

A Union Forever: The Irish Question and U.S. Foreign Relations in the Victorian Age

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Author: David Sim

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Reviewer: Andre Fleche

Ireland's protracted struggle for freedom from British rule has long occupied an important place in American imaginations. Few historians, however, have treated America's sympathy for Ireland as a matter of formal state-to-state diplomacy. David Sim seeks to address that gap in the literature with his examination of the effects Irish-American nationalists had on the foreign policy of the United States during the 19th century. The result is an incisive overview that traces American engagement with the 'Irish question' as it evolved over the course of the 1800s. Sim argues that widespread sympathy for Irish freedom and the presence of Irish nationalists in the United States shaped the decisions of American policymakers, though often with unintended results. During the 19th century, Irish nationalists put forth their best efforts to create 'complications' between the American and British governments, hoping that a war between the two powers might result in Ireland's independence. Nationalist agitation, however, ultimately brought the United States and Great Britain closer together, as statesmen in both countries worked to avoid conflict and resolve differences on issues including expatriation, naturalization, and the rights of the citizen. Sim's work ably describes the diplomatic issues at stake while also raising intriguing questions about the relationship between public opinion and formal diplomacy and the nature of nation and empire-building during the long 19th century.

Sim's first chapter begins in the 1840s with Daniel O'Connell's transatlantic campaign to win support for repeal of the Act of Union, which had subjected Ireland to the legislative authority of the British Parliament. Sim finds that O'Connell's cause gained surprisingly widespread support in the United States. Repeal Associations sprang up in both Northern and Southern cities, even though O'Connell's opposition to the institution of slavery was well-known. Sim argues that this support can be explained by America's traditions of local self-governance, a history of American sympathy for Ireland dating back to the American Revolution, and, most importantly, growing rivalry between Great Britain and the United States over the future of Texas and Oregon. By the 1840s, Sim argues, many Americans viewed Great Britain as an abolitionist power, intent on re-colonizing the western hemisphere and using the issue of slavery to disrupt the American Union. Many supporters of Repeal, then, hoped to respond in kind, by agitating the Irish question to help thwart Great Britain's imperial designs. Enthusiasm for the Repeal movement waned in the United States, Sim argues, when it became clear that O'Connell remained loyal to the British crown and did

not support American claims to Oregon and Texas.

By the early 1850s, Sim points out in his second chapter, more aggressive Irish nationalists had come to reject O'Connell's moderate position on British authority. In the United States, heavy Irish-Catholic immigration in response to the Potato Famine prompted some politicians to turn to Nativism, thereby abandoning unqualified support for the Irish people. Indeed, Sim argues that the Famine years were years of détente between Britain and the United States. To be sure, victims of the Famine garnered widespread sympathy in the United States, and American citizens responded to the crisis with extensive charity efforts. Policymakers, though, viewed the Famine as an opportunity to exercise American leadership abroad. Democrats hoped to win markets for American agricultural goods, thereby demonstrating to the British the utility of free trade, and Whigs sought to secure American influence abroad through the extension of philanthropic aid. In both cases, the cause of Irish independence took a back seat to American national interest. The 'absence of Irish nationalist politics in discussions about the provision of aid is striking', Sim concludes (p. 60).

American and Irish interests aligned again in the middle of the century, as Sim explains in his two strongest chapters. The late 1850s and 1860s, he argues, ushered in a 'distinct period in the relationship between the United States ... and Irish American nationalism' (p. 69). Diplomatic relations between the United States and Great Britain deteriorated, as Union policy-makers attempted to stave off British intervention in the American Civil War and then pursued payments for damages inflicted by the *Alabama* and other Confederate naval vessels built in British ports during the conflict. At the same time, thousands of Irish immigrants, including especially militant nationalists, arrived in the United States. These newcomers used the press to blame Britain for the Famine and to call for violent revolution in Ireland. The Fenian Brotherhood stockpiled arms and launched from American soil several attempts to invade Canada and spark revolution in Ireland. These 'non-state actors,' Sim argues, influenced diplomacy at the highest levels. American diplomats used the Fenian threat to goad Britain into negotiating the *Alabama* claims. British authorities summarily arrested suspected plotters, some of whom claimed to be naturalized United States citizens, thereby embroiling British and American statesmen in controversies over the rights of expatriation, civil liberties, due process, and, ultimately, the meaning and nature of national citizenship. The 'unsettled state of relations between the United States and Great Britain', Sim writes, 'gave Irish Americans unusual power to transform contention over a relatively small issue – the arrest and imprisonment of a few individuals – into a matter of grave national interest' (p. 106).

Ironically, the success of the Fenians in raising issues of 'grave national interest' led to the undoing of Irish nationalism as a major influence on American diplomacy. Sim makes it very clear that United States policymakers, despite the hopes of the Fenians, did not want a war with Britain, and spent much energy avoiding conflict. Indeed, the mutual desire of British and American statesmen to avoid serious entanglements prompted them to work together in the late 1860s and early 1870s to resolve all outstanding issues. Between 1868 and 1870, the United States Congress and the British Parliament passed laws recognizing the right of expatriation, and the Federal government of the United States worked to clarify the naturalization process. During the early 1870s, both countries agreed to settle the *Alabama* claims through arbitration, which represented a major step in the development of international law. By the end of the most tumultuous period in American-British-Irish relations, the United States and Great Britain had grown closer together, not farther apart. 'Irish American nationalists', Sim concludes, 'were ultimately the victims of a nascent rapprochement between Britain and the United States' (p. 127).

