



'Moderates and Peacemakers': Irish Historians and the Revolutionary Centenary

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Maurice Walsh, *Bitter Freedom: Ireland in a Revolutionary World 1918-1923* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015, 525 pp., €15 paperback).

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Jimmy Wren, *The GPO Garrison Easter Week 1916: A Biographical Dictionary* (Dublin: Geography Publications & Dublin City Council, 2015, 428 pp., €29.95 hardback).

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In November 1913, Patrick Pearse provided one of the best descriptions of the generation that would make the Irish revolution. In *The Coming Irish Revolution*, he wrote that:

There will be in the Ireland of the next few years a multitudinous activity of Freedom Clubs, Young Republican Parties, Labour organisations, Socialist groups, and what not; bewildering enterprises undertaken by sane persons and insane persons, by good men and bad men, many of them seemingly contradictory, some mutually destructive, yet all tending towards a common objective, and that objective: the Irish Revolution.

Pearse was honest and self-aware enough to admit that some of those involved seemed 'insane' and their projects 'bewildering'. Yet we might consider how one of these people, Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, responded when he was described as a 'crank'; yes, he agreed, because a crank was 'a small instrument that makes revolutions'. Sheehy-Skeffington is one of forty-two men and women whose biographies are contained in the wonderfully illustrated *1916: Portraits and Lives*. Patrick Maume's stimulating introduction and afterword, where he paints a vivid picture of Irish society prior to 1916, should be required reading for anyone seeking to understand revolutionary Ireland.

The Easter Rising and the men and women who made it have been the subject of intense interest in this centenary year. But for historians, 2016 has presented challenges. In the run-up year, many commentators worried that excessive commemoration, or, even God forbid, celebration, might produce a revival in militant armed republicanism. Their starting point seemed to be the 50th anniversary, allegedly an occasion of unbridled nationalist triumphalism. As the then Northern Ireland Secretary of State Teresa Villiers wrote during April 2016: 'It is widely acknowledged that tensions around the 50th anniversary probably contributed to the outbreak of the Troubles'.

As Roisín Higgins, Margaret O'Callaghan and others have shown (including in their essays in the collection *Remembering 1916* edited by Richard Grayson and Fearghal McGarry), the 1966 events and their impact were far more complex than that. But it was undoubtedly the case that commemoration of 1916 after the outbreak of the modern Irish conflict was deeply problematic for the southern Irish state and for many historians. Both republicans and some of their harshest critics took for granted that 1916 and the Irish Republican Army's (IRA) armed campaign were indeed linked. As one Provisional IRA supporter argued during 1974:

what mandate did Pearse, Connolly and their men have? Certainly they had none from their fellow Irishmen who had democratically supported Redmond's Home Rule policy (and) who jeered and spat at the rebels as they were led into captivity. Indeed, they were far more rejected than were the present IRA. But they did have a mandate . . . The men of 1916 had the same mandate as have the IRA today – the mandate of justice, of nationality and of

history. To deny this is to say that they – and the present IRA – were wrong. But one cannot condemn one and condone the other.¹

Perhaps ironically Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien accepted this rationale. He argued that:

if you take Pearse's values of the criteria, Ireland is unfree while it is divided and a part of it is attached to England. So they (the IRA) hold the warrant from Pearse and the democratic nationalists can say as long as they like that they don't, but they do, and their strength deep down is that everybody knows that they do . . . that they are acting on a faith and credo that the rest of us claim to be living by, but don't really live by. The Provos make people feel dishonest and a little shaky.²

As it happened, most 'democratic nationalists' rejected both these arguments. But, nevertheless, it meant that until the Northern conflict was resolved in some fashion, then the Easter Rising could not be celebrated uncritically. Indeed, some suggested that it should not be celebrated at all. Although that war is now over, many are still fighting it by proxy, as was clear from the tone of much of the media commentary about the Rising.

Some of these critics, views were reminiscent of John Joly, the Unionist Trinity College Professor who, having played a role in defence of the university during Easter Week, concluded that what he called the 'rash and foolish sons of the Empire' in Ireland needed was 'sane education . . . [and] protection from the fanatic and agitator, to whose poison they are at present exposed from their earliest years'. Joly, who features in Tomás Irish's fine study of the university in that era, could not conceive that material realities might have inspired revolt, and the tone of some of today's commentary echoes him. Yet given the obvious enthusiasm among the general public for the centenary events, it is clear that most take a different view. What has been different about these events is that there are now major collections of accessible historical source material that the public can engage with and draw their own conclusions from. The digitisation of the Bureau of Military History Witness Statements and the Military Service Pension Files, the accessibility of census reports online and the proliferation of locally based study meant there was never as much material to draw from. This democratisation provided opportunities but also challenges for historians.

How did the historians respond? As might be expected, there has been a vast output of work, much of it very good, most of it valuable. The majority of it reflects a consensus, however. In his review of Eugenio Biagini and Daniel Mulhall's *The Shaping of Modern Ireland*, Professor Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh made the telling observation that the:

prevailing intellectual temper (of Irish historians) is clearly in sympathy with 'the moderates and peacemakers' of the decades of upheaval. In this it probably reflects the prevailing attitudes among historians and intellectuals in contemporary Ireland, as they interrogate this pivotal period of the Irish past.³

¹ S. Ó Riain, *Provos: Patriots or Terrorists?* (Dublin, 1974), p. 32.

² *Fortnight*, No. 216, 18–31 March 1985.

³ *Irish Times*, 28 May 2016.

There is now certainly a sense that Irish historians have moved beyond the ‘history wars’ of the last decades and into a ‘post-revisionist’ mode.

