



***Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain.* Fintan O'Toole.  
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There is a huge asymmetry of understanding between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom: the Irish know much more about the British than the British even pretend to know about them, much as Canadians know so much more about their neighbors to the south than Americans care to know about Canadians. For obvious reasons, Irish interest in the UK has intensified since the British voted 52% to 48% to leave the European Union. The political and economic impact of Brexit would be greater in Ireland than in any other EU country, and the Irish have no alternative but to prepare for it, as Tony Connolly has detailed in his book *Brexit and Ireland* (2018).

But another Irish observer, the journalist Fintan O'Toole, offers an Irish perspective on what he believes to be the dire consequences of Brexit for Britain itself. O'Toole is a columnist for *The Irish Times* and a social democratic commentator whose previous books include *Ship of Fools* (2010), about financial corruption and malpractice during Ireland's "Celtic Tiger" years. In this new book, O'Toole presents Brexit as psychodrama – a conscious act of self-harm that has deep roots in a crisis of British or, more specifically, English national identity.

National identities in the British Isles are deeply interrelated and symbiotic. O'Toole begins his analysis with an acknowledgment of the extent to which Irish identity has been formed in opposition to Britishness:

The official Irish culture of my childhood and youth was one that defined Ireland as whatever England was not. England was Protestant; so Catholicism had to be the essence of Irish identity. England was industrial; so Ireland had to make a virtue of its underdeveloped and deindustrialized economy. England was urban; so Ireland had to create an image of itself that was exclusively rustic. The English were scientific rationalists; so we Irish had to be the mystical dreamers of dreams. They were Anglo-Saxons; we were Celts. They had a monarchy, so we had to have a republic. They developed a welfare state; so we relied on the tender mercies of charity.<sup>1</sup>

But he also acknowledges that the realities were always somewhat at odds with this official culture, as Irish people volunteered for service in the British armed forces or migrated to Britain for the health and educational benefits of its welfare state and for its greater social and sexual tolerance. O'Toole professes great affection for the British, and regrets that Brexit threatens to make Britain and Ireland formally more separate than ever by placing them on opposite sides of an EU border. But if O'Toole is writing against the grain, it has not stopped him from producing a scathing depiction of a country in torment, cut loose from the constraints of strategic or economic interest calculation, and hell bent upon a masochistic course of atavistic and hubristic folly.

O'Toole's argument is deeply indebted to four curiously different sources: Herbert Spencer's *The Principles of Psychology* (1855), E.L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), Stephanie Barczewski's *Heroic Failure and the British* (2016), and Timothy Snyder's *The Road to Unfreedom* (2018). For Spencer, self-pity "makes a sufferer wish to be alone with his grief, and makes him resist all distraction from it." The source of this grief is "the contrast between his own worth as he estimates it and the treatment he has received."<sup>2</sup> In this sense, self-pity combines a high sense of superiority with a deep sense of grievance. This phenomenon is foundational to O'Toole's understanding of Brexit.

According to O'Toole, Britain's sense of superiority is rooted in its rose-tinted imperial history and its mythologized account of its role in WWII. Its sense of grievance arises from the harsh realities of decolonization and from relative economic and military decline. The parallel economic success of Britain's WWII enemies Germany, Japan, and Italy, along with that of France and the Benelux countries whom the British insist they rescued, adds insult to injury. Britain's EU membership institutionalizes this sense of grievance.

So why, then, did Britain join what was then the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973? From O'Toole's perspective, superiority and grievance at that time still existed separately in the British national psyche, and it was the dubious achievement of the Brexiteers to combine them later. Three conditions made this possible. Firstly, there was the sense of national crisis imposed on the 1970s by severe industrial unrest, an escalation of violence in Northern Ireland, and the rise in support for nationalist movements in Scotland and Wales. Any sense that the EEC represented an opportunity for national renewal was subsumed beneath an air of general despondency.

