

Zitierhinweis

Redmond, Joan: review of: Brendan Bradshaw, *And so began the Irish Nation. Nationality, Nationalism and National Consciousness in Pre-Modern Ireland*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2015, in: *Reviews in History*, 2016, June, DOI: 10.14296/RiH/2014/1941, downloaded from Website



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The commemorations for the 100th anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising in the Republic of Ireland have thrown the issue of nationalism and independence into sharp relief once again. While the official ceremonies were largely praised for their restraint and the absence of an overblown, romanticised narrative for the most part, that does not imply there has been no debate among both historians and in more popular arenas about the legacy of Irish nationalism, as well as its current shape and trajectory. Complaints regarding the 1916 rebels' 'egotism', in the words of Northern Ireland's First Minister Arlene Foster, or comparisons between early 20th-century Irish nationalism and the current 'brand' of extremism, Islamic State, as drawn by Charles Moore writing in *The Telegraph*, indicate powerfully that nationalism and its legacies are still contested and controversial, both in the island of Ireland and its larger neighbour. Brendan Bradshaw's collection of essays therefore makes a timely entrance onto the historical scene, with its aim the elucidation of the origins of concepts such as nationalism and national consciousness in the early modern period. It reflects, to quote Bradshaw himself, 'an abiding interest on my part in the history of national consciousness in Ireland' (p. ix). While undoubtedly a practical volume for interested readers through its collection of essays, the book in many respects is a blast from an older historiographical past. The pursuit of early signs of 'nationalism' among the residents of early modern Ireland is no longer a central interest of most Irish scholars of the 16th and 17th centuries: instead of attempting to find tell-tale signs of a (rather retrospectively-applied) single outlook, historians are acknowledging and exploring early modern Ireland's different experiences through its diverse communities, with contradictions and wild variations in perspective and identification, both self-identification and that assigned by others, a key aspect of the tale to be told. Nevertheless, the book constitutes an important and thought-provoking statement on aspects of early modern Irish history, and thus worthy of our respect and attention. Readers familiar with Bradshaw's work will have encountered many of the articles and reviews reprinted in this book. It represents a bringing-together of a lifetime's work, and thus a valuable resource for early modern Irish historians through rendering more accessible some of Bradshaw's key works. The book is rather puzzlingly divided into six sections: Historical method, Introduction, Case studies, Review articles, Epilogue, and Appendix. This somewhat bizarre structure does little to help its readers in formulating a sense of a unified whole – already a common pitfall for collected essays – and instead confuses the interlocutor through over-segmentation. The 'Introduction' section forms the central, original aspect of the book, being a long essay on the wider themes of the collection as a whole, and written especially for this volume, while the other five sections consist mainly of previously-published articles and reviews. Its chief value in totality lies in the re-printing of essays from sometimes-obscure or less readily-available outlets, and the sustained 'Introduction', in which Bradshaw sets out an argument that has appeared in embryonic form in many of his previous articles. Through the introduction, he draws together many of those disparate strands to form one single piece, outlining his belief in the emergence of an early modern Irish national consciousness, and indeed a form of early nationalism.

In part one, Bradshaw sets out both to outline his terms, but also includes two key essays on the practice of Irish history, and the questions concerning methodology, approaches, and historical bias. Bradshaw's perspective and general historical outlook are very apparent even just from reading the 'Definitions and Clarifications'. They include a distinction between 'academic' and 'public' history, with the latter being defined as 'the version of history that gains currency in the public domain, and represents the popular understanding of what happened in the past', while academic history is 'the story of the past that circulates in academic circles' (p. 3). Immediately, one of the central difficulties for Bradshaw is apparent: he believes there to be a fundamental disjointedness between public and academic history, with the version of history current among the general population failing to match up to the academic narrative – a 'credibility gap'. In the reprinted interview with Tommy Graham,

published in *History Ireland* in 1993, Bradshaw lays bare his opinion of this 'gap', and by so doing illustrates in some senses his overall approach to history:

