REIMAGINING THE NATION-STATE
The Contested Terrains of Nation-building

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While researching and writing this book I have had to range far from the alienating world of the modern university. However, I have tried not to stray too far from the precious, and often anarchic, worlds of close friends and family members. Thus, while the university in Ireland today has become a far less critical, far more state-centred and colonised institution than it was even in the period described in this book, I literally still find enlightenment in the complex local, nationalist and international worlds of many old and new friends and acquaintances. These latter are far too numerous to mention. Many of them are – probably justifiably so – sceptical of writers and academics anyway to expect naming here. Nevertheless I thank, admire and respect all of you, and may you stay forever young.

As has been my custom over recent years, I offer this to the abiding memories of my sister, Evelyn, and my father, Paddy Mc Laughlin, and to the invincible spirit of my mother, Ellen Mac Callion.

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Introduction

My father was a boy of ten at the start of the Great War and a married man in his early thirties at the beginning of the Second World War. I well remember him telling me how the teacher in the national school he attended, in a remote and very beautiful townland called Leckemy near the northern tip of Ireland, used to hammer out the shape of Ireland on the wooden floor of his classroom and would then get his pupils to draw around and copy this ‘map’ on to their jotters. He used the flat-headed brads with which blacksmiths fixed shoes to horses to literally nail Ireland to the floor of one classroom in the two-teacher school my father attended. There were no wallcharts and few maps in this school and the only decent map of the country would probably have hung on the wall of the local police barracks, some six miles away. Yet Master Kane’s map left his pupils with an abiding image of Ireland which, in my father’s case, could stay with them for almost 80 years.

Gramsci would have been a student at Turin University when my father was drawing away at maps in the ‘fifth book’, or fifth class, in this quiet country school. He coined the term ‘organic intelligentsia’ to describe men and women like those who taught my father and mother history, geography and the ‘three Rs’ – reading, writing and arithmetic – in between the start and the finish of the Great War. I have always respected the gentler among them for hammering maps into floorboards, instead of ‘hammering’ their pupils with anything that came to hand. Not all of them were gentle people, as I and many of those I grew up with in the 1960s and 1970s, can testify. Not more than a dozen families in the parish where my father grew up could afford to put a child through secondary school back then when he was a boy. Like the vast bulk of his generation he himself never went beyond the ‘seventh book’, or seventh class, in primary school. Yet, like many of his generation also, I never once remember him feeling in any way uneasy in the company of those whom he met later in life and who had far more formal education than he ever had. A builder and carpenter all his life, he was an avid reader of newspapers. He scarcely bothered with the local paper, however, and always
considered the national paper superior to the local precisely because it carried world news and addressed national issues. He was also the possessor of one of the biggest books which we as children had ever seen, a dictionary of the English language and a doorstopper of a book of almost 1,500 pages. He bought it in Glasgow in the late 1930s and every time my parents ‘flitted’ house in the 1940s and 1950s, which was often in those days, that dictionary went with them. Like many new parents then, if not now, my father also owned an encyclopaedia, a ten-volume set of Harmsworth Encyclopaedia which had been published the year he was born and stayed in our family for the full duration of the twentieth century. These were the chief, and certainly the most valuable, books in our house right up until ‘free education’ was introduced in Ireland in the late 1960s. Our house was then flooded with books and comics, for ours was a large family in constant need of new, and secondhand, primary and secondary schoolbooks.

My father, at least at that time, had what might be called a tactile approach to books. The feel of a book, like the quality of the paper it was printed on, were as important to him as the knowledge contained between its covers. Even if he never got much of a chance at formal schooling himself, you see he had a nose for learning and a mind to go with it. Born into a large family on a small farm, he started working life as a stonemason and got less than four pounds per week in one of his first paid jobs – at the building of an ostentatious Catholic church 16 miles from where he lived. To this day my mother still remembers how priests then ‘never paid anybody anything’. I learned from an early age that Catholic Ireland was built on the cheap by many men like my father. He left that job and set up as a ‘jobbing builder’ and his first son, Michael, joined him when he himself was still a young teenager. This was the norm for the time and together the two built dozens of fine houses, and repaired many more, all around the countryside where, as a result of their hard work, I was privileged to wander more freely and far more leisurely.

