

L'HOMME-NATION DANIEL O'CONNELL ET LE LABORATOIRE POLITIQUE IRLANDAIS, 1775–1847.

By Laurent Colantonio. Pp 398. Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion. 2023. €29 paperback.

A review of the first of Patrick Geoghegan's two-volume lively biography of Daniel O'Connell (*King Dan: the rise of Daniel O'Connell 1775–1829* (Dublin, 2008); *Liberator: the life and death of Daniel O'Connell 1830–1847* (Dublin, 2010)) in these pages (xxxvi, no. 144 (Nov. 2009), pp 640–41) pondered whether the work was needed, given the existing corpus on the 'Liberator', stretching even as far back as Seán O'Faoláin's *King of the beggars* (New York, 1938). Books and thematic essay collections had already devoted much attention to themes which Geoghegan reprised. One self-evident reply is that our approach to the dynamics and ideologies of nineteenth-century political and social movements, not to mention perceptions of such colossal agents of change as O'Connell, have grown exponentially in the past decades. Historical biographers have progressively moved further away from hagiography, reflecting more critically on their subjects, and how they navigated the contexts they challenged and exploited. The absence of any mention of O'Connell's preponderant role in anti-slavery campaigning in the otherwise authoritative works of Fergus O'Ferrall and Oliver MacDonagh became glaring to students, after Geoghegan had appropriately embedded it in his second volume. By the early 2000s, Irish history was fast internationalising and embracing interdisciplinary perspectives, whereas until the late twentieth century, writings on O'Connell had been mostly shaped by the framework of Anglo-Irish political history, written from above and often permeated by a 'culture of defeat'. They often reflected the affirmation of Irish Catholic identity and the constitutional versus militant nationalist agitation. Geoghegan had adopted a quick-fire popularising narrative style, vividly projecting O'Connell's multifaceted persona from a fly on the wall perspective. By deliberately focusing on O'Connell's character (and frequently allowing him to speak in his own words), Geoghegan had paradoxically reprised this focal point of Victorian biography, yet recalibrated it for the post-heroic age. O'Connell had been comprehensively rescued from the unfashionable margins of Irish history, inspiring this new exploration by the French historian of the nineteenth century, Laurent Colantonio.

Scholarly French can be metaphysically convoluted, but the book's title begins with brilliantly crisp words, loosely translated as 'the man as nation'. This encapsulates Balzac's famous saying that O'Connell had come to embody the Irish nation. The title goes on to fuse this personification with the Irish political 'laboratory', which captured the imagination of international observers during the pivotal decades from the 1820s to the 1840s. This concept of Ireland as a testing ground for an unprecedented form of democratic, non-violent and popular mobilisation had inspired Catholic liberals across Europe, namely in France. Colantonio deconstructs the dynamic tension between the charismatic figurehead and the symbolic power he conferred on the masses, mostly disenfranchised from political institutions, but for whom he demanded justice for Ireland. In a well-developed introduction, the 'O'Connell moment' offers an historical perspective on current debates, as populism and embodiment in politics are gaining ground while representative democracy is in crisis. New writing is, *inter alia*, validated by an incisive overview of the existing historiography on O'Connell, pertinently critiqued at apt moments throughout the book.

Colantonio's well-paced narrative is tightly linear. He reflects on how conventional historical biography foregrounds the individual as the entry point to understanding social movements, but how this leads to the collective and their dynamic interaction. He considers how Irish Catholics regained the political sphere and agitated freely, and whether this could square with adulation of their leader. O'Connell drove, incited, spoke for others, agitated and moderated, emerging as a form of prophet. But he (and his spin doctors) also pioneered a new form of unanimously recognised leader, in an age when the authority of politicians was increasingly mediated. The cursory index, a recurring weakness in French academic publications, is largely compensated for by the book's clearly signposted


structure. Four consecutive phases of O'Connell's career are defined and briefly introduced, then developed over fifteen chapters. These are divided into sub-sections with headings, and such tools make this an indispensable resource for undergraduate teaching. Colantonio's prose is crystalline and effortless, and well within the reach of readers with a solid reading comprehension of French, especially anyone knowledgeable on the topic. The unfolding of familiar episodes (such as the Magee trial, the Doneraile conspiracy and the repeal monster meetings) are instantly recognisable, as too are the author's own clear translations from English of telling phrases from O'Connell's early journal or speeches. There are some black and white illustrations, and this portable softback volume with its attractive cover is very keenly priced.

Without overburdening an undergraduate reader with dense theoretical argumentation, *L'homme-nation* provides some original and compelling reflections on deconstructions of leadership and the fusion of O'Connell with the Irish nation. The traditional approach has been to see O'Connell as the driving force of change, and Colantonio references Hegel's 'great man' theory. He also draws some inspiration from Max Weber's sociological approach to leadership and charisma, creating an alternative reading of this case study. The interaction between leader and group is frequently considered, as is the mutual conferral of legitimacy, and not only in a one-way process, from the figure of authority down.

In another vital exercise, the book scrutinises how previous authors have approached facets of the O'Connell years, by no means rejecting their assessments as outdated, yet rightly questioning their interpretation of the sources. Colantonio takes greater critical distance than others have in the past — namely, when weighing up so-called evidence from adulatory memoirs, such as John O'Connell's or O'Neill Daunt's, published in the 1840s. The former of these was the original source for the dubious anecdote, taken at face value for generations, about O'Connell (quite conveniently) running into the Sheares brothers on the boat fleeing France immediately after the regicide, brandishing a handkerchief dipped in regal blood. This sensationalist caricature conflating 'the French Revolution' with the Terror had sufficed to underpin O'Connell's rejection of revolutionary violence. As to whether he had joined the United Irishmen, it is stated here that it was quite plausible, but certainly not indisputable, based on the scant surviving evidence.

The book ends with O'Connell emerging, in his own lifetime, as both a Gaelic hero and the first popular hero of modern times. It is here that the Ellen Courtenay paternity case, accusing O'Connell of roguish infidelities, is scrupulously deconstructed. It is held up as a test case for the historian, and Colantonio references how Erin Bishop and Geoghegan had departed from the authors before them, for whom these calumnies were fabricated to weaken the great hero or extract money from him. Like Geoghegan, this author clearly admires his subject while not engaging in hagiography, documenting when and how he was a ruthless and opportunistic demagogue, yet all the while restoring dignity to the Irish people. While not unveiling any major new material, *L'homme-nation* certainly offers many fresh and sharp perspectives. If intended to make O'Connell more known in France, it is equally a most valuable addition to Irish history.

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COMMANDERS OF THE BRITISH FORCES IN IRELAND, 1796–1922. By Tony Gaynor. Pp 398, illus. Dublin: Four Courts Press. 2023. €54.

This is a long-overdue study of the succession of senior officers who served in the crucial role of 'commander-in-chief' of forces in Ireland during this period. In total, thirty-six officers of general or field-marshal rank served in this appointment, overseeing all military business during periods of political turmoil and rebellion in Ireland, and also international conflicts that involved Britain and its empire. This volume confirms Ireland's growing military