

The Rising of the Moon

**An Irish anarchist analysis of the development of the left, Irish republicanism
and working class struggles 1780–1798 & 1880–1923**

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The 1798 rebellion and the origins of Irish republicanism

On the 23rd of May 1798 the largest popular republican rising in Irish history began. Across the island tens of thousands fought under the banner of the United Irishmen. Hundreds of thousands had been sworn into the organization in the preceding four years. On four occasions revolutionary France sent thousands of troops to aid the rebellion, the United Irishmen had built contacts with revolutionary republicans across the globe, including the USA, France, Hamburg and England.

The response of the British state to the rise of the United Irishmen was a brutal counterinsurgency campaign that stirred up sectarian conflict on the island. 1798 thus came to shape much of the political struggles that took place in the following centuries.

The 1898 centenary was accompanied by mass mobilisations. On the 15th August 1898 100,000 people gathered at the top of Grafton Street in Dublin to take part in the dedication of the first stone of a statue of rebel leader Wolfe Tone. However that centenary was used to write out of history many of the radical elements of the rebellion and people it commemorated. Revolutionary Irish republicanism was moving towards an increasingly sectarian nationalism which would remove British rule from 26 counties at the cost of cementing divisions between catholic and protestant workers and the partition of the island.

The bi-centenary in 1998, co-inciding with the 'Peace process' attracted considerable discussion with the formation of local history groups, the holding of conferences and large-scale interest, at least in the south, in the TV documentaries and books published around the event. Discovering the legacy of 1798 and the way it was used to shape both history and the idea of the Irish nation may be part of the process of overcoming the sectarian divisions and building a new radical mass politics today.

A quick summary of the Rebellion

The foundation of the Belfast and Dublin societies of United Irishmen took place in the autumn of 1791. This initially reformist organisation demanded democratic reforms including Catholic emancipation. In response to popular pressure the British government which effectively ruled Ireland initially granted some reforms. This period of reform ended in 1793 when war broke out between revolutionary France and Britain.

The United Irishmen's journey to revolutionary separatism was only completed with the Cave Hill oath of June 1795 where above the town of Belfast some of the leadership including Thomas Russell, Wolfe Tone, Henry Joy McCracken and Samuel Neilson swore "*never to desist in our effort until we had subverted the authority of England over our country and asserted her independence.*" From this time on their program was for a revolution that with French backing would break the

connection with Britain and usher in democratic reform. What seems remarkable today is that all these men who gave birth to revolutionary Irish republicanism were protestants.

In December of 1796 the United Irishmen came the nearest they would to victory when 15,000 French troops arrived off Bantry Bay. Only the bad weather and poor seamanship of the Jacobean sailors prevented the landing and saved Britain from an almost certain defeat. In the British panic after Bantry Bay Irish society became increasingly bitterly polarised as loyalists flocked to join the British army and the United Irishmen's numbers swelled massively. The British state launched a brutal counter insurgency campaign to destroy the United Irishmen before the French could return.

By the Spring of 1798 the campaign of British terror was destroying the United Irishmen organisation and many of the leaders had been arrested. The remaining leaders were forced to call an immediate rising, before French aid would arrive. The date was set for May 23rd. But a series of factors undermined the rising in Dublin it just served to spark major risings in Wexford in the south and Antrim and Down in the North. These saw large-scale battles in which tens of thousands participated. Elsewhere there were minor skirmishes particularly around Dublin. After the defeat of the main risings a small French Army landed on the west coast of Ireland at Killala on August the 22nd. Although there was almost no revolutionary organisation in that area thousands flocked to join them and the subsequent army succeeded in inflicting one major defeat on the British. By the Autumn the rebellion had been defeated, tens of thousands were dead and a reign of terror had spread over the country.

The International Context

The roots of the rebellion can be found in the transatlantic democratic revolutions that swept America and Europe at the end of the 18th Century. The American Revolution of 1771–81 and the French Revolution of 1789 were key events, which inspired a democratic revolutionary movement in Ireland. It was the demand for radical democratic reforms rather than a misty eyed nationalism that was the prime motivator for the United Irish movement.

The American Revolution

The American revolution, despite its deep flaws – it preserved and expanded slavery – was the first successful democratic revolution against monarchy and for republicanism. Events in the US were followed with keen interest, particularly among Presbyterians in the North, as *“There was scarcely a family in the north of Ireland which did not have relatives living in the colonies”*¹. Huge numbers had emigrated in the previous decades, some in a search for religious liberty, others to escape high rents. Some 250, 000 Presbyterians emigrated to the US from Ulster from 1717 to 1776.²

There were popular displays of support for the American rebels through out the north during this war with the British empire. United Irish leader John Cladwell described how *“..on the news of the battle of Bunker Hill, my nurse Ann Orr led me to the top of a mount on midsummer eve, where the young and the aged were assembled before a blazing bonfire to celebrate what they considered the*

¹ The United Irishmen, Nancy Curtin, 1994, p 16

² A history of the Irish Working Class, Peter Berresford Ellis, 1972, p51

*triumph of America over British despotism*³. The contemporary historian Dr Campell describes how local Presbyterians “*heard with pride that they comprised the flower of Washington’s army*”.

The French Revolution

The French revolution of 1789 was seen to follow on and extend the promise of the American revolution. It was more radical and saw the more direct involvement of the popular masses. Theobald Wolfe Tone, who was later to be the United Irish leader of the last French expedition, described how “*the French Revolution became the test of every man’s political creed, and the nation was fairly divided into two great parties — the aristocracy and democrats*”.⁴

In July of 1791 at the Belfast Bastille Commemoration a *Declaration of the Volunteers and Inhabitants at Large of the town and neighborhood of Belfast* was distributed which stated

” ... if we be asked what the French Revolution is to us, we answer ... It is good for human nature that the grass grows where the Bastille stood. We do rejoice at an event that means the breaking up of civil and religious bondage ... We do really rejoice in this resurrection of human nature, and we congratulate our brother man coming forth from the vaults of ingenious torture and from the cave of death.”⁵

For the Northern Presbyterian radicals France offered hope of change at home. Samuel Barber in his final sermon as Moderator of General Synod in 1791 said of France “*that nation ... will now be the refuge and asylum of the brave and good in every nation*.”⁶ France was not just seen as a refuge but also as an example that in the words of the paper of the United Irishmen, Northern Star, proved to the “*people of every country ... that when they are oppressed, they have the power to redress*.”⁷ *The Northern Star* went so far as to defend the execution of King Louis as “*as the only mode of protecting internal tranquility*.”⁸

Importantly, as France was a Catholic country, the revolution there demonstrated to skeptical Northern Presbyterians that Catholics could act independently and against the teachings of their church. Wolfe Tone asked them to “*Look at France; where is the intolerance of Popish bigotry now? Has not the Pope been burned in effigy in France*.”⁹ The previous reform movements had focused on lobbying of the Anglican Irish and British Parliaments. With the French revolution a new strategy became apparent — one of the mass of the people striking for change.

