James R. Sackett

# Irish cultural nationalism and the Protestant minority: the conditions and parameters of "Irishness"

## *Riassunto*

Tra le varie espressioni del nazionalismo in Europa, si può dire che il nazionalismo irlandese sia rimasto quello più politicamente rilevante e culturalmente influente. La sua importanza ideologica nella lotta per l'indipendenza dell'Irlanda risale a secoli fa, ma la sua incarnazione più recente e di successo differisce significativamente nel carattere dalle formazioni passate. Mentre il progetto politico del nazionalismo irlandese rimane incompiuto, dato che sei contee dell'isola formano lo stato costituzionalmente britannico dell'Irlanda del Nord, il suo progetto culturale sembra aver avuto successo nell'immaginazione popolare e nella coscienza storica. Questo successo sarebbe avvenuto a scapito della minoranza protestante irlandese, per la quale le condizioni e i parametri per un'autentica "Irlandesicità" erano deliberatamente esclusivisti e limitanti. Questa analisi del quadro nazionalista culturale per nazionalità, identità e religione nell'Irlanda indipendente esamina la traiettoria del nazionalismo in Irlanda ed evidenzia le ragioni controverse sul perché ha intrapreso un simile corso e come si è rivelato problematico per alcuni membri della storica nazione irlandese .

## *Abstract*

Among the various expressions of nationalism in Europe, Irish nationalism could be said to have persisted as the most politically relevant and culturally influential. Its ideological importance in Ireland's struggle for independence traces back centuries, yet its most recent and successful incarnation differs significantly in character from past formations.

While Irish nationalism's political project remains unfinished, as six of the island's counties form the constitutionally British state of Northern Ireland, its cultural project appears to have succeeded in the popular imagination and historical consciousness. This success would come at the expense of Ireland's Protestant minority, for whom the conditions and parameters for authentic "Irishness" were deliberately exclusionary and limiting. This analysis of the cultural nationalist framework for nationality, identity, and religion in independent Ireland examines the trajectory of nationalism in Ireland and highlights the contentious reasons as to why it took such a course and how it proved problematic for some members of the historic Irish nation.

## Introduction

Nationalism is Ireland's most significant and enduring political creed. Historically it has had several distinct formations. Its genesis is sometimes located in the "faith and fatherland" rhetoric of Hugh O'Neill (1550-1616)[1], or alternatively in the Enlightenment idealism of the late-eighteenth century United Irishmen. However, its most successful expression and application occurred in the twentieth century. Independence was achieved for twenty-six of the island's thirty-two counties following the Anglo-Irish War (1919-1921); these twenty-six counties existed as the Irish Free State, a dominion of the British Empire; an Irish republic was declared in 1949. Six northeastern counties, where a bulk of the island's Protestant population reside, had together been partitioned by the Government of Ireland Act 1920; these six counties would go on to comprise the territory of Northern Ireland, the political definition of which being itself a volatile issue.

While a beleaguered Catholic minority in Northern Ireland espoused political nationalism as a way of asserting its civil

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[1] Murphy, 2000, p. 16.

rights in a Protestant-dominated state, the Catholic majority in the Republic, who comprised over 93% at the time the country's current constitution was enacted[2], promoted cultural nationalism in affirmation of a Catholic, Gaelic identity for its society. However, this proved problematic for its historic Protestant minority, many of whom were descended from or identified with the British colonial legacy. This study examines the conditions and parameters of so-called "Irishness" according to the Irish cultural nationalist paradigm. The nature of several critical elements of Irish nationalism will be defined and dissected, and the evolution of the historic concept of "Irishness" will be explored. In doing so, a greater understanding of some of the more nuanced aspects of cultural nationalism in its specifically Irish context will be reached. Therefore, it is hoped that popularly received notions of Irish identity, which have too often been exclusionary and simplistic, may be dispelled.

