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Ireland's Revolutionary Tradition

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Ireland Turned Upside Down

Who fears to speak of the 1916 Easter Rising? A year before the hundredth anniversary of the Rising, the Irish government issued a video, *Ireland Inspires 2016*. It did not mention the executions of the signatories of Ireland's proclamation and instead the camera focused on such luminaries as Ian Paisley, Queen Elizabeth and Bob Geldof. The appearance of Elizabeth Windsor rather than, say, Patrick Pearse or James Connolly was highly unusual. 1916, the video proclaimed, was 'where we came from' but Reconciliation was 'where we are now'. Somebody, somewhere, it appeared was worried about the commemoration and they covered their fears with slick public relations banalities. The video provoked such outrage that it had to be withdrawn.

The 1916 rebellion set off a chain of events which expelled British rule from the 26 counties. It was the beginning of a phase of revolution that is commonly – but rather narrowly – called the 'War of Independence'. What started as an insurrection of the few became a revolt of the many. The current political elite owe their positions to the series of violent events that followed the Rising. Yet they do not like to be reminded of how their ancestors came to power through a revolution that culminated in a bloody counter-revolution, preferring to think of themselves as self-made men or women who rose through the ranks by their own merits. They are embarrassed by connections that are often made between the modern IRA, who fought the Northern state, and the 'old IRA', who fought the British. So they want to put all that behind them – except, of course, for a heritage-linked tourist opportunity. Major, earth-shaking events are supposed to belong to a distant past and need to be packaged up purely for cultural

memories. Moreover, too much talk of revolution can be dangerous. There are many angry people suffering from the policies of austerity in modern Ireland and you don't want to give them too many ideas. If the population became too fired up by the 1916 commemorations, some malcontents might even be tempted to do a repeat today. Hence all the talk of reconciliation and cultural memory.

Yet, despite their unease, few of the elite will openly disown the Rising. They know that generations of Irish people have been brought up to regard the 1916 leaders as heroes, and that it is politically dangerous to attack them. An exception, however, is John Bruton, the former Fine Gael Taoiseach 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.'[1] 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. Why, Bruton asked, was there no commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of the passage into law of Home Rule for Ireland on 18 September 1914?

Although separated by a hundred years, there is an affinity of social class between Bruton and Redmond. Both came from respectable farming stock, Bruton growing up on a large 400-acre farm in Meath, and Redmond turning Parnell's ancestral home at Aughavanagh into his landed estate and permanent Irish residence. Both were Clongowes boys, attending the legendary private school which did so much to instil self-confidence into the Irish elite. Both bestrode the nerve centres of the respective empires. Redmond was a power broker and 'the best dressed man' of the House of Commons. Bruton became the EU Ambassador to the United States before taking up a post of paid lobbyist for Ireland's financial industry. Both lived a life of immense privilege without the slightest embarrassment about their wealth.

Redmond lived the life of a country squire while Bruton retired on a €150,000 Ministerial pension while receiving another 'six-figure' sum as lobbyist of the Irish Financial Services Centre. Small wonder that a finance industry lobbyist finds his hero in the figure of Catholic landlord and squire.

Class ties can be thicker than ones formed around nationality, which perhaps explains why John Bruton's arguments against the 1916 Rising show a remarkable amnesia. While attacking the 'violent separatism' of the Rising, he conveniently forgets or ignores the far greater shedding of blood of the First World War. Consider for a moment the disparity in the figures for those killed. The rebellion costs of 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. Redmond argued that Catholics and Protestants should die side by side in defence of the British Empire so that 'their blood may be the seal that will bring all Ireland together in one nation.'[2] Presenting revolutionaries as violent fanatics while staying silent about Redmond's vigorous support for war is, to say the least, a little inconsistent. Yet there is a point to it. Bruton wants to pretend that constitutional politicians are peaceful individuals while revolutionaries are effectively 'terrorists'.

