

# The 1916 Rising: Myth and Reality

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The ruins of O'Connell St (at the time known as Sackville St), Dublin, after the 1916 Easter Rising.

Most nation states develop a 'creation myth' to tie their populations into a deep sense of patriotism. In the US, it is the story of the Boston tea party and how brave figures like the Sons of Liberty awoke the American people to the evil of British taxes. In Serbia, there is the often retold story of the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 where Serbian princes asserted their independence from the Ottoman Empire. The Irish story of 1916, however, has been described as a 'creation myth which does not get any better'.<sup>1</sup> A few hundred brave men and some women are supposed to have marched into the GPO, knowing that they were going to their deaths. Their sacrifice was thought to have awakened the Irish nation from its slumbers and let flow its vital energies. This martyrdom, according to the official narrative, is supposed to have given rise to 'Irish democracy'.

The 1916 mythology is, however, somewhat troublesome. The notion that Enda Kenny owes his position as Taoiseach to republican guerrillas who stormed the GPO is, to put it mildly, deeply unsettling. The political elite is therefore approaching the centenary commemorations of the rising with profoundly ambivalent feelings and not a little trepidation. Privately, some Fine Gael

politicians are in agreement with the pronouncement of their former leader' John Bruton, who denounced the Rising for starting a period of armed struggle that has damaged the Irish psyche to this day. 'If the 1916 leaders had had more patience', he declared, 'a lot of destruction could have been avoided, and I believe we would still have achieved the independence we enjoy today.'<sup>2</sup> The rebels should not have attacked the British army and should have supported the peaceful, moderate tactics of Bruton's hero, John Redmond, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, who, he argued, was on the verge of winning Home Rule for Ireland.

But even while they might privately sympathise with Bruton's view, few Fine Gaelers dare to come out openly because that would vacate a space for 'extremist elements'. The type of denunciation that Bruton made of the 1916 leaders has long been discredited and it is not hard to see why. While attacking the 'violent separatism' of the Rising, he conveniently forgets the far greater shedding of blood during World War 1. Consider for a moment the disparity in the figures for those killed. The rebellion cost the lives of 116 British soldiers, 16 policemen and 318 rebels and civilians. In the Battle of the Somme - which occurred within weeks of the Rising - over 300,000 soldiers from the opposing armies died, including 3,500 Irishmen? Yet nowhere does Bruton assign any responsibility to John Redmond for urging men to enlist in this pointless war. The notion that the constitutional politicians were peaceful individuals and the revolutionaries 'terrorists' is rightly seen as bogus.

Thus, the vast bulk of the political establishment will go through the motions of commemorating the Rising. Their primary strategy will be to build on some past myths and convey the impression that the ideals of the men and women of 1916 are embodied in the success story of the present day Irish

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in M. McCarthy, *Ireland 1916 Rising - Explorations in History Making: Commemoration and Heritage in Modern Times* Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>'Scotland shows 1916 Rising a Mistake, says John Bruton', *Irish Times*, 18 September, 2014.

economy and state. Their first attempt to do this came with the official video, Ireland Inspires 2016 whose message was that that the Rising was 'where we came from' but reconciliation is 'where we are now'. It was so banal and bad that it had to be withdrawn. Then they switched to having the Irish army delivering proclamations to every school. Their objective was to create a narrative of continuity between the present-day army of the state and the 'good old IRA' which came out of the events after the rising. This symbolism is accompanied by the theme that the official Irish state is the best entity to be responsible for the centenary celebrations and is the true inheritor of 1916. This is why it is all the more important for socialists to challenge the myths that will be told about 1916 and commemorate it as a serious anti-imperialist uprising. Naturally, this will also involve showing how the ancestry of the current Irish state lies not in the Rising but rather in the counter-revolution that overturned its original ideals.

### **Myth 1: That the rebels of 1916 changed the course of Irish history purely by their individual actions.**

There can be little doubt about the bravery of the republican and socialist fighters who staged an uprising. But their actions did not simply arise from individual decisions - it grew out of deeper contradictions in the contemporary global imperial order. Without an understanding of those contradictions, it is difficult to understand how the Rising became a turning point in Anglo-Irish relations.

In the two decades before the 1916 rebellion, Ireland appeared as a rock of stability. The Fenian tradition appeared to have been crushed after the abortive uprising of 1867. Progress had been made on a settlement of the Irish land question and new class of small proprietors were expanding, because the massive wealth of the

British Empire was drawn upon to pay off the landlord class. The Irish Parliamentary Party dominated in elections so overwhelmingly that nationalist Ireland was virtually a one party state. Its leader, John Redmond was at the helm of a mass political party of more than 100,000 members, scattered across one thousand branches.<sup>3</sup> Its tentacles stretched into every aspect of society and Redmond, for most of his political life, was known as the 'leader of the Irish race'.<sup>4</sup> Behind the Redmondite political machine stood the muscle men of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, who provided physical defence for priests fighting 'freemasonry, socialism, atheism, proselytism and all other combinations which collectively are doing considerable injury to the church'.<sup>5</sup>

Redmondism sought to create an 'imperial Ireland' - a country where a distinct national and Catholic identity would be subsumed within the wider empire. But the imperialist world had entered a period of crisis and this had dramatic effects on the British ruling class. By the early twentieth century, the leaders of British imperialism had to confront three major issues. The first was the growing military costs of maintaining the empire. This became evident during the Boer War where the British state, in order to suppress the rebellion, had to mobilise 450,000 troops and intern a quarter of the Boer population in concentration camps. The second related difficulty was Britain's economic decline in relation to its main rivals. The ruling class feared the growing economic might of Germany and some, led by the Liberal Party politician and manufacturer, Joseph Chamberlain, started to talk of tariffs to protect British industry. The third concern was how to involve the working class in the political system and defend the elite in an age that was moving towards mass democracy. The Liberals tended to favour a policy of incorporation, to woo the British trade union movement into a Liberal-Labour alliance. The Tories opted for a policy of whipping up of jingoism and chauvin-

<sup>3</sup>R. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988, p. 432.

<sup>4</sup>J. Finnan, *John Redmond and Irish Unity 1912-1918*, New York: Syracuse University, 2004, p. 154.

<sup>5</sup>JJ Bergin, *History of the Ancient Order of Hibernians*, Dublin: Ancient Order of Hibernians, 1910, p.

ism hoping to place the British masses firmly in line behind their betters. These dilemmas of empire gave rise to intense clashes within the British ruling elite.