Several of the future rebellions leaders spent time in France in the early 1790’s, John Sheares attended the execution of Louise and once waved his red handkerchief under Daniel O’Connell’s nose “*saying it was stiff with the king’s life-blood*.”¹⁰ Edward Fitzgerald wrote to his mother from Paris that “*the energy of the people is beyond belief — I go a great deal to the assembly*.”¹¹ In late

³ The United Irishmen, p 18

⁴ quoted in Labour and Irish History, James Connolly, Chap VII

⁵ Labour and Irish History, Chap VII

⁶ Presbyterian Radicalism Pieter Tesch in United Irishmen: republican, radicalism and rebellion, Ed: Dickson et al, p46

⁷ Northern Star, 3 March 1792

⁸ Northern Star, 26 Jan. 1793

⁹ An argument on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland, Wolfe Tone

¹⁰ Citizen Lord : Lord Edward Fitzgerald, 1763 — 1798, Stella Tillyard, p163

¹¹ Citizen Lord, p136

1792 these two together with the American radical republican Thomas Paine discussed in some detail a plan to start a rebellion in Ireland.¹²

The British state recognised the importance that the French connection had in mobilising mass support behind the United Irishmen. General Lake wrote in March of 1797 that *“The lower order of people and most of the middle class are determined republicans, have imbibed the French principle and will not be contented with anything short of a revolution.”*¹³

However this close identification with revolutionary France became a two edged sword for the United Irishmen. In February 1793 Britain declared war on revolutionary France. Forced to choose sides many of the early middle class membership of the United Irishmen deserted their ranks. In an atmosphere of patriotism and propaganda the presence of a French ‘spy’, Willam Jackson, became the excuse for the raiding and disbanding of the Dublin Society in May of 1794.

Within the United Irishmen some saw the French influence as negative. Too much reliance came to be placed in French intervention rather than Irish self-organisation. The United Irishmen James Hope described how before the rebellion *“The majority of the leaders become foreign-aid men and were easily elevated or depressed by the news from France, amongst their ranks spies were chiefly found.”*

The Rights of Man

This identification with America or France was through sympathy with the political demands or program of those revolutions. This was particularly the case in the north where popular support for the United Irishmen was linked to a search for a just and democratic society. A society in which all would be citizens rather than subjects. In the world of the 1700’s this was a demand that seemed as impossible as that for an anarchist society does today. The success of the American and French revolutions turned what previously would have been seen as the impossible dream of a few into a realistic program for the masses.

The high demand for political literature and papers that was evident throughout the 1790’s indicates the influence and spread of revolutionary ideas in this period. First amongst these was a two-part pamphlet called ‘The Rights of Man’ written by Thomas Paine. This pamphlet, starting from a defense of the French Revolution, argued that hereditary monarchy was unnatural and advocated a republican form of government. It was published in March 13 1791 and by July of 1791 the Dublin Whig club had already published a cheap edition for mass circulation.

By late 1793 over 200,000 copies of parts one and two had been circulated in Britain and Ireland.¹⁴ Paine’s prosecution for seditious libel by the British government only boosted its popularity and one United Irishman (and later British agent), Leonard McNally, writing in 1795 described how *“His works are in every ones hands and in every one’s mouths. They have got into the schools and are the constant subjects of conversation with the youth.”*¹⁵

¹² Citizen Lord, p153.

¹³ The United Irishmen, p120

¹⁴ The United Irishmen, p179

¹⁵ The United Irishmen, p180

The political context in Ireland

Ascendancy / penal laws

Ireland of the 1790's was ruled by Anglican (Church of Ireland) landowners and aristocrats. The mass of the population was not Anglican and so even if they could accumulate wealth they were excluded from political power. Outside of Ulster and Dublin they were overwhelmingly Catholic. Complex religious divide along class and geographic lines had been created by the British ruling class as a mechanism to 'divide and rule'. This included a codified system of religious discrimination known as the Penal Laws.

Ulster was dominated by Presbyterians (Dissenters) who had moved there in the previous centuries, often displacing the earlier Catholic population of that region. Some of this migration was in the aftermath of wars when the London government created plantations, in particular after the Flight of the Earls in 1607 when the old catholic Gaelic ruling class had fled to France and Spain. Most arrived in later waves of migration, in particular the wave of Scottish immigration, which took place in the 1690s, when tens of thousands fled a famine in the borders region of Scotland.

The previous 150 years in Ireland had been marked by two vicious wars where the combatants were mobilised along religious divides, with Catholics and Protestants (including the Presbyterians) on opposite sides. Each side in these wars claimed religious motives and the religious divide led to various sectarian massacres. This period of massacre and counter massacre created the sectarian politics that have dominated Ireland since.

The penal laws were designed to draw a religious barrier between the landlord class (which would be restricted to Anglicans) and the Catholic / Presbyterian peasantry. Catholic landlords could retain their land but only at the price of converting. Between 1703 and 1788 some 5,000 Catholic landowning families became Anglicans¹⁶. In addition by becoming agents for absentee landlords many of the Catholic gentry went underground. It's calculated that *"If one includes 'convert' estates, the figures for 'Catholic' ownership of land reaches about 20%."*¹⁷

In addition to breaking up Catholic owned estates the Penal laws also ruled that *"No prelate was allowed to reside in Ireland under a penalty of being hanged, drawn and quartered... No Catholic could serve in the armed forces or possess arms... nor ride a horse worth more than £5. They could not vote or be members of parliament or citizens of an incorporated town."*¹⁸ In short even if Catholics could acquire wealth they were still excluded from any participation in decision-making.

The Penal laws also banned Mass and education, Presbyterians were subject to similar laws. A Test act excluded them from local government. In 1713 a Westminster act made Presbyterian schoolteachers liable to three months imprisonment and Presbyterian — Anglican marriage was also made illegal.¹⁹ As late as 1771 four Presbyterians were arrested for holding a prayer meeting in Belturbet.²⁰

So-called democratic politics in Britain at the time excluded all but rich men from electing MP's. Rotten boroughs where the MP would be elected by a handful of voters were not uncommon. But

¹⁶ A history of the Irish Working Class, p57

¹⁷ The Tree of Liberty, Radicalism, Catholicism and the Construction of Irish Identity 1760 – 1830, Kevin Whelan, p6

¹⁸ A history of the Irish Working Class, p52

¹⁹ A history of the Irish Working Class, p51

²⁰ A history of the Irish Working Class, p51

in Ireland the situation was far worse, according to a letter the United Irishmen sent to the English Society of the Friends of the People;

“The state of Protestant representation is as follows: 17 boroughs have no resident elector; 16 have but one; 90 have 13 electors each; 90 persons return for 106 rural boroughs — that is 212 members out of 300 — the whole number; 54 members are returned by five noblemen and four bishops; ...

With regard to the Catholics, the following is the simple and sorrowful fact: Three millions, every one of whom has an interest in the State, and collectively give it its value, are taxed without being represented, and bound by laws to which they have not given consent.”²¹

By 1793 the laws discriminating against Presbyterians had largely been abolished (in part to head off revolt and in part to halt the loss of labour through emigration) and the worst of the penal laws against Catholics had also been abolished. However as the above quote demonstrates Ireland was still ruled by a tiny minority of wealthy Anglicans.

Origins of the Orange Order

It is inevitable that both the history of religious war in the 16th and 17th century and inequalities still present in the 1790's led to sectarianism in the general population. But the period from the 1780's on was remarkable for the fact that these sectarian tensions temporarily retreated into the background.

Armagh was the major exception to this, here the population was evenly divided three ways between Anglicans, Presbyterians and Catholics. Under the Penal laws Catholics were not allowed to have arms but some of the more radical Volunteer companies had been recruiting and arming Catholics. In the 1780's a Protestant and loyalist force started dawn raids on Catholic homes, searching for arms. These were known as the 'Peep-O-Day boys'. In 1795 one such raid at 'The Diamond' near Dunmurry saw many Catholics killed. It was in the aftermath of this clash that the Orange Order was formed.