Diarmaid Ferriter is by far our best-known historian, a prominent figure in media commentary and a member of the Government’s advisory committee on commemoration. His book *A Nation and Not a Rabble* examines the revolution and its legacies from three perspectives. Part 1 is concerned with historiography, part 2 offers an ‘analytic narrative’ of 1913–23 and part 3 assesses the revolution’s legacies. As with much of Ferriter’s work, it is refreshingly focused on ‘history from below’ and on social and cultural themes. He does not lose sight of the impact of events on ‘ordinary’ people and uses many of the newer sources extensively, particularly the Bureau statements and the Military Service Pension files. Ferriter explains the process of how this material was collected and the controversies and disappointments that accompanied it. But amid so much detail, a great deal of it discussing what historians’ views on the revolution, it can be difficult at times to grasp just exactly what Ferriter himself thinks. This reflects a wider problem with what might be called ‘post-revisionism’. In its eagerness not to rehash what are seen as sterile debates concerning political violence, sometimes taking a position is abandoned altogether. This echoes much of the official policy regarding the centenary. The focus of the state commemorations was on a ‘shared history’ between Britain and Ireland and between unionist and nationalist. The view that friendship between nation states or reconciliation between communities should be encouraged by commemoration is an appealing one. But it is unhistorical. While 2016 saw a welcome focus on civilian and child casualties, for example, there was also a tendency to present the conflict as a succession of tragedies all worthy of commemoration. But Northern Ireland’s First Minister Arlene Foster was absolutely right to describe the Easter Rising as a ‘violent attack on the United Kingdom’. Such candour would have been welcome in the Republic’s official centenary events. At least both revisionist and anti-revisionist historians had something to say. The danger of post-revisionism is that in pursuit of balance, it elevates sitting on the fence to an art form.

A good example of the shared history approach is the framing of how the participation of Irishmen in the Great War is discussed. It has become commonplace to suggest that Irishmen who fought in that war were forgotten and that on return to Ireland many of them were persecuted. Paul Taylor’s *Heroes or Traitors* (discussed below) is a welcome corrective to that narrative. But the question is rarely asked as to why Irishmen were in the British armed forces in the first place. The reality was that political life in pre-independence Ireland was governed by the knowledge that the British government, could, if it wished, deploy overwhelming force if its rule was threatened. There were usually between 25,000 and 30,000 military personnel based in the country at any one time. Hence in 1916, when that rule was challenged, it was the British forces who were responsible for the majority of death and destruction in Dublin. There was nothing particularly unusual about Irish service in the British army; every empire recruited armed forces from among their subjects and often required those locally recruited soldiers to repress their fellow countrymen. The troops who carried out the massacre at Amritsar in 1919, for example, were largely Indian themselves. By 1920, Irish ex-servicemen were enlisting as Black and Tans and Auxiliaries. The logic of shared history is that they should be remembered alongside IRA volunteers and civilians.

This is not to ignore the importance of the Great War in Irish life. The late Keith Jeffrey's *1916: A Global History* is a valuable reminder of the place of Ireland in a world at war and the connection between the Rising, 'Ypres on the Liffey', and that conflict. But it is possible to remember individual soldier's sacrifice and acknowledge the complexity of their motivations while still recognising that their primary role was to enforce denial of self-determination to the Irish people. Of course many Irish people were also complicit in the British Empire's rule in India and elsewhere. As Seán T. O'Kelly, in 1916 a Sinn Féin councillor in Dublin, told a rally of the Friends of Freedom for India in 1916, the Irish were:

under deep obligation to work for India and for Egypt until both are free . . . we owe a deep debt to these countries, for has it not been largely by the work of Irish brains and Irish brawn and muscle that these two ancient peoples have been beaten into subjection and have been so long oppressed . . . Our Indian friends, could, if they wished, tell us many heart-rending stories of the brutalities practiced upon their peoples by English regiments bearing names such as Connaught Rangers, Munster Fusiliers, Dublin Fusiliers, Inskillen Fusiliers, Royal Irish Regiment and so on. These and many other British regiments were largely composed of Irishmen. Egypt has the same sad stories to tell to our disgrace. Until we Irish do something practical to make amends for the wrong doing . . . that shame will rest with us.

On a global scale what happened in Ireland was seen as hugely significant, as Maurice Walsh shows in his evocative and illuminating study *Bitter Freedom*. British political leaders understood well the example a successful revolt in Ireland could have on the rest of the Empire. Imperial subjects from Cairo to Calcutta and activists from Moscow to New York knew it too. While the explosion of local studies in Irish history has illuminated much about our history, we have perhaps lost sight of the global impact of independence.

It is interesting that while President Michael D. Higgins could speak of the importance of understanding how 'imperial triumphalism' contributed to rebellion in Ireland, historians have tended to eschew concepts such as imperialism.⁴ Roy Foster's *Vivid Faces* is one of the most elegantly written studies of the revolution and some of the people who made it. The world of Dublin radicalism during the Edwardian era is beautifully recreated; a world of experimental theatre, clubs and societies populated by young, unsettled middle-class people, often from Protestant or mixed religious backgrounds. But in a book which is usually sympathetic and empathetic towards these republican activists, Foster cannot resist comparing Pearse's school St Enda's to an Islamic fundamentalist training centre and portraying Pearse himself as irrational. Out of the whole range of Pearse's writings on politics, language and culture, only the poem 'Little Lad of the Tricks' receives any real attention, a poem which of course suggests attraction to young boys. Any consideration of Pearse should discuss this issue (as a recent biography by Joost Augusteijn has done), but there was far more to his politics than his poetry. A much bigger problem is the implicit sense that the revolution was unjustified. The British state appears to be neutral, the administration muddling along

⁴ *Irish Times*, 20 March 2016.

and, though occasionally counterproductive or wrong-headed, not inspired by any real malice towards Ireland. The revolution then seems to have been inspired by exaggerated or even imagined grievances. There is little recognition of obvious injustices that ultimately provoked the independence struggle.