The divisions provoked a constitutional crisis and the Liberal Party moved against the Tory majority in the House of Lords. In the Parliament Act of 1911, they abolished the ability of the Lords to veto decisions made by the House of Commons. But, far from resolving the elite crisis, this move further intensified the splits within the ruling class. The Tories were determined to take revenge on their Liberal rivals, and when Northern Unionists moved into opposition to Home Rule legislation, the Tories decided to give them full support. This included support for armed resistance against the elected government.

At a mass rally at the Duke of Marlborough's residence at Blenheim in England, the Tory leader, Bonar Law, said:

We regard the Government as a revolutionary committee which has seized power by fraud upon despotic power. In our opposition to them we shall not be guided by considerations... which would influence us in ordinary political struggle... We shall use any means to deprive them of the power they have usurped... I can imagine no length of resistance to which Ulster will go in which I will not be ready to support them.<sup>6</sup>

This rhetoric gave the green light to British army officers to mutiny when they received orders to move against the Ulster Volunteers. Their leader, Brigadier General Gough, added that if it came to a civil war, 'I would fight for Ulster rather than against her.' The mutineers were summoned to London but instead of facing dismissal, they were assured that under 'no circumstances shall we be used to force Home Rule on the Ulster people'.<sup>7</sup>

It was these actions of the Tory wing of the British ruling class, and their encouragement of armed rebellion against their Liberal opponents which became the primary impetus to the creation of an Irish Volunteer movement in October 1913. Those who answered the call were predominantly 'moderate' constitutionalists who believed that they had to redress the balance against Carson's Ulster Volunteers, and not rely on British officers to advance their interests. As Thomas Kettle, a moderate Home Ruler, put it, 'we are not going to rely for our national security upon the whims or fancies of some tall fellow with gold braid down the sides of his breeches'.<sup>8</sup> Patrick Pearse himself should also be included in this category. It was only in 1911 that he began to get politically active, first in support of the Home Rule Bill. He praised Redmond for his achievement in bringing the Bill to the House of Commons and called on other parties to stand behind him in seeking a better bill. In May 1912, he spoke at a Home Rule rally alongside Redmond. He later joined the Volunteer movement.

Redmondism was being undermined, even before the Rising, by the crisis of the empire that its leader had attached himself to. In many ways, Redmond's support for the British Empire in World War I was his last throw of the dice. He had wagered everything on embracing the traditions of British Liberalism but had gained little. The war gave him cover to explain why Home Rule had to be postponed. More crucially, he was able to re-gain support from the intense chauvinist atmosphere that accompanied the outbreak of war. World War 1 was initially marked by an 'August madness' whereby the vast majority were caught up in a feeling that they had entered a 'time of greatness' when a national community could be reborn. Imperial Ireland participated fully in this mood and identified without reserve with the plight of 'poor little Catholic Belgium', which became the rallying cry for the war effort.

However, the initial political advantages

<sup>6</sup>P. Farrell, *Ireland's English Question*, London: Batsford, 1971, p. 249.

<sup>7</sup>P. Walsh, *The Rise and Fall of Imperial Ireland*, p. 273.

<sup>8</sup>The Rise and Fall of Imperial Ireland, p. 295.

that came with supporting the war soon evaporated as its full horrors became known. Undeterred, Redmond intensified his pro-war rhetoric and urged volunteers to go 'wherever the front line stretched' and 'to come together in the trenches and spill their blood together'.<sup>9</sup> In May 1915, the British Liberal government fell and was replaced by a Coalition which included none other than Bonar Law and Edward Carson, the two figures who had fomented armed rebellion to stop Home Rule. The strategy of looking to British Liberals to grant Home Rule by constitutional means was in tatters.

The contradictions of Redmondism were now in full view. It remained only for severe disillusionment with war and a determined Rising to tear down the edifice of Redmondism and Imperial Ireland. Without the wider contradictions within the imperial order which led, firstly, to deep splits within the British ruling class and, secondly, outright war with its German rivals, it is difficult to see how the hegemony of Redmondism could have been overthrown.

## **Myth 2: 1916 was planned as a blood sacrifice to awaken the Irish nation.**

The blood sacrifice myth was originally popularised by an early writer P.S. O'Hegarty who was a former member of the IRB Supreme Council. He claimed that 'the insurrection of 1916 was a forlorn hope and a deliberate blood sacrifice... But they (its leaders) counted on being executed afterwards and knew that that would save Ireland's soul'.<sup>10</sup> O'Hegarty had a particular reason for portraying the rising in these terms. He was an avid supporter of Arthur Griffith and a long-time member of his original Sinn Fein party. While he supported the rising, he adamantly opposed the launching of an IRA guerrilla campaign afterwards. He thought that the rising was necessary to awaken the nation's soul but he regarded the subsequent War of Independence

as 'Frankenstein's monster'.<sup>11</sup> He, therefore, wanted to draw a sharp distinction between the sacrificial and almost saintly conduct of the 1916 leaders and any subsequent unruly revolutionary activity that he feared.

Ironically, a parallel view took hold among republican activists over the generations. They believed that the actions of a few brave guerrillas were the 'cutting edge' which brings about change. Through this lens, mass demonstrations, strikes, occupations are at best a side show or supporting chorus to the main action. The image of 1916 as a blood sacrifice serves, therefore, as a potent narrative because it helped to sustain republican movements through periods of unpopularity. When condemnations mounted after the bombings or military actions during the armed conflict in Northern Ireland, republicans comforted themselves with the thought that the leaders of 1916 had suffered similar opprobrium before finally changing the course of history. No doubt 'dissident' republicans will do the same in the future.

However, almost every element of the blood sacrifice myth can be challenged. Most of those who fought in 1916 did not set out to deliberately die for Ireland. Or, to put it differently, those who fought in 1916 deserve to be honoured as decent human beings who challenged the greatest empire of the day. They were fighters not saintly martyrs.

This is evident in a number of ways. The rising was, firstly, a serious military operation, not a redemption drama. In the words of Piers Brendon, the author of *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire*, it 'blasted the widest breach in the ramparts of the British Empire since Yorktown'.<sup>12</sup> The rising involved approximately 1,300 insurgents, including 152 from the Irish Citizens army, a workers militia formed during the great lock-out of 1913. British intelligence - which had penetrated every other attempt at an uprising - was completely caught off guard. Quite simply, if the main purpose was to enact re-

<sup>9</sup>T. Denman, *Ireland's Unknown Soldiers: The 16th Division* Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1992, p. 87.

