

Leaders in SHAPE: Roy Foster



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**Speaker:** Professor Roy Foster FBA

**Chair:** Professor Richard English FBA

*As part of the Leaders in SHAPE series, historian Roy Foster talks to Richard English about his life, career and the making of modern Ireland.*



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Professor Richard English FBA [00:00:00] Good evening. A very warm welcome to this event, both to those of you who are in the room here at the British Academy in London, and also to those of you who are joining us online. You're all very welcome. My name is Richard English from Queen's University Belfast. And it's my privilege to chair tonight's event here at the British Academy, the United Kingdom's national academy for humanities and social sciences.

Tonight's event forms part of the *Leaders in SHAPE* series. "SHAPE", an acronym referring to social sciences, humanities and the arts for people, the environment and the economy. And this series introduces us to people who have defined the fields of social sciences, humanities and the arts – intellectual and cultural leaders whose work has done so much to shape debates in those fields.

It's a real pleasure for me to introduce our distinguished guest tonight for this event, Professor Roy Foster. Roy Foster is an emeritus professor of history at the University of Oxford and one of the world's most distinguished historians. His celebrated and influential books include *Modern Ireland 1600 to 1972*; a magisterial two-volume biography of Yeats, *W.B. Yeats, A Life*; *Luck and the Irish: A Brief History of Change 1970 to 2000*; *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland 1890-1923*; and, most recently, *On Seamus Heaney*, published by Princeton University Press.

Professor Foster's books have deservedly won numerous prestigious awards. He has become a fellow of the British Academy, a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and an honorary member of the Royal Irish Academy. It's a real pleasure to have him with us here tonight.

Our conversation is going to focus on Professor Foster's life, his work and his career. We'll begin with some questions from me, and then we'll have a chance to have questions from the audience, both the people here in the room in Carlton House Terrace at the British Academy, and also people who are joining us online. For the online audience, if you want to post your questions, please through the Q&A function on the screens in front of you.

So, Roy, I wanted to start with Trinity College Dublin (TCD). You studied history at TCD. Could you say something about the things in your upbringing which first attracted you, which drew you to the study of history, and then something about the experience of studying history at Trinity and its influence on you?

Professor Roy Foster FBA [00:02:35] Well, it wasn't going to be history. It was the 1960s, incredibly, and we all thought economics was what made the world go round. I was signed up to do economics and political science. One week of economics in the 1960s, and Trinity College convinced me that this was not what made the world go round. Economics was taught in a very mathematical, rather old-fashioned way.

I now think actually it's a very interesting question why Ireland produced so many great economists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I was asked this the other day and I thought, what an

interesting question. And maybe if economics had been taught more, let's say more contextually, more historically in Trinity, I would probably have kept doing economics, but I switched to history.

English was never an option though I later moved more and more towards literature. I like to think I had a sixth sense of what was happening to the discipline of English in the universities in the 1970s, or what was to happen to it in the 1970s, but I'd better not go there.

I had an interesting education in a Quaker co-educational boarding school in southern Ireland, and then for a year in America, which had made me, I suppose, think about Ireland, but also about a rather wider context in which Ireland would be put.

Trinity History in the sixties was very Ireland-centred. It's odd because Trinity College in Dublin had then the reputation for being a sort of Anglophile outpost. A lot of English people came there. This was traditionally a Protestant Unionist, ancient Elizabethan institution, much disapproved of by the Catholic clergy, though that was all changing in the sixties.

It's interesting now that history, as it was taught to me in the sixties and Trinity was so Hibernia-centred, and so little cognisant of what was happening in France with the Annales school, in America with the whole new social history that was being developed. I came to that just towards the end of my undergraduate career, and it opened some horizons, I think.

Professor Richard English FBA [00:04:55] Were there particular historians at Trinity who taught you who had a major influence on you at the time?

Professor Roy Foster FBA [00:05:00] Yeah, I was taught by a man called Theodore Moody, who really created the modern history school at Trinity. And he had a rather rankling seminar on the Irish Home Rule period. That was a graduate seminar. And I was really shaped by that and by the people I met.

People like Vincent Comerford. David Fitzpatrick was still around then. It was very outward looking and very contextual again. You were made to put your money where your mouth was or your mouth where your money was. And Moody took no prisoners. He was a very severe, but I found eventually, lovable kind of mentor. And I learned from him both as an undergraduate and a graduate.

There were a certain number of more eccentric old school historians, the famous R.B. MacDonald. Anyone who knows the history of Trinity College will know that name. But Moody was, I think, a more intellectually rigorous mentor than many other people in the history school at that time. Things have changed since then.

Professor Richard English FBA [00:06:08] Then you moved to work at Birkbeck College here in London, and during the 1970s and 1980s you were a historian at Birkbeck. The backdrop to that, to being an Irish historian in Britain in that period, was the terrible violence in the Northern Ireland conflict. Could you say something about the context of the Troubles for being an Irish historian in Britain, but also maybe, Roy, something about being a historian at Birkbeck itself, because again, as with Trinity, it's an institution for which you have a tremendous affection.

Professor Roy Foster FBA [00:06:35] Yeah. That's a huge question. Let's take the easier bit first and then come to the Northern Ireland crisis and what it meant for the teaching of history, because that's a very knotty question.

Birkbeck, when I went to 1974 was a fascinating place. Eric Hobsbawm was the great figure in the department. The English department was run by a marvellous scholar called Barbara Hardy. Older people like Nikolaus Pevsner, the great architectural historian, was still around. Bernard Crick in politics.

It's the school of the University College London that teaches mature students, and so the teaching was in the evening. It was right beside the British Library, which was then in the old British Museum complex, so you could work at your own stuff during the day and turn up to your paid job at four in the afternoon. And it was a very exciting environment.

When I was interviewed, I remember somebody who interviewed me, not Eric, somebody else, said, "You're an Irishman. How will you teach British history?" Because the job was very much British history and rather much British political history. I said, "I teach it as a privileged outsider", and I think that's how I always felt.