Chief Secretary Augustine Birrell was telling an essential truth when he asserted after the Rising that:

The spirit of what today is called Sinn Feinism is mainly composed of the old hatred and distrust of the British connection, always noticeable in all classes and in all places, varying in degree and finding different ways of expression, but always *there*, as the background of Irish politics and character.

Birrell was telling an essential truth. Most Irish nationalists simply did not regard British rule as legitimate. What might that have meant in 1916? Eamonn Broy, then a policeman in Dublin's Great Brunswick Street, described how during the Rising:

several loyal citizens of the old Unionist type called to enquire why the British Army and the police had not already ejected the Sinn Féiners from the occupied buildings. Whilst a number of that type were present a big uniformed D.M.P. man, a Clare man, came in. He told us of having gone to his home in Donnybrook to assure himself of the safety of his family. He saw the British Army column which had landed at Kingstown marching through Donnybrook. 'They were singing', he said, 'but the soldiers that came in by Ballsbridge didn't do much singing. They ran into a few Irishmen who soon took the singing out of them'. We laughed at the loud way he said it and the effect on the loyalists present.

Here we have Dublin policemen, agents of the crown, laughing at British losses and Unionist discomfort. What does that tell us?

The reality was that for all the talk of the United Kingdom, Ireland was thought of and ruled like a colony. It was not Canada, or New Zealand or Australia, or even South Africa. It was not a settler state where the majority of citizens identified with the 'mother country'. That is the reason why it was India that was continually referenced in debates in Westminster about Irish self-government. In 1874, Benjamin Disraeli, no less, had claimed that Ireland was 'governed by laws of coercion and stringent severity that do not exist in any other quarter of the globe'. Over 100 such acts were passed during the nineteenth century; the suspension of civil liberties and of the subject's right to protection from arbitrary state power in Ireland was almost permanent. Like India, the British administration in Ireland was headed by a viceroy (the Lord Lieutenant) and he, the Chief Secretary and Under Secretary, were appointed to run the country.

The problem was of course that Irish society had changed drastically since the Famine. The Catholic bourgeoisie was on the rise and things were certainly changing, but not fast enough. It helps explain some of the attitudes of the Dublin police that constables were forbidden from being members of any secret society, *except* the Freemasons. It was quite clear that anti-Catholic sectarianism remained deeply embedded in the structure of British rule and Irish society itself. It was expressed quite openly during debates about self-government. When the Unionist MP T. W. Russell warned that if you set up a Parliament in College Green . . . the wealth, education, property and prosperity of

Ulster will be handed over to a Parliament which will be elected by peasants dominated by priests, and they again will be dominated by the Roman Catholic Church. Russell was not demanding a secular state; he was objecting to ‘peasants’ and Catholic peasants at that, electing their own parliament. As Fergus Campbell and Martin Maguire have explained, one reason why so many young civil servants embraced radical politics was the corrupt and nepotistic practices of the administration. Competitive entry was never applied in Ireland and almost all senior posts were filled by nomination. This process was intimately connected with religion and politics. The revolution was a response to profound social and structural inequalities, not the product of boredom and restlessness on the part of eccentric young people.

Foster also bases his account on a very narrow layer of activists. There is much fascinating detail about the ‘worlds of students, actors, writers, teachers, civil servants; often from comfortable middle-class backgrounds . . .’. But it is well to recall the testimony of Chief Inspector Clayton, of the Royal Irish Constabulary in Galway East, at the Royal Commission on the Rising. Asked whether ‘The Sinn Feiners were pretty well known to you . . .?’, he answered that ‘They were’:

Were there any people of superior class or education among them?

None. One of the leaders was a blacksmith, and the Colonel of the Irish Volunteers was a publican. They were all shopkeepers and farmers’ sons.

There were none of them of the literary type?

None.⁵

There were ‘vivid faces’ in Galway too, and in Limerick, Athlone and Cork and a host of other towns and localities. Revolutionary ferment was felt not only among educated members of the middle class but across society; interestingly, the labour movement barely features in Foster’s study. Foster concludes that what emerged after 1921 was for many ‘not . . . the revolution they intended, or wanted’. The ‘revolution betrayed’ is a popular thesis among republicans and socialists, who regularly contrast the failings of independent Ireland with the lost promise of the Proclamation. It is interesting that a variant of this thesis is seemingly endorsed by Foster and to a certain extent by Fearghal McGarry in his study of *The Abbey Rebels*. McGarry has contributed significantly to our knowledge of the Rising over the past decade. His latest, beautifully illustrated book focuses on those activists connected with the Abbey Theatre. They include Sean Connolly of the Citizen Army, trade unionist Helena Molony and Gaelic League activist Arthur Shields. Shields, a Protestant member of the Volunteers, would drop out of involvement shortly after his release from prison in 1917 but later have a career in Hollywood. In considering the question of revolutionary disappointment, we should note that most 1916 veterans survived the Rising and revolution and made their lives in the new Ireland. Many rose to elevated positions in politics, including three heads of the new state. Veterans became Garda Commissioners, Army Generals and public servants in a

⁵ Irish Times, *1916 Rebellion Handbook* (Dublin, 1998), p. 183.

variety of grades. Very many of them supported Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael, while a substantial number were active in the labour movement. They may well have been unhappy with partition, but relatively few regarded the revolution as a failure. Perhaps most were not disillusioned because ultimately their aim was 'just' some form of national independence. A century on, there may be a tendency to assume they must have wanted more, because independence is somewhat taken for granted, but it was certainly not seen as inevitable at the time.

