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The Swastika and the Shamrock: British Fascism and the Irish Question, 1918–1940*

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The last fifteen years have seen an efflorescence of scholarly studies of British fascism between the wars. Once identified exclusively with the figure of Sir Oswald Mosley and dismissed as a wholly derivative imitation of its Italian and German counterparts,¹ fascism in Britain is now understood as a complex and variegated phenomenon whose roots run no less extensively in British political culture than in external influences. As historians have probed more deeply into the ideological underpinnings of the British ultra-right, they have made increasingly apparent the numerous connections between this new form of political mobilization and long-standing tensions within British politics and society.² While scholars continue to acknowledge the many important ways in which British fascism was indebted to its Continental equivalents, they can no longer maintain—as did Robert Benewick in 1969 in his groundbreaking survey of the radical right—that fascist policy was developed “with a callous disregard for principles” or that the distinctively fascist elements of British ultra-right ideology were imported en bloc from overseas.³

It is all the more surprising that existing histories should have overlooked so completely one of the most important “indigenous” components of British fascist ideology - its preoccupation with the Irish question.⁴ In the 1920s and 1930s, anti-Irish sentiment became a principal theme of several leading fascist groups, exceeded in prominence only by anti-Semitism and anti-Bolshevism, to which it was often explicitly linked. For these small, politically marginal societies, the formulation and dissemination of hibernophobic ideas held obvious attractions.

¹Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 1995 Northeast Conference on British Studies and the Irish Cultural Association of Rhode Island. I am grateful to participants at both meetings for their comments and observations.


⁵On fascist groups’ attempts to organize in Northern Ireland during the 1920s and 1930s, see J. Loughlin, “Northern Ireland and British Fascism in the Inter-War Years,” Irish Historical Studies 29 (November 1995): 537–52.

On one level, the existence of a bona fide revolutionary movement in Ireland affirmed fascist images of “the Empire in danger,” a state of affairs for which the decadence of the political establishment, the decline of British social values, and the intrigues of hostile elements at home and abroad might all be held to blame. On another hibernophobic sentiment, of which there was a well-established tradition in British culture and which appealed chiefly, though not exclusively, to the political right, offered a point of contact between the emerging fascist groups and the much larger cohort of disillusioned Conservatives who constituted their most important source of support. Anti-Irish ideology thus served a dual function. From the standpoint of policy, fascists used hibernophobic ideas to reassert the legitimacy of the imperial mission, shaken by the loss of Britain’s oldest colony, and to provide theoretical justification for an eventual reconquest of the island. In their attempts to generate anxiety over the menace posed by an independent Irish state to British national security and the subversive associations alleged to exist between Irish republicans and other “alien” movements, moreover, fascist organizations sought to distinguish themselves from other parties on the right by integrating anti-Irish prejudice into a conspiratorial world view that depicted the empire as the target of an immense global plot to overthrow British rule by revolutionary and subversive methods. This study examines the philosophical and political elements of British fascist discourse on the Irish question and offers some suggestions as to why such ideas should have attained such a significant position in the movement’s weltanschauung.

A key theme in British fascist ideology concerning Ireland was its emphasis on the racial component of Irish character. The idea that the Irish people are racially distinct from the British—that they possess physical, mental and moral characteristics, transmitted by inheritance, that are different and by common consent inferior to those of the inhabitants of the neighboring island—has a long provenance in British history. L. P. Curtis, Jr., traces the rise of this proposition to the mid-nineteenth century, when British anthropologists and ethnologists for the first time attempted to base a taxonomy of human difference upon scientific (or what passed at the time for scientific) principles. He believes that the heyday of theories affirming the racial inferiority of the Irish had passed by the end of the century, by which time most of their originators had died and a more objective approach to Irish history and ethnology had arisen.5 The treatment of the Irish question in fascist publications after 1918, however, shows that these ideas did not disappear, as Curtis and others imply,6 but found renewed


6Hugh MacDougall argues that the heyday of the “national myth” coincided with “England’s” imperial epoch and that the first years of the twentieth century witnessed the eclipse of British racial theories, whose “disintegration was simultaneous with England’s decline as a great power.” This optimistic conclusion, for which no evidence is offered, is rendered more questionable because the
life and vigor in this century on the extreme right wing of British politics. As had been the case in the Victorian era, the propensity to employ doctrines of Irish racial inferiority to explain Anglo-Irish differences between the wars was intimately bound up with the phenomenon of Irish nationalism. To Britons on the far right—and, indeed, to many others comfortably within the political mainstream—Ireland’s demand for national independence was justified by neither practicality nor logic. According to the conventional wisdom of the British governing classes, the Irish occupied the wrong side of the social-Darwinian divide that separated the “adult” from the “childlike” peoples. Lacking the mental stability, political maturity, and intellectual development of other European nations, Ireland was incapable either of recognizing or acting in accordance with her own best interests. Therefore, the periodic manifestations of armed insurrection against British rule that had occurred in the nineteenth century represented nothing more profound in the Irish than that ingrained national tendency toward criminality and violence that made self-government an impossibility, of which such manifestations were themselves the evidence.

The revolutionary campaign that commenced with the Easter Rising of 1916 and culminated with the War of Independence in 1919–21, however, was of a wholly different character to these localized rebellions, far exceeding in scale and sophistication any of the insurgencies of the previous century. While the rhetorical response of the British government was to portray the revolutionaries first as traitors and then as psychopaths, the rapidly escalating economic, military, and political costs of the war compelled it to come to terms with men it had only weeks before branded as mindless murderers and to grant the essentials of national self-determination to twenty six of the thirty-two Irish counties at the end of 1921.