Secondly, there was a change in the British practice of scapegoating – the search for an identifiable group to be blamed for decline. O'Toole notes that the last anti-Semitic riots in Britain took place in 1947, the year before the docking of the *Empire Windrush* marked the beginning of high-volume Commonwealth immigration, and black people replaced Jews as the national scapegoat. But by the 1980s, the blatant racism that had characterized the 1960s and 1970s was pushed out of political discourse, the media, and popular culture. Thereafter, though attempts to scapegoat ethnic minorities would never go away, they would be forced to become more oblique. As O'Toole puts it, "[t]he dogwhistle would replace the megaphone."<sup>3</sup> This inhibition of racial scapegoating created a vacancy which was filled by the EU. As the historian Richard Weight expressed it, "Brussels replaced Brixton as the whipping boy of British nationalists."<sup>4</sup>

O'Toole's third condition for Brexit is the failure of welfarism. The post-WWII construction of the welfare state was an ambitious and optimistic futurist project. Its promise that each generation would be better off, and more secure, than the one that went before it offered a distraction from the loss of empire and the self-pity that it could induce. But the cancellation of the welfare ethos in the age of Thatcherism, and its gradual bipartisan disassembly through marketization and privatization, deprived the British of a unifying vision of future prospects and allowed them to dwell increasingly on the losses of the past.

Under these conditions, the British became receptive to the Brexiteers' rendition of British self-pity. That rendition also drew on a fusion of two antagonistic forms of nationalism bequeathed to Britain by its imperial experience: an imperial nationalism that promises to extricate Britain from the restrictions of the European theatre and place it back on the world stage, and an anti-imperial nationalism that takes the form of an insurgency against the oppression of Brussels. The logic is that if Britain is not an empire then it must be a colony, and, if it is a colony, then it must rebel – hence the Leave campaign slogan “Take Back Control.”

Using some lamentable and over-long extracts from E.L. James's execrable *Fifty Shades* series of novels, O'Toole contends that “[t]he political erotics of imaginary domination and imaginary submission are the deep pulse of the Brexit psychodrama.”<sup>5</sup> Switching to worthier literary terrain, he finds support for the contention that Britain indulges itself in fantasies of submission in the best-selling novels that have imagined a Nazi-occupied or controlled Britain after defeat in WWII, such as Len Deighton's *SS-GB* (1978), Robert Harris's *Fatherland* (1992), or C.J. Sansom's *Dominion* (2012).

O'Toole is right that, for many prominent Brexiteers, the EU serves as a proxy for the German domination depicted in those dystopias. Indeed, the EU is frequently presented as the latest in a long tradition of coercive attempts to unify Europe. According to the late Kenneth Minogue, a Euro-Skeptic political scientist, earlier attempts include “the medieval popes, Charlemagne, Napoleon, the Kaiser and Hitler.”<sup>6</sup> The exact same sentiments were echoed by Boris Johnson during the 2016 referendum campaign.<sup>7</sup> Viewed from this perspective, the Brexit campaign is nothing less than a resistance movement, though one facing, as O'Toole points out, a harder occupation to confront:

At least the Nazis could have been, in Churchill's great and galvanic rhetoric, fought on the beaches, hills, fields and streets. They offered the ‘chance to fight back’. The new German invasion, cloaked in the guise of peaceful co-operation, is more damnable because it does not give the English Resistance a proper physical target. Hostility to the EU thus opens the way to a bizarre logic in which a Nazi invasion would have been, relatively speaking, welcome.<sup>8</sup>

The leaders of this self-styled resistance movement concede that Brexit – especially a “hard” Brexit, in which Britain leaves the EU without agreed terms – could entail considerable economic hardship in the short-to-medium term. Leading Conservative Brexiteer Jacob Rees-Mogg MP has, for example, acknowledged that it could take up to fifty years to assess whether Brexit has been positive or negative in its economic impact.<sup>9</sup> But this does not deter the resistance. To explain this, O'Toole turns to the work of Stephanie Barczewski (2016).