I didn't begin teaching Irish history at Birkbeck. For some years I was plunged into historiography, which I started as a course, and British history, which I taught the big survey courses on and some specialist subject stuff on Victorian politics, for which I had to become a Victorian political historian, which is why I wrote a life of Lord Randolph Churchill.

My principal memory of Birkbeck from those years, though, is the quickening of excitement as you moved from the British Library, or from home, where you were working or wherever, into the rather unglamorous buildings on Malet Street and the way that you had a sense of people flooding in there from their day jobs because they wanted to learn history.

I had some brilliant students, some of whom did PhDs and became academics themselves, some of whom became history teachers. Possibly one of my most brilliant students was working as a postman during the day, came to do his degree, which was history at night, and ended up head of history at a very prestigious school.

It was an inspiring place. And then you had colleagues like Graham Gibbs, David Blackburn, Richard Evans, Eric Hobsbawm, of course, who became a great friend and mentor. And you felt you were working at the cliff face of historical research. Birkbeck was, and still is, and I'm now a senior visiting research associate there again, in my old age. It's always had a very special flavour to it, and produced wonderful people and had a great commitment.

So that's the easy bit of your question, Richard. Beginning to study Irish history at a research level in 1971, too, was, of course, exactly the point when Northern Ireland was exploding. And you couldn't not write about, as I was writing about late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Irish history without thinking of the inheritance of that. Actually, I was at Birkbeck, when I wrote my book about Lord Randolph Churchill. He, of course, was one of the people who stirred up Unionist opposition to the first home rule bill, which is one of those great missed chances in Irish history.

Professor Roy Foster FBA [00:10:15] The two great missed chances in Irish history, I think, are not passing Catholic emancipation at the time of the Union in 1800, which was a complete betrayal of trust and created a bad feeling that went on for centuries, and not

passing the First Home Rule Bill in 1886. I think it was the last point, where a united 32-county Ireland could have retained a sort of conceptual identity, both as a nation, and initially within the British Empire in a Canadian way, but would – I think – have gradually separated from the Empire as the free state separated from the Commonwealth after 30 or 40 bloody years.

Anyway, sorry, I'm not here to give a brief lecture, but you couldn't not think of what was happening in Northern Ireland when you wrote about what happened between Britain and Ireland in the home rule period, which I'd begun working on, and then the period of the War of Independence, as it's increasingly called, or the Troubles or whatever, which I worked on much later.

At the same time, I don't think that it was the Troubles in Northern Ireland that galvanised what came to be called the revisionist approach to Irish history – the more complicated, inferential, quizzical views of Irish history which I and my generation tried to bring in. I'm thinking of people like David Fitzpatrick again, Vincent Comerford, Marianne Elliott, whom I met slightly later.

We were beginning to try to think like that, I think, in the late sixties, early seventies, and we were thinking like that because of the way history was being written by Eugene Genovese in America, by Theodore Selden for France, by E.P. Thompson, notably, for England. The idea that there were alternative histories, especially representing elements and communities in the larger historical world that had been, in a sense, ignored or left out of the rather high political elite view of history, which inevitably in the 1950s had been the way people learned.

So we were already, if you like, predisposed to ask questions, some of them uncomfortable questions about Irish history, and particularly the Irish British relationship through history, and particularly the vexed questions of identity in history. We were already asking those questions. Certainly Marianne was, and Vincent Comerford, before the Northern Ireland crisis impinged more and more.

At the same time to be teaching, and also learning, and writing, history in the early seventies in Britain, when there were troops out, marches on the streets, when there were horrifying murders taking place every day, when there were atrocities like Bloody Sunday, you had to see them in historical context, and it made you feel that you were working at the cutting edge of something, not just intellectually, but to a certain extent, politically.

Professor Roy Foster FBA [00:13:43] The other thing I'd like to say about learning and teaching Irish history here in the Seventies was that one had a sense that Irish history was a slightly poor relation in the world of British historiography. And Marianne and I, who are more or less exact contemporaries, born in 1948/9, coming to work in Britain as young historians felt there was a need to bring together a community of Irish historians in Britain and air these questions.

We began in 1977, I think, the Conference of Irish Historians in Britain, which still runs biennially, every two years, and which tried to bring to the fore the kind of work the graduate students were doing, as well as that established historians in Ireland were doing, and bring them over to Britain to meet the new generations of Irish historians in Britain. Out of that grew the British Association of Irish Studies, which is still flourishing, and is a kind of attempt to establish a community of Irish historians working within the British framework.

The next step was to, if it doesn't sound too conspiratorial, to plant out Irish historians in history departments of British universities, which happened, I think quite notably over the next 15, 20 years. And now Irish history is very much its own thing within the broad syllabus of history in universities in the larger island, and it's been a great pleasure to see that develop.

Professor Richard English FBA [00:15:22] Relating to that point, Roy, that you mentioned about Irish history for a time being seen as something of the poor relation of British history. After Birkbeck, you moved to Oxford in 1991 as the Professor of Irish History. I remember as a history student before that in Oxford in the 1980s that Ireland certainly didn't feature very strongly on the syllabus, but you managed to change that and to make it something which was a much more significant part of studying history at Oxford.

Professor Roy Foster FBA [00:15:49] That was the objective. There was no established chair of Irish history in any British university. Oxford got some money from a slightly unusual figure called Gerald Carroll, who was a rich business person who had taken over the family business and wanted to put money into something essentially related to the family name.

What he really wanted to do was give money for a chair of Irish history, which would be in Oxford, which would be related to the early modern period and which would prove that the Carroll family should have been high kings of the Sept of the Ely O'Carroll before the Normans.

It was it was a rather prescriptive approach to Irish history, and when I mentioned to him once that I felt that I was a modernist and that this wasn't really my bag, he said, "I'm only asking you to move the expletive hosepipe over a bit." We did find ways of moving the hosepipe over a bit.

