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Colm Tóibín as Historian

Maurice Fitzpatrick

The history of Ireland is millennia old but views of Irish history are getting shorter and shorter. The Republic of Ireland has existed for less than a century, but its historical chroniclers have made it their business to promote their perspectives so strongly that a fanatic opposition has grown up amongst them. Much of the debate that surrounds Irish history writing revolves on the point of our having been colonised by the British. An orthodoxy of opposition to all things British unsurprisingly emerged, and out of this grew a counter-orthodoxy of endorsing a bond with our neighbours at the expense of detailing the more unpalatable facts. Through their views on the British conquest in Ireland most Irish historians are unfortunately known.

Those whose perspective stems in any way from the rebellious side are labelled nationalists. They share the sentiment articulated in old ballads and slogans. The wrongs their country endured is at the forefront of their writing. They emphasise the tribe too much for the revisionist's liking.

Revisionists, as the name suggests, want to revise the history of eternal wrong visited upon the native by the colonisation. They fear the propagating of nationalist history, claiming it is inflammatory and revanchist.

This debate has been magnified by (and to a large extent originated because of) modernity, the fall of the nation state, increasing integration in economic and social patterns within a global standard. Now, more than ever,

it is attractive to declare the nation dead and to bury its history in the sepulchre with it. Irish revisionist history writers thus have the tide of globalism, a considerable aid, when they make little of nationalism in history writing.

The subject of this essay, Colm Tóibín, truculently falls into neither camp: he is neither nationalist nor revisionist. Tóibín has experienced the atmosphere of both English and American universities, where revisionism and nationalism respectively are most likely to thrive. He is also familiar with the reception given to his books in both England and the USA. His views, ever interesting, are of particular note on the subject of Irish history writing.

Colm Tóibín is the middle son of a local historian from Wexford in South East Ireland. In addition to inheriting his father's will to detail and document history, he also inherited an ideal landscape in which to think about the past – and to make sense of it. As he put it: 'The Rising [of 1798] was important for us: from our housing estate we could see Vinegar Hill where "our side", the rebels, had made their last stand...The landscape of north Wexford, where I was born, is dotted with memorials to 1798' (New Ways).

His uncle went on hunger strike in prison during the civil war. His hometown itself seemed like a palimpsest of Irish history. His father and the local parish priest took great pride in being able to buy the Protestant castle to use as a museum where Irish nationalism was enshrined: 'They were taking over the citadel, establishing in its halls their version of the Irish past' (New Ways).

Tóibín's university days – attending James Joyce's university – were no less steeped in history than his youth had been. Tóibín spent his days reading in the National Library. The building of the former UCD was the site where James Joyce read his famous lecture on Ibsen ('Drama and Life', January 20th 1900). It is Newman House, named after the founder of the National

Catholic University.

Tóibín carried his heritage under his cap when he went to UCD in the 1970s. Reflecting on that time now, he jokes that words like ‘Fenian’ (to denote ferocious nationalist) and ‘colonial’ were verboten. It was a time of huge transition in Ireland. The Republic of Ireland had just joined the EEC, a forerunner of the EU. Mayhem had broken out in the North. It seemed to historians with revisionist tendencies best to capitalise on the new dynamic that existed in Ireland. Ireland could be harnessed to a pacifistic, progressive Europe while the North, dogged by tribal division, could be left to its own devices.

This was the atmosphere in which Tóibín, the son of a nationalist historian, found himself. For someone whose first concern as a student of history was to document history, his professors left a lot to be desired. Tóibín is highly critical of the historians he studied under in UCD in the early seventies. He believed that they were far more interested in secondary sources they had come across during their time in British Universities rather than primary sources such as letters home from Catholics who had left on coffin ships:

‘In the early Seventies in University College Dublin, I studied with a few of the people involved in the project [of researching the famine]. It was clear from their bearing, timbre of their voices and their general interest in source material that their time in British universities had been very important to them, that they were happier reading *Hansard* [transcriptions of debates in Westminster] than going through lists of the names of people who had died on coffin ships...If they did not come from a class which largely spared the famine and land clearance, then they certainly aspired to it’. (*The Irish Famine*, pp21/22)

He also points out that most of the in-depth probing into the catastrophe

had been done in American universities. Tóibín is well-placed, having taught in American universities, to comment. And he understands well that many Irish-Americans who write Irish history are descendants from those who had survived the journey on the coffin ships. Their ancestors had been evicted from their land and forced into (lest they enter into near slave conditions in a work-house) involuntary exile. The narratives of these Irish people have been to some extent frozen in time. A character such as Trevelyan, an enemy castigated in a famous rebel song, is far more prominent a feature in their chronicling of history than revisionists would like. Being in America, however, far away from the orthodoxies of revisionism, they are free to write and publish as they please.

