



# Enlightenment, What Enlightenment?

*The Irish Enlightenment* • Michael Brown • Harvard University Press • 2016

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**T**HIS long book has a hard task. The words ‘Irish’ and ‘Enlightenment’ might be considered strange bedfellows. Indeed, ‘the Irish Enlightenment’ could be an oxymoron.

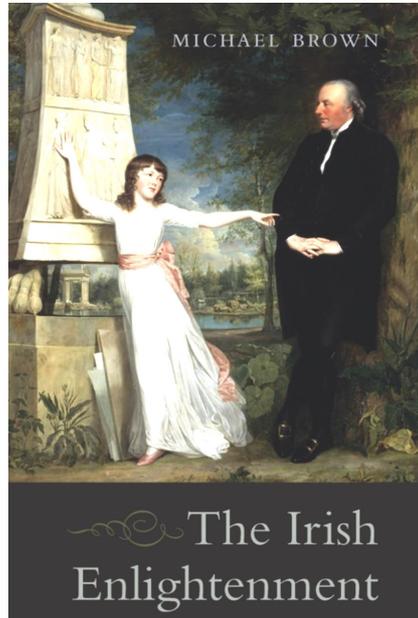
David Hume, quoted on the very first page, thought that “the common people of Switzerland have probably more honesty, than those of the same rank in Ireland” (p1). Montesquieu referred to Irish clerics in 18th century Paris as using ‘a barbarous language’. A.T.Q. Stewart, thought that the Irish looking back on the same period do not “take much interest in the Enlightenment; they prefer to remember the Age of the Protestant Ascendancy, the Penal Laws and the 1798 Rebellion” (p3). In *The Irish Mind*, an essay collection edited by Richard Kearney, David Berman suggested that the Irish in the 18th century provided an intolerant Counter-Enlightenment.

In *The Rise and Progress of Rationalism in Europe* (1865), the Irish historian W.E.H. Lecky argued that Ireland “is the only civilised country where public opinion is government, not occasionally, but habitually, by theological considerations”. In the 20th century, prominent writers like Conor Cruise O’Brien and Noel Browne thought that Ireland remained a theocracy and had never undergone an Enlightenment.

A couple of years ago, in a letter to the *Irish Times*, Desmond Fennell wrote: “Contemporary Irish culture resolutely values only one kind of creative writing, namely fiction”; and he suggested that the Irish “are a nation loving the artful creation of made-up stories, fearful of minds probing and presenting the realities of the human condition”. Fennell has a point. This small island has an international reputation for imaginative writing but doesn’t rank anywhere in terms of its thinkers, apart from George Berkeley.

Michael Brown focuses on the period between the War of the Two Kings (1689-91) and the 1798 Rebellion. He divides the alleged Irish Enlightenment into three periods: a religious Enlightenment (1688 to 1730); a social Enlightenment (1730 to 1760); and a political Enlightenment (1760-98). Ultimately, he says, the Irish Enlightenment collapsed in civil war, followed by the triumph of nationalism in the 19th century.

Brown’s definition of Enlightenment is humanist to the core: “humans are the measure of all things, and they



constitute the basic unit of analysis” (p8). It acted, he says, to usher in a secular age. Where the end was once the glory of God the Enlightenment pursued the welfare of mankind. That is very promising but unfortunately, judged by this definition, the Irish Enlightenment as described by Brown is a bit of a let down and often does not even fit the description he assigns to it.

He identifies the main religious denominations with a particular mode of thought: Presbyterians with rationalism, Anglicans with empiricism, and Catholics with scholasticism. But his understanding of these terms is far from clear. Berkeley, for example, was an Anglican and is usually regarded as an exponent of extreme empiricism, yet Brown argues that he used

reason to prove the existence of God. Moreover, Berkeley’s whole philosophy is anti-Enlightenment and an escape from reality, promoting as it did the notion that the external, material world doesn’t exist and that the things we perceive are simply collections of ideas put into our mind by God.

If Berkeley is the only world renowned Irish philosopher, Edmund Burke is the only world renowned Irish political philosopher. Yet he too, contrary to Brown’s analysis, was a counter-Enlightenment figure. A complex man who opposed British imperialism in Ireland and India and supported the American War of Independence, his whole thesis in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) is nevertheless anti-Enlightenment. In a famous passage he writes: “We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would be better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages”.

Fallible reason is no substitute for time-trusted habits and traditions. He even suggests that “there is a natural instinct in the unthinking man” who accepts and endorses the institutions and practices into which he is born”. Reason is thus made subservient to instinct, custom and even prejudice. Indeed, prejudice is a feeling which transcends reason: “When our feelings contradict our theories...the feelings are true, and the theory is false”. He even concludes that prejudices are wise and men of understanding, “instead of exploding general prejudices, employ their sagacity to discover the latent wisdom which prevails in them”.

