

## From Deference to Citizenship: Irish Republicanism 1870–1923

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Irish nationalism and republicanism are often treated as transcendent phenomena to be glorified or condemned, but, while taking account of the abiding issues, it is also necessary to understand what they defined themselves against in any particular period.

### **Deference denied**

The first of these was an *ancien régime* ideology which presented society in terms of patronage, dependence and hierarchy. The monarchy stood at the apex of a state viewed in familial terms ('family' could be defined by household membership rather than blood relationship). For much of the nineteenth century, landlords exercised many administrative functions later lost to central administration or local government, and surplus sons of the gentry enjoyed privileged access to administrative jobs. On a social level, such functions as harvest dinners for larger tenants and ceremonial addresses by tenants at points in the landlord's family cycle reasserted paternalist claims.

The paternalist self-image, always wishful thinking, was further vitiated by the famine and the increasing distancing of the élite from plebeian recreations and moral economy. It was subverted by nationalist movements not only through physical force and boycott but by orchestrated withdrawal of deferential courtesies; and occasions on which ceremonies associated with deference took place were appropriated to honour nationalist leaders whose authority was based on the popular will, just as nationalist and catholic monuments contested public space with architectural expressions of state and landlord authority.

The image of the virtuous, self-reliant, moral, patriotic peasant was a conscious riposte to conservative images of peasant irresponsibility and deference. Peasant virtue was alleged to reflect productive labour, contrasted with a self-indulgent, aristocratic leisure-ethos. Republican pastoralists projected this ideal onto the existing rural population; they recognised tensions between tenant farmers and labourers and the political

passivity of farmers with something to lose, but believed these could be resolved by politicisation. Republican activists attempted to absorb local agrarian societies into the wider movement, despite fears that absorption might work in both directions.

### **The whig failure**

One way to equal citizenship might have come through popular liberalism defined against a tory landed class; its possibilities were indicated by recurring alliances between liberals and constitutional nationalists and accusations by separatists that constitutionalists were liberals rather than nationalists. However, the shadow of the famine, deindustrialisation and earlier attempts to 'marketise' landholding prevented such political assimilation. Liberals (whose leadership remained heavily aristocratic until the 1880s) too often dismissed Irish demands for special treatment as demagoguery and were reluctant to make concessions until agitation was too widespread to be disregarded. Irish police employed political surveillance and *agents provocateur* to an extent unknown in contemporary Britain; nationalists quoted British denunciations of continental political policing as tyranny and compared liberal denunciations of Neapolitan prisons and advocacy of Italian national self-government with practices in Ireland.

Outside Ulster, liberalism became associated with upper-middle-class 'whigs', whose political brokerage provided certain benefits for previously excluded clients but easily shaded into self-seeking, and the project of creating a biddable catholic ruling class by many of the higher clergy. 'Whig' ability to win support through brokerage was also limited by a sense that catholics were discriminated against as catholics in a British polity which saw protestantism as the basis of autonomous citizenship and intellectual and economic progress. The idea that independence would mean freedom to be catholics coexisted with secular nationalism and reinforced separatism by grassroots 'faith and fatherland' sentiments, despite republican anticlericalism and the hostility of the higher clergy. Meritocracy made headway against patronage, but too many potential meritocrats and followers saw this as widening clientage rather than genuine reform for the administration to acquire a genuine popular base.

### **Decay, anger and self-help**

Many young nationalists associated their disadvantages facing institutionalised patronage structures with national economic decay and attributed Irish poverty to British exploitation, which divided the nation by corrupting sections with hollow privileges. This angry association of

political corruption and looming national extinction found expression in the writings of John Mitchel. Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century of all shades shared Mitchel's rage at the contrast between whig promises and the state of the nation. In his final manifestoes, denouncing corruption and declaring Ireland could be saved if the Irish willed it, Pearse echoes Mitchel.

A canon of nationalist literature, centred on the writings of Young Ireland, was disseminated through publications such as the Sullivan brothers' *Irish Penny Readings* and *Speeches from the Dock* or popular papers like the weekly *Shamrock*, providing a framework through which populist newspapers interpreted current events. Reading rooms and debating societies provided social outlets as well as political expression. A culture of artisan self-help, overlapping with male social networks, produced a separatist subculture consciously defying the control of authority figures in church and state. The self-disciplined citizen soldier was contrasted with the mercenaries of the government and defined against the urban lumpenproletariat as well as the idle aristocracy. The GAA reflects this resistance to absorption from above and below. Most games excluded by the GAA ban were seen as upper-class; the exception was soccer, associated with degenerate anglicised lumpenproletarians.

