

The Republic: The Fight for Irish Independence, 1918-1923

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The 20th century saw the triumph of the nation-state. It is hard to imagine it ever having passed by without Ireland, which Britain never succeeded in assimilating, joining the ranks of sovereign nations. But the manner in which she won self-determination was not preordained. Ireland fought the British crown under the banner not just of the nation, but of the republic. That this was no mere semantic distinction is perhaps the central lesson of Charles Townshend's splendid book.

Historians are only now working through the voluminous insurgent service memoirs from the Irish war of independence and civil war, formerly confidential, which have recently been made available to researchers. Townshend has pre-empted his peers by seamlessly integrating them into a fascinating survey of the Irish revolution. That he does so with witty panache and unflagging acuity means that *The Republic* will stand as a classic in the years to come.

Independence for Ireland was always likely. Townshend quotes the opinion of Michael Davitt, a popular leader of the late 19th century, that 'millions of Irishmen were ... separatists in conviction and aspiration' (p. xiii). This was unquestionably so. Though the stated political demand of nationalist Ireland before 1914 was for Home Rule, no-one sang maudlin songs around the hearth pining for provincial autonomy within the United Kingdom. The unofficial anthem of the Home Rule movement was 'God Save Ireland', a memorialisation of Fenian separatists hanged by British justice. When it was displaced after 1916 by the 'Soldiers' Song', this was indicative not so much of a new final goal as a sterner militancy in its pursuit.

The attraction of Home Rule was strategic rather than principled. Ultimately, it was hoped, a British government could be brought to concede such a moderate measure, and that Irish Unionists could be brought to acquiesce in it. But these calculations went awry. In 1914 the British Government finally legislated for Home Rule. But it simultaneously made clear that Protestant Ulster, which steadfastly refused conciliation, would not be forced to go under a Dublin parliament. The constitutionalist compromise, it turned out, came with the price-tag of partition. Worse still, with the outbreak of the Great War, Home Rule within the United Kingdom now seemed a standing peril to Irish life and prosperity, for who knew how long the wars of British global succession would continue?

At first the Irish parliamentary party lent support to the imperial war effort. A group of Republican irreconcilables were horrified by this cementing of the British-Irish link in blood, and in 1916 they rose in rebellion. At best, they hoped to stand with a victorious Germany in a post-war settlement; at worst they believed that even a failed assertion in arms of Ireland's national claims would counter the blood-sacrifice of the trenches.

The 1916 Rising was a failure, but while most Catholic Irish believed the rebels to have been deluded, they also considered them chivalrous and undeserving of the criminal status accorded them by the British Government, who executed sixteen leaders and interned thousands. The Irish Volunteers, a nationalist militia, was reconstituted and enjoyed its greatest ever appeal in 1917–18. A young man who declined to join the army in Great Britain was liable to be 'white feathered': branded a coward and deprived of feminine amours. In Ireland, one could enjoy camaraderie and demonstrate manly patriotism without having to hazard one's life against the Germans simply by joining the Volunteers and identifying with the heroes of 1916. Nationalist principle and prosaic self-preservation combined to the advantage of separatist radicals.

Both Britain and Ireland anticipated that the planned introduction of conscription in Ireland would be tantamount to a virtual declaration of war. Lord French, the British supremo, pondered the feasibility of using aircraft to harry the Irish into the recruitment centres. Irish nationalists flocked to Sinn Féin, who stood against conscription, for separatism and, a little ambiguously, championed the republic.

In the post-war general election held in December 1918, Sinn Féin sucked up nationalist support, securing every constituency outside Ulster but four. The cultural nationalism espoused by Sinn Féin took little account of the traditions of the Protestant community who traced their lineage from British roots. Michael Collins stated that the 'extent to which we become free ... will be the extent to which we become Gaels again'. Most Protestant families, as far as they were concerned, had never been Gaels to begin with. But Catholic Ireland, including its growing labour and women's movements, stood by Sinn Féin.