However, if logic is not Bruton's strongest point, his intervention has still one redeeming feature: it focuses attention on the nearly forgotten figure of John Redmond. One of the great effects of Irish nationalism has been its power to rewrite the past, so that it appears as one long, 700-year struggle. There is a historical narrative that the Irish all hailed from a common stock of dispossessed peasants who resisted a British landlord class that had stolen their land. Each uprising against British rule was only the latest instalment of a longer story. The Irish world before 1916 is virtually unknown and figures

like John Redmond appear as an aberration – a sort of bumbling interlude between the Fenian rebellion of 1867 and the Rising.

This is, however, a caricature because John Redmond had more support than modern Irish political leaders. His party was so dominant in elections that nationalist Ireland was virtually a one-party state. In the 1910 election, for example, two-thirds of the Irish Parliamentary Party candidates were returned unopposed. He led a mass political party of more than a hundred thousand members scattered across a thousand branches.[3] Its tentacles stretched into every aspect of society and for most of his political life Redmond was known as the 'leader of the Irish race'.[4] In other words, Ireland before 1916 was seen as a rock of conservative stability.

But in 1918, Redmond died and his party melted away. The elaborate network of power and patronage that had been created around him was dismantled. What was remarkable about the Rising and the revolution that followed was not just the way it overthrew the British Empire, but also the manner in which it destroyed an Irish political caste. How this occurred is an intriguing story in itself, because it can lead to a more general understanding of how revolutions happen. Revolutions are like unexpected thunderbolts, that come out of the blue. Someone writing about the need for a revolution in Redmond's Ireland would have been regarded as a political lunatic. Redmondism was the only game in town and the Irish Parliamentary Party held all the cards. Talk of revolution could only come from a dreamer or a madman. And yet it happened.

The magnitude of the change can be illustrated by comparing two events. The first took place in Dublin, just one year before the Easter Rising. On the first Sunday in April, the National Volunteers – followers of John Redmond who were willing to enlist in Britain's war effort – staged what the London *Times* correspondent called the 'largest military display Dublin has ever seen'.[5] Nearly 30,000 uniformed volunteers, many with rifles, assembled in Phoenix Park and then marched through the streets of Dublin to be reviewed by

Redmond. They were brought to the city by fifty special trains from all over the country and somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 people witnessed this display.

The second event took place in Galway a few months before. The Irish Volunteers, as those opposed to involvement in Britain's war were called, planned to hold a meeting in the city centre. But the twenty or thirty members who turned up were confronted by a number of soldiers and sailors who were on leave. When they tried to march out of their drill hall, they were met by an angry crowd who attacked and wrenched their rifles from them. They were chased through the city and subsequently the windows smashed of anyone professing sympathies for Sinn Féin. With some exaggeration, one writer has described it as 'Galway's Kristallnacht'.[6] No wonder then that the Redmondites could look down on the revolutionaries as 'a little group of obscure persons with ridiculous pretensions'.[7] Yet within a short period, all of this was turned upside down.

How did such a turn-about happen? The conventional answer is that the sacrifice of 1916 pricked the conscience of a nation and re-awakened its national instincts. As the saying goes, the leaders of 1916 'gave their lives so that Ireland might be free'. Unfortunately, this rather simplistic explanation leads to mistaken conclusions. It suggests that revolutions occur because a tiny minority of revolutionaries are organised, determined and, above all, willing to sacrifice their own lives. The mass of the people, it appears, are governed only by their emotions and spring to life when their sympathies are aroused. If that were true, martyrdom would be the key to change. Yet throughout history, there have been countless examples of people giving their lives to a cause – and little has followed. In the case of the 1916 rebellion, there were other reasons besides the horror at the executions of its leaders for why Irish people chose a revolutionary road.

