

Ian Mitchell's Ireland-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

20 – *Churchill and Ireland*

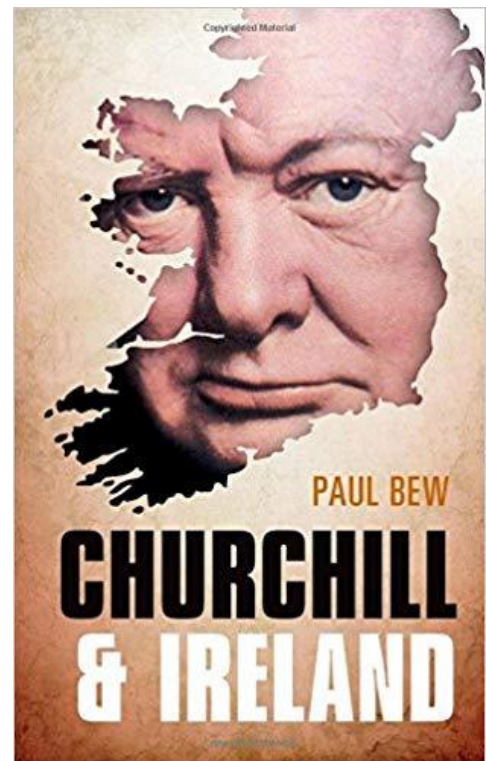
CHURCHILL AND IRELAND

Author: Paul Bew

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(available on *Amazon*, [click on cover image for link](#))

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Reviewer: Ian Mitchell, 3 November 2018



Reason to read: The most balanced, and best informed, account I have read of the allegedly poisonous relationship between the arch-imperialist, Winston Churchill, and the benighted, traduced, occupied, exploited, mocked and murdered people of Ireland—or so the “implacable, malignant minority” (in Churchill’s words, p. 145) who could see nothing good in Britain would have put it. Professor Lord Bew tells quite a different story.

It includes fascinating accounts of the Treaty negotiations in 1920-1, and their aftermath. I liked the observation that one of the reasons why Michael Collins and Winston Churchill hit it off was that they were both manic depressives. (p. 12) It also deals at length with the Irish assertion of neutrality in 1939-45. Churchill was profoundly against it, though he refused to force the issue. But you don’t have to have sat at Churchill’s desk to think De Valera’s approach dishonourable. To stand in the bunker where Field Marshal Paulus surrendered to the Soviets amidst the ruins of shattered Stalingrad, as I did in May this year, is to understand in one’s bones the cosmic idiocy, and international irrelevance, of the Irish leader’s self-righteous posturing—to put it at its kindest—or his cowardice—to put it at its unkindest.

Professor Bew implies that De Valera believed he was acting for his country’s advantage. If so, he betrayed many of his own people, enormous numbers of whom (proportionately) went off to fight, entirely voluntarily, either in the armed forces of the United Kingdom or indirectly by working in the war industries of Great Britain. And most of those who stayed at home produced food that went east across the Irish Sea. It was only the bibulous intelligentsia of upscale, radical Dublin, and the “implacable, malignant minority” who supported the IRA, that could not see beyond their own historical mythologizing. They thought the conflict was one between two different forms of imperialism.

Churchill harboured warm feelings towards the Irish *people*, whose creative genius and martial valour he admired, having experienced both personally (the latter in the Boer War). The implacable, malignant

view of him is, quite simply, wrong. It is out-of-date propaganda. However, the fact is the Britain's record of dealings with Ireland is hardly without blemish, and Lord Bew gives equal prominence to British and Churchillian prejudices and mistakes. Of these, one can comment only that Ireland was lucky in its choice of grievance object. To have had Stalin or Hitler as a neighbour rather than Chamberlain or Churchill was, perhaps, the luck of the Irish. Anyone who disagrees with that should ask, for example, the Estonians what it is like to live in a small country surrounded by real imperialists. After all, the reason Stalin invaded the Baltic states in 1940—which helped provoke the Nazi invasion in 1941—was that he needed forward maritime bases for defence purposes. That was exactly the point at issue in the Treaty Ports case, when Ireland refused to allow the Royal Navy to use, especially, Berehaven in West Cork, to extend the range of convoy coverage in the Atlantic. Yet Churchill did not do what Stalin or Hitler did—which he could easily have done.