I started a special subject in culture and nationalism in Ireland. I gave a series of general lectures. I started assembling a postgraduate, school is a rather grand word, but it was a culture of postgraduate study there, based around a graduate seminar, which I suppose I was thinking of the old days with Theo Moody back in Trinity. The Graduate seminar emphasised, on the one hand, bringing Irish historians over to expose them to an Oxford audience, on the other hand, getting graduate students to have a chance to strut their stuff in front of a quite eclectic and interesting audience.

My successor in Oxford, Ian McBride, has carried this further, and actually one of the upsides of the ghastly few years we've been going through is the Zoom seminar, and people can now link in, as they're doing today from all over. And Ian McBride, my successor as Professor of Irish history at Oxford, has used this brilliantly. You probably attended his seminars on Zoom and they now are widely distributed. It wasn't quite like that in 1991, but we began something.

There were individuals in Oxford, Angus MacIntyre – whom you knew – Toby Barnard in the early modern era, who studied Irish history as their own special subjects, their own research subjects, but there was no room for it on the syllabus, which rather downgraded Irish history as a particular part of British history, which I was very keen, naturally, to work against.



The prestigious Ford Lectures in British History were given by F.S.L. Lyons in 1970, when I was given a job in Birkbeck. And he had to ask permission from the Faculty of History in Oxford to give these lectures, the Ford Lectures in British History on an Irish topic, because this was considered slightly outré.

He gave the most extraordinarily compelling lectures, which became a book called *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland, 1892-1939*, which has been a key book in my life, and my recent book, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland 1890-1923* was written in a sense, as an answer to the world that Lyons was summoning up and the antagonisms that he emphasised in Irish life in that fascinating period from the very end of the 19th into the very early 20th century.

Professor Roy Foster FBA [00:19:43] I first heard those lectures as Ford lectures given as an interesting experiment in British history, but Irish history, that's different now. Subsequent Ford Lectures have included Marianne Elliott, myself, Jane Ohlmeyer, all of whom have lectured on Irish history subjects, and it has been accepted with lamb-like readiness by the Oxford History faculty. Irish history is now its own subject, which I think is a great advance.

Similar advances have happened in Cambridge. I gave the Clark Lectures in Cambridge on Irish literature and history, which was probably a first as well. And over my lifetime teaching in the academy, both first in London, then in Oxford, I think I've seen – and to a certain extent overseen – the way that Irish history has become both more mainstream than it once was, and also been accepted as an extremely interesting interrogative European, not to say global, subject in its own right.

A lot of work has been done currently on postcolonial Ireland. Ireland as a country and as a history with parallels in the Caribbean and in India. And that again, is a logical development, I think, from the way that my generation tried to reposition Irish history in academic life in Britain from the early 1970s when we started teaching it.

Professor Richard English FBA [00:21:24] One of the contributions you've made to that transformation of how Irish history is seen, I think, was your 1988 book *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*. In that book, published in 1988, you expressed the hope that for what you called "a more relaxed and inclusive definition of Irishness and the less constricted view of Irish history than then obtained". How far, Roy, did such hopes come to fruition?

Professor Roy Foster FBA [00:21:57] Well, I've kind of floated an answer to that in what I've just said, but I think we are more relaxed and certainly more inclusive in terms of what is seen as apposite and proper subjects of study in Irish history. We've seen Irish history expand. We've seen the history of material life expand. We've seen Irish women's history expand dramatically. But we've also seen, I think, an approach to the history of minorities within Ireland, and I would say especially religious minorities, and increasingly there'll be a study of racial minorities in Ireland as Ireland has become a country of immigrants rather than emigrants, fascinatingly, over the last 20 years or so.

My very first book, *Charles Stewart Parnell: The Man and His Family*, did highlight his sisters' work as women nationalist activists in the 1880s, and it struck me, even at the time, that this was an area that was practically untouched. That book was published in 1976, and

since then, Irish women's history has revolutionised and has become one of the liveliest areas of study. So that certainly has happened.

The history of the Protestant minority in Ireland, outside Ulster, is something that interests me hugely. And increasingly, this has been seen as, again, an acceptable and apposite subject which is being opened up in all sorts of areas.

I remember when I was beginning to write about W.B. Yeats. This would have been in the mid-eighties. At an intellectual dinner party in Dublin, somebody said to me, "How are you going to write about Yeats? What kind of person are you going to make of him?" I said, "I'm going to write about him as a marginalised Irish Protestant like myself," and the person I was talking to, a senior figure in Irish television, and a very clever man exploded. He said, "You can't describe Yeats like that. He was as Irish as I am."

The assumption he made as it was so often made that to be Protestant you couldn't be fully and properly Irish. I think he realised what he'd said as soon as it was out of his mouth, but it was a giveaway, and I still do sometimes come across, in certain quarters, that kind of attitude but far, far less often.

An interesting book, which I actually wrote a foreword to, was published about two years ago called *Protestant and Irish: The Minorities Search for Place in Independent Ireland*. And as you probably know, this book is by Ian d'Alton and Ida Milne, and it pursues the lives of the small people, not the grandees in decaying Anglo-Irish mansions, but ordinary everyday Irish Protestant life, and more and more work has been done on this. I think that's one of the things I'd hoped to see when I was writing the conclusion to *Modern Ireland*, which was a book itself, that didn't turn out in every way as I had expected it to.

Professor Richard English FBA [00:25:25] In what ways was it different?

Professor Roy Foster FBA [00:25:30] Well, I've mentioned Theodore Zeldin's histories of France published in the early seventies; a huge 19<sup>th</sup>-century history of France in two volumes with the – to me – astonishing titles of *Intellect, Taste and Anxiety*. That was one volume, and the other was *Ambition, Love and Politics*.

