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THE EASTER

RIISING AS

HISTORY

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THE EASTER RISING AS HISTORY

By C. Desmond Greaves

A Jubilee coincides with the fifty year limit and is not therefore an ideal time for assessing an event historically. Official papers, for what they are worth, have yet to be fully opened. Eye-witnesses and participants are still alive, and protected by the law of libel. Old men and their families can have strong vested interests in past events. And of course in the general sense these past events are enshrined in surviving relationships which are part of the structure of living politics. This paper does not therefore offer the impossible, the mature assessment of 1916 in all its aspects, but attempts to outline a basis for the criticism of the "official" historical assessment of 1916 which has been presented in the press over the past few weeks.

One thing is now clear. The Irish question is not dead. Britain still has, as she always had, an Irish policy. And it is well to bear in mind what that now is, and to note recent changes. Broadly speaking it can be defined as "integration within integration"; the economic and political consolidation of these islands under the hegemony of British monopoly-capitalism as an aspect of the consolidation (through E.E.C. or other means) of neo-colonialist Europe. Obviously the propaganda necessary to popularising this line of development, given existing susceptibilities, calls for some re-assessment of, not to say tinkering with the facts of history.

Take for example the attitude of the British press to Mr. Lemass's regime today, and contrast it with that taken towards De Valeras's. I well recall during the war a writer (in the Evening Standard, I think) describing De Valera's as "this rebel Government of doubtful authenticity". It had abolished the oath of allegiance to the British Crown, taking advantage of the abdication of King Edward VIII - just as of old its predecessors of Grattan's Parliament availed of the insanity of George III. It had adopted a new constitution contrary to the provisions of the Free State Constitution Act of 1922. It was thus doubtful whether it was a genuine Government at all.

Before De Valera gave place to Lemass, a coalition had proclaimed a Republic and left the Commonwealth, and was pursuing an embarrassingly uncommitted policy in U.N.O. But on Mr. Lemass's succession all was forgiven. "For the first time since 1922 there are men in Dublin with whom it is possible to do business" was one newspaper comment. And business was thereafter done. Big business shook hands across a border that was last week sealed to Republicans, even railway services being banned. There were plans to co-ordinate all Ireland economically for the benefit of British-controlled monopoly. And the independent line in foreign affairs faded away. Then came the trade pact which the Irish Workers Party, which is far from alone in this, sees as an effort to re-establish Ireland's role as an agricultural hinterland to industrial Britain.

In the midst of this development came the jubilee of 1916. It was said by Professor Clarkson when he was young and cynical that "in Ireland politics cannot be conducted without the aid of the glorious dead". How were the men who died for a Republic in 1916 to be harnessed to the task of re-establishing the Union? Clearly the Irish bourgeoisie must have a story. The story is roughly that into the quietly evolving affairs of a contented or indifferent people leapt a suicidal band of revolutionary idealists determined to save the soul of the nation through a blood sacrifice. They aroused not enthusiasm but hostility, and forfeited their lives. But then "a terrible beauty was born". All that was unchanged by the rising was "changed utterly" by the executions. Thus from the British point of view General Maxwell's reign of terror was an unforgivable blunder. From the Irish it was the justification of the blood sacrifice. Inspired by the sacrifice the Irish people accomplished feats which otherwise would have been impossible, and thus finally was established the Ireland of today in which the national aspiration had been achieved and too enthusiastic Republicans can be put in jail.

Most ancient peoples have their myths of origin, which are often highly fanciful though usually revealing. We have before us simultaneously the Irish bourgeoisie's myth of how it achieved State power, and British Imperialism's myth of how it established neo-colonialism in Ireland. It is British policy we are mainly concerned with today, and I suggest that we examine it in the account given by the assistant-editor of the London Times, Mr. A.P. Ryan, who published an article "The Easter Rising" in the April issue of "History Today". From internal evidence I am convinced that the article on the Times leader page shortly afterwards was from the same pen. As is known Mr. Ryan has published a History of Ireland and an account of the Curragh mutiny which most people have thought somewhat favourable to the Conservative party. One of the points he made in it was the Unionist defiance of the Liberal Government, which as it known involved the establishment of a Provisional Government, the arming of Volunteers and extensive gun-running, was comprehensible in view of the fact that the Liberals in the 1910 election had asked for no mandate to introduce Home Rule into Ireland. That is worth bearing in mind.

I have quoted Yeats, that great myth-maker who assimilated every event to his own aristocratic romanticism. I must quote Ryan for the record. "A public opinion poll taken in Ireland... on the Eve of the Dublin Easter Rising would have shown most men and women in favour of Home Rule, some content with the status quo, and only a small minority thinking in terms of armed insurrection". So much for the people. What of the authorities? "Poor Mr. Birrell, the Irish Secretary had allowed himself to say of the 'disaffected' men, 'I have them under the microscope'."

Mr. Ryan then continues "What neither he nor other better judges of Irish form had reckoned with was a suicidal gesture in assertion of the rights of Ireland. But that is what happened." His evidence is Pearse's alleged admission at the Court-martial on May 2nd that "he had been Commandant-General Commanding-in-Chief of the forces of the Irish Republic" (if the grammar seems curious I give it as 'twas given to me) and "had acted in fact in flat disobedience to superior orders."

