Making a revolutionary generation in Ireland

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THE IRISH REVOLUTION that ostensibly began with the Easter Rising of 1916 and ended with the Civil War of 1922-23 has been much written about, particularly since the emergence of exciting new sources such as the witness statements of the Bureau of Military History, recently opened to scholars. The events of the revolutionary period in Ireland will be much pored over during the 'decade of commemorations' now upon us, starting with the centenary of the 1912 Home Rule crisis last year. What might be called the 'pre-revolution' – the quarter-century between the constitutional nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell's fall and death in 1890-91 and the rebellion of 1916 – has not been explored so intensively, though the broad frameworks of Irish constitutional politics and political mentalities have been suggestively profiled by scholars such as Patrick Maume, Michael Wheatley and Paul Bew. In terms of revolutionary profiles, however, the coverage has been less demanding, and less interrogative. With occasional brilliant exceptions, the motivations that propelled a dedicated minority into revolutionary attitudes by 1916, bringing 3,000 rebels onto the streets of Dublin and instigating years of guerrilla war, have tended to be generalised about, or taken as read.

New look

A new look at the pre-revolutionary period in Ireland is all the more necessary, because traditional approaches to understanding revolutionary change in terms of class or ideology seem inadequate today. We search now, instead, to find clarification through issues of paradox and nuance; we have become interested in what does *not* change during revolutions, as much as what does. And recent analysis of revolution has tended to demote the centrality of ideological dynamics and see ostensibly 'political' impulses in terms of ethnic antagonism, anti-imperial reaction, and local community conflicts. Indeed, the terror, civil war and post-revolutionary fall-out in Ireland in some ways paralleled the bloody events over central Europe post-1918, subject of much recent scholarly analysis. Perhaps it is time to look more sceptically at Irish exceptionalism.

Nonetheless the idea of the Irish revolution, which apparently began with the Easter Rising, is still in process of definition: when did it begin, and end? How far was it a 'revolution' in the generally accepted meaning of the word? Should it be seen in its own terms, or mapped against other upheavals in contemporary Europe? It is now an accepted cliché – though a spectacular exaggeration – that events in Ireland from 1916 to 1921 served as a model for later revolts elsewhere. However, the Irish revolution did not leave a theoretical template to act upon, for other dominions, and the record of its events remained for many years patchy and obscure, though much has been clarified in recent years. For revolutions in other countries, scholars have tried to isolate what has recently been called a 'tipping point': the moment when substantive change becomes possible, building on an alteration of 'hearts and minds' as well as the 'presenting problem' of an immediate crisis. This is true, for instance, of many studies of the American Revolution. But, among Irish historians at least, it is less common to analyse the pre-revolutionary mentality across a broad front: to trace that process of alteration which prepares the way for crisis. In the Irish case, since the brilliant short studies by F.S.L. Lyons and Tom Garvin some decades ago, not much attempt has been made at analysing the backgrounds and mentalities of those who made the revolution. Yet the life-stories of the people involved are as important as their theories and ideas. In other contexts, it has been demonstrated that revolutionary process can be illuminated through the biographies as well as the theories of individuals, as Franco Venturi did for the first Russian revolutionaries in his classic study, *Roots of Revolution*. More recent work on the Russian revolutionary generation, such as *Heralds of Revolution*, Susan Morrissey's study of the 1905 student revolutionaries of St Petersburg, bears out this emphasis on personal experience.

The 1916 rising

How relevant is this to the Ireland of the same era? How far can we reconstruct the processes, networks, experiences and attitudes of the Irish revolutionary generation around the beginning of the 20th century? It might be helpful first, to sketch out what they brought about – before returning to where they came from. The Irish revolution began (ostensibly) with the 'Rising' or rebellion of 1916, when a small group of extreme Irish nationalists, organised by the 'Fenians' or Irish Republican Brotherhood, mounted a week-long insurrection in Dublin, occupying public buildings and creating a week of mayhem before the British army restored order. The

Figure 1. *Dublin during the 1916 rising.*

Generational shift

Several studies of the way that the constitutional-nationalist Irish Parliamentary Party lost its grip have referred to generational shift; the fracture between the old and the new ways of politics broke along lines of age as well as ideology. The exceptions, such as the old Fenian Tom Clarke (Figure 2), 58 years old in 1916, were noted as exactly that by their acolytes. 'To all the young men of the Separartist movement of that time he was a help and an inspiration', recalled the younger Sinn Fein activist P.S. O'Hegarty. 'And he was surely the exception in his own generation, the one shining example.' For radical nationalists of O'Hegarty's generation (he was born in 1879), their fathers had sold the pass to craven constitutionalism.