<sup>10</sup>P.S. O'Hegarty, *The Victory of Sinn Fein*, Dublin: UCD Press, 1998, p.3.

<sup>11</sup>K. Curtis, *P. S. O'Hegarty (1979-1955) Sinn Fein Fenian*, London: Anthem Press, 2010 p.100.

<sup>12</sup>P. Brendon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire*, London: Vintage, 2008, p.290.

demption, there would have been little point in the detailed military planning that preceded it. The biggest imperial power of the time had to re-deploy about 20,000 troops to suppress the insurrection and was pinned down for almost a week. In its sheer scale, the 1916 rising is more similar to the Zapatista uprising of January 1st 1994 in Mexico or the 'final offensive' of the FMLN guerrillas in El Salvador in 1981. In both these cases, the rebels held out for a few days but failed to launch a general uprising.

Moreover, the events of the 1916 were of a much smaller scale than its leaders had anticipated. Writers who characterise the rising as a blood sacrifice usually do so by plucking out a few quotes from Patrick Pearse's writings as if his literary expressions sum up the intentions of all the rebel leadership. However, they neglect his final bulletin from the GPO which stated:

I am satisfied that we would have accomplished more, that we should have accomplished the task of enthroning, as well as proclaiming the Irish Republic as a Sovereign State, had our arrangements for a simultaneous rising, with a combined plan as sound as the Dublin plan has proved to be, been allowed to go through on Easter Sunday.<sup>13</sup>

Pearse's reference to actually 'enthroning' as well as 'proclaiming' an Irish Republic pointed to far more ambitious plans which the leaders had for the rising. These had been drawn up by Joseph Plunkett, and were detailed in a memorandum written with Roger Casement for presentation to the German government. In these original plans, German arms and troops were to be landed in Ireland. These would be joined by rebels from Kerry, Clare and Limerick who would seize parts of the south west of the country. German U Boats were also to cut off British war ships bringing troop re-enforcements to allow the rebels take on

a weakened garrison. Volunteers from north county Dublin were then to join mobile relief columns from Athlone and come to the assistance of Dublin. The seizure of buildings in the inner city of Dublin must, therefore, be viewed in the context of wider, nationwide plans. It was supposed to be a trap to lure in the British soldiers until they were squeezed between rebel strongholds in the city and the advancing rebel columns coming from the south and west.<sup>14</sup>

These plans came apart for two main reasons. First, the German ship, the *Aud*, was sighted by the British navy off the coast of Cork and had to be scuttled to prevent the capture of its arms. It had been carrying 20,000 rifles and a million rounds of ammunition for the Rising. The second weakness stemmed from the conspiratorial methods of the IRB itself. It had distributed a forged letter designed to bounce the cautious McNeill-Hobson faction into a rising but these plans went astray when McNeill issued a countermanding order instructing volunteers to avoid manoeuvres on Easter Sunday. The confusion caused by the countermanded order meant many Volunteers did not to mobilise for the Rising on Easter Sunday and it then had to be moved to Easter Monday.

Once these mishaps had occurred, the scope for manoeuvre of the IRB Military Council was very limited. They could call off the rising and face the tender mercies of British justice who would eventually become aware of their detailed plans. They knew that instigating a rebellion in war time and co-operating with an enemy power meant certain death. Or they could go ahead even though the odds were stacked against them. James Connolly's statement that we are 'going out to be slaughtered' must be read in this context.<sup>15</sup> It was an acknowledgement by a socialist revolutionary, that as a consequence of his earlier decisions in accepting the IRB method of insurrection, he was joining a rising in unfortunate circumstances.

It certainly does not indicate that Con-

<sup>13</sup>Wall, 'Background to Rising', p. 188.

<sup>14</sup>M.T.Foy and B.Barton, *The Easter Rising*, p 15-19

<sup>15</sup>William O'Brien 'Introduction' in D. Ryan, (ed.) *Labour and Easter Week*, Dublin: Sign of Three candles, 1946, p. 21.

nolly had any thought of conducting a blood sacrifice because he had previously dismissed such talk of blood sacrifice as that of a ‘blithering idiot’. In reference to ideas that the shedding of blood could somehow cleanse a nation, he added ‘we are sick of such teaching and the world is sick of such teaching’.<sup>16</sup> It is also abundantly evident that the vast bulk of the fighters in the rising were not deliberately marching out to die. They were fighting to free their country and thought they stood a chance of doing so. This explains the reluctance of many to surrender as testimony of one Volunteer, Robert Holland, about the attitude of his leader, Con Colbert shows. Colbert, he recounted, said that ‘we must win and said to me that we must come in at the peace negotiations when the war had finished’.

### **Myth 3: The Rising lacked popular support and it was only the executions of the leaders which changed public opinion.**

Hostility to the rebels came mainly from two sources. The wealthier class of people had an instinctive class hatred for ‘the rabble’ and tended to support the Empire. There were also a large number of soldiers’ wives who benefited from separation allowances. In the aftermath of the rising the mainstream press highlighted this combined opposition while those who favoured the rising kept their heads down for fear of arrest. But there is enough evidence to show that the reaction was more mixed.

The Canadian journalist, FA Kenzie, challenged reports that the mass of people supported the British troops, stating ‘what I myself saw in the poorer districts did not confirm this. It rather indicated a vast amount of sympathy with the rebels.’<sup>17</sup> Reports from Volunteers also confirm a varia-

tion in responses. Whereas Michael Mallin’s joint contingent of the Irish Citizen Army and Irish Volunteers met with considerable hostility in the wealthier neighbourhood of Stephen’s Green, the local working class population in Grand Canal Street and Hogan Place gave the volunteers who surrendered an ovation.<sup>18</sup> Thomas McDonagh’s contingent encountered hostility from the ‘separation women’, but Eamonn Ceannt’s group was ‘met with marked enthusiasm by a great crowd of people. All along St Patrick’s we were greeted with great jubilation, particularly in the poorer districts’. Frank Thornton, a rebel who was on the surrender march from Sackville Street to Kilmainham Jail noted that people shouted support and saluted, ‘despite being pushed around’.<sup>19</sup> Another, J. J. Walsh, stated that people cheered, even under the noses of British bayonets, and that ‘it was grand to feel that already the populace was responding to the latest and one of the greatest bids for liberty’.<sup>20</sup>

The reason why there was some sympathy for the rebels was that the actions of the British Empire had undermined constitutional nationalism -even before the execution of the 1916 leaders. The rising was the tipping point in shifting allegiances to republicanism but it was a tipping point precisely because it took place when the British Empire was fighting for its life. As news of the horrors of war began to filter back home and Redmond’s National Volunteer movement began to decline. Police reports often indicated that their membership was ‘merely nominal’ and that ‘activity ceased’.<sup>21</sup> Recruitment to the British army fell off dramatically. In the first year of the war, 75,342 Irishmen enlisted but from August 1915 the numbers dropped to 15,902 a year.<sup>22</sup> While the formal structures of Redmond’s party stood as solid as a glacier, support at the

<sup>16</sup>C. Reeve and A.B. *James Connolly in the United States*, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1978, p. 274.