What Zeldin was doing in a very *analyste* way, was trying to write about the intellectual identity and the psychological identity of 19<sup>th</sup> century France through the little lives and the details of the prescriptions issued by a provincial chemist in the Gironde, perhaps, or the life of a priest who had kept a diary in some other provincial part of France.

They're marvellous books. I don't follow him in his later books, which are about everyday life and seem to me to be much more problematic, but that history of 19<sup>th</sup>-century France seemed to me a new way of writing about a country. And it's the history of its mind, as well as its politics and its wars and public affairs.

So I thought I'd write about Ireland like that, and I found I couldn't. There wasn't the same kind of database for a country, as, in European terms, marginalised and colonised and poor as Ireland. It did not have the great depths of evidence of how people lived as French history has, and that history of certain other countries as well, but notably France. I think French



history is very much a special thing. I was very influenced by Richard Cobb's history of France as well, around the same time.

So I sat down thinking I was going to write a general history of Ireland that would find the prescription lists of provincial chemists and the lives of country priests, and it just wasn't there. What I started writing instead was something more like what I have sometimes rather dismissively called the story of Ireland, which was the title I chose for my inaugural lecture at Oxford, where you follow through the history of a country as if it were almost a fairy tale.

I was very struck by the way the histories of Ireland followed the structure of the folk tale – as the structuralist Vladimir Propp outlined them – where there are only 20 basic plots and they all variable around one central plot. The central plot of Irish history was liberation, and that's how Irish history was told.

I was determined not to quite fall into that, but I did find I was writing a much more narrative history than my initial infatuation with Theodore Zeldin's histories would have led me to write. I remember saying frequently to my wife as I came down after a day writing, "I don't know how this book is going to turn out." And I didn't.

It wasn't a history of liberation because it tried to raise all sorts of questions of might-have-beens, of moments when history could have turned another corner, of expectations that weren't fulfilled, of lives that had expected to turn out one way and then turned out another, of – and this was the title eventually of the first draft that was written for me – uncertain and unexpected futures. So it had that quality of uncertainty and of trying to open out the options, which I think a general history should try and do.

Professor Roy Foster FBA [00:29:23] Interestingly, Eric Hobsbawm hadn't written his general histories then, but one of the things I love about Hobsbawm's great tetralogy of histories – ending with the great 20th century volume – is that, though a Marxist intellectually, he's very open to alternative futures. And he opens out options throughout those books. They aren't written to a schema which will have an undeviating outcome which is what vulgar Marxism would do. He writes about social history in a nondeterministic, but to me very convincing, kind of way.

When I wrote *Modern Ireland* I'd been reading his great essays on labouring man and primitive rebels and so forth, but he wasn't yet writing his big general histories. When he did, I thought that's very much the way that the general history of a country – in his case of a continent – should be written. And I still adhere to that. He is, I think, one of the great exemplars.

Professor Richard English FBA [00:30:33] You've mentioned a number of extraordinary historians who've influenced you in different ways – Hobsbawm but Lyons also, and Moody. Would Hobsbawm be the greatest influence on you in terms of how history is conceived as something which you engage in, as you've referred to him in this conversation really quite a number of times as somebody who has influenced the way in which you've thought about history, not just about Irish history, but about the writing of history, the conception of what it involves.

Professor Roy Foster FBA [00:31:05] I think he was a big influence, not only because I read him, but because I knew him, and we were friends and I went to his lectures. He is still, along with Isaiah Berlin, one of the best lecturers I've ever heard. He is, famously, a Marxist. I am not a Marxist, though I was – I suppose – Marxist a little. Certainly in my Parnell book I believed in people responding to the context of their lives making history, but not of their own volition, so to speak.

We had an event for him when he retired from Birkbeck, where we read papers about his work and what it had meant to us and so forth. And he gave a very quintessentially Hobsbawmian little speech at the end where he thanked us for our contributions. This is a paraphrase, but it's more or less the words he used. He said, "You've been very kind about my work, and I think it will last. It will last not because I was right, though I think I was, but because I went to a great deal of trouble to teach myself to write well."

I never forgot that because I thought that's a duty to your audience. And to this day I can't bear reading articles or books where care has not been taken with the way the structure of the book and the delivery of the thought behind it hasn't been carefully worked on. And the historians I like and read most, notably Hobsbawm, but others too tend to adhere to this.

You asked about other historians. I was very influenced by Conor Cruise O'Brien, whose ideas became increasingly erratic, especially in terms of politics, but who wrote like an angel, and who had a gift for bringing personal experience and family memory. I'm thinking of a book like *States of Ireland* and to a lesser extent, *Ancestral Voices*. He had a gift for bringing that personal testimony and family memory into the study of Irish history, and memory is something that increasingly we historians have become involved in.

Cruise O'Brien had also, and I suppose this takes me back to my Trinity conditioning, written his great book, *Parnell and His Party 1880-1890*, and that was one of the books that led me towards working on Charles Stuart Parnell, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century politician, as a subject. Cruise O'Brien brought not only the ideas of Vilfredo Pareto and elitism and charisma and fascinating concepts from political science in, he also brought in Yeats very profoundly, as he did in most of his books and even in his book about Burke, *The Great Melody*.

It was a lesson that you could make history even more interesting by accessing other forms of evidence, even literary evidence, even something as arcane as Yeats and poetry. And that, of course, would percolate in my mind for quite a long time and come out in the end.

Professor Richard English FBA [00:34:31] That then became a major theme of your work. There'll be a couple more questions from me, and then we're going to move after that to the audience, here in the British Academy and online, asking questions of Professor Foster. So for those of you who are online, remember, you can post those in the Q&A function, and for those of you in the room we'll have a microphone when you put your hands up when we get to that point.

First, two more questions from me, Roy, if I may. We've been looking at a centenary set of reflections on Irish history. The momentous events of 100 years ago in Ireland saw the Irish Revolution, the partition of Ireland.