Tóibín chronicles the atrocities, insofar as they are known, of the famine and William Gregory's (Lady Gregory's husband) role in immiserating the Irish people. What fascinates Tóibín is how little this catastrophe has been explored by historians and writers. At the time he wrote his study, the late 1990's, editors of letters home from Australia and America were being published. But why did it take 150 years for these truths to out? And why did a group of historians commissioned by Eamon de Valera in the 1940's, headed by Robert Dudley Edwards, fail to complete a definitive history of the famine. The project was delayed, botched-up and ultimately did not fulfill its aims. What was most bothersome was the tone of the book: the voice of the politician, the poor law administrator was heard but not that of the starving poor.

Tóibín is right to emphasise the inability of the Irish people to face up to the famine. There are reasons for this other than shame. As Tóibín highlights, a whole class of Irish Catholics prospered during the famine. Churches were built while landless peasants starved by the roadside. So while, as Brendan Kennelly once wrote, "I celebrate the darkness and the

shame”, there is also a collective guilt about the famine in Ireland: the very uncomfortable knowledge that some Catholics colluded with the like of Trevelyn and William Gregory.

Irish academics, who have taught in America, have enjoyed a certain freedom that does not obtain elsewhere. One such is Seamus Deane. A Derry man, who edited the massive and erudite *Field Day Anthology*, Deane has been none too impressed by the fortunes of Irish history writing. He cogently argues that the present revisionism rose in the wake of violence having erupted in the North in the late 1960s. He is highly influential figure in the chronicling of the nation. He also taught the youthful Colm Tóibín English Literature at UCD.

This interview, which I conducted with Deane in Newman House in Dublin on February 7th, 2007, deserves to be quoted at length. One of the questions I put to him was about Irish history writing and Colm Tóibín:

MF: In his book, *The Irish Famine*, Colm Tóibín wrote of his dismay with historians in UCD in the early 1970’s, when he was a student there, who seemed proud of the secondary research they had done in English universities. Few wanted to parse through documents and letters written by Irish people during the Famine. How do you feel about the state of Irish history writing?

SD: I am not sure I would be entirely confident that I could say that I know what the state of Irish history writing is. But what I know about it is that I think it has become even more, generally, even more coarsened than it had been by the so-called revisionist tendency which has now become obsessive in its varied attempts to dismiss what it calls the nationalist reading of history. And after thirty years, although it has taken a few

blows, it still regards itself as iconoclastic whereas in fact you can now – you can almost trace the curve of Irish historical revisionist historical writing by looking at events in the North. The degree to which, you know, Republicanism and nationalism were constantly – or caricature versions of them – presented as the enemy. And, of course, the idea of colonialism or imperialism or any violence visited by the British upon Ireland as a fundamental feature was dismissed as another nationalist myth. That said, I think also most distressing thing about the writing of history – it seems to me that there still is a degree of philosophical poverty in the writing of history and the thinking about aesthetics and the thinking about art which has strangely intensified as the reasons or excuses for it have diminished. I'm not quite sure why this is, except that I think it is part of the – what would one say – I don't simply say not the intellectual habit of mind; but a habit of mind that is formed by two or three things. One is for a long time the lack of formal education for many people and therefore their suspicion (and their well-founded suspicion) of well-educated people. So that there would be a class element involved in that, as well as a political element. That would be one thing. A second thing would be the mystification by the Irish state of the idea of the literary, which they have used as a sort of tourist card of admission to the world club. And with that, a sort of fitting into the stereotype of the notion of the Irish as an imaginative people who dare not let themselves be violated ever by an idea because this would, in some way, break the integrity of our reputation. But this notion that the intellectual life is a foolish, delusive, academic venture is deeply embedded here, though I think the Irish academy is entirely free of any charge of being intellectual. I think it is astonishing that, for instance, the humanities in Irish universities are on what one would call intellectual

traditions in philosophy and literature and history and in all the cross over areas between those, just to mention the most obvious ones and the ones that look to me the most... It is astonishing how little that they are addressed. So that is a poverty that affects the writing of history, especially in its revisionist mode has created its own poverty, and its own kind of polemic and bigotry. It is not a matter of saying, you know, “who shall ‘scape whipping?’” It is to dare to say that there is an ethical position which is not finally going to be undermined by relativism. You know, saying that because it was 1830’s, you know people thought differently therefore... You know, which is something that you often find in Irish history where there are so many atrocities. The first way of relativising an atrocity is to say: “put it in its context”. That idea of putting something in its context seems to me philosophically a very odd idea in itself. It also seems to me very risky to say “oh well, there is an ethical position above and beyond those historical conditions in which we live and in which others lived”. So, having said yes, I would then say it is more a hope than a possibility. I do not know from where one could with confidence make a critique of others or take someone to task but you certainly can do it indirectly by taking people to task for not really attending to the – let’s say – atrocious dimension of something, especially people who take care not to attend to the atrocious dimension here but take care to attend to it there, you know

