole variety of reasons: sectarianism, revenge, Orangeism, fear, greed, Defenderism, United Irish assassination and the local expression of French-inspired revolutionary violence. This is not to suggest that sectarianism had nothing to do with it, rather that the killing had complex causes. The Knipes were vulnerable loyalists watching the rapid spread of the United Irishmen in their locality.⁵¹ It is possible that they emphasised the sectarian nature of what was happening to ensure support from Dublin Castle. When George Knipe was murdered sectarianism seemed an obvious explanation, though contemporary loyalists placed more emphasis on Knipe’s activities as a magistrate. The *Freeman’s Journal* reported that Knipe was murdered in a direct response to his arrest of two ‘insurgents’ near the house of another prominent loyalist, John Tyrrell.⁵² When the Irish parliament passed an act providing an annuity to Alicia, George Knipe’s widow, and their children, the legislation noted that he ‘was lately most cruelly massacred on account of his meritorious exertions as a magistrate’ and made no reference at all to a religious motive.⁵³

Connolly’s account of the rebellion amalgamates some of the traditional interpretation (country detachments of United Irishmen in the area around Dublin were left ‘to maraud aimlessly’⁵⁴) and some of the more recent assessments that suggest a more structured United Irish rebellion (though throughout the chapter Connolly emphasises the division between the United Irishmen and the Defenders). He also emphasises the ambiguous and contested nature of a complex conflict with deep roots back into the seventeenth century: ‘In some

49 *The trial of John Tuite*, pp. 6-7.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 8. My italics.

51 On George Knipe’s vulnerability, see Thomas Bartlett, *Revolutionary Dublin, 1795-1801: the letters of Francis Higgins to Dublin Castle* (Dublin, 2004), p. 126.

52 *Freeman’s Journal*, 2 May 1797.

53 37 Geo. III c.63. When the death was first raised in the House of Commons, on 3 May 1797, similar language was used. It was noted that Knipe was ‘murdered ... by an infernal banditti of ruffians, for his meritorious discharge of the duties of a magistrate, and exertions in the public service’ (*Freeman’s Journal*, 4 May 1797).

54 Connolly, *Divided Kingdom*, p. 477.

respects – in the Defender movement, in the rallying of the Connacht peasantry to Humbert, and to some extent in the Wexford insurrection – what took place can be seen as a last revolt of traditional Catholic Ireland against the new order created by the seventeenth-century confiscations.⁵⁵ Connolly is not the only recent historian to suggest that the rebellion had its origins in earlier land confiscations, but it is not clear what ‘traditional Catholic Ireland’ means.⁵⁶ At face value there appear to be similarities with the position of Tom Dunne, or even the recent arguments of Vincent Morley, which highlight the continuity of old forms of disaffection. However, Dunne has emphatically rejected Connolly’s *ancien régime* thesis and forcefully restated the case for the profoundly colonial nature of eighteenth-century Irish society.⁵⁷ Meanwhile for Morley Jacobitism was the crucial component in popular disaffection. Connolly recognises that, in one way or another, Jacobite disaffection had a long-term influence in Ireland, but of course he argues that it was dead as a real political force by the 1790s.⁵⁸ Nor was the ‘traditional Catholic Ireland’ primarily religious (at least in the institutional sense), for Connolly accepts Dáire Keogh’s assessment that the vast majority of the Catholic clergy opposed the United Irishmen.⁵⁹ This appears to leave a vague and idealistic attachment to a distant past, though why Connolly’s general preference for pragmatism as an explanation for historical events should be dropped here is not evident. It should be noted that Connolly’s suggestion that rebels in large swathes of the country were fighting for a ‘traditional Catholic Ireland’ is made hesitatingly and is balanced against a recognition that more recent forces were at play as well.⁶⁰ In the end, what all of this suggests is that despite the scale of recent scholarship (or, perhaps, because of it) we are no nearer to a rounded and generally accepted account of the 1790s or the rebellion of 1798.

Contested Island and Divided Kingdom are works of incredible scholarship, written by an historian at the height of his powers. It is a pity that neither includes a bibliography, even of secondary sources, but it is obvious that Connolly has read astonishingly widely to produce a masterful survey. He makes a compelling case for ‘the fluid and contingent nature of allegiances and aspirations, and ... the capacity of personal, local and strategic alliances to cut across seemingly intractable lines of ethnic, political or religious division.’⁶¹ Without shying away

55 *Ibid.*, p. 483. Given the spread of the Defenders in Ulster and much of Leinster, Connolly’s comments would appear to apply to much of the territory affected by the rebellion. Compare with Connolly’s analysis in *Religion, law and power*, pp. 248-9 and ‘Eighteenth-century Ireland: colony or *ancien régime*?’, pp. 27-8.

56 See, for example, Ruán O’Donnell, *The Rebellion in Wicklow, 1798* (Dublin, 1998), p. 6.

57 Tom Dunne, *Rebellions: memoir, memory and 1798* (Dublin, 2004), p. 95.

58 Morley, ‘The continuity of disaffection’, pp. 204-5; Connolly, ‘Jacobites, Whiteboys and republicans’, p. 77.

59 Dáire Keogh, *The French Disease: the Catholic church and Irish radicalism, 1790-1800* (Dublin, 1993).

60 Connolly, *Divided Kingdom*, p. 483.

from the colonial and violent aspects of the past, Connolly successfully challenges the reader to think again about the complexities and ambiguities that created early modern Ireland. It was not Connolly's aim to explain away 'conquest and colonisation', but his work makes it very difficult to imagine the Irish past solely in those terms.⁶² If the political narrative tends to set the pace through most of the text, Connolly cannot be accused of writing only from the corridors of power in Dublin. As one would expect, he writes authoritatively about religious history, effectively integrates social and economic history and is alive also to the cultural and intellectual past. Some topics might have benefited from a more extended treatment; for example, medicine merits only a paragraph in *Divided Kingdom*. More fundamentally, in a society which was deeply exploitative (even if one might debate the causes and nature of that exploitation), further consideration could have been given to the exploited, the poor and, more generally, what Toby Barnard has called the 'lower people'.⁶³ The nature of the general survey means that these books are less confrontational and therefore probably less controversial than some of Connolly's work. However, they illustrate the importance of writing general surveys in a period when research is becoming ever more specialised and illustrate how they should be done, in a manner that is learned and historiographically informed but also accessible. Rigorously researched and lucidly written, *Contested Island* and *Divided Kingdom* should be read by every serious student of the Irish past and present.

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61 *Ibid.*, p. 497.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 497.

63 *Ibid.*, pp. 350-1; Barnard, *A new anatomy*, pp. 279-327.