



News



Amanda Foreman

17 May 2011

Recommend

For more than a decade there has been talk in Ireland about a state visit from the Queen. In 1998 the Irish President Mary McAleese declared, "I think the day [the visit] happens is a day we can all say 'Yes, we've arrived at a degree of comfort with each other that really does make the closing of the culture of conflict'." And on the eve of the Good Friday Agreement, Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern announced that a royal visit would be "inevitable" once the peace process had wrapped up.

But for all that, the Queen was going to have to do more than amble down O'Connell Street. Anglo-Irish relations are awash with symbolic rapprochements: from the £3.25billion bi-lateral loan beginning this September, to this week's announcement that the sealed oral histories of two former IRA members have been subpoenaed in the [United States](#) - histories that may reveal who murdered Jean McConville and the rest of the IRA's "Disappeared".

The "culture of conflict" has indeed moved on. However, individuals matter, and there is no individual with a greater family history of guilt and responsibility than the Queen. The monarchy's role in shaping Ireland's history contains little to celebrate and a great deal to condemn.

The British presence in Ireland had dwindled to near insignificance when [Henry VIII](#) decided to reconquer the country in 1536. This decision had far-reaching consequences for the destinies of both countries. The "pacification" of Ireland continued for the next 250 years, involving the total disenfranchisement of Ireland's Catholic hierarchy. Her economy was systematically decimated.

In 1800, [George III](#) had the chance to remove this stain on Britain's national character by allowing the union of the two countries to go through on terms of religious equality between Catholics and Protestants. Tragically, he viewed the idea as an attack on the constitution.

His misguided objections poisoned the Act of Union from the outset, helping to create the economic conditions that led to the horrors of the potato famine of 1845-9. Ireland's population actually decreased during the 19th century. Shortly before the famine there were 8.2million people in Ireland; by 1899, a combination of disease and mass emigration had left only 4.7million.

After George III's blunder, it was not what the monarchy did but what it failed to do that tarred its reputation in Ireland. It was not a question of animosity: [Queen Victoria](#), for example, personally contributed £2,000 during the potato famine. There was, however, a total failure of leadership regarding the larger question of Irish independence.

It is this - the moral lacuna between the vacuous expressions of goodwill made by Edward VII and George V and the reality of Ireland's suffering - that has made it impossible for any British monarch to visit Ireland since 1911.

This is why the most important place [Queen Elizabeth](#) will visit is the Garden of Remembrance in Parnell Square, which commemorates all who died in the cause of Irish freedom. No action could speak louder or close more wounds than this public acknowledgement of royal regret.

Amanda Foreman's recent book on the US civil war, [A World on Fire: An Epic History of Two Nations Divided](#) is out in Penguin paperback next month.

Recommend

Be the first of your friends to recommend this.

0



Sponsored links

Restaurant Discounts

Amazing Daily Deals. Get 90% off at Restaurants in Your City. Join Now! www.kgbdeals.co.uk

Her Royal Hotness?

Check out Pippa Middleton in FullHD Quality viewing for less at Kogan kogan.co.uk

Parish Records Online

Search Millions of Parish Records Official Documents from the UK Findmypast.co.uk/Parish_Records

MAMMA MIA! London

Book Tickets direct with the theatre from just £20 www.Mamma-Mia.com