Professor Bew quotes a nutty socialist republican called Jim Phelan, who wrote a pamphlet which Gollancz published in May 1940 at about the time of Dunkirk. Unlike some of his countrymen, Phelan saw the main point very clearly: “If the British people do not stand off Nazism, if they tolerate the lies and swindling and cheap histrionics of Hitler’s admirers past danger point, they *and we* will be stamped out of existence. There will be no more pseudo-democratic British capitalism, which some Irish might think a good thing. But there will also be an end to the incipient Irish republic. The fighting republican politically-alert people of Ireland can not allow the British to lose.” (p. 142, emphasis added)

Thought(s) provoked:

1. Devolution doesn't work. The whole history of the negotiations for Home Rule, for peace at the time of the Free State and finally during all the stages between 1922 and Ireland's final and complete break with Britain and the Commonwealth in 1949, illustrates this. Professor Bew comments in connection with the original Home Rule scheme in 1912: “The experience of ‘actually existing’ devolution in Scotland in a far more benign historical context has encouraged even greater scepticism about the reconciling potential inherent in devolution as such.” (p. 60)
2. It is really true to say, as Mick Masterson did one night recently in Patrick Murtagh's incomparable bar in Arvagh, Co. Cavan, that Ireland exchanged one empire for another, the British for that of the Catholic Church. He did not disagree when I added that the new, post-Catholic empire is the EU, and that the Irish are now worshipping at the altar of Euro-style materialism. Just as De Valera was in league with Rome, so the current Taoiseach is in league with Brussels. The country is not as independent as it likes to think it is, or as the old idealists hoped it would be—speaking Gaelic and turning its austere righteousness back on the “cheap and cheerful” culture of the “plastic, populist”, anti-poetical Anglo-American world.

Incidental interest: The same Jim Phelan quoted above concluded his pamphlet with this interesting flourish: “With all its myriad faults we, the Irish, will fight for this western end of Europe. For little things that will be bigger and shall mean likeable things that will be better. For the sweet taste of milk hot from the cow and the lazy lying to smoke by a river; for apples in Covent Garden and trout in Killarney; for the bustle of London's West End and the lonely lorries on the Great North Road; for the smoke of turf in Tipperary and the talk of the miners in the Rhondda and in a tap room in an English village where I can hear Gaelic spoken, every night, by 20-odd hard-eyed young fellows in air force blue,

some but an hour back from tearing at the iron heel. For these things, foolish or otherwise, a man can fight and be easy.” (p. 143)

The question in our materialistic, “Euro” world is this: which of those “likeable things” can still be enjoyed? No milk fresh from the cow, no apples in Covent Garden, no Great North Road, no turf smoke in Tipperary, no miners in the Rhondda, no tap rooms anywhere, and no Gaelic spoken, even by air force pilots from Ireland. So was it all worth it? Or were they all actually fighting for something different, something less tangible—perhaps a little, shall we say, “offshore”, Anglo-Irish even?

Surprising points: The 1916 Easter Rising was partly about *money*. In the nineteenth century Ireland was thought to be—and probably was—overtaxed within the general British scheme of things. But the introduction of social welfare, in Lloyd George’s budget of 1906, began to change things. “A significant point of the impulse behind the 1916 Rising lay in the idea that nationalists had to act before the Irish people were seduced by old age pensions and the other comforts of the nascent welfare state.” (p. 134) This point has been reinforced in recent years by the wild popularity of the European Union while it was handing out more money to Ireland than it was taking in taxes. Scotland likes the EU too, because it taxes the English, especially in the City of London, and spends lots of other people’s money here.

Style: Smooth, and with enough “human interest” to bring the subject alive—history as it should be written, but so seldom is these day by academics.

Publishing quality: Excellent – only one glitch I spotted (p. 125, first line, 3rd para., should be: “De Valera-Collins pact”, not “Craig-Collins”—I think).

Smile(s): Churchill’s favourite Irish joke: Two Irish airmen in an RAF bomber over Berlin, caught in the searchlights, with one engine on fire, the rear-gunner wounded, but still pressing on to the target through hellish anti-aircraft fire and fighter attacks. In the bomb bay, the two Irishmen are sweating and terrified, but they are arguing and, being Irish, they are arguing about politics. One is pro-De Valera, and the other anti. Eventually the pro-De Valera one runs out of arguments and shouts out defiantly, “Say what you like about Dev, at least he kept us out of this bloody war!” (p. 183)

Author: Paul Bew (ennobled for services to the Good Friday Agreement) is Professor of Irish Politics at Queens University, Belfast. He has written widely on Anglo-Irish history and conflict.

Link(s): You can see an excellent lecture which Lord Bew delivered in parliament at Westminster, on the general subject of this book: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvv7UI_fpw

Overall recommendation level: VERY HIGH INDEED

About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including *Isles of the West* and *The Justice Factory*. He is writing a multi-volume study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*. He lives in Campbeltown and can be contacted at ianbookrec@gmail.com. For other reviews in this series, see: <https://www.moffatrussianconferences.com/ian-mitchell-s-russia>