It was in the interests of both the Irish landlord class and the British government to promote sectarian conflict. As the Anglican Archbishop of Armagh pointed out of the land struggle in the 1780's *“The worst of this is that it stands to unite Protestant and Papist, and whenever that happens, good-bye to the English interest in Ireland.”*²²

Land conflicts

Central to understanding the motivation for many of the rebels in the 1798 rising were conditions for the peasantry. For the most part they had no rights, were treated as animals and were completely alienated from the landlord class. In 1831 there were 1,500 absentee landlords living outside Ireland who owned 3,200,000 acres and a further 4,500 absentee landlords living in

²¹ Address from the United Irishmen of Dublin to the English Society of the Friends of the People, dated Dublin, October 26, 1792, quoted in Labour and Irish History, Chap VII

²² A history of the Irish Working Class, p68

Dublin and owning 4,200,000 acres.²³ There were famines in 1740, '57, '65 and '70. The first of these killed 400,000.²⁴

The complete subjection the peasantry were subjected to is hinted by a traveler through Ireland at the time who wrote "A landlord in Ireland can scarcely invent an order which a servant, labourer, or cottier dares to refuse to execute... Disrespect, or anything tending towards sauciness he may punish with his cane or his horsewhip with the most perfect security. A poor man would have his bones broken if he offered to lift a hand in his own defense ... Landlords of consequence have assured me that many of their cottiers would think themselves honoured by having their wives and daughters sent for to the bed of their master — a mark of slavery which proves the oppression under which such people must live."²⁵

Another source of resentment was tithes. Everyone regardless of their religion was required to pay a tithe to the local Anglican clergy. These payments were often the at the centre of agrarian struggle. The resolution below were adopted at a mass meeting of Munster Peasantry in 1786

"Resolved — That we will continue to oppose our oppressors by the most justifiable means in our power, either until they are glutted with our blood or until humanity raises her angry voice in the councils of the nation to protect the toiling peasant and lighten his burden. Resolved — That the fickleness of the multitude makes it necessary for all and each of us to swear not to pay voluntarily priest or parson more than as follows."²⁶

In this period the working class was also starting to develop and assert itself. Even in apparently rural areas many were at least somewhat dependant on manufacture for part of their income. The United Irishmen organisation in the north outside Belfast was to be focused on the 'Linen Triangle'.

There were at least 27 labour disputes in Dublin from 1717 to 1800 and the formation of the early trade unions had started.²⁷ "There were 50 combinations in 27 different trades in Dublin in the period 1772–95. There were at least 30 food riots ... in the period 1772–94."²⁸

A handbill entitled *The Cry of the Poor for Bread*, from Dublin in 1796 read

"Oh! lords of manors, and other men of landed property, as you have monopolised to yourselves the land, ... can the labourer, who cultivates your land with the sweat of his brow, the working manufacturer or the mechanic, support himself, a wife and 5 or 6 children? How much comfort do you extort from their misery, by places, offices and pensions and consume in idleness, dissipation, riot and luxury?"²⁹

Irish history was no longer to simply be a conflict over the religion of those who would rule. Previous rebellions had concentrated on winning back the land for the old catholic Gentry. But by 1798 in addition to families who converted in order to maintain their lands, many other catholic gentry families had become middlemen who sub-rented to smaller tenants. In Co. Dublin 60 of the previous land owning families were middlemen, in South Co. Wexford there were 21.³⁰

²³ A history of the Irish Working Class, p55

²⁴ A history of the Irish Working Class, p54

²⁵ Arthur Young, in his Tour of Ireland quoted in Labour and Irish History, chap IV

²⁶ Munster peasantry, in 1786, in Labour and Irish History, Chap IV

²⁷ The United Irishmen, p147

²⁸ The Tree of Liberty, p92

²⁹ Quoted in The Tree of Liberty, p46

³⁰ The Tree of Liberty, p7

These families were frequently indistinguishable to the outsider from the peasantry but “Especially in remote areas, or on the estates or absentee landlords, these old families retained effective cultural control of their communities.”³¹ They regarded themselves as above the peasantry and disliked the new ‘gentry’ of whom they said “It is not right that sons of churls or labourers should behave as the son of the gentlemen.”³² In turn even the Catholic new gentry like Lord Kenmare said of them “Every one of them thinks himself too great for any industry except taking farms. When they happen to get them, they screw enormous rents from some beggarly dairymen and spend there whole time in the alehouses of the next village.”³³

By the 1760’s as capitalism had begun to penetrate Irish agriculture and enclosures began to create middlemen with vast landholdings the social bond that held this dispossessed catholic gentry to the peasantry began to break. Catholic as well as Protestant landowners and middlemen became targets for the various agrarian secret societies.

Secret societies

The complete absence of democratic rights made it impossible for ordinary people to organise in any public manner. But the harsh repression peasants lived under generated resistance. Peasants organised throughout the 18th Century through secret underground societies. Their members would often operate at night and in disguise, taking direct and often violent action against local oppressors.

In the 1760’s one such society was the Oakboys. The Oakboys were particularly strong in the counties of Monaghan, Armagh and Tyrone and mainly organised against the system of compulsory and unpaid road repairing.³⁴ In 1762 the Whiteboys, an anti-enclosure movement involving poor Protestants and Catholics, were active.³⁵ The Steelboys of the 1770’s were one of the most powerful. They organised in the counties of Down and Antrim and were for the most part Presbyterian. They fought for the abolition or reduction of tithes and were also against the enclosures of common land.³⁶

These societies at times conducted mass public mobilisations. James Connolly notes of the Steelboys that “In the year 1772 six of their number were arrested and lodged in the town jail of Belfast. Their associates immediately mustered in thousands, and in open day marched upon that city, made themselves masters thereof, stormed the jail, and released their comrades.”³⁷

This suggests elements of organization and federation beyond the local level. The Defenders were organised nationally in Lodges.³⁸ The British Viceroy Camden claimed “They meet in bodies of several hundreds and on some occasions 3,000 or 4,000 had assembled.”

³¹ The Tree of Liberty, p8

³² quoted from Pairlement Chloinne Toma/in The Tree of Liberty, p9

³³ The Tree of Liberty, p13

³⁴ Labour and Irish History, Chap IV

³⁵ A history of the Irish Working Class, p59

³⁶ Labour and Irish History, Chap IV

³⁷ Labour and Irish History, Chap IV

³⁸ The United Irishmen, p161

The volunteers

If the secret societies represented the peasantry in the years before the rising the Volunteer movement was the clearest expression of progressive middle class and even ruling class organisation. It had arisen as a volunteer body to defend Ireland from invasion but by the early 1790's under the influence of the French and American revolution had evolved into a radical body seeking democratic reform.

However its structure prevented it from being open to anyone but the wealthy. Even its public demonstrations which were well-disciplined parades of uniformed men excluded the vast bulk of Irish society who could not afford the uniforms.

