

Critical Inquiries Into Irish Studies

Volume 2
Issue 1 *Borderlands: Focus on
Northern Irish Writers*

Article 4

February 2020

Téacsúil Fionnachtain

Alan Delozier

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/ciis>



Part of the [Celtic Studies Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Delozier, Alan. "Téacsúil Fionnachtain," *Critical Inquiries Into Irish Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2020, <https://scholarship.shu.edu/ciis/vol2/iss1/4>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70531/2576-6414.1007>



Téacsúil Fionnachtain

Alan Delozier, Seton Hall University

"Textual Discovery" is presented to pique interest in unique works in Irish language, literature, and history that have been largely forgotten over time. Articles will cover different subject areas, authors, themes, and eras related to the depth and consequence of the Gaeilge experience in its varied forms. The inspiration comes from selections found within the affiliated Irish Rare

Book and Special Collections Library at Seton Hall University, New Jersey, but on a deeper level this piece serves to honor forgotten works that can be found listed in bibliographical compilations and on the shelves of libraries across the world.

Ulster and the British Empire 1939, Help or Hindrance?

Connected to the central theme featured in this edition of *Critical Inquiries In Irish Studies*, Northern Ireland, this essay focuses on a 1939 book entitled, *Ulster and the British Empire 1939, Help or Hindrance?* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan; London: Robert Hale, Ltd., 1939) by Henry Harrison, which is part of the Irish-centered Rare Book and Special Collections Library at Seton Hall University, New Jersey. This particular work was produced in order to examine the state of Northern Ireland and its place within the Empire, along with its impact on the Irish Free State as World War II was progressing throughout Europe. This 231-page volume offers specific details on the state of the geo-political conflict, economic factors, and other aspects of contention and discussion points that Harrison wanted to highlight.

Captain Henry Harrison, OBE, MC (1867-1954), expressed his perspective on the Ulster province and mission to help promote positive relations between the whole of Ireland and the United Kingdom through political action and published works. Harrison also found a public platform as a Member of the House of Commons as a representative of the Irish Parliamentary Party, along with service in the British Army during the Great War as a member of the Royal Irish Regiment. The formative years for Harrison were in large measure shaped through the example of his father, Henry Senior, who was an ardent Protestant Nationalist and mother, Letitia (ne Tennet), the daughter of Robert James Tennet, a former Liberal MP representing Belfast from 1847-52. The younger Henry was later educated at Balliol College, Oxford University and was a secretary within the Home Rule Group organized on campus ("Henry Harrison").

The political inspiration for Harrison came through the example of Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-91), famed Irish Nationalist who was leader of the Home Rule League and quite vocal member of parliament in his day. Harrison caught the attention of his role model after he was involved in direct conflict with authorities during the Gweedore eviction protests of 1889 in County Donegal. The publicity that Harrison received came to the attention of Parnell who urged

his new protégé to run for his old seat in the parliament as a representative for Mid-Tipperary, which resulted in his election victory and legislative service from 1890-92 (“Henry Harrison”).

During the course of his term, Harrison willingly compromised his political future by standing by Parnell during the O’Shea affair (Katharine and husband Captain William O’Shea were involved in a contentious divorce, with charges of adultery against Parnell, which caused a scandal and great uproar throughout Catholic Ireland), leading to division among party members and the citizenry of Ireland. During this situation, Harrison became a bodyguard and aide-de-camp for Parnell. As a result of having this close inside relationship with Parnell, Harrison later positively focused writings on, and about, his mentor. However, this allegiance would lead to a loss when he stood for re-election in 1892 as a “Parnellite” from West Limerick instead of his existing base in Tipperary. He also lost three years later when he moved to North Sligo, in effect ending his formal political career at least from an electoral standpoint (“Henry Harrison”).

Having first-hand knowledge of the nature of the relationship between Parnell and O’Shea, aside from tabloid-like reports, Harrison wrote a pair of books defending Parnell in the 1930s, *Parnell Vindicated: The Lifting of the Veil* (1931) and *Parnell, Joseph Chamberlain and Mr Garvin*, which was written in response to J. L. Garvin's biography of Joseph Chamberlain (1938), that, according to F.S.L. Lyons, made a crucial impact on Irish historiography, leading to a more favorable view of Parnell among later-day critics, and “did more than anyone else to uncover what seems to have been the true facts” about the Parnell-O’Shea liaison” (qtd.in “Henry Harrison”).

