

# WILLING AND ABLE TO ASSIST

JOE FODEY shares with us his talk, at an event hosted by the Irish Heritage Foundation, about the Irish National Foresters

THE main problem in researching the history of the Irish National Foresters (INF) is the lack of a comprehensive archive of the society. We do, however, have the newspaper reports, in particular, the *Freeman's Journal of Dublin* and the *Glasgow Observer*. The Foresters themselves often placed these reports, making them primary historical sources.

In the 1890s, Catholic Irishmen started to enter the skilled trades and climb the social ladder in Scotland. Irishmen and women however still provided mainly unskilled labour and lived in overcrowded conditions in areas with the highest death rates. Letters to the *Glasgow Observer* in May and June 1888 express, graphically, the struggle of having to provide food, clothing and shelter for a family of eight, as well as pay for the schooling of three children and this out of a wage of about £1 a week with a grocery bill of 12/6. Sickness or unemployment meant dependence on the grudging and demeaning Poor Law, with its system of outdoor and workhouse relief, and on the charities. Celtic Football Club was formed in 1887 to provide funds for the charities of the Catholic parishes of the east end of Glasgow.

The benefit societies, however, provided an alternative. With their bucolic names like 'Foresters,' archaic offices like Chief Ranger, Woodward, and Beadle and their anachronistic dress they might have appeared quaint but they met a serious need. The 1884 Rule Book of Branch Heart of Erin, Cowcaddens, whose rules are typical of the society as a whole during this period, stated that the aim of the Society was: "The raising of money by contribution of members; entrance fees and donations."

This was in order to: "Pay weekly allowance to members when bodily sick; pay for the decent burial of members and their lawful wives (and) pay for supplying medical attendance and medicines to members"

## Beginnings

The INF—who had broken with the larger Ancient Order of Foresters in autumn 1877 over political and religious issues—held their first meeting in Dublin in August 1877 with six members present. The *Freeman's Journal* tells us that in May 1878, James Gilday of Anderston was initiated into the INF, received a ceremonial sash and was given permission to form a branch in Anderston. This branch—Branch Shamrock No. 2—appears to be the first in Scotland. The success of the society in Scotland is shown by the fact that by 1895, there were more branches in Scotland than in Ireland—64 compared to 63—with 51 of these Scottish Branches being part of Glasgow and West of Scotland District.

The local branch was the basis of the society. These branches combined into districts—Glasgow and West of Scotland District included branches in the Lothians and Fife! The INF was a self-consciously Irish organisation run by Irishmen for the benefit of Irishmen, and Irishmen abroad were no less Irish than those at home. The unity of the society was maintained by the rotating the location of the Annual Convention, the main assembly of all the INF, between Ireland, England and Scotland and ensuring that there were members from Irish, Scottish and English districts on the National Executive. The INF Central Office in Dublin provided services to the local branches and districts. The tension between the centralising tendency of the Dublin office and the demand for devolution to the branches and districts was a recurring feature of this period.

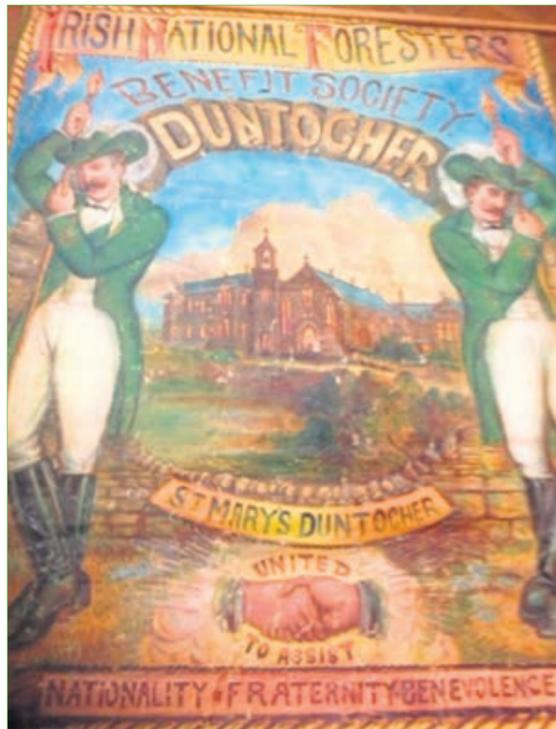
## Membership

To be a member one had to be Irish by birth or descent and be male. The candidate, who had to be proposed by an existing member, had to be certified fit for regular employment by the Branch Surgeon. Because she too was eligible for funeral benefit, the candidate's wife also had to be examined by the Surgeon. This being a mutual-help society, the character of the candidate was also important and following a dissolute or idle life was grounds for rejection. If accepted the candidate became a member of the society by going through an initiation ceremony.