In their search for democratic reforms, which above all else meant giving the Irish parliament power to pass economic laws, the Volunteers provided an initial organisational focus for all the young middle class men radicalised by the American and French Revolutions. Many of the older United Irish leaders started off as Volunteers. Later the Volunteers served as a mass front through which the United Irishmen could operate. The 1792 Volunteer organised Bastille Day celebration was particularly important.³⁹

The high point of the radical volunteer movement was the Dungannon convention of February 1792, when delegates claiming to represent 1,250,000 people endorsed both Catholic emancipation and parliamentary reform. However as an omen of divisions to come they refused to condemn the British empire's war against France. As the masses became radicalised and the demand for Catholic emancipation and radical parliamentary reform was pushed up the agenda the Volunteers split and the leadership dropped into inactivity. For the most part they failed to resist the British attempts to disarm and disband them from 1793 and indeed *"Up to that date ... their only military engagement had been to suppress a strike of cotton workers in Belfast."*⁴⁰

The formation of the United Irish Men

From the early 1790's the British state was becoming increasingly wary of the way in which the Northern Presbyterians were seeking to overcome sectarian divisions. The Viceroy Westmoreland wrote on the 26 July 1791 that *"the language and sentiments of these dissenters is to unite with the Catholics and their union would be very formidable. That union is not yet made and I believe and hope it never could be."*⁴¹

Their fears were well founded, already several of the most radical figures in the Volunteers, the Whig Clubs and the supporters of Catholic emancipation were engaged in discussion. On the 18th October 1791 the Belfast United Irishmen formed with 36 members. On the 9th November the Dublin society was founded. Two days later the Home Secretary Grenville observed of the United Irish call for Irishmen to unite regardless of religion that *"there is no evil that I should not prophesy if that union takes place."*

Although many of the United Irishmen started off as reformists looking for an equal relationship with Britain they were significantly different from the earlier movements. Instead of lobbying the Irish ascendancy or British Parliaments for reform they aimed for mass mobilisa-

³⁹ The United Irishmen, p229

⁴⁰ 1798: the United Irishmen and the early Trade Unions, Mary Muldowney in SIPTU Fightback No 7

⁴¹ Revolt in North, Charles Dickson, 1960, p91

tions of the population. They also attached no limitations on Catholic emancipation and openly looked to a future where all men would be equal citizens.

The class basis of the United Irishmen

The United Irishmen were initially drawn from the same circles as the Volunteers, the Protestant middle class, and in particular the legal professions. Nancy Curtin's study of the class composition of the early United Irishmen (before 1794) shows that nearly 70% of them were "*merchants and gentlemen*."⁴² Only some 20% of the membership were artisans, clerks and labourers. When a committee of 21 drafted the political program in December of 1792 they rejected a property qualification in order for men to vote. But this almost split the committee down the middle and was carried only by a vote of 11 to 9.

There was a class conflict at the core of United Irish ideology, but this was not the class conflict between worker and capitalist anarchists speak of today. The class conflict the initial United Irish leadership was based around was that between industry and aristocracy. Many were even hostile to the developing union movement although "*Thomas Russell ... defended the journeymen weavers in an industrial dispute with local linen merchants and the 'Northern Star' ... applauded the defeat of an anti-combination bill in the House of Lords*."⁴³

For their time however the United Irishmen were "*in the vanguard of European radicalism*."⁴⁴ In January of 1794 their Dublin Plan of Reform program included 300 electoral divisions, a vote for all men over 21, representatives to be over 25 but not required to own property, all representatives to be paid, and annual elections. This represented a radical program even in comparison with the wave of European revolutions in 1848, some fifty years later. It would be well over a hundred years before suffrage at this level became common in Europe.

The United Irishmen were republicans but at the time this was a very ambiguous term. As John Adams put it, the republic "*may signify anything, everything or nothing*."⁴⁵ The Northern Star summarised what the United Irishmen stood for when it proclaimed "*Liberty, or Freedom consists in having an actual share in the appointing of those who frame the laws and who are to be the guardians of every man's life, property, and peace*."⁴⁶

The French expeditions of 1796 and 1798 carried copies of *An Address to the People of Ireland*, to be distributed on landing. This outlines the program that would be implemented if the rebellion had been a success.

"The aristocracy of Ireland which exists only by our slavery, and is maintained in its pomp and splendor by the sale of our lives, liberties and properties, will tumble in the dust; ... we shall have a wise and honest legislature, chosen by the People, whom they will indeed represent, and whose interest, even for their own sakes, they will strenuously support... Your peasantry will no longer be seen in rags and misery, their complaints

⁴² The United Irishmen, 1994

⁴³ 1798: the United Irishmen and the early Trade Unions

⁴⁴ The United Irishmen, p26

⁴⁵ The Burden of the present, Thomas Bartlett in United Irishmen: republican, radicalism and rebellion, Ed: Dickson et al, p2

⁴⁶ Northern Star, 28 Jan. 1792

will be examined, and their suffering removed; ... The unnatural union between Church and state ... will be dissolved."⁴⁷

Organisational structure

The United Irishmen operated in the manner of the society they wished to create. That is they were a mass, democratic organisation open to all who took the oath. At first each local society was organised autonomously of the others. The Dublin Society was relatively public in its dealing until May of 1794 when it was raided. As well as regular meeting of all the membership it had a Publication Committee which produced pamphlets and monitored pamphlets being produced by others. The Correspondence Committee, which normally had a dozen members, dealt with national and international correspondence. The officer's posts were rotated every three months.

In Dublin any existing member could veto applicant members although this was rare. Well-known international republicans like Tom Paine and Thomas Muir were made honouree members.

Initially there was little formal contact between Dublin and Belfast. From the start the Belfast society was more secretive, with a secret committee from 1791. It is probable that one of the key organisers Samuel Neilson led a secret Belfast Committee of Public Safety from an early date, he certainly proposed a similar structure for Dublin in January of 1794.

The spread of ideas

Neilson also published *The Northern Star*, the United Irishmen's main paper until it was finally forced to close in 1796. At the end of the 18th Century the new technology of cheap mass printing and the mass literacy that accompanied it facilitated the rapid spread of democratic ideas. Printing was seen as important because in itself it was a political act as it treated the masses as citizens who should be involved in politics. In the north many Presbyterians could read because they had a strong desire to study the bible. Literacy rates among adult males in parts of Ulster were the highest in Europe, as high as 76%.⁴⁸

But there was also a "*revolution in English language literacy*" in the 1790's outside the north as the result of work carried on by itinerant schoolmasters in rural Ireland. These were often radicals themselves.⁴⁹ Even in areas where literacy was very low oral reading was common, one United Irishman traveled Galway reading political literature to gatherings of peasants.

There is little doubt that this educational work played a major part in building mass support for the later rebellion. In 1795 Paine's '*Age of reason*' was distributed among Belfast mill workers and discussion groups were held about it.⁵⁰ Observers reported that the *Northern Star* was "*So ardently ... sought for and enjoyed by lower orders*" while later rebels explained that "*If it were not for newspapers we would not know that Napper Tandy or Thomas Paine were in existence.*" One English traveler in Ulster in June 1796 wrote "*I often meet Sir John's labourers walking to work and reading their papers as they move along.*"⁵¹

⁴⁷ A history of the Irish Working Class, p75

⁴⁸ The Tree of Liberty, p66

⁴⁹ The United Irishmen, p.9

⁵⁰ The Tree of Liberty, p63

⁵¹ The Tree of Liberty, p66

The *Northern Star* reached a circulation of 5,000 making it not only the highest circulation Irish paper of the times but also giving it a higher circulation than the English *Times*. The police chief in the small town of Athlone warned “*The press is destroying the minds of the people in this country ...*”⁵² The government reacted to mass literacy and the printing of ‘dangerous ideas’ by attempting to tax literature out of the hands of ordinary people. Although this had an effect on circulation it also meant that people would gather in pubs and coffee shops to read a copy of the paper there and that it would be passed from hand to hand. It is estimated that between 20 and 50 people read each copy of the *Northern Star*.⁵³

This gathering of people together to read seditious literature had obvious advantages for those seeking to build a mass movement. One Loyalist writer commented in 1794 that “*In the coffee houses of Dublin there is that kind of conversation which in London would produce serious consequences.*”⁵⁴ Prosecuting counsel John Schools recorded in 1797 that “*The Northern Star [is] the principle and most powerful of all the instruments used for agitating and deluding the minds of the people... The lowest of the people get it. It is read to them in clusters. A whole neighborhood subscribe to it.*”⁵⁵

The United Irishmen also made use of other means of getting the word out, the Earl of Westmoreland observed in 1792 that “*they set ballad singers in the streets.*”⁵⁶ Indeed they translated the ‘Ca Ira’ and ‘The Marseillaise’ for publication along with specially written Irish ballads. Leaflets were also produced. The Dublin Society distributed 5,000 copies of the letter announcing its foundation in 1792. 20,000 copies of Gratten’s 1795 address to the house of parliament were distributed in Dublin within hours of it being given.