## 1. *Nation and nationality*

Depending on one's viewpoint nationalism may appear either multifaceted or fickle. As D. George Boyce comments, "There has never been agreement about what constitutes a nation; hence the plethora of 'definitions' ranging from the complex and solemn to the simple and facetious"[3]. Some of the definitions that have been proffered still provide insight into the fundamental principles of nationalism. Ernest Gellner maintains that "nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent"[4]. James Anderson and James Goodman have a similar take on "the nationalist ideal," that "the nation's territory and the state's territory should be one and the same"[5]. The issue of statehood and territoriality has obvious relevance in the case of a partitioned country like Ireland. In a place like

[2] Doyle, Kenny, McCrudden 2024, pp. 200-201.
[3] Boyce 1982, p. 17.
[4] Gellner 1983, p. 1.
[5] Anderson, Goodman 1998, p. 8.

Northern Ireland, are those who identify as Irish part of the British nation, or are those who identify as British part of the Irish nation? Can the Irish Republic speak for Irish nationalism if it does not exist as a thirty-two-county polity?

Despite any controversy regarding Ireland's split political state-hood, Ireland's cultural nationhood has been firmly expressed by the South since independence. In contrast to civic nationalism, which is based on citizenship, social rights, and obligations, cultural nationalism is based on custom, language, and communal memory[6]. Irish cultural nationalism stresses Irish as the country's first language, Catholicism the first religion, and territorial unity[7]. Much of the character of twentieth century Irish cultural nationalism is exemplified in the works of D.P. Moran and Daniel Corkery, most notoriously in Moran's *The Philosophy of Irish Ireland* (1905) and Corkery's *The Hidden Ireland* (1924) and *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (1931). According to the philosophy of "Irish Ireland," "The foundation of Ireland is the Gael, and the Gael must be the element that absorbs"[8].

However, nationalism in Ireland underwent various transformations before settling to its most popularly accepted form. Historically, the theoretical ideals of Irish nationalism did not always parallel the ideology's practical reality. As Boyce comments, while

[…] the political theory of nationalism, from [Henry] Grattan, through [Wolfe] Tone, to [Thomas] Davis […] stressed the comprehensive nature of nationalism, its need to incorporate all Irishmen within its bounds, its inclusiveness, its non-sectarianism […] the popular appeal of nationalism, its emotional attraction, its sentiment, were derived, not from this ideology, but from a myth, a view of the past that was accepted whether it was true or false. This view of the past was exclusive, describing the struggle of the Irish race, or, as some called it, the "real nation," to free itself from the wrongs and oppressions of the English *and* of the English and Scottish colonists. And it was enduring […] The problem with Ireland was that she encompassed a plural society that did not and could not see itself as plural[9].

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6  Smyth 1998, p. 11.
7  Kearney 1988, p. 79.
8  Moran 2006, p. 37.
9  Boyce 1982, pp. 385-387.

The ideological evolution of Irish nationalism explains why the country's Protestant minority in the twentieth century would feel alienated from the mainstream of what constitutes being authentically Irish, i.e. "Irishness." This would be despite the historically active role of Protestants among the leadership of various nationalist movements in the country's past. By the twentieth century, nationalism had deviated from previous Enlightenment and Romantic principles and morphed into an "Irish Catholic holy nationalism" operating under "an increasingly perfunctory pseudo-secular cover"[10]. The prevailing attitude of cultural nationalism held that Ireland was Gaelic and Catholic, and Protestants were excluded from full historical and spiritual membership in "the Irish race."

The ideological trajectory that Irish nationalism underwent is perhaps understandable. As E.J. Hobsbawm notes, "The force of the sentiments which leads groups of 'us' to give themselves an ethnic/linguistic identity against the foreign and threatening 'them' cannot be denied"[11]. Edward Said adds, "Nationalism is a word that has been used in all sorts of sloppy and undifferentiated ways, but it still serves quite adequately to identify the mobilizing force that coalesced into resistance against an alien and occupying empire on the part of peoples possessing a common history, religion and a language"[12]. According to Hobsbawm's and Said's interpretations, nationalism is by its very nature a dichotomy, the foundation for which being enmity. There are arguably justifiable historical precedents as to why that is, but this being the case, Irish cultural nationalism's exclusionary impact on the general mentality of the island's Protestant minority becomes irrefutable.

