

Institution: University of Oxford
Unit of Assessment: 30
Title of case study: Changing Perceptions of Modern Irish Nationalism
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>The peace process in Northern Ireland and recent Anglo-Irish rapprochement has spurred fresh interest in new approaches to Irish history that venture beyond the traditional confines of nationalism. In a series of books, public lectures, essays and broadcasts over the last 20 years, Roy Foster has offered a distinctive perspective on the development of Irish history and identity, rejecting the idea of the uniqueness of Irish nationalism and showing how Irish and British culture and history have developed in dialogue with each other. Challenging inherited perceptions of Anglo-Irish exchanges, he has enhanced the quality of media representations and public discussion of Irish history, and improved public understanding of our shared past (and future).</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Much of Foster's research has been devoted to reconsidering long-conventional views of Irish history and British-Irish relations. Distinctive to his work has been a profound engagement with Irish culture, through which he has shown how Irish nineteenth and twentieth-century culture and politics developed in Britain as well as in Ireland. He shows that even the most nationalist figures in early twentieth century Ireland were often Protestant or deeply influenced by English cultural models. A leading cultural figure himself, Foster's work restores a humanity and complexity to the study of Irish history that was repressed through the years of nationalist isolationism.</p> <p>The overall significance of his work is fourfold. First, Foster's work has re-ordered the received version of Irish political and cultural independence, re-establishing a more open-ended version of possibilities in – for instance – the period of 'experimental Unionism' in the very early nineteenth century (with a comparative look at contemporary Scotland). Second, he has re-evaluated the extent to which W.B. Yeats remained an intersectional figure in Irish-British culture as well as a 'founding father' of Irish cultural autonomy. Third, he has analysed the cultural and social projects involved in the idea of 'independence' and republicanism in the early twentieth century, and the extent to which they were abandoned in the autonomous Ireland that emerged. Finally, he has taken a sceptical and critical view of more recent events, including the effects of the upheavals in Northern Ireland since 1969 on the polity and self-image of the Republic and the extent of the economic 'miracle' in 1990s Ireland.</p> <p>Since the appearance of <i>Paddy and Mr Punch</i> in 1993, a study of cultural and political interactions between Britain and Ireland, Foster has explored the entwined narratives of history and culture between Britain and Ireland, most notably in his two-volume biography of W.B. Yeats and his times (1997, 2003). This prize-winning biography has been hugely influential and has been very widely read. The research behind this body of work involved wide reading in contemporary Irish literature (polemical, historical and creative) during the period of the Union and independence, tracing the enormous corpus of Yeats's manuscripts and correspondence in Britain, Ireland and the USA. Foster followed this with a book and exhibition (with Fintan Cullen) at the National Portrait Gallery about the Irish in Victorian London (2005), and a study of nineteenth-century Irish literature and British-Irish cultural exchange (2010).</p> <p>Foster's range covers the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with works on the competing narratives of Irish history (2001), and a book about the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' period of recent Irish history (2007) and analysing the work of contemporary Irish writers with a cross-channel and global dimension, such as Sebastian Barry and C��lm Toib��n. His most recent project is 'Making a Revolution in Ireland' (Ford Lectures 2012), to be published as a book in 2014, which focuses on the intellectuals who made the 1916 uprising.</p>

Impact case study (REF3b)

Foster was awarded the Wolfson Research Chair in 2009. The Chair (2009-12, worth £150,000), was one of only four awarded out of 174 applicants; the British Academy describe it as one of their most prestigious awards – the letter of appointment explaining that ‘the four successful candidates were chosen for the outstanding quality of their Research proposals and for their achievement as scholars able to share the excitement of their work with a broad audience.’

All the above research has been conducted since Foster’s appointment as first Carroll Professor of Irish History at the University of Oxford in 1991.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

1. *W.B. Yeats, A Life, I: The Apprentice Mage, 1865-1914* (Oxford: OUP, 1997) and *II: The Arch-Poet, 1915-1939* (Oxford: OUP, 2003). Available upon request.
The Apprentice Mage won the James Tait Black Prize for Biography, and *The Arch-Poet* was shortlisted for the British Academy Book Prize.
2. *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making It Up in Ireland* (London: Penguin, 2001). Available on request.
The Irish Story won the Christian Gauss Prize for Literary Criticism awarded by the Phi Beta Kappa Society and was short-listed for the Orwell Prize.
3. (with Fintan Cullen) *Conquering England: the Irish in Victorian London* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2005). Available upon request.
4. *Luck and the Irish: A Brief History of Change, c. 1970-2000* (London: Penguin, 2007). Available upon request.
5. ‘Changed Utterly? Transformation and Continuity in Late Twentieth-Century Ireland’, *Historical Research*, 80.209 (August 2007): 419-41 [DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2281.2007.00411.x] (Peer-reviewed journal).
6. ‘Forward to Methuselah: The Progress of Nationalism’ in Terence Dooley (ed.), *Ireland’s Polemical Past: Views of Irish History in Honour of R.V. Comerford* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2010). Submitted for REF2 (N03).

