

The Making and Remaking of Irish History: An Interview with Vincent Comerford

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Introduction: Prof. Vincent Comerford

On Tuesday, 26 April 2016, I sat down with former head of History at Maynooth University, Professor Vincent Comerford, to chat about the current state of the discipline, about changes within history over time and the telling of Irish history, and about the centennial commemorations of Ireland's 1916 Rising. Prof. Comerford is originally from Tipperary and came to Maynooth in 1962, where he studied for his undergraduate and Master's degree. He then attended Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and earned his PhD with the guidance and supervision of T. W. Moody. Subsequently, he became a lecturer in History at Maynooth in 1977, and was appointed Professor of Modern History and head of department in 1989, remaining in post until his retirement in 2010. At Maynooth he supervised more than thirty PhD theses on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland, and oversaw a great expansion in the size of the History department and the scope of its activities. Professor Comerford's bibliography includes: Charles J. Kickham: A Study in Irish Nationalism and Literature (1979); The Fenians in Context: Irish Politics and Society, 1848-82 (1985); and Ireland: Inventing the Nation (2003). Comerford also contributed the primary narrative for the period 1850-91 to A New History of Ireland. He has edited several collections and written numerous articles that focus on Irish nationalism and nineteenth century Irish history. The following is a transcript of our (just-over-one-hour-long) conversation.

Q. *The SAH Journal is multi-disciplinary. How do you see the relationship between History and other disciplines?*

A. *When I became committed to history in my early twenties, I still found it difficult to pin down a rationale for the subject. I loved doing it but, looking at the range of disciplines, each of the others seemed to have some very defined and serious role in the scheme of knowledge, while with History you have to justify doing something that looks like pure indulgence. History is about the past but of course many other disciplines are interested in the past as are many individuals in literature and all the creative arts. And people who exercise political*

power or aspire to it have always been interested in using the past. So then, what is different about what historians do?

I think the thing is that the discipline of History, as it has developed and evolved, has a special relationship with evidence. When a historian makes a statement about the past, the expectation is that it is related to evidence—which is not to suggest that any two historians will make the same statement in response to the same evidence. Other disciplines call on evidence from a relevant sphere, possibly in the past, to explore specific hypotheses or theories related to a body of disciplinary concerns. For historians the testing of hypotheses, or even the construction of narratives, never quite sidelines reveling in the specificity of what the sources reveal. So, while doing History can mean dealing with the mighty and their institutions, it can also mean savoring the details of the contingent and the forgotten. The opportunity to track and even touch the contingent traces of earlier lives, great, small and in-between, is probably the great attraction of History.

Is this of any benefit? Well, whatever about more tangible rewards, it brings intellectual and emotional satisfaction. Perhaps touching past lives in this way is a mechanism for coping with the complexities of existence. The particularity of life matters. It may be telling that when people get the opportunity to return to formal education as students of mature years, a high proportion of them tend towards History. But there is no justification for being prescriptive about this—many perfectly well-adjusted people have little or no interest in trying to understand in any detail how what is around them now relates to what has happened in earlier times.

Q. Are you suggesting that History and historians have little need of the other disciplines?

A. On the contrary. Given that History is so empirical in its methodology and so uncircumscribed in its reach, it needs to constantly draw on concepts from the Humanities and Social Sciences that enable it to relate to the ever-changing wider learned discourses of the age. We can't really talk for very long in an interesting way about the past without using the categories and concepts that are derived from the other disciplines, and I think that is a very important thing to recognize. Democracy, the proletariat, modernisation, the bourgeoisie, Giffen goods, the imagined community and many other concepts that we rely on to talk about the past were coined and defined in other disciplinary territories.