Your book, *Vivid Faces*, which you've referred to, was a brilliant evocation of the network of revolutionaries and the formation of those people, many of whose anticipated futures didn't

come true, as you've been talking about. Can you say something about that work on the people who tried to transform Ireland 100 years ago in the Irish Revolution and their motivations, their inspirations, their networks, their goals?

Professor Roy Foster FBA [00:35:30] How long do I have?

Professor Richard English FBA [00:35:32] You can speak for as long as you want.

Professor Roy Foster FBA [00:35:37] We're greater at commemorating things in Ireland. We're in the decade of commemorations at the moment. Historical memory is a very immediate, very public thing, unlike in this country. I was so surprised living here in 1991, I thought there's going to be a big noise made about 1691. There's going to be a big noise made in 1988 about 1688 – the glorious revolution on which this country is so based. The whole idea of Whig politics, which constructed the political future of this country. You hardly noticed it as it went by like a whisper.

It's something to do with a sense of entitlement and confidence and being, superficially at least, a winning culture. I think the fact that in Ireland historical identity is hard fought over and is a contested entity, and that cultural independence came – as with political independence – after a great deal of struggle. I think this means that memory is much more edgy. It's much more pointed. It's much more contested in its own way.

I had got into trouble, not for the first time, in 1998 for writing a piece about the commemoration of the rebellion of 1798 which had been taken over by the government and – I thought in a completely intellectually disreputable way – was segued into the peace process.

The 1798 rebellion, which had ended in a sort of bloody sectarian [inaudible] with horrific cruelty on both sides, was modernised into a moment when Protestants and Catholics came together and when a secular, independent state could have been born, which might have been true for a microsecond of history, but certainly isn't the full story of 1798. The way it was presented in current politics, for I'm sure well-meaning ideas, irritated the hell out of me. And I was giving the Trevelyan Lecture in Cambridge, and I took this as my subject.

So commemoration and its misinterpretation, its utilisation and its exploitation is something I'm very interested in. And I know you are too, and like me, you've dipped your toe into writing nearly contemporary history which involves many of these episodes or issues.

So the decade of commemorations was looming up, which is the centenary of the decade of 1912 to 1922, from the crisis over home rule under the Anglo-Irish Treaty. And that 10 years is now seen, rightly I think, as a continuum of radical and often unexpected events.

I was more interested in what predisposed that moment of change, and I had become interested through reading some European history and the articles written by sociologists like Karl Mannheim and Ortega Gasset in the 1920s and 1930s which saw the histories of their countries as dictated by a generational change at a certain moment.

[00:39:15] It struck me that nobody had ever thought of the revolutionaries who made the Irish Revolution as a generation. As people who are all born, most of them around 1880, as the people who – the more I read their diaries and letters – seemed to me to be in revolt against their parents as much as against the British state.

Without wanting to get too unduly psychological about it, the British state was, for them, a kind of parent imposing, materialist goal-getting values, telling them they had nothing to worry about any more. Telling them they'd get home rule but they had to behave well in order to get it.

There was a moment – and maybe in this again I refer to own memory of the 1960s, particularly 1968 when I was 19 – that came to mind when I was reading about the revolutionaries who stood behind the 1916 Rising. Many of the people I became interested in had been marginalised by then.

They were the vegetarians, the lesbians, the radicals and the socialists. They were the people who confronted the reality of British rule and an establishment which they were determined to tear down. They were not the kind of blood and soil pious Catholic devotees who came more to the fore in the later stages of the revolution, but they seem to me to make the way for those people.

The other thing that interested me was that after the 1916 rising and the executions which put it down, and the shift in mentality towards independence rather than home rule in Irish life, it seemed to me that those interesting radicals, whose diaries I spent years and years reading were marginalised, and that an older style of nationalism reasserted itself.

A distinctively Catholicised version of what Irish independence must mean then took the reins. And this, of course, dictated developments in Ireland through the 1920s, thirties, forties and fifties until again, the revolutions, the intellectual revolutions, of the sixties and seventies. So I was trying to place the Irish Revolution both in a forward looking and I suppose rather retrospective way. And I was trying to get away from commemorationism as a simple assertion of a centenary celebration and more of a way of recapturing a mindset, which I think has not been done justice to.

One thing that enabled me to do this was the great boom in women's history as well, because many of these forgotten figures were women and people like Hennessy, Sheehy-Skeffington, Rosamond Jacob, Louie Bennett, Helena Molony. They had put themselves at the cutting edge of rethinking Irish identity and cultural initiatives.

Two of the chapters in *Vivid Faces* are about theatre and about writing, and these are both involvements in which women and radical women took a very leading part and were written out of history subsequently. So again, it's about uncertain futures and unexpected futures and futures that didn't happen, which has been, as you said already, a key theme in my work.

Professor Richard English FBA [00:43:02] Your work has also moved into contemporary history, the writing of history of our times, and that inevitably brings us into current politics. Can you say something about what the greatest challenge you have found to be in writing about much more contemporary history? Your book, *Luck and the Irish*, based on some

brilliant lectures I heard you give in Belfast, brought things really up to now. What is the greatest challenge with that?

Professor Roy Foster FBA [00:43:29] *Luck and the Irish*. The greatest challenge in that was avoiding litigation which Penguin was extremely worried about because Charles James Haughey was still alive. I was writing about Ireland from 1970 to 2000, and it was a risky thing to do. Those lectures were about 2004 or 2005, weren't they? And the so-called Celtic Tiger, the economic miracle had changed so much. So many attitudes in Ireland had been revolutionised. So many extraordinary things had happened.

I was asked to give the Wiles Lectures in Queen's in Belfast, so I took the theme of metamorphosis in Irish history, since the period that *Modern Ireland* had stopped. My book ended in 1973, when the special position of the Catholic Church in Ireland was removed, and Ireland joined what was then the EEC, later the EU. That seemed a good closing point. I'd often been asked to add a bit on to take the story up to the present day, but I thought that was a different book.