<sup>17</sup>F.A. McKenzie, *The Irish Rebellion: What Happened and Why*, London: C. Arthur Pearson, 1916, p. 105-6.

<sup>18</sup>Foy and Barton, *The Easter Rising*, p. 88.

<sup>19</sup>Kennedy, *Genesis of the Rising*, p. 103.

<sup>20</sup>*ibid.* p. 103.

<sup>21</sup>B. Mac Giolla Choille, *Intelligence Notes* Dublin: Chief Secretaries Office, 1966, p. 86-90.

<sup>22</sup>P. Callan, ‘Recruiting for the British Army in Ireland during the First World war’ *Irish Sword*, Vol. XV11, 1987, pp. 42-56.

base was melting way. When the funeral of the old Fenian, O'Donovan Rossa occurred in August, the republicans were able to mount a huge display of strength. The British Under-Secretary, Nathan stated that 'I have an uncomfortable feeling that the Nationalists are losing ground to the Sinn Feiners'.<sup>23</sup>

When the threat of conscription appeared, Redmond was then in real trouble. In December, 1915, there was a huge anti-conscription meeting in Dublin and the stage was set for widespread opposition, even a possible insurrection, if it were forced though. Faced with this, the London government retreated. The Irish were exempted from the Conscription Act, passed in January 1916, but few believed that its imposition in Ireland was far off.<sup>24</sup>

All of these issues meant that a storm was brewing for the Irish Parliamentary Party - even before the 1916 Rising. They had pinned their hopes on an alliance with Liberal Party and supported an imperialist war on a vague promise of Home Rule. Yet the British state treated them like lapdogs. This was not lost on the wider population and a shift in the popular mood was now underway. This helps to explain why there was a more mixed reaction to the rising than the traditional stereotype of a brave but isolated rebellion. There is no doubt of the tremendous courage on the part of the Irish Volunteers who dared to take on the might of the British Empire, even though they were badly equipped and with poor weaponry. Yet despite this, the rising cannot be seen as an isolated event. It certainly became the focal point of change - but precisely because change was already underway, silently and on the margins of official power structures. Ironically, John Dillon, one of the leaders of the Redmondite party gave a perceptive summary after the event:

The fact is that since the formation of the Coalition govern-

ment in June 1915, we had been steadily and rather rapidly losing our hold on the people and the rebellion and the negotiations only brought out in an aggravated form what had been beneath the surface for a year.<sup>25</sup>

#### **Myth 4: The 1916 Rising was followed by a War of Independence which 'freed' Ireland.**

Conventional historians do not like to talk about an Irish revolution and as the historian, Peter Hart, pointed out the term 'Irish revolution' is not commonly in general or scholarly use.<sup>26</sup> This omission occurs because mainstream historians are often deeply sceptical about the ability of the mass of people to re-shape their societies and so tend to focus on 'great men' or armed conflicts. John A Murphy's book, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, is a good example. The Irish side consists of a guerrilla army who have 'ambivalent' support from the 'population at large' and are led by the 'indefatigable' Michael Collins, who is Adjutant-General of the Volunteers, the Director of Intelligence and Minister of Finance.<sup>27</sup> There is no mention of strikes, land seizures, soviets or mass boycotts and the mass of people simply play a support role for the great leader. In fictional form, this version of history appears in Neil Jordan's film, *Michael Collins*, where the romantic Collins becomes the hero of the struggle for independence.

The particular forms of struggle that occurred during what is normally termed the 'War of Independence' did not conform to the patterns of other revolutions, but revolutions by their very nature diverge from set patterns. In Russia in 1917, the revolution involved mass strikes, the creation of worker's councils and a final successful insurrection. In Ireland, by contrast, the process was in reverse order. There was, first, an unsuc-

<sup>23</sup>L. O Broin, *Dublin Castle and the 1916 Rising*, Dublin: Helicon, 1966, p. 53.

<sup>24</sup>Kennedy, *Genesis of the Rising* p. 214.

<sup>25</sup>F.S.L. Lyons, *John Dillon: A Biography*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968, p. 403.

<sup>26</sup>P. Hart, 'Definition: Defining the Irish Revolution' in J. Augusteijn, *The Irish Revolution*, Basingstoke; Palgrave 2002, p. 18.

<sup>27</sup>J. A Murphy, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975, p. 20-21.

cessful insurrection in 1916, which was then followed a mass revolt which led to a form of dual power. This, however, mimicked the existing state and did not have a distinct class basis. Nevertheless, for a period, control of society was not in the hands of the elites because masses of people intervened to shape their own destinies. It only became an aborted revolution because no political force emerged which could fuse national and social demands.

The Irish revolution involved, firstly, an intense level of military activity to resist the repressive machinery of the British state. Approximately one hundred thousand people joined the Irish Volunteers in the wake of the conscription crisis in 1918 and a smaller minority engaged directly in military operations. The strategy of the Volunteers - later renamed the IRA - was to uproot the British administration in local areas and so their primary target was the Royal Irish Constabulary, an armed police force.

However, while the IRA inflicted serious damage on the British forces, it could not do so without an active boycott campaign from the mass of people. Early in the conflict, Sinn Fein called for a ban on all social intercourse with the police. This boycott were largely adhered to - and then backed up by military action. RIC Barracks were no longer supplied with turf, butter, eggs or milk and people walked away from church pews if police officers arrived. Stones were thrown and the police were attacked on streets until they were eventually isolated. The combination of boycott and military action led to the creation of liberated zones.