After a decade or more of virtual anonymity, Harrison re-emerged as a military hero, having been mustered into the Royal Irish Regiment of the British Army and serving on the Western Front in WWI. He earned the rank of Captain after distinguishing himself as a patrol officer, and in 1919 was awarded a Military Cross and made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (“Henry Harrison”). A treatise featuring Northern Ireland produced by Harrison in 1937 was in large measure inspired by his time in the Great War. Various accounts on English politics were interspersed with his own perspective on personal interaction with British soldier-citizens, which imparted a humanity and depth to his commentaries:

“The author spent two of the happiest years of his life as a soldier on the Western Front fighting amongst Irish comrades for the defense of Western civilization. And there he witnessed the inspiring spectacle of the spontaneous fraternization of Irishmen of the most diverse political and religious origins, drawn together by their conscious kinship which transcended all minor differences of politics and bred kindly and courteous tolerance for all other faiths . . . The consciousness of the brotherhood of blood and temper, the discovery of mutual feelings of neighbourly kindness, of shared sympathies and pride in our native Ireland, of common points of view, brought the men closely and quickly together where there was none whose interest in was to keep them apart. There were many that thought and said that here was the end of the Irish question – cured by the common understanding that special circumstance had fostered. Alas! It was not to be . . . There exist in Ireland all the elements that are needed to breed

a good understanding between the North and South – if only they are allowed operate” (Harrison, *Ireland*, 9-10).

Harrison made an encore appearance on the domestic political scene when he became Secretary of the Irish Dominion League, which advocated for Irish independence within the British commonwealth system, while also being a severe critic of the separation of the primarily Catholic-centered counties of the Irish Republic from those of Northern Ireland. As a journalist, Harrison became a dedicated Irish correspondent for the English periodical, *The Economist*, from 1922-27 and he was concurrently the proprietor and editor-in-chief of the *Irish Truth* from 1924-27. Harrison’s many volumes connected to Irish politics highlighted in this essay include, *Parnell Vindicated: the lifting of the Veil* (London: Constable), 1931; *The Strange Case of the Irish Land Purchase Annuities* (Dublin, M. H. Gill), 1932; and *The Neutrality of Ireland: Why it was Inevitable* (London, Robert Hale Ltd.), 1942 among others, prior to his death in 1954.

Ulster and the British Empire 1939, Help or Hindrance?

Harrison covers a great deal of historical and political ground in this volume, based on his previous knowledge and on contemporary accounts for the late 1930s. The contents of the book are laid out in terms of historical context and various aspects of state welfare issues and concerns. Among the major topics include: Anglo-Irish Relations *TABU* – “Towards a Better Understanding,” the Economic War and how it impacted on both sides and also some on the Constitution, but also looks at the commentary on the North-South relationship and the attitudes from British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlin and Irish Taoiseach Eamon De Valera among other figures of prominence involved with the situation (11).

Regarding the partition of Ireland, Harrison gave a historical overview covering the pre-Civil War period from 1920 to 1939. He explores “Partition as a Method of Statesmanship,” Principles, Minority Protection, “Hidden Purposes”, “An Absurdity in Principle”, “Partition: A Term of Evil Omen”, “The Protection of Minorities and the Obligations of Good Faith.”, “Britain’s Sovereignty and Full Responsibility.”, “The Banquo’s Ghost of Murdered Irish Unity Forbids Final Appeasement,” “Is There a Sinister Explanation?”, “Irish Partition is the Achilles’ Heel of Britain and the Commonwealth,” and others.

Harrison also examined other global examples including Poland, Palestine, and Czechoslovakia. He noted that Britain has forgotten its obligations to the minority populations of Northern Ireland and they had a responsibility for the welfare of those within the orbit of their Commonwealth. Harrison specifically noted that Northern Ireland as an “Integral Part of the United Kingdom,” as well as The Northern Ireland “Finance Accounts” illustrate its subordination to the United Kingdom Government and British Parliament. Other topics covered include, “Ireland’s Complaint,” Oppression in Northern Ireland Permitted by Britain,” “Three Principal Evils,” “Gerrymandering,” “Proportional Representation Abolished,” “Misrepresentative System Substituted,” “Remedies Ready to Britain’s Hand,” “British Governmental Silence and Inaction,” “What Apologia Will British Ministers Offer?”

