Chapter Forty-Four

Irish Mythologies

Eamonn McCann has written a fine, argumentative book, a blend of autobiography and of political analysis, in which he continuously relates his own experience of grassroots politics to Ireland’s recent history. The merits of the book are uneven; the sections of autobiographical narrative are first-rate, the political history is good in parts, but only in parts, and the application of what Mr McCann takes to be Marxism leads to a final substitution of fiction for fact. Nonetheless, Mr McCann’s book could play an important part in destroying the current English mythology about the North of Ireland.

The current English mythology runs like this. There were, indeed, until 1968 grave abuses in Northern Ireland which somehow English liberalism had just not got around to reforming. Then, a civil-rights movement arose and would have moved toward its goals, but for the fact that it was too influenced by – O, horror! – dangerous extremists. These extremists

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1 Part 4 of the original edition of War and an Irish Town (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1974), which dealt with the development of the state in the North from the formation of the Unionist Party in 1886, was ‘reluctantly’ dropped from the second edition of the book (Pluto Press, London 1981), but reinstated in an expanded third edition (Pluto Press, London 1993). References which MacIntyre makes are from these deleted sections of the 1974 edition. The footnotes indicate where these references also occur in the 1981 edition.
aroused a Protestant backlash and so that nice fellow Lord O’Neill of the Maine, who was about to solve all the problems, fell from power. That almost as nice fellow Major Chichester-Clark then came to power, but was too reform-minded to satisfy the Protestant extremists, who finally in August 1969 rioted against the Catholics so that the British Army had to be brought in to protect them. The Provisional IRA then prevented the problems being solved by attacking the British Army and cunningly winning considerable Catholic support. The British Army, of course, behaved with marvellous restraint, just as it did in Cyprus and Aden. So bad did things get that even that perhaps not-so-nice fellow, Brian Faulkner (but then, he was not an Old Etonian) could not solve the problems and the Stormont Parliament had to be suspended. Finally, that nicest of all possible fellows Mr Whitelaw came in and he solved the problem, by putting in power again that nice Mr Faulkner along with that nice Mr Fitt, who turned out only to have been pretending to be each others’ mortal enemies before (how very Irish!). Unfortunately, so malignant are the Irish that not only have the Provisional IRA wantonly refused to go home (they are after all – O horror! – fanatics); but the entire Protestant community in the North refuses to believe what the British House of Commons has told them again and again, that the constitutional problems have now been solved (with the aid of that awfully nice fellow, Mr Cosgrave). If the Irish are not careful, the supply of Old Etonians available to solve their problems may well run out.

The fact is that Mr Whitelaw’s policy was fraudulent and the Sunningdale Agreement represents the culmination of a series of conjuring tricks, exercises in political illusion. What made the former constitution of Northern Ireland unworkable was the fact that it had to be imposed by force on a substantial proportion of the population; what makes the present constitution unworkable is the same fact. Too large a part of the Catholic community could not consent in the past; too large a part of the Protestant community cannot consent now. An imposed solution is no solution. Indeed, no solution is possible, unless it wins the minds and hearts of a majority of the Protestant community. Mr Whitelaw does not betray the shadow of an understanding of that community. Here, Mr McCann also fails (I shall return to this), but on a number of other points his book is a splendid correction to the mythology.

First of all, as to the civil-rights movement. Let us be clear about it. In that movement, as so often before, not only did much of the dynamism