Furthermore, the people also turned their back on the official state institutions. In the general election 1918, they voted to give Sinn Fein 73 out of the 105 seats and the elected members decided to convene Daíl Éireann as a constituent assembly of an independent Ireland. The Daíl then began to formulate laws as if it was the real government of Ireland. One of its first decisions was the establishment of republican courts. Judges - or brehons as they were called after the old Irish term - were to be elected in

each chapel by adult suffrage.<sup>28</sup> Clergymen or magistrates who had resigned from the British system were, however, allowed to become judges, ex-officio. A campaign against the British court system quickly ensued. Litigants for the Crown courts were turned away by republican pickets and prospective jurors were told that attendance would be considered an act of treason to the Irish republic.

The other key element in the revolt against the British government was workers action. On a number of occasions, the sheer strength of the workers movement forced the British government to retreat. The first was the attempt to introduce conscription in April 1918. As soon as it was announced the Irish Trade Union Congress called a special congress and delegates voted for a general strike to occur three days later. The resolution declaring the general strike stated that it was hoped it 'will be a signal to the workers of all countries at war to rise against their oppressors and bring the war to an end.'<sup>29</sup> The strike was a magnificent success as most of the country closed down - the exception being Belfast.

After the victory against conscription, a strike was called by the small but militant Irish Automobile Drivers union against a requirement that all motor vehicles obtain a permit from the military. The next intervention of labour came with the declaration of a soviet in Limerick in April 1919. The immediate cause was the imposition of martial law on the city by the British army.

The Limerick Soviet did not reach the level of similar organs in Russia because it confined itself to the demand for the abolition of martial law. It also had a more limited level of mass participation as it was not based on re-callable delegates from workplaces. But it represented an impressive development in class consciousness as workers took a lead in opposing British repression. The tragedy was that the militancy of Limerick workers was not matched by their union leaders. In the end, the Limerick Soviet ended with a promise that military permits would not be required to the same ex-

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<sup>28</sup>D. Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish Life*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1977, p. 178

<sup>29</sup>ITUC Annual Report 1918 p.38



tent as before.

The next major action by workers was hugely significant. On 5 April 1920, thirty-six prisoners in Mountjoy gaol went on hunger strike because of they had been imprisoned without even being charged. As news of the hunger strike spread, people began to gather outside the jail and, by the end of the week, forty thousand people were at a protest confronting British armoured cars. The ITUC called a general strike and the response was electric. The country ground to halt and a correspondent from the *Manchester Guardian* drew attention to the manner workers councils took control of towns:

It is particularly interesting to note the rise of the Workers Councils in the country towns. The direction of affairs passed during the strike to these councils, which were formed not on a local but class basis. In most cases the police abdicated and the maintenance of order was taken over by the Workers Councils... In fact it is no exaggeration to trace a flavour of proletarian dictatorship about some aspects of the strike.<sup>30</sup>

The next intervention of labour was directly influenced by events connected with the Russia revolution. In May 1920, dockers in London refused to load coal on a munitions ship, the Jolly George, which was taking arms to the White armies which were trying to crush the Russian revolution. This successful boycott inspired Irish trade unionists to ask why the same could not be done for Ireland. Shortly afterwards, Dublin dockers refused to unload two ships, the Anna Dorette Boog and the Polberg. News of the boycott spread and then the railway workers declared that they would refuse to transport any military cargo or armed men. By July, the Commander in Chief of the British army in Ireland, General Macready,

was describing the action 'as a serious setback for military activities during the best season of the year'.<sup>31</sup>

The sheer scale of the struggles for national liberation - which we have only briefly sketched - indicates that a genuine revolutionary process was underway. Yet the official accounts in school history books and many academic studies have largely ignored its significance. Just as slave revolts or the contribution of women to science or art have been 'hidden from history', so too has workers action during the Irish revolution. Among the honourable exceptions are Conor Kostick's marvellous, *Revolution in Ireland* and Emmet O Connor's *Syndicalism in Ireland 1917-23*. The omission of mass action from historical memory is profoundly political. The Southern elite want to pretend that the Irish are a naturally conservative people so that no future attempt will ever be made to shake their rule. Their attitude is encapsulated in statement by Kevin O Higgins, the key figure in the post Treaty counter-revolution, who boasted 'that we are probably the most conservative minded revolutionaries that ever put through a successful revolution'.<sup>32</sup> If by 'we' O Higgins meant the upper class, 'Donnybrook set' who jumped into Sinn Fein, he might right. But of course this 'we' never 'put through any successful revolution' - they did everything they could to restrain and squash it. The actions of the mass of people in backing an armed struggle and taking action themselves testifies to a very unconservative outlook.

### **Myth 5: The Struggle against the British Empire was purely for independence - nothing more.**

The leadership of the republican movement had a strategy of confining the struggle to purely a matter of achieving independence from Britain. There was to be no discussion of what type of Ireland would ensue from the revolution. But the injunction to fight for

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 134-5

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 143

<sup>32</sup> M. Laffan, 'Labour Must Wait: Ireland's Conservative Revolution' in. P.J. Corish, *Radicals, Rebels, and Establishments*, Belfast: Historical Studies, 1985 p. 219.

national liberation first and suspend social issues until later, did not fit with the experience of workers, small farmers or agricultural labourers. As a general rule, once people enter a political process, they tend not to confine themselves to distinct stages. As they mobilised for national independence, the poor saw an opportunity to gain land or better wages or conditions. In brief, there was a tendency for the national revolt to spill over into social questions.

In post war Europe after 1918, there was also a ready-made language of radicalism which could give expression to demands of the poor. The Russian Revolution had shown that it was possible to re-fashion society in the interests of workers and peasants and the lesson was not lost on Irish workers. On 4 February 1918, 10,000 people attended a rally in Dublin and passed a resolution to 'hail with delight the advent of the Russian Bolshevik revolution'.<sup>33</sup> As a result, the word 'soviet' - a Russian term for workers councils - came to be used in a number of workers' struggles that coincided with the fight against the British Empire, most notably in the designation 'the Limerick soviet'. In an age when mass communications were far more limited than today, the spread of this term was significant. A Sinn Fein commentator, Aodh de Blacam, wrote that 'never was Ireland more devoutly Catholic than to-day... yet nowhere was the Bolshevik revolution more sympathetically saluted'.<sup>34</sup> The language of the Russian Revolution was often combined with Connolly's rhetoric about a 'workers republic' to express an aspiration for a different Ireland.

