PROLOGUE: BEFORE THE EASTER RISING

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IRISH NATIONALISTS: POLITICIANS AND REBELS

On 16 June 1904, as Leopold Bloom walked the streets of Dublin, he paused to browse in a bookshop at Merchant's Arch. Nearby, in a small cluttered room at the back of a house on Fownes Street, the author of a bizarre political tract was nearing the end of his labours. Between 2 January and 2 July, Arthur Griffith's *The resurrection of Hungary* made its first appearance as a series of articles in the columns of his weekly newspaper, the *United Irishman*. It was a strange manifesto.[1] By Bloomsday twenty-four of its twenty-seven instalments had already been published, but although Griffith had provided a massively detailed treatment of Austro-Hungarian relations in the mid-nineteenth century he had, so far, barely mentioned Ireland. Nonetheless *The resurrection* became for many years the bible of the Sinn Féin party which Griffith dominated for over a decade, and with which he remained closely associated for the rest of his life. Not only did its final chapter lay down a blueprint for a political programme, part of which would be implemented many years later, but its very title hints at images that inspired radical Irish nationalism.

By the early twentieth century most Irish people were prepared to exploit the opportunities provided by their citizenship of the United Kingdom. Many grievances and injustices had already been remedied. In the course of the preceding decades Ireland had already experienced a social revolution, and most of the land which had been conquered and confiscated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was by now restored to the Catholic, Gaelic-Norman majority of the population – or at least to the dominant section of that majority. The Wyndham Act of 1903 accelerated the transfer of land ownership by providing

[1] In November 1904 the articles were published as a booklet consisting of ninety-nine pages of text and costing one penny. This was the same price as an issue of *The United Irishman*, and one-third the price of a pint of Guinness. Its mixture of lively journalism and pedantic detail is illustrated by the chapter headings, which ranged from 'And how the emperor of Austria lost his temper' to 'The meeting of the Hungarian diet of 1865'. The contents will be examined in more detail in pp. 17–18.

generous state loans to tenant farmers. But a small minority of nationalists deprecated all such reforms and insisted on regarding the country as oppressed, deracinated and moribund. These radicals believed that the Irish people should be jolted out of their trust in British measures, their bland acquiescence in an improved version of the status quo; only as a fully separate state could the nation be regenerated. Some members of this faction planned to fight for a republic on the French or American model, while Griffith argued that Ireland should follow the peaceful example provided by Hungary in the mid-nineteenth century.

For many decades their cause had seemed hopeless, but they revealed an almost religious faith as they awaited and prepared for a national resurrection. It was appropriate that a symbol often associated with them was that of the phoenix rising from its own ashes; failure, however often repeated, was no more than a prelude to ultimate triumph. Eventually the most daring of these revolutionaries seized the unexpected opportunities which became available to them. On Easter Monday 1916 they staged a rebellion, and although it failed their action brought their cause the mass support which the Irish people had always denied it. Soldiers soon joined forces with politicians, and for the next few years virtually all those who sought a fully independent Ireland were able to work together within the Sinn Féin party. (Some also worked through another body, the Irish Republican Army.) By now, however, Sinn Féin had been transformed into a movement vastly different from anything which Griffith could have imagined as he wrote *The resurrection of Hungary* in the weeks before and after Bloomsday.

In February 1922 Joyce's *Ulysses* was published in Paris. A month earlier Griffith had been elected president of an independent Irish parliament remarkably similar to that which he had advocated in 1904. Only his opponents recognized him as the president of an Irish republic which he had not sought and which he now disowned. This paradox illustrates the complex history of the ideas which he propagated, the party which he led, and the conflicts in which he became embroiled.

Sinn Féin, the political manifestation of the Irish revolution, was born in the aftermath of a doomed rebellion and died in the bitterness of a civil war. In most respects it was a new organization, although it retained the name of Griffith's party, together with some of its predecessor's structures and policies. It represented a synthesis of different beliefs, traditions and methods. It was a coalition between two forms of Irish nationalism, one committed to the establishment of an Irish republic by revolutionary measures, the other aiming at a more limited degree of independence which would be achieved through political organization and passive resistance. Although dominated by soldiers, the party became a triumphant political force; although committed to a goal which necessitated

violence, it helped lay the foundations of a democratic state; although successful and massively popular, it was soon repudiated and abandoned by almost all its members; and although its ultimate enemy was the British government, many of its heroic struggles were fought against fellow nationalists. Its first opponent (and also its first victim) was the moderate home rule movement, or the Irish Parliamentary Party.

