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Líam Kennedy, *Unhappy the Land:*

The Most Oppressed People Ever, the Irish?

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accompanied by thoughtful response from author

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Sombre in subject matter, lucid in approach, impressive in range, brilliant in insights, sturdy in documentation, judicious in tone, coolly courageous in its willingness to debunk stereotypes: all these descriptions amply fit Líam Kennedy's manifesto to Irish pluralism, entitled *Unhappy the Land*. It should be required reading not least for all historians of Ireland, but also for all participants in the tangled debates surrounding the history of famines, genocides and large-scale human disasters – as well as for all those who study the genesis and survival of long-term cultural memories.

This recommendation comes from one who is a complete non-specialist in the Irish dimension. But, as a keen advocate of History viewed long, I applaud the relevance and fascination of Kennedy's contribution both in its specifics and its general bearing.

Firstly, the title: *Unhappy the Land* is offered in light irony. Yet, like many ironic usages, it may end up being taken literally, as endorsing an overall stance which is not actually the author's. Kennedy is in fact combating the ahistorical thesis that the Irish are 'the most oppressed people ever'. Of course, he is not denying that there have been many (too many) disasters in the history of Ireland, including one among the most terrible famines ever known. On the other hand, Kennedy does not see all gloom. He worries instead at the cult of victimology that can be found amongst some communities in both Protestant and Catholic Ireland. Hence he took his title from Bertolt Brecht, whose full dictum declared: 'Unhappy the land that is in need of heroes'.¹ A strong thematic hint. It's not exactly Kennedy's case that his fellow citizens need anti-heroes. Nor is he calling for a 'merry Ireland' thesis to rival the trope of 'oppressed Ireland. But he wants much less one-sided and misleading mythology and much more historical realism.

Secondly, then, the contents of *Unhappy the Land* offer much upon which to reflect. Kennedy's study, compiled from an array of separate essays, offers a concatenated overview of Irish history. He does not tackle every crisis or controversial figure. There's nothing on Oliver Cromwell, for example. Yet an overarching argument comes through plainly enough. The opening chapter (pp. 11-41) poses the core question. Are the Irish really the most historically oppressed people ever? That assumption pervades many books and many cultural references, which are repeated within Ireland and by the descendants of the huge Irish diaspora. Yet Kennedy disagrees. What is required, he intimates, is a good dose of comparative history.

Moreover, Kennedy wants to apply his medicine not to a stereotypical model of Ireland perennially divided between two rival ethnic and religious groups. Instead, he sees pluralism. He himself is an

Irishman from Tipperary in the Republic who has lived and worked for most of his life in Northern Ireland's Belfast. His history seeks to incorporate all Catholics, including Catholic Unionists; all Protestants, including Protestant republicans; and all the (generally subdued) agnostics, who may include left-leaning humanists like himself.

The analysis, after the opening salvo, moves smartly through time. Chapter 2 (pp. 42-52) reviews patterns of early settlement, finding much population mobility and intermarriage between successive generations of Gaels, Vikings, Normans, English and Scots. There was also much movement between Protestant and Catholic affiliations. In practice, albeit often not in rhetoric, the lines of descent were fluid. Chapter 3 (pp. 53-77) provides a cultural counterbalance. It examines the emerging sense of two different ethnic-religious blocs, known by the later nineteenth century as Nationalists and Unionists.

Such beliefs, strengthened through much repetition, had great emotional resonance. They offered an apparently clear thread to guide people through a tangled history. In reality, however, the binary model had serious limitations. For a start, it underplayed the long-standing doctrinal and institutional divisions within Irish Protestantism. The Presbyterians, who were particularly strong in Ulster, had long been in rivalry with the Anglican Church of Ireland. Within the Irish Catholic tradition, too, there were quieter divisions, with markedly differing degrees of anti-Protestant militancy. And there was a covert challenge to all Christians from the small number of self-declared non-Christians. In 1911, the Belfast printer William Doherty was one of the few recorded in the census as having 'no religion'. There must have been more than a few others like him. But Doherty was unusual in being so explicit. Irish social classification was dominated by religious categories. And particularly

when battle-lines were being drawn, easily understood binary views tended to prevail.

Kennedy's fourth chapter 'Cry Holocaust' (pp. 81-104) is much the most important in the entire book. He does not see Ireland's Great Famine of 1845-52 as economically inevitable. So it would be misleading to view the unfolding mega-disaster as 'just' an illustration of Malthusian crisis in action. True, there were warning signs, in the early nineteenth century, of an unbalanced economy and seething social tensions in the countryside. One English traveller, John Gamble, considered in 1818 that Ireland constituted 'a sleeping volcano, in which the fire of ages is pent up'. He feared that fevers, famine, emigration, or, especially, warfare might denude the country, 'sufficient to erase half the actual generation from the earth'.² Given that Ireland's aggregate population today has not yet surpassed the level reached before the Famine, Gamble's prophesy had a melancholy point. He did not, however, foresee anything like the reiterated scale of the potato blight and its consequences for a monocrop rural economy. The catastrophe took everyone by surprise.