At the same time, it has to be said that historians tend to have a very strong sense for when a book about the past is History or Social Science. For obvious reasons with the practice of History, undergraduates who are also taking another subject is most desirable. No discipline is sufficient unto itself. And History would be crippled without languages and literatures, for instance. For linguistic and other reasons History students, even as undergraduates, can benefit not only from other disciplines, but especially from taking a semester or two to see how things are done elsewhere. History needs wider contacts especially in order to avoid falling behind with respect to epistemology. By comparison with even a few decades ago historians have learned to be much more circumspect now in making assertions about 'the facts', or 'what actually happened'. The historian is endeavouring to achieve the most credible interpretation of the evidence as it now stands and is now understood, not some perpetually valid verdict. Also I should say that the practice of History, as I have attempted to describe it, is not confined to History departments—individual practitioners can also be found, for example, in many Geography and Literature departments.

Q. What changes in the discipline of History in your time have interested you most?

A. Down to the 1960s history writing in this part of the world was preponderantly about nations. But even more basic than that, going back at least to the early nineteenth century, and not just in Ireland of course, history was written on the basis that you can explain things through racial origins. There was English history writing which distinguished between the public character of the population in one part of England compared to another, on the basis of what percentage Anglo-Saxon they were. A great change came with the reception of E P Thompson's Marxist-inspired work on the English working class in the early 1960s.¹ The eventual result of Marxist influence was an amalgam of political, social and cultural history writing, best represented by the works of Eric Hobsbawm.² Despite all the 'turns' that History has taken in the past forty years, I suspect that Hobsbawm (rather than, say, any of the New Historicists) is still the single greatest influence on how History is written in Britain and Ireland.

In the early 1980s, as the Soviet Union and the socialist project generally lost credibility ethnicity and nationalism became the subject of intensive analysis, by social scientists and historians. Existentialist and structuralist critiques undermined essentialist and 'primordial' understandings of the nation, leaving them as indefensible as Ptolemaic astronomy. That realization will however take some time to settle in fully. All of this has implications that go beyond 'identity' issues. In every area of History there is no avoiding the need to consider what people and institutions are doing as distinct from what they represent themselves as doing. What people are saying on platforms is one thing (and of course it can be extremely interesting and important when taken at face value), but it is even more interesting when placed in context to be assessed as evidence for its wider meaning. The point is not so much discovering what people are deliberately concealing as much as the things they do not know they are hiding.

Also, I think developments in information and communications technology have touched on History in numerous ways that have been fascinating to experience. Take the British Parliamentary Papers, a source of inestimable importance for Ireland from 1800 onwards. Down to the 1960s, a scholar intending to work on a full set had to travel to Britain. In the early 1970s, Irish Academic Press published about ten percent of the papers in a magnificent bound format, and at an enormous price geared to wealthy American and Japanese libraries. Two decades later the full set became available at a reasonable price in the non-user-friendly format of the microfiche. Now it is available online in searchable format at a price that any research library can afford. The explosion of accessible source material is a challenge and an opportunity, and there is no telling where it will ultimately lead. In the most recent *American Historical Review*, for example, Lara Putnam demonstrated how the dramatic rise of transnational history in the past decade is linked to the massively enhanced access to sources made possible by digitization. As far as the reception of history writing is concerned, serious new complications have been introduced into the understanding between author and publisher on one hand and reader on the other, about the relationship of written History to evidence.

¹ For example, such seminal studies by Thompson as his 1963 published work *The Making of the English Working Class* (Penguin UK, 2002).

² For example, Eric Hobsbawm's trilogy of studies from the 1960s: *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789-1848*, *The Age of Capital: 1848-1875* and *The Age of Empire: 1875-1914*. Also see *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge University Press, 1990); *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

Q. Can you perhaps speak something to Irish women's history and an emergence of a necessary corrective within the discipline?

