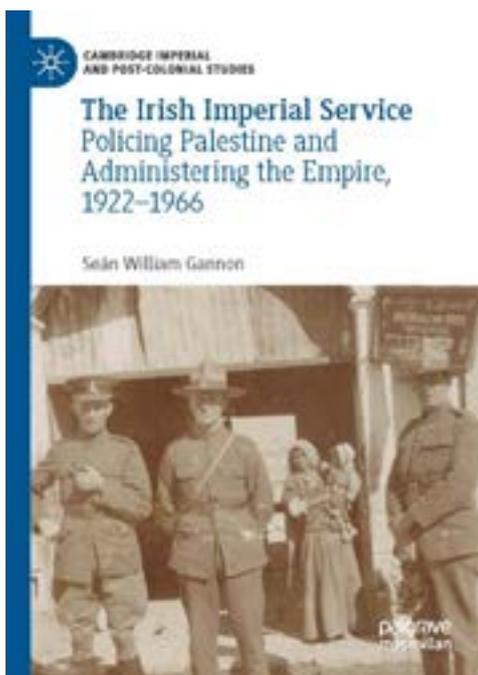


BOOK REVIEWS

Ireland and Palestine as Models for the Policing of the British Empire

The Irish Imperial Service: Policing Palestine and Administering the Empire, 1922–1966 by Seán William Gannon. London: Palgrave MacMillan Cham, 2019. Hardcover, €74.99; paper, €49.99. (eBook, €42.79)

Review by Mahon Murphy



Abstract

In this review of *The Irish Imperial Service: Policing Palestine and Administering the Empire, 1922–1966* by Seán William Gannon, Mahon Murphy discusses the book's relevance for studies of Palestine and how British policing policy developed there impacting practice in the British Empire as a whole. The creation of the Irish Free State in 1922 created a rupture in Ireland's relationship with the British Empire and Irish imperial activity. Nonetheless, contacts and entanglements of Irish people with the administration of the British Empire continued through to the 1960s. Between 1922 and 1966 when the British Colonial Office closed, Irish men and women were continuously recruited into Britain's imperial civil services, thus maintaining a significant Irish presence in the governing of empire. The majority of these Irish colonial servants were assimilated into Britain's imperial ruling caste and their attitudes toward anti-colonialists in Africa and Asia were no different from those of their British counterparts. This book, with Mandatory Palestine as its base, makes an important contribution to the discussion of the complex relationship of Irish nationalist attitudes and the British Empire.

Keywords

Mandate Palestine; British Empire; Palestine Police Force; Ireland; British Palestine Gendarmerie.

The Palestine Police Force, established in July 1920, was to form the frontline against Zionist insurgency to British rule during the last decade of Palestine as a British Mandate. In 1926, to bolster the locally recruited Palestine Police Force, the British Section (BSPP) was created. Originally consisting of a 200-man elite squad, the BSPP evolved into a 4,000-strong semicivil police unit representing over half of the entire force. In 1938–39, Irish men and women accounted for 11 percent of enlistments and rose to about 20 percent in the last year of the Mandate. Seán William Gannon's new book traces the Irish contribution to the Palestine Police Force and the long-term impact of the Irish British Gendarmerie to the policing of the British Empire after the First World War. The creation of the Irish Free State in 1922 saw a rupture in Ireland's relationship with the British Empire and Irish imperial activity. Between 1922 and 1966 when the British Colonial Office closed, Irish men and women, and not only those north of the Irish border, were continuously recruited into Britain's imperial civil services, thus maintaining a significant Irish presence in the governing of empire. The majority of these Irish colonial servants were assimilated into Britain's imperial ruling caste and their attitudes toward anti-colonialists in Africa and Asia were no different from those of their British counterparts. This book, with Mandatory Palestine as its base, makes an important contribution to the discussion of the complex relationship of Irish nationalist attitudes and the British Empire. For readers of the *Jerusalem Quarterly*, the book's main interest will no doubt be in its discussion of the Palestine Police Force and, particularly, how it came to be a template for imperial policing.

Gannon's book traces six distinct yet connected aspects of the Irish contribution to the British imperial project after 1922. First, he examines the British Gendarmerie, which was almost entirely recruited from Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) sources. The focus then shifts to Mandate Palestine and the Irish recruits both north and south of the Irish border that made up the BSPP between 1926 and 1947. With these recruits in place, Gannon then investigates their attitudes towards the Arab and Jewish communities that they policed and how their "Irishness" conditioned their response to Palestinian political issues. Taking a chronological step back, Gannon then discusses how the history of the British Gendarmerie helped act as a conduit for the transmission of an RIC culture of police brutality into the Palestine Police and through it to the wider empire. The latter chapters then build on this by examining the Irish imperial service's recruitment in southern Ireland after independence and the extent to which their "Irishness" shaped their professional experience of being servants of the British Empire in the mid-twentieth century. This book presents an independent Ireland that was not the anti-imperial "hothouse" that it is traditionally represented as being (18). While he does not deny that anti-colonialism was an important aspect of Irish political life in the era of decolonization, he stresses that there is an important discussion to be had about post-independence Ireland's relationship with empire. The many men and women who took part in Irish imperial service highlight a clear disconnect from Ireland's anti-imperialist political culture.