Women, of course, faced many of the same problems if they lost work through illness and women's branches came into being in the late 1890s. The 'Irish by birth of descent' rule led to some problems in Scotland, for instance in areas where there was no Irish doctor. The local Catholic clergy, in particular, tended to be great supporters of the organisation. However priests, like Fr Beyaert, after whom the Parkhead branch was named, were not Irish. Francis Gillespie, the secretary of the Glasgow and West of Scotland District, proposed a motion to the 1890 Annual Convention which called for a modification of the rule. The motion was, however,



(Above) Scottish branches of the Irish National Foresters taking part in a procession. (Right) The INF banner of the St Mary's Duntocher Branch



defeated because of fear of loss of Irish leadership of the society.

## Growth

The 1880s and 1890s was a period of growth for the society—including here in Scotland. In 1887 and 1888 alone, the *Glasgow Observer* reported on meetings to establish branches in Bridgeton, Parkhead, Lochgelly, Falkirk, Loanhead, Renton and Denny. In April 1885, Doctor John Conway—who was surgeon of Branch O'Connell—when commending the benefit societies in general, reserved special praise for the INF. While paying benefits equal to the others—save one unnamed society—they took substantially less in subscriptions. The weekly subscription of Branch Heart of Erin in 1884 of between four pence half-penny to six pence depending on age was typical at this time. The low subscription suggests that the target membership was drawn from the lower paid sections of the workforce; the benefit rate meant this had to be a highly efficient operation. At the 1893 Annual Convention in Dundee, James Shanks, then Lord Mayor of Dublin, asserted that no other benefit society excelled the INF in efficiency of management.

Branch Henry Joy McCracken was established in Kinning Park in January 1888. Between January and June, the *Glasgow Observer* reported about 117 people were proposed for membership, of whom about 75 were initiated. Some dozen of the branches in the area we now call Glasgow—Anderston and Maryhill were then outside the city boundary—reported, with varying degrees of regularity, on their meetings. According to these reports, between January and June 1888, about 135 persons were proposed for membership of whom roughly 100 were initiated. Two hundred and seventy payments of benefit were also reported in the *Glasgow Observer* during this period.

## Who were its members?

But who all were these members? The lack of archives makes this a difficult question to answer. The National Records of Scotland do hold 68 membership applications for Branch Sir Charles Russell, Linlithgow, between 1890 and 1892—54 of which have employment information. The National Records also hold employment information of trustees in the Branch Registration records and combining this with some census data provides information on the employment of 38 members in the Glasgow area between January and June 1888.

Despite the different times, locations and data sources there are consistent patterns. In Glasgow and Linlithgow the most common employment was

'labourer' or 'miner' and a number were responsible for machine minding and operating including 'retort-men' (who operated shale extraction machinery) boiler-men, engine-men and gas workers. In the Glasgow sample—possibly because of the higher proportion of trustees and branch officers—a higher percentage were in skilled or semi-skilled trades such as joinery and bricklaying, blacksmithing and iron-moulding. Also included in the samples are jobs as diverse as a quarryman and a mason in Linlithgow and a calico printer, a paper manufacture worker and a gardener (the worker was also described as a botanist) in Glasgow. Notable in both Glasgow and Linlithgow also are numbers working in the shop-based provision of retail and other services, these include a draper and tailor, a butcher, boot and shoe makers, a hairdresser and a bookseller's assistant.

