

The vivid faces of Ireland's revolutionary generation

ROY FOSTER

in conversation with Richard English

In 2015 Professor Roy Foster FBA, Carroll Professor of Irish History at the University of Oxford, received a British Academy Medal for his book *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland 1890–1923*.

The day after the British Academy's Prizes and Medals Ceremony in September 2015, Professor Foster was interviewed for the *British Academy Review* by Professor Richard English FBA, Wardlaw Professor of Politics at the University of St Andrews, to discuss the hopes and expectations of Ireland's revolutionary generation – as we approach the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising.

You have a Yeats-ian title to your book about the revolutionary generation in Ireland. How much was W.B. Yeats a presence for you as you wrote this book on Ireland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries?

George Moore said, 'Everything begins in Yeats and everything ends in Yeats', and that has been horribly true. I began working on the authorised biography of Yeats in 1986, spending 18 years on it.¹ In writing that biography, I read not just letters to and from Yeats, but letters of his friends to each other, because they so often wrote about him. In immersing myself in the correspondence of that couple of generations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, I was more and more struck by a sense that opinions were changing under the surface. People start signing their names in Irish; people start writing much more disrespectfully about the previous generation; scepticism about the Home Rule enterprise creeps in, sometimes along with worry about where the current of 'advanced nationalist' feeling is going to take things.

In Yeats's great poem from which the book's title is taken –

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.

1. R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life* (Oxford University Press, Volume 1 1997, Volume 2, 2003).



Professor Roy Foster FBA – pictured here (right), together with Lord Stern, the President of the British Academy – received his British Academy Medal in a ceremony held at the Academy on 29 September 2015. According to the citation, Professor Foster 'enters uncharted territory with a highly original analysis of the "generation" and its formation which made the 1916 Easter Rebellion in Ireland. *Vivid Faces* unfolds in beautiful prose and scintillating erudition.' A full list of the Prizes and Medals awarded by the British Academy can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/2015prizes/

– he is biographising the revolutionary generation. As I wrote about Yeats, the thought at the back of my mind was the change of Irish hearts and minds against which his work and his life are patterned. And I thought, once I had finally finished with him, how interesting it would be to turn to the generation who supplanted Yeats's generation and by whom all was 'changed utterly', as he put it in the poem.

An aspect of *Vivid Faces* that ties in with one of the profound themes in your earlier scholarship is the idea of uncovering the unanticipated futures, or the futures people anticipate which then don't come to fruition. There is a lot in the



Figure 1
Muriel MacSwiney in the USA, 1922. Photo: private collection.

correspondence from this period about people expecting certain kinds of revolution which don't turn out to be the case: sexual revolution, social revolution, etc.

That is a key theme. One of the things Yeats wrote in a letter shortly after the Easter Rising was, 'We can no longer be certain about anything to do with the future, except that it must be very unlike the past.' In people's diaries and letters and especially through contemporary reflections, a lot of their thought was predicated upon a future that was going to be different from the past. They had a sometimes surprisingly radical – sometimes surprisingly secular – idea of the future. It would be a liberation from forms of authority beyond just the authority of the British Government: liberation from patriarchy, received gender roles and all sorts of things that seem to us very of the moment. For that interestingly radical generation in the Edwardian period, in Britain, France and Germany it was a time of questioning received verities, and that was happening in Ireland as well.

And freedom from parents, for some of them?

Yes. For many of the people whom I profile in this book, the authority that they sought to separate themselves from was the authority of the home, of the parents. You get these wonderful quotes, especially from the women. 'I have been brought up as a prisoner, an internal prisoner of my own family', is what Alice Milligan says. Muriel MacSwiney (Figure 1) says, 'I am only typical of many who are brought up shut up at home.' In this and in other ways they kept reminding me of the 1960s and a youth generation determined to remake the world.