### **Secrecy versus politicisation**

The need for revolutionary movements to gain recruits and publicise the cause coexisted with the need to organise in secret. This was less problematic at moments of political upheaval, when success seemed imminent; in more quiescent times the IRB maintained organisational continuity, but was hindered by internal rivalries, infiltration, and the problem of maintaining support when there seemed no hope of victory in the near future. At such times, republican commitment reflected the life-cycle, with members falling away as the prospect of revolutionary change seemed remote and they acquired family responsibilities. The republican movement consisted of a shifting body of younger activists and a core of older figures whose long-term commitments involved considerable sacrifice. Critics saw republicans as irresponsible adolescent fantasists; purists saw constitutionalism as corruption and republican heroism incarnated in the lifelong commitment of such figures as John O'Leary or the London-based Fenian, Mark Ryan.

Some separatists, as well as most constitutionalists, thought secrecy demoralising and contrary to the ethos of citizenship. In 1848, Mitchel attributed the failure of the United Irishmen to their operation as a secret society and declared victory inevitable if the Irish people scorned temporising and openly defied British rule; he was transported to

Australia. Sixty years later Griffith declared he had no secrets for spies to uncover and proclaimed ‘treason’ openly; Griffith’s paper was occasionally seized by the police before 1906 (failure to take more drastic action reflected political space won by nationalists since 1848). Some later separatists subscribed to the Mitchelian view for political or religious reasons; when final victory seemed imminent after 1916, some Sinn Féin leaders argued that a secret society was unnecessary once mass support was secured.

### **Economic citizenship**

Separatism often involved rejection of economic liberalism. Most nationalists (and some unionists) believed that the early nineteenth-century deindustrialisation of Ireland could have been prevented by tariffs, that Irish workers and employers shared a common interest in the well-being of Irish firms, and that an Irish state would promote the national economic interest rather than any section. It was believed republicanism implied social equality. The Belfast Fenian Frank Roney joined the IRB because he believed the poverty he saw in Belfast slums could not exist in a republic. (His exile to America disabused him of this belief). The Invincible P.J.P. Tynan argued Home Rule could not solve Ireland’s problems because it precluded industrial development through tariffs. Belief in a developmental state was compatible with a ‘producerist’ alliance between Irish employers and workers (often seen in terms of conflict between those who made things—farmers, labourers, manufacturers—and ‘parasitic’ importers and distributors, who aped aristocratic scorn for ‘trade’). However, it was often equated with socialism by later writers who included Irish capitalists in the parasitic classes, sought to construct a socialist republican pedigree from the nationalist canon, and called socialism the natural corollary of republican equal citizenship (while traditional nationalists, not always insincerely, proclaimed that British workers would prove no less manipulative towards their Irish allies than British whigs).

Similarly, the attraction of republicanism for some élite women in the period reflected hostility to the aristocratic view of woman as ornament. Despite its limitations, the classical republican image of heroic domesticity, servicing the male citizen-warrior and the next generation of citizens, could be extended to justify political and economic activity in defence of the ‘hearth’, metaphorically extended to the whole nation. Here again, towards the end of the period, the possible full implications of equal citizenship were advanced.

## Twins

For most of the period 1870–1922, republicanism was overshadowed by the Irish parliamentary party. The two movements had more in common than often realised. Throughout the period, constitutional nationalists joined separatists in commemorating the Manchester Martyrs (whose anniversary on 23 November became a major nationalist anniversary) or demanding amnesty for prisoners—the amnesty campaign of the late 1860s and early 1870s was a seed-bed of the Home Rule movement as well as a means by which the IRB regrouped. The Irish party often presented itself as part of a constitutional tradition going back to Grattan and O’Connell and distinct from the separatism of Tone and Young Ireland. It was also possible (especially for members who had been Fenians) to see the Irish party as heirs to the Fenians, achieving their aims by different means. The ‘other’ against whom many Irish party supporters defined their nationalism was not so much the IRB remnant, as the ‘whigs’ and ‘Nominal Home Rulers’ displaced from parliament in 1885 but retaining influence through economic, professional and political patronage; internal party divisions were characterised by accusations that the opposing faction had reverted to ‘whiggery’.