Before quoting Ryan further here I must interpose that he omits the point that Pearse accompanied his acceptance of sole personal responsibility with the request that his life alone should be forfeit and his comrades should be spared. It is evidence of the position after the Rising, but is insufficient for founding an estimate of the Rising itself.

Ryan records that "Volunteers taken prisoner were hooted by the Dublin crowds. For a day or two it seemed that Pearse's blood-bath had failed in its object. Then came the executions carried out by British military authority. They led to a complete revulsion of feeling The Rising drove Home Rule off the stage, created a climate of opinion in which the guerilla war against British troops and Black-and-Tans could be waged, and led through civil war and much bloodshed to the establishment of the Republic. Pearse won. How and why he did so makes a study in Irish psychology....."

This quotation gives the curious impression that once Maxwell had carried out the executions, British Imperialism committed no more sin against Ireland. Ireland had done with it. Yet it contains a reference to the Black-and-tans, who were certainly not in Ireland in 1916, and were only sent when the Royal Irish Constabulary, unreliable and weakened by resignations, was unable to control the country. That five years of class and national struggle could be motivated merely by a memory is to caricature Clarkson, and would certainly provide an interesting study in "psychology" - that is of course if it were true.

Let us now compare the myth as it unfolds with the realities as far as we are able to ascertain them.

Bourgeois writers are always at their most naive in accounting for the mood of the masses. That the gas-worker, shop-keeper or taxi-driver is just as complex and individualized a product of history as the senator on the bench is incredible to him. That the mainstream of history runs through the lower orders seems preposterous. Hence the masses are either duped or inspired by agitators or idealists; or respond to some vague entity called the "spirit of unrest". Let us consider some of the actual experiences of the people just before 1916, when their mood will become more easily understood, and the absurd gallup-poll antithesis "are you for Home Rule or insurrection?" can be avoided.

In 1916 the majority of the Irish people still lived in the country. In the preceding thirty-five years revolutionary changes had taken place. As a result of the agitations led by the Land League which at one time organized practically the whole agrarian population of Ireland, the tenantry had been progressively transformed into State mortgagees. The process began with the more prosperous tenants and being about half finished by the Birrell Act left a countryside acutely divided along class lines but with its traditional leaders temporarily satisfied. Agrarian agitation nevertheless continued throughout the west, alongside agitation on behalf of town tenants. The larger farmers together with the bourgeoisie of the country towns (mostly merchants) were members of the United Irish League and supported its Parliamentary Party led by Redmond. It must be borne in mind, however, that there was great variety in the Irish countryside, the three main divisions, the cattle-breeding west, the cattle-fattening east and the dairy-farming south forming an integrated system whose division of labour expressed itself in different proportions of family and wage labour. For the remaining tenantry and the landless men Home Rule meant that those who had already benefitted from land division would hurry on with its completion; at the same time the fact that they seemed inclined to hurry slowly led to dissatisfaction. This expressed itself partly through the old secret agrarian societies, and partly through the physical force movement, the Irish Republican Brotherhood. It was thanks to the personal intervention of Sean MacDiarmada, one of the signatories of the proclamation, and himself a Connaught man, that the I.R.B. in Connaught were permitted to hold membership in the "moonlighting" societies.

Home Rule was, of course, the demand of the bourgeoisie. Up to the forties the demand had been "the repeal of the Union". In the seventies this was scaled down to "federalism" a demand which had in O'Connell's day flourished mainly in Belfast. The effect of the Union had been both relative and absolute elimination of Irish industry by British competition, and a constant agrarian crisis thanks to cheap food from virgin lands. The essential demand was thus fiscal independence. Whether Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule was motivated by the high-minded considerations his biographers attribute to him, or whether he was also weighing the advantages of transferring the cost of land-purchase to an Irish exchequer, control of tariffs neither he nor his successors would grant. Home Rule was thus born in chains. Worse than that, the Irish bourgeoisie were split on its method of application. The last time the industrialists of the North joined forces with the merchants and small manufacturers of the south was in 1896. That was in a common front against the over-taxation of Ireland. Thereafter, with tariff control withheld, every instalment of land-purchase seemed to detract from the value of Home Rule to the northerners who held the main taxable capacity. Throughout this period the southern bourgeoisie preferred to give concessions in hope of bourgeois unity rather than vigorously fight Britain for a better Bill.

For to do so would have set the masses in action. The smaller bourgeois were of course not so inhibited.

Now let us turn to the working class. These were concentrated in Belfast and Dublin, together with the large coastal towns. This population distribution shows the predominantly mercantile character of Irish capitalism apart from Belfast. While they are capable of considerable industrial militancy, the political tradition of the workers had been to support the capitalists. Why? Because they gave work. Their continued existence in competition with English manufacturers was the Irish worker's passport to live in his own country. The farmer was a different matter. He was blamed for the fact that butter and bacon were dearer in Dublin than in London. Home Rule to create more work was one thing. Home Rule to subsidise the farmer was another. Nowhere was this suspicion of the agrarian south stronger than among the Protestant workers of Belfast who enjoyed a privileged position as against their Catholic fellow workers. To them the papist was typically a countryman. Thus the split in the ranks of the bourgeoisie communicated itself to the working class quite readily as the history of Carson's agitation shows only too well. The Ulster Volunteers were formed and armed ostensibly to defend the Protestant worker from "popery". The Redmondites' intention to play off country against town was revealed clearly in the electoral clauses of the Home Rule Bill, which favoured the countryside with disproportionate representation in the proposed local Parliament.