The evolution of independent Ireland into a culturally Gaelic, religiously Catholic, constitutionally revanchist state after centuries of Protestant administrative dominance is less a departure from a nationalist standard and more an extension of it. As David Lloyd notes, while nationalism is "oriented towards the production of a sense of popular unity," it is "con-

[10]  O'Brien 1998, p. 39.
[11]  Hobsbawm 1990, p. 170.
[12]  Said 1990, p. 74.

ceived within a generally oppositional framework"[13]. Due to its dichotomized nature, nationalism is prone to actions of redress or revenge once power is obtained. One of the great dangers of nationalism is that it "frequently takes over the hegemonic control of the imperial power, thus replicating the conditions it rises up to combat", sometimes developing "a xenophobic view of identity and a coercive view of national commitment"[14]. Conor Cruise O'Brien asserts:

> […] even under the most benign definitions of nationalism, much more is subsumed than simple affection for one's fellow citizens, and one's native place. Collective selfishness is there, aggression, and the legitimation of persecution, with at the back of it all, the old doctrine of the superiority of one's own nation[15].

Questions are then raised as to who is part of "one's own nation" and who ultimately makes that decision. Gellner offers two theoretical definitions for the "elusive concept" of nationality:

> 1. Two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating.
> 2. Two men are of the same nation if and only if they *recognize* each other as belonging to the same nation[16].

If Ireland is to be considered a plural society in terms of culture, tradition, and ethnicity, the first of Gellner's definitions falls short in accommodating the country's non-Gaelic, non-Catholic minorities. The second definition offers more flexibility, but as mentioned earlier, the prevailing cultural nationalism of the time exclusively recognized "the Irish race" as representative of an Irish nation, a nation in which Protestants may be a part so long as "the overwhelming primacy and preponderance of the Gaelic and Catholic component"[17] is acknowledged. The popularly received notion of Irish identity in the twentieth cen-

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[13] Lloyd 1993, p. 17.
[14] Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2002, p. 151.
[15] O'Brien 1971, p. 8.
[16] Gellner 1983, p. 7
[17] O'Brien 1972, p. 117.

tury is thus obviously and particularly problematic for those of Protestant, and possibly British, backgrounds.

It was only in the later decades of the twentieth century that Irish national identity began to be sought amidst a plurality of cultural forms with a measure of earnestness[18]. Yet even this development arose greatly out of a necessity to come to terms with the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland in the latter half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, one cannot discount the fact that the attitudes molded in the 1920s and the 1930s by traditional nationalist ideology held currency into the 1980s[19] and the philosophical tenets of Irish-Ireland had defenders well into the 1990s[20].

## 2. *Identity and ethnicity*

"Identity" as a philosophical concept is not easily transfixed, nor can it be understood within a single definition. At its simplest, identity offers an answer to the questions, "Who am I?" and "Where do I belong;" it is the means by which we "have the facility to *identify* ourselves in relation to others and by which others separate the 'insiders' from the 'outsiders'"[21]. Identity is then too confronted by an oppositional framework akin to that of nationalism. Zygmunt Bauman asserts, "One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety of behavioral styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people around would accept this placement as right and proper"[22]. For Protestants in independent Ireland, a self-conscious sense of one's place in Ireland is rooted in an uncertainty that the historic British or Anglo-Irish Protestant presence in the country is indeed "right and proper."

In any interrogation of identity in Ireland, there is a dynam-

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[18]  O'Mahony, Delanty 2001, p. 178.
[19]  O'Halloran 1987, p. 181
[20]  Maume 1996, p. 10.
[21]  Kershen 1998, p. 1.
[22]  Bauman 1996, p. 19.

ic at play between what Boyce terms "National Identity" and "Colonial Identity." National identity "is felt by members of a group who define their culture as the national one, and their group as the true legitimate inheritors of the national territory, of the homeland"; Colonial identity "is felt by members of a group whose national identity takes its origins in the mother country, but whose cultural identity has been shaped by their new environment"[23]. For Gellner, "The question of identification […] is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image"[24]. The tensions that would arise from a conflict between notions of national and colonial identity are a result of an internalized consent to the "images of identity" that twentieth century Irish cultural nationalism produced.

