

Clearing the After-Birth

P. E. POOLE



CONOR CRUISE O'BRIEN presents us with a masterly summary* of the "troubles" in Ireland right up to the present times and it is more than a turgid repetition of the facts: it's very much a personalised account of the events as seen, and to an extent influenced, by O'Brien's family.

But the book is particularly valuable for its potential contribution towards a solution, for it clarifies the crucial difference in the cultural attributes of the peoples on the island. As O'Brien emphasises, the issue is not one of religious, but rather of cultural, contrasts. Two problems present themselves.

First, if the protestants are a distinct cultural entity, then do they not have the right to remain apart from the Irish mainstream? A similar issue faced the Ibos of Nigeria.

Secondly, if they are culturally distinct, what rights, if any, do the protestants have to retain political control over a part of the island?

Says O'Brien: "The root-relation between Protestant and Catholic in Ireland is one between settler and native." But he does, in fact, show how this simplistic analysis can be broken down into more fruitful subdivisions (pp 71-74).

If the protestants have retained the cultural norms of the Scots and English from whom they were extracted, and if they insist on annually celebrating the difference to the beat of drums, then our two problems seem to resolve themselves in this way.

As colonialists, they are entitled to keep apart from the mainstream, and it would have been useful if O'Brien had given more detail of the characteristic contrasts, such as the strong protestant ethic for private property in land compared with the communal land norms of the islanders which the English settlers destroyed. But at the same time, however, they would have very tenuous claims to the land which they dominate: 350 years of history founded on force of arms, against the whole history of the Celts and their ancestors who first settled the land.

The lesson, then, becomes clear. Either the protestants are English, in which case, "Come home, boys,

there's room for you in England." Alternatively, they are Irish, in which case they should just get on with integrating themselves with their brothers and stop bleating for privileges. They would thereby become a religious, not a cultural, minority.

It is the problem of settlers versus indigenous community that confronts us today. Britain is clearing up the aftermath of Amin's arbitrary settlement of Uganda's Asian problem. After the birth of a new nation comes the inevitable after-birth, and Britain, as the imperialist midwife, can fairly be said to have the responsibility for sponging up the mess. My analysis would not, I suspect, be rejected by a Marxist since it leans heavily on an imperialistic foundation. But although it seems to follow from O'Brien's account, he specifically (in the foreword) pooh poohs a Marxist interpretation:

"These interpretations vary rather widely, but a common feature is the effort to trace the evils of Northern Ireland and the Republic, to a source in British imperialism, apprehended as being an active force now as at any time in the past, intensely concerned with keeping its grip on Ireland, and able to control the policies and actions of British governments, whether Tory or Labour. The grip of British imperialism is to be broken by revolution, for which the way will be prepared by various forms of activity (there is disagreement as to what forms) as a result of which the consciousness of the masses will be raised to a level at present attained only by a few people, the authors of the interpretations in question."

Until Stormont was closed, there was little doubt that it could get its way with an acquiescent Westminster. And the "grip" certainly seems to be in the process of being smashed, with the IRA gunmen as the instrument by which the "consciousness of the masses" will be (perversely, one admits) raised to a level necessary to achieve unification.

But the Marxist interpretation would break down simply because we are dealing with cultural, rather than class, conflict. Yet O'Brien himself ironically lends credence to a class conflict analysis when he talks of an "institutionalised caste system" existing in Ulster since 1921.

However, our cultural thesis is not, in fact, damaged, because O'Brien seems to be wrong in talking

* *States of Ireland*, Conor Cruise O'Brien, Hutchinson, £3.25

about castes. Certainly the protestants have the trappings of a superior caste - wealth and political rights, for instance. But a necessary condition of a caste system is the general acceptance by the lower castes of their inferior status and the ascription by them of superior virtues to their "betters". If there is one thing that we can be certain about, it is the refusal of catholics to accept any status of social or religious inferiority.

Furthermore, the protestant "caste" is made up of not just one, but several, classes, from rich landowner to poor unemployed, all of whom share the same values.

O'Brien's book, however, is more than the story of cultural conflict. It also analyses the conflict between means - the democratic, and the anti-democratic action of the gunman and bomber of the private army for whom the notion of "the people" is just a banner for their convenience. In terms of both prose and sentiment, the epilogue is a fine piece of vitriol against the IRA which feels free of the obligation to justify its actions to the living citizens of the island, claiming support from those who died for their cause - a number the IRA is determined to increase. The sooner rational men like O'Brien hold sway over the island, the better for humanity.

Light on the New Left

ROY DOUGLAS

PART of the trouble with being a revolutionary is that there are lots of other revolutionaries about, and they all want to make different kinds of revolutions. Thus, if a revolution does happen, it is most unlikely to be one of your own favourite kind. (Sorry comrade! The first tumbrel is reserved for revolutionary heretics, not for reactionaries!)

The current brand (or rather, brands) of revolutionary politics constitute what is known as the "new left." It is inordinately difficult to discover what the "new left" wants to do, not least because there are several groups who all want to do different things, and frequently hate each other like poison. Where the "new left" is of interest, however, is not in the blueprints for a new society which it offers (for these are often very blurred indeed), but in its criticisms of the existing one.

It is this power of criticism which makes *Counter Course** a fascinating book - at least in patches. It is a mass of articles, written by many different hands, and equipped with a bibliography designed to make even the academic mind indulge in a quiet little boggle. The whole thing is written by students and recent ex-students who are linked more or less closely with various groups of the "new left." It

provides a searching critique of the academic disciplines which they are required to study.

There can be very few people who would fully understand all of it. Your reviewer freely admits that he curls up when he sees calculus equations freely scattered over pages of print. On the other hand, some parts - notably the very funny essay, "Doing Eng. Lit.," are really worth reading. The articles on medical training and chemistry also appealed to him. It is probably wrong, however, to try picking out bits from a work of this kind; it must be seen as a whole. Parts of it, one suspects, are little more than examples of bright undergraduates pretending to be even brighter than they are. Other bits do really throw useful light on the sacred asinities of some academic courses, and university teachers will ignore those bits at their peril.

Running through the whole work is a sort of zany, Alice-in-Wonderland logic - at times palpably insane, at other times illuminating dark and murky places. If one may give some serious advice to these people, it is that they should consider their reader's state of ignorance more than they do, and not use jargon words without explaining them.

Has the book a message? Yes, it has. It is all too easy to look at almost any academic discipline

from the angle of the Top People - to think, for example, of sociology and social psychology as subjects which study how workers behave, rather than subjects which could study how bosses behave. To take a widely different discipline, it is very easy to learn quite a lot of chemistry, and yet never ask oneself why one selects certain chemicals for study and neglects millions of others. Is the selection based on economic use - possible profitability - or what?

So by all means go and read it. Great masses of the book are gobbledegook, but here and there you will find gems. When you get to the bits that float over your head, do what your reviewer did, and skip them. Oh, and by the way, as these people obviously have no clear idea about what should be done to make things better, they are presumably receptive of suggestions. Perhaps some readers of this magazine may be able to help them. . . .

AMIN THE MASOCHIST

UGANDA has imposed a ban on imports of scores of consumer goods. President Amin said he knew Uganda did not have facilities to produce cars but it was time she did and plans were being made to establish a car assembly plant.

**Counter Course: a handbook for course criticism.* Edited by Trevor Pateman. Penguin Educational Specials, 75p.