This volume is rounded off with a look at the all-important economic position of Northern Ireland and its impact. He noted that it was a “Sensational Failure” and castigated the silence on the constitutional items, “Parliament Self-Muzzled,” “Under What Banner? Which Ideology?,” “Ulster Must Not Be Coerced,” “Let Ulster Freely Choose – Will It Be Help or Hindrance?”

Both of Harrison’s volumes—*Ulster and the British Empire 1939, Help or Hindrance?* And *Ireland and the British Empire, 1937, Conflict or Collaboration?*—provided a platform for his detailed commentaries on Northern Ireland. In 1937, the Irish Constitution (Bunreacht na hÉireann) was ratified in order to establish how government should properly function and the rights of every Irish citizen along with the “wider human rights framework” and treaties with all other nations centered around equal treatment and rights (“Irish Constitution”). With this as a backdrop, Harrison touched in his 1939 volume on various topics related to the welfare of the Irish experience, including perspective on the Anglo-Irish Trade War, Land Purchase Annuities, and later Irish neutrality during World War II, and pre-Republic status along with other aspects of public and national welfare (Harrison, *Ulster* pp. 1-4).

Harrison noted in the Preface of *Ulster and the British Empire 1939, Help or Hindrance?* that he was inspired to write further on this topic due to the following circumstances:

It is the author’s belief that there is identity of essential interest for Ireland and Britain in any combination of circumstances pointing to the possibility of another Great War. He is convinced that the genius of the two peoples, diverse in inspiration, in ultimate aim, in immediate method, yet seeks expression on parallel lines of political and cultural growth which should commit them to close alliance for concerted action in external affairs. He believes that the only impediment to such concerted action lies in the exacerbation of spirit and in the weakening of economic power which is caused by the Anglo-Irish conflict. Were it happily adjusted all else might follow. But if it be not happily adjusted . . . It is unwise to prophesy about Ireland. But it can safely be said that Ireland, in that event, will be a source of embarrassment and not of strength if war comes. No responsible Irish leader will try to bind and hold Ireland to a line which she feels to be inconsistent with her national right, her pride and her passion. None will try, for none could do it. (7)

Harrison noted in sum that the Anglo-Irish Treaty was the motivating document behind his study. He elaborated in all sincerity that: “It may be that candour of expression can in places cause a certain discomfort to sensitive readers, but perhaps they will pardon the roughness for the sake of sincerity that is behind it. For the author is sincerely anxious that the Anglo-Irish conflict shall be brought to an end in order that both countries may concentrate their attention upon the vastly greater interests which are in issue in the world arena” (7). Within both Éire and the British Empire during the late 1930s, Harrison provided a background on Northern Ireland especially in light of its place within the context of the Civil War of 1921 and the continued relationship between those regions. He called it an: “uneasy maladjustment” and partition

remained the most central point of debate. Harrison went on to state his theories on how an uneasy peace was ongoing during his own time (8).

“To-day . . . Great Britain and the Irish Free State are sundered in spirit and in policy by a conflict which has been . . . been confined, fortunately, to the economic sphere so far as active operations have resulted. But although the state of affairs thus arising is certainly preferable to that ended by the Treaty, it is still of such gravity in its consequences and in its potentialities as to furnish legitimate cause for infinite disquietude. It is not in the immediate results that the threat of stark catastrophe is to be seen. The sabotage of the old-established and very valuable Anglo-Irish trade is, of course, deplorable. And, as Ireland has been found to be capable of enduring it no less than Britain, a situation of mutually harmful antagonism has been stabilized as a normal condition of co-existence.” (13-14)

From this viewpoint, Harrison wrote that England was a land of, “storm clouds gathering over the troubled horizon,” that had its attention diverted from Ireland by more pressing concerns elsewhere in Europe and around the globe (296). He went on to note that conditions were somewhat manageable at least from the British standpoint at this time, but beyond armed conflict there were other sources of rivalry and competition for needed resources among those residing in the Free State.

Authority and influence were one-sided and this naturally caused resentment. In this respect, Harrison stated: “There is peace with the Irish Free State—peace but a state of conflict. There has been an economic war—there is still a modified economic war—waged by Britain on the Irish Free State in an effort to bend it to her will. That economic warfare, though it has failed, has caused hardship enough to breed embitterment” (296). Further, England had basic responsibilities in regard to trade and commerce that were not met also due to the impact of growing worldwide Depression. Harrison viewed these economic aspects as a *force majeure* power play on the part of England that influenced news, editorial pages, and all publicity efforts to diminish the Irish Free State in the eyes of the world (296). With World War II on the horizon, Ireland would remain neutral, while British priorities and focus were on self-preservation.