A. Nothing evidences the success of History over the past half century so much as the multiplication of specializations within the discipline. The American Historical Association's taxonomy now recognizes (superimposed on more than one hundred and fifty temporal/geographical categories) no less than sixty thematic categories. A gratifyingly large number of these are represented among History of Ireland specialists, at home and abroad, but only a small proportion are formally organized with functioning agencies. Among the most prominent of these is Women's History. The emergence of Women's History as a thematic category was largely contemporaneous with the arrival of women in university in large numbers as part of the expansion of the 1970s. That was a vital first step in putting right long-standing imbalances. The formal establishment of Women's History served to challenge all historians to set about redressing ingrained prejudice against, and dismissal of, half the population both in contemporary society and in the representation of the past. It would be foolish to suggest that either objective has been fully achieved, and recidivism is always a threat, but substantial progress has undoubtedly been made over the intervening decades. At this point the study of the role of women in the Irish past is feasible both within the structures of the thematic category or in the general disciplinary field, and it is undoubtedly valuable that this choice is available.

Q. What thoughts do you have on the state of History in Ireland now and how Irish history is being told?

A. It seems obvious that research on the Irish past is flourishing not only in Ireland but also in several other parts of the world. Equally importantly, the study of the past of other parts of the world is also well grounded in Irish universities. If you were to go back forty, fifty, sixty years just about everybody doing History professionally in Ireland knew one another and shared interaction, friendly or otherwise, especially at the biennial Irish Conference of Historians. Now there is not one single community of historians in Ireland, but many partially overlapping communities which range far beyond the island, and indeed these islands.

A very important thing to be said about the discipline in Ireland is that from the late 1930s with the launching of the thirty-two-county *Irish Historical Studies*, it became possible—indeed the norm—for academic historians to write the History of Ireland in a way that rose above the bitter nationalist v. unionist animosities of the period in which their universities were deeply implicated. This was a remarkable achievement for the profession at that time. So, contrary to frequently-repeated assertions in more recent times, it was not in response to the onset of the Troubles in the late 1960s, but thirty years earlier, that mainstream Irish historiography began to eschew confessional flag-waving and the justification of atavistic animosities. This practice became the target in the 1980s of a Cultural Revolutionary campaign denouncing 'revisionism'. Raw emotions from the Troubles were to the fore. Personality clashes, resentments and personal ambitions were not far in the background. Interestingly, with very few exceptions the small number of academic historians who countenanced the anti-revisionist charge continued themselves to write and publish in the non-partisan mode. The principal outcome was to validate recourse to grimly nationalist or 'anti-colonial' tropes in the treatment of the Irish past and present within disciplines other than History. This was an entirely redundant effect. And irrespective of the stances of any academic discipline the animosities of the Irish situation endure, and provide the driving force of significant amounts of popular representation of the past—including a large segment of the newly-flourishing genre of the graphic book.



Q. Are you concerned about no-go areas in Irish History?

A. History is necessarily confined to that part of the human past for which we have evidence, but de facto it's also limited to the areas of the past that we can actually talk about. In many societies and I suppose in any society at any particular time there are aspects of the past that are so contentious that it is difficult to have a dialogue about them, or indeed even to obtain a hearing for a particular viewpoint, and that is something to think about. For example, for thirty or forty years following the Irish Civil War any reference to the conflict or its principal protagonists was parsed to see which side it backed in a binary judgmental framework in which most of the political life of the day was invested. Unsurprisingly, the subject received little attention from historians. Fields of past life can also be written off not because they are too contentious but because they are beyond contention, typically because actors have been demonized to justify some major social upheaval. A case in point is the Irish land question—down to the 1970s the only kind of commentary on the topic for which there was any public hearing in this jurisdiction was denunciation of landlords. An interesting subject for round-table discussion would be the identification of topics that are currently neglected because of being out of fashion, demonized, or otherwise unattractive. Disputes in recent years about aspects of death by shooting in County Cork in the 1920-22 period have at times engendered such extreme bitterness that the issue seemed to be moving out of the realm of historical discourse.