Beyond an individual sense of one's own identity are factors regarding wider societal affiliations and allegiances. A paradigm of "us" and "them," "insiders" and "outsiders," speaks to the significance of social identity in determining an understanding of oneself in Ireland. Marilynn B. Brewer and Miles Hewstone offer the following on the concept of social identity:

> social identity refers to those aspects of self-knowledge that are derived from membership in specific social groups, meaning identity that is located *within* the individual self-concept. In this usage, social identities are aspects of the self that have been particularly influenced by the fact of membership in specific social groups or categories and the shared socialization experiences that such membership implies. The emphasis here is on the *content* of identity, the acquisition of psychological traits, expectations, customs, beliefs, and ideologies that are associated with belonging to a particular social group or category. Identification refers to the centrality of a particular social group membership to the individual's sense of self and the meaning that is derived from that identity[25].

For Irish Protestants, the aspects of their social identity with which they would be primarily concerned might include the historical legacy of colonialism and imperialism, cultural and theological Protestantism, associations with the Gaelic, Catho-

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[23] Boyce 1982, pp. 18-19.
[24] Gellner 1982, p. 45.
[25] Brewer, Hewston 2004, p. xi.

lic "other," contemporary sectarianism and political violence, and territorial confiscation and displacement.

Once more, the root of this dynamic can be traced to Protestants in Ireland having been defined within and against mainstream Irish culture. Cultural nationalism, focused as it was in the twentieth century "on the fiction of an 'homogenous people' and their alleged common, cultural attributes"[26], made a considerable impact in how the country's Protestant tradition was to be perceived and how the inheritors of that tradition were to perceive themselves. The process of identification not only requires marking differences[27], but sometimes desires to emphasize them in order to achieve positive distinctiveness[28]. When a cultural nationalist criterion for Irish identity is applied, the wider notion of Protestant Irishness is undermined; Protestant consciousness of difference translates into self-consciousness of exclusion.

Discourse on Irish identity tends to inevitably gravitate towards defining the nebulous concept of "Irishness." Susan Schreibman articulates the difficulty and unlikelihood of ever reaching a consensus definition, stating, "Ireland, nearly 100 years after independence, still struggles with categories of Irishness, admitting select definitions of who belongs, and who does not; of what writing represents the people and the nation"[29]. Irishness has sometimes been defined along ethnic parameters, with the Gael typically holding primacy over the country's other stocks. A belief that Gaelic ethnicity has been historically inherent to Irish identity is erroneous. As Tom Garvin explains:

In mediaeval Ireland, a sense of Ireland as a home to one ethnic tradition to the exclusion of others does not seem to have existed; the Gaelic Irish saw themselves as Gaelic in culture and not different fundamentally from the Gaels of western Scotland and the Isle of Man, who shared the same language and culture. The non-[Irish] speaking inhabitants of Ireland (Viking or *Gaill* and English or *Sean-Ghaill*) were commonly labelled na hEireannaigh (the Irish) in contradistinction to the Gaels […] An overall "Irish" identity does not seem to have existed[30].

[26]  O'Mahony, Delanty 2001, p. 188.
[27]  Grossberg 1996, p. 89.
[28]  Cairns 1982, p. 294.
[29]  Schriebman 2012, p. 130.
[30]  Garvin 2006, pp. 243-244.

The conflating of Gaelic ethnicity with authentic Irish identity is a relatively modern innovation of cultural nationalism. The fact that even into the last decade of the previous century Irishness continued to be "implicitly and inextricably bound up with Catholicism and Gaelicism"[31] speaks to the endurance of cultural nationalism's impact on the popular Irish consciousness. Yet the conflation comes at the expense of the factual historical record. As Richard Kearney asserts:

> when cultural nationalism does refer to ethnicity, it is obliged – if it is to be consistent – to invoke several different ethnic legacies. In the case of the Irish cultural nation this requires acknowledgement of the Viking, Norman, Scots, and Anglo-Saxon contributions alongside those of the "ancient Celtic race." Thus, we might say that the exclusivist equation of "Irish Irish" with Gaelic and Catholic by D.P. Moran and other fundamentalists [...] was in fact a betrayal of the full complexity of Irish culture[32].