Many of the advanced-nationalist women whose records I was exploring saw themselves as feminists and wanted to create a very different kind of world than the patriarchal, very Catholic world which more conventional revolutionary nationalists wanted. Again,

the language is surprisingly modern, and the sense of frustration and of being stifled is modern. The last part of the book, called 'Remembering', deals with revolutionary disillusionment, and this is an important part of this disillusionment of those women. Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington and Rosamond Jacob, who live on into the early 1960s, are very conscious that from the 1920s onwards they are living a life that was not the life they thought they had agitated for – and in some cases had fought for.

Would it be fair to say that your own analysis challenges any sense of the inevitable – that the early 20th century would inevitably descend into revolution, or indeed more recently that the 1960s would inevitably descend into conflict in the Northern Ireland Troubles? Is there a contingency, rather than an inevitability, in both periods? Or is the tide so likely to go in one direction that we are watching the working-out of something that is predictable?

I hate predetermined history. I am a 1960s person myself, which is one reason why the parallels keep occurring to me. But one thing I have learned, in common with many of my contemporaries, is that the new world we expected in the 1960s did not happen, and that the governing forces in the world that we expected to decline – religion and nationalism – have not mutated into harmless forgotten lifeforms. They have come roaring back, red in tooth and claw, to construct the extremely uncertain world we live in today. If we had been told back in the 1960s that religion and nationalism were going to be what governed world affairs in the early 21st century, we would not have believed it. But it is, alas, true.

As I say, I am very uncomfortable with predetermined history. One reason why I admired the work of Eric Hobsbawm very much was that, though he adhered to a Marxist framework for understanding the past, he didn't make the mistake in his historical work of taking a predictive or overly predetermined approach to the future. He always built in the power of contingency and the power of irrationality, both of which I think are themes that pulse through the Irish Revolution, at least as I have analysed it.²

One of the reasons why Hobsbawm's historical work remains so commandingly important, even for people who would not have shared his politics at all, was exactly that intellectual self-discipline that he showed in being the historian primarily and the Marxist secondarily.

In your own case, as somebody who grew up in the Ireland that had been formed by the generation you are describing, has it been a difficult thing to disentangle Roy Foster who has an emotional engagement with that legacy from Roy Foster the historian who is digging through the archive material and producing a dispassionate and

2. Eric Hobsbawm (1917-2012) was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1976. An extract from the newly published Biographical Memoir of Eric Hobsbawm, by Sir Richard J. Evans FBA, is published in this issue of the *British Academy Review*.

distanced account?

It is very hard for oneself to stand back and say that the persona that goes into the archives and then comes out and writes a book is different from the persona that has been embedded in Irish life – sometimes in Irish controversies – since adulthood. I don't think there is any such thing as a purely impartial historian, because I think what we bring to the table is the colouration and configuration of all sorts of things in our past. In my case, it would have to include being educated in a radically progressive Quaker environment. My family were not themselves Quakers – they were Church of Ireland – but both my parents taught at a coeducational Quaker boarding school, which was the background of my whole youthful life. The older I get, the more I realise how much that conditioned my approach to Irish history and to Irish identity, which has always been a theme in what I have written.

The influence of the 1960s, of that moment when 'to be young was very heaven', is also there.

But so also, I think, is my transmutation into a British historian. When I came to teach at Birkbeck College in 1974, I decided that, since I had a job teaching British history, I had better write British history. I got interested in Victorian high politics and culture, about which I wrote during the 1980s – before returning to Irish history in the 1990s. The baggage I bring from that period, especially from teaching Victorian Studies with my friends the literary scholars Andrew Sanders and Michael Slater in Birkbeck, was a very strong infusion of the importance of literary sources and literary consciousness in understanding the minds of a generation, and that certainly has played very directly into the way I approached *Vivid Faces*.

It seems to me that, when you write about the people in your book – though I suspect you would not have instinctive sympathy with the politics of many of them – you present them with dignity, understand them with empathy, and have looked at the network of their associations and motivations more closely than anybody else has before. There is a recreation here that is respectful of worlds of which you would not necessarily approve, but which as a historian you think need to be recreated in a full and empathetic approach.

