

The Irish Times

Ireland's Allies – America and the 1916 Easter Rising, and Ireland's Exiled Children: reviews

A book edited by Miriam Nyhan Grey and one by Robert Schmuhl spotlight US links to Rising

Frank MacGabhann, 21 January 2017

No one has put it quite so succinctly as Prof Joe Lee when he stated: “No America, no New York, no Easter Rising – simple as that.”

It would probably be only a slight exaggeration to substitute “John Devoy” for “New York” in that statement. Devoy permeates this truly excellent book, *Ireland's Allies – America and the 1916 Easter Rising*, published in conjunction with Glucksman Ireland House of New York University and edited by its associate director, Miriam Nyhan Grey and with a most perceptive foreword by Prof Lee.

There are 24 chapters, each taking a different aspect of the American connection with the Easter Rising in 1916. The endnotes run to over 100 pages and the sources cited will be a treasure trove for a generation of scholars and lay readers alike. One of the more satisfying aspects about last year’s centenary celebrations and commemorations was the recognition that Devoy, exiled Irish rebel leader and owner and editor of the *Gaelic American*, has finally received for his role in 1916. Historians believe that his row with de Valera in 1920 in America, which is outside the scope of this book, led to him being relegated to little more than a footnote in Irish textbooks.

There will be many names in this book unfamiliar to Irish ears but who were prominent 100 years ago in New York, including congressman William Bourke Cockran and Dr Gertrude Kelly, both of whom are typical of the Irish middle class there who had “made it” despite being Irish-born. They are presaged in the excellent chapter on the collapse of support in Irish America for John Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party. Both had kept a close watch on events in Ireland and had supported Home Rule and Redmond. The break for them came after Redmond’s speech in Woodenbridge, Co Wicklow on September 20th 1914 when he urged Irishmen to enlist in the British Army “and go wherever the firing line extends”.

Tipperary-born Kelly was a political radical who founded, in December 1916, the Cumann na mBan of New York. This New York edition differed from its Irish counterpart in that Dr Kelly ensured that it was not simply a “ladies auxiliary” type of organisation. This is accurate because this reviewer’s aunt, Alice Comiskey Carragher, who was treasurer of the New York Cumann na mBan Relief Committee subsequently, collected and disbursed monies (and demanded acknowledgments) independently of Clan na Gael.

Bitter anti-Catholic prejudice

Sligo-born Bourke Cockran, a great orator, was a mentor of Winston Churchill due to his friendship with Churchill's mother. He championed and drew parallels between Cuba and Ireland and had even been asked by Redmond in 1903 to give up his seat in Congress and go back to Ireland and stand for Parliament.

Terry Golway's incisive introductory overview of Devoy and 1916 is all too brief, given Golway's deep knowledge of his subject. Also the subject of chapters are Tom Clarke, Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, Joe McGarrity, Jim Larkin, Daniel Cohalan, the composer Victor Herbert, and lawyer and art patron John Quinn. The chapter on Roger Casement is marred by reliance on innuendo and dubious handwriting analysis to attempt to prove that Casement was a homosexual. His life as a cultural revolutionary and a fighter for indigenous peoples is not alluded to.

There is an excellent chapter by Robert Schmuhl on the American press coverage of the Easter Rising. The influence of the Rising on the radical black community in New York, especially Marcus Garvey, is examined as well as left-wing Irish nationalists such as Frank P Walsh and Dudley Field Malone. There is also a chapter on Irish suffragists in New York during that decade, especially Lucy Burns.

The chapters on New York's Cardinal Farley, the reaction of the American Catholic hierarchy and the American Catholic press to 1916 are informative, but are effectively treated as a moment in time in isolation from the context of the history of the Irish in New York. No mention is made of Archbishop John Hughes who was, as Peter Quinn has called him, "an Irish chieftain" transplanted to New York in the 1860s. He had to do battle against bitter anti-Catholic prejudice.

These chapters might have discussed why Farley and Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore wanted so desperately to establish the "Americanism" of Catholics living in America. The proclamation of papal infallibility by Pope Pius IX in 1870 had reinforced the view then prevalent in America that the Irish could not be good Americans because they could not think for themselves. Pope Pius X, elected in 1903, had denounced the separation of church and state in France, Poland and elsewhere as well as modernism. This background might usefully have been explored in these chapters. However, this book will be a standard reference book for many years to come.