One of the reasons the Easter Rising holds such a grip on the popular imagination is that it appears to have been a 'clean fight'. Uniformed men and women took on the might of the Empire without sullyng their cause by 'cowardice, inhumanity or rapine'. This was always a myth of course. During the Rising, the rebels killed civilians, sometimes by accident and occasionally deliberately. Unarmed policemen were shot and the rebels' tactics arguably brought destruction down on Dublin's inner city. But it is true that, in most cases, they tried to obey the rules of war and that the majority of civilian casualties were caused by the British. The War of Independence, despite its own powerful mythology of flying columns and derring-do, produces more conflicted emotions. Some of the IRA's tactics between 1919 and 1921 – the assassinations, the shooting of informers – resemble those of the modern IRA too much for comfort. The Civil War is another matter entirely, seen as a tragic waste of lives in a struggle between former comrades or a descent into madness.

From an early stage, there were revolutionaries, such as Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) man P. S. O'Hegarty, who regretted what had been unleashed in 1916. O'Hegarty's *The Victory of Sinn Féin* has been republished as part the University College Dublin (UCD) Press Centenary Classics series. O'Hegarty asserted in 1924 that 'When it was open to any Volunteer Commandant to order the shooting of any civilian, and to cover himself with the laconic legend "Spy" on the dead man's breast, personal security vanished and no man's life was safe'. He lamented how the high ideals of 1916 had seemed to produce anarchy. O'Hegarty's thesis had a profound impact on many Irish scholars, particularly those who saw the Civil War simplistically as one between would-be dictators and democrats. It was also permeated with elitism and sexism, with vitriolic contempt expressed for female Anti-Treatyites. In O'Hegarty's book, Anti-Treatyite women were irrational 'furies' driving otherwise moderate men towards confrontation, a thesis which simply does not withstand examination but continues to influence some views of Anti-Treaty republicanism. Similarly, while the Civil War was indeed tragic, it was not solely the product of Irish refusal to compromise but also of decisions made in London and demands placed on a fledgling state by its former masters.

The year 2016 has seen a renewed focus on revolutionary women. Indeed, if there has been one theme of almost every commemoration, it has been the role of women. This is a necessary corrective to condescension and ignorance, but it was never entirely true that women were written out of the story of Easter Week. Lauren Arrington is the author of a new study of the most famous of the women rebels, Constance Markievicz. Markievicz provoked both intense devotion and bitter hostility in her lifetime. Arrington points out that Markievicz has been demonised because of her alleged role in killing a policeman during the Rising, but that no

male rebel has been defined by involvement in similar killings. Arrington's examination of the lives of Markievicz and her husband Casmir illustrates the political development of a most unusual revolutionary, whose ideas were influenced by mysticism, radical Catholicism and socialism as well as Irish separatism. However, Markievicz was only one of hundreds of Irish women embracing radical politics. Sinéad McCooile was writing on these women revolutionaries twenty years ago and her new illustrated book reiterates many of the central themes about their role. While Markievicz and a few other prominent women have always grabbed much of the attention, female participation was not confined to them. Mary McAuliffe and Liz Gillis have produced a comprehensive study of the seventy-seven women jailed in the Rising's aftermath in Dublin, women from a variety of backgrounds and political strands. Senia Pašeta locates these female radicals in the development of Irish separatist and feminist politics after 1900, tracing links between activists and their milieus in a vibrant fashion. Every study of the women of the revolution must grapple with the problem that while the substantial number of women from upper or middle-class backgrounds involved in republican politics left plenty of sources from which to draw, there are other women whose activity is far more difficult to trace. Members of the Irish Women Workers Union in Dublin drawn to the Citizen Army or women from rural Ireland who became active in Cumann na mBan have their stories as well. However, this attention surely means that in future it will be, thankfully, impossible to call the female activists of 1916 the 'forgotten women'.

However, not all women embraced the revolution, and those who opposed it were among those who suffered violence at the hands of the IRA between 1919 and 1923. Gemma Clark's *Everyday Violence in the Irish Civil War* examines the more unpalatable aspects of the revolution, particularly as it impacted on 'outsiders'. Her study focuses on Limerick, Tipperary and Waterford, and one of the cases she examines is that of a gang rape of a Protestant woman by Anti-Treaty IRA men. It has been generally believed that instances of sexual violence were rare in this period but they may in fact have been understated. I know of at least two more, one involving the Free State army in Kerry and the Special Constabulary in Armagh (discussed below). Controversially, and echoing the work of the late Peter Hart, Clark asserts that there was 'an inescapable trend: Protestants and those with a connection with the British administration in Ireland were targeted with violence and intimidation, resulting in significant departures from independent Ireland'. By concentrating on the Civil War, after the main British forces had left, Clark reminds us of a seedy, unromantic conflict, of old scores settled, of land grabbing under cover of the conflict, of the confusion and fear for those on the receiving end. She also notes that much of this violence occurred during labour and agrarian conflict. At times, it is unclear who the perpetrators were and whether their rationale was always political or indeed sectarian. (I am aware of a case involving Pro-Treatyites victimising a Protestant family in Tipperary, for example.) Any discussion of either sectarian or opportunistic motivation for IRA actions always produces intense debate. Clark has amassed a strong case. However, I would note that farmers were also the instigators of violence during disputes and capable of employing intimidation themselves. In south Leinster, for example, hundreds of labourers joined the Irish Transport Union and engaged in strikes against the

large farmers in the area. But the majority of the farmers were also Protestant and the labourers almost all Catholic, which must have added an edge to an already bitter conflict.