Certainly, the responses of both the British government and the (many absentee) Irish landowners to the unfolding Famine were massively and appallingly inadequate. Kennedy, however, courteously but firmly rejects any identification of their actions and inactions as a conscious policy of genocide. Such an interpretation does double violence to historical understanding. It wrongly implies that the enormity of Ireland's tragedy can only be recognised by classifying it with inter-communal genocides. And it equally blurs the nature of human atrocities by classifying them with the spiralling outcomes of natural catastrophes.

A related chapter 5 (pp. 105-24) underlines the same point. It considers the extent to which belief in the Irish Famine as a deliberate genocide has been circulated in the later twentieth century. Much of the

pressure for this case has come from some key Catholic Irish-American lobbying associations. They expressed the furious aftershock of flight from disaster into exile. In such circumstances, it can be cathartic to denounce a nation of uncaring English villains. Not all descendants of the Irish diaspora share that viewpoint. But some do, very energetically.

At this point, Kennedy detours to ask whether the admirable Polish lawyer, Raphael Lemkin, defined the Irish Famine as a case of genocide (pp. 108-12). It was a terminology which he developed, to encapsulate the organised purposiveness of eliminationist killings and atrocities. And eventually he lobbied successfully to achieve the 1948 United Nations' Convention in 1948, which recognised genocide as a crime against humanity. There was no sign, however, that Lemkin considered the Irish Famine as falling within his definition. Moreover, it is pertinent to ask again whether it is analytically helpful to clump all catastrophes and crimes together under one label. Kennedy unequivocally argues that it is not. 'There is neither benefit nor dignity in trading upon another nation's wound', he states (p. 124). Instead, teaching and remembering the Irish Famine can be properly done (and seriously debated) in the sharp light of history, not in the blur of simplified and thought-constricting slogans.

Part Three of *Unhappy the Land* then changes tack, turning to the political and cultural conflicts of the 1910s and 1920s. Here Kennedy's argument, whilst lucid, is highly intricate. Chapters 6-9 are consequently more difficult to absorb for those who are not already immersed in the twists and turns of Irish affairs. Nonetheless, their content is bracing. They track the cultural making of 'big' historical memories, alongside the historians' unpicking of the nitty-gritty. Kennedy, who was himself reared in Catholic Republican circles, only gradually became aware of contradictions and silences within the partisan history he had imbibed from childhood (pp. 187-9, 194). To start fresh, as it were, he thus

examines in chapter six (pp. 127-45) the text and context of the *Ulster Covenant* of 1912. And in chapter seven (pp. 146-67) he does the same for the *Proclamation of the Irish Republic* (1916). He finds that partition between a 'Protestant' North and a 'Catholic' South was already heralded in the respective terminology and militancy of these resonant documents, which quickly became iconic for their separate supporters.

That sense of bipolar opposition remained intransigent, despite the fact that there were substantial minorities of Catholics in Ulster and (at least at the time of partition) numerous Protestants in the new Republic of Eire. Indeed, the territorial overlapping of the different cultures helped to sharpen the sense of bitter rivalry for the same land. Terminologies conveyed not-very-hidden messages of belligerence and violence. The result was 'mutual suspicion and insecurity' (p. 256, n. 8). And elsewhere, Kennedy notes the extent of 'ethnic autism' and lack of empathy between Ulster Unionists and Irish Nationalists (p. 239, n. 97).

Actions and inactions by political leaders across Ireland and mainland Britain contributed significantly to the crisis that eventually led to Partition between North and South in 1922. Yet there were underlying structural factors too. As an economic historian, Kennedy offers a cool assessment. During the nineteenth century, it was becoming clear that Ireland contained two distinct and non-complementary economic regions (pp. 135-6). The North, led by the industrial port of Belfast, drew its raw materials of coal, iron, timber and flax from overseas, whilst its products chiefly went to markets in mainland Britain and the wider world. The South, by contrast, had a chiefly agrarian economy, not unlike (say) Denmark. Its urban leadership did not come from the North but from Cork and, especially, Dublin with its historically large service sector, based upon the professions and government. Hence, while there was more

than one possible constitutional outcome of the confrontation, the socio-economic bifurcation between North and South was likely to persist.

