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Beyond the boundaries in the island of Ireland

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Abstract The review essay opens with positive attributes of Ireland but then considers that the island has been subject to centuries of bitter dispute and unrest. The historical background to this is outlined, particularly the interactions between Ireland and its neighbouring island, Great Britain, which dominated Irish affairs. One policy adopted by the British was to encourage migration of Protestants into the largely Catholic island in the vain hope that this would reduce unrest. The two islands were then united from 1801 as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland but demands from indigenous Irish Catholics for independence continued, resisted by the Protestant minority who wished to remain inside the UK. After the Great War a solution was imposed that granted most of Ireland independence but left the largely Protestant northeast corner within the UK as Northern Ireland. Reaction to and life with the Irish border are considered and the paper concludes with musings about its future.

Introduction

Ireland, the world's twentieth largest island at 84,421 sq km, is situated off the northwest edge of Europe. It is a land of great geological complexity with a considerable variety of environments, including some rich cultivated areas, but the damp, rather cool, climate restricts agricultural opportunities and the island is noted for livestock production and dairying rather than cereals. Famous products traded internationally include Irish whiskey (spelled with an 'e', unlike Scotch whisky) and stout, a dark beer manufactured by a number of companies including Guinness. People from Ireland have made a considerable contribution to world affairs. For example, the Nobel Prize for Literature, awarded since 1901, has been won by four Irish writers: William Butler Yeats (1923), George Bernard Shaw (1925), Samuel Beckett (1969) and Seamus Heaney (1995), whilst the fact that James Joyce did not win in the early twentieth century was very controversial. Irish writers of earlier periods such as Oscar Wilde, Oliver Goldsmith, Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Jonathan Swift would surely have been of a status to win such a prize had there have been a competition in their lifetimes. People of the Irish diaspora have also made major contributions, thus 20 of the currently 44 men who have been president of the USA had (or have) Irish ancestry, including Barack Obama who has Irish blood on his mother's side. Irish music, dancing and other aspects of culture have become world-wide commodities from the musical show *Riverdance* to the ubiquitous international Irish pub, in which can be enjoyed, one hopes, good *craic* using that untranslatable Irish word for warm feelings and good fellowship. It is also of positive note to record that the Irish landscape is undeniably beautiful, the island's characterisation as the 'Emerald Isle' conjuring up images of its lush green fields, although

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the grass grows so well only because it rains a lot and even the greatest lover of Ireland cannot pretend that its weather is pleasant!

On the other hand, beautiful Ireland has had a traumatic history. This can be evidenced by the fact that its population total today remains less than it was at the census in 1841. A famine in the mid- to late-1840s caused by *Phytophthora infestans*, a disease introduced accidentally from the Americas that blighted the staple crop of potatoes, together with an inadequate and tardy official response to relief, led to a high mortality rate. Limited international emigration had been occurring before the famine (Royle and Ní Laoire, 2006) but during that disaster there was a massive outflow of Irish people and this process continued for generations. Only in the mid-twentieth century did the population of Ireland stop declining. The resultant Irish diaspora means that there are many more people of Irish descent outside Ireland than live within its shores.

Further, Ireland is plagued by disunity, bitter rivalries and contestations that have blighted lives for many centuries. The most recent unrest, the three decades of disturbance known as the 'Troubles' from the late-1960s to the late-1990s, caused almost 3500 deaths within Ireland and beyond its shores. Most of the violence was confined to the northeast corner of the island itself (Fig. 1), but it spread to a limited extent to other parts of Ireland and outside it to Great Britain and Europe, particularly to English cities including but not limited to London. The Troubles were intimately related to one of the souvenirs of earlier Irish unrest, that it had become a divided island with an internal international boundary that splits it into two different polities. One is an independent state, the Republic of Ireland; the other, Northern Ireland, is within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the world's longest official state name, invariably shortened to the UK. Such insular divisions are rare but are found elsewhere in the world as demonstrated in a new book edited by Baldacchino, 2013, *Divided Islands*. This author wrote the chapter therein on Ireland (Royle, 2013) and is delighted now to have been given the opportunity to follow up that piece by looking in this review essay 'beyond the boundaries in the island of Ireland'.

Fig. 1 Bomb damage during the Troubles, University Road, Belfast. Photograph by Stephen Royle, May 1977.

Ireland and the 'curse' of Great Britain

First it is necessary to reprise something of the history of Ireland, so its political division can be understood. The basic issue is geographical, namely Ireland's location just west of the much larger island of Great Britain. That location has always provided opportunities for Irish people who for centuries have migrated to Britain for work and residence. However, it has also been seen as Ireland's 'curse' as the nationalist leader Wolff Tone put it in 1798 shortly before he was sentenced to death for leading a rebellion against the British. The English and then, after the *Act of Union* in 1707 when Scotland joined England and Wales, the British, needed to control Ireland. There was always a fear that Ireland would be used as a stepping stone into Britain for that country's continental enemies, particularly the French and Spanish. Ireland had to be swept into the arms of England/Britain essentially to keep the latter nation safe. This policy can be traced back to 1169 when King Henry II of England mounted his first invasion of Ireland. Neither Henry nor his successors succeeded in gaining control of all of the island. The fourteenth century saw the depredations of the Black Death, the bubonic plague that killed about one-third of Europe's population, which rather changed priorities. The following century brought to England the Wars of the Roses, a conflict which meant that Irish affairs were again neglected. The Irish were able to take advantage and pushed back the area under English control to an enclave around Dublin on the east coast known as 'the Pale'. Then in 1542 England's puppet Irish parliament in Dublin declared King Henry VIII of England to be also King of Ireland. After this renewal of interest in Ireland, the Pale was extended once more despite risings against the English with their unpopular foreign ways and customs, including the English language.

Ireland proving difficult to subdue militarily, the English decided on a different policy, that of changing Ireland's population composition by encouraging migration of people into Ireland from England itself, also its tributary state of Wales and a little later, Scotland. This policy was called the 'Plantation' and can be dated first to the 1550s, when Queen's County (now County Laois) was 'planted' with such migrants. In the province of Ulster in the north of Ireland, the local lord, Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone who had supported the Spanish in the wars between Spain and England was defeated in 1603 and he and other lords left Ireland. Their lands were issued to settlers from Great Britain to try to forestall further rebellions. This process, the Ulster Plantation, saw up to 80,000 Anglicans and Presbyterians, two significant Protestant sects, move into what had been heretofore largely a Roman Catholic island. These groups are all Christians but there was considerable rivalry between Catholics and Protestants and the Ulster Plantation extended an ethnic division within Ireland that was a significant factor in its later political division, given the different identities and cultures of the religious groups (Graham, 1997). The Ulster Plantation did not officially affect the two eastern Ulster counties of Antrim and Down, but they were settled privately largely through the immigration of Protestants from Scotland. One notable Country Antrim settlement from the early seventeenth century was Belfast, founded in 1603 (chartered 1613) on land granted to Sir Arthur Chichester, Lord Deputy of Ireland. Belfast was laid out within earthen ramparts for its immigrant Protestant population, local Catholics being required to reside outside the defences (Gillespie, 2007).

The aim of the plantation to bring peace failed in that there was an uprising in 1641 and the English reverted to a military strategy. In 1647 there was an unsuccessful campaign, then in