As "the Irish gene pool has been profoundly mixed" and "there were no discernible natives in the sense of an original people from whom all others and their descendants are less truly Irish"[33], the cultural model in which Gaelic ethnicity is requisite for authentic Irishness is not only biased, but patently false. Yet the concept of Irishness must be understood beyond just ethnic descent. Religious affiliation has not only played a more prominent role in influencing widely held notions of Irish authenticity, but has also very often been the primary determinant of an individual's sense of self and communal belonging.

## 3. *Name and confession*

A tendency to equate a Catholic religious background with authentic Irishness has much to do with the history of victimization that Catholics endured since the time of the Protestant Reformation. A shared disenfranchisement of the island's Gaels and Norman-descended "Old English" by "New

[31] Shovlin 1991, p. 59.
[32] Kearney 1997, p. 6.
[33] English 2006, p. 24.

English" Protestants engendered Catholic solidarity; "under the impact of defeat, Catholics were now seen and saw themselves as a single, coherent community […] Catholics were the dispossessed"[34]. Catholics have historically comprised the majority of the island's inhabitants and continue to do so, though the ratio in their favor is especially strong in the South. As prior secular and religiously plural modes of nationalism failed to galvanize the wider Irish populace, it should then be of little surprise that in the decades leading up to independence the cultural standards of nationalism would rely on, not just Gaelicism, but Catholicism as its foundation. The relatively late date of formation for this concept of Irish nationality helps to explain both the concept's endurance throughout the twentieth century and its ability to incapacitate previously held notions of Protestant "Irishness."

If Penal Laws and land dispossession may be said to have fostered a sense of Catholic unity, the actions that took place during and after the United Irishmen Rebellion of 1798 may be said to have catalyzed a sense of Protestant unity that had been absent prior to the uprising. An earlier Catholic rebellion in 1641 witnessed large-scale massacres of Protestant settlers, with the worst atrocities having taken place in Ulster. The memory of 1641 had a powerful impact in shaping a collective Northern Protestant mentality, but it would not be until after the events of 1798 that a divide between the official church's Anglicanism and so-called Dissenting denominations would be bridged in a more composite sense of Protestant identity throughout the island. An unfortunate irony is that the failure of a movement on behalf of "the common name of Irishman" resulted in modes of identification that relied on a sectarian binary. As Brendan Bradshaw comments, though the United Irishmen designed to unite native and planter, Catholic and Protestant:

> Their attempt was subverted when the Rebellion they initiated in 1798 was transformed into a Catholic Peasant Fury directed against the Protestant planters. The memory of the massacres that resulted seared

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[34] Killeen 2005, p. 105.

itself upon the collective consciousness of the Protestant community in turn and defied all attempts at community bridge-building thereafter[35].

A lasting consequence has been an extraordinarily high correlation "between religion (or religion of origin) and national identity (and political allegiances)"[36]. Unfortunately, the binary of Protestant and Catholic is most often manifested in antagonisms. As the Catholic church "came to represent Irish identity in such a profound way as to render all those who challenged it somehow foreign, less than Irish"[37], Protestants have, more so than their Catholic counterparts, subjected themselves and been subjected to assessments as to the degree to which they may be considered Irish without reservation.

This is not to say that Protestant self-regard of being Irish was ever fully without its self-conscious conflicts or tendencies for delineations and qualifiers. It was the settlers themselves who applied labels such as "mere" and "native" to the people who had been living in Ireland prior to the island's Protestant colonization. Yet it was the Anglo-Irish political elite who first regarded themselves as being the quintessential representation of "the Irish nation". Tensions did exist between disparate notions of English and Irish identity. A predicament for Irish Protestants of English descent being viewed as Englishmen in Ireland and Irishmen in England is a well-established trope. Sir Richard Cox's *Hibernia Anglicana*, published in two volumes in 1689 and 1690, affirms that such perceptions were formed early in the history of Protestant settlement:

If the most ancient Natural Irish-Man be a Protestant, no man takes him for other than an English-Man; if a Cockney be a Papist, he is reckoned in Ireland as much an Irish-Man as if he was born on Slevelogher[38].