For Britons on the right of the political spectrum, the concession of Irish independence was a profound blow to national pride and to national identity. Only three years after the British empire emerged victorious over its enemies in the Great War, the notion that it could be defeated in its own hinterland by a few thousand Irish guerrillas proved difficult for many Britons to accept—as

empire did not reach its farthest geographical extent until 1933. In a critique of Curtis’s work, Sheridan Gilley has suggested that British attitudes toward the Irish in the nineteenth century were free of racialism, an argument that hinges largely upon his definition of what is connotated by the term “race.” See H. A. MacDougall, Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons (Hanover, N.H., 1982); S. Gilley, “English Attitudes to the Irish in England, 1780–1900,” in Immigrants and Minorities in British Society, ed. C. Holmes (London, 1978), pp. 81–110.

7They were not confined exclusively to the right. In 1913 Sidney Webb published an essay that apprehended “this country gradually falling to the Irish and the Jews” as a consequence of the British middle classes’ failure to reproduce themselves in sufficient numbers. Quoted in B. Semmel, Imperialism and Social Reform: English Social-Imperial Thought 1895–1914 (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 51.
difficult as many Americans found the United States’s similar experience in Vietnam half a century later.\textsuperscript{8} Nowhere was this sense of national humiliation more keenly felt than in the new fascist and ultra-right organizations that began to spring up in the early 1920s. In the words of a leading member of the largest of them, the British Fascists, the concession of Irish independence was “the greatest injury which we English ever sustained,” and there could be “no safety for the Empire until the Union of the Three Kingdoms” was restored.\textsuperscript{9} To these groups, the surrender of the British government to the “Sinn Fein Murder Gang” was convincing evidence of the corruption and decay of the existing political system. But in the social-Darwinian world of British fascism, in which military prowess was seen as an outward and visible sign of racial vitality, the triumph of an inferior race by whatever means over a superior one raised particular theoretical problems. A great deal of racial hibernophobia was consequently geared toward explaining, or rationalizing, this apparent paradox.

The rejection by a majority of the Irish people of British identity and governance was bitterly resented not only by fascist groups, but by a wide cross section of British patriots and conservatives. According to the \textit{English Review}, the treaty settlement had covered England “with the deepest shame which in her long history she has ever known,” while in a similar expression of chagrin the prominent historian W. Alison Phillips described the loss of Ireland as “the greatest humiliation which has ever fallen upon a proud and ancient people and Government.”\textsuperscript{10} In the immediate aftermath of the War of Independence, many Tories associated with the Die-hard wing of the party pointed to hereditary factors as an explanation for the manifest failure of the British \textit{mission civilisatrice} to take firm root in Ireland. These Tories argued that the Irish people’s persistent refusal over the centuries to acknowledge their dependence upon benign British tutelage suggested that irrationality was an enduring aspect of Irish character. From this perspective, Ireland’s separation from the union was the consequence not of any failure of British policy, but of her congenital unfitness

\textsuperscript{8}In an evocation of the \textit{dolchstoss} legend that was gaining currency in Germany at much the same time, a category of consolatory literature appeared in the aftermath of the War of Independence portraying the Crown forces as having virtually eliminated the IRA—whose members were depicted invariably as savage and inhuman—only to be deprived of the fruits of victory by venal, cowardly politicians. Typical of this fictional genre is S. C. Mason’s novel \textit{"Bloody Murder": A Story of Ireland} (London, 1937), which relates the exploits against superhuman odds of a British officer in the “Auxies,” the paramilitary division of the Royal Irish Constabulary. Fifty years later, strikingly similar motifs featured in the popular “Rambo” and “Braddock” movies, in reference to the United States’s experience in Southeast Asia.


to be a part of it in the first place. Thus, Captain Hugh Pollard, a British intelligence officer at Dublin Castle during the War of Independence, contended that "the Irish problem is a problem of the Irish race, and is neither a by-product of politics nor of environment, but is rooted in the racial characteristics of the people themselves." According to Pollard, the specific forms of behavior by which these characteristics manifested themselves were a "pre-disposition to violent political crime" that appeared "to be transmitted hereditarily" and a "pandemic psychosis...typical of the thought processes of children, some types of criminals, savages, and the lower classes of certain races." These inherited attributes accounted for the success in Ireland of "movements which would be abortive failures among the nordic races of Europe" and for the "credulity and fanaticism [that] are still dominant factors in spite of a century of well-meant British endeavour." A similar line of argument was proposed by Digby de Burgh, the former owner of an estate in County Limerick, who commented in the aftermath of the revolution on the "negroid" appearance of the "small dark people" who had been his neighbors in the West of Ireland. "They are an inferior breed of men, and are more given to crime and superstition than pure white men." This negroid influence de Burgh traced back to its source in the Iberian stock, of which the native Irish purportedly were an offshoot. Plain Speech, the journal edited by Lord Alfred Douglas, taking the argument a stage further, contended that the Catholic Irish were positively "inferior in race to the negroes," declaring that there could be "no peace, and we say it calmly, until every weapon of modern warfare is used. to burn, slay and exterminate the vermin...who have almost devoured the South of Ireland." The far-right journal The Patriot also took up the theme of the Irish as an evolutionary throwback, asserting that their average IQ was far lower than that of other Europeans and, implying that they had thrown the Darwinian mechanism into reverse and were devolving from man to ape, characterized the direction of Irish society since independence as "backing towards the tree-tops." Arguably, the most extreme expression of

12Ibid., pp. 245, 248.
13Ibid., p. 247.
14De Burgh’s observation also extended, libellously, to Welshmen—“Mr Lloyd George is a specimen of the breed”—and followed immediately upon a declaration that the difference between Britons and Irish was not a racial one (D. H. de Burgh, *Western Thugs, or, Ireland and the English Speaking World* [London, 1925], p. 9).
15*Plain Speech*, November 12, December 3, 1921.
16*The Patriot*, October 5, 1922, July 3, 1924.
die-hard racialism was found in the works of Charles Bretherton, Irish correspondent for the *Morning Post* during the War of Independence, whose book, *The Real Ireland*, an amazing compendium of hibernophobic slurs, was published in 1925. The native or Iberian Irish, he declared, were a "matriarchal race" whose characteristics, both physical and mental, were "carried from one generation to the next by the women, and not, as among the Aryan races, by the men." This circumstance was responsible for the ease with which the more masculine Aryan Briton had subjugated the Irish, as well as the fact that whenever "the Hibernian women married the Aryan men, the children in nearly every case took after their mothers in disposition." Thus, altruistic British attempts to bridge the "racial divide" by instructing the Irish in standards of Western civilization and hopes that an independent Ireland might achieve them on her own were equally futile, contradicted as they were by immutable racial laws:

A handy prescription for understanding the Irish can readily be given. You have only to understand that the Hibernian proper has the slave mentality, and will act accordingly. He is a mixture of childishness and ferocity. He is basely superstitious, callous to suffering, credulous, excitable, thriftless, untruthful, dirty, pettily dishonest, destructive, cunning, imitative, tortuous, devoid of moral courage, and intensely vain. There are not many slave virtues, but such as there are—cheerfulness in adversity, frugality, a certain capacity for being led, and for becoming inspired, for the time being, with the spirit of the leader—are his also....Your Iberian does not "civilize" any more easily for himself than for those who are trying to civilize him. On the other hand, he makes an admirable savage, picturesque, amusing, cheerful, and amiable to strangers whom he does not suspect of missionary instincts.

There was little that was original in these anti-Irish broadsides, which merely recycled the familiar racial stereotypes of the mid-Victorian period. For the ultra-right societies emerging at this time, however, the revival of these doctrines in public discourse offered an ideal point of connection to the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that were their primary stock-in-trade. The earliest such group to perceive this link was the Britons, founded by Henry Hamilton Beamish in 1918 to work towards the eradication of alien influence throughout the empire. In the June 1920 number of their rabidly anti-Semitic journal *Jewry Über Alles*, the Britons alleged the existence of a connection between "the Jew and Sinn Fein," whose joint objective was the establishment of a Soviet Republic in Ireland no less like that in Russia. Successive issues amplified the theme of a "Yiddo-Sinn Fein alliance," describing the War of Independence as "the decisive battle-ground" in the "Jewish world-plot" to achieve global domination. In this

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18 Ibid., pp. 42, 180. Bretherton seemed untroubled by the glaring contradictions in this passage, which assigned as invariable characteristics to the Irish "thriftlessness," "frugality," absence of "moral courage," and "cheerfulness in adversity."

19 Renamed *The Hidden Hand* the following September and *British Guardian* in July 1924.
interpretation, Sinn Féin emerged firstly as “a sub-division of the German military organisation” and then, “coincident with Bolshevism in Russia, became merely the Irish section of Lenin’s Jew Government, with Michael Collins and his murder gang—i.e., the Irish Republican army—acting directly under Lenin’s orders.” The ramifications of the rebellion, moreover, were being spread far beyond Ireland’s borders by a powerful co-conspirator, the Irish Catholic Church, whose headquarters, “the Jesuit [sic] college of Maynooth,” was one of four world centers of revolution and whose “graduates are everywhere hand in glove with the Jew.”

The failure of a Soviet state to materialize in Ireland, despite optimistic reports by far-right observers of a reign of terror perpetrated by marauding bands of communists speaking “a strange language with a German dialect,” led some members of the Britons to refine their account of the relationship prevailing between the Irish and the Jews. To Joseph Banister, former editor of Jewry Uber Alles, the War of Independence was no longer to be considered simply the Western front of Bolshevism, but instead was indicative of an association of much greater antiquity between two peoples historically alien in race and religion to the British nation. Imaginatively tracing the genesis of this alliance to a meeting of “Jews, Irish and Irish-American politicians...in a third-class hotel in Broadway, New York” in the late nineteenth century, Banister proceeded to describe its modern complexior in a book, Our Judaeo-Irish Labour Party, published in 1923. As its title suggests, Banister regarded the British Labour Party as a political vehicle for promoting the “anti-British prejudices and interests of the Yiddish and Irish riff raff” and ultimately for reducing Britain to the condition of “the once mighty Russian Empire.” Evidence of the subversive intentions of the Irish remaining in Britain was provided by the establishment of an independent Ireland that had not been succeeded by the removal of “this huge swarm of alien barnacles” back to their homeland.

A wholesale exodus of the ethnic Irish was nonetheless a necessary condition to the well-being and security of the British state, Banister maintained, inasmuch as Irishness, like Jewishness, was a racial rather than an environmental trait.


22. The Patriot February 23, April 6, 1922. The language in question was probably Gaelic.

23. Free Press, July 1939. Additional particulars of this supposed alliance were provided by Banister in The John Bulletin, June 19, 1929.

“Of the two million Irish aborigines [sic] who afflict this country a considerable proportion have been born here, but are just about as English in sentiment and loyalty as the Jews of English birth.” Considerations of political allegiance aside, Britain gained nothing from the presence of “Irish Romanists” in her midst. The Irish were fated to remain “hewers of wood and drawers of water owing to their lack of the necessary intelligence, knowledge, enterprise and character to be anything better,” and their habits of life were offensive to Britons as “their drunkenness, rowdiness, laziness, criminality and filthiness speedily turn any street they get possession of into a slum.” Failing the providential intervention of “a plague or famine...to come and wipe them out of existence,” Banister called for the severance of all ties between the two countries. The Hibernian “human rubbish” that “infested” British cities would then become “aliens in law, as they already are and always have been in race, religion, and loyalty” and might be expelled en masse from the country.

The racial vitriol of a Banister, drawing much of its inspiration from long-standing religious and class prejudices, was characteristic of one discrete strand of fascist hibernophobia in the interwar period. To others on the far right, however, its presumption of an alliance of equals between Jews and Irish seemed implausible on its face. In the view of Banister’s friend Colonel Arthur Lane, a member of the Britons and founder in 1930 of another fascist fringe group, the Militant Christian Patriots, the Irish were too mentally deficient to be considered credibly alongside the Jews as Machiavellian co-conspirators; any relationship existing between the two, therefore, was one of patronage rather than partnership. Furthermore, the logic of Banister’s argument was unacceptable to many fascists, because it implied not the destruction of the Irish state and the reimposition of British colonial rule, which they held to be imperative, but merely the removal of the ethnic Irish from the British mainland. It therefore fell to those most concerned about the Irish question to fabricate a new ideology that would serve not only to demonstrate the incompatibility and inferiority of the Irish on racial grounds, but also to provide justification for reconquering the island. In the 1930s this was preeminently the work of two closely associated organizations, the Nordics and the Imperial Fascist League (IFL).