It is worth remembering that the constitutional Home Rulers represented the opinions of the majority in Ireland in 1914; the radicals were a minority, and would remain so. At the same time, many of the attitudes and beliefs that they embraced so fervently were echoed, if in a diluted and perfunctory form, by the rhetoric of constitutional nationalism: that Fenian pedigree which Tom Clarke represented was often invoked from Irish parliamentary party platforms. In the later memories of those who participated in the 1916 Rising, a hereditary Fenian indoctrination would be the predominant feature of their

revolutionaries had originally expected substantial help from Germany, with whom Britain (and therefore Ireland, officially) was at war; when this went astray, they went ahead anyway, in what became a gesture of sacrificial violence rather than a serious challenge to Britain's government of Ireland. That government was already, so to speak, under review, and a measure of Home Rule for Ireland had been passed by the British parliament, granting Ireland some self-government; but it had been postponed for the war's duration, and in any case had been blocked by resistance in Ulster, bringing Ireland to a point of threatened civil war just before the World War broke out in August 1914. As in Russia, a sense of blocked domestic revolutionary potential was released by international war; but the outbreak of hostilities also constituted, for a minority of Irish revolutionary purists, an opportunity they had been anticipating for a long time.

What happened in 1916 set in motion a change of mentality, a change in hearts and minds, whereby within two or three years Irish opinion would shift dramatically away from the old, constitutionalist Home Rule idea, and in favour of a more radical form of republican separatism, achieved if necessary by force of arms. Gradualism was replaced by revolution: it is in these years, especially from 1918, that a revolutionary vanguard emerged in an organised way, and sophisticated structures of subversion and rebellion emerged (though these latter phenomena owed much to previous formations in Irish history). But these later developments built, above all, upon a moment of generational change.

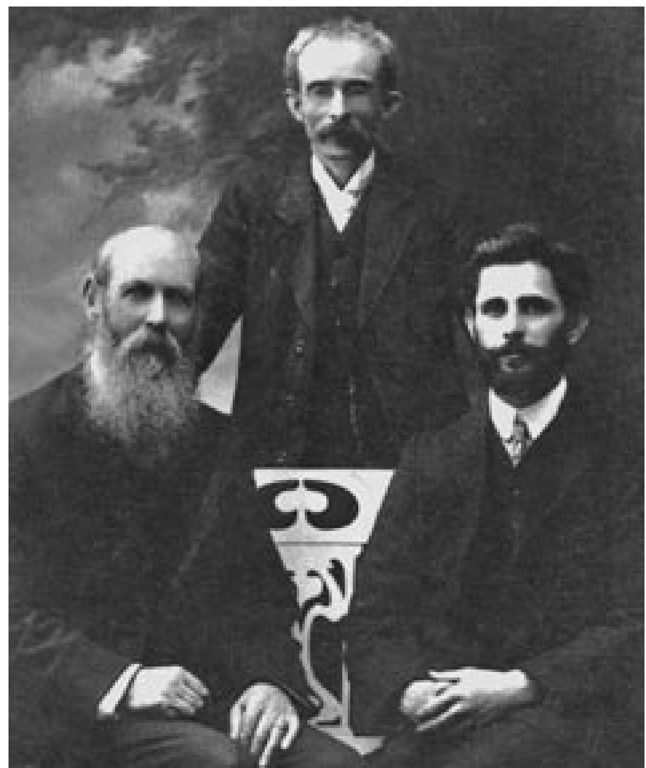

Figure 2. *From left to right: John Daly, Tom Clarke and Sean McDermott [Sean Mac Diarmada], representing the different generations of revolutionary.*

Figure 3. *Terence MacSwiney.*

pre-revolutionary conditioning. And – without the benefit of hindsight – the youthful Cork nationalist Terence MacSwiney (Figure 3), writing his diary in 1902, recorded proudly that he was an 'extremist', differentiating this identification from the constitutional politicians of the previous generation.

