



Études irlandaises

49-1 | 2024

Contemporary Irish Poetics

Pauline Collombier, *Imagining Ireland's Future, 1870-1914: Home Rule, Utopia, Dystopia*

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Édition électronique

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/18392>

DOI : [10.4000/etudesirlandaises.18392](https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.18392)

ISSN : 2259-8863

Éditeur

Presses universitaires de Caen

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 12 avril 2024

Pagination : 188-190

ISBN : 978-2-38185-235-5

ISSN : 0183-973X

Référence électronique

Anne-Catherine de Bouvier, « Pauline Collombier, *Imagining Ireland's Future, 1870-1914: Home Rule, Utopia, Dystopia* », *Études irlandaises* [En ligne], 49-1 | 2024, mis en ligne le 28 mars 2024, consulté le 18 juin 2024. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/18392> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.18392>



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The new subtitle, “The IRA and Cumann na mBan”, recognises women’s contribution to the struggle. The two women interviewed, Máire Comerford and Brigid Lyons Thornton, both entered republican politics through their membership to Cumann na mBan. Daughter of a Fenian, Thornton was arrested during the Rising, and though she was “shattered” by the terms of the Treaty (p. 265), she accepted Collins’s offer to act as a medical officer in the Free State army. Comerford rejected the Treaty and supported Éamon de Valera, until she broke with him after he established Fianna Fáil. In the book, she castigates the mentality that predominated in the Free State and denied that Ireland was emancipated by the Treaty.

Many of the stories told in *Curious Journey* vividly echo the tragic consequences of the civil war, when old comrades were torn apart from each other. Sean Harling, another Rising veteran, acted as an aide for Collins, then for de Valera. He took the anti-Treaty side and was arrested by a former friend, now a Free Stater. David Neligan, another interviewee, was part of a police manipulation to pressure Harling into acting as a spy within the IRA on his release.

The events told are viewed from a republican perspective and they vividly capture the twists and turns of the revolutionary days, going against mainstream silence in a post-Treaty divided Ireland. Confirming the now available witness statements and pensions files from the Bureau of Military History, the book contains fascinating material that will not be appealing to historians alone.

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Pauline Collombier, *Imagining Ireland’s Future, 1870-1914: Home Rule, Utopia, Dystopia*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 362 p.

The issue of home rule occupied a significant amount of political time in the United Kingdom in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. From the early 1880s, demand for home rule for Ireland became the backbone of the Irish Parliamentary Party led by Charles Stewart Parnell, and later by John Redmond. The endorsement of home rule as party policy by William E. Gladstone caused a major split within the Liberal Party in the spring of 1886; the prospect of home rule brought about an articulate and organised unionist opposition in Ulster, which eventually secured the partition; the Lords’ adamant refusal of this proposed constitutional change was one of the elements which precipitated institutional reform through the 1911 Parliament Act. In short, home rule was an element of polarisation in the political life of the United Kingdom. The outbreak of the First World War suspended the implementation of the third and last Irish Home Rule Bill; by 1918, matters stood quite differently – so that home rule never came to be more than a paper creation. But it caused a lot of ink to be shed.

Having dedicated several years to researching home rule in its arcane political variations – home rule for Ireland, home rule all round, home rule within home rule, imperial federation – Pauline Collombier was also aware of the varying public reception of the several proposals, and of the debates they generated. Home rule for Ireland, being the most pressing demand and the most likely to be eventually enacted, did capture the imagination, to the extent of triggering the publication of a number of works of fiction based on “what if” scenarios, in addition to being widely discussed in the press and popularised in illustrations. This is what Collombier explores in *Imagining Ireland’s Future, 1870-1914*, enabling the reader to grasp what ordinary citizens understood of the issue, what they hoped or feared should it be enacted and implemented. And also: how fiction and the press were used as propaganda tools, in a time of rising literacy and circulation facilities.