The suggestion that sectarianism might have played a role in the independence struggle remains toxic. The Armagh republican Frank Aiken, for example, had a career that in the round might be considered one of honourable compromise. He was reluctant to engage in the Civil War, and, when he did become the IRA's leader, he brought that conflict to an end as soon as he could. Aiken also played a major role in bringing many republicans into constitutional politics via Fianna Fáil. But for Unionists in Northern Ireland, Aiken is a 'butcher', a man responsible for brutal sectarian killings. Matthew Lewis examines Aiken's early career and deals with the bloody circumstances surrounding the 'Altnaveigh massacre'. In June 1922, B-Specials raided a pub in south Armagh, seeking its owner, republican activist James McGuill. During the raid, women were beaten, McGuill's wife raped and a servant sexually assaulted. Aiken ordered retaliation, and at the village of Altnaveigh, six Protestants (including a woman) were killed, a dozen wounded and homes and shops burnt and bombed. What is notable, apart from the horror, is that this type of violence was relatively rare in Ireland's revolution (though more common in Ulster of course). In comparison to many of contemporary Europe's civil wars, it is often suggested that we got off lightly. That is of little comfort to the victims however, and one of Aiken's comrades perhaps put it best when he recalled that his:

feeling was one of horror . . . nothing could justify this holocaust of unfortunate Protestants. Neither youth nor age was spared . . . I still have the view that it was a horrible affair – nothing could justify such a killing of unarmed people.

The subject is such a contentious one that any of us who write on the subject must do so with care. In Ferriter's *A Nation Not A Rabble*, he notes the IRA killing of Monaghan woman Kitty O'Carroll and describes her as a Protestant. She was not. But the error is mine and not Ferriter's as he was quoting something I wrote in my *The IRA: a Documentary History*. I have since been corrected, but I had made the assumption that she was Protestant (O'Carroll was described as such in several accounts) without checking the relevant source material.

Religion of course was also inseparable from the question of Ulster and partition. Joseph Johnson's *Civil War in Ulster* is another from the UCD Classic series. Johnson was that relative rarity, an Ulster Protestant Home Ruler. Protestant rebels were also a rarity, but far from uncommon. Roy Foster describes many of them in *Vivid Faces*. Perhaps it was their existence that prompted so many radicals to be optimists when it came to the subject of Ulster. The view after 1912 was often that Unionist mobilisation would ultimately force a confrontation with Britain and thus make Unionists recognise their Irish nationality. As Eoin MacNeill put it:

A wonderful state of things has come to pass in Ulster . . . it is manifest that that all Irish people, Unionist as well as Nationalist, are determined to have their own way in Ireland. On that point, and it is the main point, Ireland is united. Sir Edward Carson may yet, at the head

of his Volunteers, 'march to Cork'. If so, their progress will probably be accompanied by the greetings of ten times of their number of National Volunteers, and Cork will give them a hospitable and memorable reception. Some years ago, speaking at the Toome Feis, in the heart of 'homogenous Ulster', I said that the day would come when men of every creed and party would join in celebrating the defence of Derry and the Battle of Benburb. That day is nearer than I then expected.

Patrick McCartan, a leading figure in the IRB and Sinn Féin in Tyrone, took the rhetoric so seriously that he lent his car to the local Ulster Volunteers during the Larne gun-running; the Home Rulers were not slow to remind Sinn Féin of that in the 1918 general election. Pearse contended that:

One great source of misunderstanding has now disappeared: it has become clear within the last few years that the Orangeman is no more loyal to England than we are. He wants the Union because he imagines it secures his prosperity; but he is ready to fire on the Union flag the moment it threatens his prosperity. The position is perfectly plain and understandable. Foolish notions of loyalty to England being eliminated, it is a matter for business-like negotiation... The case might be put thus: Hitherto England has governed Ireland through the Orange Lodges; she now proposes to govern Ireland through the A.O.H. (Hibernians). You object; so do we. Why not unite and get rid of the English? They are the real difficulty; their presence here the real incongruity.

We may describe this view as naïve or idealistic but it was certainly not sectarian. But within the separatist movement there were a variety of views, and a distinct difference between those who had experience of Ulster and those who did not. The Sinn Féiner Arthur Clery would claim that he 'never understood Ulster Protestants until he met an Ulster Catholic' and Fr. Michael O'Flanagan, vice president of Sinn Féin after 1917, would write that though 'geography has worked hard to make one nation out of Ireland, history has worked against it. The island of Ireland and the national unit of Ireland simply do not coincide'. As a result, O'Flanagan asserted, it was wrong for republicans to think that they could force unionists into a united Ireland. This diversity of opinion within the revolutionary movement should make us careful of generalisations regarding sectarianism. The sectarianism inherent in Unionist opposition to Home Rule and in attitudes towards Catholics in general is somewhat underwritten. An exception is Fergal McCluskey's study of Tyrone during the revolution. McCluskey is a rarity among Irish historians in writing from an explicitly anti-imperialist perspective and one in which Unionism is seen as an expression of settler supremacy. But his study also looks at intra-nationalist division, land and labour conflict and the impact of the Great War on the county. The role of the Ancient Order of Hibernians as a powerful part of the Home Rule machine emerges clearly and suggests a general history of that organisation would be a worthwhile project.

