

Canada and Ireland: A Political and Diplomatic History by Philip J. Currie

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Canada and Ireland
A Political and Diplomatic History

by Philip J. Currie

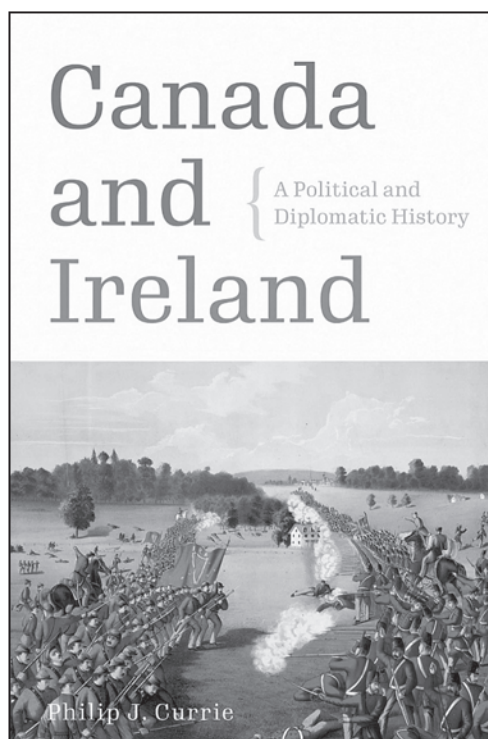
Vancouver, British Columbia: UBC

Press, 2020. 274 pages.

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Thirty years ago, historiographer John Whyte observed that, “relative to its size, Northern Ireland is possibly the most heavily-researched area on earth” (*Interpreting Northern Ireland*, back cover). Whyte’s observation related to only one of the two Irish polities, and it was expressed at a time before the Good Friday Agreement, and long before Brexit was on anyone’s radar. Imagine if you will the great volume of scholarly work that now exists on Ireland, North and South, and how daunting this may be to find a space within such well-trod ground. I think of Whyte’s quotation whenever I discover something added to the cannon of Irish history that is truly new and innovative, and I thought of it most recently in relation to Philip J. Currie’s new book, *Canada and Ireland: A Political and Diplomatic History*, which is long overdue.

In this book, Currie has the hard task of toggling between recounting the history of two nations, as one (Canada) sought to operationalize its recently achieved Confederation, and the other (Ireland) worked to win a measure of autonomy for itself. Picking up the Irish story with the drive for Home Rule, we discover how the existence of an Irish Canadian voting bloc ensured that developments across the pond could not be ignored by Canada politicians. While there were more Protestants than Catholics within Canada’s Irish immigrant population, early overtures by Canadian politicians seemed to side with



the Home Rule faction, yet Unionist advocacy did soon emerge and grow. Through much of the period under study, Canadians looked at events in Ireland through the lens of Canada’s own bicultural (and later pluralistic) construct, where the Riel rebellions and the dynamics of French-English relations shaped their understanding of the drive for Home Rule; Unionist hostility to Irish autonomy, and the ever-present threat of violence.

Despite the apparent dangers of identity politics in Canada, many imperial theorists viewed Canada as an example of how dominion status could address Irish nationalists’ demand for Home Rule, keeping it within the Commonwealth. Dominionhood, modeled on the Canadian example, did form part a general Irish settlement, which saw the island partitioned. The Protestant dominated Northern Ireland

parliament in Belfast would exercise legislative powers delegated from Britain, while a controversial treaty granted dominion status to the Irish Free State covering the rest of the island.

After independence, the Free State and Canada combined efforts through the Imperial Conferences of 1923 and 1926 as they worked to re-define dominion status and expand their autonomy. The Statute of Westminster, codifying the dominions' co-equal status with Great Britain, was the ultimate result of their handiwork, but it also marked something of a departure for Canadian-Irish cooperation using the Commonwealth apparatus. The following year, republican Éamon de Valera came to power, and he soon set to work shedding the Free State of the remaining constitutional restrictions that he had objected to in the treaty. The decade witnessed a deterioration of Anglo-Irish relations, amidst concerns from other dominion governments, such as Canada, that these activities were weakening the Commonwealth at a time of rising international tensions. Thus, while de Valera plodded his own path and worked to make Éire (as it was now called) into a near republic, English Canada's continued reverence for King and Empire provided sufficient restraint to keep Canada firmly within the imperial fold.