In the period before 1795 the United Irishmen were not yet a mass organisation. They had grown since 1791 but relatively slowly, in July of 1794 the Dublin society had only 250 members. The structural changes in 1795 represented a turn to mass recruitment based on the new objectives of the society, revolution and separation from England. By February of 1798 the United Irishmen claimed 500,000 members of whom 280,000 were said to be battle ready.⁵⁷

After the raids of 1794 the United Irishmen moved from reform to revolution so their organisational structures changed. On 10 May 1795 a new constitution was approved, under this each club would split in two once it had 36 members.. By the spring of 1798 the instruction was that “*No society should consist of more than 12 members .. thoroughly well known to each other.*”⁵⁸ The clubs meet monthly with much of the business being conducted by committees between meetings. Each town or parish sent delegates to a regional committee. The national executive directory consisted of a director and one member from each of the four provinces.

Although it was later fashionable to criticise the United Irishmen’s revolutionary organisational structures as being responsible for the informers that plagued the rebellion this is not how the British viewed it at the time. Camden wrote after the failure of the 1796 arrests to break the

⁵² The Tree of Liberty, p64

⁵³ The United Irishmen, p176-8

⁵⁴ The United Irishmen, p177

⁵⁵ The Tree of Liberty, p69

⁵⁶ The United Irishmen, p193

⁵⁷ The United Irishmen, p255

⁵⁸ The Tree of Liberty, p84

northern organisation that *“It is therefore the regularity of their system which is to be dreaded more than any individual ability.”*⁵⁹

In fact the United Irishmen successfully turned informers into double agents and they even recruited the man responsible for opening their mail in the Post Office. British counter measures were to prove successful from 1797 but in August of 1796 John Beresford capturing the panic of the ruling class wrote *“We are in a most desperate situation, the whole North, Louth, Meath, Westmeath, Longford, Roscommon, Galway, the county and city of Dublin ready to rise in rebellion, an invasion invited by ambassadors, our militia corrupted, the dragoons of Ireland suspected; the United Irishmen organised, the people armed ... our heads are in no small danger, I promise you.”*⁶⁰

A radical economic program?

The *Report of the Secret Committee of the House of Lords* reported that in June of 1791, shortly before the United Irishmen were formally founded, Tone, Samuel Neilson and others in the north circulated a Secret Manifesto to the Friends of Freedom in Ireland. Towards the end this contained a description of the failure of past movements that was to prove accurate as a description of events in 1798

*“When the aristocracy come forward, the people fall backwards; when the people come forward, the aristocracy, fearful of being left behind, insinuate themselves into our ranks and rise into timid leaders or treacherous auxiliaries.”*⁶¹

Before 1794 the role consigned by republican leaders to the masses was fairly passive displays of support for change. For example Illuminations, where people put lights in their windows, were important to demonstrate large-scale public support.

Following the 1794 banning of the Dublin United Irishmen ways to encourage active mass participation were favoured. Riots were organised by the United Irishmen, particularly those around Camden’s arrival in March 1795 when aristocrats were stoned in the streets. Rioting continued throughout April, the rioters included students from Trinity College. By the summer the United Irishmen were moving on from this tactic and beginning underground insurrectional organisation.⁶²

Once the United Irishmen had decided to take the direction of rebellion they had to win the mass of the people actively to join in such a rebellion. Gaining the vote for rich Catholics landowners would mean little to those paying rent for this land. Therefore in order to create a mass organisation they also began to hold out promises of economic reforms.

Historian Nancy Curtin points out that *“Some united Irish recruiters ... suggested that a major redistribution of land would follow a successful revolution”*⁶³ and that as a result *“To a certain extent republicanism became associated in the common mind with low rents, the abolition of tithes and a tax burden borne by the wealthy and idle rather than by the poor and industrious.”*⁶⁴ In 1794 a

⁵⁹ The United Irishmen, p111

⁶⁰ The Tree of Liberty, p113

⁶¹ Quoted in Labour and Irish History, Chap VII

⁶² The United Irishmen, p240

⁶³ The United Irishmen, p120

⁶⁴ The United Irishmen, p119

United Irishmen text asked “Who makes them rich. The answer is obvious — it is the industrious poor”.⁶⁵

The Union doctrine; or poor man’s catechism, was published anonymously as part of this effort and read in part

*“I believe in a revolution founded on the rights of man, in the natural and imprescriptable right of all citizens to all the land ... As the land and its produce was intended for the use of man ‘tis unfair for fifty or a hundred men to possess what is for the subsistence of near five millions ...”*⁶⁶

United Irish leader Dr William James MacNeven was under interrogation by the House of Lords in 1798. When he was asked if Catholic emancipation or parliamentary reform mobilised ‘the lower orders’ he replied “*I am sure they do not understand it. What they very well understand is that it would be a very great advantage to them to be relieved from the payments of tithes and not to be fleeced by the landlords.*”⁶⁷

From 1794 with the turn towards revolutionary politics and the need to mobilise the masses the class basis of the United Irishmen also underwent a radical change. In Dublin membership of artisans, clerks and labourers rose to nearly 50% of the total.⁶⁸ In Dublin there were also working class republican clubs independent of the United Irishmen. A member of one such club, ‘Huguenots’ published several issues of a broad sheet called *The Union Star*.⁶⁹ This named leading loyalists and suggested they should be assassinated. The United Irishmen leaders formally condemned the *Union Star*.⁷⁰

Other popular political societies in Dublin in 1790’s included ‘the strugglers’. One judge referred to “*the nest of clubs in the city of Dublin.*” Their membership was said to consist of “*The younger part of the tradesmen, and in general all the apprentices.*”⁷¹ The informer Higgins described these clubs as comprising “*King killers, Paineites, democrats, levellers and United Irishmen.*”⁷²

As public demonstrations were banned various ruses were used to gather United Irishmen together. Race meetings were used as pretexts for mass assemblies. Mock funerals with up to 2,000 ‘mourners’ would be held, sometimes the coffin would actually contain arms. Or alternatively there would be enormous turnouts for the funerals of relatively unknown ordinary people. In the countryside mass potato diggings (often for imprisoned United Irishmen) were organised and often conducted as military drills. These were a way of seeing who would turn out and how well they would follow orders. All of these gatherings, unlike the earlier Volunteer style parades, gave the masses an active and central role.

Learning to follow orders was central to this process as the United Irishmen’s leadership wanted to be able to control and discipline the masses in the event of a rising. This was also why a French landing was central. The French army would help not just to beat Britain but also

⁶⁵ The Tree of Liberty, p76

⁶⁶ quoted in 1798: the United Irishmen and the early Trade Unions

⁶⁷ The United Irishmen, p28

⁶⁸ The United Irishmen, 1994

⁶⁹ The United Irishmen, p225

⁷⁰ The United Irishmen, p225

⁷¹ The Tree of Liberty, p77

⁷² The Tree of Liberty, p79

to control the masses during and after the rebellion. The original strategy for the rebellion saw only a few thousand United Irishmen joining the army of the French to be quickly disciplined. The rest would act “to harass the escorts of ammunition, cut off detachments and foraging parties, and in fine, to make the King’s troops feel themselves in every respect in a foreign country.”⁷³

This is the context in which Tones “Our freedom must be had at all hazards. If the men of property will not help us, they must fall; we will free ourselves by the aid of that large and respectable class of the community — the men of no property.”⁷⁴ must be taken. Yes the United Irishmen turned to the ‘men of no property’ but the leadership still intended to run the show and with French help hold back the masses from redistribution of the property of the wealthy.

