

Book Review: John Hume and the Revision of Irish Nationalism

by Blog Admin

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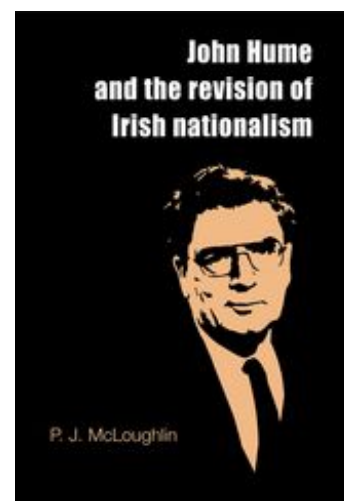
This book explores the politics of one of the most important Irish nationalist leaders of his generation, and one of the most influential figures of twentieth-century Ireland: Nobel Peace Prize winner John Hume. Given his central role in the reformulation of Irish nationalist ideology, and the vital part which he played in drawing violent republicanism into democratic politics, the book shows Hume to be one of the chief architects of the Northern Ireland peace process, and a key figure in the making of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Adam Larragy finds that this political and intellectual biography of Hume should be very useful for students seeking to gain an understanding of the politics and intellectual development of the SDLP in Northern Ireland.



John Hume and the revision of Irish Nationalism. P.J. McLoughlin. Manchester University Press. March 2012.

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In October 1998 the Nobel Peace Prize was jointly awarded to David Trimble, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), and John Hume, leader of the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), for their respective roles in the Northern Ireland Peace Process. The award followed the successful negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) between the British and Irish governments and the nationalist and unionist political parties of Northern Ireland – though Iain Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party refused to acknowledge the agreement. The GFA continues to provide the basis for Northern Ireland's consociational political structure, which guarantees participation in the Northern Ireland Executive for Northern Ireland's unionist majority and nationalist minority.



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The GFA was remarkably similar to the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973, which also proposed power-sharing and the involvement of the Irish government in Northern Ireland's government, brokered between Hume's SDLP and Brian Faulkner's UUP. So much so that Hume's closest political ally called the GFA 'Sunningdale for slow learners'. A young Trimble gave legal advice to the Ulster Workers Council (UWC) that broke Sunningdale through a general strike, while Hume served as Minister for Commerce in the short-lived Sunningdale executive. If Trimble's award recognised a remarkable political trajectory, from participation in the far-right Ulster Vanguard movement to leading the UUP to a settlement with their *bête noire* Sinn Féin (SF), then Hume's acknowledged a steady adherence to a consistent set of principles.

Hume's own form of Irish nationalism, and its eventual displacement of the southern state's formally irredentist but passive nationalism and SF's physical-force republicanism, is the subject of P.J. McLoughlin's *John Hume and the Revision of Irish Nationalism*. This gives the study of Hume's development of his own, and his party's, nationalist ideology a particular relevance, even as the SDLP's electoral star continues to wane and SF increasingly colonises the wider spectrum of nationalist opinion in Northern Ireland. Given that Hume was a practicing politician responding to events in Northern Ireland, the book is wisely arranged chronologically, which both orients the reader and contextualises Hume's political positions.

What kind of Irish nationalism was being revised? McLoughlin uses John Whyte's well-known characterisation of the 'traditional nationalist view of Northern Ireland' as one which views the people of Ireland as forming one nation, and that any divisions are fostered by British rule. The focus on Hume's own understanding of Irish nationalism leads to, at times, an understandable blurring of alternate articulations of Irish nationalism to encompass Whyte's capacious definition. The distinctions within Irish republicanism – the shift towards Marxist political theory in SF in the 1960s and the subsequent split between the Provisionals and the Officials in 1969, the federal 'Eire Nua' policy of Provisional SF and IRA in the 1970s, the shift towards electoralism and an openly 'socialist republican' programme under the Adams/McGuinness leadership – do not receive a sustained treatment, so that at times it can seem as if Hume is wrestling in the dark.

However, the nationalism of the Provisionals and Officials did often resemble Whyte's typology, with both groups seeming to assume unionists and loyalists – particularly the working-class – were suffering a form of 'false consciousness' that would melt away if the British could only be forced, through a terrorist campaign, to withdraw from Northern Ireland. By the end of the 1980s, SF had at least come to recognise that unionists had a distinct identity as a '[national minority](#)', though they still demanded immediate British withdrawal with scant regard for unionist opinion, let alone consent and maintained that the British presence was the main cause of the Troubles.