This period was characterized by better relations between Canada and Northern Ireland, than between Ottawa and Dublin, even as Canadians struggled to understand the political status of the Northern Ireland government. Canada's indifference to Éire, and especially de Valera's anti-partitionist rhetoric, turned to mild hostility during the Second World War as Éire remained neutral, and refused to sever diplomatic relations with the Axis powers. After the war, relations would improve, however Currie recounts a number of instances where Éire

took umbrage to Canadian lapses in diplomatic protocol in the lead up to Irish Taoiseach John Costello's decision, in 1948, to use the occasion of a visit to Ottawa to formally declare Éire a republic. However, citing a Mackenzie King diary entry, Currie was able to show that Costello's timing had more to do with Irish internal politics, than anything more scandalous involving Canada.

According to Currie, Irish-Canadian relations in the 1950s and 1960s were marked by lingering Canadian hopes at the highest levels that Ireland would return to the Commonwealth, juxtapositioned with Irish bewilderment that Canada had not followed the Irish example. And as the Northern Ireland civil rights movement evolved into "the Troubles" in the later 1960s, once again, it would seem that domestic Canadian matters (e.g. the rise of Quebec separatism, FLQ bombings, and the October Crisis) shaped how Canada was to respond, making Ottawa reluctant to offer advice lest it might invite similar interferences in Canadian affairs. With the notable exception of the leading role that former Canadian General John De Chastelain played in the decommissioning of paramilitary arms as part of the peace process, this pattern of non-interference best describes Canadian involvement in Irish affairs through to the current Brexit era.

In Currie's telling, part of the story of Canadian-Irish relations concerns the way in which Irish affairs went from having a central place in Canadian political discourse, to near disappearance as Canadian demography changed, and the Irish element declined. With reference to the Dublin-Ottawa dimension, this is also a story about two dominions, one more restless than the other, taking different paths to political maturity.

Relying extensively on archival materials, this book reflects a keen interest in the

diplomatic history of Ottawa's relations with Dublin, and with somewhat less emphasis on the Belfast or French-Canadian dimensions. It is, perhaps, an odd choice to use the Battle of Ridgeway on the cover of a book that had next to no focus on Fenianism, and Currie's description of the Jus-

tin Trudeau-Leo Varadkar era of relations as having been reduced to "photo-ops and selfies" (223) seems like an unnecessary political jab, but these are but trivial concerns in an otherwise excellent book.

James Cousins

Canada 1919

A Nation Shaped by War

Edited by Tim Cook and J.L. Granatstein

Vancouver, British Columbia: University of British Columbia Press, 2020. 324 pages. \$32.95 paperback. ISBN 9780774864084 (ubcpres.ca).

1919 was a year of hope and idealism in Canada but also of fear and upheaval. The fighting of the First World War had ended, peace treaties were being negotiated, and soldiers began the process of repatriation. Canadians on the home front anxiously awaited the return of their loved ones and grieved for those who did not come home. Politicians sought to assert Canada's role on the world stage, and the military struggled to define itself in a peacetime environment. Many veterans, particularly those from Indigenous communities and ex-nursing sisters, envisaged a better world but often found themselves disillusioned with the Canada they returned to. The 1918-19 influenza pandemic, the Winnipeg General Strike, and an economic downturn also contributed to the uncertainty.

Canada 1919: A Nation Shaped by War

sets its sights on this turbulent year. While focusing on a single year might appear restrictive, the editors and authors of *Canada 1919* demonstrate how that single year is a compelling lens through which to view the First World War's enduring effects on Canada. 1919—a year in which the war was not quite over, and the peace had not quite started—serves as a springboard for exam-

ining wider issues. Nineteen chapters span topics from the jubilant reception in Quebec City and Montreal of the 22nd Battalion (canadien-français) to children's responses to the difficult readjustments brought about by the end of the war, and from the development (or lack thereof) of Canada's post-war armed forces to the relationship between war art and national art.

The collection's overarching question—a common one in scholar-