By the early eighteenth century, the way the Anglo-Irish saw themselves became also a matter of internal conflict. R.F. Foster says of their dilemma, "[...] there was some doubt as to

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35 Bradshaw 1998, p. 215.
36 O'Leary 2014, p. 151.
37 O'Farrell 1972, p. 1.
38 Boyce 1982, p. 85.

whether they wanted to be *called* 'Irish'; but they increasingly felt that this was what they were, one way or another"[39]. A more uncomfortable truth about the concept of identity presents itself. While identities may, according to how one perceives oneself, be rigid or fluid, narrow or wide-ranging, they are also something that a person sometimes has no voice in choosing, this despite identities often being subject to historicization and transformation[40]. In addition, people are then obliged to shoulder both the positive and negative associations or connotations that accompany whatever identities are put upon them: the contents of "social identity."

What makes the matter of Irish identity especially contentious for Protestants is that there is an impetus to reconcile authentic Irishness, as defined by cultural nationalism, with their "colonial identity" as descendants of either colonizers from an "alien" land or converts to a faith considered "alien" to the culture of the majority that are secure in their sense of "national identity." The terms through which Protestants in Ireland had to engage notions of identity have their origins in the beginning of the nineteenth century with the passing of the Acts of Union in 1800. One of the effects of union was the dissolving of the Parliament of Ireland, with a supposed benefit being an affirmation of the British identity of the Protestant minority. Yet by conceding power to London, the Protestant community became as vulnerable to the will of British governance as the Catholic community.

However, in the North, where sectarian violence was more commonplace than other areas, and where a large portion of the region's Protestants were Presbyterian and of Scottish descent, as the century progressed there developed a more receptive audience to the notion of a political and cultural identity based on the two pillars of Britishness and Protestantism. That may come as no surprise considering the demographics of the North, but what must be underscored is how Northern Protestant attachment to and insistence on British identity grew in tandem with the advancement and orthodoxy of the cultur-

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[39]  Foster 1988, p. 178.
[40]  Hall 1996, p. 4.

al ideals of Irish nationalism. J.W. Foster comments, "As nationalist ideology developed from the early nineteenth century, there was an answering self-exclusion by Northern Protestants from nationalist Irishness, a self-exclusion that was nevertheless largely irrelevant to that ideological development"[41]. It is evident that nationalism's monopolization of cultural politics in late-twentieth century Northern Ireland has an even earlier precedent than is generally recognized. There is a dynamic in which the way others perceive the Protestant community considerably shapes the way that community perceives itself. The agency to define Irishness was not just taken out of the hands of Protestants, but was relatively easily relinquished. In nationalism, "Irishness endures as an absolute abstract noun. When threatened by that absolute, Unionists reach for the security blanket of Britain or Ulster"[42]. Had there been no recourse to Britishness, it is a matter of speculation as to how the North's Protestant community might have responded differently to cultural nationalism's undermining of its Irish identity.

Protestants in the South, predominantly members of the Anglican Church of Ireland, truly only began to feel external pressure about the validity of their Irishness once Irish-Ireland principles imbued the mainstream of Catholic nationalist thought. As Terence Brown points out:

It was indeed the Irish Ireland movement that had given potent propagandist currency to the term Anglo-Irish itself, to the discomfort of many individuals who had hitherto had no doubts of their fully Irish patrimony [...] Accustomed to think of themselves as unambiguously Irish, indeed Irish in one of the best possible ways, they had found themselves swiftly becoming treated in the newspapers, in political speeches, and in polemical pamphlets as strangers in their own land[43].