The role of the IRB in the Land League at local level (especially in its Mayo birthplace) remains underexplored. Leading IRB Land Leaguers believed the British government was so dominated by the landed classes that it would never make serious concessions to the tenants; hence, land agitation would automatically produce separatism. This underestimated the willingness of Gladstone to make concessions in his 1881 Land Act, which detached many farmers from radical agitation. The land campaigns succeeded in partially paralysing the administration and to some degree creating alternative power structures such as ‘Land League courts’, but the campaign of 1881–2 while the main Parnellite leaders were interned in Kilmainham, though showing Ireland could not be governed without some concession to Parnell, degenerated into sporadic, unco-ordinated violence and failed to produce a viable alternative strategy or leadership.

The flight of many radicals after the Kilmainham Treaty and the Phoenix Park murders strengthened Parnell’s parliamentarian control of the movement. The artisan separatist tradition survived, Irish-American groups continued to mount dynamite attacks in Britain, and an IRB tradition mixed with ‘Whiteboyism’ survived in areas such as mid-Clare and east Galway where the land struggle was particularly bitter—but these were weak, ill-directed, and increasingly penetrated by government agents. Their main importance lay in the creation of new martyrs and their use against constitutional nationalism by unionists. Meanwhile,

accommodation and intimidation of conservative forces within catholic Ireland which were too powerful to be destroyed, an aggressive campaign against the administration of Ireland (in particular the administration of justice), and the extension of the franchise by the Third Reform Act gave Parnell a stronger electoral mandate and, by British terms of reference, a clearer claim to represent Ireland than any previous nationalist leader.

### **‘Union of Hearts’?**

Gladstone’s response to the 1885 election—willingness to offer greater Irish autonomy than any mainstream British politician had previously considered—suggested Irish concerns might possibly be accommodated within a British framework. Gladstonian liberals and even nationalists claimed Home Rule would produce a ‘Union of Hearts’ more enduring than an incorporating union based on coercion. As most of the liberal aristocracy finally defected to the conservatives, Michael Davitt—already active in British radical campaigns—proclaimed that ‘British Democracy’ and the Irish people faced a common struggle against privilege. (A few Party supporters were republicans but not separatists, advocates of a federal British republic). Richard Barry O’Brien, a former Fenian sympathiser who moderated his views after the reforms of the first Gladstone government convinced him some Englishmen recognised Irish grievances, published books upholding Gladstonian claims to represent the liberal reform tradition (as against liberal unionists) by arguing that liberal policies in Ireland were blighted by unwillingness to accept the logical conclusion of trusting the people. The Plan of Campaign land agitation, whose objectives included showing that Ireland would be ungovernable without Home Rule and keeping local activists occupied, consolidated Irish support by displaying parliamentarians as martyrs, although some separatists regarded their brief imprisonments as cheap and showy in comparison with the long suffering of Fenian prisoners.

This strategy had its limitations. The plan structures were damaged by mismanagement and countered by ruthlessly-enforced emergency legislation. Liberals made electoral use of the plan, but only a few radicals were prepared to endorse outright defiance of the law and Parnell privately doubted its wisdom; the agitation provided unionists with additional ‘evidence’ that Irish nationalists were too barbaric to be acceptable political partners, supported by copious recital of agrarian violence and mutual denunciations by Irish and Gladstonians. Unionists proclaimed that nationalist majorities in ‘the south and west’ did not constitute a distinct nation which could override law-abiding citizens who knew how to run the country; the view that Ulster unionists were not a national minority but a separate nation was occasionally canvassed,

though it did not become central until the dismantling of the landlord position and the persistence of the Home Rule demand further undermined southern unionism. Most fatally, the 'Union of Hearts' project rested on an unrealistic assessment of the ability of Gladstone to convert the British public to Home Rule, masked in the short term by the vigour of the Gladstonian crusade.

### **Whigs or nationalists?**

The Parnell split exposed the equivocations behind 'Union of Hearts' rhetoric. Parnell claimed anti-Parnellite willingness to sacrifice their leader at Gladstone's dictation, showed they had been corrupted by 'whiggery', like earlier 'Nominal Home Rulers'. By allying with the IRB remnant, attacking the prospective limitations of Gladstonian Home Rule (whose details had been left vague to focus on the principle), and taking up such causes as amnesty for the dynamite prisoners of the 1880s, which anti-Parnellites could not endorse unreservedly without alienating British opinion, Parnell emphasised gaps between nationalist and liberal expectations. The factionalisation deriving from the split permanently damaged parliamentary nationalism, and Parnell's death elevated his final tactics into lasting principles for those who wanted more than British statesmen would give.

