



## Joseph Bruce Nelson (1940-2022)

Posted on July 16, 2022 by Nelson Lichtenstein

Bruce Nelson was a great friend. I'll never forget the first time I met him, in the Buttercup Bakery on College Avenue in Berkeley, sometime in the late 1970s. Bruce came out of a different ethno-class background than me, he had been in a different political sect, and he had

actually "industrialized," which gave him enormous street cred in both of our circles. We bonded immediately because of a shared passion for understanding the mentality of workers,

in struggle and out. His *Workers on the Waterfront* (1989) was and is a classic that explained

how radicalism and militancy can spring from the most prosaic ideas about what should constitute the good life. I think some of Bruce's experience studying theology before he entered the Berkeley history program was put to excellent use in that book. It unquestionably

exemplifies what was most exciting and attractive in the "new labor history."

A shared generational experience can be a powerful thing. Visiting Bruce in Vermont in 1990 -

he was teaching at Dartmouth – we both watched, I think for the first time, the new video, “Berkeley in the Sixties.” We took an enormous, unstated pleasure from that, whatever the various arguments and controversies we were happy to refight about those times. In the mid 1990s Bruce and I were able to spend some time together in Charlottesville when he was at the Carter Woodson Institute on a fellowship. It was such a delight to hang out with him, exchanging any and all ideas about our profession and the life we led within it. We would meet my son at a local ice cream parlor after Dan’s Hebrew lessons. “Sky’s the limit!” we would both tell him in recognition and reward for all of his Bar Mitzvah study.

Bruce was then working on the book that would become *Divided We Stand* (2002), a study of “whiteness” and its corrosive impact on working-class solidarity and militancy. So, Bruce was also among the vanguard of labor historians who were properly putting a question mark next to many of the assumptions put forward in that now aging “new labor history.” He did it with skill, resourcefulness and an absence of polemic. The work had a big impact on my own work and in particular on the study I was then making of the kind of people who worked for and managed Wal-Mart.

Upon his passing I had not yet read Bruce’s *Irish Nationalists and the Making of the Irish Race* (2012), but as it happens Eileen Boris and I learned of his death just hours before we were off to the airport for a visit to Ireland, my very first. I quickly grabbed a copy of his book from my bookshelf and stuffed it in my luggage. Thank goodness I did, because reading Bruce Nelson’s *Irish Nationalists* proved an extraordinary journey, an illuminating compliment to the museums and monuments of Dublin itself. Bruce captures all the drama inherent in the Irish struggle for nationhood, both tragic and triumphant. Most important, the book is a highly nuanced study

of  
the ideological and cultural tensions inherent in the growth of Irish nationalism. Did the  
Irish  
revolutionaries see themselves as part of a world-wide, multi-national, multi-racial struggle  
for  
liberation? Or were they for “ourselves alone,” indeed the last “white nation” still oppressed  
by a 20th century imperium? While working on this book, Bruce conducted numerous tour  
groups  
through Ireland. Those of us who failed to tag along, really missed something special.

## Author



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