Although the United Irishmen are remembered as the authors of the rebellion this should not be reduced down to a small middle class leadership ‘tricking’ the mass of the population into rebellion through the use of economic slogans they never intended to implement. Even within the United Irish leadership some leaders had quite radical economic ideas while others opposed the early unions. The workers and peasants who formed the mass of the rebellion were not an empty vessel without ideas but very often self-organised through the secret societies and clubs already mentioned. The republican movement represented a coming together of many such forces around a limited common program but with each faction hoping to use the rebellion to advance its own vision of how a free society should be organised.

The link with the defenders

A central part of the strategy of mass rebellion was to build links with the already established movements, and in particular the Defenders. It was also hoped the links with the Defenders would help win over the Militia, the local state defense force.⁷⁵

The Defenders in Armagh had started as a local ‘faction’ (gang) and were initially non-sectarian, their first Captain being Presbyterian.⁷⁶ . They then grew out of the political agitation around the arming of Catholics which had “the full support of a radical section of Protestant political opinion”, and the Peep-O-Day Boys opposition to this⁷⁷. These origins are important to understand as later historians have attempted to portray the Defenders as simply a Catholic sectarian organisation, a sort of mirror image of the Orange Order.

Despite their rural origins the Defenders were not just a peasant movement but “drawn from among weavers, labourers and tenant farmers ... and from the growing artisan class of the towns.”⁷⁸ Late 18th century Armagh experienced rapid social change generated by its thriving linen industry.⁷⁹ The Defenders were already politicised to some extent by the hope of French intervention and their anti- tax and anti-tithe propaganda. They proclaimed “We have lived long enough upon potatoes and salt; it is our turn now to eat mutton and beef.”⁸⁰

The Defenders spread well outside Armagh. By 1795 there were some 4000 Defenders in Dublin, closely linked with many of the republican clubs in the city. Their spread there was

⁷³ A history of the Irish Working Class, p. 74

⁷⁴ (Missing footnote)

⁷⁵ The United Irishmen, p167

⁷⁶ The United Irishmen, p149.

⁷⁷ The Defenders, p18, Deirdre Lindsay, in 1798 ; 200 years of resonance, Ed. Mary Cullen

⁷⁸ The Defenders, p20

⁷⁹ The men of no popery, p29, Jim Smyth in 1798 ; 200 years of resonance, Ed. Mary Cullen

⁸⁰ The Defenders, p19,

facilitated by “*the pre-existence of illegal ‘combinations’ (proto-trade unions)*”. They had their own links with revolutionary France as early as 1792.⁸¹ Historian Deirdre Lindsay offers a further illustration that the Defenders were not simply a sectarian organisation when she points out that “*in Dublin there were Protestant Defenders.*”⁸² All the same she states “*revenge against Protestants was certainly an important element in Defender thinking.*”⁸³

In 1795 up to 7,000 Catholics were driven out of Armagh by Orange Order pogroms. Many Catholics saw the hand of the government behind this making them more sympathetic to the United Irishmen. The United Irishmen provided lawyers to prosecute on behalf of the victims of Orange attacks. “*Special missions were dispatched there in 1792 and again in 1795 and senior figures like Neilson, Teeling, McCracken, Quigley and Lowry worked the area ceaselessly ...*”⁸⁴ Many expelled Catholic families were sheltered by Presbyterian United Irishmen in Belfast and later Antrim and Down.

The United Irishmen were aware that the nature of these attacks had inevitably introduced sectarianism into the Defenders. But they saw this sectarianism as being due to the influence of priests and directed only against Protestant landlords. This was to prove a serious underestimation of the problem, particularly outside of the north. But the link with the Defenders did bring recruits. Robert Wadell a Co. Down magistrate, reported in July ’96 that Orange attacks “*have driven some hundreds to join the United Irishmen.*”⁸⁵

Defenders at local level were led by Catholic, “*alehouse keepers, artisans, low schoolmasters and a few middling farmers*”. At regional level they were led by a “*handful of really successful Catholic families.*”⁸⁶ It was these families who were to provide the link with the United Irishmen through the individuals mentioned above. Later this limited contact would prove to be a problem as many of these individual United Irishmen were killed or jailed before the rebellion got underway.

1798 and the colonial model

There is a strong argument for saying that the 1798 rebellion represents one of the first anti-colonial struggles of the modern era the other being the successful rebellion in Haiti which has started in August of 1791. Every national liberation struggle since has been marked by the tension that caused the failure of the rebellion. A middle class leadership needing to turn to the masses in order to get the numbers needed to defeat the colonial power but having to seek safeguards against the masses gaining so much power that they go on to attempt to smash the class system itself.

After the French Revolution ‘the people’ had started to move to centre stage. They were no longer just foot soldiers for various factions of the ruling class but instead the much-feared ‘mob’ which was beginning to insist that it could run society. Time and again in the next 200 years wealthy nationalists would show they would sacrifice ‘the nation’ to protect their wealth and class. At best they were treacherous allies in the struggle against colonialism.

⁸¹ The United Irishmen, p162

⁸² The Defenders, p20

⁸³ The Defenders, p22

⁸⁴ The Tree of Liberty, p128

⁸⁵ The United Irishmen, p163

⁸⁶ The Tree of Liberty, p41

On the other side of this equation 1798 saw the use by Britain of many of what would become the core tools of modern colonial wars.

Tools of counter insurgency

One of the most successful British strategies of 1798 and the years that followed was to encourage the further growth of sectarianism in order to divide the workers and peasants of Ireland. It would be an oversimplification to claim Britain invented this sectarianism, the tensions were already there but it provided the careful nurturing in which it grew. Key to this process was encouraging the growth of the Orange Order and sectarian warfare in Armagh. Kevin Whelan summarises the benefits of this project for the British state as *“It inserted an implacable barrier to the linking of the United Irishmen and Defender territories; it stopped the spread of radical Freemasonry; it pulled Protestants in general firmly to a conservative pro-government stance; it split the nascent Presbyterian – Catholic alliance in mid-Ulster; it checked United Irishmen infiltration of the yeomanry and militia.”*⁸⁷

General John Knox was the architect of this policy and described the Orange Order as *“the only barrier we have against the United Irishmen.”*⁸⁸ In 1797 he wrote *“I proposed some time ago that the Orangemen might be armed and added to some of the loyal corps as supplementary yeomen ... They are bigots and will resist Catholic emancipation.”*⁸⁹ Later he wrote to the administration in the castle that *“the institution of the Orange Order was of infinite use.”*⁹⁰

Many mechanisms were used to promote the Orange Order but most importantly its members were effectively given impunity (as many death squads were in 1980’s Latin America) for pogroms against Catholics. One victim recalled *“every magistrate in Ulster, but one or two, was an Orangeman, and no justice could be obtained either in courts or law ...”*⁹¹ In 1795 this policy became so obvious that Camden complained *“some of the magistrates have been incautious enough not to carry on this measure so secretly as to have escaped the notice of the public.”*⁹²

Terror

From 1796 the British state carried out a campaign of terror directed against the United Irishmen and the Defenders. The law and constitution were effectively suspended. Camden ordered General Lake to take action *“if necessary beyond that which can be sanctioned by the law.”*⁹³ Lake himself said *“I am convinced that the contest must lay between the army and the people.”* Nancy Curtin describes how *“From the beginning of 1796 hundreds of men were seized and disposed of without the formalities of charge or trial”*⁹⁴ as suspects were jailed, sent to the British fleet in their thousands or simply killed.