The anti-Parnellites were weakened by Gladstone's failure to secure a British mandate for Home Rule, the refusal of the liberal government of 1892-5 to set aside the law of property (to prevent evictions) or to reinstate the evicted tenants of the plan (whom Parnellites described as sacrificed for a liberal election slogan), and the refusal of Home Secretary Asquith to amnesty the dynamite prisoners (some of whom went mad in prison). Parnellites pioneered tactics later used by Sinn Féin against Redmondites, asking why anti-Parnellites did not use the balance of power to obtain all their demands, supporting the Home Rule Bill in principle while publicising its limitations as proof of liberal treachery and anti-Parnellite folly, and accusing anti-Parnellites of 'whig' corruption in securing government jobs for supporters. When, after Gladstone retired, the liberals were routed in the 1895 general election and many liberals (including Asquith) spoke of dropping Home Rule, the Parnellite critique seemed vindicated.

One possible development from that critique was rejection of parliamentary action as corrupting and unworkable; the post-Parnellite republican self-image stressed uncompromising principle and attributed parliamentary factional divisions to abandonment of principle for personalised leadership. Abstentionism, intermittently advocated by nationalists since the union, became the crucial dividing line marking refusal to play

by the rules of the British political system; Griffith frequently stated that if Parnell failed to keep his followers from being corrupted by Westminster, lesser men could not succeed. The amnesty question provided a rallying-point for separatists as well as Parnellites in the 1890s. At a meeting to welcome released dynamiters (including Tom Clarke) in 1897, Willie Redmond declared that if war came, an unfree Ireland would support Britain's enemy.

The Irish party continued to hold itself aloof from state occasions and proclaim that British sovereignty in Ireland could have no legitimacy until it recognised the expressed wish of the Irish people for self-government. It was reunited in 1900 by opposition to the Boer War (when its open rejoicing in Boer victories and British defeats went beyond all but a few of the most radical British pro-Boers, though seen as insufficient by separatists, who took hope from British diplomatic isolation and military incapacity against guerrillas) and renewed land agitation in the west, though these were assets of diminishing value. Despite some suppression of newspapers and imprisonment of MPs, a new Land Act removed the edge from agitation; the political and economic decay of landlordism, symbolised by land purchase and the institution of elected local government, allowed the extension of nationalist influence, but also stimulated new accusations of whiggery and corruption from those unsatisfied with its exercise.

### **The separatist revival**

From the late 1890s a newer generation of separatist activists, whose involvement began with the political Sunday schools for children and literary clubs operated by separatists in the 1880s, came to maturity.<sup>1</sup> The most prominent of these, Arthur Griffith, is not usually thought of as a republican, yet for most of his career he proclaimed himself to be one. 'Sinn Féin' reflected the slogan 'Ourselves Alone', used by Young Irelanders to attack O'Connell's liberal alliance. His Hungarian policy was presented as the policy for a new Parnell, to be supported by republicans as a stepping-stone. (Griffith's attempt to assert continuity with Parnell as well as the IRB tradition irritated younger purist republicans, too young to have experienced the split. From 1907 these organised in groups like the Dungannon Clubs, associated with the revitalised IRB). Griffith argued that victories claimed by the Irish Party were achieved by the people themselves and frustrated by a self-serving parliamentary élite; the people could be free and prosperous if they ceased to collude in their own oppression.

Griffith was suspicious of cultural nationalism because of the clearly-visible hopes of some of its clerical and aristocratic supporters that



deference and privilege might be rehabilitated as Gaelic traditions and separatism silenced as a colonial imposition. The republican ethos of active citizenship distrusted the idea that cultural production could be judged by criteria separate from patriotism; the Gaelic League, the GAA and the Literary Theatre were regularly reminded that they owed their origins, and much support, to the assertion of a separate Irish nationality and must subordinate themselves to that project.

From 1905–6 scattered Sinn Féin councillors appeared in areas with separatist traditions or local factional disputes. Sinn Féin was strongest electorally in Dublin where there were significant numbers of separatists, dissent was harder to suppress, and a focus was provided by campaigns against Dublin Corporation vested interests and councillors who supported loyal addresses when the monarch visited Dublin. Such visits, defended by their advocates as providing employment—Castle patronage was used to win support from tradesmen, employers put pressure on employees to join loyal demonstrations, and professionals anticipated honours in return for displays—were seen by separatists and many constitutionalists as ‘political souperism’.