The modi operandi of the Nordics, a small and shadowy group of activists dedicated to preserving the supremacy of the Nordic race, and the IFL, with which it amalgamated in February 1934, were so similar that they may conveniently be examined together. Both sought to construct a distinctive racial typology upon the existing body of ethnological research and thereby to develop a theory of race, tailored to British requirements, analogous to the productions emanating from Nazi Germany at the same time. Unlike the latter, however, the

25 Ibid., p. 19.
26 Ibid., p. 44.
Nordics and IFL derived relatively little from the nineteenth-century romantic and volkisch tradition represented by de Gobineau and H. S. Chamberlain, instead basing their ideas upon a number of Anglo-American studies appearing in the early part of the twentieth century.\(^29\) The reliability and objectivity of their source material varied widely, ranging from the relatively carefully researched publications of W. Z. Ripley and A. H. Keane at one end of the spectrum to the intemperate racial diatribes of Madison Grant and Theodore Lothrop Stoddard at the other.\(^30\) What these works shared was a schema, derived in part from the data of such dubious nineteenth-century investigators as John Bedloe,\(^31\) that divided the population of Western Europe into three distinct and separate races, the Nordic, the Alpine, and the Mediterranean. Upon this categorization, the Nordics and IFL erected a theory dedicated to the internally inconsistent proposition that the Irish were unassimilable into the mainstream of British life, but that, nevertheless, the continuing menace posed by their presence on both islands could be lifted only by a British reoccupation of the Irish Free State.

The connection between this tripartite racial division and the physical and mental differences distinguishing Britons from Irish was laid out, albeit in an unsystematic manner, in a series of pamphlets and articles published by the two organizations in the mid-1930s. Their common denominator was an apotheosis of the Nordic race that, according to the IFL, comprised the majority of the British population. Nordics, or Aryans, standing at the pinnacle of human development, were characterized physically by their fair complexion, tallness, and well-proportioned build, and mentally by their steadiness, stability, courage, cu-

\(^27\)Ibid., pp. 4–5.

\(^28\) A. H. Lane, _The Alien Menace_ (4th ed.; London, 1933), p. 128. Bretherton already had made the same suggestion (_The Real Ireland_, p. 71). Lord Alfred Douglas quoted the American right-winger, Rear-Admiral W. S. Sims, in support of the proposition that Jews, too, were repelled by the Catholic Irish and were associating with them only for the purpose of bringing about England’s destruction; “Under no other circumstances would they stoop to an alliance with the Emerald islanders” (_Plain English_, July 9, 1921).

\(^29\) Thurlow, _Fascism in Britain_, p. 86. A partial exception was the Nazi race theorist Hans Günther, who had a formative influence on the ideas of the IFL leader, Arnold Leese. Günther’s views on the criminal and conspiratorial predisposition of the Irish race were drawn from Anglo-Saxon sources, notably the works of Theodore Lothrop Stoddard and Madison Grant. See H. F. K. Günther, _Racial Elements of European History_ (London, 1927).

\(^30\) W. Z. Ripley, _The Races of Europe: A Sociological Study_ (New York, 1899); A. H. Keane, _The World’s Peoples: A Popular Account of their Bodily and Mental Characters, Beliefs, Traditions, Political and Social Institutions_ (London, 1908); M. Grant, _The Passing of the Great Race, or, the Racial Basis of European History_ (New York, 1916); T. L. Stoddard, _Racial Realities in Europe_ (London, 1924).

\(^31\) For a discussion of the work of Bedloe and his contemporaries, see Curtis, _Anglo-Saxons and Celts_, pp. 71–72, 74, 136–37.
riosity, high intelligence, and "instinctive respect for fair dealing." Mediterra-
neans, in contrast, were physically short and dark-skinned; their leading person-
ality traits were impulsiveness, excitability, and superficiality. Ireland was popu-
lated predominantly by Mediterraneans, who "are frequently misleadingly called "Celts...." These constituted the aboriginal population of both islands, but had been conquered and displaced westward over the centuries by the more dynamic and aggressive Nordics. In an elaboration of this hypothesis provided
by the IFL's leader, Arnold Leese, the historic overlordship exercised by Nordic
Britain over Mediterranean Ireland constituted a social-Darwinian proof of the
superiority of the Aryan "Fighting Races" over their "non-fighting" neighbors
to the west, one that had not been contradicted by Irish success in the War of
Independence. To the contrary, "a mischievous or irresponsible predilection for
violence, such as some Irish seem to possess," served only to confirm their
status as one of the non-fighting races that had established "no claim to Nation-
ality; they are happy under just Aryan rule, which should be absolute over them."

The IFL's explicitly racialist ideology arguably did little more than attach a
veneer of pseudo-scientific authority to the crude anti-Irish stereotypes propa-
gated elsewhere on the British ultra-right. Yet, to ignore the differences between
these various doctrines, trivial though they may appear at first sight, would be
a mistake inasmuch as minor distinctions in racial theory frequently translated

\[32\text{Imperial Fascist League, Race and Politics: A Counter-blast to the Masonic Teaching of Universal}
Brotherhood (London, n.d. [c. 1934]), p. 2.\]