That book became *Luck and the Irish: A Brief History of Change*. Unfortunately, shortly after it was published, the reverse gears were thrown on the machine and there was the great crash in 2006, and Ireland didn't look quite as shiny and extraordinarily modernised as it had. I still think I was right that those 30 years heralded a change in attitude, which was enormously important and for Northern Ireland as well.

I still think I was right that, though they were unevenly distributed, the economic gains which were made were spectacular. The figures for Ireland's economic performance in the 1990s and very early 2000s were astonishing. Though the stone rolled back down the hill with the crash, the extent to which those gains have lasted. Ireland is still, and this is largely thanks to the EU, an infinitely more prosperous, outward looking – one has to say for better or worse – globalised country than it was before the 1970s. And I think mostly for good.

It is, as I said earlier, a country of immigrants now rather than emigrants. Reverse migration paused during the crash, but has revived again. There's been surprisingly little disruption to the social fabric in Ireland, and surprisingly few nativist, populist rumblings about "strangers", the great Irish word, coming to live among us. It is an outward looking country, and I think I stand by a lot of what *Luck and the Irish* suggested had happened. But I was writing about a period that was just receding over our shoulders as I wrote it.

[00:46:37] You write contemporary history, too. You write about terrorism and Northern Ireland up to the very, very recent past. And you know well that one writes constantly in the sense that one might be second guessed but that doesn't stop it. Another thing I would say, and this is relevant to writing about, as you have done, the history of Irish nationalism and the history of terrorism. You are writing to clarify where we are as well as to explain where we've come from.

I don't think that's an ahistorical thing to assert. Fifty years ago, the Oxford history syllabus would have said it was. There was a cut-off point which would be at least 50 years before the present day. There are now, of course, special subjects on Thatcher and probably on Blair, and history has caught up with the contemporary aspect.

I think it has to do that, and I think it's one way in which the discipline has changed, and it's one way in which I think the study and the practice of Irish history now by a supremely talented new generation of Irish historians who are using not only transnational perspectives but also recent developments in economics and sociology to point up what's happened in Ireland over the last half century. I think that's both exciting and acceptable.

Professor Richard English FBA [00:48:20] Roy Foster, you've raised an enormous amount of material there for us to pick up on. We're going to move to questions now. I'm going to start with a couple of questions from people here in the room in the British Academy. There'll be a microphone to go round. So who will start us off?

Member of the audience [00:48:39] I'd like to ask a question about the Unionist community. That is to say that there have been a number of occasions where the Union community has, to put it mildly, been at odds with the British government. And I wondered whether the current problems over the Northern Irish Protocol are as significant or maybe more significant than previous differences?

Professor Roy Foster FBA [00:49:12] That's a highly relevant question and it's rather takes up with what I was just saying just a few minutes ago about the necessity to look at current events in the light of what's gone before. I think the Unionists and here I'm diverting into politics, the Unionist community, certainly those of them who are represented by the DUP which is not the whole Unionist community – as I'm sure you would agree Richard – have painted themselves into a corner.

The idiocies over the protocol, the idiocies over Brexit in general, the supporting of Brexit by the DUP, I think largely because Sinn Fein were against it. It's nearly as unforgivable as the way that Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, such as Owen Patterson and Theresa Villiers campaigned for Brexit, knowing full well unless they were even stupider than they seem to be, that this would be a disaster for Anglo-Irish relations, for North–South relations. That it would place in jeopardy the hard-won balance which is always on the edge of fracture of the Good Friday Agreement.

This has led to a very scary moment in Northern Irish politics. The thing one ought not to do as a historian is try and forecast, but I do think that what's happened about the idiocies about the protocol, what's happened about the complete ignoring of the realities of the Northern Irish situation by the current government will predispose more people in Northern Ireland towards voting for unification and a border poll when it happens – which won't be for a while yet – than would have been the case.

I expect there to be a quite decisive shift in the youth vote there, even from among people from traditionally Protestant and Unionist backgrounds. I think that the Republic is a more attractive option for young people in the North than it once was.

One of the key themes of my *Luck and the Irish* was the destruction of the old semi-theocratic state in the Republic and how quickly it happened. It's a chapter I called, perhaps mischievously, "How the Catholics became Protestants".



But there is a kind of alteration there, which has to have an effect in the way that the North looks at the South. And I see it among moderate middle class Unionists who I think are more ready to conceive of closer links with the South, especially economically, especially given the obvious economic disaster that Brexit is bringing about. So I think that's one aspect of it, and I think what your question is implying.

At the same time, moderate middle class Unionists are by no means the only people we are talking about, just as the DUP don't represent all of Unionism. There is a very dangerous element of unreconciled, unentitled, deeply angry working class Unionists who are quite prepared – and we've seen this – to go back to paramilitary methods if they feel their interests are being sold down the river, as I think they probably are feeling they are right now.

[00:52:45] The inter-community relations on the ground in Northern Ireland – and Richard knows much more about this than I do – but my impression is that in the more disadvantaged areas they're as bad as they've ever been and they're certainly quivering on the edge of conflagration all the time. So though we will see moves towards, and re-envisioning of, relationships with the Republic, we won't see them happening in what I would see as a healthy and progressive way for quite some time yet.

When Richard asked about historians whom I am influenced by, he is not exactly a historian, but the great Irish essayist Hubert Butler is one of my great admirations, and he did write historical essays, but he also wrote about North–South relations.

In the 1950s, he said that the hope for the future of the border would be that this would become like a distinction that did not divide, and eventually floated away like a sticking plaster off a wound that had healed. This is more or less what the Good Friday Agreement hoped to bring about. And the not quite vaporising, but the fading of the border in all sorts of ways, economic, social, even physical, was what happened after the 1988 Good Friday Agreement. That's exactly what Brexit, as any fool could have forecast, has thrown into reverse. And I'm not optimistic in the near future.