### **The end of a project**

From 1906, with a new liberal government committed to limited devolution, the Irish party extended its influence in the Irish administration. Such brokerage, however, could be seen as renewed ‘whig’ corruption, while the party was also tarred by liberal reluctance to meet all its demands. The introduction of a new Home Rule Bill after the abolition of the Lords’ veto boosted Redmond’s prestige, but where Gladstone presented Home Rule as a moral crusade, Asquith made a political bargain. Distrust of the liberals reflected not only the government’s maladroit response to Carsonism but also knowledge that a few years previously many liberals wished to abandon Home Rule. The Irish Volunteers represented not only the small republican cadre but also wider fears that Ireland’s interests were being unacceptably compromised.

Redmond’s support for the war assumed that with Home Rule conceded, Irish nationalists must unequivocally accept the status of equal citizens within the United Kingdom. Redmond and Clarke might still have agreed that an unfree Ireland should support Britain’s enemy, but differed about whether Ireland was free. Redmondism grew more problematic as the government proved insufficiently responsive to nationalist concerns, and the 1916 rising brought tensions within the Redmondite position to breaking-point. Failing to secure immediate Home Rule except on politically impossible terms, the Redmondites found themselves saddled with responsibility for the government’s actions and accused of

‘whiggery’. A rival political leadership, beginning with a new amnesty movement, crystallised around the old Sinn Féin and Irish Volunteer leadership and defecting party activists; and with a liberal-conservative coalition in power and emergency legislation, disused before the war, extended and enforced on a scale unseen for decades the separatist critique of parliamentary strategies seemed vindicated. The threats of famine and conscription, the longstanding tendency to enforce conformity upon minorities, and the first-past-the-post electoral system sealed the fate of the Irish Party.

### **Triumph or disaster?**

The explicit republicanism of post-1917 Sinn Féin reflected the belief that British politicians had shown themselves untrustworthy and that compromise led to disempowerment and defeat. Attempts by élite groups to broker a dominion settlement in 1919–20 were dismissed by Sinn Féin as surrender. Once more, nationalists erected alternative administrative structures and tried to make the country ungovernable; delinquency of older control structures and the increased role of nationalists in local and national administration fatally weakened the government apparatus and made the shadow government more effective than its precursors. Government reprisals and repression provoked increased resistance, and Collins’s squad proved more effective than the Invincibles or Devoy’s assassination squad of the 1860s. Armed resistance was strong enough to make reconquest prohibitively expensive for Britain, but not to achieve complete victory; once again nationalist Ireland split on the issue of compromise.

The Treaty debate revolved around sovereignty because this symbolised significant social divisions within Ireland as well as the separatist interpretation of recent history. The support given to the Treaty by most of the professional and business classes allowed opponents to see it as representing recrudescing ‘whiggery’, which would corrupt the new state. Mary MacSwiney’s prediction that the Viceregal Lodge would become a centre of social, political and moral corruption rested on the belief, shared by most Sinn Féiners, that this had happened with the Redmondites. Such fears were strengthened when the new government responded to language reminiscent of unionist appeals to order, as it crushed republican guerrillas with measures which often flagrantly breached the rule of law.

The new government could also be seen by pro-Treaty IRB veterans, including former republican critics of Griffith, as asserting the difference between the use of force for clear-cut political ends and the pre-political banditry which at times had been absorbed into the physical-force movement and at other times threatened to dominate it; a difference

denied by aristocrats and unionists. The fear that ‘Mexican politics’ would reduce the new state to anarchy and starvation if the new state hesitated to assert its authority where the old order had collapsed was very real in 1922. The authoritarian attitudes noted by John Regan in the new ruling class of the 1920s were, nonetheless, restrained by a sense that to impose dictatorship in the name of good government would vindicate unionist slanders that the Irish majority were unfit to govern themselves.

The institution of a responsible government after the fall of the union was an achievement easily discounted in retrospect. The failure of many hopes associated with independence, the persistence of poverty and class division, and the view that the harsh economic policies of the 1920s reflected the influence of pro-British special interests alienated many Treaty supporters and allowed the Republican tradition to be claimed by a Fianna Fáil party advocating the cross-class, producerist social republicanism of traditional nationalism and by a smaller physical-force movement reverting to the élitist conspiratorial methods of the pre-independence IRB.

**Note**

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Kelly, *Historical Journal*, September 2000, pp. 729–50.