\[33\text{This was a background they supposedly shared with the Jews: "the Jew is devoid of any Nordic}
component, and is chiefly Mediterranean and Alpine" ("Cobbett" [A. M. Ludovici], Jews, and the}
Jews in England [London, 1938], p. 22). In a similar interpretation derived from ludicrously naive
philological evidence, R. N. Bradley argued that the Mediterranean race to which the Irish belonged
possessed "Hamitic," i.e., negroid roots: "The steppe-folk who as the Gaels introduced Indo-European
speech to these islands were ultimately of African origin and brought an African language." As
befitted true Mediterraneans, the latter-day Irish were lazy, "never distinguished for truth, mor-
rality or altruism," at once individualistic and possessed of a strong herd-instinct "such as is found
among savages and animals," witty but not truly humorous (lacking the ability to laugh at them-
selves), "feminine" in tone, and deficient in intellect (R. N. Bradley, Racial Origins of English
Character [London, 1926], pp. 6, 55, 104-05).\]

\[34\text{Race and Politics, p. 5; The Nordics, "Some Questions and Answers. What is the Race Question?"}
The Fascist, March 1933. The British mainland was also home to a small population of Alpines,
"of a colour generally intermediate between the Aryan and the mediterranean; stolid, unimaginative,
without initiative, sticking to the soil and amenable to discipline" (Race and Politics, p. 4). Alpines,
however, featured only marginally in fascist racial discourse.\]

9-10. Professor George Mudge of the Britons was another who complained that the combative
qualities of the Irish had been greatly exaggerated during the Great War. "Many of the Irish regi-
ments were largely recruited from English counties, but it was Irish deeds which were portrayed
to us, not English, as they were in the main" (G. P. Mudge, "Pride of Race," British Guardian,
May 1924).\]
into marked divergences in policy. This can be seen most clearly in the range of approaches taken to the problem of reversing the verdict of the War of Independence. While most British fascist organizations shared a common objective in their Irish policy—the destruction of the Irish state and the recovery of Britannia irre denta—the means they advocated were closely related to their individual perceptions of how far the Irish people’s innate incapacity, or malignity, extended.

One example of this connection may be seen in the case of the largest radical-right organization of the 1920s, the British Fascists (BF). Launched in 1923 by Rotha Lintorn-Orman, the alcoholic and affluent granddaughter of a field marshal, the society was dedicated to the protection of traditional British patriotic and imperial values, which its founder believed to be under siege from an unholy combination of trade unionism, Bolshevism, atheism, and Irish republicanism. Until the period immediately preceding its demise in 1935, when it adopted a virulent strain of anti-Semitism, the BF’s anti-Irish propaganda found expression primarily through conspiracy theories of varying levels of implausibility rather than in racialist rhetoric, which generally took a milder form than in other extreme-right societies. Thus, an article by a woman loyalist advocating the reconquest of Ireland in February 1933 was couched in the language of imperialist paternalism, depicting the Irish as irresponsible rather than incorrigible:

We loyal Irish love our country with a fervour that seems ridiculous to the English mind. We love her for her mistakes and shortcomings, for her inconsistancies [sic] and her soft, energy-sapping beauty, but loving her unselfishly, we know she is not fit to govern herself. Only by keeping her place within the British Empire can she fulfill her destiny.36

Explanations of Irish incapacity in terms of the peculiarly “soft” or enervating qualities of the physical environment constituted a common motif in this style of fascist discourse. Another was the personification of Ireland as feminine or effeminate and Britain, conversely, as a source of racial virility upon which the Irish depended for the masculine qualities of industry, leadership, and self-discipline. Such images were flexible enough to be applied to a variety of political objectives, as the leader of the BF’s Ulster Women’s Units and co-editor of the British Fascist, Dorothy Grace Harnett, demonstrated in the course of an article equating the preservation of unionist hegemony in Northern Ireland with the survival of the British Empire.

[T]he beautiful North is hard, and her soil needs hard men to till it. The soft, enervating South may produce men of charm and poetic temperament, but the men of Ulster are strong workers, strong fighters, and strong loyalists....When good Queen Bess planted Ulster, she sent over men, men of strong British stock who

36“Shall We Lose Ulster? No Surrender,” British Fascist 23 (February 1933).
mingled their blood with the softer Celt, and bred the Empire's greatest asset, the Ulster Irishman. The Ulster man is an ardent Imperialist, stand by him now, English brothers, and you need never fear a stab in the back from an enemy at your gate.  

The direction in which this comparatively restrained form of racialism pointed was that the Irish people themselves would eventually come to recognize their reliance upon British direction, once their ill-advised flirtation with self-government had run its course. To assist them toward this conclusion, the BF took the unique step of extending its organization to both parts of Ireland, forming branches in Dublin, Belfast, and Kilkeel, County Down. Composed largely of Ulster Unionists and British expatriates, the BF's Irish Command was dedicated to the task of eradicating "the boundary line between loyal British subjects, North and South," thereby ensuring that "future generations of loyal Irishmen will not lose any of their inherited respect for our great heritage, the Empire."

The results of this strategy, however, never came close to meeting the BF's aspirations. Like its British parent, the Irish Command was a highly fissiparous body, whose short history was marked by frequent resignations, expulsions, and demotions. In the six counties, the BF became little more than an adjunct of the Ulster Unionist party, assisting its candidates during elections and breaking up the meetings of its opponents. The achievements of the southern wing of the organization were even more meager: during its nine years of existence, the most significant action accomplished by the Dublin branch occurred in November 1926, when a member "recovered a small Union Jack single handed from an attacker who had snatched it from the person of a loyal citizen." By the time of the BF's dissolution in 1935, attempts to relaunch it as a successor to the Ulster Volunteer Force having failed, the sole tangible result of its Irish policy had been to assist in propagating a series of fanciful hibernophobic scare stories.

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38 At the bottom of his heart the most fervid Republican knows he was better off under British rule. If the British troops were to march into Dublin tomorrow, they would be welcomed with open arms and prayers of thanksgiving would be offered up in every church and chapel, that the rule of the place-seeker and terrorist was over" ("Shall We Lose Ulster? No Surrender").

