

What is revisionism?

The establishment of an independent state in Ireland occurred in connection with four major events: the First World War, the Easter Rising, the 1918 General Election, and the Second World War. The object of revisionist writing in recent years is to disparage everything that went into the making of an Irish independence movement, and hold up to admiration all that ran counter to it.

It praises Irish Home Rule participation in the British militarism of 1914; deplores the Easter Rising as a "*blood sacrifice*" enacted by a small group of fanatics; does what it can to remove the 1918 Election from the historical record; and plays on a widespread sentiment that it would have been better if the Irish State had placed itself at Britain's disposal in the Second World War and thus had some marginal part in the post-1945 reconstruction of Europe.

Revisionism is primarily an academic phenomenon. It aspires to bring about a fundamental change in public opinion through the medium of the greatly expanded educational system of recent times.

Its task was facilitated by the fact that the Irish Universities, during the 50 or 60 years preceding the arrival of organised revisionism, had not produced proper histories of any of those four events, except the Easter Rising.

The accepted, consensus view of these events was maintained by word of mouth, by popular newspapers and the writings of the participants themselves in those events. It was history from the horse's mouth. But, with the great expansion of education in the 1970s, the acquisition of historical knowledge came to be associated with the Universities. There were no Irish academic histories of the First and Second World Wars, so

British histories filled the vacuum. And there was no history at all of the 1918 Election.

If the Irish State had consolidated in academic histories the actual course of its own development, the War of 1919-21 would be seen as a natural consequence of the decision of the British Parliament to set aside the 1918 Election result. In the absence of a history of that Election, the revisionists could treat the War of Independence as a revival of the democratically unauthorised 1916 Rebellion, and therefore morally problematical.

Revisionism re-arranges Irish history in accordance with British requirements. Irish history is in great part the history of British rule in Ireland. And the critical issue for Britain is its handling of the Irish Election at the end of the Great War for Democracy and the Rights of Small Nations. They responded to the ballot with the bullet and that is something that they need to gloss over. In the era of general democracy, the over-riding of a democratic election result by an authoritarian application of military force must in principle be a bad thing. And the pushing aside of that Irish election by Britain, the architect of the League of Nations, in the first year of the League of Nations, when the world was waiting to see what the words of the victors would mean in practice, set the scene for fascism.

Britain therefore had good reason, when the opportunity presented itself, to take over the writing of Irish history (mainly via Oxford University) and to prevent this aspect of the matter from being dwelt upon.

The opportunity presented itself as a consequence of the collapse of Irish policy on the North in 1970 and the general sense of disorientation and moral culpability that followed. There was initially a false expectation that Ulster Unionism would crumble under Nationalist pressure. This expectation was grounded in the assumption that the Unionists formed part

of a common nationality with Nationalists, and that the application of Nationalist pressure would bring out that sense of common nationality. When it became clear in the mid-1970s that this was not the case, public opinion in the South fell into a state of basic confusion, which was skillfully exploited by British interests.

The idea was put about that the conflict in the North did not arise out of the undemocratic mode by which Britain chose to govern it, but was a consequence of the teaching of Irish history. It followed from this idea that peace would only come about if a different history was taught.

Patrick Hillery, Minister for Foreign Affairs at the critical period in 1969-70 and later President, spelt it out after the Government had succumbed to British pressure. He proposed in a memorandum to the Cabinet that *“In teaching history in schools emphasis should be given to the positive aspects rather than the aspects which tend to be divisive”* (6/2/1970).

The Government therefore set in motion a project to devise a new history and insert it into people's minds, through the rapidly expanding educational system, in place of the old history—a basically totalitarian project.

This led to the concept of looking at relations between Britain and Ireland as that of ‘a shared history’ despite centuries of conflict, war, plantations etc. and the emphasis should be on ‘reconciliation’. This was not explaining our history – rather it was a method of explaining it *away*.

And that is what revisionism is.

Though British Universities have been active in implementing it, it is not merely a British conspiracy.

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