Home rulers and their enemies

The home rule party had dominated Irish public life for decades. Inaugurated in a diffident manner by Isaac Butt in the early 1870s, re-established in an imperious style by Charles Stewart Parnell some years later, it had succeeded by 1885 in crushing or marginalizing all rival forms of Irish nationalism. It was faction-ridden, and at local level its organization remained weak, but outside the unionist stronghold of the north-east it faced no serious competition. The party was able to disengage itself from its involvement in the Land War and from its tactical co-operation with Irish republicans. It replaced this short-lived 'new departure' by a strategic alliance with the British Liberals which lasted until the First World War. In social terms the home rule movement became increasingly conservative, and it prospered through its close links with those tenant farmers who benefited from the land acts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However the fact that so much of its programme on the land question was implemented by British governments made the party appear irrelevant to many who had supported it as an agent of social change;[2] home rule became its only significant remaining objective, and its survival became ever more dependent on achieving this one aim.

The Parliamentary Party was an inclusive, 'catch-all' movement which thrived on imprecision. Its ranks included mutually suspicious and even mutually hostile groups which could be expected to quarrel among themselves once home rule had been achieved. Its members were encouraged 'to restrict discussion to generalities about the "national cause" to which no interest group could take exception. Vague slogans could win acceptance from a far more diverse army than any well-formed, and therefore controversial, programme of future action could have done.'[3] For over thirty years nationalist

[2] Paul Bew, 'Sinn Fein, agrarian radicalism and the War of Independence, 1919–1921', in D. G. Boyce (ed.), *The revolution in Ireland, 1879–1923* (London, 1988), p. 224.

[3] David Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish life, 1913–1921: provincial experience of war and revolution* (Dublin, 1977), pp. 92–3.

Ireland was overshadowed by this one party, either in its original united and disciplined form or else in the changing shapes of its different factions. From 1900 until his death eighteen years later its leader was John Redmond, who was accompanied (often unhappily) by his deputy, John Dillon, and it was supported by all but a small minority of Irish nationalists.

To maintain this mass democratic following was in itself a triumph, since the party failed to translate its popularity into the achievement of its main objective. For decade after decade Westminster consistently ignored or rebuffed the demand made by the vast majority of Irish electors, and yet their faith in parliamentary methods remained largely intact. The habit of seeking British support became ingrained, and one radical nationalist lamented long afterwards that the people were preoccupied by performances in the House of Commons. 'To all appearance Ireland had abandoned Physical Force and thrown its all on the political spell-binders at Westminster.'[4]

The process of democratization proceeded slowly, despite the changes in land ownership, and the Protestant ascendancy retained much of its old dominance. By the outbreak of the First World War many intelligent and ambitious young people felt frustrated and resentful. In 1911 Catholics comprised 74 per cent of the population, but they accounted for only 46 per cent of those who worked in insurance companies, 44 per cent of barristers and solicitors, 42 per cent of commercial travellers, 39 per cent of auctioneers, 36 per cent of civil engineers, and 35 per cent of bankers and bank officials;[5] 78 per cent of policemen were Catholics, but five years later thirty-three of the thirty-seven RIC county inspectors were Protestants.[6] The mass of the population might reasonably feel that it was excluded from many of the country's better-paid or more prestigious occupations, and a sense of victimization was one of the driving forces behind Irish nationalism. Yet despite the remaining injustices, and despite latent (at times, blatant) anti-British sentiment, those radicals who demanded drastic social or political changes could attract only a few followers. In most respects the 'wild Irishman' was no more than a British caricature, and a large majority of the population sought moderate aims by political means.

Redmond varied his tactics in the course of the long struggle for home rule, and having attempted to conciliate unionists between 1893 and 1903 he sought to overcome them in the years after 1909.[7] But his basic strategy remained unal-

[4] J. J. Walsh, *Recollections of a rebel* (Tralee, 1944), p. 16.