Sinn Féin MPs proceeded to meet in Dublin as the self-constituted Irish parliament, Dáil Éireann. On 21 January 1919 it declared an independent Irish republic to be in existence, though it was dated from the rebellion of Easter 1916. Democracy, this implied, only ratified an indefeasible right to national sovereignty defended through thick and thin by a self-selected elite.

The Dáil hoped to present Irish independence as a mandated fact to the victors of the Great War. This foundered on the rocks of international realpolitik. Nonetheless, a parallel government – including ministries, a national loan and 'republican courts' – began to function. The Irish Volunteers considered themselves to be the army of the republic, and they became widely known as the Irish Republican Army. Their primary loyalty was to the ideal of the republic, and the elected Dáil only took full responsibility for their actions in 1921.

With the end of the World War and the threat of conscription, volunteer ranks had thinned out. The cadre left behind were by definition the best motivated and determined. Hardened militants went on the run and an underground developed. This was a molecular process rather than a sudden phase-shift. The Volunteer *Bulletin* itself recalled that 'eighteen months ago the Irish Volunteers were a volunteer reserve rather than an army in the field. But when a price was placed on the heads of its more active members, these men went into

permanent active service, determined to defend their liberty with their lives' (p. 299). Of course, these militants now had an occupation security-apparatus to confront and a democratically elected government to defend. The IRA's war was consistently depicted as defensive in its own, very effective, propaganda.

Townshend rightly highlights the first and perhaps most important stage of the IRA's campaign: the systematic defamation, boycotting, and isolation of the native and predominantly Catholic police force, the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC). The RIC were the mainstay of imperial rule in Ireland, and their re-definition as legitimate targets was crucial to any sustained insurgency. A cycle of republican provocation and crown force reaction set in. Éamon de Valera, president both of Sinn Féin and Dáil Éireann, said in 1917: 'England pretends that it is not by the naked sword, but by the good will of the people of Ireland that she is here. We will draw the naked sword to make her bare her naked sword'. This indeed was the historic function of the IRA military campaign.

Slowly collisions between the two rivals for governmental authority escalated. An editorial in the IRA weekly paper, *An t'Oglach*, on 31 January 1919 declared that a state of war existed, but episodes of armed action were sporadic at first. The first major and co-ordinated IRA action was on 4 April 1920, the anniversary of the 1916 rebellion, when incendiary raids destroyed income tax offices and 315 (evacuated) RIC barracks.

The IRA conducted a guerrilla campaign that was highly localised but with important organisational and intelligence direction from the Dublin centre. Because the IRA consciously organised itself as a hard-headed army, Townshend is able to make excellent use of its numerous field reports. These frankly evaluated actions without bluster, both successes and failures. If anything, Townshend seems to find more delusion and puffery in British records.

Britain tried to treat the crisis as merely an escalation of political criminality. The predominant mood of Dublin Castle, the centre of British administration, was one of bewildered frustration with the incorrigible Irish. 'I almost begin to believe that these mean, dishonest, insufferably conceited Irishmen *are* an inferior race and are only sufferable when they are whipped - like the Jews', the normally unflappable official, Mark Sturgis, confided to his diary. By the summer of 1920, Britain had reinforced the RIC with levies of demobilised British soldiers: the notorious 'Black and Tans' and 'Auxiliaries'. Though rarely matching the brutality of the German Freikorps there's little doubt that they operated by intimidation. British officers reported with satisfaction that after 'reprisals' against civilians, locals would once again tip their hats and duck their heads as soldiers passed. Prime Minister Lloyd George positively welcomed extra-legal assassinations of IRA volunteers by crown forces. King George V, to his credit, was much more disturbed by reprisals than were any of his ministers.