Revolutions, therefore, are more complex affairs. Their roots lie deep in society and do not spring simply from the imagination or

bravery of the few. To understand why the Irish revolution occurred, it is first necessary to look at what kept Irish society in the thrall of conservatism for decades – and how its own internal contradictions blew it apart.

The Defeat of Fenianism

Redmondism can be described as an imperial mindset of the respectable elements of Irish society before 1916. Its origins lay in the enormous social changes that overtook Ireland in the wake of the Famine and the crushing of an earlier revolutionary tradition of Fenianism.

In the years of the Great Famine, between 1846 and 1851, 1 million people out of a population of 8 million lost their lives and a further million emigrants fled. Despite attempts by 'revisionist' historians to absolve the British government of responsibility, there can be no avoiding their guilt. Roy Foster, for example, has claimed that Britain operated no differently than the Belgian government when they confronted their famine by providing a similar amount of relief. The problem, he suggested, was that 'local differentiation' meant that the British government 'underestimated what faced them'.[8] His implication was that the tragedy arose from a misunderstanding and poor administration. Yet the reality was that Britain only provided £10 million in relief and much of this was spent on an ill-administered public works scheme. That amounted to just 0.2 percent of its GNP and was a good deal less than the £89 million spent on the Crimean War a few years later.[9]

The British elite's approach to the Famine was conditioned both by their racism and their free market fundamentalism. The Famine coincided with the rise of the Whigs who were committed to market forces and free trade, and who opposed any ban on the export of food, a measure that could have saved many lives. They also ended food relief schemes and put the burden of paying for public works programmes

onto ratepayers who were already devastated by the famine. Assistant Secretary to the Treasury Charles Trevelyan explained the reasoning behind restricting the supply of free food in a letter to Lord Mount Eagle in 1846, stating that he wished to dispel all doubts about the 'magnitude of the existing calamity and its danger not being fully known and appreciated in Downing Street'. However,

> The ability even of the most powerful government is extremely limited in dealing with a social evil of this description. It forms no part of the functions of government to provide supplies of food or to increase the productive powers of the land. In the great institutions of the business of society, it falls to the share of government to protect the merchant and the agriculturist in the free exercise of their respective employments, but not itself to carry on these employments.[10]

He added that it was part of 'the defective part of the national character' of the Irish that they demanded such intervention.[11] The famine, Trevelyan hinted, provided a God-sent opportunity to remove the surplus population. 'The real evil with which we have to contend', he later claimed, 'is not the physical evil of the Famine, but the moral evil of the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the people.'[12]

The horrors of the Famine left an indelible impression on a generation of survivors. John Mitchell gave expression to this blinding rage in his *Jail Journal* where he described how 'husbands and wives fought like wolves for the last morsel of food in the house … how the "laws" [were] vindicated all this time … how starving wretches were transported for stealing vegetables at night.'[13] Mitchell had called for uprising in the midst of the Famine, but he was working with a Young Ireland movement led by upper-class gentlemen such as William Smith O'Brien and Gavan Duffy, who appeared to be more concerned about the rights of private property than in actually pursuing an insurrection. As James Connolly later recounted it, the crowning

absurdity of their efforts was the sight of William Smith O'Brien telling the peasants of Mullinahone that they should not fell trees to build barricades until they first asked permission of the landlord.[14]

However, despite this fiasco, the flame of revolution was passed on. It was taken up by poorer Irish men and women, who had been driven into emigration or left smouldering with resentment at the state of their country. The Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood – later renamed the Irish Republican Brotherhood and known as the Fenians – was formed by James Stephens in a woodyard in Dublin in 1858. Modelled on Irish secret societies such as the Ribbonmen – peasant groups which attacked landlords – and also the Continental revolutionary conspiracies in which Stephens had participated, the aim of the Fenians was the overthrow of British rule in Ireland by means of an insurrection. Despite being organised in secret revolutionary circles, the Fenians grew into a mass movement with a membership variously estimated at between 50,000 and 80,000. They were particularly strong among Irish emigrants in Britain, who co-operated actively with radical British workers. When, in 1867, they mustered for an attack on Chester, they could mobilise a thousand members. The Fenians even had many members serving in the British Army in Ireland and it took over a hundred court martials to break up their network.[15] Overall, the Fenians' main base in Dublin came from skilled workers and shop assistants, while in the countryside, agricultural labourers often formed the backbone of the organisation.

