

## Schoolroom nationalism

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### Faith and Fatherland: the Irish Christian Brothers and the development of Irish Nationalism 1838-1921

Barry Coldrey  
Gill & Macmillan, £27.50

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The Christian Brothers merit the gratitude of Irish Catholics to a greater degree than any other religious order, whether of native or foreign origin. Founded in Waterford in 1802 to provide basic education for the boys of poor families, they set up schools over the succeeding decades in cities and towns throughout Ireland. The intensive teacher-training which they underwent was reflected in the impressive standards of literacy and numeracy attained by their pupils. When they went on to offer secondary teaching as well, and especially after the introduction of a state examination system in 1879, the same excellence was achieved at the higher level. Each advance in popular education brought better employment opportunities for boys of underprivileged background. As a result, by the end of the nineteenth century the Brothers had triggered a social mobility in Irish society unexpected, and not altogether wanted, by Church or State — to quote the most significant observation in Barry Coldrey's richly perceptive book.

The insurrection from which an independent Ireland eventually emerged was largely the work of the new and educated lower middle class created by the Christian Brothers' schooling. It can therefore be asked how far the education dispensed by the Brothers had not only a social and economic objective but a deeper political purpose. The wide-ranging researches presented here by Brother Coldrey (an Australian member of the order) confirm the evidence of thousands of Irishmen that they

learned at their school desks to see their country's past as a confrontation between Irish nobility of character and English perfidy. The message reached them through the "readers" (anthologies of short essays, stories and poems used to teach reading and writing skills), the histories and even the geography textbooks compiled by the Brothers. The same theme underlay the balladry of school concerts and the occasional excitement of an historical pageant. A less-than-objective Irish nationalism was certainly bred in the Brothers' classrooms.

But Brother Coldrey will not allow us to argue *post hoc, propter hoc*. He points out that romantic hyperbole was the stock-in-trade of all nationalists, of the constitutional Home Ruler as much as the would-be insurgent Fenian. He might have added that it was an age of rampant nationalism everywhere. British schoolchildren were encouraged to take pride in the empire on which the sun never set ("because the Lord wouldn't trust ye in the dark!") muttered an Irish MP at Westminster). The Brothers' magazine *Our Boys* was, if anything, less triumphalist than the *British Boys' Own Paper*, while the "readers" and other texts did no more than counterbalance the readily available chauvinism of Kingsley, Kipling and G. A. Henty.

In contrast to the national pride bordering on what we now call racism, which marked public sentiment in Ireland and England (not to mention Germany, France and elsewhere), the superiors general and other senior office-holders of the Christian Brothers appear from this book to have been very restrained in their attitude even at the time of the 1916 Rising and during the subsequent "Troubles" in which so many of their ex-pupils were deeply involved. It was otherwise with some of the younger Brothers, yet their commitment was less noticed than that of numerous priests. Perhaps the most that can be said is that the Brothers failed to perceive the potential of nationalist rhetoric for creating a revolu-

tionary cadre in the Irish circumstances of the day.

The author errs in one particular. When he refers to the Irish Catholic colleges for the better-off, he says they were modelled on the English public school. It is a common misconception. In fact they were structured and run in accordance with the norms of the Jesuits, Vincentians, Dominicans and Holy Ghost Fathers by whom they had been established. It is true that the nationalist content of their curricula was negligible; but, contrary to the jibes of their critics at the time, they never sought to inculcate unionist or imperial values. For them, a classical education was its own end and not the vehicle for political ideology: an admirable stance in schools which were under no pressure to fend off competition.

The Brothers found themselves forced into a different mould. For, unlike the colleges, they had to combat both the proselytism of some of the privately-run schools for the poor and Victorian convictions regarding the unity of the United Kingdom put under the aegis of the state education board: factors which would have left Irish Catholic children with no focal point for their loyalties as they grew in awareness to manhood. Hence the Brothers' emphasis on Irish history and the Irish language as well as the Catholic faith: a combustible combination, perhaps, but conducive to the self-identity and self-respect of youngsters who all too often had few enough props in life to give them confidence. Brother Coldrey summarises: "Education in a colonial context among the oppressed has always had an explosive content." So it was in Ireland.

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