There was, first, a demand for land redistribution, principally in Connaught. Although these land conflicts are often ignored in subsequent standard accounts of the War of Independence, contemporary observers were very aware of their relevance. The *Irish Times* told of how its wealthier readers were experiencing sleepless nights as the spectre of 'agrarian bolshevism' swept the land.

Despite its own strategy, the IRA was drawn into these struggles. This sometimes happened because local units wanted to use the land agitation in an instrumental way. Others, probably the poorer elements within the IRA, were more sincere and, under the guise of attacking 'anti-national landlords', supported the seizure of land. Eventually, however, the strategic emphasis of republicanism on national unity overrode these instinctive sympathies and the Sinn Fein arbitration courts became the means by which land agitation was quelled. Art O'Connor, Minister for Agriculture in the republican Daíl, attacked land seizures as 'a grave menace to the Republic' adding that 'the mind of the people was being diverted from the struggle for freedom by the class war'.<sup>35</sup>

Republican police moved against the land agitators to stop any breaches in national unity. This brought them into confrontation with poorer farmers and landless labourers. Sean Moylan, a senior IRA officer and subsequently a Fianna Fáil Minister, later explained how republicans responded:

I know what the IRA were doing in 1920-21, they were engaged in an unselfish struggle for the freedom of this country... I remember very well a discussion by the IRA headquarters officers on the question of cleaning up the cattle drivers in County Mayo - and they were cleaned up by the IRA and by the County Mayo IRA.<sup>36</sup>

As the IRA cracked down on seizures, the big landowners began to look to the republican courts for protection rather than the British courts. But this also meant there was a marked decline in enthusiasm for the national struggle in parts of Connaught that had been most hit by land hunger. When the IRA took up the policeman's baton to protect the big farmers, there were many who asked was the Republic really worth fighting for.

<sup>33</sup>E. O'Connor, *Reds and Greens*, Dublin: UCD Press, 2004 p.15

<sup>34</sup>A. De Blacam, *What Sinn Fein Stands For*, Dublin: Talbot Mellifont Press, 1920, pp. 105-6.

<sup>35</sup>Bew 'Sinn Fein, Agrarian Radicalism and War of Independence' p. 232.

<sup>36</sup>*ibid.*

The second flashpoint was the extraordinary struggles launched by landless labourers. These were generally organised by the Irish Transport and General Workers Union and mainly focussed on a demand for higher wages. Sometimes, however, they also spilled over into demand for land redistribution. The ITGWU won its reputation as a fighting organisation among the landless labourers when it began to organise militant countrywide strikes. These often involved sabotage on big farms, disruption of markets and the deployment of armed pickets with clubs to prevent the movement of goods.

The leadership of the republican movement made little effort to tie the issue of landlordism to the British Empire because they saw these issues as separate. Landlordism and the aspirations of the landless were to be dealt with at a later stage after independence had been won. As the writer Sean O’Faolain explained, ‘The policy of Sinn Fein has always been, since its foundation, that simple formula: Freedom first, other things afterwards.’<sup>37</sup> They, therefore, simply referred these disputes to conciliation councils founded by the Daíl or, in at last one case, intervened to stop blockades of big farmers.

The third pattern was workers’ struggles for higher pay and shorter hours and then later, after 1920, resistance to wage cuts. The manner in which national and social aspirations fused together during Irish revolution was evident in a huge growth in union organisation. In 1916 there were 100,000 unionised workers in Ireland but by 1922, this had grown to 225,000. Inside the union movement there was also a strong militant syndicalist influence - this was the idea that there needed to be one big union that would become strong enough to lock out the employer class and bring about a new society for workers. As the numbers of unionised workers grew, so too did the depth and quality of organisation. Trades Councils - which brought together different workers- were often re-named as ‘workers councils’ and they co-ordinated strike action on city or town

wide basis. After 1918, there was a big push for higher wages and this was often fought for by local general strikes. The town of Charleville, for example, saw five local general strikes between 1918 and August 1923 while Dungarvan had eleven.

Emmet O’Connor sums up the mood:

There is no denying the extraordinary class triumphalism that gripped the people. Red banners, Mayday rallies, workers aeraiochtai, (festivals) soviets, and the mosquito press are merely the archival remains of a spirit that once electrified vast sections of the labour movement. ... This counter politics stood for the rejection of capitalism, and the celebration of solidarity, spontaneity, and direct action.<sup>38</sup>

### **Myth 6: The Irish state is the inheritor of the Rising and of the subsequent revolution.**

The failure of the republican leadership to grasp the significance of the social struggles and to adopt a strategy of combining national and social demands meant that they became more vulnerable to a British counter strategy. This involved three elements. First, after General MacCready was appointed the overall Commander in Chief in Ireland the British unleashed a campaign of terror to restore the morale of their own forces. Death squads, collective punishments, reprisals, burnings of towns were all used to cow the population. Second, they moved rapidly to partition Ireland and give support to loyalist armed forces in Ulster. Third, even while stepping up its military repression and colluding with sectarian forces in the North, the British government started sending out feelers to the republican leadership and eventually offered a truce on 11 July 1921. This was followed eighteen weeks later by the Anglo-Irish Treaty which was signed on 6 December and granted a limited

<sup>37</sup>H. Patterson. *The Politics of Illusion: Republicanism and Socialism in Modern Ireland*, London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989 p.12

<sup>38</sup>O’Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland*, p. 45-6

degree of independence to the 26 counties but it also entailed partition.

Support for the Treaty came primarily from Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins who in their different ways represented the main strands of counter-revolutionary thought that would later prevail in Ireland. Griffith had always advocated 'dual monarchy' and so had little difficulty with the oath. His concern was to build up Irish capitalism and he wanted both a connection with the British Empire and a degree of independence to support its growth.

Michael Collins typified the military wing of Irish republicanism. His ideas on the type of post-independence Ireland were very vague, combining a desire for more co-operatives with distaste for socialism and strikes.<sup>39</sup> He had no time for land agitation or workers occupations. He saw the Irish revolution as a purely military affair, with himself as its leader and his support for the treaty was conditioned by that perception. Collins's exclusive focus on the military side meant that, ironically, the former gunman became the most enthusiastic advocate for a settlement. It was a path trodden by other IRA leaders afterwards.