During the last quarter of the 19th century, as Sim explains in his final two chapters, the importance of Irish nationalism to American statecraft had faded. Indeed, Sim provocatively suggests that the well-known image of a fiercely pro-Irish American foreign policy was largely a myth constructed from the events of a relatively brief period in American-British relations. By the 1880s, he argues, the growing force of anti-Irish Catholic prejudice in the United States had taken its toll. American politicians increasingly denounced the rising power of Irish American political machines at home and expressed doubt about the Irish capacity for self-government abroad. In the early 1880s, some radical Irish nationalists carried out the first dynamite bombing

campaigns, which caused humanitarian revulsion and proved even more troubling to moderate American sentiment. As a result, American diplomats rarely brought up the Irish question in discussion with their British counterparts. Ultimately, the decline in the importance of the Irish issue underscored the degree to which Britain had come to be viewed by the Americans as a 'friendly nation' by the turn of the 20th century. Sim concludes that as the 19th century ended, the United States itself had become an imperialist power, which prompted 'a notably more positive interpretation of the British Empire,' an interpretation which stressed a shared 'Anglo-Saxon kinship' and a joint role in imparting the 'civilizing' values of 'English-speaking peoples' (pp. 175–6).

Sim's book provides a useful and informative overview of the diplomatic issues raised by the Irish question. His work also raises a number of intriguing questions, some of which might prompt wider discussions. First, Sim's book implicitly contributes to our understanding of the emergence of nationalism in the 19th-century Atlantic world. In his introduction, he points out that American interest in Ireland dated back to the time of the American Revolution. Affinity for Ireland, he argues, stemmed from shared experiences as 'provinces subject to the dictates of the London metropole' (p. 3). Such an insight might bear further elaboration in a chapter of its own. Beginning the story of American engagement with Irish nationalism in the late 18th century would help contextualize O'Connell's popularity in the America of the 1840s. It would also place the Irish question squarely in the middle of a transnational 'Age of Revolution', in which formerly subject and colonized people in the Atlantic world asserted the right to self-governance. To what extent, one wonders, should the Irish drive for an independent republic be viewed as part of a wider violent movement for republican government that began in 1776, brought revolution to Europe and Latin America in the 1800s, and reverberated among many peoples in the 20th century?

In at least one way, the diplomatic wrangling occasioned by the Irish nationalist movement advanced international understandings of post-colonial state formation, as Sim's intriguing discussion of citizenship reveals. The question raised by Britain's summary arrests of naturalized American citizens proved central to settling some of the most important questions raised by the emergence of nationalism in the 19th century. As Sim points out, British officials subscribed to the doctrine of 'perpetual allegiance', which held that those born subject to monarchical rule remained so for life. 'British law', Sim reminds us, 'assigned no value to the adoption of U.S. citizenship' (p. 98). The insistence of American policymakers on upholding the right to renounce allegiance to a monarch and adopt new loyalties to a state played a key role in shaping the concept of citizenship, a development central to the project of modern nation-building. As Sim argues, the 'action of Irish American nationalists' thereby 'reshaped the legal construction of citizenship' (p. 99).

Sim's discussion of citizenship fits a narrative highlighting the decline of monarchies and the rise of nations in the 19th-century Atlantic world. Sim, however, challenges those too eager to embrace the American belief in a 'progressive interpretation of history,' which maintained that 'liberty would gradually spread around the globe' (p. 3). He rightly ends his story with the late 19th-century resurgence of imperialism in both the Old and New Worlds, a troubling development explored recently by a growing number of scholars. Just what caused Americans to abandon their commitment to republicanism? Indeed, one might ask how central support for republicanism, and, by extension, Irish nationalism, was to American foreign policy at all. In Sim's account, the Irish question was always only one of many issues influencing relations between the United States and Great Britain, and the stance American policymakers took on Ireland depended upon the overall tenor of the relationship existing at the time between the Americans and the British. During the 1840s and 1860s, when diplomacy between Great Britain and the United States was tense, politicians took a more aggressive stand on Irish liberty, but after more difficult issues had been resolved, policymakers proved more willing to cooperate. As a result, Sim's work contributes not only to our understanding of the Irish question but also to our knowledge of the relationship between an Old World empire and a growing world power in the process of consolidating state authority at home and entertaining imperialist ambitions abroad.

In wrestling with these ironies, Sim's work illuminates the long-debated tension between idealism and realism in American foreign policy. Sim is especially strong in describing the relationship between public

opinion, non-state actors, and formal diplomacy. In many ways, Sim's story is a story of elite American diplomats using, channeling, and often thwarting the public's desire for aggressive action on behalf of Ireland. At times, non-state actors, in this case Irish nationalists, succeeded in setting the diplomatic agenda between Britain and the United States. Sim's findings imply, though, that national interest most often won out among the nation's elite politicians.

Sim's book covers all the ground expected from a traditional work of diplomatic history, but it also reflects the most recent trends of transnational scholarship by including average individuals, non-state actors, and the role of public opinion. His book presents a useful account of the Irish question in American foreign relations, but also raises important questions about the development of nationalism in the Atlantic World. Indeed, the strength of Sim's work lies in its attention to nuance and tolerance of ambiguity. Sim refuses to settle for easy answers. 'Ireland', he concludes, 'occupied an ambiguous place in Americans' thoughts about global politics. Perceived to be neither wholly of the Old or New Worlds – a potential wedge for republican revolution in Europe yet apparently desperately poor, Catholic, and hopelessly dependent upon British power – Ireland offered a damning indictment of British governance and hope for future reform' (p. 5). Sim's work will prove essential to understanding how American statesmen dealt with these complex problems raised by the 'Irish question'.

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