

Eric P. Kaufmann, *The Orange Order: A Contemporary Northern Irish History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 373 pages.

In March 2005, almost exactly one hundred years after the formation of the Ulster Unionist Council, the Orange Order severed its formal ties with the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). In this impressive and insightful book, Canadian scholar Eric Kaufmann describes this moment as ‘truly the beginning of a new era for Orange politics’ (p. 313). Indeed the simple fact that this book could be written at all, drawing as it does on unprecedented co-operation from the Order itself, is a sign of some of the far-reaching changes that have occurred within the Orange movement since the early 1960s.

Kaufmann claims, not without some justification, to have produced the ‘first modern history and social analysis of the Orange Order’, based on a ‘treasure-trove’ of internal official documents never previously made available to a non-orange audience (p.1). This provides the foundation for eleven chapters that discuss the main issues faced by the Order over the past fifty years, including its policies on political reform after the abolition of Stormont (which effectively removed its insider influence on government policy), the disputes over major initiatives such as the Anglo Irish and Belfast Agreements, and its stances on security and the always controversial parading issue. The overall approach is chronological and historical, and while this generally works, at times it sits uneasily with sections in which the author attempts to develop a socio-economic analysis of membership and to assess trends in political preferences. Accounts of internal debates and meetings are often rather clunky, and there are several annoying factual errors. The ‘field’ at Finaghy for example is placed in north Belfast rather than south, Roy Bradford (rather than Rev. Robert) is said to die at the hands of the IRA, the New Ireland Forum Report is attributed to Jim Prior, Clifford Forsythe is given as MP for South Down rather than South Antrim, and Lansdowne Road - the home of Irish rugby - is referred to as a race-track in Dublin! Perhaps, however, this is a small price to pay for an assessment of the Orange Order that is dispassionate and objective, and avoids the temptation to knee-jerk criticism.

A central strength of the book lies in its deconstruction of the image of the Order as a monolithic institution characterised by parades of ‘mysterious bowler-hatted men wearing Orange sashes accompanied by hard-thumping marching bands’ (p. 1). Instead, Kaufmann situates the Irish movement within its wider context – making some insightful comparisons with Canada for example – and draws attention to all the nuances and fissures within the organization, to its internal power relations and socio-economic make-up. As well as politics and parading for example, there have always been important divisions over issues such as attendance at Catholic services, ecumenism, and about whether alcohol should be permitted in Orange halls. Another important internal value relates to the preference for ‘respectability’, discipline and law and order. However this co-exists uneasily with a ‘rough’ populist element and those occasions when the Order has supported pan-unionist movements such as Vanguard (in which the participation of loyalist paramilitary groups was evident), and especially with the support for violent action that surrounded the Drumcree parades in the late 1990s.

Many of these issues are characterized by a ‘great divide’ between what Kaufmann terms ‘traditionalists’ and ‘rebels’, the former stronger in the border counties with a

predominance of members from the Church of Ireland, the latter in Antrim and Belfast where there is a more nonconformist streak. This cleavage manifested itself in the internal divisions over parading. So in 1995 a group of militants banded together in the 'Spirit of Drumcree' (SOD) to demand stronger action against the re-routing of parades, no negotiations with nationalist residents' groups, an end to the link with the UUP, and internal structural reforms to strengthen further the influence of the grassroots. In this it was opposed by clergy-led traditionalists in the Education Committee who adopted a more pragmatic approach and worked to improve the Order's external image. Although relatively short-lived, SOD was the harbinger of important structural changes, and also played a crucial role in stiffening the sinews of the Order against compromise with either nationalists or the British government in the wake of the Belfast Agreement.

A core element of Kaufmann's thesis is that general trends promoting the modernization of society have had a crucial impact on the Orange Order. He argues for example that major social changes have contributed to a levelling of status hierarchies, manifested initially in the emergence of popular challenges to a dominant elite closely linked to traditional political unionism - not only from outsider figures such as Paisley but also with the accession of 'populists' such as James Molyneux and Rev. Martin Smyth to positions of authority within the Order. Crucially important is Kaufmann's grounding of the Orange Order within an organizational framework that sees it as an 'agent of "bonding" social capital' (p. 7). Drawing on the work of Robert Putnam and others - indeed it is instructive that the Grand Lodge invited Putnam to address it in 2005 - he develops the important argument that the Order is an association like any other, a dynamic entity that must compete with other outlets for leisure time and social interaction. In this context the most pressing concern is a long-term trend decline in membership from around 70,000 in the late 1950s, albeit punctuated by upsurges at times of political crisis. For Kaufmann however, the explanation has more to do with social change than politics. This is highlighted in the fascinating claim that the most important correlate of Orange membership decline is the expansion of the roads network rather than traditional variables such as class and employment. Indeed 'whatever way the data are sliced, the most important determinants of membership are anchored in less sexy socio-economic trends related to geographic mobility and changing cultural practices' (p. 284). So there is a notable urban/rural divide, with urbanites more likely to leave the Order than those in rural areas where there are fewer alternative opportunities for social engagement.

Although essentially a conservative body, the Order has had to adapt in the face of such social change; indeed Kaufmann argues that the story of the Order in the second half of the twentieth century is one of 'continuity and adaptation' (p. 314). Prompted by the crisis around Drumcree, it has paid greater attention to its public image and also has begun to re-articulate its preferences in the language of equality, multiculturalism and human rights rather than tradition. Indeed media training, PR, cultural exhibits and tourist promotion are 'increasingly part of the Orange lexicon' (p. 314). This of course raises the fundamental question: what is the future for the Orange Order? In the final pages of the book, Kaufmann speculates that even if the political situation normalises, the Order 'will continue to have a cultural role as custodian of the Ulster Protestant collective memory' (p. 319). However given that he accurately locates the Orange Order as a core pillar of 'no' unionism, it is unfortunate that the seismic shift that saw the DUP and Sinn Féin agree to form a power-sharing

executive, came too late for inclusion in this book. What does this mean for the future of the Order, and for its role as the voice of 'no' unionism?

[1211 words]