The fundamental cause of all this disunity was the refusal of British Imperialism to concede the one right without which Home Was was little more than a sham. The I.R.B. who were strong among the artisans and tradesmen of the towns, as well as having a following among the intellectuals of the Gaelic language movement, prepared first for a "patriot opposition" which would fight within the local Parliament for the enlargement of its rights. After the final concession to the Unionists, when Redmond accepted the principle of the partition of Ireland (that is to say the split in the bourgeoisie was to be made the basis of a division of the national territory) the need for a revolution which would precede the establishment of Home Rule and thus avoid partition became a matter of discussion. When successive postponements aroused the suspicion that Home Rule was not coming at all, a revolution to free Ireland once and for all became the obvious alternative.

It is clear therefore that the issue of Home Rule was entangled in a most complex set of class antagonisms. If the average patriotic Irishman thought that he should support it because that was all he could get, still those who offered it him were not unfaulted idols. The brutal measures taken by 404 Dublin employers in hopes of destroying militant Trade Unionism before Home Rule came into force were well known and understood.

Connolly had no difficulty in winning support for his policy of defeating the Liberals at the three 1913 by-elections. And it was the Home Rulers who squealed. And again let it be said, the people were by no means satisfied that the Redmondites were capable of bringing home the bacon. Hence the Irish Volunteers, founded in November 1913 as a broad military organization controlled by the I.R.B.

From the formation of the Volunteers until June 1914 the Parliamentarians sought first to weaken, then to control the Volunteers. There is no doubt whatsoever that their titular head, Eoin MacNeill used his position on the organization committee with undue freedom. He opened negotiations with the Parliamentarians and allowed their appetite to be whetted by encouragement until they demanded that to the provisional committee of twenty five should be added a further twenty five. Since the provisional committee contained some of their adherents the result was to give them control. This was conceded so that when the war broke out it was possible for Redmond to offer Asquith the defence of Ireland for the Empire through the Volunteers. Then followed negotiations for putting the Volunteers under the British War Office under the Territorial Army Act. Finally in September Redmond made his notorious speech at Woodenbridge urging the Volunteers to join up for service in Flanders.

The result was a split. The original committee resumed its freedom of action. The Volunteers had become a mass organization numbering over 100,000. Every town and village had its company. The officers were drawn from the merchants and larger farmers with a sprinkling of artisans and tradesmen. The split followed class lines. In both country and town there **was** a new gathering centre for small men. The Trade Union movement declared against the war and Connolly described the tactics to be adopted by the united movement of workers and petit-bourgeoisie in terms very different from the supposed blood sacrifice:

"The Germans are in Boulogne where Napoleon projected an invasion of Britain. To Ireland is only a twelve hour run. If you are itching for a rifle, itching to fight, have a country of your own; better to fight for our own country than for the robber empire."

Connolly wrote "starting thus Ireland may light a fire which will not burn out till the last capitalist bond and debenture will burn to ashes on the grave of the last war lord."

In those early months of war the Irish neutrality league was founded. Organizers were despatched throughout Ireland to re-build the Irish Volunteers. There was general understanding that England's difficulty was to be Ireland's opportunity, and to Connolly at least (and his newspaper had wide circulation, reaching up to 80,000 for some issues) Irish tactics were to be based on the resolutions of the Basle and Stuttgart

conferences of the International. The Imperialist war was to be turned into a war of national liberation.

There are no records of Connolly's meetings at this time being broken up by hostile mobs. There are no records of opposition to the marching Volunteers or Citizen Army in Dublin, though this is recorded of cities such as Limerick and towns like Tullamore in less than a year's time. But there are records of 500 prosecutions under the D.O.R.A. between the outbreak of war and the Rising, and the suppression of every single paper of the national opposition.

That the promising anti-war movement languished there is little reason to doubt. In part the suppression of newspapers contributed to this result. But more important were the economic results of the war. The farmers could sell all they produced and could employ their sons and hired men. Recruitment took off the surplus labour force, providing some homes with regular earnings for the first time in years, and separation allowances brought 'affluence' even into the ranks of the lumpen-proletariat. The Home Rule Act was on the statute book (together with an amending act suspending its operation until after the war) and while for the time being the people were enjoying as a result of war the economic benefits which they hoped to get from Home Rule, after the war was over they expected to continue to enjoy them under Home Rule. The first effect of the war was to sharpen class contradictions; its second effect was to place them in suspense. And it was this suspense, while all the issues remained unsolved, which appeared on the surface to be acquiescence. The mood of the masses was to make economic hay while the sun shone. This was not the time for rocking the boat. Imperialism, as Connolly put it was "buying the souls of men". But this was a temporary phenomenon resulting from a particular stage in the war. The many writers over these past few weeks who have extended it backwards over the years miss its distinctive character. Lenin accurately summarised the situation when he said that the struggle had not yet matured. But all the factors were present.

Now for the thoughts of Dublin Castle. That Mr. Ryan is right about "poor Birrell" is confirmed elsewhere. Thus on April 10th Major Price, Chief of the Military Intelligence in Ireland wrote:

"The general state of Ireland, apart from recruiting and apart from the activities of the pro-German Sinn Fein minority is thoroughly satisfactory. The mass of the people are sound and loyal as regards the war, and the country is in a very prosperous state and very free from ordinary crime."