Q. What do you make of the on-going 1916 commemorations, and the way the Irish past is interpreted?

A. The Easter Rising, from a historian's perspective, comprises a number of distinct but related issues. In the first instance it is a significant historical event, the centenary of which encourages a bout of public interest, scholarly research and topical publication. All of this is enhanced by the availability in recent times of masses of new archival material, much of it online. However, Easter 1916, like the siege of Londonderry in 1688 or the fall of the Bastille

in 1789, is also an event that has been given mythic status. An event which actually happened, is completely documented and all the rest of it, can also be mythologized. This means heightened popular awareness and a magnifying distortion of the evidence. It has been elevated to the realm of the mystical, in a process that is replicated in one form or another in most societies. This came about because the Rising produced a leadership cadre that within three years seized the helm of politicized Irish nationalism and established the iconic event that they 'owned' as the foundational event of an idealized nation state. This notion of the Rising as a crucial turning point has been boosted mightily by those disapproving of what the rebellion represents, most notably Conor Cruise O'Brien.

Easter 1916 is the point at which everything came together, or things fell apart, depending on which one of two simplistic points of view one is advocating. It suits the purposes of those on both sides to proclaim that the Easter resort to arms derailed what would otherwise have been an inevitable progress to a Home Rule settlement after the Great War. This, however, flies in the face of the evidence. Irish party politics, unionist and nationalist, had been militarized since 1913-14; no dramatic intervention was necessary in order to ensure that blood would flow in Ireland; and the prevention of fighting at Easter 1916 would not have precluded later violence. The achievement of an Irish Republic cannot be shown to have been advanced by its proclamation in 1916. While most of the newly independent nations were internationally recognized republics by 1920, Ireland did not claim that distinction until 1949.

Historians, it is fair to say, are having a challenging time injecting into the popular discourse of the centenary a measured assessment of the consequences of the Rising. Prevailing distortions in popular coverage in respect of the antecedents of 1916 are even more disquieting. You, David, will be keenly aware as a specialist in the history of Irish-America in the nineteenth century of what a stretch is involved in depicting Easter 1916 as the foundational moment of modern Ireland. Indeed, most of the socio-political culture of independent Ireland was a development from the nineteenth century. The kind of mythic commemoration involved in the 1916 centenary celebrations is practiced in many countries, and nowhere more thoroughly than in Britain, with the annual ritual that culminates at the Cenotaph on Remembrance Sunday. As with the GPO at Easter, there is vicarious participation in blood sacrifice. A prime function of such practices—which appeal to some very deep human tendencies—is to draw people together, discourage dissent and inculcate respect for leaders. Inculcation of a simplistic and evasive, or even delusional, sense of the group's place in the world is also an integral feature. Thus, at the Cenotaph, there is a formal representation of the scores of countries and territories from around the globe that cover the footprint of the Empire. Yet there is no advertence to that place called Europe, where most of the millions being commemorated actually shed their blood.

All this is to say that people indulge for the occasion in the fantasy politics of imperial greatness. This might be characterized as delusional behavior, or as an exercise in therapeutic liturgy. At the GPO the equivalent fantasy politics is about the imagined people of Ireland united in an indefeasible nation under the banner of the Republic proclaimed in 1916. In March 2016 one could feast for days on speeches, broadcasts and extravaganzas of all kinds without being asked to take on board the fact that within five years of the Rising Ireland was partitioned, as it still remains. Furthermore, in May 1998 the population on both sides of the border voted by large majorities that Ireland would remain partitioned until the majority in Northern Ireland decide otherwise, and that the residents of Northern Ireland were entitled to be Irish or British, or both. This utterly deconstructs the idealist nationality of the Proclamation. The Proclamation is a powerful icon and includes some admirable sentiments

memorably expressed, but as a political blueprint it has long since been discarded in practice by the actual people of Ireland.

Along with the rituals of nationalist commemoration the Easter 1916 centenary events included an element that can more exactly be described as an exercise in patriotic affirmation. This was the parade of the state's armed forces and associated services on Easter Sunday. It evoked genuine expressions of gratitude and pride that in the minds of many were quite separate from the nationalistic aspects of the occasion.