For some 'extremists', like MacSwiney, the notion of a righteous war of liberation was a desideratum from early on; the idea pulses through his personal writings in the early 1900s. This belief was founded in imbibed ideas of history, from mentors at school as well as at home; it was also founded in a fervent and mystical devotion to Catholicism. In common with many of the revolutionary generation, MacSwiney had been educated in the doctrine of faith and fatherland by the Christian Brothers. But extremism could emerge from less traditional seed-beds too, and the beliefs embraced by MacSwiney were also articulated by radicals from very different backgrounds. Feminism, socialism, women's suffrage, anti-imperialism, anti-vivisectionism were among the anti-establishment beliefs appealing to young people in the Edwardian era – in Ireland as in Britain. The more avant-garde among them read Freud, and paid attention to new currents of thought in Britain and America. Several of them also embraced secularism, as O'Hegarty, writing from London in 1904, tried to explain to MacSwiney. In a series of absorbing letters O'Hegarty preached that anti-clericalism was now a desirable, indeed necessary, option for the modern Irish nationalist who had embraced wider horizons (in his case, ironically, by moving to England). While removal to London could hasten this effect, other radicals, especially from Protestant backgrounds, needed no encouragement to see the Catholic church as one of the main obstacles to liberation – along with the Irish Parliamentary Party: the two were often jointly identified through the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the highly-politicised Catholic association founded and led by Joe Devlin and routinely denounced by 'extremists'. To the revolutionary generation such institutions represented a corrupt old order which had to be excoriated.

As the new century dawned, such feelings were not restricted only to the political extremists, but also to cultural activists; the young W.B. Yeats, writing in a radical nationalist journal in 1901, conjured up an undercurrent of revolutionary initiates, bent on overthrowing a decadent modern civilisation, working among the multitude as if 'upon some secret errand'.[1] The Irish generation of 1916, like the European generation of 1914 described by Robert Wohl, or the Risorgimento generation of mid-19th century Italy analysed by Roberto Balzani, defined themselves against their parents' values and were fixed upon a project of reclamation and self-definition. This was partly to be achieved through Gaelic revivalism, and increasingly through a dedication to violence. At all costs, their project was aimed at rescuing Ireland – as they saw it – from the virus of materialism, compromise and flaccid cosmopolitanism which English rule had infused. To that extent, the Irish revolution might be seen as a function of the success of British rule in Ireland, rather than of its failure. This might also explain the passionate and unanalytical pro-Germanism that affected many young Irish radicals after August 1914.

Patterns

To analyse the formation of this radical revolutionary element requires examining their education, their family relations and affiliations, their romantic lives and sexual identities, their intellectual influences, their leisure pursuits of reading-circles, clubs and agit-prop drama groups, and their gradual glorification of violence – paralleling the trajectories of similar age-cohorts all over Europe in the opening years of the 20th century. There is also a marked syndrome, not much noticed before, of the children of the prosperous Irish middle class repudiating the comfortable Home Rule or Unionist beliefs of their parents, and launching revolutionary initiatives from the security of a privileged background There now exists a large database of recorded memories, as well as contemporary diaries, journals, and letters, and the official records of relevant organisations and institutions, through which the group biography of a revolutionary elite can be reconstructed.

[1] *United Irishman*, 9 November 1901.

Figure 4. *Molly Childers and Mary Spring-Rice running guns on Erskine Childers' yacht, July 1914.*

My research, funded by a British Academy Wolfson Research Professorship, has enabled me to trawl intensively through this material for three absorbing years. It is now being written into a book, though the temptation to keep reading more and more archival material is overpowering. The patterns are suggestive. The revolutionaries were often less puritanical, more consciously feminist, more anti-clerical, and less conventional than might be expected: partly because some of the more radical died young, partly because the post-revolutionary dispensation became so thoroughly Catholicised. Several of them sustained an internationalist perspective on radical and anti-imperialist politics, and a fellow-feeling with contemporary Indian nationalists, though this was by no means a majority trend. In many ways they were more comparable to the Russian 'narodniks' of a slightly earlier period. Above all, in terms of a rejection of Anglicised bourgeois values, which they identified with the comforts and compromises of their parents' generation, and the sense of occupying a new position in a transforming world, they were a self-conceived 'generation' of the kind becoming identified in other parts of Europe at the dawn of the 20th century.

There is also the important factor (as Ernest Renan pointed out long ago) of creative mis-remembering, in making the history of a nation. This is what is partly preserved – not intentionally – in just-opened official archives such as the Bureau of Military History, where the ex-revolutionaries recorded their memories after the dangerous interval of 30 years. Those three decades had encompassed first, a traumatic civil war, where the revolutionary generation had turned on each other and comrades became enemies; and then the austere years of defining a new state (still within the Commonwealth, for all their efforts) and the abandonment of many of the impulses that had galvanised them in the heady times up to 1916. This evidence, fascinating if sometimes flawed, can be combined with the more immediate evidence of letters, diaries, and contemporary journalism. What emerges, as a pattern is established of overlapping lives, experiences, relationships and backgrounds, is a study in how a generation is made, rather than born; and also how the structures of a post-revolutionary state help to impose a received version of revolutionary process which bears a very uncertain relation to how people experienced it at the time.

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