The Irish remained keen, but cautiously optimistic when it came to the prospect of full, or even partial equality, and the Northern Irish situation would remain mostly in the shadows as 1939 gave way to worldwide violence during the following decade. Harrison wrote in a wistful tone that even as threats from afar were in mind, the time and need to push for fairer recognition was at hand along with searching for harmony, reconciliation, and a united Ireland:

“Is it not time to cry “Halt” to such a conflict? Is it not time to get back to the atmosphere of the Anglo-Irish peace negotiations of 1921? If history teaches any lesson at all, it reaches that the Irish national spirit is inextinguishable and that Ireland, having sustained the rigours of armed warfare, is unlikely to succumb to the irritation pin-pricks of economic strife. Everything is to be gained and nothing is to be lost by peace between Britain and Ireland . . . It is urgent that all

root causes of rancor and suspicion should be extirpated. It would not be well that ancient embers should be left for a chance breath of war-time passion or of enemy design to kindle into flames . . . An Anglo-Irish peace leading to mutual trust and collaboration, if achieved in advance, will be worth more than one victory on the battle-field after hostilities have begun. It is a condition of ultimate success.” (297-98)

Harrison opined that little had changed from 1936-39 in regard to the second-class status view of the Free State within Ulster in particular. However, the need to change was coming to a head since relations were becoming more intense in some quarters and had to be fully made as soon as possible:

“True, there has been in Anglo-Irish affairs a fruitful and beneficial change along the main lines of a true appeasement. But the change stopped short of completion. It remains a process in suspended operation—a *coup manqué*. The injunction “make peace with thine adversary quickly” is not obeyed by composing the whole quarrel with him while preserving five-seventeenths in aching activity; seventeenths of the adversary and keeping five-seventeenths of him in a most obnoxious constraint. Appeasement is of necessity integral. It cannot be fractional.” (8)

Harrison argued that the Anglo-Irish situation needed to be taken to a new level of understanding and full cooperation: “This book, therefore, is devoted to demonstrating how undesirable Partition has shown itself to be in every aspect, to recording the facts that prove its failure, and to pointing out certain most significant ambiguities in its treatment by British statesmanship” (8). He went on to add that: “Britain could without difficulty supply a solvent for present Irish differences by merely removing inhibitions and by setting free the play of natural forces. On the other hand, Britain is probably able, if she wishes it, to keep Ireland divided. It might have been imagined that all her fundamental interests would lead her to prefer a united Ireland as the broad and enduring base of an Anglo-Irish reconciliation and collaboration in the world sphere” (10). This was a common theme throughout Harrison’s writings: the central theme of equity. Interestingly, Harrison dedicated *Ulster and the British Empire 1939, Help or Hindrance?* to Franklin Delano Roosevelt: . . . *to whom the Moral Leadership of the English-Speaking World has unquestionably passed* This Book is Most Respectfully Dedicated by the Author *In Unshaken Faith and Unextinguished Hope* But E RERUM NECESSITATE Without Permission sought for or Accorded” (ii). Harrison was perhaps foreseeing or hoping American help might be forthcoming to resolve these issues.

Public reactions to this book were included in an editorial from the *Manchester Guardian* of 8 August 1939. “Letters to the Editor, I.R.A. Bombings and Partition—The Ulster Question,” submitted by Ellen M. Power of Chorley, Lancashire, England, reads in part:

There is no natural or economic reason for dividing up the ancient province of Ulster in the way it has been done. Captain Henry Harrison has said truly in his

recent book, 'Ulster and the British Empire,' The sole test in carving up the territory was to give the maximum area and population that could be effectively dominated by the privileged minority that was being presented with Governmental institutions of its own . . . What makes the position particularly intolerable is that the Nationalists in the partitioned area have never got anything like fair play. (16)

While this may have been typical of the rank and file, a review by a critic with the initials of M.T. was fairly critical:

Recent events, which would perhaps have rendered impossible the writing of this book, have not made the task of reviewing it any the easier . . . its author's aim was to show the advantages to Great Britain of peace with Ireland, so here he sets out to demonstrate that Partition is a cause of loss to the British Treasury and that its continuance will involve the Empire in manifold dangers . . . From the Irish point of view, unfortunately, it seems to be hardly worth while to harp very much on this obvious and easily-ascertained fact. (520-21)

Further, this critic remarked on some glaring omissions in Harrison's economic-based arguments:

Captain Harrison makes, we think, no reference at all to the great financial crisis of 1929; yet the merest glance at this figures would suggest that this played a bigger part in altering the balance of payments than even the notorious loving-kindness towards Northern Ireland of that rather forbidding duenna, the British Treasury. A further suggestion to which he does not advert is the disquieting one that, financially and economically speaking, Northern Ireland is in the circumstances more of a liability than an asset, and that reunion with their unwilling brethren would not conduce at the moment to the financial contentment of Éire's already hard-pressed taxpayers. This tendency to prove too much – from premises too easily taken for granted – is a fundamental weakness in Captain Harrison's book as a whole. (521-22)

The political parties of the Free State, most notably Fianna Fail, are put into the spotlight as well as the critic sees Harrison's views as too partisan:

In the very first chapter the reader – who, we can assure Captain Harrison, will not be prepared for the shock in all cases in Ireland, not to speak of England – discovers that the basis of the whole argument is to be the official Fianna Fail version of the dispute about the land annuities and the constitutional questions which were rightly or wrongly made incidental to the economic war. Now whether or not the maxim, *finis coronat opus*, be applicable to this case, it remains true that very many quite intelligent and patriotic Irishmen (again not to

speak of Englishmen) cannot bring their intelligences to accept the Fianna Fáil doctrine, even as a matter of history. It becomes therefore a rather unsound basis on which to build up an unanswerable case against Partition. As a result of its adoption, a great many perfectly good arguments adduced throughout the book are at least partially deprived of their effect. When the reader finds Captain Harrison, in his search for the causes of the undoubted partisanship of British Conservative governments towards Northern Ireland, hinting at more “secret agreements,” his distrust, if he be not already a sworn follower of the Taoiseach, will be still further set on edge. (522)

Finally, M.T. opines that Harrison’s “plea for a better turn in British policy and for a change of heart in Northern Ireland . . . is amazingly vague” and the critic resoundingly concludes, “Captain Harrison, having failed to state the Partition problem in terms either complete or relevant, naturally fails also to find its solution. His book may perhaps do one service, if it brings home to those engaged in controversy about Partition the strange fact that the question has never yet received a fair, logical, or exhaustive examination from either the British or the Irish Side (522).

Harrison understood that the period in which he wrote was fraught with uncertainty and passion on both sides and circumstances would not be conducive to a quick or easy resolution on either side. Under the concluding subhead “Let Ulster Freely Choose – “Will it Be Help or Hindrance?” Harrison summarized his work in a wistful manner with the following pronouncement:

But, above all, there should be an authoritative appeal to the people of Ulster to approach the subject in all sobriety of judgment and with a full consideration of all the greater matters that are at stake in a momentous crisis in world affairs. Ulster in the days that are to come may prove to be the Achilles’ heel of the British Commonwealth and Empire, or Ulster, linked again with the parent Ireland, may prove itself a subtle yet powerful bond to hold the English-speaking world together in confident array against the greatest peril in its history. Let the choice be made clear and let the decision be deliberately and gravely taken. Let Ulster say whether it will be help or hindrance to the British Commonwealth of Free Nations in this crisis of its destiny. (156)

Works Cited List

“Henry Harrison (Irish Politician).” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 28 November 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Harrison_\(Irish_politician\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Harrison_(Irish_politician)). Accessed 1/17/2020.

Harrison, Henry. *Ireland and the British Empire, 1937. Conflict or Collaboration?* Robert Hale Ltd., 1937.

Harrison, Henry. *Ulster and the British Empire 1939, Help or Hindrance?* Dublin: Browne and Nolan; London: Robert Hale, Ltd., 1939.

“The Irish Constitution – Citizens Information.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 3 January 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitution_of_Ireland. Accessed 17 January 2020.

M.T. *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 28, No. 111, September 1939, 520-522.

Power, Ellen M. “Letters to the Editor, I.R.A. Bombings and Partition – The Ulster Question,” *The Guardian and The Observer*, 8 August 1939, p. 16.