39 *British Lion*, September 25, 1926. According to an Irish police report, the promoters of the BF in Dublin were "chiefly ex-officers of the British Army..." National Archives, Dublin. Garda Síochána (Detective Branch) report, April 12, 1933, Dept. of Justice file S152/33, C.S. 209/33. Although few details concerning membership of the Irish Command are available, the predominance of British-born adherents can be inferred from the names of its recruits, which include such Anglo-Saxon appellations as Attwood, Burland, Crawley, Higginbotham, Hinchcliff, Leadbeater, and Robson.

40Ibid., February 19, 1927. One of the meetings of the Kilkeel branch in November 1933 sparked "a mini-pogrom against the Catholic population of the town which lasted over a week" (Loughlin, "Northern Ireland and British Fascism," p. 542).

41*British Lion*, December 4, 1926.

42In summer 1928 the BF journal warned that large numbers of Irishmen were being recruited into the Soviet Red Army, supplementing this intelligence the following year with a report that "Down
To the more racially militant organizations, on the other hand, any suggestion that Britain should attempt to persuade Ireland of the benefits of union was out of the question, inasmuch as such a policy implied that the Irish themselves had a right to decide to whom they owed allegiance. Writing after the ascension of Éamon de Valera to power—an event that provoked the fascist societies to new heights of rhetorical incontinence—Colonel Lane of the Militant Christian Patriots declared that the entire “Southern Irish” population residing in Britain ought simply to be instructed to return to Ireland and redeem itself by working for the restoration of British rule. “Had these people not deserted their native land and left it to a gang of adventurers and traitors supported by foreign money and led by a descendant of a Spanish Jew, the present state of anarchy would never have been brought about.” An even more uncompromising stance was taken by the IFL, whose “scientific” racialism excluded the possibility of the Irish people ever standing on terms of equality with the British, no matter how accommodating their political attitudes might later become. Quoting Lord Raglan to the effect that “there is not a single element in modern Irish culture, from Papal supremacy to potatoes, which has not been introduced by English agency,” Leese dismissed the idea of “an Irish Fascism” as unworthy of consideration. Recognition of race as “the true basis of politics” was rather one of the chief factors calling for the forcible elimination of the Irish state, a demand the IFL made in its publications with monotonous regularity between 1937 and 1939.

To show solidarity with the Ulster Unionists in Northern Ireland who shared a common racial heritage with the mainland British, to destroy a state that “was chiefly arranged by Jews using Irishmen as pawns in the game,” and to secure Britain’s economic and military interests against the “insane hate” harbored by Irishmen waiting “to stab us in the back,” there was “nothing for it but to South, the Germans are busily erecting workmen’s cottages on solid concrete bases, and forming a small Vaterland among their ‘Irish Brothers.’” Other articles maintained that the majority of Irish immigrants to Britain were spies for the IRA, that “disloyal Southerners” were “being drafted north for the purpose of eventually voting Ulster into the Free State,” and that the “pentecostal crew” of “English, Russian, French, [and] German” agitators supposedly flooding into Ireland were agents of a larger world conspiracy. The extent of the BF’s familiarity with Irish affairs may be inferred from its apparent belief that a “captured” letter revealing the subversive intentions of republican agents had been signed by an IRA leader named “Mise le Meas Mór” (the phrase is Gaelic for “Yours very sincerely”). See the following British Lion articles: “The Peril in Ulster,” no. 24, December 1927; “Moscow Plot in Ireland,” no. 27, n.d. (c. Summer 1928); “Irish Republicans in London,” no. 28, n.d.; “The Achilles Heel; The Truth about Ireland,” March 1929. Also see “Ireland is the Achilles Heel of England,” British Fascist 20 (Spring 1932).

43 For the same reason none of the British fascist societies manifested any enthusiasm for their closest Irish equivalent, General Eoin O’Duffy’s quasi-fascist Blueshirt movement. As Dorothy Harnett insisted, no common ground could exist between any British patriotic society and an organization that would “not fly the Union Jack, nor sing the [British] National Anthem.”

44 A. H. Lane, “If De Valera Declares a Republic,” The Fascist, February 1934.

45 Ibid., October, 1933.
re-occupy, and if necessary to re-conquer, the country."

Inasmuch as the island was and would remain divided between two incompatible peoples, England could “have no interest in being friendly with Ireland.” Thus, she should “END THE IRISH FREE STATE: AND DO IT NOW AND QUICKLY.”

Less than a month after its final call for the invasion of Ireland, the IFL’s ultimate nightmare of a war between two “Teutonic” peoples, the British and the Germans, had become a reality. Within a year, all the fascist organizations had been suppressed under Defence Regulation 18B, and their leading members were placed under detention for the duration of the conflict. Ironically, the proscription of these societies did little to improve public perceptions of the Irish, as the security considerations that led to the societies’ dissolution now gave rise to widespread resentment of Ireland’s neutrality and her consequent refusal to turn her seaports over to the use of the Royal Navy. Before long, the IFL’s clamor for British occupation of Ireland had given way to scarcely less strident demands for the same objective, this time voiced by members of His Majesty’s Government. In the event the Cabinet decided against violating Irish neutrality, although British bitterness over Ireland’s failure to rally to the defense of the empire provided another fertile source of anti-Irish sentiment in the years to come. For the British fascist organizations, however, the combination of wartime repression and the appearance of a new bogey, Commonwealth immigration, caused the Irish question to decline in importance until the outbreak of hostilities in Northern Ireland restored it to something resembling its former prominence in the 1980s and 1990s.

In purely political terms, the impact of racial hibernophobia in the interwar period was limited. Notwithstanding the links between the development of the doctrine and fascist anti-Semitism, at no time did anti-Irish prejudice threaten to attain the same significance among the British ultra-right as did hostility toward the Jews. An important part of the explanation is to be found in the

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47 Ibid., May 1939.