This confirms what has been said. Ireland had been restored to the position she held before the repeal of the corn laws, and held a highly favoured position in the British market. The two provisos are however

noteworthy. The people were sound and loyal but didn't want to join up. And they seem to have managed to tolerate the "pro-German Sinn Fein" (meaning the Volunteers) for nearly two years. This might be held to imply that they still regarded the Volunteers as a rod in pickle in the event of Home Rule not coming up to expectations.

Accepting Birrell's complacent statement at its face value Mr. Ryan can only suggest that no Government can be expected to anticipate suicide. But more is known than that about the situation within the Castle. Professor Leon O'Broin has recently published an analysis of the documents so far available. These show that what can be conveniently termed the "Home Rule crisis" was affecting the ruling class as deeply as those classes contending for power. From the introduction of the Home Rule Act onward no official knew for certain who was going to be his boss next year. This uncertainty led to a weakening of the vigilance of the R.I.C., and a loosening of the traditional loyalties of the entire civil service. More than that it led the authorities at the Castle to give far more weight than would have been otherwise possible to the opinions of the Parliamentary leaders. They regarded themselves in a sense as a caretaker administration paving the way for Redmond and Dillon who would in due course take over.

Repeatedly from his arrival at the end of 1914, landlords and others with eyes to the ground, were urging on Birrell strong action against the Volunteers. The under-secretary, Nathan, was not averse from obliging. At the end of 1914 he listed the "seditious press" and considered suppressing it. He sent copies of the Irish Volunteer and Ireland to Birrell in London. Birrell consulted Dillon and Devlin who advised against suppression on the grounds that far from harming them it would rally support. In any case the "Sinn Feiners" (note this is the title given them by their enemies, not that which they themselves chose) were an insignificant minority. Nathan replied that he was tired of hearing the Sinn Feiners called an insignificant minority; they were not an insignificant minority and it was not true to say they had no influence. And Nathan had his way and the papers were suppressed. There is preserved a letter in which he suggested that in order to help the good work, Mr. Dillon the Nationalist leader should include in one of his speeches the suggestion that if Ireland were invaded by the Germans, the "Sinn Feiners" would help the Germans.

The funeral of O'Donovan Rossa at the beginning of August 1915 was a tremendous demonstration of the depth and extent of national feeling. The military suggested action to prevent the collection of money for arms. Birrell forbade it. In November, after the Citizens Army had carried out a mock attack on Dublin Castle, Lord Midleton demanded that the Volunteers be forcibly disarmed. Nathan reported that "the Nationalist party had lost control of the country and with the avowed purpose of preparing to resist conscription, the extremists were everywhere organizing and gaining strength."

In early December he warned that "Sinn Fein was edging out Mr. Redmond, their Volunteers were doing much mischief, and the young priests who supported them were very extreme." He described the difficult role Redmond had to play. "He had been honestly imperial in the war, but by going as far as he had had lost his position in the country." But still Dillon advised him to "keep his hands off the organizers."

On January 20th 1916, Lord Midleton saw Birrell himself and drew attention to the speeches being made by Fr. Michael O'Flanagan to the alleged effect that Ireland should be an independent country in alliance with Germany, and a circular from the Cork Volunteers declaring that opposition to conscription should be backed by armed force if necessary. Inevitably the failure of recruiting was bringing the issue of conscription to the fore. And it had been agreed by the Irish Neutrality League, or a broad committee under its aegis that in the event of conscription, an attempt to disarm the Volunteers, or a German landing, the Volunteers should make an insurrection. As the war proceeded, despite the economic prosperity, these issues increasingly darkened the horizon. One the question of the German arms ship it appears that though British intelligence knew of its journey (though not the correct date) Nathan was kept in ignorance out of concern lest the source of the information (required for even more momentous matters) should leak out.

The explanation for the unpreparedness of the authorities thus lies in the general situation vis-a-vis the transfer of power. It was essential for the bourgeoisie to maintain its influence against a coalition which though organizationally far weaker at the time, could expand very rapidly if certain issues were raised. And of course it was not a question of suicide. If Redmond and Dillon were anxious not to take the offensive against what was in essence Republicanism, it did not follow that Republicanism would not take the offensive against the war forces. And this is indeed what happened.

Since it is not now a question of explaining a suicidal blood sacrifice, perhaps we should now consider why the Volunteers and Citizens Army undertook an insurrection which while (as I hope to show) militarily sound was politically premature.

The reason was basically the fear that the war might end before the opportunity was taken. There had been many reverses for the Entente arms. These, for example the disaster of Suvla bay, had helped to discourage recruitment and to encourage the movement against conscription. In January 1916 Countess Markievicz with characteristic ingeniousness expressed from a public platform the hope that the rumours of peace were unfounded. She drew sharp rebukes from the pacifist Sheehy-Skeffington, who subsequently was murdered in cold blood by a British officer when trying to effect mediation between the parties during the fighting. And it is generally accepted that

in the early part of 1916 the British cabinet were giving serious consideration to a negotiated peace. The seizure of power was thought of as a stimulus to this negotiated peace, in which Germany would prove relatively stronger than she had been at the outbreak of war, and if power could be held long enough for the establishment of any kind of administration, then that administration could claim belligerent rights and expect international recognition in the peace settlement. The problem was thus how to seize enough territory for the establishment of an administration and how to hold it long enough. In his analysis of the military objectives of the Rising that actually took place, Col. Eoghan O'Neill of the Military College at Curragh, expressed his conviction that the mission decided upon was the occupation of Dublin. This opinion was based on an analysis of the military dispositions actually made. It may be added that he considered the careful planning shown completely at variance with the theory of a suicidal blood sacrifice, although he held the view that a number of mistakes were made.

