



Northern Ireland, the United States, and the Second World War

by Simon Topping.

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Historian Simon Topping's rigorous new monograph on the US presence in Northern Ireland during World War II concludes that the Americans exacerbated tensions between Republicans and Unionists and encouraged Northern Irish leaders to champion the United States' Scotch-Irish heritage. Topping (Univ. of Plymouth)¹ also examines racial tension within the American ranks, and asks how Stormont managed to accommodate segregation in a country largely devoid of racial animus. Northern Irish attitudes towards Black American servicemen, while generally tolerant, evinced prejudices that deepened the country's sectarian divisions. Topping is ecumenical, faulting Unionists for internal repression, and Republicans for political opportunism. He is also prone to draw conclusions without evidence.

The presence of American troops on Northern Irish soil, writes Topping, forestalled a reunified Ireland under Republican leadership. By landing in Ulster without asking permission from Éire's president, the American military leadership "exposed the emptiness of [de Valera's] ... irredentist rhetoric and demonstrated that Northern Ireland was patently not part of the 'national territory'" (16). The American adjutant general downplayed Republicans' historical grievances in *A Short Guide to Great Britain*, a primer issued to servicemen in 1943. "We don't worry about which side our grandfathers fought on in the Civil War," the *Guide* intoned, "because it doesn't mean anything now" (33). As Topping notes, the analogy was unfair to Catholics. Of the five residents killed by recreant Americans, four were Catholic, notwithstanding the fact that Protestants represented two-thirds of the Northern Irish population. This "statistical anomaly," comments Topping, "reflect[ed] that the Americans were often stationed in predominantly Catholic districts" (45). *Stars and Stripes* editorialized on Éire's "stubborn neutrality," especially after Secretary of State Cordell Hull demanded that Nazi officials vacate Éire (59). British and American journalists' coverage of links between Éire and the Third Reich "made many American readers conclude that Éire's neutrality encouraged fifth column activities" (105). "The Guinness Crisis," during which "brewers in Éire refused to supply pubs across the border, leading to a shortage of beer," frustrated American servicemen, who complained incessantly of boredom (64).

Mass Observation surveys reported the Catholic suspicion that "the Americans may really be there to ensure partition" (77). Topping cites a colleague's 2018 study of the Belfast Irish Republican Army [IRA] in noting that the group "obsessed about the arrival of US troops" and "directly linked the renewal of its terrorist campaign in April 1942 to the Americans" (100). Many Americans who formerly supported Irish independence, wrote AP journalist William King, found themselves "on the other side of the fence when the IRA made the presence of the United States troops

1. His previous work includes *Lincoln's Lost Legacy: The Republican Party and the African American Vote, 1928-1952* (Gainesville: U Pr of Florida, 2008).

a major point in its brief for Irish liberty” (109). The message here, Topping concludes, was that “Northern Ireland had aided the Americans, and Éire had pointedly refused to” (202).

Northern Irish officialdom and its allies in the press, eager to capitalize on their welcoming attitude toward the US military, brandished Ulster’s links to the American Founding. The Unionist *Sentinel* parroted Prime Minister John Andrews’s comments upon the arrival of the first American troops in 1942, lauding “the many ties of kinship ... with the great Republic of the West” (15). The paper “heralded a ‘new chapter’ between the British Empire and America, and ‘especially this most loyal patron of it in Ulster.’” Adjutant General Boyd Shriver’s *Pocket Guide to Northern Ireland* acknowledged a common theme of Unionist literature, “add[ing] nine Revolutionary War generals to the ubiquitous signatories of the Declaration of Independence and presidents of Ulster stock,” a line adopted by Unionists that elided the fact that Scotch-Irish Patriots had fought to dismember the British Empire (31).²

Similarly, *Stars and Stripes* “noted ‘associations dating back to the Pilgrim times’ and the inevitable thirteen presidents of Ulster descent” (59). Unionists sought to expose Republican expropriation of Scotch-Irish Revolutionary history. W.F. Marshall, a Presbyterian minister, was particularly exercised when Irish-American groups laid claim to Anthony Wayne, “whose grandfather had fought with King William at the Battle of the Boyne” (177). Historian A.J. Tulip presented a BBC program in May 1942 featuring “American Presidents of Ulster descent” (64). Nor did the Northern Irish press shrink from likening Lincoln’s leadership during the Civil War to their attempt to maintain the territorial integrity of the British Empire. “Unionist press stories were largely divided between good news stories about American soldiers and those repeatedly emphasizing historical connections between Ulster and the United States” (52). Unionists deftly melded “this utilization of historic links ... with contemporary hostility to Éire’s neutrality” (171).