Gemma Clark, again following on from the work of Peter Hart, also identified ex-servicemen as a group targeted for violence by republicans. Paul Taylor's *Heroes or Traitors* takes a very different view. Taylor argues that the experience of ex-soldiers in southern Ireland, in general, was not one of persecution. During the War of Independence, some ex-servicemen were killed by the IRA as alleged informers, while others

were killed by Crown forces for various reasons. Some veterans were involved in labour and land agitation, while some were landowners and employers themselves. (Trade union accounts stress ex-soldiers' involvement in the 1920 general strike in support of republican prisoners, for example.) A number of veterans joined the IRA. Some remained supportive of the Home Rule party and its successors well into the 1920s, while very many kept their heads down and got on with their lives. The 100,000 or so war veterans (a major group in a population of 1.5 million males) were divided by politics, religion and class. Indeed, one section of them demonstrated continuing loyalty to the Crown by joining the police between 1919 and 1921; there were Irish Black and Tans, though they are rarely mentioned when we discuss Irish service in the British military. The Civil War divided veterans again, with perhaps 30,000 serving with the Free State forces but a number also joining the Anti-Treaty IRA. The man who fired the shot that killed Michael Collins, Denis 'Sonny' O'Neill, was an ex-serviceman. Asserting that the war was forgotten also means ignoring the huge commemorations, up to 40,000 strong, that took place every year in Dublin (and some other towns) until 1939. Certainly in the 1920s, the commemorations on 11 November involved thousands of ordinary ex-servicemen. But they were also highly political Unionist demonstrations, bedecked in poppies and Union Jacks, and therefore always contentious. As Garda Commissioner Eoin O'Duffy complained in 1928, 'if the Irregulars adopted such tactics they would be arrested under the Treasonable Offences Act'. In 1933, his successor alleged that the 11 November commemorations were in fact an occasion for 'anti-Irish and pro-British sentiments'. It is little wonder that they were controversial. In contemporary Ireland, however, discussion of the experience of war veterans has tended to ignore these nuances. Taylor's book focuses on southern Ireland. The experience of veterans in Northern Ireland was just as varied. Catholic and Protestant ex-servicemen fought each other in Belfast from 1920 to 1922 and veterans made up a large part of the new Northern state's security forces.

One of the more startling omissions from Foster's *Vivid Faces* is any consideration of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). A necessary corrective to this is *The GAA & Revolution in Ireland*, edited by Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh. These essays illustrate how the GAA played a major role in the separatist movement, but that it was not without contradictions. While the Cork republican J. J. Walsh could claim that 'every man from the Rebel County who participated in this epic struggle was a Gael' and that 'followers of alien games were to be found in the Pal's Battalions playing, as always the enemy's game', the reality was more complex. An interesting essay by Ross O'Carroll shows how much the Great War affected the GAA, with many players joining the British Army. Both the 1916 rebels and the IRA afterwards also contained a substantial number of devotees of what were dismissed as 'foreign games'. When the Dubliner Oscar Traynor was interned after 1916, he claimed to have been pleasantly surprised by the number of colleagues from soccer clubs that he met in Frongoch.

That the movement was reborn in Frongoch and elsewhere and a new generation emerged from these 'universities of revolution' is something of a cliché. But prison experience, prison protest, mobilisation in support of prisoners and the radicalising impact of jail were all part of the revolution. The quirky rebel Darrell Figgis provided an account of his post-1916 experience in *A Chronicle of Jails*. William Murphy has

produced the most complete study to date of the experience of Irish political prisoners. Beginning with the treatment meted out to Suffragettes, Murphy takes us with great skill through the different phases of government policy towards republican prisoners, through hunger strikes and escapes. *Political Imprisonment and the Irish, 1912-1921* will be the definitive account for some time to come.

Commandant W. J. Brennan-Whitmore wrote both a memoir of his time in Frongoch and of his role during the Rising itself, *Dublin Burning*. A former British soldier and journalist, he was one of the few senior Volunteer commanders to write a detailed account of the fighting itself. He is also of interest, however, as one of those individuals whose involvement in the Rising poses questions about the overall ideology of the revolution. Brennan-Whitmore was bitterly anti-Semitic and would align himself with extreme right-wing politics all his life, becoming chairman of a Neo-Nazi party in this old age. His politics (which were evident in 1916) are not mentioned in the foreword or introduction to *Dublin Burning* (though they do form part of the storyline in Gene Kerrigan's pacy novel based on the Bureau Witness Statements, *The Scrap*). And though Brennan-Whitmore was unusual, he was not unique. J. J. O'Kelly, the editor of the influential *Catholic Bulletin*, a Sinn Féin TD by 1918, J. J. Walsh, who was 'out' with the Hibernian Rifles in 1916, Fr. Thomas Burbage, a member of the Sinn Féin executive, and the outstanding field commander during the Ashbourne ambush, and later republican martyr Thomas Ashe all endorsed anti-Semitic politics. O'Kelly's discussion of what republicanism meant to him is revealing. He recounted how he had:

been reading from boyhood the history of the French Revolution and of the French Republic. I loathed it, and that was the feeling in my home. That was the feeling my father and mother and relatives had about Robespierre and the anti-Christian, inhuman excesses of the Revolution. Fortunately I formed a different opinion about the Republic of the United States that dethroned England – and in due course – influenced largely I may admit, by Cathal Brugha – I had no difficulty in swearing allegiance to the Irish Republic.

That the politics of the Irish revolution were influenced more by the European right than by progressive republicanism is the central thesis in W. J. McCormack's *The French Connection*. There is much interesting material here, but McCormack's hostility to the entire revolutionary project colours his interpretation and he overstretches the point at times. Irish separatism drew on a whole range of ideas, many of them contradictory. But it was not essentially racial or religious and therefore could find room within it for Irish Protestants (and Jews) in a way that a coherent right-wing movement could not have.