The Irish public had failed to follow the [academic] historians' lead ... I feel that my mission is to show that Irish history can be interpreted another way that attempts to capture the reality of that experience ... I want to show that that can be done in a fully scholarly way and that there is a rational conceptual framework which will justify that approach to history (p. xvi). The heavily nationalist outlook of 'public history' is therefore under scrutiny by Bradshaw, as he attempts to utilise the scholarly apparatus of academic historians to show that there are grains of truth indeed to the 'popular' version. In doing so, Bradshaw is explicit in his rejection of Hebert Butterfield's argument for 'past-centred history', and 'value-free' history, arguing instead for a 'present-centred history', with the 'first obligation of the historian ... is to the society in which he/she lives ... It is to help explain 'how we have got to where we are', rather than history being history 'for its own sake' (p. 5). The two articles printed alongside these definitions show Bradshaw's beliefs in action. His much-cited and much-discussed 'Nationalism and historical scholarship in modern Ireland' was an attack on revisionist historians, and particularly on their unwillingness to engage with the more 'catastrophic' elements of Ireland's past, with an abandonment of the nationalist perspective that had privileged the history of violence and armed struggle. Bradshaw attacked the 'value-free history' practised by revisionists as 'flawed', because of their inability adequately to confront these often-less-than pleasant dimensions of Irish history, and its 'tacit bias', especially in explorations of Irish nationalism. It is here that Bradshaw articulates the concept of the 'credibility gap' mentioned above, and also sets forth two key criteria for the advancement of early modern Irish scholarship: empathy, and imagination (p. 31). Bradshaw was strident in his call for these two elements as being fundamental to a reading of the primary sources, for they would enable the credibility gap to be bridged, between rigorous professional scholarly standards, and the 'totality of Irish historical experience' (p. 32). Having established therefore both several crucial definitions, and articulated a general viewpoint or approach to history, the volume then moves onto the only substantial new section, the 'Introduction'.

In the introduction, Bradshaw argues that it was in the early modern period that ideas of national consciousness and nationalism first took root. In defining nationalism, Bradshaw describes it as the 'patriotically-inspired commitment to upholding the freedom, identity and unity of one's nation' (p. 47). Further, and significantly for his later argument, he also states that 'freedom' does not imply total sovereignty, but could also accommodate governmental structures such as devolved parliaments or Home Rule; secondly, he is categorical that nationality does not equal ethnicity. Nationality is a broad category in which the idea of the 'homeland' is the common bond between people, rather than membership of an ethnic community. Nationalism can thus encompass many ethnic groups under its banner (p. 48). The section then continues, by arguing that scholars seeking the origins of both 'national consciousness' and nationalism in Ireland should be examining the 16th and 17th centuries, rather than the 18th and 19th as has previously been widely claimed. In doing so, Bradshaw identifies the twin forces of Renaissance and Reformation as playing central roles in this development. The Renaissance, he argues had a dual impact through increasing the sense of 'national sentiment', while the revival of classical learning also expanded the vocabulary of the 'nation', and enabled the articulation of different conceptions to their medieval forebears. Similarly, the Reformation across Europe more tightly bound politics with religion, while also contributing to a strengthening of a 'national psyche' in religious terms (p. 52). After exploring medieval Ireland and its 'national' heritage, in which Bradshaw dismisses the idea of 'nationalism' or 'national consciousness' because of the failure of either the Gaelic Irish or Old English community to develop a 'capacious collective' in which both could identify as 'Irish', preferring instead to draw out ethnically-based arguments. It was from the mid-15th

century that something akin to 'national consciousness' began to emerge: Bradshaw pinpoints the 1460 Irish Parliament, in which it was declared that Ireland was independent of laws passed in England, as being a key moment, because of the claim for Ireland as its own entity, and the Old English community's apparent identification of Ireland as their 'homeland'. This process moved further forward with Ireland's elevation to a kingdom under Henry VIII, and the 'reforming' policy of the Old English, he argues, represents their wish to create a unified society in Ireland through 'civilising' the Irish, and having effectively one people on the island.