The introduction and first chapter delineate the several understandings of home rule and chart its political course, from the publication of Isaac Butt’s *Irish Federalism!* in 1870 to the final negotiations of the Home Rule Bill in 1914. Collombier articulates the contribution of predictive fiction and of the press (through articles, letters and cartoons) to the construction and understanding of the issue of Irish self-rule, providing as they did tools to “explore constitutional possibilities” (p. 6). The study of such sources also showcases “common tropes” for nationalism and unionism which, she argues, “borrowed from each other’s discourses” (p. 10), either in writing or in illustrations at a time when “visual communication was a crucial component of [...] public political culture” (p. 8).⁴ The sources that provided the material for *Imagining Ireland’s Future* are considered not only as evidence of the hopes, fears and questions attending the issue, but also as means of “mobilis[ing] the grassroots” in support of or opposition to Irish self-rule (p. 9).

The book contains forty images – “illustrations” would be inadequate here – coming from an impressive variety of sources and archives, including private collections. The existence of predictive political postcards will come as a surprise for most readers. Four dystopian postcards are reprinted, representing unionist fears. “Home Rule Parliament 1915” features Irish MPs robustly fighting each other with cudgels in the College Green building in Dublin. Printed in Belfast c. 1912, “Donegall Place under Home Rule” and “Belfast under Home Rule” show crumbling civic and industrial buildings. In “Carrickfergus under Home Rule”, the military buildings of the town have been transformed into a pub, the entrance of which is no longer commanded by the statue of William III but by a heavy John Redmond mounted on a mule. Great care has presided over the selection and reprint of images, making the book quite vivid. The images are always put into perspective; they show the substance of home rule projections underlying the institutional debates, and are one of the strong points of the book.

4. Pauline Collombier quoting Matthew Roberts, “Election Cartoons and Political Communication in Victorian England”, *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2013, p. 370.

The chapters entitled “The Future of Ireland in the Pro-Home Rule Press” and “Irish Self-Government Further Imagined: Pro-Home Rule Fiction” predictably focus on sources for which self-rule is a desirable utopia. The interest lies in the evolution through time, with an increasingly confident and optimistic tone as the prospect of self-rule drew closer – and an ominous underestimation of unionist resistance in Ireland, dismissed as a by-product of misrule and not as an issue *per se*. Different issues combined with self-rule: economic development, empire, or women’s political rights. All sorts of questions were broached, such as the future flag, the language to be used in future Irish institutions, or the nature of the political divides that would replace the self-rule issue in Irish politics. Not all Irish nationalists were supporters of home rule, and Collombier insists that the rise of the Irish Parliamentary Party did not mean the disappearance of radical or advanced nationalists. For them, an Irish parliament within the framework of the Union was not a desirable end – that could only be the establishment of Ireland either as a fully separate kingdom, or as a republic. *Ireland’s War*, published in New York in 1881, features a protagonist of the 1950s reminiscing episodes of a war of liberation that deliberately present the American and French revolutions as sources of inspiration.

The chapter entitled “Reaching out to New Converts” explores the dynamics of the relation between nationalist and unionist receptions of home rule once it had entered discussion in Parliament and become a party issue. Collombier shows how printed material was deliberately geared towards a “propaganda war” (p. 219) in the context of an increasing reading market boosted by higher literacy and cheaper print. Supporters of and opponents to Irish self-rule vied to mobilise grassroots and harness public opinion – in Ireland and Great Britain, but also in the United States and the dominions. The most striking elements brought to light by this chapter are the development of postcards, and the publications aimed at female readers.

The last three chapters focus on more singular points of view: the British positivists with their view of the ultimate independence of Ireland as desirable and inevitable as the end of empire, Michael Davitt with his emphasis on the land question, and William Morris with his rejection of imperialism and his call for a new organisation of society.

Throughout her work, Collombier examines a variety of sources, some of them unknown or very little known, and reappraises the issue of Irish self-rule in the light of recent historiography. *Imagining Ireland’s Future* is a vivid, original and thoroughly researched book, written, edited and produced with great care. It is a must-read for scholars interested in Irish history, Irish nationalism, Anglo-Irish relations, print and the media in the United Kingdom, popular and visual culture, and the history of ideas and their circulation.

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