Abstract

This paper summarises themes and arguments presented in my forthcoming edited work, *Britain, Ireland and the Italian Risorgimento* (Palgrave, 2014). In the mid-nineteenth century there were few international issues that resonated as strongly in Ireland as the ‘Italian Question’: the right (or otherwise) of the Italians to national self-determination. Irish opinion polarised along sectarian lines: the Protestant minority enthusiastically embraced the Italian nationalist ‘cause’, while the Catholic majority mobilised against it. At the height of the so-called Risorgimento (1859-70), sectarian divisions over Italy often led to violent confrontation between Protestant and Catholic communities, both in Ireland and in Britain, most notably in (but not confined to) Galway, Tralee, London, Liverpool and Newcastle.

The sectarian nature of Irish (and British) responses to the Italian Risorgimento was indicative of the ways in which Italian affairs in Ireland (and Britain) were interpreted through the lens of religion: the anti-clerical, anti-Papal character of Italian nationalism appealed to Protestants at a time when, in the popular Protestant imagination at least, Catholicism represented a clear and growing danger to Protestant interests in both Ireland and Britain. Thus, while Protestants dismissed Irish Catholic-nationalist demands for self-rule, they supported Italian nationalist claims for the same. For their part, Irish (and British) Catholics - and Irish nationalists - opposed Italian nationalism because it threatened the temporal and thus (so it was thought) the spiritual power of the Pope. In 1860, an Irish volunteer force even went to fight in Italy in defence of the Papacy, despite the repressive, reactionary and corrupt reputation of Papal government.

Only recently have historians begun to examine in detail Irish responses to the Risorgimento. These, however, have ignored one crucial dimension of the story: how Ireland’s relationship with Britain (and British views of Ireland) influenced the way in which events in Italy were interpreted and acted on within Ireland. This paper addresses this lacuna in the historiography. The paper also explores Italian nationalist views of Ireland and Irish nationalism, which were similarly coloured by deep-rooted religious, political and cultural assumptions about the nature of the Irish and British-Irish relations.