Brennan-Whitmore described the crowds who booed the defeated rebels on their way into captivity as comprising the 'scum of Dublin'. The hostility of many of the urban poor towards republicans is reflected in several of the Bureau Witness Statements. It deserves closer examination. Occasions when this hostility erupted into violence are described in both Pat McCarthy's study of Waterford and John Borgonovo's *The Dynamics of War and Revolution: Cork City, 1916-1918*. The war is key to both studies. Borgonovo shows how censorship and repressive legislation was used to clamp down on activists, creating resentment. Deficit spending created massive inflation and led to

demands for wage rises and hence to strikes; wartime arbitration encouraged the growth of trade unions (the ITGWU's revival after 1913 being part of this process). In 1917, food rationing terrified a population only fifty years removed from the Famine and saw labour and republican activists create local food committees outside of state control. Hostility to the government contributed to clashes between Cork youth and the police throughout 1917, with British troops being regularly called out to quell riots in the city centre. By the time the British government attempted to introduce conscription in 1918, large sections of the population were in open defiance. To explain how this happened, Borgonovo tells the story of Cork's rival Home Rule machines, its IRB and Volunteer organisations, its Unionists and Protestant population and the city's trade unionists and employers. In Waterford, in contrast, large sections of the local population, many of them connected to the war effort, remained loyal to the Home Rule party, giving it its one success outside Ulster in 1918. Ballybricken, once a Fenian stronghold, was a dangerous place for Sinn Féiners in the elections of that year. Waterford city managed to combine a militant labour movement and continuing electoral success by the Home Rule party. Borgonovo and McCarthy (and McCluskey on Tyrone) provide fantastic detail on the most important general election in modern Irish history, December 1918. What their accounts illustrate is that a popular general account of that election (and the conscription crisis which preceded it) is desperately needed.

Any study of Ireland in that period cannot avoid discussion of class. Ernie O'Malley described how 'in the towns tuppence-ha'penny looked down on tuppence, and throughout the country the grades in social difference were as numerous as the layers of an onion'. Irish society was acutely aware of the differences not only between but within classes. Gavin M. Foster's *The Irish Civil War and Society: Politics, Class and Conflict* examines the assertion that the conflict pitted the 'stake in the country' people against the 'men of no property'. In what is a fine study Foster discusses the concept of 'respectability' and how many on the Pro-Treaty side did see themselves as socially superior to their opponents. He examines other cleavages, such as between town and country and how the rhetoric of the new state sought to marginalise its republican opponents. He also discusses how, for Anti-Treaty republicans, the Civil War produced a new wave of emigration, with long-term consequences for Irish republicanism. But the Anti-Treatyites had their own perceptions of class. As Limerick IRA man Mossie Hartnett put it in his memoir *Victory and Woe*, the Free State Army were paid:

the then generous wage of 25 shillings per week and their keep. It had a staggering impact on poor needy labourers and ex British soldiers, all without money and work. So it was goodbye to Republicanism, which most [of them] did not understand anyway.

It may be the case that the republican movement gradually became more proletarian in the post-Civil War period. Certainly by the early 1930s, the IRA's rank and file was largely made of the urban and rural unskilled, in a way it had not been from 1916 to 1921. How much opportunity the revolution offered for social advancement begs further investigation. It is unlikely that J. J. Walsh, a postal clerk until 1915, would have risen to the position of Postmaster General under Dublin Castle, but he had achieved that by 1922. Facing industrial action from his former colleagues, he utilised the new Free

State's Army to break the strike and contemptuously reminded them that they had never struck under British rule.

Dublin's O'Connell Street does not contain a statue of any of the 1916 leaders. However, revolutionary syndicalist and briefly communist TD Jim Larkin occupies a prominent position close to the general post office. Larkin was of course missing in 1916 and some continue to believe that Larkin remained loyal to socialism, while James Connolly succumbed to nationalism. As the doyen of Irish labour history, Emmet O'Connor, illustrates in *Big Jim Larkin: Hero Or Wrecker?*, Larkin was both an Irish-Irelander and a far more sentimental nationalist than Connolly. The Irish Transport and General Workers Union's politics were socialist republican and Larkin had emotionally spoken of the need for armed rebellion as soon as the Great War broke out. Ultimately, however, Larkin was not in Ireland between 1914 and 1923 and his relationship with Irish republicanism on his return was ambiguous. Nevertheless, his union and many of his closest collaborators played key roles in the revolutionary period. Whether labour would have taken a more assertive position if Larkin was in Ireland is difficult to say. His far less charismatic rivals, such as William O'Brien, presided over a vast expansion of the union and were in a strong position to resist him on his return. O'Connor's approach is certainly critical, especially so about Larkin's behaviour during the 1920s, but it deserves to become the standard account of the labour leader's life.

Of all the 1916 leaders, James Connolly continues to inspire the most interest. Padraig Yeates (whose own contribution to Irish history in his series of monographs about Dublin from 1913 to 1924 has been outstanding) has provided commentary for a collection of facsimile copies of Connolly's *The Workers' Republic* from 1915 until Easter Week. There is a detailed account of Connolly's work by Conor McNamara and the entire collection (though weighing as much as an old-fashioned telephone directory) has been very well produced and reasonably priced thanks to the support of Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU). The collection is particularly valuable for building a picture of working class life in Ireland during wartime. It is also useful for those engaging in the seemingly never-ending debates about what Connolly stood for. What is striking is the extent to which Connolly's rhetoric resembled that of Pearse. In August 1915, Connolly declared that:

for twelve months, twelve dreary agonising months we have seen war in Ireland, war upon the soul of Ireland, war upon the traditions, the religious spirit, the centuried hopes of the martyred men and women who had made Ireland famed and respected . . . never has a nation suffered such an onslaught. Betrayed and deserted by all but a faithful few Ireland was attacked by every poisonous agency ever brought to bear upon the mind and soul of a people. Her religion, her love of nationality, her strict sexual morality . . . the fighting in Belgium or Poland was for the material possessions of town and cities, the fight for Ireland has been one for the soul of the race.

