

Political Thought in Ireland 1776 – 1798: Republicanism, Patriotism and Radicalism.
By Stephen Small. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; pp. viii + 307.
£50).

The goal of Stephen Small's monograph, as he characterizes it, is to combine an explanation of the failures of the 1798 Rebellion in Ireland with an analysis of the inconsistencies ('cacophonies', p.1) in Irish Patriot (Protestant) political thought, and an investigation into the manifold influences of the French revolution on political developments in the Kingdom of Ireland in the 1790s. The method he proposes is based on work by J. G. A. Pocock and can be roughly summarized as a comparison of 'political languages' (i.e. utterances of political views) in order to extract characteristics certain political *mentalités*.

One of the first assertions that Small is able to prove in his thesis outlines the direction he intends to take: Republicanism, Radicalism and Patriotism have not been completely disjointed political ideologies in Ireland (or elsewhere). Moreover, the public political debate in late-eighteenth-century Ireland shows a surprising lack of clarity as far as the foundations for particular political arguments are concerned – almost every political protagonist or pamphleteer represents a blend of ideas from many different political backgrounds. In general, the absence of conscious theoretical reflection on the foundations of one's political attitudes may often result in a suppleness regarding political alliances that occasionally borders on gross opportunism – just as in the case of the Irish Patriots, whose failure in 1798 is explained as a result of the emergence of fundamental differences that had in part only been superficially suppressed for the sake of temporary political unity and to raise the odds of success.

Of course, Small's analysis is much more subtle and detailed than this little point. Taking into account all primary sources available and never forgetting about the particularities and peculiarities of the historical environment, he paints an extremely informative picture of the political debate in Ireland from the dawn of the American Revolution to the failure of the 1798 Rebellion, when the ever more radical United Irishmen did not receive the unanimous backing from their fellow Irishmen that would have been necessary for the Rebellion to succeed.

Consistent with his methodology, Small reflects this lack of ideological strictness in the Irish political debate by referring to the pamphleteers and politicians of Republican, Radical, Whiggish or Patriot background simply as 'Patriots' (attributing 'radical', 'republican', 'Whiggish', etc., whenever necessary), and distinguishes between them by summarizing and comparing an impressive number of pamphlets, newspaper columns and speeches in Parliament. The prevailing 'political languages' in late-eighteenth-century Patriot Ireland, according to Small, were those of natural rights, commercial grievances, corruption of the government, ancient

constitutionalism (the reference to a purportedly ideal ancient Anglo-Saxon constitution that needed to be restored in England and Ireland), and citizen militias. Other ‘languages’, such as Protestant ascendancy, gradually faded away after the radicalization of the political debate inspired by the French Revolution and the subsequent crackdown on critics by the British government.

A very short summary of the book might run as follows: that politically active Irishmen were, in the majority, far from disinterested when arguing their political stance on issues such as Irish independence or parliamentary reform had already become clear by 1776, when a trade-off between sympathy for the American cause and loyalty to the (in every respect dominant) English neighbour had to be sought. Due to continuing concerns about the way Ireland was treated commercially as well as politically, the debate intensified. Under the influence of the Volunteers – whose membership also encompassed contrary political directions – many ideological subtleties and difficulties of practical politics were brought to the attention of Irish Patriots, especially the predicament of an originally elitist (and elite-led) political movement attracting people from very diverse backgrounds due to a commitment (sometimes disingenuous, sometimes honest) to egalitarian policies, as well as the issue of Catholic emancipation. For the first time, the Protestant-ascendant prejudice which held that Catholics were unfit for political participation, was criticized, and became especially dangerous to articulate because of increasing Catholic membership in some Volunteer clubs. These differences were aggravated when the Tithe Dispute of 1785-88 (the conflict surrounding the tax that everyone – including Catholics, many of whom failed to refrain from violence in expressing their opposition to it – had to pay to the Church of Ireland) raised the Catholic cause again. This sparked a row between those who would accept the treatment of Catholics as a somewhat inferior class of citizens (thereby denying that they had the same reasons to demand civil liberties and non-interference by the state as Protestants) and those who refused to subscribe to this notion (despite often not rejecting it without ambivalence).

The French revolution had a dual impact on Irish Patriotism. First, it helped less radical Patriots to overcome their assumptions respecting the political maturity of Catholics, which many Republicans and radical Patriots had already abandoned by that time. Since in France contemporary Catholics had proven their ability to overthrow a system synonymous with injustice for most Patriots, Catholics were no longer perceived as politically incapable. However, as soon as the Jacobin regime assumed power in France, radical Patriots became more reluctant to refer to France as a prime example of Catholic political action for the causes of liberty and justice. Nevertheless, one of the main inconsistencies on the Patriot political agenda – calling for increasing powers of the Irish parliament while maintaining the selective (as opposed to universal) suffrage – seemed to have been dissolved.

However, the French revolution also had a second, contrasting, effect. In reactionary circles, it was used to emphasize the point that an open political debate without

editorial censorship as well as parliamentary reform could entail a severe blow to their special interests, and could be tantamount to inviting Radicals to overturn the political structure of the country, rather than just appeasing them. In particular, the French Revolution prompted relentless action against the radical wing of the Patriot movement, the United Irishmen, which included many former Whigs. It also prevented more moderate Patriots from supporting some radical Patriot activities without reservation, depriving the Patriot movement of the solidarity and unity that would have been necessary for the protagonists of the 1798 rebellion to persevere with their efforts.

Stephen Small's monograph, which is based on his doctoral thesis, is a magnificent example of what Oxford University's Examination Regulations demand from such a dissertation: a piece of scholarly writing, the result of years of advanced learning and research. However, in order to appeal to a wider audience, it might sometimes have been preferable to stress pivotal points of his analysis repeatedly, and to emphasize more frequently the importance of certain *en détail* investigations of primary sources for the main argument. Stephen Small's book should not be regarded as a particularly accessible account of late-eighteenth-century Ireland, but rather – which is partly due to the methodology he employed – as an insightful, extremely careful and extraordinarily balanced study of one of the most crucial events in early modern Irish history.

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