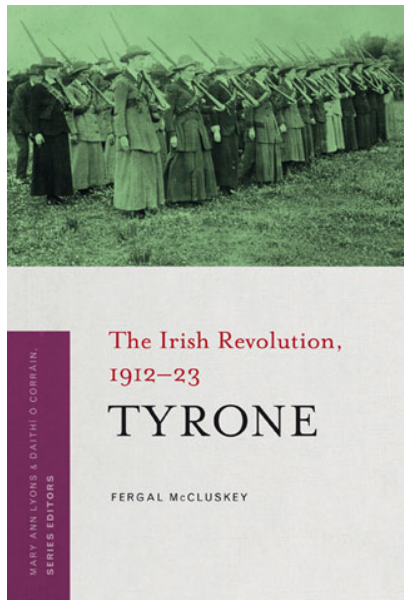


Review: Fergal McCluskey, *The Irish Revolution 1912 - 23: Tyrone*

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Fergal McCluskey, *The Irish Revolution 1912 - 23: Tyrone* 2014 Four Courts Press, Dublin, €17.95

This book gives a study of a critical region in Ireland during the revolutionary years 1917 - 1923. The question of the fate of Tyrone in those years was at the heart of whether Unionism had a future and whether partition could have been avoided. It is refreshing that in his approach to the subject the author writes the history of the county without giving ground to any kind of revisionism. The perspective of McCluskey can be summarised by his conclusion that ‘the partition of Ireland did not rely on the existence of two nations or on fears of religious persecution, but rather on the determination of a Tory political elite, which included the Ulster unionist leaders, to preserve imperial interests.’¹

There are many targets that the material in this book can be used to address. Unionists will dislike the fact that it ex-

poses both the crude settler supremacism of their early twentieth-century champions and their use of sectarian violence for the establishment of the Northern Irish State. Conservative nationalists of the SDLP type will be uncomfortable at the glaring capitulation of their kind of politics to partition. But in this book too, can be found plenty of evidence that even the more radical nationalist Sinn Féin supporter or anti-Treaty IRA member had a political strategy that was inadequate to the challenge of preventing partition.

Because of its immense importance to a future revolution in Ireland, this review will focus on the question of whether partition could have been avoided in the period 1917 - 23. Such a narrow focus is unfair to the broad reach of the book, which encompasses a wider portrayal of the events of the era, but McCluskey, too, is interested in this question and offers plenty of analysis relevant to it.

Ultimately, the question of revolution in Ireland at the time was a question of force. And the problem that nationalists had to face in Tyrone was that Unionists, with the complicit support of the British Empire (and after 1921 their open assistance), had a great deal of force at their disposal. Thus, in a county that contained a majority of Catholics, there was never anywhere near parity of military strength. Starting with the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force and later their incorporation into the A and B Specials, armed loyalists far outnumbered armed nationalists in Tyrone, even at the height of IRA organisation.

¹Fergal McCluskey, *The Irish Revolution 1912 - 23: Tyrone* (Dublin, 2014), p. 134.

By September 1913, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) had about 7,500 members in Tyrone. The local aristocracy and mill owners were the driving force in establishing this sectarian army; during an instruction camp in County Tyrone at Baronscourt and again in Dunganon and Cookstown mill owners gave their (Protestant) employees a week's paid leave to attend.² The creation of the Ulster Special Constabulary (A and B Specials) late in 1920 effectively brought the UVF into the official imperial fold, reorganising them and ensuring they obtained a plentiful supply of arms. By November 1920, the police in the six-county area of Northern Ireland had the assistance of 2,000 full-time paramilitary specials (A Specials) and 19,500 part-time armed reservists (B Specials).

This imperial loyalist force could not be beaten in a straight fight by northern nationalists. In Tyrone at the time of the Truce (July 1921), there were about 15 reasonably active IRA companies in Tyrone, each with about 50 men but with only about six men in each company being armed. Therefore around 100 republicans faced 3,000 heavily armed RIC, A and B Specials in the county.³ And while, under very difficult circumstances, these Volunteers attempted to raid RIC barracks and attack the UVF in ambushes, even successful nationalist military activities were problematic, since they resulted in horrific, indiscriminate reprisals against the Catholic population, especially among the minority community in the unionist dominated parts of the county. The question of defeating the UVF and their paymasters could never be a purely military one: success in doing so and therefore success in avoiding partition was a question

of understanding the social composition of Orangeism and splitting it apart on class lines.

The apparent strength of loyalism in Tyrone as elsewhere was also its weakness. Precisely because the UVF grew from Unionist employers and aristocrats recruiting their Protestant workers and tenants, it was vulnerable to crisis caused by social unrest. While there were periods where the Protestant worker felt that joining the UVF and its Orange Order precursor offered security of employment against Catholic rivals, there were also periods when the tension over the social differences within Unionism boiled over. The crucial point, then as now, was this: a great many Protestant workers and poor tenants may have believed they were better off united with their employers in sectarian organisations, but there would always arise occasions where the reality of exploitation in the workplaces and farms of Northern Ireland would prove them mistaken.

One very harsh lesson for working-class loyalists came with the Great War. For, through the eyes of the War Cabinet on a prize of global dominance, the rank-and-file UVF member was simply cannon fodder for the Empire. And some of them began to realise this. In Tyrone, in 1918, a number of young UVF members contacted the Volunteers in order to unite against conscription. A nationalist run news-sheet in Omagh, *The Conscription News*, had a readership that was 'surprisingly numerous and still more surprisingly heterogeneous.'⁴

The potential to split Unionism on this issue was squandered by the overtly Catholic nature of the anti-Conscription campaign launched in Dublin on 20 April 1918. In a move that was very damaging

²*ibid.* p.27.

³*ibid.* p.99.