Gannon's book is based on an impressive array of primary source material. The

author has analyzed documents from various archives in Ireland and the United Kingdom along with the Central Zionist Archive in Tel Aviv and the Israel State Archives in Jerusalem. These are supported with memoirs, letters, interviews, and other material from former police officers to give the human narrative. While certainly adding some color, the introduction of extensive private source material allows the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations of the Irish to join the Palestine Police Force than the official documents and data would allow.

Many of those Irish recruited for the British section of the Palestine Police had little or no knowledge of the region before deployment; their first meeting with either Palestinian Arabs or Jews would take place after they entered the country by train via Egypt. To make sense of the Arab-Zionist conflict they would fall back on what they were familiar with and thus view Palestine through an “Irish national lens” (106). In Ireland, parallels were drawn between the Arab experience in Palestine and that of the Catholic Irish in Ireland. From an Irish point of view, the privileged position of Zionists in Palestine was easily equated to that of Irish Protestant ascendancy rule, and the repression by the British section of Palestine was linked to that of the notorious Black and Tans in revolutionary Ireland. As Gannon notes, many Irish police officers in Palestine had sympathy for Palestinian Arabs. However, these tended to be personal rather than political sympathies. They were members of the Police Force above all and had been at the forefront of containing the Great Arab Revolt. Nonetheless, although they were active agents in the suppression of Arab nationalism, many Irish police officers still held an affinity for Palestine’s Arabs.

On the other hand, there were those who contextualized the forging of a Jewish national identity in Palestine during the Second World War as an independence movement similar to that of Ireland during the First World War. No matter what angle Irish police saw Palestine from, there were very few genuine friendships created between them and the Jewish and Arab population. The nature of the relationship was one between colonizers and colonized. Even among their Arab colleagues on the Police Force, there was little collegial interaction. Irish attributed one reason for this to the Muslim prohibition on alcohol, which for most was the center of Irish social life. There was also the lack of shared space: the Police Force had segregated canteens and the Irish saw themselves as part of the colonial ruling caste.

The creation of the Irish Free State in 1922 ruptured Ireland’s association with the British Empire. Ireland had long been an important recruiting ground for the British Colonial Office and this rupture threatened to interrupt the flow of new Irish charges into the Imperial administration. However, as Gannon shows, recruitment from what was now southern Ireland remained buoyant as Irish men (and women) from both sides of the religious divide looked to colonial recruitment as a way to escape from a country where they felt politically or otherwise alienated. The key focus on this book is on ex-Royal Irish Constabulary who were the targets of Irish Republican Army (IRA) violence due to their counterrevolutionary role. Around 250 of these men moved to Britain’s newly acquired League of Nations Mandate, Palestine, where they formed the core of the British Gendarmerie, bringing their institutional methods with

them. This initial wave of Irish recruits established a tradition that carried throughout the history of the Mandate's policing up to 1948.

A recent article published on the Irish national broadcaster RTÉ's website caused some controversy in Ireland as it discussed the need for a reopening of discussions of independent Ireland's relationship with empire.¹ The different experiences of Ireland as a partitioned island has greatly shaped how Irish history is written. With the centenary of Ireland's partition marked in 2021, a reappraisal of Ireland's entanglements with the histories of India, Egypt, and of course Palestine among others can help us to critically engage with empire as a system and its many contested legacies. Gannon's book is a very useful contribution to this debate. The default position among many Irish historians used to be that while Irish workers made significant contributions to the administration of the British Empire, this all stopped after 1922. Gannon successfully shows in a comprehensive manner that this was not the case and that the recruitment of Irish by Britain's imperial services was a link retained through the post-independence period up to the large waves of decolonialization in the 1950s and 1960s.

The British Section of the Palestine Gendarmerie created in 1922 became the focus for Irish Colonial Police recruitment post-partition. As Gannon shows, this created a conduit for the transmission of an RIC ethos into the Palestine Police and through it onto the wider empire. This resulted in a culture of police brutality similar to that used in revolutionary Ireland. This is seen in the BSPP's handling of the Arab and Zionist revolts. Gannon traces this to other sections of the empire, through either the movement of Palestine policemen across the empire or the creation of an institutional memory that transferred from Ireland to Palestine and onto the wider empire. Gannon's book is an important intervention in the debate on post-independence Ireland's relationship with the British Empire. It will also be of interest to those looking to understand the BSPP through its personnel and its institutions and is an excellent example of the entanglements created by empire.

Mahon Murphy is an associate professor at the Faculty of Law, Kyoto University, Japan. His research interests focus on the global impact of the First World War, looking at the conflict's extra-European theaters. He has published previously on the British military occupation of Jerusalem 1917–1920.

Endnotes

- 1 Dónal Hassett, Hussein Omar, Laura McAtackney, "The Case for Rethinking Ireland and Empire" (19 April 2021), online at (rte.ie) bit.ly/3ugNu3k (accessed 6 February 2022).