(IASIL Japan, Vol. 21)

So where did and does Tóibín fit in with the rising tide of revisionism? He ‘became a revisionist, luckily, just as the word was coming into vogue’ (New Ways). But the new amnesia about history did not successfully dispel the nagging question in the mind of young Tóibín. He went to Spain, saw

the fall of Franco and continued to question the political undercurrents of Irish history writing. He saw that those, such as the revisionists, who liked to think their work above the politics that had marred Irish history writing for so long, was in fact prey to politics of a new kind: a politics with a definite agenda for Ireland's future in Europe. Tóibín's 'wishing things were simpler' did not make them so. And he realises now that certain forces 'operate within me too...we [Irish people]... are learning to talk in whispers. It will take time' (New Ways).

Tóibín's assesses problems of modernity and Ireland both past and present. One piece of writing crystallises Toibin's stance on Irish history. Tóibín's booklet, *The Irish Famine*, grew out of a review Tóibín wrote in 1998 which was extended and published in 1999. As Deane notes, 'the famine was the last disaster of its kind on Western Europe' (pp 115, *The Field Day Anthology*). In his booklet, Tóibín continually emphasises the monumental nature of the famine in Ireland: how it totally transformed land ownership, patterns of emigration, the fate of the Irish language and how it informed on Ireland's relationship with England.

In another work, he writes: 'Imagine if Irish history were pure fiction, how free and happy we could be! It seemed at that time a most subversive idea, a new way of killing your father, starting from scratch, creating a new self'. Synge of course in his *The Playboy of the Western World* riotously sent up the paradigm of filial revenge. While adopting an ironical title, Tóibín, in an essay published in the *London Review*, acquitted himself well on the subject of country or *patria* as an enormously pressuring force. His essay is also fascinating in its treatment of historian and Yeats biographer, Roy Foster, who embodies a wave of thought about Irish history.

Tóibín, in addition to being an astute historian, brings a fine literary style to history writing which helps to make his arguments compelling. Fine

examples of his ability to use tone to devastating effect and to highlight the undercurrents of the tones employed by other writers.

Tóibín writes: ‘Nothing now roots among the broken stone: the site where the house once stood is cemented over, as though to contain uneasy spirits in the foundations ... the demolition [of Lady Gregory’s house] in 1941 was a disgrace’ (*The Irish Famine*). The tone of this paragraph is indicative of his alignment with an older order which is best called feudal. It echoes, very closely, a poem by an anonymous hand of the 17th or 18th century entitled Kilcash:

“What shall we do for timber?
The last of the woods is down.
Kilcash and the house of its glory
And the bell of the house are gone,
The spot where the lady waited
Who shamed all women for grace
When earls came sailing to greet her
And mass was said in the place.

My grief and my affliction
Your gates are taken away,
Your avenue needs attention,
Goats in your garden stray.
The courtyard’s filled with water
And the great earls where are they?
The earls, the lady, the people
Beaten into the clay”. (Penguin Book of Irish Verse)

That essential order – the earls, the lady, the people – all together, living in harmony was lost in Ireland. Lady Gregory, in her tireless work for the Gaelic revival and in her hosting Yeats summer after summer in her house while he wrote, is an exemplar of one who would try to restore that order, of one who turned her back on the colonial class she came from.

The tone of his booklet is reminiscent of MacNeice’s dictum that we are ‘incorrigibly plural’. After centuries of colonial occupation easy distinctions between the rulers and the ruled can no longer be made or, at least if they are made, it is sometimes to smooth over rather uncomfortable self-realizations.

Lady Gregory like Yeats, however, in moments of anger or frustration could betray the inherent master class dogma of her people. She once said to Yeats: “It is a battle between those who use toothbrushes and those who do not”. Needless to say, the Catholics did not use toothbrushes. But on the whole Tóibín (who has written a separate study exclusively on her life and work) seeks to praise Lady Gregory despite the fact that in her vision of a dreamy Ireland of the future “the events of the famine had no place” (*The Irish Famine*, pp 85).

Colm Tóibín is one of the most important living Irish authors because he can write with such love and sympathy about his background while at the same time having renounced so much of his heritage. When he was in college, in the early seventies, with so many fashionable trends about Irish history evolving in public discourse, Tóibín managed to keep his own mind. This has continued in Tóibín’s writing: it is not so much his originality as his incorruptibility that makes him important.

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