

EDITORIAL

The Irish Revolution

Fifty years ago, on Easter Monday, April 25, 1916, began the glorious Irish Revolution, a revolution that was to end by sweeping away a monstrous record of brutality and oppression that had been foisted for centuries upon the long-suffering Irish people. In defeating the mighty armies of the greatest and most ruthless empire on the face of the earth, the Irish were the first people to have the courage and the stamina to follow through on the promise of the American Revolution against the same imperial oppressors: a Revolution that had been the first successful war of national liberation in modern history. The Irish Revolution was the second such successful war. For other wars of national liberation prompted by the American Revolution (e. g. Belgium, the Netherlands, Geneva, and later the revolutions of 1848) had been beaten back by the forces of armed international counter-revolution.

The Irish Revolution was fought and won in the only way such wars can be won: in relentless guerrilla fashion, by an armed people. Characteristically, it was begun heedlessly, recklessly by a relatively small band of idealistic young people, young people who did not sit around waiting for the ripening of "objective conditions" before launching their rebellion. The Easter Rising was hopeless, bungled, quixotic, doomed--and yet was eventually to succeed, thus confirming the unquenchable convictions of the rebel leaders. As the historian of the Irish Revolution writes:

The leaders realized with complete clarity that the majority of the Irish people were almost lost to all sense of the rights of Ireland as a nation, had learned to rely on the vague optimism of the Parliamentarians and were ready to give thanks for a petty instalment of Home Rule. The Independence movement was the movement of a minority still, and those who were ready to give and take

life in armed insurrection were a minority in that movement. They believed, however, that the inherent native passion for freedom was dormant, not extinguished, and that only bold action was needed to arouse the people to a sense of their rights, their needs, and the strength that still lay within them unused.¹

While their actions were quixotic in the short-run, the rebel leaders were astute enough to realize that England's troubles were Ireland's opportunity, and that therefore England's embroilment in World War I furnished an indispensable opportunity for launching the revolution. This illustrates the general historical rule that imperialist wars form the seedbed of revolution.

The linkage between America and the Irish cause has not been confined to the influence of the American Revolution. The Irish cause has long been sustained and nurtured, materially and morally, by Irish-Americans, in such influential organizations as the Clan-na-Gael. Irish-and-American linkage has also run the other way: for the methods and procedures used by the English to suppress the Irish then served as models for English imperial rule over the American colonies. Not only that; for the genocidal racism directed against the Irish also served as model for the English-American treatment of the American Indian. The pattern of dehumanization was for the English to steal Irish land, murder and drive out the inhabitants, and then to sneer at the unfortunate Irish as inhuman because they somehow chose to live in squalor and misery. Thus, the English historian William Thomas wrote in 1552:

. . .the wild Irish, as unreasonable beasts, lived without any knowledge of God or good manners, in common of their goods, cattle, women, children, and every other thing. . .And hereof it followed that because their savage and idle life could not be satisfied with the only fruit of the natural unlaboured earth, therefore continually they invaded the fertile possessions of their Irish neighbours that inhabited the. . .English Pale.²

During its relatively brief career, the government

1. Dorothy Macardle, The Irish Republic (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1965), pp. 145-46.
2. In Howard Mumford Jones, O Strange New World (New York: The Viking Press, 1964), p. 169.

of the United States of America has come down unerringly on the wrong side of virtually every issue in foreign affairs. Its record during the Irish rebellion was all too consistent with this bleak record. Rather than being favorable, or even neutral, toward the Irish struggle for freedom, that great Anglophiliac fighter for national self-determination and the rights of small nations, Woodrow Wilson, did his best to rivet the chains of oppression upon Ireland. Despite our supposed neutrality in the World War, agents of the U. S. Secret Service illegally raided the offices of the German Consul in New York on April 18, 1916, and there broke into and confiscated the files of correspondence. On finding news of the imminent Easter rising, the U. S. government lost no time in transmitting the information to the British Embassy, and this act of invasion and belligerence played an important part in crushing the initial stage of the rebellion. The resulting summary execution of the rebel leaders by the British may thus be partly laid to the door of the Wilson Administration.

