Book Review


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A number of studies have recently appeared on the Orangemen, in their first origins as the not-so-distant cousins of the freemasons, thanks to a general interest in the Northern Irish peace process (see a review by Géza Prohászka in *JRFF* 1.1 [March 2010], 128–29 for a listing). Eric Kaufmann, the author of the book at hand, has published on an admirably wide range of issues from religion and ethnicity to nationalism and politics. Here, he displays a thorough knowledge of the minutiae of Northern Irish Unionism. His book proudly proclaims to be ‘the first modern history and social analysis of the Orange Order’.

As the book is rich in social analysis, the latter part of the assertion is fully substantiated. However, the ‘contemporary’ of the title expresses well what this book is about: the development of Orangeism in Northern Ireland during the last 50 years. The emphasis is on the years between 1995–2005, when the Order was defeated in the Drumcree parade dispute and also ended its formal link with the Ulster Unionist Party. The entire second half of the book deals with these developments, as well as the Order’s opposition to the government-appointed Parades Commission, which regulates controversial parades in Northern Ireland.

In Ulster, religion serves as an ethnic boundary and the Orange Order regards itself as the custodian of Protestantism. An Irish Orangeman is not allowed to marry a Catholic and should not ‘countenance (by his presence or otherwise) any act or ceremony of Popish worship’, even the funeral mass of a Catholic friend. Kaufmann thus describes the Order as an ethnic rather than a religious association, despite its Protestant Christian self-definition. Records show 325 Orangemen died in the ‘Troubles’ of 1969-98. While Protestant firebrands not inclined to cheek-turning have appeared in its ranks, Kaufmann argues that on the whole, the Order successfully steered the bulk of its membership away from actual violence.

Kaufmann describes the transition from an organization led by the Irish Protestant elite, with its public-school background and fake English accents, to a more popular body. The bulk of Orange membership always came from working-class and rural backgrounds but it is only recently that these classes took over the leadership. The central theme of the book is this long-standing conflict, which pitted deferential, often Church of Ireland (Anglican) ‘traditionalists’ against populist ‘rebels’, the latter being more likely to be Presbyterians or Methodists. An episode symptomatic of the change was the decision to delete dozens of unelected deputy grand masters and chaplains from the Grand Lodge and change its structure in a more representative direction.

Another climax of this struggle was the 1990s conflict between the Grand Orange...
Lodge of Ireland’s Education Committee, and the extremist (even by Orange standards) Spirit of Drumcree group. The former saw the Order as a primarily religious organization which should even explain its activities to incredulous outsiders. However, to the unfortunately-abbreviated SOD faction, the Order was a Protestant self-defence organization that was not averse to violence if needs be. To this reviewer, this part of the book is the most fascinating: I first gained access to Orange archives in the 1990s through the good offices of their then archivist, a member of the Education Committee.

The existence of such a cleavage in Ulster Protestantism is not in doubt and in dealing with an organization as history-obsessed as the Orange Order, it would have been beneficial to go beyond the 1960s. For instance, the relative strength of Orangeism in Church of Ireland areas comes as no surprise to anyone familiar with Orange origins in 1795. The Order was, after all, started by Anglicans in an era when Anglicanism was the sole established religion. A longer historical introduction would thus have helped to make the book more accessible to readers unfamiliar with Northern Irish politics.

The theoretical terminology Kaufmann uses to describe the divide is not unproblematic. Using the term ‘rebel’, which in an Irish context carries strongly (Catholic) Republican connotations, to describe Protestant populists may be confusing. Likewise, some of the ‘traditionalists’ such as the innovative Education Committee, were in fact reformers – not that they would admit it of course! Kaufmann’s tendency to set in opposition ‘traditionalists’ to ‘conservatives’ (otherwise ‘rebels’) of the SOD has the potential to further confuse the reader.

Apart from these remarks, this is a fine and readable analysis of the internal and external politics of Irish Orangeism at the turn of the millennium. It is largely based on Orange archives, almost to the point of exclusion of other sources. As few scholars have previously been able to use these records, this should not be seen as a criticism. However, the (possibly selective) release of sources by the Order places the emphasis firmly in the political sphere. Thus, despite the writer’s demonstrated ability to deal with social and religious issues, there is no attempt to place the Orangemen in the wider sphere of ‘fraternalism’ (and certainly not ‘western esotericism’) more familiar to the readers of this journal.

The weakest part of the book is the index. For instance, the entry ‘Freemasons’ tells the reader to also see ‘Masonic’, and vice versa, but both list practically the same pages. The frequent appearances in Chapter 2 of key Orange leaders, such as Sir George Clark or Martyn Smyth, are not indexed at all. The Unionist MP Phelim O’Neill, whose expulsion proceedings are presented as a landmark episode of the traditionalist-rebel dispute (pp. 35–39), is totally absent from the index.

This is not the definitive history of the Orange Order in Northern Ireland, but still ranks as a very useful survey of a crucial period in its history. A related contemporary history title jointly written by Kaufmann and Henry Patterson appears in the index as forthcoming but has since appeared, *Unionism and Orangeism in Northern Ireland Since 1945: The Decline of the Loyal Family* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). More advanced plans for publication to cover Orangeism in Ulster, Canada and Scotland appear on the author’s website (http://www.sneps.net/research-interests/orangeism).