⁴*ibid.* p.75.

to the prospect of drawing Unionist workers away from Orangeism, William O'Brien and Thomas Johnson, the leaders of the labour movement, threw their lot in with the pan-Catholic alliance, rather than attempt to spearhead a non-sectarian anti-conscription campaign.⁵ It was a tragedy that James Connolly was dead and Jim Larkin was in Sing Sing Prison at this time; both understood the outlook of Protestant workers and had experienced some success in building non-sectarian labour organisations.

Equally as tragic was the defeat of militant Tyrone trade unionism at this time. Among the various radical strikes of this period was an attempted soviet in 1924, by miners working for Belfast coal magnate, Sir Samuel Kelly.⁶ In the first nine months of 1918, ten major strikes shook Dungannon, Cookstown and Coalisland and another strike took place in the shirt factories of Strabane. In the summer of 1918 there were rural strikes and strikes among the textile workers and council workers of Omagh.⁷ The height of the strike movement in Northern Ireland was the January 1919 engineers' strike centered on Belfast and although it ended with a sense of defeat for the workers, it led to revolutionary socialists having a considerable following among northern working class communities, Protestant and Catholic.⁸

One of the key disputes in Tyrone was that at Fulton's Woolen Mill, Caledon in 1919. Despite the best efforts of socialist organiser, Peadar O'Donnell, who for a while managed to get the Union flags issued by the employer to be replaced by the red flag, the 200 workers failed to break

the resolve of Fulton (an employer closely connected to the main political figures of Unionism) and after a month, Fulton was able to split the workforce and with the assistance of Ulster Workers Union scabs, bring about a return to work on a sectarian basis. He celebrated his victory with a social under the banner 'Caledon's Double Celebration: Overthrow of the Huns and Irish Bolsheviks'.⁹

Irish nationalism, even in its more radical form of Sinn Féin (as opposed to the conservative version espoused by Joe Devlin or the Irish Parliamentary Party) had no interest in promoting class conflict. After all, their goal was (never to be explicitly stated as such) a capitalist Ireland and Irish employers had an instinct that they would need low wages and poor working conditions to compete with the older established nations. Unfortunately, too, the officials of the growing trade union bureaucracy in the south of Ireland proved to be unwilling to champion working class militancy, except when it was unavoidable or could be channeled safely towards Sinn Féin. The strike wave in Tyrone, as elsewhere, scored some victories, but ultimately failed to establish a political alternative to Unionism that could attract and retain significant numbers of Protestant workers. Yet only by doing so, could partition be avoided.

Chris Bambery once argued that socialist criticism of Collins needs to be based on the fact that nationalists should have continued the military struggle curtailed by the Treaty, and that by doing so they could have removed Britain from Ireland completely in 1922.¹⁰ This reduction of

⁵Conor Kostick, *Revolution in Ireland* (Cork, 2009), pp. 36 - 42.

⁶McCluskey, *The Irish Revolution*, p. 85.

⁷*ibid.* p.83.

⁸Kostick, *Revolution in Ireland*, pp. 55 - 73.

⁹McCluskey, *The Irish Revolution*, p. 85.

¹⁰<http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/sr203/bambery.htm>

the Irish revolution to a war between two blocks, one progressive, one reactionary, is mistaken. No one on the nationalist side, pro- or anti-Treaty had any strategy for overcoming the military deficit with the North and - as McCluskey shows - all those involved in the Free State government, including Collins, rapidly abandoned their comrades in the six-counties for the sake of consolidating power in the south. To have waged a revolutionary war against Unionism from 1922 would have meant carrying out a revolution in the south with much deeper social roots than even the most radical anti-Treatyite (e.g. Liam Mellows) was advocating.

A 'stages' solution to Ireland's revolutionary years, whereby first some variant of nationalism conquered all 32 Counties and later the left had their turn was an impossible outcome due to the military balance of forces in favour of Unionism. In some scenarios of twentieth century revolutions in countries where the old regime was particularly weak, e.g. Cuba 1953 - 9, a 'deflected' permanent revolution proved to be possible. In others, say China 1925 - 7, or Spain 1936 - 9, failure to carry through a socialist revolution meant defeat. Northern Ireland c.1922 was closer to the Spanish example than the Cuban. Then major employers with powerful resources and the backing of an empire stood in the way of a united Ireland. Either Unionist influence over Protestant workers was undermined by socialist revolution or partition was inevitable. Even if somehow the full resources of an undivided IRA could have been marshaled in an assault against Unionist strongholds, it is not at all clear they would have had the forces to impose

a united Ireland on the six-counties.

Or to put it another way. Imagine, by some miracle, Connolly survived the Easter Rising. Would he, in 1922, be urging Collins to wage war against the Crown forces in the six-counties? Would he place the Citizen's Army at the disposal of an all-Ireland assault on Unionism? This, at a time when Collins was using the Free State army to smash a crucial Post Office strike and break up the creamery soviets of the Shannon. Surely, Connolly would be urging revolt against the Free State, both to secure the futures of workers in the south and to create the kind of society that would destroy the grip of Unionism over northern workers? Insofar as military action would be needed in such a scenario, most of the impetus for shattering the UVF would come from residents of the six-counties themselves, with the red flag replacing that of the union flag as it briefly did in one of the strongholds of Unionism in 1919.

If the prospect that revolution in 1917-1923 could have been driven by Irish workers sounds unrealistic, that is largely due to the underreported history of the Irish workers' movement of that time. *The Irish Revolution* by Fergal McCluskey is not a work of labour history, but it does give due attention to social conflict. Moreover, by working comprehensively (and densely) through the evolution of all the main political forces of the era without fear of revisionist condemnation, McCluskey has made a very valuable contribution to our understanding of those revolutionary years, both in Tyrone and, indeed, across the whole island.