What were the problems? The first problem arose from the immaturity of the mass movement. This expressed itself within the liberation front. Griffith and his Sinn Fein (the only group at that time entitled to the name Sinn Fein) were not in favour of an offensive insurrection. Had Britain attempted conscription or the disarming of the Volunteers they would probably have offered resistance. But this might not necessarily have involved Britain. Even prominent members of the I.R.B. for example Hobson, had been converted to a preference for guerilla tactics. He wrote a pamphlet entitled "defensive warfare". Those in favour of armed insurrection were confined to the Citizen Army under Connolly and Mallon, and the supreme Council of the I.R.B. In mid-January the supreme council met and elected a full "military council" which was authorised to prepare secretly an armed insurrection at a date within their discretion, and in doing so to come to an accommodation with Connolly.

The proposal made to Connolly was to organize a Rising on Easter Sunday under cover of manoeuvres, relying on Pearse's position as director of organization and the cadre of I.R.B. men within the Volunteers, to effect the transformation without MacNeill's knowledge. He would find himself the leader of an insurrection and could go on or drop out as he pleased. It must be recalled at this point that MacNeill had only two years previously taken it upon himself to negotiate a new constitution for the Volunteers with the Redmondites. Under this constitution the men who were now proposing to deceive him would have been excluded from their positions. Connolly thought this course dangerous. It is not known what precisely he urged. But from what he said on other occasions it seems he was generally in favour of changing the leadership. His colleagues thought that this might act as a warning to the authorities and bring about an attempt to disarm the forces before they were prepared. And Connolly, says Desmond Ryan, conceded with much misgiving.

The next problem was arms. Arrangements were made that these should be landed at Fenit in Co. Kerry. Railwaymen were to run a special train up the west coast dropping arms at Limerick which was to be by-passed by the Ballysimon loop, Ennis, Crusheen, Gort, and Tuam but above all at Athenry. These arms were to be used on the line of the Shannon thus drawing off forces from the west of Dublin and making it difficult for the British to invest the city. As for the Volunteers elsewhere they must make do with what they had or could capture. It should be noted that it was in the west that the Volunteers had their largest reserves of unarmed manpower.

A further problem was created when at the end of March a number of Volunteer organizers were arrested and deported to Britain. These included Mellows who was to take command on the Shannon. He was traced to his place of exile by his brother who impersonated him for sufficient time to let him out of the country in disguise. He reached his headquarters at Killeeneenmore, near Athenry, the day the Rising began.

The final problems were the failure of the arms landing and the discovery by MacNeill that the manoeuvres were indeed to be an insurrection. The failure of the arms landing was basically due to the arms ship not being equipped with radio, and thus not receiving last minute orders to delay the landing. Strangely enough this last minute message was intercepted by the British who thus did not discover the ship on the day she actually arrived. The ship was scuttled and Casement who landed from a submarine was arrested.

Almost simultaneously MacNeill and Robson discovered the truth, and for several days orders, confirmations and countermands were flying between headquarters and the outlying companies. The confusion was indescribable. MacNeill made certain that all would know of the cancellation of the manoeuvres by inserting an advertisement in the Sunday Independent. This may have allayed the fears of the authorities who were now (possibly subject to the results of the emergency cabinet then meeting) preparing plans for mass arrests and disarming the Volunteers. But it could not bring into action the many Volunteers who retired from the fray in disgust. After a long and serious meeting in Liberty Hall the military committee decided to put into action as much of the original plan as was possible on the Monday. Code messages were sent out in all directions. The Volunteers who took part in the Rising were substantially the members of the I.R.B., plus the Citizens Army.

Colonel O'Neill considers that to hold Dublin for a week with the forces available would be considered a very remarkable achievement even for a professional army. He doubted if he had ever trained soldiers who were half as good in street-fighting and marksmanship. These opinions

by a professional military man are of great important where the "blood sacrifice" theory is in question. It should be noticed too that the political aim was still intact. It is interesting to speculate what would have happened if at the Cabinet meeting it had been decided to seek a negotiated peace. In the west something approaching a thousand square miles of Irish territory was held for several days. The insurgents in Wexford held out even after Dublin had surrendered.

We can now turn to the question of the attitude of the Irish people. Here it would seem there was a significant gulf between town and country. Too much should not be made of it of course, as policemen are spread thinner in the country and the walls do not have ears. Nobody who reads Mellows's story of the rising in Galway or speaks to his surviving comrades can doubt that the popular nature of the insurrection was well understood. The Athenry area had benefitted from the land division, but this was by no means complete. The town tenants agitation had been exceptionally intense as recently as 1907. The I.R.B. was strong and had assisted the small farmers and landless men in their agitation.

