2 Ethnicity and Ideology

INTRODUCTION

The prior existence of some kind of ethnic consciousness among a substantial proportion of the target population is critical for the emergence of ethnic nationalism. The exploitation of ethnic links via nationalist ideology necessarily draws on various historical, cultural and religious elements related to ethnic identity. Accordingly, the most important initial requirement of a nationalist movement is the construction and dissemination of a suitable ideological foundation for nurturing national sentiment and executing the political struggle of national independence. This chapter shows how ethnic nationalism first arose in each country and examines each movement's early attempts at political mobilisation. It argues that while these efforts manage to win over a committed core of support, ultimately each movement was fundamentally handicapped by the structural limitations of its nascent national organisation. It shows that while the development of a nationalist ideology grounded in language, culture and religion was essential to the establishment and early development of each movement, it was not nearly sufficient to meet the goal of taking control of the state.

IRELAND

This section argues that ethnic nationalism, in the sense of a nationalist political ideology linked to explicit ethno-cultural and linguistic demands, did not become a significant force in Ireland until the end of the nineteenth century. It suggests that prior nationalist movements and uprisings all contributed, in the context of a modernising Irish state, to a growing ethnic consciousness amongst the intelligentsia and the middle classes. Only once this was in place, and a constitutional approach to addressing national aspirations partially discredited, was a new, ethnic-based mass movement focusing on Catholic political and cultural autonomy able to establish itself.

The section begins by analysing the various nationalist and quasi-nationalist movements of the early and mid-nineteenth century. It then looks at the Land War of the 1870s and the Home Rule strategies of
Charles Stewart Parnell. Following this it examines the early movements of the new nationalism such as the Gaelic League and Gaelic Athletic Association and suggests that these marked the foundation of an ethnic nationalism. Finally it turns to the political origins of Sinn Fein and analyses the party’s early activities while seeking to explain its limited political success.

**The Origins of Irish Nationalism**

When Ireland was granted restricted political autonomy from Great Britain in 1782 Sir Henry Grattan, leader of the new Dublin parliament, declared that ‘Ireland is now a nation’. The term ‘nation’ was also widely used in Wolfe Tone’s United Irishmen movement in the period up to the failed revolt against British rule that he had led in 1798. According to the standard nationalist interpretation of Irish history, this was the period when modern Irish nationalism was born. It was under Tone that the first elements of nationalist iconography became widely used and recognised, notably the display of the green flag with the Harp of Erin. But while both Tone’s republicanism and Grattan’s parliamentarianism undoubtedly contained nationalist elements, neither grouping remotely constituted a mass-based, ethnic nationalist movement. Nor, in the first part of the nineteenth century, did Daniel O’Connell’s Catholic Association and Repeal Movement even though the organisations pursued limited ethnic mobilisation along religious lines to secure, respectively, Catholic social and political rights and the repeal of the Act of Union. Indeed, O’Connell came under withering criticism from later nationalist leaders for his neglect of issues of Irish language and history.

A far more influential precursor to Irish ethnic nationalism was the Young Ireland movement. Started by a Protestant, Thomas Davis, in the 1840s it was self-consciously styled on emerging European nationalist movements in Germany and Italy. Young Ireland introduced the romantic element critical for the emotional commitment demanded by ethnic nationalism. As one of Davis’s chief lieutenants, Charles Gavan Duffy, put it, the nationalism they promoted sought to be non-sectarian, ‘inspiring genuine emotion and comprising noble ends’. Centred on the *Nation* newspaper, the movement began to develop and propound a new, nationalist history of Ireland. It extolled the activities of Tone and the United Irishmen, and started to write about and popularise a glorious Irish past – a field which had hitherto been the preserve of only a small coterie of Protestant history