Q. Can you say something about the state of history and the humanities in the Irish higher education system?

A. I have been away from that scene now for several years, so my knowledge of internal third-level matters is quite out of date. However, I know that measures taken in the recent economic downturn have impinged damagingly on appointments to academic posts. At a distance from institutions but from contact with early career scholars, I have a very strong sense (and this is not just applicable to History but across the Humanities) that early-career people will have great difficulty not just getting a job (that's always been the case) but also actually even getting a sense of what's happening in the area of jobs. Again, if you go back fifty or sixty years, everything was on a small scale and perhaps informal. But then from, I would say the late 1960s, as the entire system began to professionalize more fully, there was a very clear set of structures; departmental structures, and so on, and appointments and promotions procedures, which at least meant you could know where you stood. Now I have a sense that university structures have been bashed around a bit everywhere and people feel they have little sense any more of knowing who's where and what is likely to happen next. I am told that some elaborate departmental websites actually convey less solid information about staff and their status than the printed university calendars of twenty-five years ago.

Transparency will scarcely be improved if, as is reported, two universities are each adopting new and individual nomenclatures for academic staff grades. I am not opposed to change and I would be the first to say that the systems in place for forty years from the late 1960s were ready for re-assessment. For as long as anyone can remember those in the Humanities have felt threatened by policy statements about the funding of Science and Technology. The Humanities survive and hopefully will continue to thrive because there is a demand for them. People of all ages want what you have to offer them

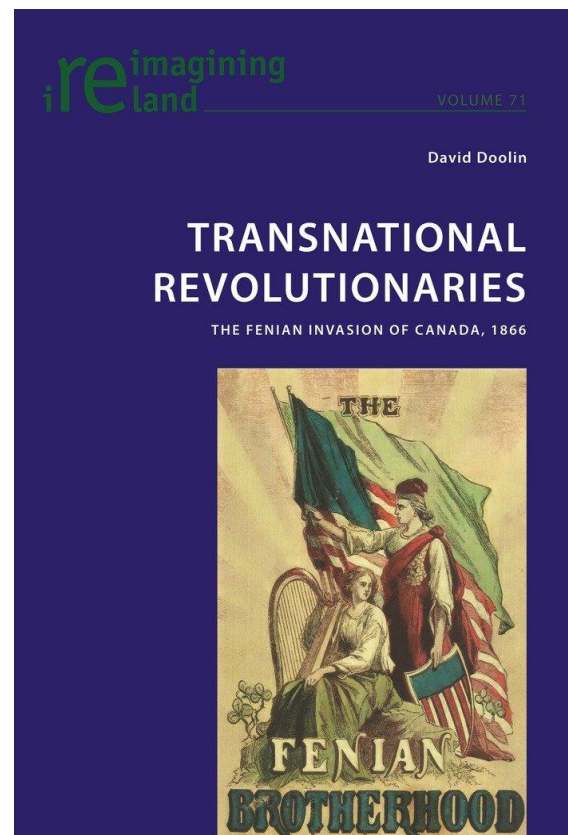
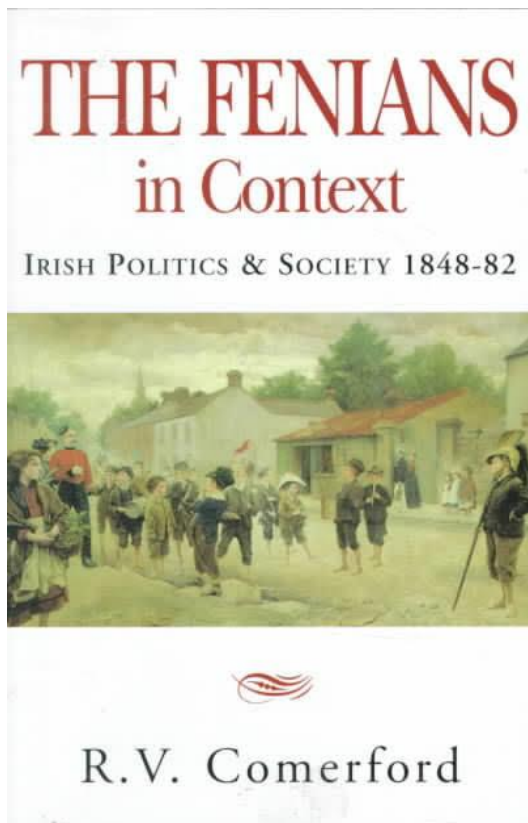
Q. And finally, considering we both have tackled the Fenians, I was wondering about your thoughts on a continuum from the Fenian founding (Stephen's IRB in Dublin/O'Mahony's Fenian Brotherhood in the United States) through to the 1916 Rising?