49 A recent example of the British ultra-right’s renewed focus on Ireland is the riot perpetrated in Dublin by a group of English supporters at an Ireland-England football match in February 1995. Hurling missiles, bottles, and far-right tracts, chanting anti-Irish and anti-Catholic slogans, and giving the fascist salute, the rioters injured more than fifty people in and around the stadium. An official inquiry found that the disturbance had been planned and orchestrated by two London based neo-Nazi groups, the British National Party and Combat 18. As one participant explained, “The general feeling was that the government have let us down as far as Northern Ireland goes. [The riot] was us saying bollocks to the government and bollocks to the IRA” (*Sunday Times*, February 19, 1995).
unwillingness of the largest radical-right organization in the 1930s, Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF), to display much interest in the question. With the notable exception of William Joyce, who as a fifteen-year-old boy had attempted to join the Black and Tans, the leaders of the BUF remained for the most part indifferent to Ireland.\(^5^0\) Although an autonomous branch of the organization, the "Ulster Fascists," was launched in Belfast in April 1934, it seems to have had little to do with the movement on the mainland, and its short-lived attempt to transcend divisions between unionists and nationalists within a framework of imperial unity fell flat. By September the Ulster Fascists had split disastrously; after less than a year the organization became virtually extinct. Nor did the main body of the BUF accord the Irish question a significantly higher priority. Lord Rothermere, during his brief flirtation with fascism, claimed in April 1934 that he and Mosley were "entirely at one...in thinking that Ulster must have from now on unyielding support"\(^5^1\) from the BUF, but all the momentum appears to have come from Rothermere's side, and with the termination of the relationship between the two men later in the summer Mosley seems to have found little reason to concern himself with either part of Ireland. Thus, whereas the BUF maintained a generally hostile stance toward Irish nationalism,\(^5^2\) calling for the imposition of economic sanctions "until Southern Ireland [sic] behaves herself as a loyal member of the Empire,"\(^5^3\) the party stood aloof, at least as far as Ireland was concerned, from the racial rhetoric of its competitors.

This attitude was probably the fruit of political calculation rather than moral scruples. In the BUF's own anti-Semitic campaign, which it launched in 1934 mainly for opportunistic reasons, the organization claimed to oppose the Jews not as a race but as a nation that set its own interests above those of the Empire. Specious though this distinction undoubtedly was, it largely precluded the adoption of anti-Irish sentiments based explicitly upon theories of racial difference. Another factor tending in the same direction was Mosley's much-publicized record of opposition, during his former career as an Independent and Labour

\(^{50}\) In 1934 Joyce "protested strongly against the action of the British Government in surrendering Southern Ireland [sic] to a gang of gunmen" and, in an obituary of Edward Carson, claimed the UVF as "a precursor of Fascism in Europe" (Fascist Week, June 29, 1934); Fascist Quarterly 2 (January 1936): 28.

\(^{51}\) Rothermere to Sir Charles Blackmore, April 23, 1934, quoted in Loughlin, "Northern Ireland and British Fascism," p. 550.

\(^{52}\) See, e.g., "Fascist Drive in Ulster," Fascist Week, March 23, 1934. Occasionally, the BUF deviated from this line, as when a member whose name suggests Irish ancestry taxed the Stormont government for persecuting northern Catholics, thereby leaving "Britain's flank in the west...unprotected by a discontented Ireland" (John O'Brien, "More Ulster Nonsense," Action, February 4, 1939).

\(^{53}\) Ibid., May 4, 1934.
parliamentarian, to the forcible repression of Irish nationalism, a stance he could not have repudiated without attracting charges of inconsistency. Additionally, the BUF may have been inhibited from pursuing an aggressively anti-Irish agenda for fear of antagonizing potential Catholic supporters, to whom the organization deliberately appealed. While other radical-right societies like the Britons had sought to avoid this difficulty by expressing their conviction that “the overwhelming majority of English Roman Catholics are absolutely loyal,” that they felt the necessity to make such distinctions indicated their awareness that hibernophobic rhetoric could be counterproductive without careful handling. As a rule, therefore, the BUF preferred to ignore the Irish question and in so doing deprived racial hibernophobia of its most promising constituency.

The influence of fascist ideology upon popular attitudes toward the Irish is more difficult to assess. There is some evidence to suggest that fascist racial doctrines achieved a wider currency among the British public, especially in those areas most affected by Irish immigration. In early 1934, for example, the Liverpool Review ran a series of articles asserting the racial incompatibility of Nordic Britons and Mediterranean Irish and demanding the exclusion of the latter from the British mainland. Racial attitudes also became something close to the conventional wisdom in Scotland, where the primary appeal of local fascist or-

54“Archbishop Mannix.” Not all members of the radical right were prepared to acquit Catholicism of its “anti-British” associations. Whereas Lord Alfred Douglas, himself a Catholic convert, maintained that Ireland and crime went hand in hand “because its people are Irish, not because they are Catholics,” Hugh Stutfield attributed the Irishman’s “enormous cruelty and his inordinate lust of blood, English blood in particular,” to the influence of the Church, calculating with mathematical exactitude that “Roman Catholics are, on a rough average, about four times as wicked as other people" (Plain English, December 11, 1920; Stutfield, “The Ethics of Assassination,” National Review 474 [August 1922], emphasis in original).

55An exception was Alexander Raven Thomson’s argument that the British “Left” had forced “specifically Anglo-Saxon democratic methods of parliamentary government” upon the Irish, to whom these institutions were “entirely foreign and thoroughly distasteful.” The union of Ireland North and South, he predicted, would come about under fascism, a system he apparently considered less alien to “the native Celtic culture” (“India and Ireland—Why Democracy Distorts Both,” Action, July 3, 1937).

56The more extreme anti-Irish agenda of other fascist organizations may have damaged Mosley by association. Chris Husbands notes that the BUF had little success in winning converts among the Irish laboring population of the East End (C. T. Husbands, Racial Exclusionism and the City [London, 1983], pp. 51–56).