For Barczewski, “the highest form of English heroism is stoicism in the face of defeat,” and the commemoration and memorialization of heroic defeats and failures – the 1809 retreat from Corunna during the Peninsula War, Franklin’s lost expedition of 1845, the catastrophic Charge of the Light Brigade in 1854, the massacre at the hands of the Zulus at Isandlwana in 1879, the death of General Gordon at Khartoum in 1885, the debacle of the Somme in 1916, the 1940 evacuation of Dunkirk – are staple British cultural tropes.<sup>10</sup>

In drawing on Barczewski, O’Toole’s point is that the prospect of post–Brexit hardships does not deter Brexit; rather, it converts Brexit into an opportunity to display the resilience in the face of hardship that the British believe to be an elemental part of their national character. In that sense, the release of Christopher Nolan’s film *Dunkirk* in the year of the EU referendum is a priceless coincidence.

In the work of American historian Timothy Snyder, O’Toole finds further explanation for the apparent eagerness of many Leave voters to confront the queues and shortages that Brexit may entail: it is a form of what Snyder calls “sadopopulism” – a people’s willingness to inflict pain on themselves provided that, at the same time, it inflicts as much, or greater, pain on the enemy. This can be found in Brexit campaigners’ threats of a tourist boycott of Spanish beaches, or of the imposition of tariffs on German cars or Italian wine: it is acceptable to damage the UK economy in pursuit of Brexit, provided it damages the EU economy too.

*Heroic Failure* presents Brexit as the existential scream of a Britain in the grip of a collective identity crisis. All nations are, in Benedict Anderson’s 1983 coinage, *Imagined Communities*, and, as Linda Colley (1992) has shown in *Britons*, Britishness was imagined in order to provide the state created by the 1707 Act of Union between England and Scotland – expanded to include Ireland in 1800 – with a corresponding national identity. It is well understood that the “Celtic” nationalisms of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales have presented challenges to that English–dominated Britishness. But, for O’Toole, the principal challenge to British identity today comes from a distinctly *English* nationalism, the resurgence of which provides the energy that fuels Brexit.

For centuries, English identity folded itself comfortably into two structures that were notionally British but in reality English-dominated: the empire and the Union. The empire, of course, is long gone. The Union still exists, but it underwent profound changes in the 1990s, with the Belfast Agreement in Northern Ireland in 1998, which provided for a revived Northern Irish Assembly, and with the creation of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly in 1999. As a consequence, the English, with no specifically English national political structures, began to withdraw mentally from the Union. As O’Toole points out, the heartlands of Brexit are to be found in non–metropolitan England. That this growth in English national consciousness went largely unnoticed – not least in metropolitan England, where politics, the media, and academia are located – is the principal reason why the Leave vote in 2016 came as such a surprise, even to leading Leave campaigners.

That Brexit now poses an existential threat to the Union is acknowledged on both sides of the argument. In England, 54% of voters voted Leave, as did 52% of voters in Wales. By contrast, Remain won with 62% of the vote in Scotland and with 55.8% in Northern Ireland. As a

result, it is entirely possible that in the future some parts of what is now the UK will be inside the EU and others outside. In the Scottish independence referendum of 2014, the risk that an independent Scotland would not be admitted to the EU was a major part of the Unionist case. Today, the prospect that Scotland may be taken out of the EU even though it voted with a solid majority to stay is fueling demands for a second reformation on independence. In Wales, public opinion now trends majority Remain and support for independence, though still very low by Scottish standards, has edged marginally upwards.

But it is on the island of Ireland that Brexit's impact on the question of national identity within the UK is most intensely felt. The UK's departure from the EU poses immense practical problems for Northern Ireland. Since the Good Friday peace agreement of 1999, there has been only the softest of soft borders between the province and the Republic of Ireland. The risk is that the border hardens as it becomes the only land boundary between the UK and the EU. This is the subject of the so-called "Irish backstop" that has caused the Brexit negotiations between London and Brussels to stall. Under the backstop, the border would be kept soft by the UK retaining all EU regulations and tariffs, thereby negating the purpose of Brexit. Alternatively, Northern Ireland could retain the EU rules as the rest of the UK casts them off, leading in effect to a border in the Irish sea between Northern Ireland and the mainland – a nightmare scenario for Unionists. The Irish republican party Sinn Fein has already issued calls for a "border poll" on Irish reunification in the event of Brexit taking place.