Professor Richard English FBA [00:54:24] Thank you. Roy. We'll take another question here.

Member of the audience [00:54:30] Thank you, Professor Foster. I'm currently studying history, so I was just curious. You also mentioned how a lot of historians, and yourself also, have your own unique voice when writing history, for instance news narrations and telling about the history of Ireland. How did you find that unique voice in the writing of history?

Also, do you think that voice changed through the course of your time and career of history? And a follow-up question will also be that for youngsters such as us, we might not have a lot of life experience, so what would you what would be your advice in terms of finding our own voices and writing history or doing research? Thank you.

Professor Roy Foster FBA [00:55:15] That's a very interesting question – the historian's voice. I think it's one reason why one still reads and rereads historians like G.M. Trevelyan, a very old hat liberal Whig historian but writes in such a relaxed, compulsively readable way

that you do go back to him. E.H. Carr is another example. I still go back and read books like *The Romantic Exiles* because of the alluring, lucid, ironic style. And again, Hobsbawm would be an exemplar in our own day.

I don't know where you find a voice from writing except by rewriting, and by reading models, not to imitate them, but to see how they make the effect that they make. Rewriting is incredibly important I think, and reconstructing. If you feel something isn't working, you know, at some level that is not working and you have to reconstruct it.

I think it's very important, in my case, not to sit straight down at a computer but to, almost like Yeats's automatic writing, set out a pad with a pen and let the pen take you where it's going to take. For historians who are at an earlier stage, especially postgraduate historians, again the models you read are very important but it's also vital to be led by your sources.

I think it was G.M. Young, another marvellous historian of the old school, who is always worth reading for the marvellously relaxed but intellectually exciting nature of his prose. G.M. Young said, "You have to read your sources until you hear the people talking," and that kept coming to my mind when I was writing *Vivid Faces*, because I was reading diaries and letters and memoirs, and the more you read – and you had to read intensively and continually – you could hear the people's voices in your head. When you hear a voice in your head, it's time to start writing it down yourself.

That's true of a biography as well. And *Vivid Faces* is a group biography in some ways. But it's that G.M. Young advice, read till you hear the people talking, because there's always people behind what you're writing about. There are themes. I said earlier that I began my university career briefly as an economist and gave it up, I think wisely both for the science of economics and for myself, but even behind the driest economics, there are people. And I think you've got to read until you hear people talking and the voices come to your head. That's rather Yeatsish, sort of like automatic voices.

Professor Richard English FBA [00:58:14] Thanks, Roy. One of the questions from online, Roy, says, "Which of your books are you most proud of and why?"

Professor Roy Foster FBA [00:58:25] Not for me to say. I have difficulties with all my books when I go back and read them because there are things I would have done differently. But I liked what *Paddy and Mr Punch* said about Anglo-Irish relations, that they were complicated, they were nuanced, that you had to read into them and you had to read the literature, and creative literature, to understand how this difficult non-marriage between two very different peoples, a slow-witted people governing a quick-witted one – as Lord Callan said – created the kind of dynamic that it did. I was writing about Elizabeth Bowen's fiction as well in that book, which seems to me to epitomise Anglo-Irish differences.

But I think of my several books, probably the second volume of Yeats, *The Arch-Poet*, is the book where I finished up thinking it'd come nearer to what I wanted it to be than anything else I'd written. And I'm still quite satisfied with the way it turned out. This is absolute hubris. I'll probably regret as soon as I go home and take it down and look at it.

Professor Richard English FBA [00:59:56] I doubt it. Another online question says “You’ve written a lot about W.B. Yeats. Has he been the most exciting topic for your history writing?”

Professor Roy Foster FBA [01:00:07] Before *Vivid Faces*, I’d have said yes. I think it’s usually your last born child that is closest to you in terms of book writing, which would make it *On Seamus Heaney*, but actually *Vivid Faces* is still very present with me because I still keep coming across things about those people, my revolutionaries as I rather proprietorially, think of them.

They’re very vivid to me, but Yeats is one of them, of course, so in a way I can telescope those two, because Yeats was a great figure to many of that revolution generation. They disapproved of his politics. They liked him for his brief period of Fenian revolutionary. They liked him for Kathleen Ni Houlihan, which Lady Gregory really wrote anyway. But his presence is there with them, and they refer to him in their writings to each other. And of course, he would himself write the key poem about the 1916 Rising, out of which I took my title – Easter, 1916.

“I met them at close of day  
Coming with vivid faces  
From counter or desk among grey  
Eighteenth-century houses.”

So he is a very constant and exciting presence. And I, if you like, relayed him or refracted him through *Vivid Faces* as well. I suspect anything I write from now on, and this is true of my little book *On Seamus Heaney*, will have a nod towards Yeats in it, so okay, the answer is yes.

Professor Richard English FBA [01:01:45] Thank you. Let me back to questions from people here in the Academy.

Member of the audience: [01:02:01] Thank you for the great conversation. Just a question. You can disagree if you want. So the premise is that to be a first-class historian, you should also be a great historiographer. And the question is, how do you handle the responsibility and the privilege to have such a great impact on deciding or setting the course on what questions are worth asking in writing history of Ireland?

Professor Roy Foster FBA [01:02:35] I really have to think that one though. You’ve asked, how do I accept, or how do I more or less rationalise, the responsibility of what questions to ask? Every historian has to select what angle, what theme, what issue she or he is going to put first. It is a responsibility. It’s an intellectual responsibility, but it’s a responsibility that’s taken on by anyone, no matter at whatever level, who tries to write history.

The responsibility is, I think, not to exclude something because you don’t like it. The priority is to look as clear sightedly as you can at every aspect of a subject. That means if you’re

writing about history in Ireland, you have to look at the facts of great internal and externally inflicted violence. You have to look at the facts of extreme antipathies. Dr Johnson said “the Irish are a fair people; they never speak well of one another,” which is at least half true. You have to face up to these unpleasantness.