A. We are indulging ourselves a little at this stage. Maybe the most important thing about the Fenians is your angle, the Irish-American angle. Fenianism brings Irish America into Irish politics (or vice-versa, Irish politics into America, with invading Canada and what not), but it is fascinating to see the way in which, if there is a sense in America that there is something happening in Ireland, this can generate amazing enthusiasm among a large number of people for a short time, and a lifetime of enthusiasm among a small number of people. But in either case with significant impact for things in Ireland.

Again, I should say that the Rising of 1867 in Ireland obviously wouldn't have happened but for the American dimension. But this brings me back to the blood sacrifice; the government of the day were extremely wary of creating martyrs and when a few of the

participants were sentenced to death in Ireland, the sentences were commuted. And then in a moment of distraction in November 1867 the Cabinet decided to go ahead with the execution of Allen, Larkin, and O'Brien—the Manchester martyrs. And it is clear from one of the diaries of Lord Stanley that they were actually thinking of keeping control of incipient labour violence in British cities; there had been a few unsolved murders associated with trade unions here or there, and now they had got somebody for a violent event and so here was a chance to make an example; without adverting to the fact that this had an Irish dimension. It immediately, in the course of a few days, transformed and created an enormous storm of sympathy in Ireland and among the Catholic Irish everywhere.

The resultant embrace of Fenians by the wider Catholic community in Ireland led to many Fenians getting into politics over the following ten or fifteen years. Charles Stewart Parnell it was he who saw them [the Fenians] as potential cadres to win over, so when the agricultural crisis came in the late 1870s he was there and he had them to utilize. But again, it would all have been quite different without the American side. Parnell then went on his famous tour to the United States in late 1879 and collected a very large sum of money, which actually kept his system going to the end. The book by Michael Keyes about the funding of O'Connell and Parnell makes the point that Irish America was a tremendous source of money but that it came like monsoons, rather than as steady rain, and Parnell was there at the right time. Of course Devoy was crucial at that time as well and was still there in 1914 when the Great War broke out, having in the meantime attempted to interest five or six different countries in organizing something to disadvantage Britain. As soon as War was declared he was talking to the German consul and to German societies in New York, for example



Q. An encore question: do you have a favorite piece of writing/work of your own or is there something that you are currently reading in history (or literature or other recommendations in general) that you would recommend for anyone that is a must read?

A. One of the books that I have enthused most about in recent times is Robin Fleming's *Britain after Rome: the fall and rise, 400 to 1070*, from the Penguin History of Britain edited by David Cannadine. This is a completely fresh account of a period lacking, especially in the early stages, in literary sources. The author deploys a formidable knowledge of archaeological findings, thus providing a headline in how a historian can transform understanding of a period by use of newly available evidence. This is a study in the emergence of social and ultimately national institutions that is free of all notions of prior ethnicity and of the assumptions of 'Germanic' roots or cultures as the basis for the Anglo-Saxon kingdom. This would be a fascinating read even if it were not about the emergence of a power that has to interest a historian of Ireland. I have little patience for fiction set in historic periods reimagined by the author. However, it is another matter when a gifted observer sets out to recreate in fictional form the feel and character of a lost society that they have known or glimpsed. Such a book is Joseph Roth's depiction of the service culture of the Austro-Hungarian empire—*The Radetski March*. I got around to reading it just recently. It is a delight.