Negative attitudes about the authenticity of Anglo-Irish Irishness was essentially an objection to the group's social and colonial identity as Protestants. The historical foundation from which Catholicity became a marker of essential Irishness has

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[41] Foster 1991, p. 255.
[42] Longley 1994, p. 177.
[43] Brown 1981, p. 83.

been touched on earlier. In the early years of the Irish Free State, "Catholic moral law was made state law" with religiously derived edicts being issued from the government on matters ranging from divorce, the use of contraceptives, censorship of books and films, blasphemy, education, and the rearing of children from mixed Catholic-Protestant marriages"[44]. If an Anglo-Irishman was insufficiently Irish, it was because he was a Protestant. A prime example is the Protestant-born Erskine Childers, a prominent republican leader in the Anglo-Irish and Civil Wars, and how he is remembered in nationalist lore compared to his Catholic contemporaries:

> Because his father was English and his mother Irish, official Irish nationalism implied that Erskine Childers was not a "true" Irishman. Patrick Pearse, however, had an English father and an Irish mother. And Eamon de Valera was born in New York City of a Spanish father and Irish mother. Yet no one denied their Irish identity. But Pearse and de Valera were Catholics, while Childers was a Protestant. Religion, not paternity, was the criterion by which official nationalism determined whether an individual was Irish. The execution of Erskine Childers was the symbolic execution of the idea that Protestants could be Irish[45].

The example given above does not seem to be a radical departure from the perceptions that prevailed over two centuries earlier in the time of Sir Richard Cox, but a crucial difference of Ireland in the era following independence and partition is Catholic control of a political entity with the power to make official cultural principles rooted in religious identity.

The 1937 constitution, which renamed the Free State, Ireland, or *Éire* in Irish, recognized "the special position of the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church as the guardian of the Faith professed by the great majority of the citizens"[46] (Article 44). As Protestants in the South were unable "to mount any effective political opposition to the dominant political, ideological, and cultural consensus"[47], they were effectively stripped of any agency in defining their own Irishness, left

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[44] Fallon 1995, p. 73.
[45] *Ibid.*
[46] Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937.
[47] Brown 1981, p. 80.

with few options other than assimilation, emigration, or insulation. Catholic dominance in polity and culture was derived from a cultural nationalist directive "to strike back against the Empire, and particularly against the dominant position of the Anglo-Irish in higher education, the arts and intellectual culture"[48]. State-sponsored exclusivist machinations pertaining to "official" Irishness destabilized a notion of Protestant Irish authenticity. This questionability was popularly received in mainstream Irish culture at home and abroad. As O'Brien points out, an assumption that "the Irish' means "Irish Catholics, and nobody else":

> has been very strong in the Irish Catholic culture, not only in Ireland, but throughout the English-speaking world, in the United States, Canada and Australasia. It has been carried, not only through Catholic schools […] but above all in millions of Catholic homes. Even today, the assumption that the Catholics are the only real Irish shapes the attitudes of many Irish-Americans to Northern Ireland[49].

Indeed, it is only in Northern Ireland where the nationalist discourse on identity politics is maintained along traditional sectarian lines between Catholic and Protestant. In the Republic, the Protestant minority has effectively ceased to exist as a vital and distinctive community. Aforementioned reasons like emigration and assimilation played their roles throughout the decades leading up to the current century. Cultural nationalism's dictates may have proved too overwhelming to resist and too influential to defy.

### Conclusion

Nationalism in Ireland is at an ambiguous place in time. With the culture of the Catholic majority having predominated in the Republic throughout the twentieth century, and the Protestant minority shrinking into quiet insignificance, the traditional arguments over Irish identity and authenticity appear

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[48] *Field Day Vol. II* 1991, p. 954.
[49] O'Brien 1995, pp. 9-10.

less agonizing and contentious. "Irishness" assumedly signals Catholic, Gaelic, and green. Recent debate about notions of nationality and identity are less rooted in history and sectarianism, and are more concerned with migration from cultural, ethnic, and religious groups originating outside the British Isles, from places in the European Union and beyond. With the country's comfortable membership in the EU, Ireland's major political parties largely embrace neoliberal ideals and avoid insisting on the rigid conditions and parameters that formerly helped institutionalized the popular conception of "Irishness." However, the island's partitioned status leaves a door open for nationalistic revivals, be they Irish or British. The matter of whether Northern Ireland remains a part of the United Kingdom or integrates into an all-Ireland nation is likely to revivify old spleen about nation, race, and sect. Therefore, a nuanced understanding of the history and formation of nationalism in Ireland remains relevant for the future.

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