After these opening arguments and elucidations, the 'Introduction' then moves on to the first of its four examples of Bradshaw's central thesis. He introduces us to William Nugent, an Old English poet, and considered a forerunner in the process of articulating an Irish national conscious. His poetry displays certain important qualities, including patriotism; recognition of the value of Gaelic heritage and culture; strong Counter-Reformation rhetoric and belief; and the strong view of Ireland as a sovereign kingdom. He was also instrumental in the development of the early modern exile poem, in which the figure of Ireland played a central role.(1) Many of these ideas have been touched on before by Bradshaw as being key criteria for a national consciousness, and thus Nugent stands tall as an important example of a trend of thought emerging among the 16th-century Old English community. After considering this 16th-century example, Bradshaw moves on to examine Geoffrey Keating, a figure very familiar to early modern Irish scholars.(2) He outlines Keating's approach to Irish history, and particularly his privileging of its Catholic aspects in the pursuit of an 'origin legend' that could appeal to both the Gaelic and Old English communities; Keating also argued for an ancient constitution founded on Ireland's high kings, and he also attempted to vindicate the Old English community's position in Ireland through a clever twisting of the narrative of the Norman conquest in the twelfth century. According to Bradshaw, Keating also argued strongly in favour of the 'Gaelicisation' of the Old English, in order to create a unified Irish people, thus eliminating the ancient ethnic distinctions between them, in order to face the challenges presented by the New English settlers arriving from the mid-16th century. The third figure in Bradshaw's early modern pantheon is the lawyer Patrick Darcy. Darcy's *An Argument*, formulated in response to the abuses committed during the lord deputyship of Sir Thomas Wentworth, later earl of Strafford, in the 1630s, was intended as a setting out of the grievances of the Irish political elite from across the religious and ethnic spectrum.(3) Darcy's outline of Irish parliamentary sovereignty, and the points strongly arguing Ireland's rights as a kingdom which possesses sovereignty, were, according to Bradshaw, a key expression of belief in Irish self-government, albeit within the umbrella of the Stuart personal union of crowns. After Darcy comes the fourth and final person under examination, Dáibhí Ó Bruadair.(4) A renowned bardic poet of the mid- and late-17th century, Bradshaw's interest in Ó Bruadair lies in his depiction of a unified and harmonious 'Irish' community composed of both Gaelic and Old English, with the New English the undoubted enemy – perhaps indicating a legacy of sorts from earlier figures including Nugent and Keating. Ó Bruadair's poetry contains many of the features hinted at in the discussion of earlier figures, such as his development of the 'person' of Ireland in his poetry, and an intense usage of 'fatherland' motifs, and a fierce commitment to Roman Catholicism. He represents in some respects a culmination of many of the forces described by Bradshaw that began in the sixteenth century, drawing together ideas of nation, religion and community – but was writing at a time when the Irish Catholic community was facing into its darkest period.

Upon concluding this 'Introduction', the volume then presents a series of 'case studies', each of which explore some or all of the central criteria introduced by Bradshaw, such as the effects of Renaissance 'patriotism', the Reformation, and ideas touching constitutions, government, history and identity. In 'The Tudor Reformation and Revolutions in Wales and Ireland: the origins of the British Problem', Bradshaw explores the very different outcomes of the Tudor 'revolutions' in government of the 1530s and 1540s, together with a

consideration of the progression of Reformation in both countries. Defining the 'British problem' as Ireland's seeming inability and/or unwillingness to assimilate into the wider British state, he seeks to find the origins of this through examining the success of Tudor reforms in Wales, versus their failure in Ireland. The failure of these policies in Ireland, he argues, is attributable to beliefs especially among the ruling Old English community of Ireland's 'ancient constitution' and its status as a lordship, and then a kingdom – thus the reforms were resisted as infringing on ancient liberties and privileges, as well as subjects' well-being, thus going against closely-held ideas of 'good lordship' and just rule. The sense of especially the Old English's commitment to a sovereign Ireland is particularly drawn out by comparison with Wales, who welcomed these reforms as an extension of the rights of subjects already enjoyed by the English to them, with the Welshness of the Tudor dynasty, and their willingness to involve local elites through office-holding further boons in assisting the transformation of political and religious life in the principality. Subsequent essays similarly elucidate particular themes: 'The beginnings of modern Ireland' sets out the centrality of parliament in ideas of Ireland's status as sovereign kingdom, while 'Native reaction to the westward enterprise: a case study in Gaelic ideology' further discusses bardic poetry as a source of study Irish mentalities, including attitudes to colonisation and the arrival of 'foreigners' into Ireland. 'Geoffrey Keating: apologist for Irish Ireland' advances many of the themes established by Bradshaw's overview of his work in the 'Introduction', while the concluding case study concerns a review of Patrick Sarsfield's conduct during the two sieges of Limerick in 1690 and 1691, revising many earlier accounts regarding his effectiveness. Following the case studies, two 'review' articles are presented, one concerning Elizabethan Ireland, and the other the 1641 Rebellion in Ulster. In the latter, Bradshaw argues strongly for the importance of grievances touching land and religion, which came to be subsumed within a wider political campaign, for explaining the origins of the rebellion. That 'political cause' united protests regarding land ownership, security, and plantation together with the persecution of Catholicism, which together produced an overarching belief in Ireland's gradual diminishing to the status of colony, rather than kingdom – belief in the latter, of course, as has been shown, was central to many emerging ideas of nation and nationalism in the 16th and 17th century, and thus, in Bradshaw's view, provided a central motivating and organising thrust for one of the most cataclysmic events in 17th-century Irish history. The legacies of Nugent, Keating et al found a definitive expression in the rebellion. There can be little doubt that this collection will be of great practical use to historians not just of early modern Ireland, but any scholars interested in the processes of nation-formation, ideas of nationality and nationalism, and in wider British history. Bradshaw's *oeuvre* is wide-ranging and always engaging, and his willingness to engage in comparisons, such as with Wales, marks him out as a key figure in the wider field of 'British' history. Readers interested however in the original portion of this volume, the 'Introduction', will find relatively little that is truly new – figures such as Keating, Darcy and Ó Bruadair have received not-insubstantial scholarly attention in the past, and while the 'Introduction' is an important articulation of Bradshaw's thought as it has developed across all the works contained in the volume, it represents in some respects a useful and concise summary, rather than a significant new contribution to the debate. However, it and the essays that surround it nonetheless raise important questions that will doubtless continue to exercise scholars in the coming years. One aspect that is quite sorely lacking especially in the 'Introduction' is any sense, beyond the key figures under discussion, of whether the ideas of Nugent and Keating gained widespread acceptance among others within the Old English community. Certainly the unwillingness of many Old English nobility to support Hugh O'Neill's rebellion in the 1590s should raise questions about the degree of their acceptance of Gaelic culture and heritage, versus their traditional orientation towards England. Similarly, Bradshaw mentions in various articles the importance of the Confederation of Kilkenny in the 1640s in 'cementing' this bringing-together of the two historic communities, but nowhere is especial attention devoted