I recall these details here because this study insists that nations are socio-cultural and geographical constructs which literally have to be built from the ground up. That church which my father helped to build, that complicated map of nails on the floor of the school he attended, were far more influential than nationalist literature in stirring up images of the nation for his generation. Before nations can be built from the ground up they have to be lodged in the hearts and minds of people. Men like Master Kane clearly
belonged to what Gramsci labelled the ‘organic intelligentsia’. As elsewhere in nationalist Europe they were the unsung heroes of nation-building. They have been neglected almost as much as the men, like my father and oldest brother, who literally helped to build nations from the ground up and who peopled them with families.

The history of the past two centuries is adequate testimony that places have mattered as much to nationalists as they now do to critics of nationalism. The contested histories and geographies of Ireland have rendered this particularly the case in Ireland. To national separatists and unionist nationalists here places have always been ‘debatable lands’. They were never simply the uncontested basis for the ‘imagined community’ of the nation. They were literally the contested terrains of nation-building. They were pawns in wider nation-building exercises, some of them going back to the seventeenth century. In Ireland as elsewhere in nation-building Europe small places nestled in symbolic landscapes of great antiquity. They were embedded in economic and geo-strategic landscapes that were part of much larger nation-building and empire-building projects. They literally were the homes of people, the homelands of what Gramsci, writing at the start of the twentieth century, referred to as ‘people-nations’ (Gramsci, 1971, p. 418). Not surprisingly nationalism in Ireland has been a banal force and an ‘improving’ ideology. To sceptical students of nationalism in more recent decades local places have literally been the starting points for politics. In Ireland they constituted the very elements of different versions of the nation. They are also keys to an understanding of interrupted nation-building exercises which, many believe, have yet to run their course. Whatever else they were, unionist nationalism and national separatism in Ireland have always been historically oriented, socially embodied ideologies. They literally had their own way of dealing with the land and its resources, and their own quite distinctive territorial imperatives.

Contrary to Gellner, Marxism was not the only social scientific tradition which contained within it ‘an anticipation of the decline of nationalism’ (Gellner, 1972, p.147). Students of nationalism, like postmodernists and globalisation theorists, have grown sceptical of the naturalisation of nationalism by nationalists, including nationalist social scientists. Chapter 1 shows how this intellectual rationalisation of nationalism accompanied its naturalisation. It had its origins in historiography and in ethnocentric accounts of the rise of the modern nation. It reached its climax in a powerful nineteenth-century defence of ‘big-nation’/unionist nationalism –
not least in Unionist Ulster and Ireland (Mac Laughlin, 1986a, pp. 14–16). It condemned minority nationalisms as Balkanising forces for challenging the authenticity of a nation-centred modernity. Thus the authors of these accounts, whether in history books, political pamphlets, the provincial press, national newspapers or academic journals, insisted that nationalism was the prerogative of progressive peoples. It applied only to powerful – i.e. ‘power-filled’ – places. If today we have grown sceptical of the naturalness and limited universalism of nationalism, this is because we live in an age of postmodern scepticism. This is a world apart from the secular certainties and ‘scientific’ nationalisms of the nineteenth century. The rationalism of unionist nationalism then was so much taken for granted that few felt the need to challenge it. The fact that Irish nationalists did so is perhaps their most important achievement. It is also their most neglected, and problematic, contribution to the theory and practice of nation-building since the eighteenth century.

This study suggests that the imagined community of the nation in Ireland always possessed a logical contingency precisely because it was historically and geographically contingent. Yet historians and cultural nationalists have, until recently, generally taken the territorial integrity and historical inevitability of ‘their’ nation for granted. This naturalisation of nationalism was especially true of ‘big nations’ or unionist nations. As Ireland, Spain, Yugoslavia and Canada demonstrate, theorists of nation-building have for too long disregarded the rootedness of nationalism and political regionalisms in the ethnic geographies and divided communities of nation-building societies. Part of the reason for this was that hegemonic traditions in social philosophy in the nineteenth century looked upon minority nationalisms as political and regional anomalies. They regarded unionist nationalism as the natural attribute of progressive peoples. They treated the ‘big nation’ as the political and geopolitical norm. Scorned as ‘Balkanising forces’, minority nationalities all across Europe were expected to go gently in the dark night of unionist nations, and on terms laid down by the unionist state. Failing that they could, like the Irish, ‘go it alone’, reject ‘big-nation’ nationalist modernity, embrace a nineteenth-century version of ‘small nation’ post-modernity, and face an uphill struggle to establish the credentials and political legitimacy of the small ethno-nation.