Though O'Toole professes to feel Britain's pain – which may become Ireland's pain – there is a detectable undercurrent of Schadenfreude in this book. This is especially apparent in his treatment of the Brexiteers' adoption of the Irish Free State (IFS) as a model for Brexit Britain. At its creation, the IFS was subject to constraints imposed by the UK in terms of access to ports, oaths of supremacy, and residual fiscal obligations; however, over time, the IFS was able to erode these constraints in practice and to construct a genuine independence. For some leading Brexiteers, Britain could gradually erode away the constraints of any Brexit deal with the EU in the much same way. It is hard to begrudge O'Toole his sense of delicious irony as he watches Brexiteers – most of whom are staunch Unionists – adopt Éamon De Valera as a role model. O'Toole also has fun drawing parallels between the July 2016 Leave vote and the 1916 Easter Rising – an Irish heroic failure.

But O'Toole is also genuine in his lament for Britain, which he believes to be losing, rather than recovering, itself in the Brexit process. This can be seen in a further irony: Brexit's importation of French political concepts that have, until now, been absent from, and antithetical to, the British political tradition. This can be seen in the constant evocation of "the will of the people" – a Rousseauian, French revolutionary term that implies that the 52% who voted Leave constitute "the people," with no consideration given to the 48% who voted Remain. It can be seen too in the use of the term "enemies of the people" to describe critics of Brexit, as in the *Daily Mail's* November 4, 2016 headline after three High Court justices ruled that the initiation of Brexit would require the approval of Parliament. In that sense, there is something very un-British about this particular British revolution.

*Heroic Failure* is a highly intelligent, often humorous, polemic, illustrated by a wide range of pop-cultural references. Anyone interested in the interplay of national identities in the

United Kingdom would do well to read it, though the utility of the book would have been greatly enhanced by the inclusion of an index. But O’Toole is too ready to let the Brexiteers represent the British as a whole – perhaps inadvertently conceding to them their highly questionable claim to speak for “the people.” And English readers might ask the familiar question about why Irish, Scottish, and Welsh nationalism are seen as progressive forces, whereas English nationalism is necessarily reactionary.

There can be no doubt that Britain today is a deeply troubled place, as evidenced in the June 2019 survey by BritainThinks, which reveals a country that is deeply divided by region, by social class, and by age, and one that is increasingly contemptuous of its political institutions, that believes its future prospects to be bleak, and that considers itself to be an international laughing stock on account of Brexit.<sup>11</sup> It is a picture of fatigue, lack of confidence, pessimism, and embarrassment, very much at odds with the bombast of the Brexiteers who appear throughout this book. But O’Toole’s core argument – that Brexit is best understood in terms of conflicting conceptions of identity in a post-imperial Britain in which the Union is loosening – is highly plausible. So, too, is his contention that Brexit will prove to be yet another heroic failure – whether Britain leaves the EU or not.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Page xii

<sup>2</sup> Quoted p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Page 17.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted, p.17.

<sup>5</sup> Page 25.

<sup>6</sup> Page 34.

<sup>7</sup> Jules Johnson, “Boris Johnson Compares EU to Nazi Superstate,” <https://www.politico.eu/article/boris-johnson-compares-eu-to-nazi-superstate-brexiteers-ukip/>

<sup>8</sup> Page 52.

<sup>9</sup> Graeme Demianyk, “Jacob Rees-Mogg Says It Could Take Fifty Years to Reap the Benefits of Brexit,” *Huffington Post*, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2018. [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/jacob-rees-mogg-economy-brexiteers-uk\\_5b54e3b5e4b0de86f48e3566?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2x](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/jacob-rees-mogg-economy-brexiteers-uk_5b54e3b5e4b0de86f48e3566?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2x)

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted, p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> Mood of the Nation – A Study by BritainThinks, June 18 2019. <https://britainthinks.com/news/mood-of-the-nation-2019-a-study-by-britainthinks>

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