The Catholic Church never backed the IRA's campaign: its doctrine of Just War could hardly allow it. But by characterising British rule as collapsed into lawlessness, the hierarchy were able to argue for a restoration of legitimate government on the basis of consensus. Given the overwhelming mandate that Sinn Féin had won in 1918, consensus could only be on its terms. To hostile observers, this looked like typical Roman Catholic sophistry, but it was realistic.

Led by Tom Barry, a 'flying column' of IRA men permanently on the run ambushed elite Auxiliary forces at Kilmichael, County Cork, in November 1920, killing 17. Since Peter Hart's brilliant if controversially iconoclastic study of 1999, a storm has raged over the credibility of Barry's claim that he ordered no-quarter only after auxiliaries had used the cover of a false surrender to shoot down members of the flying column. Townshend sensibly declares the extant evidence to be indeterminate, whilst pointing out that IRA willingness to risk deliberately sparing enemies was more likely the exception than the rule. As Britain did not recognise the codes of war as applying captured IRA volunteers were liable to be hanged even if they escaped battle-field execution. Dan Breen, another IRA militant, recalled that there was not much incentive to leave enemy witnesses.

In the orchestrated shooting of suspected British agents in Dublin on Bloody Sunday of November 1920,

there was certainly no question of taking prisoners. But any nationalist revulsion at IRA ruthlessness was immediately effaced by the crown forces' reaction on the same day, firing into civilians at Croke Park sports ground. The IRA also used exemplary executions to deter civilian informers. Research has failed to prove that many thus targeted were actually spies, though the IRA's counter-intelligence capabilities seem to have been sufficiently robust to suggest that they were not always victimising outsiders entirely innocent of charge.

By 1921, there was in south west Ireland what the British defined as the Martial Law Zone and the IRA called the War Zone. In March 1921, the IRA stormed and destroyed Rosscarbery police barrack in Cork, which cleared a 270-square mile district of the war zone of permanent crown garrison. De Valera, who spent much of the conflict in America seeking support and funds, pressed the IRA command – notably Richard Mulcahy and Michael Collins – to risk prioritising large-scale engagements over small-group operations and assassinations. De Valera no doubt had a poor grasp of what was militarily practicable, but his political instincts were sound. Clear-cut acts of war did most to undermine British pretensions that it was simply maintaining law and order against 'murder gangs'. In May 1921, in a very substantial coordinated IRA action, a key administrative centre for the Government, the Customs House in Dublin, was rushed and its records torched (dozens of IRA volunteers, however, were captured).

Britain finally accepted that negotiations with Irish republicans were inescapable. Having spent years shedding blood to defeat Prussian militarism and the frightful Hun, the brutishness of British rule in Ireland was an acute embarrassment. The IRA, unquestionably, had given substance to the republic's claims of de jure authority. Perhaps even more importantly, with the recent establishment of unionist-controlled Northern Ireland, partition was now a fait accompli. Britain was saved from having either to coerce the north into accepting Dublin rule, or fighting a war against the Irish majority to dismember their nation.

A truce was agreed in July 1921. The IRA flooded into public spaces, presenting itself as the legitimate army of the republic. There was not the wholesale retribution against loyalists one might have expected. But the fact that IRA commandants felt the need to post guards at the homes of Protestants in some areas is evidence enough that the 'national minority' had real reason to feel fear. Some loyalists were indeed murdered, and a great many more readied to emigrate.

Negotiations for a settlement took place in London. The Irish knew they had to compromise, and the biggest obstacle proved to be British intransigence over symbols. Britain insisted, with a self-righteousness now hard to respect, that imperial prestige demanded formal Irish obeisance to the crown. Few episodes of British rule in modern Ireland do it less credit than its manner of taking leave.

Lloyd George led the British negotiators, but de Valera remained in Ireland. Probably de Valera was keeping his personal intervention in reserve, the better to reassure IRA fighters that his Dáil government had gone to the wire and taken every risk to get as close to the republic as possible. Taking advantage, and unabashedly wielding the threat of all-out war, Lloyd George pressed the Irish negotiating team to sign a treaty on 6 December, without referring back to Dublin. Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith, the dominant Irish negotiators, agreed because they believed no significant improvements could be secured, and they saw no reason to hand de Valera credit for cutting a deal.