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Burke also opposed the separation of church and state pursued by the revolutionaries. For him this was a repudiation of the divine gifts of government, society, and religion. “We know, and it is our pride to know, that man is by his constitution a religious animal; that atheism is against, not only our reason but our instincts; and that it cannot prevail long”. Without the warm cloak of custom, tradition, experience, history, religion, and social hierarchy – all of which radical man would rip off – man is shivering and naked. Free man from all mystery, demystify his institutions and his intellectual world, and you leave him alone in a universe of insignificance, incapacity, and inadequacy. The demystification of institutions removed the awe and respect with which Burke believed they should be viewed.

Similarly, Burke dismisses the idea of ‘natural rights’ which he says are ‘pretended rights’ and are ‘morally and politically false’. For him, rights were not universal but particular to each society and handed down by our forefathers. He claimed that his view of rights was the traditional British view. In *Magna Carta* and in the 1689 *Declaration of Right* there is no mention of ‘the rights of man’. Instead, rights are regarded as a patrimony or inheritance. Burke defined rights as “an entailed inheritance derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity; an estate specially belonging to the people of this kingdom without any reference whatever to any more general or prior right”. We receive and transmit our privileges “in the same manner in which we enjoy and transmit our property and our lives” (i.e. by legal and genetic inheritance). Such an analysis implies that people who have no bequest of democracy or liberty from their ancestors have no automatic right to them. “Freedom is not so much a right that is a necessary part of being human but an inheritance that is handed down to the British people as a piece of property might be”.

**B**ROWN would have been better advised to take John Toland and Francis Hutcheson as the true, though neglected, models of Irish Enlightenment rather than Berkeley or Burke. Yet Toland is given only a page in the Introduction and Brown completely underestimates Hutcheson’s importance. He says that “he enunciated a modest empirical enlightened Presbyterianism” (p46). On the contrary, Hutcheson had a major impact on moral and political philosophy. His ideas, which had been imported into pre-revolutionary America, were re-imported to his native Ireland in the insurrectionist ideology of the United Irishmen. In his book on *The Scottish Enlightenment*, Arthur Herman puts it strongly: “Francis Hutcheson had created a new political and social vision, one that went far beyond Locke or any comparable English thinker: the vision of a ‘free society’. He is Europe’s first liberal in the classic sense: a believer in maximising personal liberty in the social, economic and intellectual spheres, as well as the political. But the ultimate goal of this liberty was, we should remember, happiness – which Hutcheson always defined as resulting from helping others to be happy” (op cit. p80).

As for Toland, he more than anyone else was the Father of Irish secular philosophy. For example, in *Pantheisticon* (1720), originally published privately in Latin and only translated into English in 1751, he asserted: “The universe is infinite, with infinite stars and inhabited worlds: in an infinite space there can be no up or down, no centre or extremities... There is an infinite number of other worlds similar to the earth we inhabit, circling around their suns (which we call the fixed stars)... The Universe (of which the world we know is only a very small part), is infinite in extent as well as in potential. By the continuity of all and by the contiguity of its parts it is one”.

Both Toland and Hutcheson have been largely written out of Irish history, and I’m afraid that Brown’s book does nothing to remedy this injustice. Significantly of course, like many dissident writers, they left the country, as did Burke and Goldsmith, while Swift – who thought of Ireland as ‘that slavish hateful shore’ – made frequent exits. That so many writers of stature at that time went into exile hardly bespeaks of a significant 18th century Irish Enlightenment. Yes, there were traces of one, and Brown is best in his treatment of what he calls a ‘social enlightenment’, in which he includes poetry, literary essays, journalism, oratory and public meetings. Indeed, he writes: “in many ways, the coffeehouses, taverns and bookshops of the capital city identify the heart of the Irish Enlightenment” (p229). This may be so, but it was largely a gathering of elites and didn’t really impact on the wider society, a fact which became all too apparent at the end of the century.

Indeed, Brown’s failure to deal adequately with the political and philosophical thinking of the time is nowhere more manifest than in his treatment of the failure of the project of the United Irishmen. He sees it as a conflict between rationalism and empiricism which the latter won. He writes that Ireland in the 1790s “descended into civil war over these two visions of politics” (p407). Philosophically, he is again misusing these concepts, as noted earlier in relation to Berkeley. He argues that the United Irishmen – the republican separatists – were rationalist utopians who wanted a better society, while the empiricists – the staunch loyalists – favoured the status quo. To suggest that the sectarian slaughter of 1798, in which 20,000 died (killed mostly by followers of scholasticism!), was caused by an excessive dose of empiricism is just plain daft and displays an ignorance of the philosophical meaning of the term, which is not antithetical to rationalism but a necessary companion to it.

In truth, the attempt by the United Irishmen to replace Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter by the common name of Irishman failed because their enlightened outlook was not shared by the vast majority of the Irish people. If there had been any substantial Irish Enlightenment in the previous 100 years, it might have been very different. Brown’s work has merely succeeded in confirming that there wasn’t one. It is certainly worth reading but its central thesis is unconvincing. □

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