

*The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Troubles.* By Margaret M. Scull. Oxford University Press, Oxford. xii + 236p pp. ISBN 978-0-19-884321-4, £65.

Directing scholarly attention to the complex interaction between the Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland conflict, Margaret M. Scull's book constitutes an original contribution to the literature on the Church and its adherents. Scull is primarily concerned with how the Church, as both an institution and an assembly of individual subjectivities, navigated Irish republicans' long and bloody campaign against British rule. Engaging a wide range of Catholic press and diocesan material, Scull delineates the Church's changing agency through three decades of conflict.

Throughout the work, Scull contends that 'the power of personalities' is crucial to understanding the relationship between the Catholic Church and its flock – including those sections who supported, or participated in, militant republican activism. To this end, Scull provides a detailed Appendix with useful biographical information on twenty-nine noteworthy Church figures. Chapter 4 is chiefly a study of several leading members of the Catholic hierarchy, especially Tomás Ó Fiaich, whose papers are subjected to especially forensic review. Extensive research contrasts Church politics across Ireland, England, and Wales: Scull is especially strong on how the Church responded differently to the conflict across diverse political geographies. Witness, for example, the particular challenges facing Catholic clergy in British towns and cities which experienced the Provisional IRA bombing campaign, or the significance of Pope John Paul II sending an envoy to Ireland in 1981, rather than attending in person (p. 114).

Scull engages an array of primary evidence from Church sources and convincingly demonstrates the complicatedness of religious figures' public and private political interventions. The extent to which the book *explains* that complexity varies, reflecting the fundamental epistemological challenge of determining what is meant by 'the Church' and 'republicanism' in the first place. Both signify complex, heterogeneous institutions with internal hierarchies and political differences across time and space. Chapter 1 is somewhat torn between, *inter alia*, charting individual and institutional Catholic positions from 1968 to 1972, exploring contemporary press representations of clerical politics and republican insurgency, and brief oral history excerpts necessarily triggering wider debates around memory. In these sections, the lines of inquiry appear slightly blurred. Refined, more thematic research questions might have taken the analysis further by interrogating the interplay of place, class, kinships and personal networks, in shaping relationships between the Church and key actors in the conflict.

Taken in sum, there are important interventions on the Church's changing agency. Scull posits that intra-clerical dissent grew gradually throughout the conflict, contrasting grassroots Catholic initiatives and decentralised, peace-building efforts in the 1990s with the early years of conflict when 'explicit clerical dissent towards hierarchical leadership remained limited' (p.26). The author's previous research informs a discussion of the particular historical and theological debates around hunger-striking in Ireland. For Scull, republican perceptions of Machiavellian clerical conduct during the hunger strikes of 1981 – not least surrounding Father Denis Faul – were a turning point for many republicans who had hitherto tolerated the Church's political interventions (p.89). By the 1990s, the Church's institutional agency in politics diminished – not least due to revelations of clerical child abuse – while religious grassroots initiatives for peace and reconciliation became

increasingly important in facilitating cross-community dialogue (p.196). Details of entangled disputes and negotiations between the Church and republicans, for instance concerning paramilitary funerals, pervade the book, reflecting Scull's subtle framing of priests' 'liminal position, acting both as insiders protesting for change, as well as outsiders, in their efforts to maintain the peace' (p.27).

In a broad study of religious and political subjectivities in conflict, greater prominence might have been afforded to the historical and sociological insights of Oliver P. Rafferty, whose work has done much to illuminate the changes in Catholic political subjectivities with which Scull is centrally concerned. Similarly, while Scull claims at the outset that 'Marxist political theorists and sociologists have ignored religion altogether in their analyses' of the Troubles (p.5), the conceptual tools and analytical frameworks of, for example, Paul N. Siegel's *The Meek and the Militant* (2005) would have enriched the contextual underpinning of complex relationships between religion and radicalism worldwide. Brief contrasting allusions to worker-priests in 1940s France and liberation theology aside, Scull roots the discussion in an Irish and British context.

In a work which draws upon detailed reading of press and Church sources, there are occasional oversights on the nuances of republican politics and strategy. The assertion that the publicity and attendance of the Church's funeral of Official IRA victim Ranger William Best in Derry in 1972 forced the Officials to 'refine' their attitude towards the Church is debatable (p.54). Similarly, Scull lists Joe Fenton alongside Gabriel Mullaly – both killed by the Provisional IRA in February 1989 – as 'retired Catholic RUC officers' perceived to have 'betrayed' northern Catholics (p.152). In fact, the Provisionals killed Fenton as an RUC Special Branch informer.

Nevertheless, *The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Troubles* helpfully prompts broader questions for historians of the conflict. The several cases Scull highlights of leading republicans looking to the Church for vindication or publicity assistance on human rights abuses, not least in prisons, raises important questions about the sociological and historical contexts of a radical guerrilla movement looking for succour from an institution it generally regarded as an irrelevance.

Thought-provoking content makes this book a worthwhile addition to the literature on the conflict. Disaggregating Church approaches to prison protests, Chapter 3 includes original content on the complex roles of Fathers Brian McCreesh – whose brother Oliver died as an IRA hunger striker in 1981 – and Denis Faul. Insights in Chapter 5 from primary research on cross-community initiatives from the late 1980s, not least the secretive peace-building efforts emanating from Clonard Monastery, complement the work of Maria Power. This work merits an addition to the library of all researchers interested in the difficult relationships between religious and republican actors, and the internal differentiation of both.