A number of ways of terrorising the general population were used including house burning’s, crop destruction, confiscation of food and goods. Sometimes victims were picked on the basis of

⁸⁷ The Tree of Liberty, p124

⁸⁸ The Tree of Liberty p119

⁸⁹ The Tree of Liberty, p124

⁹⁰ The Tree of Liberty, p120

⁹¹ The Tree of Liberty, p123

⁹² The Tree of Liberty, p120

⁹³ The Tree of Liberty p125

⁹⁴ Revolt in North, Charles Dickson, 1960, p121

intelligence, sometimes the army simply arrived in a suspected rebel village and selected random people for its terror in order to force them to reveal who the rebels were or where arms were located. Many women were raped and other men and women were subjected to a wide range of other tortures which included pitch capping where the victims head was set alight, half-hanging where the victim was repeatedly hung until they passed out and flogging with hundreds of lashes to the point where the victims skin would split and their innards be exposed. After one victim, Anthony Perry, was pitch capped, it “*raised all the skin of his head and part of his face*”⁹⁵ and unknown numbers if victims died during and after these tortures.

Alongside these deaths were dozens of executions of United Irishmen. You could even be executed for allegedly swearing new members into the United Irishmen! In April of 1797 four United Irishmen from the Monaghan militia were executed in front of thousands of other soldiers who were then marched past their bodies.⁹⁶ These executions were effective in particular at challenging and undermining the United Irish organisation in the Militia although they also created martyrs for the United Irishmen like William Orr.

Alongside this a campaign was launched against the United Irish publications. Those who were sympathetic to the United Irishmen were bribed or threatened into silence. Those like the *Northern Star* or *The Press* which could not be bought were physically closed down so that by the spring of 1798 there were no radical or opposition papers in print. This allowed the pro-British press to spread unchallenged all sorts of lies before and during the rebellion.

As well as the stick Britain used the carrot to buy off sections of the population, in particular wealthy Catholics who were given additional rights and the Catholic hierarchy who were given a college at Maynooth in 1795. The hierarchy repaid this debt in 1798 when they came out in strong opposition to the rebellion.

The Rebellion

In December of 1796 a French Fleet appeared off the shores of Bantry Bay with 15,000 French soldiers and Wolfe Tone. Rough seas and inexperienced sailors prevented a landing which would have had a good chance of liberating the country from British rule. The British campaign of terror against the United Irishmen over the next two years was seriously undermining the organisation by 1798. In the Spring of 1798 pressure was mounting for a rising without the French and after the arrest of most of the Leinster leadership those who escaped set a date for the rising, May 23rd.

The Dublin rising

The key to the rising was to be Dublin. It was intended to seize the city and trigger a message to the rest of the country by stopping the mail coaches. Their non arrival would be the signal for local rebellions. However although thousands turned out for the rising in Dublin it ended up as a fiasco with almost no fighting. The reasons why this happened and why there was no significant rising in Belfast can be found in the class basis of the leadership of the United Irishmen.

Once it was clear that the rising was going to happen without the French it was also clear that there was no mechanism to hold back the workers and peasants from going beyond the

⁹⁵ The Wexford Rising in 1798, Charles Dickson, 1955, p44

⁹⁶ The United Irishmen, p173

bourgeois democratic and separatist aims of the bulk of the leadership. The French Revolution had shown that particularly in the cities 'the mob' were capable of creating their own demands and attempting to implement them even where they went beyond the wishes of the leadership.

Edward Fitzgerald, Neilson and the others who planned the May 21st rising in Dublin were willing to risk this. But they were arrested and thus removed from command by May 19th. The British on the information of informers had seized Smithfield square which was to be the gathering point for the rising. In the confusion there was thus little chance of the rank and file of the United Irishmen spontaneously gathering to create an alternative plan. The second rank of leadership which should have created an alternative plan failed to do so precisely because it now feared the uncontrolled 'mob'. From the British side General Carhampton, expressed this as a fear the *"the city [would] be handed over to a municipality formed of the dregs of the people, who, armed with pikes and whiskey, would probably plunder and burn the town, and the whole kingdom then be undone for a century to come."*⁹⁷

Precisely as had been warned *"when the people come forward, the aristocracy, fearful of being left behind, insinuate themselves into our ranks and rise into timid leaders or treacherous auxiliaries."*

The Wexford Republic

A limited rising happened around Dublin, just enough in fact to encourage the Loyalists and British forces to unleash further terror in the rest of the country. In Wicklow and North Wexford this included the execution of over 50 United Irish prisoners, the attacking of civilians and the burning of cabins. Although Wexford had over 300 United Irishmen the bulk of them do not appear to have been preparing for a rising and would probably have been against one for the reasons outlined above.

A historian of the rebellion, Dickson states that *"without a French landing and without the compulsion applied by the magistrates and their agents ... there would have been no Wexford rising at all."*⁹⁸ and his account demonstrates that the early battles were spontaneous clashes. Indeed at the all-important victory at Oulart on the 27th May there was no real commander and some of the United Irishmen were armed only with stones. There, in part due to very poor militia tactics and a successful ambush, the rebels wiped out a detachment of the Cork militia.

The Oulart victory demonstrated that even a well armed and organised British force could be defeated. This victory and the increasing brutal counter insurgency campaign saw hundreds and then thousands flock to join the rebel hilltop encampments. On the 30th May a second successful ambush on the militia included the capturing of the artillery, in turn leading to the capture of Wexford town. The town of Enniscorthy was also taken.

Eventually the superior tactics, arms and training of the British forces was to prove a match for the rebels except where the British army was ambushed and heavily outnumbered. On the 1st of June the rebels captured Bunclody but a lack of discipline led to looting and in the confusion the British army counter attacked and retook the town. On the 4th and 5th of June the rebellion suffered its most decisive defeat at the battle of New Ross with over 10% of the Wexford rebels being killed in the battle or massacred in the aftermath.

The Wexford rebel's second (and final) major attempt to spread the rebellion to neighboring counties failed at the Battle of Arklow on the 9th June. The rebel army was increasingly demoralised

⁹⁷ 1798: the United Irishmen and the early Trade Unions

⁹⁸ The Wexford Rising in 1798, p36

and restricted to defensive battles and guerrilla raids. On the 21st the final major battle was fought at Vinegar Hill after which the remaining rebels broke into small parties some of which carried out guerrilla attacks for three more years. It had taken some 20,000 British soldiers almost a month to crush the 30,000 rebels who were “*utterly untrained, practically leaderless and miserably armed.*”⁹⁹

Wexford town had however been liberated for a short while. At the time it was thriving and had a population of 10,000, many of whom were Protestants. After liberation a seven-man directory of the main United Irishmen and a 500 strong senate took over the running of the town. Both of these included Catholic and Protestant members. In addition each district had its own local committee, militia and elected leader. The three weeks before it was retaken did not allow time for much constructive activity beyond the printing of ration coupons.¹⁰⁰

Events in Antrim/Down

Robert Simms was Adjacent-General of the United Irishmen in the north and he simply refused to acknowledge that the signal from Dublin indicated he should rise. Instead, presumably in part for the class interests already outlined, he preferred to wait for the French.