Perhaps the best-known manifestation of the emerging self-confident entrepreneurialism within the Irish community at this time is Celtic Football Club. No less than three of the first board of 1888 were also Trustees of Branch O'Connell in Calton in 1890. John Glass was a glazier who owned a builder's business with his brother. John O'Hara, a shoemaker and later a publican, was replaced in 1890 by James Quillan, a cooper with a business in Parkhead. The other trustee was Dr Conway who was Celtic's first honorary president. The irony is that at this very time, Glass was in dispute first with Doctor Conway and then with James Quillan about the future development of Celtic. The fact that people from such different circumstances were members the same association highlights the wide attraction of the INF.

## Benefit rates

The 1884 benefit rates stated in the Heart of Erin handbook were 10/6 for the first six months of inability to work due to sickness. Dr Conway emphasised the importance—in psychological as well as physical terms—of the workman not being forced back to work prematurely because of loss of wages. While 10/6 was not quite enough for the grocery bill for the family of eight referred to at the beginning of this article, it was still more than half wages for the £1-a-week workman also mentioned above. For the next six months of illness 6/- was payable and thereafter four shillings per week without a set time limit. This was effectively a pension for men too ill for their normal employment and there were complicated provisions to allow taking up lighter work.

This long-term commitment, however, could potentially be a heavy demand on a branch's resources. It is worth noting that no benefit was payable for self-inflicted harm, often caused by alcohol. Between May

1887 and September 1888, Branch Wolfe Tone in Maryhill published the names of beneficiaries. Thirty-one different people received benefit—one-third of which was paid for periods of illness of one week or less. The most any beneficiary received was four payments. Further investigation found details of eight of the beneficiaries—five of whom were married, four with families ranging from one child to four children. Not quite in the circumstances of the family of eight mentioned previously, but perhaps going that way.

## Recognition

We noted how members of the INF were becoming important members of the wider community in Scotland. The *Glasgow Observer* reported on Dr Conway's address in April 1888, to Branch Parnell in Bridgeton, in which he emphasised how the advantages of membership of the INF went beyond the material benefit and that the making proper provision for 'the evil day' made for independence and self-respect. Dr Conway noted the extensive membership of benefit societies among the Scots working population and said that in emulating them the Irish community would '... compel the respect of neighbours... irrespective of creed or nationality.'

Lord Mayor James Shanks at the 1893 Annual Convention also reflected on the independence of the Scots community—this time in Dublin. However, in their providing for themselves and their families, he saw the same attitude in the Dundee Foresters. The benefit societies made much of the fact that benefits paid from their own resources reduced the demand on the ratepayers, though Joseph Hutchinson—the general secretary of the Society and Dublin Corporation Council—complained how little this was recognised. However, the civic recognition of the importance of the INF and its members in Scotland is shown in two events. The 1890 Annual Convention in Glasgow was held in the City Halls, and the City Chamberlain welcomed the delegates to a viewing of then new City Chambers in George Square, and in 1893, the Lord Mayor Shanks saw the attendance of the Lord Provost of Dundee at the banquet to celebrate the Annual Convention in that city as the seal of civic approval for the INF.

## Fraternity

The INF was not merely an insurance organisation to which the member had an external relationship. It was a fraternity. By joining the member—while ensuring his own welfare—was also taking on responsibility for the welfare of other members. We can see various manifestations of these fraternal relations. Visits by the

Woodwards to members on the sick list ensured proper payment but also maintained contact between society and the member, so too did the commitment to attend the funerals of members and their wives and thereby add respectful dignity to the occasion.

We read also of individual and collective examples of fraternal behaviour. Dr Conway—whose commitment to the people of the east end was well-known—took on the additional responsibility for trusteeship of the Branch O'Connell. Thomas Kelly, the district treasurer of Glasgow and West of Scotland refused payment for his services. The members of Branch Heart of Erin in the Cowcaddens collected a fund to pay off the dues of members who were behind because of unemployment.

## Symbols

Fraternity was expressed also in the symbols of the society—the sash was a symbol of membership. It was a matter of pride to process behind the banner of the branch alongside one's brethren and of prestige to be elected by one's brethren to an office of the society. Concerts, soirées, talks were regular features of INF and the anniversary of the branch was a cause for celebration when members from other branches would join in the festivities.