The prosperous elements in Irish society and the Catholic hierarchy immediately backed the Treaty. As soon as news of it became public, six Catholic prelates issued a statement supporting it, with one Bishop claiming that 'the men who made the treaty would be immortal.'<sup>40</sup> The debate within republican ranks about the Treaty was often conducted at the level of symbols and oaths. Yet behind the symbols, there was an important point at issue. The anti-Treatyites sensed their former comrades were accepting a dependency relationship with their imperial foes. Although they articulated their opposition with reference to a mythical, abstract republic, they were not entirely wrong. Griffith and Collins' endorsement of the Treaty did in fact lead into a greater entanglement with their former imperial mas-

ters. This became abundantly clear when they agreed to work closely with the British to crush their former republican comrades. They claimed that they were merely restoring law and order but it was an order where the poor knew their place and where there would be no more talk of land re-distribution or better conditions for workers. With the first shot of the Civil War, the Irish counter-revolution had begun.

At 4.15 am on the night of June 27, 1922 the Irish Civil War started. Anti-Treatyite forces had previously occupied the Four Courts and the pro-Treatyite Free State leaders began talks with the British military authorities about supplying artillery to dislodge them. It was only after two eighteen pounder field guns were supplied by the British army that the attack on the Four Courts began. After the republicans were removed Churchill wrote back to Collins, 'If I refrain from congratulation, it is only because I do not wish to embarrass you. The archives of the Four Courts may be scattered but the title deeds of Ireland are safe.'<sup>41</sup>

The Provisional Government prosecuted the Civil War with an extraordinary ferocity because they wanted to finish it as rapidly as possible lest the British be tempted to get involved.<sup>42</sup> They launched a huge recruitment campaign to their army with money no obstacle as they were effectively bankrolled by the British state. At the start of the Civil War, they had 8,000 troops but by November this had grown to 30,000 and by the end of the ten month war they had 50,000 soldiers. This gave the Provisional Government overwhelming superiority over their republican opponents who had an estimated 13,000 soldiers. The new recruits to the National Army were not particularly motivated by any political ideals but were often attracted by the prospect of pay and excitement.

After fighting for independence, the population was tired of war and dreaded a return to armed conflict yet the leaders of the republican forces offered nothing but

<sup>39</sup>P. Hart, *Mick: The Real Michael Collins*, London: Macmillan, 2005, pp. 358-9.

<sup>40</sup>G.G. Corone, *The Catholic Church in the Irish Civil War*, Madrid: Cultiva Comunicacion, 2009, p.22-3.

<sup>41</sup>Hopkinson, *Green against Green* p. 126.

<sup>42</sup>J. M. Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution 1921-1936*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2001, p.72.

a purely military strategy. They ignored the continuing social discontent and conducted the fight as if it were simply about the niceties of constitutional arrangements. They presented themselves as living for a higher moral ideal and saw no link between rejecting the Treaty and improving the lives of the poor. Liam Mellows summed up this attitude:

We do not seek to make this country a materially great country at the expense of its honour. We would rather have the country poor and indigent, we would rather have the people of Ireland eking out a poor existence on the soil, so long as they possessed their souls, their minds and their honour.<sup>43</sup>

Mellows would later move away from this absurd attitude but between the signing of the Treaty and the start of the Civil War, the republicans continued with the old policy of suppressing or regulating social conflict through republican courts. This meant that the republicans fought on a purely military basis against far superior forces.

During the course of the Civil War, the Provisional Government transformed itself into a brutal, authoritarian regime which brushed aside all considerations of human rights and inflicted terror on their opponents. It introduced emergency legislation to set up military courts. These were given powers to impose a death penalty on anyone who took up arms against the state. It decreed that for every republican outrage, three republicans would be executed. Seventy seven republicans were eventually executed - more than three times the number of IRA volunteers executed by the British before the truce.

The Provisional Government also used death squads to eliminate their opponents. A Criminal Investigation Unit, headed by Joseph McGrath abducted and killed over twenty anti-Treatyite volunteers in Dublin

while in other areas, most notably in Sligo, prisoners were murdered after capture. Kerry saw the worst of the brutality and in a horrific incident in Ballyseedy, nine republicans were tied to a landmine that was then detonated. This act was a reprisal for the killing for five Free State soldiers in a nearby village but more revenge was to follow. Of the thirty two anti-Treatyites killed in Kerry in March 1923, only five died in combat. The Civil War was an extremely brutal and bloody affair and both sides engaged in horrific killings. The republicans thought they could win by fighting hardest but they were no match in the terror stakes for the state forces.

The victory of the Free State forces heralded a counter-revolution where the ideals of the Irish revolution were destroyed. The formal leader of the victorious Free State regime was William Cosgrave, an old associate of Griffith and a member of the dual monarchist Sinn Fein from its early inception. The key figure, however, who embodied the counter-revolution was Kevin O'Higgins. He belonged to the Catholic upper professional class and detested the 'anarchy' of the revolutionary period. O'Higgins had attended the elite private school in Clongowes Wood College. The speaker of the Free State Daíl, Michael Hayes, who was certainly no radical, had the measure of him when he said, 'he didn't understand... what the whole struggle had been about. He reduced it to the notion of the Irish people getting a parliament.'<sup>44</sup>

O'Higgins saw the period of revolution as one where the moral fabric of society was torn apart and was determined to re-mend it. He despised the 'attitude of protest, the attitude of negation, the attitude sometimes of sheer wantonness and waywardness and destructiveness which... has been to a large extent a traditional attitude on behalf of the Irish people.'<sup>45</sup> He was determined to cure the patient and establish respect for 'the rule of law.' To do so, he surrounded himself in the cabinet with ex-Clongowes boys and

<sup>43</sup>Costello, *The Irish Revolution and its aftermath*, p. 294.

<sup>44</sup>Regan, *The Irish Counter Revolution* p. 87.

<sup>45</sup>J. Knirck. *After image of the revolution: Cumann na nGaedheal and Irish Politics, 1922-1932* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014, p. 43.

members of the Catholic upper professional class, who barely concealed their contempt for a lawless but land hungry peasantry. By 1926, there were more ex-Clongowes boys in the cabinet than veterans of the 1916 Rising.