After the rising was over the R.I.C. reported to the commission of enquiry. Anybody familiar with the district will immediately be struck by the confusions and contradictions. Sometimes the distances between well-known towns are ludicrously wrong. It should be remembered of course that their officers were reporting to people who probably did not know the district. There are detailed descriptions of events which were both topographically unlikely, and chronologically suspect. The explanation of this is that from Ballinasloe to Galway City, some forty miles, and from Tuam to Gort, some thirty odd, the R.I.C. evacuated all outlying posts and shut themselves up in their barracks in the few large towns, sometimes providing accommodation in addition for the larger merchants or prominent members of Redmond's party. That the landlord classes screamed for help is undoubted. And there are fanciful stories only explicable, in my opinion, as elaborate explanations of why it was not forthcoming.

When the Volunteers camped at Moyode they were almost embarrassed by the swarms of young children who came pressing on them their (unnecessary) services as scouts. The farmers wives baked bread for them, and offered onions, potatoes and vegetables. In the field kitchen which supplied several hundred men these combined with the rumps of bullocks commandeered from the local landlords to make appetizing Irish stew. Police were taken prisoner and when the cease-fire was being negotiated one of the objections was that the police prisoners would identify the insurgents. They gave their word of honour not to do so. And it is still said locally that some of them kept it. Why? Because otherwise it would not be very healthy living in the district. The Rising in Galway was a kind of peasant war accompanying the national revolution in Dublin.

Recently the Liverpool Echo published an account of the Rising which seems to have indicated that the people were bitterly opposed to it. A correspondent who claimed to have lived on the Navan road as a little girl told in reply how she had seen a fleet of cars carrying wounded men and was extremely upset asking the villagers what was wrong. "Don't worry. They are great heroes and are fighting for Irish freedom" she was told. They had been involved in the battle of Ashbourne. Again to return to Dublin, there is ample evidence in the extensive literature for sympathy with the rebels among the people. There was a widespread fear that they would give in too soon and thus become an object of ridicule. But there is also evidence that the lumpen proletariat which had indulged in looting before the fire got too hot, did assemble near the quays and do a bit of boozing. But even in 1916 this was not a dense residential area, and certainly not typical of the working class. In Grafton Street, the Bond Street of Dublin, well-dressed ladies and gentlemen showed their breeding by spitting at the prisoners. But just after an insurrection, when a city is still smoking, when there is martial law and thousands of men, women and boys have been arrested, is not the time when even the most optimistic sympathiser could be expected to come out and cheer. Those who were in sympathy would naturally keep their opinions to themselves. Certainly they would not express it to the numerous British press men who thronged the city.

My Ryan calls the Rising "Pearse's bloodbath" oblivious of that other bloodbath which was simultaneously claiming millions of the youth of Europe.

"It is better to die 'neath an Irish sky
Than at Suvla or Sud-el-bar"

runs the famous song.

But Pearse, the only one among the revolutionaries who had ever given voice to sentiments of "blood sacrifice" was by no means the lonely central figure he is alleged to be. The notion of establishing a secret society to prepare an insurrection to free Ireland had occurred to Stephens while an exile in Paris following the abortive Risings of 1848 and 1849. In 1855 he founded the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood with this object. A Rising was attempted in 1867. The organization, now called the Irish Republican Brotherhood, played an enormous part in the Land League struggles and formed a backcloth to the militant Parliamentarianism of Parnell. It fell on lean times after his fall, being so to speak entangled in the debris. But it continued uninterruptedly, was revived soon after the turn of the century by Hobson and McCullough, and in 1907 by the return of Tom Clarke. These, with Sean McDiarmada built up the organization throughout Ireland, and throughout the whole period there was training in the use of arms which took its first organized form some months before the foundation of the Irish Volunteers. Pearse did not become a member of the I.R.B. until the end of 1913.

Of the seven signatories Connolly will be known to all here. "How do you know so much about revolution Mr. Connolly" an interrupter once shouted up at him. "My business is revolution, madam" he replied. Tom Clarke had spent many years in jail in Britain on dynamite charges; he had survived thanks an iron will and strong constitution under conditions where some of his fellow-prisoners went mad. While in the U.S.A. he was a member of the Engineer's Trade Union. There was nothing suicidal about either of these men.

Sean MacDiarmada was born in Co. Leitrim but as a youth emigrated to Glasgow where he became a tramdriver and bartender. Later he worked awhile in Belfast where he met Hobson and McCullough. For several years after 1905 he toured Ireland on a bicycle forming circles of the I.R.B. wherever he went. Eamonn Ceannt was a clerical worker who strongly supported the workers in the lock-out of 1913. His character is shown in his last message sent out before his execution:

"I leave for the guidance of other Irish revolutionaries who may tread the path which I have trod, this advice: never to treat with the enemy, never to surrender to his mercy, but to fight to a finish. I see nothing gained but grave disaster caused by the surrender which has marked the end of the Irish insurrection of 1916 - so far as Dublin is concerned. The enemy has not cherished one generous thought for those who with little hope, with poor equipment and weak in numbers, withstood his forces for one glorious week. Ireland has shown that she is a nation. This generation can claim to have raised sons as brave as any that went before; and in years to come Ireland will honour those who risked their all for her honour at Easter in 1916."