It is difficult not to conclude that Connolly's participation in the Rising was motivated in part by despair.

What Connolly actually said remains of importance because the centenary has been marked by criticism of the performance of his successors in the labour movement. The

government too faced criticism for what seemed initially to be half-hearted and bland plans for the commemorations. There is a strong sense on the left and among republicans that the Irish state is embarrassed by 1916. This view is put forcefully in James Heartfield and Kevin Rooney's *Who's Afraid of the Easter Rising?* They contend that the revolutionary example of the Rising is completely at odds with official Ireland's political elite's view of the world and that, rather than look back on its origins with pride, the Irish state seeks to embrace a watered down version of John Redmond's Home Rule politics. There is certainly an overrepresentation of the Redmondite view among the Irish media. But while Heartfield and Rooney would have had a strong case for their thesis in 1991, the ending of the Northern conflict has transformed commemoration in this state. The problem for at least some republican critics of the centenary events was that they, like some of their 'revisionist' enemies, were still fighting the last war. Kevin Bean's essay on commemoration in the Grayson and McGarry collection has a surer grasp on the current state of Irish commemorative politics.

The difficulty of putting the 1916 generation into neat ideological boxes is illustrated by Jimmy Wren's revealing study of the General Post Office (GPO) garrison. Many layers are revealed in this biographical directory of a group of 572 people. It allows for an analysis of class and occupation, of age and gender, of regional background and of later political allegiance. A startling statistic is that the largest single portion of GPO veterans (41%) were neutral during the Civil War. A number dropped out of all activity after the Rising. A small group actually joined the British Army and fought in the Great War *after* 1916! Many veterans prospered in independent Ireland but others fell victim to suicide, ill-health or mental illness. Wren makes extensive use of newspapers, memoirs and the Bureau Witness Statements, but in many ways, the Pension files are the most revealing and the most unsettling. While those interviewed by the Bureau knew that their statements would eventually be made public, people applying for pensions had no idea that their secrets would someday be accessible to all. They often make difficult reading, and, while Wren eschews some of the grislier details, his references provide a guide for further research.

Most of those who took part in the Rising in Dublin were never involved in anything like it again; barricaded inside buildings, under machine gun and artillery fire (the exception being the beginning of the Civil War in Dublin). In general, the nature of the War of Independence and their role in it was very different. After 1917, only a relatively small number of the Dublin IRA were on full-time service. Despite much wider public and political support for them, few engaged in purely military activity and there were not widespread attacks on British military in Dublin until late 1920. The exception to this was the small number of veterans around 'the Squad'. It is surely no accident that some of these men were so hardened by violence that, by 1922, they were engaging in some of the worst atrocities of the Civil War. Jimmy Wren's book is a fine example of a labour of love by an amateur historian providing material of immense use to anyone studying the revolution.

Roy Foster complained during 2015 that Irish bookshelves were creaking with 'popular pictorial histories and uplifting hagiographies of dead heroes'.⁶ In fact the

⁶ *The Spectator*, 25 April 2015.

majority of the published output for the centenary has been of high quality. Locally produced publications have benefitted from access to primary source material, and while hagiographies have appeared, they were few and far between. Several of the popular illustrated works are in fact extremely useful for specialist and general reader alike. John Gibney's *A History of the Easter Rising in 50 Objects*, Conor McNamara's *The Easter Rebellion 1916: A New Illustrated History*, Michael Barry's *Courage Boys, We Are Winning* and Lorcan Collins's *1916: The Rising Handbook* all utilise new and sometimes rare archival and visual material.

By 1918 crowds at Sinn Féin meetings sometimes sang:

When we were little children Johnny Redmond was a fool,
He bade us to be satisfied with something called Home Rule,

But we have learned a thing or two since we went to school
and we'll crown de Valera King of Ireland.

The verse says a lot about popular conceptions of republicanism and is one of hundreds contained in Terry Moylan's marvellous *The Indignant Muse*. Many of the ideas and slogans that inspired people were transmitted to popular audiences by song or verse. Thomas Ashe's poem 'Let me carry your cross for Ireland Lord', for example, was hugely influential in the period after his death by forced feeding in 1917. Some songs from the period such as 'The Foggy Dew' are well known and still sung. Others like the Civil War ballad 'Take it Down From the Mast' have a more limited following among republican activists. Some of the better ones have been recorded by modern musicians; the Pogues' version of the satirical 'The Recruiting Sergeant' for example. Many others are lost or forgotten. This wonderful book contains the words of Unionists and Home Rulers, land and labour agitators, songs encouraging army recruitment and protesting against war, supporting and opposing the Treaty, and verses that are funny and satirical or racist and sectarian. Many of the most prominent activists of the era wrote poems or songs, so James Connolly, Roger Casement, Thomas Ashe, Countess Markievicz, Seán O'Casey, W. B. Yeats, Oliver St. John Gogarty, Peadar Kearney, Tom Kettle, Francis Ledwidge, Patrick Macgill, Lord Dunsany, Rudyard Kipling and Percy French all appear in the collection as well. Of all the publications of the centenary year, Moylan's evocative book sums up the spirit of the revolutionary era better than anything else.

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