In 1887, the *Glasgow Observer* reported on the commissioning a banner from E.M.O'Grady of Dublin by Branch Thomas Moore, which required a special committee and fund. The banner was of 'finest Irish poplin' and cost £25, and taking possession of the banner was a cause for celebration.

We have mentioned, that with the growth of the INF in Scotland, the Scots Foresters demanded more independence. The Central Office had insisted that regalia, along with administrative materials and so on, were to be purchased from Dublin. However the banner of Branch Fr. McCluskey of Duntocher, the images of which accompany this article, was created locally in 1897 by a local artist William Donnelly of Old Kilpatrick.

## Processions

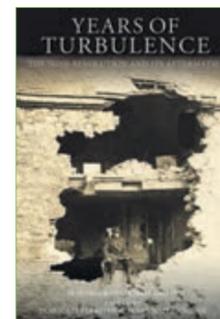
The Foresters' processions were also famous. The 'Irish Forester's Gala' in Blantyre, which featured the Thomas Moore Banner, was described in detail in the *Glasgow Observer* of September 8, 1888. We are told participants came from Glasgow, Motherwell, Hamilton, Kilsyth, Partick, Govan, Kinning Park, Coatbridge and other surrounding areas.

"Every second person wore a green sash or rosette," the report said. "Crowds of pedestrians came streaming from in from the neighbouring towns and villages while from places at a distance special and ordinary trains arrived in rapid succession."

"The Glasgow contingent (was) accompanied by two brass bands, that of Branch Shamrock of Anderston and the Crox Brass Band, which (accompanied) the Thomas Moore Branch... playing appropriate airs during the march... On reaching St Joseph's Schoolroom... the procession was reformed for the march to the park. Leading the body on horseback were messers J Brown Thomas Moore Branch, and P Masterson, Harp of Erin Branch, Blantyre. Both these gentlemen were dressed in the Emmett costume and gave to the procession quite a martial air... the banner of the Branch Columbkille, Port Glasgow was borne at the head of the procession. Following came AM Sullivan Branch, Hamilton who had with them the splendid band of the second rifle volunteers. The beautiful banner of Branch Thomas Moore, South Side Glasgow, which is one of the finest in the country, bore on one side the figures of two members of the order and a bust of Moore with the title of the branch on a scroll. The reverse showed the visit of a member to a friend, prostrate by illness and round the border of the banner ran the legend: 'Irishmen are both able and willing to assist each other,' a statement which cannot be made frequently made..."

"The procession having been marshalled by Brother Thomas J Brady proceeded from the school to the park where the gala was arranged to take place. Crowds of spectators lined the streets. The utmost good order and friendliness prevailed."

Joe Fodey is a retired librarian. At Glasgow Caledonian University, he was a member of their historical research collections team. Before that he had worked on a number of local history projects in the east end of Glasgow. His interest in the Irish National Foresters comes from a family connection, with his grandfather being a member of William Collins Branch in Strabane, County Tyrone. Joe would like to acknowledge Ian McCallum's book *The Gathering Storm* as a source of biographical information of the members of the first Celtic Board. A version of this article will also appear in *Open House* magazine



**YEARS OF TURBULENCE: THE IRISH REVOLUTION AND ITS AFTERMATH**  
Edited by Diarmaid Ferriter and Susannah Riordan  
UCD Press  
£30/€40

THE year was 1922, the date February 4. An editorial in the *Connacht Tribune* captured the mood and the minds of the people of Galway when it asked: "Where are the rejoicings and jubiliations of a liberty-loving and impulsive race, which has regained its freedom after seven-and-a-half centuries of bondage? As far as can be judged, they are entirely absent."

The approval of the Anglo-Irish Treaty met with little of the boisterous enthusiasm which normally marked local political events. The sought-after Republic seemed lost in small print and the mood among the people was one of relief rather than triumph when the Treaty was endorsed by the Dáil.

Historian Uana Newell recalls Frank Fahy's question: "Have we been playing at Republicanism?" and much more in an essay which deals with the Treaty, the Pact Election and the Civil War in Galway. It is part of an excellent new book, *Years of Turbulence, The Irish Revolution and its Aftermath*, edited by Diarmaid Ferriter and Susannah Riordan.