[5] *Census of Ireland, 1911. General report, with tables and appendix* (London, 1913), pp. 9–10.

[6] Henry Duke, *Hansard*, 87, col. 414 (9 Nov. 1916).

[7] Paul Bew, *Conflict and conciliation in Ireland, 1890–1910: Parnellites and radical agrarians* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 193–4, 199.

tered. He depended on his alliance with the Liberal party – even though in some respects the Conservatives proved to be more thoroughgoing reformers, and even though the Liberals' return to office in 1905 seemed to bring home rule no closer. Irish unionists grew uneasy as their British protecters relaxed their vigilance, and their most energetic Conservative champion, Walter Long, found it difficult to defend a union which did not seem to be endangered.[8] But after the deadlocked 1910 elections it seemed as if the Nationalists' long years in the wilderness had come to an end. Asquith's Liberal government now depended on Irish support for its survival, and it introduced a new home rule bill soon after the House of Lords' power of veto had been abolished. Under the protective umbrella of the 1911 Parliament Act a devolved legislature would be elected in Dublin within three or four years. It appeared that the Nationalists' faith in the Liberals and in British democracy had been vindicated, and that their patience would be rewarded at last.

The Conservative opposition and its unionist allies realized that they could no longer block home rule by constitutional means. They resorted to treason. Inspired by Sir Edward Carson they formed a paramilitary force, smuggled German arms into unionist Ulster, and threatened rebellion against the government. Andrew Bonar Law and his Conservatives were able to combine principle with cynicism as they incited their unionist protégés to defy the Liberal cabinet and a majority of MPs. Irish moderates were embarrassed and discredited. In the words of one republican observer, 'it seemed to the Irish people that the English desired to have it both ways. When they [the Irish] sought to enforce their national rights by the methods of Fenianism they were told to agitate constitutionally, and when they acted constitutionally they were met by the methods of Fenianism.'[9] In the Curragh Incident of April 1914 a group of army officers made it clear that they would resign their commissions rather than obey any orders which involved suppression of the Ulster Volunteers; they claimed the right to pick and choose between the various instructions which they received from their superiors, a liberty which (as Labour spokesmen and others pointed out) they would not tolerate among the soldiers under their command. For virtually the only time in recent British history a government felt it could not rely on its army, and there were widespread fears of civil war in both Britain and Ireland.

At least part of the reason why home rule perished was that the Tories refused to regard it as anything less than revolutionary and destructive;[10] thereby they precipitated a more full-blooded upheaval which destroyed far more of the

[8] John Kendle, *Walter Long, Ireland, and the union, 1905–1920* (Dun Laoghaire, 1992), p. 53.

[9] Bulmer Hobson, *A short history of the Irish Volunteers* (Dublin, 1918), p. 92.

[10] Patrick O'Farrell, *Ireland's English question* (London, 1971), p. 175.

system which they wished to preserve. They began the process of radicalizing Irish nationalists, of pushing them into support for drastic measures which would have been unthinkable in the early years of the century. On the Conservative and Unionist leaders lies the ultimate responsibility for redirecting the course of Irish politics. Bonar Law and Carson were to be deeply shocked and repelled by much that happened in Ireland during the decade which followed their defiance of parliamentary government, but without their example the Irish revolution would not have come about. General Maxwell, who suppressed the Easter Rising, appreciated this influence when he remarked that the Ulster Volunteers were responsible for Ireland's inflammable situation: 'from this date the troubles. The law was broken, and others broke the law with more or less success.'[11]

Already before the outbreak of the First World War Redmond's Parliamentary Party had been gravely weakened by the unionists' armed challenge. After September 1914, when the Home Rule Bill was simultaneously enacted and suspended for the duration of the war, the party did little more than follow Asquith's earlier advice to his opponents that they should 'wait and see'. Its members watched in dismay when the Conservatives returned to office in May 1915 as the junior partners in a wartime coalition. Nationalists could only hope that this shift in the political balance of power would not be followed by any dilution of the concessions which Redmond had earlier squeezed from the Liberal government. As disillusionment spread among home rule supporters their fervour and optimism seeped away.