I think empathy is vital. But I don't think it is our business to approve or disapprove of the political choices made by people in an era a century before. Of course, there is a certain extent to which that is nonsense. If you are writing the life of one of the worst possible Nazis imaginable, Reinhard Heydrich, you have to approach him with what his biographer, Robert Gerwarth, describes as 'cold empathy' – but still empathy. You have to try to understand why people think the way they do.

The empathy I approach these people with is much warmer than that, because I respected their idealism so much. And while I imagine, if I had been in their place, I would have retained faith with Home Rule for much longer than they did, one can see the idiotic, often pusillanimous and insensitive approaches of the British Government towards the ripening crisis in Ireland from

1910 as so infuriating that, at the time, you would have been very tempted to be pressed towards the simpler, more Manichean dualities of the Sinn Féin and then the Republican approach to an Irish future.

Unfortunately, that Manichean duality tended to exclude, I think, the complex realities of other Irish identities: the Irish Protestant and the Irish Unionist identities. Actually, some advanced nationalists were very acutely attuned to these, but they tended to be the kind of people who believed, as I was saying earlier, that the future would be secular. The anticlericalism of some of, if I can call them this, *my* Nationalists – Patrick McCartan, P.S. O'Hegarty, people from Quaker backgrounds like Bulmer Hobson (Figure 2) and Rosamund Jacob (Figure 3) – is I think very striking and, to me, very sympathetic.

One of the patterns that emerged when I was writing the book, and which only struck me very much towards the end, was that – if I can borrow a phrase from Régis Debray in the 1960s – there was a 'revolution within the revolution'. As things turned to fighting in 1919, the hard men with the guns were from a very different background to a lot of the people who had made, if you like, the revolutionary consciousness. They were more 'Faith and Fatherland'. They were more rural. They were more ruthless.

The more intellectually-oriented revolutionary agitators whom I had been dealing with, and into whose minds and hearts I had been trying to get, very often were surprised when these people emerged as pulling the triggers and then pulling the levers of the revolution. 'Who are they? Where have they come from? We have never met these guys. They have not been coming to the salons that we have been frequenting.' This struck me very forcibly. I think that is something which is new in the book: that there is a shift between one kind of revolutionary and another, and that it happens when the shooting starts.

That does come through to the reader very strongly. I think it is one of the explanations for the disjunction between so many of the expectations of the people whose networks you describe here and the Ireland that emerges in the 1920s and '30s. Violence does tend to set the pace and accelerate the agenda. It also polarises in ways that make it more difficult to have complexity, and it leaves legacies of bitterness and enmity that are difficult to unpick.

One interesting thing that comes out very strongly from your book is the mutual deafness between Nationalism and Unionism at moments that really matter. You find this during the First World War, a cataclysm which changes Irish history as so much else. There are these passions that shout past each other. When you look at the sources for these people who are mostly southerners, to what extent do you get a texture of what they think about Ulster and that unanticipated future?

There is a deep prejudice against the North – almost an ethnic prejudice. This is very strong the further south you get. Liam de Róiste, who kept a copious diary and whom I find a very attractive character, was a young



Figure 2
Bulmer Hobson. Photo: National Library of Ireland.

radical agitator from a very poor farming family, educated himself through night college, started little theatre groups, wrote reams of appalling poetry, tried to start up little magazines, and became a passionate Sinn Féin-er. When the Boundary Commission in 1925 ratified the boundary border between the North and the rest of Ireland, he is exactly the kind of person you would expect to be outraged. Previously he has written along the lines of 'They have got to understand. They have got to be Irish. They have got to come in with us.' But in 1925 he more or less says, 'Good riddance to them. They are intrinsically different from the South, and we are better off without them.'

