

Scripture Politics: Ultimately Ineffective

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Course: HIST 2011
Date: February 14th 2022
Word Count: 1433

Scripture Politics by Ian McBride is a book on the history of the Presbyterian Church in Ulster, Ireland from the seventeenth century to the Irish Rebellion of 1798. The island of Ireland is divided into four provinces, with Ulster being the northernmost. It is the part of Ireland where the most British settlers live. There were two types of British settlers, English Anglicans who owned most of the land and controlled most of the government, and Scottish Presbyterian who were mostly middle class and had some government access.¹ McBride focuses on the Scottish Presbyterian settlers, who developed their own identity and started radical efforts. McBride details the history of this radicalism through the sermons and official documents of the Presbyterian Church at this time. While McBride presents interesting research, and quality sources, due to a lack of a thesis, and an objective that is too broad for the scope, his book is overall ineffective.

The first aspect of this book that will be examined is what the book aimed to achieve, what facts it contained, and what sources it used. The author of this book, McBride, states that he is trying to uncover how concepts of nationality and liberty were discovered, popularized, appropriated and revised through focusing on different theories, political culture of volunteering, denominational and ethical affiliations that fed into political insurrections during this time.² He attempts to write a history of Presbyterian radicalism, and he believes that one did not exist at the time he is writing.³ McBride outlines his objectives in the introduction, but he does not state an argument or thesis for either the entire book, or for individual chapters. This book is structured chronologically, with each chapter approaching a different period, from the point of view of the Presbyterian Church officials, in particular, ministers. It stretches in time from the seventeenth

¹ Ian, McBride, *Scripture Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 15.

² McBride, *Scripture Politics*, 4.

³ McBride, *Scripture Politics*, 3.

century to the Irish Rebellion in 1798, but has a very narrow scope of study, focusing on the history of the Presbyterian Church and its officials.

In chapter one, he gives a background of the protestant arrival in Ulster and discusses how they gained more political and social power throughout the eighteenth century.⁴ Chapter two discusses the emergence of New Light Presbyterians, a group that broke off from the church as they wanted to have more progressive beliefs.⁵ In chapter three he discusses another break up of the Presbyterian Church into the Seceding and Covenanting Sects.⁶ In chapter four he discusses the emergence of Presbyterian radicalism, and argues that they were influenced primarily by sermons.⁷ In chapter five, he discusses how Presbyterian radicalism was influenced by the American Revolution, and he argues that this was more influential than the French Revolution.⁸ Chapter six discusses the Presbyterian campaign for there to be changes to the House of Commons, and their discussion around the Catholic Question, which was the debate if Catholics should be able to be politically involved.⁹ In chapter seven he discusses the emergence of the Society of United Irishmen, which was fighting for equal representation for all in government.¹⁰ Finally, chapter eight discusses the social conditions surrounding the Rural Revolutions in 1798.¹¹ Each chapter is written similar to a textbook chapter, in that it gives an overview of the topic discussed, but does not make a strong argument or state an opinion. All chapters have a church based top-down history slant, in terms of how they focus on the leaders in the church and their actions, but no arguments, larger conclusions about the impact of their actions, narratives, or normative claims are made.

⁴ McBride, *Scripture Politics*, 14.

⁵ McBride, *Scripture Politics*, 41.

⁶ McBride, *Scripture Politics*, 62.

⁷ McBride, *Scripture Politics*, 84.

⁸ McBride, *Scripture Politics*, 113.

⁹ McBride, *Scripture Politics*, 134.

¹⁰ McBride, *Scripture Politics*, 165.

¹¹ McBride, *Scripture Politics*, 186.

McBride uses mainly primary sources, including sermons, church records, treatises, and pamphlets. These were all documents produced by the Presbyterian Church or its members, and thus they are written by the people that McBride sees as most influential. McBride sees sermons in particular as the most influential as they are effective methods of relaying information and the church served as a meeting house for dispersing ideas.¹² Ministers served as political orators, election agents, journalists, pamphleteers, and rebel soldiers and giving sermons was one of their main methods of idea distribution.¹³ As McBride sees the ministers and church officials as vital to the development of Ulster Ireland he studies their writings in order to determine developments in this period. Primary church-based sources like these sources are used throughout the book's eight chapters. For the scope that McBride chooses, he utilizes very effective sources, as they are written, produced and distributed by the people that he is studying.

The second aspect of this book that will be examined is how it failed to be effective. The two main reasons why this book is ineffective is because McBride does not provide a clear thesis, and chose an objective that was too broad for the scope.

Instead of providing a thesis, this book is written similarly to a textbook, in that it discusses the period, the events that occurred, and the people involved, without stating an opinion, or making normative claims. This however, is misleading as his introduction suggests that he is presenting argumentative historical information, yet he offers no argument in the subsequent chapter. The introduction states that McBride is to give a history of Presbyterian radicalism as well as uncover how concepts of nationality and liberty were discovered, popularized, appropriated and revised.¹⁴ However, the scope of this book was too narrow to fully understand these concepts, and the lack of an argument meant that no direction to these was

¹² McBride, *Scripture Politics*, 6.

¹³ McBride, *Scripture Politics*, 6.

¹⁴ McBride, *Scripture Politics*, 13.

given. This book is structured chronologically, with each chapter examining a different historical period. There is no narrative to connect events, or stated reason for why these events were chosen. As there is no narrative, or message drawn from the events, the book has a listless quality as there is no sense of progression. It is valuable as it uses good sources and provides detailed descriptions of events, but it does not make an argument, or offer a unique perspective.

McBride chooses an objective that is too large for his scope. He is unable to fully examine Presbyterian racialism, as his objective states, as he studies top-down history and focuses only on the leaders of the church, rather than examining the life of regular Presbyterians and their motivations for radicalism. He is also unable to examine the concepts of nationality and liberty because he only studies church officials. This omits how non-Presbyterian, women, and non-church officials viewed these concepts. It does not study the people who were affected by the Presbyterian action, such as the native Catholics, has no mention of the living conditions of the people mentioned, has few mentions of women and fails to study the lives of the individuals mentioned outside of their church-related activities. His narrow scope means that he is able to provide a very detailed study. However, he sets expansive goals in the introduction that are not achieved with the specificity of his study. While the author does not make many sweeping generalizations within the chapters, in the introduction he sets out to make large conclusions that are impossible to draw with this small scope and no argumentative direction.

Overall, this book presents very interesting research, and it has a lot of potential with the quality of sources used. However, due to his failure to provide a clear thesis, and his goals being too sweeping for the scope, this book is overall ineffective in achieving its stated goals in the introduction. For McBride to write a more effective book he would need to revisit his intentions in the introduction and outline how the book will not make argumentative claims, and would

instead give a history of the Presbyterian Church officials in Ulster. This would prepare the reader for a textbook-like book, and inform them of the narrow scope. This would prevent readers from being misled, and help those who are researching a similar topic to locate the book easily. McBride aims to contribute a history of Presbyterian radicalism to academia, and in this he is successful. Choosing a narrow topic allows for a very thorough study, and using primary sources produced by the church allows McBride to understand their ideas and influence effectively. He however does not achieve his other objectives, and it would be impossible to do so with the narrow subject matter examined. While it has a misleading introduction and fails to achieve its stated objectives, McBride's book adds detailed research to the study of enlightenment-era Ireland. However, a misleading introduction means that it may not find the audiences that will be able to best use it. Thus, while this book is interesting with good sources, it is ultimately ineffective.

Bibliography

McBride, Ian. *Scripture Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.