All of the prejudices of the Catholic upper professional class came into view. These had enjoyed the privileges of working within the structures of the Empire but now wanted to replicate these same institutions in their own state. Many were sympathetic to the ideas of Arthur Griffith and had no difficulty with the concept of empire - they only wanted their own share of it. O'Higgins summed this attitude up during the Treaty debate when he openly acknowledged that the treaty left Ireland bound to the Empire. 'Yes, if we go into the Empire, we go in, not sliding in, attempting to throw dust in your people's eyes, but we go in with our heads up.'<sup>46</sup> Not surprisingly, therefore, this social class sought to restore the same type of order they had learnt to admire under the Empire - only this time with an Irish flag.

This involved a re-structuring of the state apparatus so that the vestiges of the revolutionary period were removed. All the elements of the counter-state that had been created during the War of Independence were to be replaced with more straight forward versions of the British model. In 1922, O' Higgins moved against the republican courts after they had granted a habeas corpus for republican internees. Two years later, after the republican courts were abolished, he introduced a Courts of Justice Bill on the British model. Judges were no longer elected but were instead appointed from the same class that O'Higgins hailed from. They even adopted the wigs and pomp of the British system. The civil service machinery of the Empire was also re-furbished and its existing structures were simply taken over, with the addition of just over a hundred Daíl servants and others who had been dismissed by the British government. To ward off the danger of dissidents using the local government system - as the republicans had previ-

ously done during the War of Independence - a highly centralised government structure was created. Local government acts were passed to allow Ministers to dissolve local authorities and replace them with commissioners. Inside the apparatus of the central state, the Department of Finance was given a crucial role and all legislation being submitted to the Daíl had to be scrutinised by it in advance. As the Department of Finance's central mission was to maintain 'balanced budgets', a conservative bias was built into the Free State from the very start.

Although it was faced with a major crisis of unemployment, the new Cumann na nGaedheal government believed that the state could do little to provide jobs. Instead Patrick McGilligan, the Minister of Industry and Commerce, put its philosophy bluntly, when he stated that 'It is not the function of the Daíl to provide work and the sooner this is realised the better... people may have to die in this country of starvation'.<sup>47</sup> He was only expressing the core attitude that lay at the heart of the counter-revolutionary state - it backed business and big farmers but no social rights.

The victorious post-Treaty state was also deeply hostile to any form of militant trade unionism - particularly if it came from its own direct employees. O'Higgins boldly declared, 'No State, with any regard for its own safety, can admit the right of the servants of the Executive to withdraw their labour at pleasure. They have the right to resign; they have no right to strike'.<sup>48</sup> He made this statement when postal workers struck in 1922 over a pay cut and he included them in the category of civil servants who had no right to strike. Soon after the strike began, strikers were shot at by the National Army, pickets were beaten up and preparations were made to employ ex-postal workers to break the strike. The Free State government was determined to defeat them because as J.J.Walsh, the postmaster general later recalled, 'at this critical juncture to smash such a well organised strike was a salutary

<sup>46</sup>Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution*, p. 84

<sup>47</sup>J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985*, Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 127.

<sup>48</sup>Daíl Debates, Vol. 1 No. 2, 11 September 1922

<sup>49</sup>J.J. Walsh, *Recollections of a Rebel*, Tralee: Kerryman Ltd, 1944, p. 63.

lesson to...general indiscipline.’<sup>49</sup>

There was also plenty of ‘indiscipline’ on the land that the Free State was determined to crush. Small farmers continued to demand not only land redistribution but sometimes had ceased paying rent or annuities to landlords. The Free State’s answer was the Enforcement of Law (Occasional Powers) Act of 1924 to give greater powers to bailiffs. These could immediately seize property from recalcitrant farmers, sell them off within twenty four hours and charge the cost of their seizure to the victims. A special mobile unit of the Irish army was also established to capture cattle that had been ‘driven’ from big estates. ‘The bailiff, as a factor in our civilisation, has not been particularly active or effective in recent years’, O’ Higgins declared and he intended to fix that.<sup>50</sup>

The Free State, however, offered its population one compensation for the dashed hopes of the revolutionary years - a strict Catholic morality. Despite their own self-image as cosmopolitans who disdained the crudities of the Gaelic revival, the Free State elite were the first to forge a tight bond with the bishops. They saw them as agents for control and rewarded their loyalty to the state with measures to enforce a Catholic fundamentalist ethos. The Free State completely banned divorce by closing off all loopholes and imposed strict censorship on films, including even the posters used for advertising those films. It targeted unmarried mothers and created a framework for punishing those who were ‘recidivists’. It established a Committee on Evil Literature in 1926 to identify publications that were deemed offensive on sexual matters. It adopted a particularly vindictive attitude to women who sought to be politically active outside the home or simply more engaged in the wider society. In 1927, O’Higgins introduced his Juries Bill that excluded women from jury service and brought about a return to the pre-revolutionary practice.

Contemporary Irish politicians of all hues claim an allegiance to the 1916 Rising and, with a certain nervousness, suggest that the Irish state owes a gratitude

to those ‘who gave their life in 1916’. However, the current Irish state is not a product of the Rising - it owes its existence to the counter-revolution of 1923. That state established clear structures that survived for decades -even after it was modified by subsequent Fianna Fail governments. It was an authoritarian state that kept a battery of repressive legislation at the ready for dealing with dissidents. It was a highly centralised state which left little room for local democracy. Free market conservatism was built into its apparatus from the very start and ‘fiscal rectitude’ and ‘balanced budgets’ became its catch cries to ward off claims for social rights. The top civil servants, who controlled the Department of Finance, had an inordinate influence and restricted any legislation that would help develop a welfare state. The demands of labour were regarded with suspicion - unless its union leaders could be co-opted into the national project of building up Irish business. The central project of this state was promoting Griffith’s notion of a Gaelic Manchester and, as a result, corruption was inscribed into it from the very start. Irish capitalism was puny and weak and needed a helping hand from state funds. So the borderline between private business and farming interests was never tightly drawn. Covering it all up was a sanctimonious Catholic morality that repressed sexuality and denied women an active role in the wider society. This morality was, in fact, the spiritual anti-depressant offered to the population to encourage them to accept their lot.

Although the population has moved away from Catholic fundamentalism, the structures of the counter-revolutionary state that grew out of the civil war remain intact. The current Irish state, therefore, has little in common with those who staged an uprising in 1916. It is plugged into the global imperial order as a minor player and has absolutely no intention of cherishing ‘all the children of the nation equally’. A new massive popular uprising will be required to establish even this limited ideal. That should be the real lesson of the centenary.

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<sup>50</sup>Knirck, *Afterimage of the Irish Revolution*, p. 67.