In January, 1922, a reporter from the *London Times* wrote: "I have talked with many inhabitants of Galway, and they all look to a revival of the industries in the city—jute mills, flour mills and other industries—which aforesaid promised a reign of prosperity for the West of Ireland."

"The vision is bright with promise, and it is not surprising that most people of the county desire to see the establishment of peace and the opportunity for development."

If anything these disparate opinions demonstrate that it is almost always the local newspaper, not the national, which has its finger on the pulse in matters of politics. In the Dáil, the seven Galway TDs voted four to three in favour of the Treaty settlement. Pdraig O Maile, George Nicholls, Patrick Hogan and Joseph Whelehan voted in favour of its ratification. Liam Mellows, Frank Fahy and Brian Cusack voted against it. But had Whelehan voted the way he originally acknowledged—he was against it—Galway would have returned a verdict of four to three against the agreement.

Mellows, who was shot by firing squad in Dublin's Mountjoy Jail on December 8,

1922, is said to have 'dismissed the Treaty out of hand'; Cusack stressed the inviolability of his oath to the Republic and Fahy asked the question, which became the title of this thoroughly researched essay: "Have we been playing at Republicanism?"

The first 25 years of the 20th century in Ireland compel and inspire historians, researchers, and writers, more than any other. That this should be the case is hardly surprising given the vast confluence of significant national and international events, which had profound political, social and military consequences.

In Ireland we had the Home Rule movement, the Gaelic revival, the rise of the Ulster and Irish Volunteers, the 1916 Rising and the subsequent turmoil of the War of Independence, Treaty and Civil War. Internationally, the landscape included the changing nature of the nation state, the rise of organised labour and left-wing ideologies, the suffragette movement, as well as many technological and telecommunication advances—all eclipsed by the conflagration that became the First World War.

The Connacht Women's Franchise League, based in Galway city, was an important part of the suffragette movement and details of some of its most prominent members are included in *Years of Turbulence*.

Here some of Ireland's most talented historians offer new perspectives and insight into Ireland's revolutionary period from 1912-1923, giving a platform to many of the muted voices of the revolution and elaborate on some of the central, current debates on the revolutionary period.

This book's strength stems from the breadth of its subjects, the quality of its writers and researchers, its determination to uncover experiences that (until now) have remained relatively undocumented, and its emphasis on primary source material—including censuses of Ireland of 1901 and 1911, the Bureau of Military History collection, the Military Service Pensions Collection.

Such themes as the experience of violence in its various forms, the specific circumstances of individual counties, tensions between constitutionalism and radicalism, between elites and the grassroots, the extent to which the IRA's campaign was effectively coordinated and controlled, as well as the challenge of writing about women and what they experienced, are deeply considered.

The writers also recognise the need to address, not just events of the revolutionary period, but its afterlife, assessing what the revolution and its leaders came to symbolise, the extent to which a hierarchy of benefit existed in its aftermath, and what the implications were for survivors.

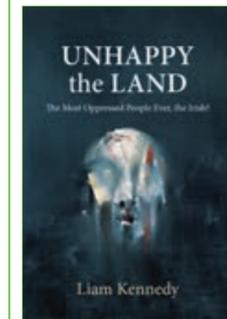
*Years of Turbulence* shines a penetrating light through its many panes on a landscape that, while familiar, is revealed anew, afresh and differently in this fascinating new book.

Diarmaid Ferriter is one of Ireland's best-known historians. Susannah Riordan—co-editor—is a lecturer in the School of History at the University College Dublin as is contributor Catherine Cox. Una Newell, who contributed the chapter on Galway, is Watson

Sematic Specialist at ORRECO and a graduate of both NUI Galway and UCD. She is an Irish Research Fellow of the UCD Humanities Institute and her most recent publications include *The West Must Wait: County Galway and the Irish Free State 1922-32*.

**Years of Turbulence: The Irish Revolution and its Aftermath** is available online and at all good bookshops in both hardback and paperback formats

BILL HEANEY



**UNHAPPY THE LAND: THE MOST OPPRESSED PEOPLE EVER, THE IRISH?**  
By Liam Kennedy  
Merrion Press  
£17/€22.50

LIAM Kennedy could start a row in an empty house and that is not a bad reputation for a polemicist to have. It helps to sell books.