You’ve also got to, and this is the great phrase of E.P. Thompson, try to avoid the immense condescension of posterity towards people who, if you like it, didn’t make it through to the written record, or didn’t make it through to the right side of what the general conception of history conceives to be the right side.

In the case of Irish history, that means looking at the people – I’m back to this question again – whose futures were not the futures they expected. And even if they were wrong, you’ve got to give them credit for what they were trying to do. You’ve also got to, on every level, be open to alternatives. And this is why I’m not – I suppose – what I’ve called earlier, a vulgar Marxist. You’ve got to be open to all sorts of outcomes and to all sorts of possibilities.

The more I’ve written history, the more the importance of contingency has come to affect me. A historian I greatly admire my near contemporary, now alas dead, David Fitzpatrick, said the same thing to me shortly before he died.

I think Irish history is full of contingency and your duty writing about it is to accept the possibility of other contingencies than what happened. It’s not, as I said, a great tapestry leading inevitably towards liberation. It’s a much more complicated journey than that. Though it is a journey. That probably hasn’t answered the implications of your question, but it’s the best I can do.

Professor Richard English FBA [01:05:40] Thank you very much. Another question here at the front.

Member of the audience [01:05:50] Do you think there was ever a period, or when was the period, when it seemed that Ireland might have remained within the Union?

Professor Roy Foster FBA [01:05:57] Yes, I think that I sort of gestured to that earlier, but I’m very glad to have the chance to expand on it. I think the Act of Union of 1800, which in the traditional nationalist view of Irish history is – of course – demonised. “They got rid of the old house at College Green, our parliament. We’ve got to get it back.” That’s what the repeal was all about.

The old house, that college green, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Irish parliament, was a flagrantly elitist and sectarian construction which needed to be reformed root and branch. Most of all, allowing Catholic citizens to sit on it. They were allowed vote in a very minor way, but not to sit on it. The Act of Union – by melding together the two parliaments, by bringing Irish MPs into the British Parliament – was one way of reforming.

It can be seen as a reform act, reforming the Irish Parliament – if this were linked with giving Catholics the right to sit in Parliament in Westminster – as was the original draft. But George III refused, and Andrew Roberts has written an enormous biography of him recently, defending him warmly for this – I think heinously bigoted – refusal to accept Catholics sitting in Parliament.

That at a stroke it destroyed any good feeling because middle class Catholic pressure groups in Ireland had supported the Act of Union thinking they were going to get the right to sit in Westminster as part of it, but they didn't. When they did get it in 1829, it was 30 years too late. The Ireland had entered the soul.

Nonetheless, in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a kind of Unionist Catholic mentality. Young, middle class Catholics went out and worked in the British Empire. Young middle class Catholics came to London to, in many ways, create a dominant presence in the world of the arts, theatre, journalism, the law. It's quite striking. I co-curated an exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery quite a few years ago, with the art historian Fintan Cullen called "Conquering England – The Irish in Victorian London", and it was very much making that case.

The only other point where I think Ireland could have stayed in the Union comes at the high point of that kind of cultural infiltration – if you like – of the Irish in London. And that is when Gladstone introduces the First Home Rule Act in 1886 and talks for, I think two and a half hours pleading with the House of Commons saying "Think wisely. Think well before you vote on this bill. You know, this is the last chance of reconciling after centuries of misgovernment," which Gladstone talked endlessly about. And he believed the Act of Union, in fact, had no moral force. So he took a very radical line on this.

As we know, the First Home Rule Act was rejected by a small minority. The Second Home Rule Act was passed but thrown out by the Lords. The Third Home Rule Act 1912 was passed but by then Northern Ulster, the future state of Northern Ireland was never going to accept it.

I think the last point in which there could have been a united Ireland within the Empire was 1886, because the Home Rule Bill would have brought Ireland within the Empire. I think there would have been – and I've said this earlier – a gradual separation from a Canadian style status to more and more the status of India, actually, a republic within the Commonwealth.

But that could have happened without the ghastly parade of deaths and violence and bitterness that the Anglo-Irish War of 1919 to 1921 and the subsequent Irish Civil War brought about. But history is full of missed chances. But to me, 1818 and 1886 are the two great missed chances.

Member of the audience [01:09:50] In 1886 [inaudible] of Scotland.

Professor Roy Foster FBA [01:09:52] Yes, I think so. Though Scotland had made a better thing out of an Act of Union with Britain than Ireland ever was going to, I think.

Professor Richard English FBA [01:10:00] Roy, there's a question here which says "what is your next book going to focus on?"

Professor Roy Foster FBA [01:10:10] I have a book of essays, which I hope will be the third book of essays. And like Flann O'Brien, I think things happen in triads. I've written two books of essays *Paddy and Mr. Punch: Connections in English and Irish History*, *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it up in Ireland*. And there's a third one for which I don't have a title. The essays are there, and they're about literary intersections and political intersections again, but in a rather different kind of way. They end with an essay called "The Buried Tombstone", which is about history and memory in Ireland. And I think that will be the kind of theme. And then I give up.

Professor Richard English FBA [01:10:54] When Roy Foster talks about giving up, we know it's time to bring the session to an end. It's been a wonderful evening. I'd like to say three kinds of thanks. I'd like to thank the audience, both the audience here in Carlton House Terrace in the British Academy in London for coming along and for the great questions, and to the audience online. It's been great to have those questions come in and get a chance to hear Roy reflecting so widely.

I'd like to say thank you to the staff of the British Academy for putting on this event and this series, The *Leaders in SHAPE* series. Please do keep an eye on the British Academy website for further events online, and also, praise the Lord in person now as well, when people can actually meet in rooms. But mostly, for a brilliant survey of an influential career in doing so much so valuably to shape how we think about past, present and future, I'd like us all now to join in thanking our guest tonight, Professor Roy Foster.

Professor Roy Foster FBA [01:12:00] Thank you. Thank you.

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