There is no trace of a death-wish here, except perhaps for a few more of his enemies. The remaining two signatories, Plunkett and MacDonagh, were intellectuals. Plunkett was the youngest but was seriously ill. Nevertheless he managed to get married in prison before he was executed. As for MacDonagh his every word and line breathes irrepressible gaiety and love of life.

As for the rank and file, one can imagine the 200 odd sturdy Trade Unionists of the Citizens Army engaging in a blood sacrifice. One might just as well call an unsuccessful strike a "work sacrifice".

A quotation from the official enquiry will throw some light on the temper in the west:

"My lord", said Inspector Clayton, R.I.C., "It all started in Craughwell in 1907. Secret societies followed and branches were organized in Loughrea, Athenry and Kilrea. And then that fellow Mellows came from Dublin. He was a paid organizer and he enrolled every youth in every parish."

Lord Hardinge: The Sinn Feiners were pretty well known to you I suppose?

Inspector: Yes, my lord, they were.

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

Inspector: No, my lord, none.

Lord Hardinge: What class did they come from?

Inspector: Small shop-keepers, blacksmiths, publicans and farmers' sons.

Lord Hardinge: There were no literary types among them?

Inspector: No my lord.

It is only necessary to appreciate this class composition of the insurgents to see how impossible it would be, after MacNeill had already given everybody who wished to withdraw a perfect excuse for doing so, for Pearse to lead these men into a "blood sacrifice" even if he had wished to do so. His gallant offer to take full responsibility, coupled with a romantic streak in some of his writings, are not (as was said earlier) adequate for the assessment of an insurrection of this magnitude and complexity.

That the executed men took their place alongside Tone and Emmet as a result of the executions is of course plain. But to say as Mr. Ryan does in his concluding paragraph of his article that Kitchener and Maxwell "performed their involuntary roles as founding fathers" (of the Republic that exists today) is to miss the essence of the situation in 1916. Tone was executed in 1798 and became a hero at once. Did any revolution follow? Emmet was executed after an unsuccessful insurrection in 1803. He has remained a hero sung in verse from that day. Did any revolution follow? The Manchester martyrs were hanged and every year from then on throngs assembled to commemorate them. Was there a revolution? What then distinguished the insurrection of 1916? It was that the Rising took place as the first breach in the world imperialist war front, that the crisis in Ireland was a real crisis, affecting both rulers and ruled, and merely hastened, did not create, the inevitable reassertions by history of the actual relationships of Irish life, which had been partially (and only partially) obscured for the short space of just over a year.

What had been implicit in the situation all along now shone out with blinding certainty. The British were not in the war to establish the independence of small nations. The Redmondites who were supporting them had thrown away, not utilized, Ireland's advantage. The merchants, large farmers and industrialists were left without a policy. Simultaneously the results of the decision taken in London to prosecute the war more vigorously began to take effect. Prices rose. Small farmers began to agitate for land. Where they secured the land the threat of conscription hung over their labour force, their children. The expected expansion of war-production in Ireland did not take place. The new party established by the petit-bourgeoisie was given Griffith's name of Sinn Fein, but had De Valera as president and Griffith as vice-president. It grew from strength to strength. In the 1918 election it won the suffrages of 80% of the people.

It was when British imperialism refused to accept the verdict of the people in 1918 that the most intense phase of the national struggle began. Dail Eireann, established in defiance of the British power, reaffirmed Irish independence and began the de facto administration of the country, with its own finance department, local government department, courts, police and even jails. Against it Imperialism sent soldiers and black-and-tans. That the inspiration of the men of 1916 still encouraged there is no doubt. But the struggle was against actual evils being perpetrated by imperialism, the murders, incendiarisms, shooting up of whole towns, to say nothing of the herding of the men of Ireland into jails and concentration camps. It was now that imperialism was fought to something approaching a standstill and Lloyd George adopted the alternative policy of seeking an accommodation with more compromising elements (notably Griffiths and Collins) who had become the guardians of bourgeois interests after the old bourgeois party had disintegrated. It was this accommodation, not the Rising of 1916, nor the Anglo-Irish war, that gave rise to the present partitioned Ireland, one of whose states is the Republic that Mr. Ryan fathers on General Maxwell.

Finally it is worth dealing with the frequently made speculation that had Maxwell not introduced the white terror the revolution which followed 1916 would never have taken place.

What would the alternative have been? Obviously no government so defied in the midst of a war could afford to let everybody go scot free. What then was the minimum reprisal possible consistent with remaining the Government? Or consistent with continuing the war? The imprisonment of the sixteen men who were executed and all others let off? This line of thought leads to a fantasy. Once the act of defiance had been committed, provided that imperialism remained imperialism, that Ireland remained a subject nation, that the crisis of the world war was there and bound to develop further - granted these concretely existing conditions, there was no course of action British imperialism could adopt which would not serve to strengthen the national liberation movement.

It is interesting to compare Mr. Ryan's description of the Rising as a "suicidal gesture" with that of Karl Radek who stigmatised it as a "putsch". His article appeared in the Berliner Tageblatt under the title "a dead letter". In his criticism of Radek's thesis Lenin commented that it was an odd coincidence that the "representative of the imperialist bourgeoisie", Kulisher (a Russian "Cadet") dubbed the Rising "the Dublin putsch".