This was a challenge which the ethnic intelligentsia in rural societies like Ireland had to accept more or less on their own. The ethnic intelligentsia of Europe’s more powerful nations were liter-
ally arraigned against them. The latter were to the forefront of a quasi-scientific naturalisation of ‘big-nation’ nationalism. They defended the hegemony of the nation-building and imperialistic haute bourgeoisie. They functioned as scholar-politicians or scholar-nationals who supported the projects of unionist nation-builders and empire builders alike. Never the friends of ‘lesser peoples’ or minority nations, they developed a whole range of racialised precepts that justified the marginalisation of ethnic minorities. It is not generally recognised that defences of small-nation nationalism then emanating from the peripheries of Europe, not least from Ireland, required colossal intellectual integrity. Those who defended the small nation went against the grain of unionist nationalism and imperial colonial aggrandisement in the nineteenth century. Academics then, not least state-centred ‘ascendancy academics’ throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, were considered professionals precisely because they were skilled and proficient in knowledge sanctioned by academic disciplines and the sciences. They were professional in a wider sense also because they used their academic accomplishments to further the state-centred and colonial agendas of the nation-building bourgeoisie in the Darwinian half of the nineteenth century. In other words they viewed themselves, and were viewed by others, as state functionaries. They performed services for the public good, and in the national or nationalist interest. As Chapter 1 suggests, the institutionalisation and subsequent development of social science, political economy, eugenics, ethnography, geography and anthropology can partly be explained in terms of their ‘scientific’ legitimations of ‘big-nation’ nationalism and colonial expansion. Like the German geographer and social Darwinist Friedrich Ratzel, they believed that the struggle for survival literally involved a struggle for space (Ratzel, 1898, p. 356). To unionist nationalists everywhere, in Ireland, mainland Europe and North America, it also involved mastery of nature on a grand scale. Until the rise of the Irish Home Rule movement this resulted in the political incorporation of minority peoples within the folds of the powerful nation.

In challenging the prerogative of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy to own Irish resources and represent Irish people, the ethnic intelligentsia in Ireland were insisting that the Irish were as worthy of ‘peoplehood’ – and a homeland – as any other nationality. They transformed Irishmen and Irishwomen from mere ‘serial numbers’ in an Anglo-centric landscape into people in their own right. The
Irish now were a people who literally had a right to self-determination in their ‘own land’. In so doing the Irish intelligentsia reacted against the ‘hegemonism of possessing’ that was such a distinctive feature of English rule from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.

This study suggests that nations, whatever their scale, were historical ‘happenings’ and geographical constructs. They were rarely abstract ‘imagined communities’ as Anderson implies (Anderson, 1983, p. 15). They were never the ‘natural’ homelands of ‘peoples’ as nationalists insist. They entailed tremendous amounts of social and environmental engineering from a very early stage in the evolution of national modernities. They authenticated themselves, or more accurately had structures of authenticity imposed upon them. Thus unionist nationalists invented tradition, ethnicised historical records, claimed territory for the powerful nation, dismissed the demands of minority peoples and rival nationalities, and marginalised the interests of the socially subordinate. This study also suggests that nationalisms in Ireland were always expressions of practical politics. As such nationalism, whether in unionist or national separatist garb, was rooted in concrete socio-historical formations and in well-defined geographical milieux. That is why this study does not take the historical or geographical logic of Irish nationalists, unionist nationalists or Ulster Unionists for granted. It seeks to avoid the ethnic historicism of Anthony Smith (1986), the cultural reductionism of Benedict Anderson (1983) and Homi Bhabha (1990) and the economic reductionism of Hobsbawm (1962, 1988), Wallerstein (1974) and Nairn (1977). It recognises the inter-relatedness of intellectual, social, economic and political forces underlying the quite different and frequently contentious processes of nation-building that emerged in Ireland over the course of four centuries or more.