America's entry into World War I provided the Wilson Administration with the opportunity to harass and persecute American friends of Irish liberation. Confiscated German documents were leaked to the press smearing Irish-American leaders. Particularly severe was the persecution of Jeremiah A. O'Leary. O'Leary was indicted by the Administration for conspiring to obstruct recruiting in the armed forces and to commit treason, and documents were released to the press charging him with being ready to commit sabotage on behalf of Germany. So ill that his trial had to be postponed, systematic brutalities were inflicted upon O'Leary in the Tombs prison. Finally acquitted in January, 1919, O'Leary was given a hero's welcome by thousands of Irish-Americans in New York City.

In the summer of 1917, the Friends of Irish Freedom circulated a petition in the United States for Irish independence. Woodrow Wilson's response was characteristic: ordering Secret Service agents to engage in rigorous examination of the finances of the Friends. Was their campaign financed by "German gold?"³ Neither were local governments hesitant about getting into the patriotic act. Peaceful meetings of the Friends in New York City were broken up by the police and by federal soldiers, who had been creative enough to

3. See Charles C. Tansill, America and the Fight for Irish Freedom (New York: Devin-Adair, 1957), pp. 233ff.

include the "preaching of sedition" in their definitions of "disorderly conduct" and "obstructing traffic." The Espionage Act was also invoked to break up pro-Irish meetings. The good, grey Anglophiliac New York Times hailed this "forward step" in preventing expressions of sedition; but, it sententiously hastened to add, "free speech, in a reasonable sense, will not be interfered with."⁴

But the implacable ruthlessness of the British Empire, assisted by its mighty U. S. ally, could not suffice to keep Ireland in thrall forever. The Irish Republic proclaimed by seven gallant and seemingly quixotic rebel leaders on Easter Monday, 1916, was destined to prevail, despite their execution by the vengeful British. Perhaps the best epitaph to these men was the deeply moving revolutionary speech delivered the previous August by the young lawyer and poet, Padraic Pearse, who was to read this proclamation of the Irish Republic and be named its President. Pearse's great speech was a eulogy at the funeral of the grand old Fenian rebel, Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, and the enthusiasm lit by Pearse at that eulogy may be considered the spark for the Easter Rising eight months later. Pearse had stirringly proclaimed:

. . .if there is anything that makes it fitting that I rather. . .than one of the grey-haired men who were young with him and shared in his labour and in his suffering, should speak here, it is perhaps that I may be taken as speaking on behalf of a new generation that has been rebaptised in the Fenian faith, and that has accepted the responsibility of carrying out the Fenian program. I propose to you then that, here by the grave of this unrepentant Fenian, we renew our baptismal vows; that, here by the grave of this unconquered and unconquerable man, we ask of God, each one for himself, such unshakable purpose, such high and gallant courage, such unbreakable strength of soul as belonged to O'Donovan Rossa. . .

We stand at Rossa's grave not in sadness but rather in exaltation of spirit that it has been given to us to come into so close a communion with that brave and splendid Gael . . .

In a closer spiritual communion with him now

4. H. C. Peterson and Gilbert C. Fite, Opponents of War, 1917-1918 (Madison, Wisc.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1957), p. 74.

than ever before or perhaps ever again, in spiritual communion with those of his day, living and dead, who suffered with him in English prisons, in communion of spirit too with our own dear comrades who suffer in English prisons today, and speaking on their behalf as well as our own, we pledge to Ireland our love, and we pledge to English rule in Ireland our hate. This is a place of peace sacred to the dead, where men should speak with all charity and all restraint; but I hold it a Christian thing, as O'Donovan Rossa held it, to hate evil, to hate untruth, to hate oppression, and hating them, to strive to overthrow them. Our foes are strong and wise and wary; but, strong and wise and wary as they are, they cannot undo the miracles of God who ripens in the hearts of young men the seeds sown by the young men of a former generation. And the seeds sown by the young men of '65 and '67 are coming to their miraculous ripening today. Rulers and Defenders of Realms had need to be wary if they would guard against such processes. Life springs from death; and from the graves of patriot men and women spring living nations. The Defenders of this Realm have worked well in secret and in the open. They think that they have pacified Ireland. They think that they have purchased half of us and intimidated the other half. They think that they have foreseen everything, think that they have provided against everything; but the fools, the fools, the fools!-- they have left us our Fenian dead, and while Ireland holds these graves, Ireland unfree shall never be at peace.⁵

5. Macardle, *op. cit.*, pp. 136-37.