You feel a fight coming on immediately when uber Unionist and right-wing journalist Ruth Dudley Edwards has this to say about Professor Kennedy's latest book, *Unhappy the Land*: "This fascinating, beautifully written, myth-shattering explorations of some of the most contentious episodes in Ireland's story will excite you and inspire or infuriate depending on your prejudices. Get your friends reading them too and they could start another civil war."

And when the subtitle for *Unhappy the Land* carries a question mark: "The Most Oppressed People Ever, the Irish?" you can feel the provocation coming up the stairs.

One person who cannot tolerate the writings of Ruth Dudley Edwards—I know because he has confided this to me often—is Ireland's best known historian Tim Pat Coogan, the man of the triple name.

It is well known that Dudley Edwards, Kennedy and Tim Pat Coogan look at Irish history through different colour glasses. Kennedy's provocative new book interrogates many of Ireland's historical giants and titanic events in a wholly new and disarming manner, according to his publicist, who adds: "Disaster and oppression are the hallmarks of our difficult trajectory, making our current achievements all the more remarkable—or so we like to think."

"Yet the Irish historical experience is not particularly dismal, though we have been very good at marketing our misery, not least to ourselves. "Kennedy suggests we are suffering from the MOPE (Most Oppressed People Ever) Syndrome."

This controversial—and to many unwelcome—analysis includes his assertion that the Easter Rising marked a radical

lurch to the right in Irish political development. And that the War of Independence represented—in some important respects—a purge within the Irish Nationalist movement and a suppressed civil war of North and South.

*Unhappy the Land* is certain to intrigue, challenge and cause widespread irritation in this period of particular historical reflection as we move into 2016.

The fact that Kennedy doesn't think much of Coogan's work becomes clear with his reference to a discussion of Joel Mokyr's 'agenda-setting' book *Why Ireland Starved*. The discussion was part of a conference organised by the Queen's University Centre for Economic History in Belfast at Eastertime 2014. The author, who is the Emeritus Professor of Economic History there, writes: "Against this backdrop of busy academic activity may be found two works that take a radically different stance in the sense that they argue explicitly for the genocidal interpretation."

The books, which he names, are *The Famine Plot* by Coogan and *A United Ireland* by Francis Boyle. Kennedy gives short shrift to *The Famine Plot* and dismisses it in a curt sentence: "The Famine Plot has received such a cool reception from scholars that there is little merit in pursuing it further."

This just adds insult to injury for Coogan who recently came under fire from another academic, Professor Diarmaid Ferriter who savaged his most recent book in a review in *The Irish Times*. Kennedy's questions will—without doubt—cause a few heated arguments. He asks was the catastrophe of the Great Hunger really an Irish Holocaust? Was the Ulster Covenant anything other than a battle-cry for ethnic conflict? Was the Proclamation of the Irish Republic a means of "texting terror"? And who fears to speak of an Irish War of Independence, shorn of its heroic pretensions?

In *Unhappy the Land* Kennedy poses fundamental questions about the social and political history of Ireland and challenges deep-seated notions of a uniquely painful past. He maintains that images of tragedy and victimhood are deeply embedded in the national consciousness, yet when the Irish experience is viewed in the larger European context a different perspective emerges. His provocative new examination of pivotal episodes in Irish history serves to subvert and collapse the commonplace assumptions he claims we unquestioningly hold about oppression, victimhood and a fate said to be comparable 'only to that of the Jews.'

Kennedy argues that the privileging of "the gun, the drum and the flag" above social concerns and individual liberties gave rise to disastrous consequences for generations of Irish people. The professor says Ireland may well be a land of heroes, from Cúchulainn to Michael Collins, but Kennedy like Brecht vigorously questions why we should need them at all.

Liam Kennedy is a member of the Royal Irish Academy and a life-long trade unionist as well as a human rights activist

*Unhappy the Land: The Most Oppressed People Ever, the Irish?* is available online and at all good bookshops

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