Topping also considers racial segregation and consequent tensions within the American forces stationed in Northern Ireland. “British troops’ apparent racial tolerance heightened tensions between them and the (white) Americans” (43). Black troops seemed more exotic to local women, over whom competition remained fierce. The army’s public relations officer bluntly told Unionist newspapers, “in the opinion of the American soldier any white girl who associated with a coloured man was beneath the lowest rung of the social scale” (123). Letters home proved the accuracy of this statement. One sergeant complained, “I would not be caught at a dog fight with any” Northern Irish women, since “they will go out with a Negro just as quick as they will with a white man” (123). Another soldier reported having “seen nice looking white girls going out with a coon.” One soldier warned, “[w]ait’til Georgia gets those *educated* Negroes back there” (141). “Interracial sex,” comments Topping, “was the primary source of resentment” (141).

Topping juxtaposes the generally tolerant attitudes of the Northern Irish people and press with the uneven sentences meted out to Black and white American service members. In one September 1942 incident, for instance, white MPs shot a Black private and cuffed him to railings. The killing “had all the hallmarks of a lynching” (143). While this shooting went unpunished, the private’s comrade who shot a white soldier in retaliation received a five-year prison sentence.

Stormont was impotent to rectify such inequities and had to defer to American military leadership. While Northern Irish officials “would not enforce segregation,” Topping writes, they “periodically turned a blind eye to discrimination” (137). Prime Minister Basil Brooke recommended

² Comically, Northern Irish prime minister Basil Brooke commented during a 1950 trip to America on his ancestor’s military service in the War of 1812, during which Col. Arthur Brooke and his commanding officer, both Ulstermen, assisted in burning the White House to the ground (178).

that welfare committees seeking to host Black soldiers in Northern Irish homes “seek the advice of the local American commander” (48). Ultimately, the hospitality committees resolved the quandary by “arranging a pre-Christmas party for black troops and Christmas Day visits to homes for white” (72). Red Cross Clubs remained segregated. Some Northern Irish reactions to Black soldiers revealed festering class prejudices. “Unionist bias in hospitality committees,” comments Topping, “was overlaid with class, as middle-class women ... had the time and the means to participate” (48). With the influx of Black soldiers, several Unionist MPs indulged in paranoia over the prospect of interracial babies and fell back on sectarian stereotypes. MP Dehra Parker, for one, noted, “our people ... seem to prefer the black to the white. I am told that this applies particularly to the R.C. [Roman Catholic] population and of course the lowest class of white girl” (122).

The most salient virtue of Topping’s book is its fairness. He attends closely to his use of proper names, a fraught topic in the Six Counties. For instance, he meticulously explains his decision to designate the twenty-six counties comprising after 1922 the Republic of Ireland “Éire” instead of Ireland. He deftly criticizes “supposedly loyal Protestants ... whose loyalty did not extend to enlisting in great numbers” without exculpating Republican leaders (113). He scathes de Valera and his ilk, who “never prioritized ending partition, preferring to consolidate his party’s position in Éire” (82). Nationalists inhabited a “self-referential moral universe” where stoking historical grievances mattered more than fighting fascism (89). “The IRA suffered from ... ‘moral myopia’ about the war and the consequences of a German victory” (101). All these judgments come from a man who bemoans “the disenfranchised and rightly disgruntled minority” of Catholics in Ulster (20). Such moralism weighs lightly on the reader because it proves to be even-handed.

Topping occasionally draws conclusions unverified by the evidence he provides. He writes, for instance, that “sexual assaults, no doubt common, were rarely reported” (40). He thinks it was “unstatesmanlike” for Prime Minister John Andrews to consult with a justice of the peace about how Unionists might use the American presence to bolster their position “and also implied that he had given the matter little thought” (181). Neither conclusion follows from the correspondence he quotes. Flashes of wit make up for some of these shortcomings. He refers to prostitutes as “women of negotiable virtue” and notes official guidance advising American servicemen that their attendance at British sporting events “should be noisy, partisan, and disrespectful” (68). While some knowledge of Irish history is necessary to understand Topping’s references to events beyond the scope of his monograph, both specialists and general readers will benefit from reading Simon Topping’s informative and sometimes amusing book.