Two final chapters conclude by exploring the escalating violence of early twentieth-century Irish politics. Chapter eight 'Texting Terror' (pp. 168-86) records the mutual bitterness stoked by militant partisans. A moderate nationalism, which might potentially have had majority support, was eclipsed. Various land and franchisal reforms had been instituted in the later nineteenth century which responded to many genuine Irish grievances (p. 186). Yet those improvements did not assuage the anger of militants or stem the readiness of individual gunmen to take direct action.

Most personally, Kennedy's chapter nine (pp. 187-217) provides his own take upon partition in 1922. He seeks to deflate the rhetorical claims of the Nationalist South's 'war of independence'. Instead, he depicts a confused and prolonged pan-Ireland civil war, which ended in Partition/Secession. But, on the way, the advent of the gunmen and the atmosphere of crisis triggered a mix of sectarian killings, local feuding, political banditry, labour militancy, and a further civil war in the South in 1922-3. All that, despite the fact that there was no evidence for a widespread desire across Ireland for violent struggle (pp. 201, 202).

History's evidence could cut both ways. During the years of the Anglo-Irish Union 1801-1922, there was much *de facto* movement, intermarriage, and cultural contact between the peoples on either side of the Irish Sea. Numerous Irishmen thought it entirely natural to fight alongside their English, Welsh and Scottish brothers-in-arms against Britain's enemies in the First World War. (Indeed, although Kennedy does not say so, many citizens of the Republic also enlisted in the British Army in the Second World War as well).

Yet vivid perceptions of past oppressions were readily invoked to justify sectarian murders. On the killings of local Protestants in West

Cork, Kennedy quotes a Catholic businesswoman, who exulted at this triumph over the so-called descendants of ‘Elizabethan and Cromwellian settlers’. ‘Blood would flow to cleanse the record – much blood, and no regrets,’ she recalled starkly (p. 206). Unhappy history took a lot of appeasing – and created new sources of bitterness and mutual incomprehension as it did so. Eventually the cross-community fighting within Ireland helped to achieve Partition by producing weariness with the entire Irish imbroglio on the part of the British state and mainland British public opinion (p. 213). The events of 1922 did not mark a heroic end to a war of independence; but a political-cultural stalemate.

So, thirdly and finally, the verdict: what does a historian of long-term Time make of this case? A first conclusion is that Ireland’s complex history confirms the recurrent significance of intertwining history, historical memories, and historical myths in informing communal legacies. The aftershocks of extreme events persist for centuries. Indeed, viewed as part of ‘Big History’, the nineteenth century is but yesterday. William Faulkner was one who understood the phenomenon of persistence. ‘The past is never dead’, he wrote from the American Deep South in 1951, still steeped in American Civil War resentments and rancours. ‘It’s not even past’.³ Little surprise, then, that Irish cultural life today is deeply imbued with glum legacies from past horrors and conflicts, as examined in *Unhappy the Land*. History and current affairs overlap. Moreover, as Lám Kennedy mournfully notes, a people’s past experience of oppression does not automatically make successive generations kinder and more sympathetic when other great disasters afflict other groups or nations today (pp. 100-2).

Another big conclusion is that balanced historical research – and serious historical debates – really do matter. It’s not good for people to live in a fog of ‘post-truth’ mythologies. All humans need to learn from

history, because it is the collective log of all human experiences. It's essential therefore to understand past catastrophes and conflicts – and to debate how best to cope with their legacies, and to decide how best to avoid their recurrence. With reference to pestilential famines, humans still have a long way to go. Global relief agencies are struggling to cope with immediate problems, which may have political or economic origins (or both); and there is great uncertainty about how to reconstitute entire economies that have slipped into structural crisis.⁴ Yet, unless development economists, politicians and relief agencies can collectively learn, there are going to be yet more negative legacies, in terms of untimely deaths, unsought population diasporas, cultural dislocations, bitterness, anger, conflicts, regret, and prolonged aftershocks.

Finally, were the Irish historically the most oppressed people EVER? Alas, there are too many other claimants – not least peoples sold into slavery or dispossessed permanently from their ancestral lands – to let one island and its descendants have a monopoly of grief. History can be complicatedly and too often repellently terrible. Yet it has to be studied soberly, in order to gain wisdom – and to improve global politics and applied economics too.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Kennedy's chosen rendering from Bertolt Brecht's play, *Life of Galileo* (1938), in idem, *Collected Plays* (London, 2015), Vol. 5.

² J. Gamble, *Views of Society and Manners in the North of Ireland, in a Series of Letters Written in the Year 1818* (London, 1819), pp. 422-3.

³ W. Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York, 1951), Act. 1, sc. 3

⁴ For an introduction to definitions, data, and contextual reading, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Famine>.