

Ireland was barely mentioned in the campaigns leading up to the referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union in 2016, and few could have predicted the central part it was to play in the negotiations. That is, perhaps, except historians. Kevin O'Rourke, a half-Irish academic, has unravelled the long strands of history that have led to Brexit and its current complications, and in so doing he illuminates not only the Irish problem, but the entirety of Britain's strange, ambivalent relationship with the EU.

If O'Rourke admits his Irish heritage affects his judgement ("the implications of Brexit for my country are truly alarming"), his book could hardly be more rigorous or comprehensive. It talks us through the past hundred years or so of European and then EU trade arrangements and trends in globalization, making heavy use of data in charts, graphs and statistics. The real gems are to be found in the detail. In 1947, contemplating the prospect of a European customs union, a British committee concluded that joining would have "little economically in its favour other than the damage which would be caused by being excluded from it". In 1956, working out on what terms Britain could be economically integrated with what became the European Economic Community (a year later), Harold Macmillan suggested "Plan G",

an agreement whereby Britain could gain all the benefits of EEC membership, such as frictionless trade, but retain its sovereignty and be able to make preferential deals with other countries – or, as it was put at the time, "have its cake and eat it too". The EEC would agree to it, the Board of Trade said, because "the possibility of UK co-operation would be so welcome that we should be able to enter the plan more or less on our own terms". The EEC declined. Those who read *A Short History of Brexit* will find warnings for the future, too. By 1960 British politicians had begun to realize that the country's international standing – and special relation-

ship with the US – was being damaged by the fact that it was not in the Common Market, a consideration pivotal to its eventual decision to join, which was first attempted in 1961 (but did not succeed until 1973).

O'Rourke is clear that Britain has always been ambivalent about the bloc, feeling it a threat to its imperial past and relationship with the US. It dragged its feet in joining, and if it enjoyed the economic benefits of the EEC and its successors, it was much less keen on the supranational ambitions of EU committees. Continental Europe, too, was ambivalent about Britain, especially de Gaulle, who, concerned about France's voice being weakened by British membership, vetoed the country's applications in both 1961 and 1969. It is important too, O'Rourke says, to note that Brexit has always been about borders. "The British decided in 2016 to take back control of theirs; the Europeans have insisted on retaining control of theirs, and the Irish are determined to avoid one on their island." Little wonder that it has all

come down to the Irish backstop.

This may all sound familiar to Brexit watchers, but the advantage of O'Rourke's book is in the sheer weight of facts and the most salient one, that it refuses to polemicize at a time where most do little else. The author takes pains to emphasize the roles of chance and contingency: Leave won by a small majority – had just 635,000 voted the other way, Brexit would not be happening. He also looks beyond the United Kingdom and sets his explanations in global context, surveying the rise of populist politicians, and the cultural and economic conditions that enable them, and considers whether citizens tend to vote rationally or be fooled by lying politicians (short answer: it's both).

The book may be tough going for those not electrified by the intricacies of twentieth-century international law or the workings and dissolutions of EU sub-committees. O'Rourke is mistaken if he thinks occasionally describing the atmosphere in the Old Library in his college helps to leaven it. He also refers readers to Tim Shipman's *All Out War* (2016) so often that they might start wondering how much Shipman has paid him. But those who read *A Short History of Brexit* will have a distinct advantage: they might actually start to understand what has happened to the United Kingdom.

# Stale cake

## How to understand what has happened to the UK

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Kevin O'Rourke

A SHORT HISTORY OF BREXIT

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