This study also emphasises the social class and ethnic origins of the organic intelligentsia. These ‘organisational men’ not only defended the historical legitimacy of the ‘historic’ nation on the one hand, or the ‘Irish nation’ on the other – they literally ‘realised’ their versions of the ‘imagined community’ in very concrete terms in the contested terrains of nation-building Ireland. They also fostered the political and cultural hegemony of the nation-building petty bourgeoisie. That is why this study devotes as much space to the structuring agencies of national consciousness as it does to the ideals of nation-builders, and to nationalist and unionist idealists.
In rejecting categorisations of the country as an ‘English colony’, this study views Ireland as a building block of the unionist nation from the seventeenth century onwards. Chapters 1 to 3 suggest that racist defences of nation-building here regularly constructed Ireland as a barbarous wilderness in need of taming by civilised ‘planters’. Viewed thus seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Ireland was inhabited by ‘good’ settlers who were relentlessly ‘stalked’ by the ‘barbaric’ Irish. The latter, it was argued, were wilfully intent upon wrecking plantation projects for transforming Ireland into a ‘home country’ of the English nation. English visitors regularly painted Ireland as a country without history in any uplifting, ennobling or evolutionary sense. English settlers in Ireland placed England at the civilised centre of an otherwise disorderly world. They insisted that Ireland’s proper place literally lay within an expansionist, nation-building Britain. They deemed themselves to be equipped with all the skills necessary for incorporating premodern Gaelic society into the modern English nation. They literally had mastery over the native Irish, and over Irish nature, and as such deserve to be ranked among the first lords of humankind. Chapter 2 suggests that modern demography as ‘political arithmetic’ had its roots in this Anglo-centric tradition of writing about Ireland and the Irish (Mac Laughlin, 1999d, p. 327). This tradition insisted that improvements in the ‘common weal’ could only be achieved when those guided by reason, rather than by custom or historical tradition, were granted land and entrusted with public office. Analysing the works of Hobsbawm, Gramsci, Anderson and Wallerstein, Chapters 3 and 4 show how nations were the building blocks of bourgeois society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This gave rise to a major paradox of nationalism, i.e. the most vociferous defenders of the rights of nations were themselves responsible for hostile constructs of minority nationalities as ‘Balkanising forces’. They also reduced those living beyond the narrow metropolitan world of western Europe to the status of ‘inferior peoples’ and ‘colonial subordinates’. They condemned Irish nationalism because it threatened the integrity of the ‘historic’ nation and challenged an English modernity in Ireland. The Irish had challenged a whole range of Enlightenment values in Ireland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the nineteenth century they rejected ‘big-nation’ nationalism in Ireland and challenged the very structures of British modernity. Yet Hobsbawm is historically and geographically incorrect in arguing that claims to nationhood based upon such ‘unfashionable traits’ as ethnicity, religion, language and shared historical experiences
were chiefly confined to the post-colonial half of the twentieth century (Hobsbawm, 1977, p. 5). Nationalism as national separatism in Ireland has a far more ancient history than that. It goes back at least to the eighteenth century when Irish nationalists staked their claims to nationhood precisely upon these distinctive traits. Similarly, Ulster Unionists revealed themselves as defenders of the ‘historic’ unionist nation in Ireland, and as successful separatists who wanted no part in the irredentism of Irish nationalism. As Chapter 8 shows, they based their defence of the Union on quasi-racial arguments regarding the ‘inability’ of ‘lesser peoples’ to govern themselves or rule ‘successful people’ like Ulster Protestants. They believed that nationalist Ireland could not go it alone in a new world order of powerful nations, colonised countries and peripheral minorities. Thus unionist nationalism in Ulster had its own rationale and a considerably longer pedigree which predated the rise of national separatism and Home Rule in the nineteenth century. It was rooted in a much deeper landscape of nation-building in Great Britain and Ireland and was saturated in a highly racialised tradition of state formation which, since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, insisted that Ireland’s proper place was in the United Kingdom.

Chapters 7 to 10 show how the battle to win the plebeian sectors of Catholic Ireland to the cause of nation-building occupied most of Ireland’s ‘long nineteenth century’. It involved not only constitutional and revolutionary contestations with ‘English rule’ in Catholic Ireland. It also entailed a struggle for ‘hearts and minds’ by an organic intelligentsia who struggled to incorporate the subordinate poor into the nation-building world of their social class ‘betters’. In the event the pragmatic ‘new Ireland’ of the late nineteenth century was radically different from more idealistic versions of Ireland and Irishness dreamed up by nationalist intellectuals. Despite the vigour of the cultural renaissance, the radicalism of plebeian politics, and the intellectual strengths of revolutionary thinkers, the country fell to men of property, not least to the substantial tenantry, owners of industry, the shopocracy and clergymen. They literally ‘built’ Catholic Ireland and Unionist Ulster. Catholic Ireland was a country constructed by and for hegemonic sectors in Irish society. Thus this study suggests that nationalism was not ‘achieved’ through a mass conversion of the subordinate poor to the state-centred agendas of their social superiors. It was achieved instead by priests, nuns, teachers, newspapermen and political propagandists who struggled relentlessly to convince the poor that their best interests lay in a
nationalist Ireland under the leadership of ‘natural leaders’ drawn from the petty bourgeoisie. In this ‘other Ireland’ the pulpit and the national school forged citizens out of what remained of the Irish poor after famine, poverty, emigration and unemployment sapped their energies and depleted their ranks. In the event the Irish poor became citizens of the small Irish nation, subjects of a Catholic power that ranged well beyond the narrow ground of nationalist Ireland. Because the gospel of nationalism was preached from the same altars as the Christian gospels, the Catholic poor often found it difficult to know where the spiritual pronouncements of their religious superiors left off, and where their class preferences and political teachings took over.
1 The Naturalisation of Nation-building in the Nineteenth Century: The Anomalies of Minority Nations