Police records provide one indication of this weakening support for the Parliamentary Party. Every month the RIC prepared sets of figures relating to the United Irish League (UIL), the party's national organization. The statistics are unlikely to be accurate in detail, but they nonetheless provide a revealing general impression of its drift after the Redmondites had been blown off course by the unionist wind. Every year between 1913 and 1918 there was a drop in the police estimates of party membership, from 132,000 at the beginning of the period to 105,000 at the end. The number of branches fluctuated, but here too there was an overall decline, from 1,244 to 1,077.[12] In July 1915 it proved impossible to hold a convention in North Tipperary to choose a successor to the deceased MP because, in Redmond's words, 'the branches of the organisation have been allowed to die out'.[13] Subventions from the United Irish League of

[11] Maxwell, 'Report on the state of Ireland since the rebellion', 24 June 1916, Cab.37/150/18.

[12] 'United Irish League meetings', CO.904/20/2.

[13] Paul Bew, *Ideology and the Irish question: Ulster unionism and Irish nationalism 1912–1916* (Oxford, 1994), p. 145.

America virtually dried up when Redmond urged Irish Volunteers to join the British army after the outbreak of the First World War; by 1915 he was obliged to reverse the normal direction of the flow of money sent across the Atlantic, and he supported the American organization with funds from Ireland.[14] Even though Irish revolutionaries did not seize the initiative until the Easter Rising and its aftermath, the Nationalists had lost their momentum before the outbreak of the war. Carson had already knocked Redmond off his pedestal before Clarke or Pearse, de Valera or Griffith were able to do so.

The unionists were only one of several forces whose combined efforts formed a broad (if often unconscious) coalition of interests opposed to the cause of home rule. Another was the 'Irish-Ireland' movement which, despite its commitment to cultural and non-political objectives, nonetheless helped undermine the bases of the party's support and beliefs. In the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth, the Irish people had changed their vernacular from Irish to English, and in contrast to many of its European counterparts Irish nationalism expressed itself in the language of the occupying power.[15] A small minority took a different path; working mainly through the Gaelic League, its members hoped to create an Irish-speaking Ireland which would throw off British cultural (rather than political) domination. For centuries Catholicism had been the traditional badge and shield of Irish identity, differentiating the majority of the island's population from Protestant Britain. But both political and cultural nationalists rejected this equation; many of their early leaders were Protestants, and they all wished (at least in theory) to appeal to the million Protestants who lived in Ulster. In some quarters it was hoped, improbably, that the propagation of a separate language would smooth over Irish sectarian divisions. The more radical among the cultural nationalists planned not merely to reform and regenerate the Irish people; they also hoped to achieve a separate state in which the people's distinctive identity could be fostered by a sympathetic government. They saw this as a natural and logical progression.

Early in the twentieth century a new intolerant mood emerged, a determination that Irish would be made 'essential' or compulsory for educational

[14] Francis M. Carroll, *American opinion and the Irish question, 1910–23* (Dublin, 1978), p. 42; Alan J. Ward, *Ireland and Anglo-American relations, 1899–1921* (London, 1969), p. 80.

[15] On the Irish experience see Garret FitzGerald, 'Estimates for baronies of minimum level of Irish-speaking amongst successive decennial cohorts: 1771–1781 to 1861–1871', in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 84, C (Dublin, 1984), pp. 117–55 (summarized in *IT*, 10 June 1985); on parallel developments elsewhere see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism* (2nd edn, London, 1991), pp. 73–5.

advancement; it would become what English had been in the past, the language of opportunity.[16] The Gaelic revival movement achieved some success in ensuring that knowledge of Irish became a prerequisite of higher education, but the British authorities blocked its attempts to 'nationalize' both the educational system and public appointments in the Gaeltacht (the remaining Irish-speaking districts which were concentrated on the Atlantic coast). Its members tended increasingly to think in terms of capturing the state machine as a first step towards implementing their programme.[17]