Of the people I am interested in, Alice Milligan, Bulmer Hobson, Patrick McCartan, Sean MacDermott, Denis McCullough are all people who come from Ulster, or at least 'nine-county' Ulster. They invariably start with a great belief that they will reawaken the great tradition of Presbyterian radicalism, the United Irishmen, both sides joining in a great Republican movement and realising that more unites them against the British Government than divides them in the north-east. But, one and all, they give up and they come south. They come to Dublin, where people will agree with them. They pay lip service to the idea of radicalising the North into green Nationalism, but they know it's not going to happen.

Alice Milligan does go back to live in the North. This is partly because of disillusionment with what becomes of the Free State. She is no more keen on the North, but it

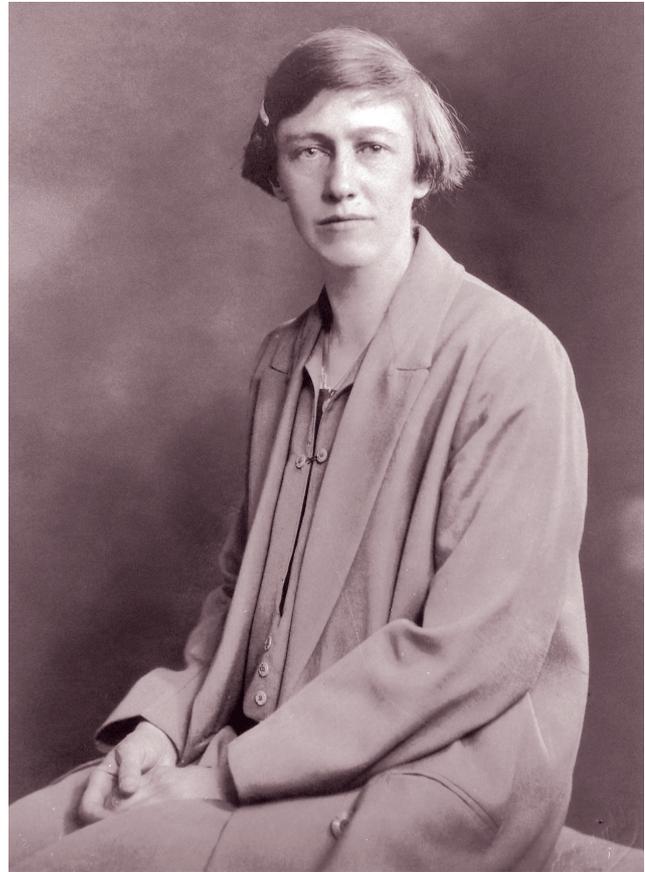


Figure 3
Rosamond Jacob. Photo: National Library of Ireland.

is where her family and her roots are. It's rather a sad story.

I think there is a lot of wilful blindness, and there is a lot of prejudice. Heaven knows, northern Unionists have never been in the business of making themselves likeable. But there is certainly a very strong sense of a border in the mind. In my treatment of the Ulster Literary Theatre, which was one attempt to create this kind of Nationalist consciousness in the North, it ends up underlining the border in the mind that exists between what will become Northern Ireland and the rest of the country.

I think that comes through very strongly from your depiction of the period from the 1890s onwards. If you were reading this and knew nothing at all about what was going to happen in Irish history, partition would come as no surprise, because the roots of it are so deep, tangled and complex.

We started with Yeats and I think we should end with him, as the book itself does. You draw a phrase from his famous poem about Easter 1916, about knowing the dream of the revolutionaries. As a scholar who has studied this generation as part of a much wider understanding of Irish history throughout your whole career,³ to what extent did your view of their dream change during the gestation of this book? Did you feel that the book changed you?

3. For example, R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972* (Penguin, 1988).

Yeats's phrase is: 'We know their dream; enough / To know they dreamed and are dead'. I felt that we didn't know their dream.