According to Radek it was a "putsch" that could come to nothing. He wrote his article for the issue of May 9th., possibly before he had heard of any executions. His disdainful approach to the Irish National movement arose from his belief that the "Irish problem was an agrarian problem" and that the peasants having been appeased with reforms, the national movement was now a "purely urban, petty-bourgeois movement which notwithstanding the sensation it caused, had not much social backing."

As we have seen, land purchase was far from complete despite the Birrell Act, and there was required another Act (the Free State Land Act of 1924) before the way could be cleared for completing the agrarian revolution. Second, the whole course of the Home Rule crisis had shown how widely the masses were involved in the national movement. The imperialist Mr. Ryan sees in the Rising something that should never have happened. At the end of his article he expresses the view that the Irish should remember "not without shame" the British soldiers who were killed while suppressing the insurrection, and he suggests that candles should be lit in the Dublin churches to them as well. This expression of chauvinism fits exactly his opinion that the unnatural event could never have happened but for the sublime madness of Pearse and the administrative folly of Maxwell. How many times have we heard such analysis applied in India, Egypt or Vietnam?

To the leftist Radek on the other hand, the Rising could not possibly be justified because it did not coincide with his preconceived opinion of what was worth revolting about.

Lenin described his opinion as "monstrously doctrinaire and pedantic", and his reply is worth re-reading in full:

"The term 'putsch' in the scientific sense of the word may be employed only when the attempt at insurrection has revealed nothing but a circle of conspirators or stupid maniacs, and has aroused no sympathy among the masses. The centuries old Irish national movement, having passed through various stages and combinations of class interests.....expressed itself in street fighting conducted by a section of the urban petty-bourgeoisie and a section of the workers after a long period of mass agitation, demonstrations, suppression of the

"press etc. Whoever calls such a Rising a 'putsch' is either a hardened reactionary, or a doctrinaire hopelessly incapable of picturing a social revolution as a living thing."

"For to imagine that social revolution is conceivable without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without the revolutionary outbursts of a section of the petty bourgeoisie with all its prejudices, without the movement of politically non-conscious proletarians and semi-proletarian masses against landlord, church, monarchical, national and other oppression - to imagine that means repudiating social revolution. Very likely one army will line up in one place and say "We are for socialism", while another will line up in another place and say "We are for imperialism" - only from such a ridiculously pedantic angle could one label the Irish rebellion a 'putsch'."

"Whoever expects a 'pure' social revolution will never live to see it. Such a person pays lip service to revolution without understanding what revolution really is."

Further on in the same article Lenin returns to the subject, and adds:-

"If on the one hand we were to declare and to repeat in a thousand keys that we are 'opposed' to all national oppression and on the other hand we were to describe as a 'putsch' the heroic revolt of the most mobile and enlightened section of certain classes in an oppressed nation against its oppressors, we would be sinking to the same stupid level as the Kautskyites."

"The misfortune of the Irish is that they have risen prematurely, when the European revolt of the proletariat has not yet matured. Capitalism is not so harmoniously built that the various springs of rebellion can of themselves merge at one effort, without reverses and defeats. On the other hand, the very fact that revolts break out at different times, in different places, and of different kinds, guarantees wide scope and depth to the general movement; only in premature, partial, scattered and therefore unsuccessful revolutionary movements do the masses gain experience, get to know their real leaders, the socialist proletarians, and in this way prepare for a general onslaught, in the same way as separate strikes, demonstrations, local and national, outbreaks in the army, outbursts among the peasantry, etc. prepared the way for the general onslaught in 1905."

How then are we to look at 1916? Not surely in isolation from the events which followed. One way of viewing its history is to regard the entire period from 1912 to 1923 as the Irish revolution, and the Home Rule crisis, the distortion of its development through the war, the rising and aftermath, the national resurgence, declaration of independence, Anglo-Irish war, truce and civil war, as the concrete forms the struggle took in its successive phases. Historically it took the forms we have enumerated. But the process as a whole, with all its accidents and contradictory developments, was a product of the opening stages of the general crisis of capitalism. That in the end the victory was only partial, that the bourgeoisie recovered the initiative and appropriated to itself some (though not all) of the gains won by the people, and seems now prepared to retreat still further, indicates that the struggle has not yet ended.

Now what is the effect of the myth, which we referred to at the opening of the discussion? First the pretence that 1916 was the struggle for the existing Republic in the twenty six counties embellishes the present regime. It obscures partition and the facts of neo-colonialism. It fits in well with the current affectation that "imperialism is dead" in general and the Irish question in particular. By resting the Irish revolution on the accident of 'suicide' and the accident of Maxwell's undue harshness, the irreconcilability of British imperialism and the Irish people's movement for national democracy is concealed.

The last thing I would wish to suggest is that Mr. Ryan worked up his theories for that deliberate purpose. That these theories are very widespread anybody who has read the British (or Irish) papers in the last few weeks will testify. What is being concealed is the responsibility of British imperialism for forcing the Irish to accept something less than they fought for in 1916. And under these circumstances the integration which is equally enforced, but under economic pressure, can be represented as the voluntary action of a free people.

I am of course not anxious to stand over ever dot and comma of what I have just said. But I offer it to you for your discussion as a more credible version of the history of 1916, and of 1916's significance for history, than that produced by the assistant editor of the Times.

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