The Irish negotiators had conceded the republic in the hope that they could secure at least the prospect of a united Ireland. Lloyd George convinced them that he too was willing to secure an end to partition so long as Ireland remained under the crown. He was convincing in this because he was in earnest, even if he declined to coerce the Ulster Unionists. In effect, the Irish accepted a dominion-status Free State in return for Britain's benevolent interest in the end of partition, an interest which, as it happened, did not out-last the fall of Lloyd George's coalition government in 1922.

The treaty presented an excruciating dilemma for republicans. The Free State's leaders were required to swear an oath of fealty to the British monarch. It was one thing to admit the limit to force of arms. It was another thing to abandon history and principle by willingly deferring to a paternal British monarchy. For

Liam Lynch, it would mean that ‘for the first time in our history the people would have, by their own deliberate act, accepted foreign domination’ (p. 369).

Since the treaty, the IRA had occupied barracks as British forces evacuated and the RIC stood down. Now they had three options: they could hold the barracks as republican bulwarks against the will of the pro-treaty electorate, convert themselves into the army of His Majesty’s Free State, or simply de-mobilise. De Valera, who opposed the Treaty, agonised over this impossible choice ‘between a heart-breaking surrender’ of the republic, and repudiation of ‘the keystone of democracy – majority rule’ (p. 438). It was enough to precipitate a temporary nervous collapse in de Valera himself. Probably most IRA volunteers simply dropped out of service.

Michael Collins tried to rally republicans of all shades by organising a joint IRA offensive against Northern Ireland, but the proposed campaign’s complete absence of strategic or political sense only exposed the hopelessness of trying to square the circle. It served only to escalate the ‘crossness’, as it was sometimes tellingly called, of inter-communal conflict in Ulster. 1922 saw the peak of violence in Northern Ireland, as the Catholics were pummelled into acquiescence.

The anti-treaty IRA hoped that moral clarity could be restored if their provocations led to a renewed war with Britain, but London was not to be drawn. Instead the British government pressed for and equipped a Free State offensive to clear the anti-treaty strongholds, starting with the Four Courts in Dublin. Almost certainly strong action by the ‘irregular’ republicans at the outset of the civil war of 1921–2 could have secured a putsch, but they lacked the self-certainty to impose dictatorship. The irregulars fought a losing and increasingly unpopular rear-guard action against a grimly determined Free State. Commanders on both sides complained of the unwillingness of their men to fight to the knife and, despite outbreaks of terrorism *pour encourager les autres*, casualties in Ireland’s civil war were, by international standards, slight. Tragic though it was, the civil war at least broke up Sinn Féin and ensured that one-party domination of nationalist Ireland, a constant since the 1870s, would not disfigure the independent state.

Britain was smug, sure that it had manoeuvred the Irish into accepting de facto dominion status in perpetuity. But the Irish did not feel so bound – they had signed up to the crown only under duress. In the years following 1923 they progressively dismantled the treaty. The British were outraged, but unless they re-invaded there was little they could do. They discovered that they had lost the Irish war after all.

But the republican ideal remained elusive. In the civil war, Townshend argues, the Free Staters mobilised a language of ‘nation’ to counter loyalties to the lost republic. Its precise meaning was vague, but it clearly implied settled social conservatism. Significantly, the republican courts legal system that had dispensed cheap, efficient and relatively egalitarian popular justice during the war of independence was allowed to lapse. Though the new state avoided such British archaisms as a hereditary upper chamber and established church, it was nonetheless socially hierarchical, conformist, and oppressively religious. The wheel had turned and, for good or ill, it was not the idealistic republic but its shadow in the nation that had triumphed.

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