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Foster’s interpretation of Irish history has sparked wide popular and academic interest. It has been disseminated through the curation of exhibitions and media appearances on radio and television, as well as through numerous public lectures and publications. All of his books have been published in paperback as well as hardback editions, and sold widely (*Luck and the Irish* sold 14,000 in hardback alone, almost all after 1 January 2008). The public impact of Foster’s work has, before the REF period, been well-expressed in citations for honorary degrees, including Trinity College, Dublin (2003), Birkbeck (2006), Aberdeen (1997), and Queen’s University Belfast (1998). Foster’s re-reading of Irish history has changed perceptions of the ‘national story’ across a wide front: it has contributed to a new view, both of the complex and sometimes antagonistic history of British–Irish relations, and between Northern Ireland and the rest of the country. His work has had a decisive effect in contributing to a new political language between Ireland and Britain, as can be attested by, for example, Colm Tóibín (Prize-winning novelist and public commentator), Bobby McDonagh (former Irish ambassador to Britain, 2009-13), and Mary Robinson (former President of the Irish Republic, 1990-7) [2-4]. He is a central figure in the public presence of Irish history and culture both in the Irish Republic and in the UK, as shown particularly in his numerous newspaper articles, interviews (for a selection of both since 2008, see [v]), and in his collaboration in major TV work, as section 2 below shows.

1. Improving Public Understanding of Modern Irish History, Culture, Politics

The impact of Foster’s study of Ireland in the ‘Celtic Tiger’ years, *Luck and the Irish*, was affirmed

in a range of four-star reviews in the UK, Ireland and the USA, culminating in Cólom Toibín's lead review for the influential New York *Bookforum* (April-May 2008) [i].

Foster's work on key Irish literary figures has also made him a prominent figure within contemporary Irish culture. He has chaired and run the Ewart-Biggs Prize, a high-profile award given to writers, film-makers, journalists, playwrights etc. for a work increasing understanding between the peoples of Britain and of Ireland, North and South, since 1977 [ii].

Foster also helped found the British Association of Irish Studies (established 1985), an organisation which has done much to raise the profile of Irish matters in Britain, outside academe as well as within it, and which is highly active; he continues to be closely involved in it, as the website shows [iii].

2. Enhancing the quality of media representations of Irish History

The cumulative effect of the re-reading of Irish history over the last two centuries provided by Foster's work has been reflected in a wide range of interviews and television programmes in both the UK and the Irish Republic. In the REF period, examples from TV are the 'One to One' interview with Bryan Dobson on RTE, 16 June 2008; and 'William Crawley Meets...' on BBC Northern Ireland, 11 Nov. 2009. From radio, examples are 'In Our Time' with Melvyn Bragg, Radio 4, 17 April 2008 and 26 Feb. 2009.

In particular, Foster acted as the presiding consultant and script editor of a major television series presented by Fergal Keane, 'The Story of Ireland' (in which he also appeared frequently as a commentator and interviewee). It was broadcast by BBC and RTE in 2011, averaging 1.2 million viewers per episode and gaining top audience-satisfaction figures; RTE have since repeated it twice; it achieved live viewing-figures in Ireland of approximately 250,000 and an audience-share of 21% (the usual figure for programmes of this sort is 5%). The makers of the programmes received many emails from individual people in Ireland and Britain and the USA, praising the series for altering the perspectives they had inherited from childhood stories. For example, the headmistress of a school in County Roscommon wrote on 10 March 2011: 'There's a fantastic reaction to the whole series here in Ireland. We need more of this sort of stuff for our young (and OURSELVES) to know and appreciate our history. Well done to the whole team.' It was also widely reviewed in the press, and excited a great deal of comment, mostly favourable (e.g. with a review in the *Independent*), and some polemical (for example, from the Irish blogosphere, 'The correct title of the series should have been, *My (well really the revisionist historian Roy Foster's) Version of the Story of Ireland* by Fergal Keane OBE...'), which well attests to the impact the series had and to Foster's central role in its conception [iv].

The best indication of the significance and wide impact of the series can be found in the words of Fergal Keane himself, who wrote: 'In 35 years as a journalist I have never before experienced such a positive and enduring level of feedback for a work with which I have been involved. In both Ireland and Britain, and among those interested in Irish history across the world, the series achieved something very rare in modern television: an informed, intelligent and fruitful debate and a real sense that wider public knowledge of an often difficult and painful history had been advanced. The fact that the series has been broadcast three times in Ireland speaks loudly for the impact it made on audiences there. A recurring theme in the comments from viewers is an appreciation for the rigorous intellectual honesty of the series, the refusal to accept old myths as historical fact. With Professor Roy Foster as our series advisor it could not have been any other way. He demanded the highest standards from all involved and in doing so ensured the success of the series. His influence at every stage of the process – from initial meetings, through scripting and editing – was immense. When young Irish people come up to me in the streets of Dublin, Cork or Belfast to commend the honesty of the series they are paying tribute to the rigour of Professor Roy Foster.' [1]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Testimony

[1]: Email from BBC Television Producer of "The Story of Ireland".

Key Irish authorities are also prepared to attest to the continuing public impact of Foster's work, including its remarkable effect on Irish culture and historical memory more widely. This corroboration is available from:

[2] Prize-winning novelist and public commentator.

[3] A former Irish Ambassador to Britain.

[4] A former President of Ireland.

Other sources of corroboration

[i]: http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/015_01/2265

[ii]: <http://www.ewartbiggsprize.org.uk>

[iii]: <http://sites.brunel.ac.uk/bais>

[iv]: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/reviews/last-nights-tv--the-story-of-ireland-bbc2-all-watched-over-by-machines-of-loving-grace-bbc2-2288129.html>
<http://www.boards.ie/vbulletin/showthread.php?p=71222289>

[v]: some recent newspaper articles and interviews:

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/dec/13/celtic-tiger-ireland-bankers-people>

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jun/15/saville-inquiry-marks-milestone-to-peace>

<http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/roy-foster/macmansions-cellars-and-garrets-surveying-new-ireland-1>

<http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/the-critics/roy-foster>

<http://www.thefuturestate.org.uk/professor-roy-foster-ireland-past-and-present-radical-perspective/>

<http://www.rte.ie/news/2008/0616/onetoone.html>