Nationalism rescued the Irish language revival from what many people dismissed as mere scholarly antiquarianism, and the Gaelic League's political neutrality became harder to maintain. Douglas Hyde prided himself on being a 'non-political' president throughout the first twenty-two years of its existence, but even he singled out the Parliamentary Party for attack.[18] Eoin MacNeill – who with perfect symbolism was the main inspiration both for the Gaelic League in 1893 and the Irish Volunteers twenty years later – was able to write in 1908 that 'while I believe in working the language movement honestly for its own ends, I cannot hide from myself the conviction that this movement is also steadily building up the foundations of political freedom'.[19] Some years later the MP for West Kerry referred to 'the poison of the Gaelic League', and complained that Irish language students were nearly all anti-party men.[20]

Long before the First World War the failure of a purely cultural movement had become apparent, and some of those who were committed to a linguistic revolution came to believe also in the necessity of a military struggle. Patrick Pearse and Eamon de Valera were merely the most prominent among those idealists who concluded that their aims could be achieved only by rebellion. And a growing number of radicals saw cultural nationalism simply as one of many weapons which could be used to fight the British; for them 'the Irish language was valued not for itself but as a symbol of national distinctiveness. Beyond that, it was fit only for children and for others who needed protection against English civilization.'[21] Many cultural revolutionaries rejected the constitutional

[16] See R. V. Comerford, 'Nationalism and the Irish language', in Thomas E. Hachey and Lawrence J. McCaffrey (eds.), *Perspectives on Irish nationalism* (Lexington, 1989), pp. 33–5. Also see below, pp. 236–9.

[17] John Hutchinson, *The dynamics of cultural nationalism: the Gaelic revival and the creation of the Irish nation state* (London, 1987), p. 293.

[18] D. George Boyce, *Nationalism in Ireland* (3rd edn, Dublin, 1995), p. 239.

[19] Michael Tierney, *Eoin MacNeill, scholar and man of action, 1867–1945* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 104–5.

[20] Thomas O'Donnell to Dillon, 14 Oct. 1914, cited in J. Anthony Gaughan, *A political odyssey: Thomas O'Donnell, M.P. for West Kerry, 1900–1918* (Dublin, 1983), p. 97.

[21] Tom Garvin, *Nationalist revolutionaries in Ireland, 1858–1928* (Oxford, 1987), p. 102.

methods of the Parliamentary Party, along with what they believed to be its complacency and corruption. MacNeill loathed the way in which 'Ireland's representatives wheedled, fawned, begged, bargained and truckled for a provincial legislature.'[22]

Every setback experienced by Redmond and his followers in their battles with the Conservatives and Ulster unionists made them more vulnerable to the attacks of enemies within their own camp. They were assailed and undermined by the 'separatists', those nationalists who sought a far more thorough degree of separation or independence than was provided by the Home Rule Bill. Over time the party became increasingly exposed to critics who demanded more assertive tactics than negotiation and compromise with British ministers.

The IRB and the Volunteers

Among the fiercest opponents of moderate nationalism was the Irish Republican Brotherhood, or IRB, whose aim was the achievement of a fully independent Irish republic. It was the successor of the Fenians, the more flexible of whom had engaged in electoral politics and had co-operated briefly with Parnell in the 'new departure' of 1879, but most of whose members repudiated even a tentative flirtation with constitutional methods. Wariness of political activity was an enduring characteristic of Irish republicanism. The brotherhood was dedicated to achieving its aims by conspiracy and rebellion, and its members were always a small minority, unrepresentative of most Irish nationalists; it was a secret society like the Italian Carbonari, a revolutionary underground like the Russian Bolsheviks.

The IRB infiltrated the various bodies which flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in particular it concentrated on the two main expressions of 'Irish Ireland', the Gaelic League and the Gaelic Athletic Association. Long before the 1916 Rising the brotherhood had begun to appropriate the Irish language and Gaelic games.[23] In turn it was observed closely by the British authorities, and its activities were reported to Dublin Castle by spies and informers.[24] This surveillance was eased after 1905 when the Liberals returned to power, largely because of an over-confident belief that (in the words of one senior Castle official) 'there is no evidence that the IRB is anything but

[22] Eoin MacNeill, *Daniel O'Connell and Sinn Féin* (Dublin, 1915), p. 15.

[23] Garvin, *Nationalist revolutionaries*, p. 98.

[24] Leon Ó Broin, *Revolutionary underground; the story of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, 1858–1924* (Dublin, 1976), pp. 117–20.