Fenian*ism* became a wider revolutionary attitude of opposition and rebellion. As one historian described it:

> … they were losing the 'tug-of-the-forelock' mentality that traditionally pervaded Irish society. The Fenians came mainly from the lower classes – artisans, town and country labourers, small farmers. Some of them, at least instinctively, resented the place delegated to them in Irish society by social betters. Lack of deference became almost a physical characteristic in the eyes of the authorities.[16]

The Fenian tradition was based on older notions of revolution as a conspiracy fomented by an organised minority. The Fenians were to infiltrate movements, create provocations and name the time and date for revolution. They – and not mood or determination of the wider mass of the people – were to decide when to make the call for insurrection. The uprising was seen as a technical issue to be determined by the inner readiness of their organisation and by opportunities inadvertently presented by the state. Revolution was not seen as a social upheaval, but was reduced to a purely military operation. It was divorced from wider developments in society and sprung only from the fact of British domination. There was no social programme in Fenianism – its focus was purely on the political separation of Ireland and Britain. While the Fenians continually attacked the general evil of landlordism, they believed that nothing could be done about it until Ireland was free. The Fenian leader, James Stephens, noted that while the movement sometimes advocated peasant ownership of land, 'national independence was put forward as the point to be gained *first*.'[17] There was no discussion on what *type* of republic might emerge from separation. One result of this was that the Fenian movement went through long periods of inactivity as it simply waited for the great day of the Rising.

The Catholic Church hated the Fenians. Led by the influential Cardinal Manning in Westminster, the Catholic hierarchy wanted to keep an Irish representation in the House of Commons as leverage to gain some advantage in a largely Protestant society. They also feared the republican ethos that proclaimed solidarity between Catholic and Protestant and a common citizenship based on nationality rather than religion. They preferred continuing British rule over Ireland – albeit with discrimination against their own church – to outright revolutionary politics. As Cardinal Cullen, the leader of the Irish Catholic Church put it:

> For thirty years I have studied the Revolution on the Continent; and for nearly thirty years I have watched the Nationalist movement in Ireland. It is tainted at its sources with the Revolutionary spirit. If ever an attempt is made to abridge the rights and liberties of the Catholic Church in Ireland, it will not be the English government, nor by a 'No Popery' cry in England but by the revolutionary and irreligious nationalists in Ireland.[18]

Much to the delight of the bishops, the Fenian uprising of 5 March 1867 was a disaster. A Fenian provisional government, based in London, had appointed an Irish-American officer, Godfrey Massey, to organise the uprising. Instead of embarking on a guerrilla-style action, he went for a full-scale insurrection, even though the movement had been weakened by previous arrests. The crushing of the uprising discredited the purely 'physical force' strategy for a generation and helped to bolster the bishops' condemnation of revolutionary secret societies.

From Land Reform to Redmondism

The defeat of the Fenian revolt led to splits and divisions. Some, led by Jeremiah O'Leary, wanted to wait until the time was ripe for another insurrection and did not want their movement sullied by any engagement with social issues. But others looked in a different direction. After the defeat, a number of Fenian revolutionaries began to grasp the connection between social issues and the fight for independence. Led by John Devoy in the US and Michael Davitt in Ireland, they embarked on a strategy of land agitation to win mass support for a national revolt against British rule. To facilitate this, they formed an informal 'broad front' with the rising star of the Irish Parliamentary Party, Charles Stewart Parnell. The 'New Departure' as it became known, was to play a decisive role in the reshaping of Irish