PROJECT MUSE®

Ireland and the Second World War: Politics, Society and
Remembrance (review)

Patrick J. Hicks

New Hibernia Review, Volume 5, Number 1, Earrach/Spring 2001, pp.
149-151 (Review)

Published by Center for Irish Studies at the University of St. Thomas

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nhr.2001.0006>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/23967>

Ireland and the Second World War: Politics, Society and Remembrance, edited by Brian Girvin and Geoffrey Roberts, pp.186. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000. \$55. Distributed by ISBS, Portland, OR.

The Second World War cast a long shadow over not only the subsequent history of the nations involved in that conflict, but also upon those nations that did not fight. The path of neutrality that Ireland chose has continued to color its foreign policy, while also establishing a subtle form of erasure in regards to the thousands of Irish men and women that fought against the Third Reich. Although neutrality was a definitive moment for international Irish policy, its continued sociopolitical significance has remained relatively unexplored. The ten essays that Brian Girvin and Geoffrey Roberts have gathered together discuss neutrality along with such other themes as the lost voices of Irish soldiers, the politics of de Valéra's government, the role of Northern Ireland, the propaganda of censorship and, finally, the lasting affects that neutrality has had upon Irish politics.

The collection begins with John Murphy's "Irish Neutrality in Historical Perspective," which offers an insightful outline of neutrality as an act of independence against British rule. He also examines the importance of the Port

Treaty in regards to English militarism as well as possible IRA backlash if Dublin had adopted an aggressive stance. Murphy maintains a keen historical eye that questions neutrality as the originator of postwar Irish politics; he also offers a cleverly interwoven argument that addresses Ireland's initial rejection of NATO and subsequent role in the European Union as two policies stemming from an early engagement with military passivity.

Likewise, Brian Barton contributes an excellent article titled, "Northern Ireland: the Impact of War, 1939–1945." Barton, the premier expert on Ulster's wartime experience, discusses such topics as rationing, the housing shortage, and the chronic lack of preparation that Belfast had for an impending Blitz. Unlike most previous studies of the topic, his focus is cast away from the carnage that Nazi bombers visited upon Belfast, and directed more upon the political agenda of Lord Craigavon, who struggled with economic issues and postwar plans. Barton reminds us that the war united Westminster and Stormont at the expense of further estranging Northern Ireland from the Free State.

Editors Girvin and Roberts should be applauded for the arrangement of these articles. Richard Doherty's "Irish Heroes of the Second World War" and Aidan McElwaine's "The Oral History of the Volunteers" work extremely well in tandem. Doherty offers compelling evidence to show the actual number of Irish soldiers who served during the war and, of these 120,000 volunteers, he focuses his attention on three highly decorated men. It is a fascinating read, followed by an equally absorbing effort from McElwaine, who discusses the oral history of Irish veterans in the British forces. This article posits reasons for enlistment as well as a thoughtful examination of how to analyze oral testimonies.

Donal Ó Drisceoil's cleverly titled, "Censorship as Propaganda: the Neutralisation of Irish Opinion during the Second World War," investigates the expurgation of wartime information. Central to Ó Drisceoil's argument is the role of absence as a means of propaganda and, by way of example, he examines the suppression of such seemingly benign matters as movies, meteorological reports, and obituaries. Censorship of the press is well documented and we delight in the rebellious spirit of R.M. Smyllie, editor of the *Irish Times*, when he refers to battle-wounds as "lead poisoning" or naval mishaps as "boating accidents." Although this is a provocative article, Ó Drisceoil's argument would have benefited from an engagement with the question of how wartime censorship may have influenced the peacetime activities of the Censorship of Publications Board, which, throughout the 1950s and 60s, banned some of the finest novels in the Western canon. The Irish variant of censorship may have its genesis in the Second War; it would be interesting to see how it, as propaganda, developed beyond 1945.

In other articles, Brian Girvin discusses election politics in light of neutrality, Cormac Kavanagh examines Irish and British governmental policy towards the Irish volunteers, and Tracey Connolly inspects how Irish workers were treated in wartime Britain. Of other interest is Eunan O’Halpin’s detailed account of covert operations within MI5 as well as Geoffrey Roberts’s thorough examination of the historical narratives surrounding neutrality. Although the importance of neutrality is often downplayed, *Ireland and the Second World War* reminds us that, in appearing to do nothing during the war, Ireland in fact laid the groundwork for everything that it would achieve in the latter half of the twentieth century.

∞ PATRICK HICKS