I was very determined not to be swayed by retrospective memory and by hagiography, which is a besetting sin of so much Irish history. I wanted to get back to what they were saying at the time.⁴ The more I read their diaries and letters, that is when I began to intuit dreams that were, as I said earlier, about secularism, escape from family, vegetarianism, antivivisectionism, feminism, socialism. And I realised that those dreams were some of the dreams that disappeared when the guns came out – not so much in 1916 itself, but when the guerrilla war began, and most especially when the civil war happened. Therefore, I suppose that, in trying to inhabit their hearts and minds, willy-nilly I broadened my own view of what the revolutionaries wanted.

The response to the book in Ireland has been very interesting. In some quarters, some surprise has been expressed at the extent of empathy that I seem to feel with revolutionary advanced nationalists this time. But I think the sheer energy of the idealism of these people is something with which one has to feel a certain sympathy.

We are back to your question about unforeseen futures. The fallout from sacrificial violence is very rarely worth the candle, and often, I think, produces a level of trauma and the advancing of all sorts of agendas that the people who have died for their faith would never have wanted to see. And then it inevitably ends up in political compromises, which will almost universally bring about a situation that is not that much terribly different from what could have been brought about by less glamorous and spectacular forms of politics which have been superseded along the way.

Vivid Faces is a book that is essential to the understanding of modern Ireland. But I have also recommended it to people who are interested more widely in the processes by which young people shift from comparative quiescence to violent forms of nationalism or other kinds of struggle. You have produced a book that is very sensitive to context,

4. Professor Foster was awarded a British Academy Wolfson Research Professorship (2009-2012) to carry out the research that led to *Vivid Faces*. 'The Wolfson Research Professorship gave me three vital and halcyon years just to plunge, at deep level, into the sources, to spend a lot of time in Ireland, to search out stuff, and then I was able to write up. Without that precious breathing space, I would still be trying to organise it. It was a wonderful book to research. The research was pure delight.'

to the role of individuals and small-group agency, and to understanding and empathising with the nature of what people do, however distasteful those legacies might turn out to be in the end. It is a work that has world historical resonance. For all of the difference between the early 20th century and the early 21st century, understanding the processes and the networks that you describe – you use the word 'radicalisation' in the book frequently, which is of course the word we now use about jihadism and so forth – can only properly be done by someone who brings a historian's mind to the subject.

The parallels with jihadism did of course occur, though I tried to suppress too obvious a connection. Especially in the relation between nationalism, religion, the family and repudiation, one kept seeing very strong parallels there.

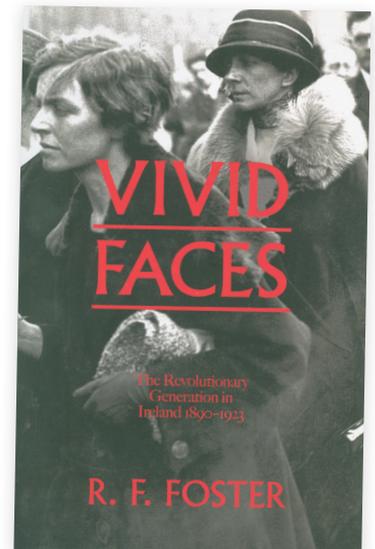
But I also saw parallels with a much more contemporary phenomenon: young Russian radicals, not so much in 1917 but in 1905, the student revolutionaries of St Petersburg. I was very struck by a book by Susan Morrissey called *Heralds of Revolution*, which had access to marvellous material which reflected the contemporary minds and hearts of that generation – surveys, letters and diaries. Even in the configuration of their backgrounds, often coming from families with a strong clerical predisposition, often medical students, they reminded me so much of their exact contemporaries, especially in the National University in Dublin at the same time.

I think one always has to be on the alert for these parallels. And if they are happening in the same cosmic timeframe, they are even more striking than if they are parallels that are repeated in a different era, about which one has to be much more careful – though they can still be enlightening.

This article is an edited version of the conversation.



For a longer version, including a discussion of how the 1916 centenary will be marked in Ireland, go to www.britishacademy.ac.uk/vividfaces/



Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland 1890-1923 by R.F. Foster was published in 2014, and reissued as a Penguin paperback in 2015.