Nationalism and the Modern Nation-state

One of the major paradoxes surrounding the study of nationalism is the fact that, despite the duration of the process in the metropolitan world at least, theories of nation-building and nationalism are of relatively recent origin (Blaut, 1987; Breuilly, 1982; Davis, 1978; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990; Hroch, 1985; Smith, 1981). This is all the more surprising in view of the fact that the nineteenth century was an age of nation-building which also witnessed the coming of age of the social and political sciences. For most of that century, however, the study of nationalism was imbued with nationalist and anti-nationalist sentiments inherited from highly charged racist, nationalist and anti-nationalist environments. The nineteenth was clearly also a century which, for the most part, frowned upon minority expressions of nationalism and ethno-nationalism. It was a time when everything was done to prevent Europe’s ethnic and nationalist minorities from engaging in nation-building. On the other hand nationalism-as-national-unification was the nation-building norm for much of the nineteenth century. This expressed itself as Unionism in the contested terrains of nineteenth-century nation-building Ireland. It was equally evident in the powerful drives for national unification in Germany and Italy in the 1860s and 1870s (Clark, 1998; Rietbergen, 1998). This brand of nationalism had its origins in post-Revolutionary France in the late eighteenth century. It was especially important in class-divided industrial Britain in the nineteenth century. Indeed it was encouraged precisely because it contributed to a politics of national – if not nationalist – consensus while all the while fostering the growth of strong multinational nation-states. As an expression of ‘big-nation’ nationalism this genre of nationalism was never meant to apply to
minority nationalities – let alone minority nations – like for example the Irish, the Welsh, the Bretons or the Basques (Williams, 1984a, p. 114). From the start it cast serious doubt on the ability of these small nations, and other European ethnic minorities, to go it alone in a nineteenth-century world consisting of a handful of powerful nation-states lording it over myriad national minorities at home and a whole range of politically subordinate colonial societies abroad.

National separatism, especially minority expressions of nationalism – as in Irish nationalism and Basque nationalism – were to be resisted because they threatened the territorial integrity of some of western Europe’s most powerful nation-states like late-nineteenth-century Britain and Spain (de Cortazar and Espinosa, 1994, p. 284; Heiberg, 1989). Minority nationalisms were also condemned because it was felt they could give bad example to struggling nationalities in central and eastern Europe and to colonial elites in countries as far apart as India and South Africa. Ethno-nationalist and national separatist movements were still being disparaged as ‘Balkanising’ forces as recently as the 1960s. They too were seen to threaten the breakup of highly centralised state systems and encourage the transformation of the late colonial world into innumerable nation-states. Elie Kedourie, a leading student of nationalism in the 1960s, rekindled this scepticism towards post-war expressions of nationalism when he suggested that this was an ideology that was invented in the nineteenth century but was now a redundant, even a retrogressive force in the brave new world of the 1950s and 1960s (Kedourie, 1960, 1971). Kedourie, writing of the nineteenth century, was clearly addressing a post-war western world that was witnessing the breakup of European empires. He insisted that nationalism was simply one of a whole series of Kantian Enlightenment doctrines which undermined world order and upset an old global political status quo. National liberation struggles, including the new anti-imperial nationalisms of the colonial world, were to be reviled because they threatened the destruction of this European world order which, some argued, had not yet reached its full developmental potential.

Hans Kohn, writing around the same time as Kedourie, was also extremely pessimistic about the future of nation-building and nationalism in the modern world. Writing between two world wars which saw Europe torn apart by international warfare, Kohn suggested that ‘errors of judgement’ regarding the centrality of nationalism in historical affairs contributed greatly to these global conflagrations (Kohn, 1955, p. 89). Bemoaning the lack of a