The first three chapters, drawing on previously published articles, chart Hume's reaction to the suppression of the civil rights movement in Ireland in 1968 and 1969, the foundation of the SDLP in 1970, and the collapse of the Sunningdale Agreement in 1973. McLoughlin convincingly shows, drawing upon Hume's speeches, newspaper articles, and SDLP policy papers, that Hume always believed, at least since 1964, in non-violent unity by consent, pursuing a strategy of the 'three r's': reform of Stormont, then reconciliation between the two communities, and then reunification.

The latter objective was often emphasised by Hume in the political context of the early 1970s, when nationalists in Northern Ireland were feeling the brunt of Stormont's repressive policies (such as internment) and ill-disciplined sectarian police force, and the use of state terror by the British security services. Indeed, McLoughlin points to the *Towards a New Ireland* document, published in 1972, as an example of Hume – who wrote the final draft – prioritising the aim of Irish unification in reaction to the increasing pull of physical force republicanism in nationalist communities that felt under attack – particularly following Bloody Sunday – from the RUC and the British army. In the context of Hume's revision of traditional nationalism, the document represented a traditionally nationalist view of unionism, downplaying unionists' identification as British and focusing on the need to convince Protestants that their religious liberty would be safeguarded, a position shared by Harold Wilson when leader of the opposition.

Chapter three is particularly strong in tracing this tension in relation to the Sunningdale Agreement. The SDLP *de facto* accepted the main tenets of what McLoughlin identifies as the 'fundamental axiom of revisionist nationalism', the principle of consent. However, they accepted a great deal more, including the continuation of internment. To compensate, the SDLP exaggerated the achievements of Sunningdale, pointing to the powerless all-Ireland body the Council of Ireland as a vehicle to forward unification. As such, SDLP rhetoric downplayed the need for unionist consent, implying it was something that would be granted *ex-post*. In any event, Faulkner failed to convince unionist public opinion he had safeguarded the unionist veto, as radical loyalist politicians such as Iain Paisley and loyalist paramilitaries co-operated to bring down Sunningdale through a fourteen day general strike, strengthening unionist and loyalist intransigence for decades.

Chapter four examines the development of Hume's 'two traditions' approach to Northern Ireland, which can be viewed as a decisive turn towards 'revisionist nationalism'. Hume argued that the Northern conflict could only be solved by recognising and reconciliation the unionist and nationalist traditions in Northern Ireland, and that consequently a political settlement would have to recognise the roles of both 'traditions' and the Irish and British governments. To McLoughlin, Hume's political efforts can be seen as an effort to unite the adherents to both traditions, rather than national territory. The remainder of the book covers the subsequent well-known path of Hume's efforts: the engagement with politicians in the United States, his shrewd dragooning of an often unresponsive southern Irish political elite, the brave decision to engage politically with Gerry Adams, and finally the negotiation of the GFA.

The final chapter surveys Hume's enunciation of nationalism in the 1990s and argues that Hume had – as a result of success of the European Union – come to seek political settlements that would allow the protection and expression of multiple identities, of which national identity would be one. McLoughlin acknowledges that the GFA has not created a pluralist Northern Ireland but argues that it can provide the basis for 'the development of a society which is more tolerant and plural'.

If there is a lacuna in the book's account of Hume's political development, it is the treatment of economics. Other senior founding SDLP figures such as Fitt and Devlin were clearly to the left of Hume, and more attention to the distinctions between Fitt and Devlin's economic views on one hand, and Mallon and Hume's on the other would have been welcome. Northern Ireland is as divided by class as southern Irish and British society, and austerity measures from Westminster – who still control the purse strings under the GFA – will place great pressure on Northern society. While the book does not seek to act as full biography of Hume, it can be used as a political and intellectual biography of Hume, and should be very useful for students seeking to gain an understanding of the politics and intellectual development of the SDLP in Northern Ireland.

Adam Larragy is a history PhD candidate at Royal Holloway, University of London. His research focuses on economic ideas in early nineteenth-century Britain. He holds a BA in economics and history from Trinity College, Dublin and an MA in International Political Economy from the University of Warwick. [Read more reviews by Adam.](#)