57To some extreme Conservatives a strong anti-Irish policy stood out as one of fascism’s most positive attributes. A lengthy doggerel in the Saturday Review, listing the benefits that fascist government would bring to Britain, noted that under such a regime “Hibernians and Hindus/Will find they cannot flout us as they choose” (“Featuring Fascism,” Saturday Review, May 5, 1934).

ganizations, according to the future M.P. Willie Gallacher, was “not anti-Jewish but anti-Irish.”  In 1923, a report submitted to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland ominously entitled The Menace of the Irish Race to our Scottish Nationality distinguished between Ulster unionists, who “are of the same race as ourselves,” and native Irish, who “cannot be assimilated and absorbed into the Scottish race.” Scottish writers in the 1920s and 1930s played unwearily upon the same theme. A journalist who later became Lord Beaverbrook’s political aide, George Malcolm Thomson, in a work that was part alarmist polemic and part dystopian novel, predicted the outbreak of a racial war between beleaguered Scots natives and hordes of Irish immigrants which would eventually lead to the extinction of the Scottish people and the reduction of Scotland to a province of “Greater Ireland.” Similarly, a writer for the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP), one wing of which lay far to the right of the political spectrum, raised the specter of Scotland’s subjection to a “Green Terror,” warning that there would be “race-conflict of the most bitter kind” unless Irish immigration were halted. Although anti-Irish racism in Scotland was often connected to Orangeism or the more bigoted variants of militant Protestantism, “pure” hibernophobia was no less prevalent within respectable Scottish society. Thus, a discussion of the “national evil” of Irish immigration by Andrew Dewar Gibb, Regius Professor of Law at the University of Glasgow and a future chairman of the SNP, was equally notable for its venom and for its insistence that what Britons found truly objectionable were the Irish themselves, not their religion.

In Scotland the rule is, once an Irishman always an Irishman. Thus in the heart of a dwindling though virile and intelligent race there is growing up another people, immeasurably inferior in every way...squatting and breeding in such numbers as to threaten in another hundred years to gain actual predominance in the country.....[T]o suggest...that the aesthetic outlook in Scotland brightens with every batch of Irishmen that is born or brought into it is surely the quintessence of absurdity. Even if it be granted that the Roman church has a humanizing influence a hundredfold greater than that of the Calvinist Kirk, the conclusion cannot be

59 Hence the observation of one Captain Coates at a Glasgow BF meeting that “Glasgow with its low Irish undesirables...could well do with a dose of sound Scottish Fascism” (British Lion 29 [March 1929]). See also T. Gallagher, “Protestant Extremism in Urban Scotland 1930–1939: Its Growth and Contraction,” Scottish Historical Review 64 (1985): 150.


61 G. M. Thomson, Caledonia, or The Future of the Scots (London, 1927). Thomson referred to the “Irish invasion” of Scotland as “the gravest race problem confronting any nation in Europe to-day” (p. 16).


drawn that Scotland will benefit or ever has benefited by the Irish inhabitants any more surely than that she would benefit by the presence of a like number of Hottentots converted to Roman Catholicism. The finest manure makes no impression on concrete.  

Paradoxically, such effusions as these may provide another part of the explanation for the failure of anti-Irish rhetoric to bring fascist organizations the political dividends for which they hoped.

Although the ultra right north and south of the Tweed took the lead in codifying and disseminating pejorative images of the Irish in the interwar period, even their most extreme formulations differed from “mainstream” expressions of intolerance only in degree. The ubiquity of what might be described as low-level hibernophobia from the British right, tending to evoke contempt for its target rather than genuine anxiety, deprived the more extreme fascist variety of much of its impact and, consequently, fascist ideology of an element of its political distinctiveness. Manifestations of this casual prejudice may be found at all levels of British society. From the observation of the Cabinet minister responsible for relations with Ireland, Leopold Amery, that its people were distinguished by “a fault in the blood, some element of ape-like savagery which has survived every successive flood of settlers” to the plebeian disdain evinced by Robert Roberts’ slum neighbors in Salford for the still more degraded “low Mick from the bog” in their midst, the existence of a consensus concerning the inherent inferiority of the Irish is clearly discernible. In contrast to similar attitudes toward British Jews, however, this assumption rarely masked an element of envy on the part of those who harbored it. Lacking visibility in the professions, the media, and the business world, substantially over-represented in undesirable low-wage occupations, and concentrated in poor urban areas, Irish immigrants in interwar Britain were not normally viewed as serious social or economic competition even by individuals professing pronounced hibernophobic opinions. Similarly, the obvious poverty, ideological conservatism, and military insignificance of the new Irish state, which could hardly have conformed less

64 A. Dewar Gibb, Scotland In Eclipse (London, 1930), pp. 56–57, 61. With disarming frankness, Gibb observed that anti-Catholicism might nonetheless be employed as a valuable weapon: “The Irish question admits of Machiavellian handling. It has two main aspects, the social-political and the religious. The [Established] Church may press its case under the cover of concern for the welfare of the State. The statesman may affect [sic] a hostility to Roman Catholicism, as to which in effect he cares not a row of pins, in order to get rid of a congeries of social pests. Both have happened. It is a case in which one combatant may be forgiven for borrowing the weapons of the other, since on every score the need is great” (Ibid., p. 60).


closely to the overheated fascist-generated image of a hotbed of international revolution, meant that few Britons outside the ranks of the politically simple-minded could seriously believe the notion that it constituted any real threat to British security.

In noting the limited political impact of these extremist doctrines we ought not wholly overlook their remote influence, which is probably of greater significance than the number of conversions to out-and-out fascism for which they were responsible. Sedulously fanning the flames of anti-Irish hostility, maintaining an uninterrupted supply of Irish conspiracy theories to be taken up and reproduced in the mainstream media by fascist fellow-travellers like the Duke of Northumberland, chairman of the Morning Post, and Lady Houston, owner of the Saturday Review, and preaching constantly the existence of an unbridgeable, indeed Manichaean, division between the British and Irish peoples, fascist organizations simultaneously exploited a more widely shared vein of anti-Irish prejudice in British public opinion and contributed in some measure to its persistence. If the hibernophobic component of fascist doctrine never gained for its originators the political support they sought, the remarkable vitality in British public discourse long after its heyday of themes configuring the Irish as “a people alien in race, temperament and religion” may have provided an element of consolation to them.