to outlining how that came to be so, beyond his claims for an increasing identification with the Gaelic Irish among the Old English through their mutual embrace of Tridentine Catholicism. This is a social process that current historians grapple with, and a debate that will undoubtedly continue into the future. Similarly, the apparent mental acrobatics involved in how 16th-century Old English leaders could argue for the creation of a single 'Irish' nation, but one that conformed to English standards of civility, dress, language and so forth represent a teasing challenge for current historians, if indeed the Old English did intend the creation of an 'Irish' nation – personally, I doubt it (p. 59). Leaps of logic together with a failure to probe more deeply these paradoxes and difficulties, and instead a dogged pursuit of a single narrative, serve at times fundamentally to undermine Bradshaw's central arguments about the emergence of a unified, 'Irish' nation in the early modern period, and render his core theses less credible. However, these questions and criticisms serve not to dismiss this volume, but rather to show Brendan Bradshaw's continuing ability to provoke debate, and to pose questions regarding some of the central issues in early modern Irish history. In that, his call to imagination in the practice of the historical craft will surely be an enduring legacy.

Notes

1. G. Murphy, 'Poems of exile by Uilliam Nuinseann', *Eigse*, 4 (1948), 8–15; H.C Walshe, 'The rebellion of William Nugent, 1581' in *Religion, Conflict and Coexistence in Ireland: Essays Presented to Monsignor Patrick Corish*, ed. R. V. Comerford, M. Cullen, J. Hill, C. Lennon (Dublin, 1990), pp. 26–52; 297–302.
2. See, for example, Bernadette Cunningham's *The World of Geoffrey Keating: History, Myth and Religion in Seventeenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin, 2000), and recent work on Keating's work as history, Sarah Connell, 'The poetics and politics of legend: Geoffrey Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* and the invention of Irish history' in *Journal of Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 14, 3 (Summer, 2014), pp. 83–106.
3. L. O'Malley, 'Patrick Darcy; Galway lawyer and politician, 1598–1668' in *Galway; Town and Gown, 1484–1984*, ed. D. Ó Cearbhaill (Dublin, 1984), pp. 90–109; Aidan Clarke, 'Patrick Darcy and the constitutional relationship between Britain and Ireland' in *Political Thought in Seventeenth-Century Ireland: Kingdom or Colony*, ed. J. Ohlmeyer (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 35–55; idem, 'The policies of the 'Old English' in parliament, 1640–1' in *Historical Studies*, ed. J. McCracken, 5 (1965), pp. 85–102.
4. B. Cunningham and R. Gillespie, 'Lost worlds: history and religion in the poetry of Dáibhí Ó Bruadair' in *Dáibhí Ó Bruadair: his historical and literary context*, ed. P. Riggs (London, 2001), pp. 18–45; L. Irwin, 'Purgatory re-visited : the historical context of Ó Bruadair', in *Dáibhí Ó Bruadair*, ed. Riggs, pp. 1–17.