The situation in the North had also changed since 1796. A savage campaign of British torture had terrified, disorganised and disarmed many of the United Irishmen. General Knox had told General Lake that his methods were also intended to “*increase the animosity between the Orangemen and the United Irishmen.*” The Presbyterian link with America, once a recruiter for the United Irishmen’s cause had become a liability. France and America had fallen out and were now enemies. One observer reported of northern Presbyterians that “*They now abhor the French as much as they formally were partial to them.*”

Nevertheless the rank and file were determined there should be a rising and the lower officers with Henry Joy McCracken – who had just returned from jail in Dublin – forced Simms to resign on June 1st and got an order for a rising agreed at a delegate meeting on June 2nd. This delay meant it was not till the 7th that the rising started in Antrim and the 9th in Down. In the course of this delay the Northern rising was further weakened. Three of the United Irishmen colonels gave the plans to the British taking away any element of surprise and allowing them to prepare for the rising.

More seriously rumors started reaching the north from the Wexford rebellion with the newspapers “*rivalling rumour in portraying in Wexford an image of Catholic massacre and plunder equalled only by legends ...*”¹⁰¹ Many of these stories were false although Protestant men had been killed in Enniscorthy. The distorted version that reached the north by 4 June (before the northern rising) was that “*at Enniscorthy in the county of Wexford every Protestant man, woman and child, even infants, have been murdered.*”¹⁰² Alongside this were manufactured stories like a supposed Wexford Oath “*I, A.B. do solemnly swear ... that I will burn, destroy and murder all heretics up to my knees in blood.*” In addition there was “*ample time*” before the battle of Ballynahinch on the 13th for news of the Scullabogue massacre to have reached the North.

⁹⁹ The Wexford Rising in 1798, p41

¹⁰⁰ The Wexford Republic of June 1798 : A story hidden from history, Kevin Whelan in 1798 ; 200 years of resonance, Ed. Mary Cullen

¹⁰¹ The United Irishmen, p262

¹⁰² The United Irishmen, p260

Later commentaries have tried to deny the significance of the Northern rising or have claimed the many Presbyterians failed to turn out. However given all of the above what is truly remarkable is how little effect all this had, in particular as by the 6th the Wexford rising had clearly failed to spread. At this stage there were 31,000 United Irishmen in the area of the rising in the north of which 22,000 actually took part in the major battles, more turned out but missed the major battles.¹⁰³

Like the Wexford rising the Northern rebels succeeded in winning minor skirmishes against the British but were defeated in the major battles by the British armies superior training, arms and tactics. Henry Joy McCracken issued the proclamation to rise on June 6th and in County Antrim the towns of Ballymena, Portaferry and Randalstown were quickly taken. As many as 10,000 United Irish and Defenders assembled at Donegore Hill and marched on Antrim town on June 7th. There they were initially successful in their assault on the garrison but the arrival of additional artillery with British reinforcements from Belfast caused the disintegration of the rebel army.

In County Down a second army of around 8,000 under Henry Munro won a battle at Saintfield on the 7th when they ambushed the York Regiment and the local Comber and Newtownards Cavalry. The towns of Portaferry and Strangford were attacked with the result that after the battles their garrisons withdrew and these towns were also captured. On the 12th June the British forces which had put down the Antrim rising retook Saintfield, which they set on fire. They proceeded to Ballynahinch much of which was also set on fire. On the 13th June Munro attacked Ballynahinch and initially the battle went in favour of the United Irish. However when the British general Nugent ordered the retreat his bugles was misunderstood by the rebels to signal the arrival of British reinforcements with the result that many panicked and fled. Taking advantage of the rout the British forces massacred the retreating rebels with grapeshot.

As in Wexford the British burned towns, villages and houses they considered sympathetic to the rebels and massacred both prisoners and wounded during and after the battles. After the battle of Antrim some were buried alive.¹⁰⁴ In addition 32 United Irishmen leaders were executed in the North after the rising, including two Presbyterian ministers.

The last major battle of the Northern rising was at Ballynahinch on the 13th June. In Wexford the rebel army was dispersed at the battle of Vinegar Hill on the 20th June. By the time the French arrived in Killala in August it was too late although their initial success does suggest that either the Wexford or Antrim rebels may have been much more successful if they had the benefit of even the small number of experienced French Troops and arms landed at Killala.

Henry Joy McCracken was captured and executed in Belfast on July 16th. But for a while he had managed to go into hiding after the rising where he wrote a letter to his sister in which he sums up the causes of the failure of the rising as "*the rich always betray the poor*". The key informer who betrayed the Dublin rising, Reynolds, had turned informer in 1798 because of fears of his ancestral estates being confiscated.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ The United Irishmen, p267

¹⁰⁴ Revolt in North, p135

¹⁰⁵ Citizen Lord, p246

Agendas in writing the history

It is a common observation that history is written by the victors. The British and loyalist historians who wrote the initial histories of the rising described it as little more than the actions of a sectarian mob intent on massacring all Protestants. Even nationalist reformers sought to hide their program of uniting Irishmen regardless of Creed. After 1798 nationalists turned to the confessional politics of mobilising Catholics alone. Daniel O'Connell, the main architect of this policy went so far in 1841 as to denounce the United Irishmen as "... *wicked and villainously designing wretches who fomented the rebellion.*"¹⁰⁶ O'Connell had served in the militia in 1798.

James Connolly described the Irish nationalist history that emerged of 1798 as "*The middle class 'patriotic' historians, orators, and journalists of Ireland have ever vied with one another in enthusiastic descriptions of their military exploits on land and sea, their hairbreadth escapes and heroic martyrdom, but have resolutely suppressed or distorted their writings, songs and manifestos.*"¹⁰⁷ In short although the name of the United Irishmen was honoured their radical democratic ideas were buried even before the formation of the 26 county state.

The grave of Wolfe Tone who today is remembered as the main figure of the United Irishmen was unmarked until 1844. Around this time radicals in Ireland once again fell under the influence of a wave of international republicanism that was to climax in the European democratic revolutions of 1848. Part of this meant exploring the real causes and aims of the 1798 rebellion. The organisation of this period, the Young Irelanders, erected a plain black marble slab on Tone's grave and "*celebrated the United Irishmen not as passive victims or reluctant rebels, but as ideologically committed revolutionaries with a coherent political strategy.*"¹⁰⁸ Paying homage at the grave of Wolfe Tone became an essential annual rite for any party wishing to claim the republican legacy.

What is meant by this legacy in itself became a battleground in the years that followed, at times literally! In 1934 when protestant members of the Republican Congress arrived from Belfast with a banner proclaiming 'Break the connection with capitalism' they were physically assaulted and driven off by IRA members. Not simply because they were protestants but because they were raising a communist slogan that was seen as well beyond what republicanism was about.

The first response to the Loyalist history in Ireland was an alternative but parallel history produced to suit a Catholic and nationalist agenda. Both of these agendas neatly dovetailed in showing the rising as a fight for "faith and fatherland". This is illustrated by the treatment of two portraits of prominent figures in the rebellion. Edward Fitzgerald's had his red cravat¹⁰⁹ painted out and replaced with a white one. Farther Murphy had his cravat painted out and replaced with a priests collar. Within factions of republicanism and the left there were attempts to rescue this history, starting with the memoirs of United Irishmen like Myles Byrne who had chosen exile over compromise. But all too often this history has been crushed beneath histories designed to fulfill the contrasting needs of the British and Irish ruling class.

¹⁰⁶ Freeman's Journal, 22 May, 1841

¹⁰⁷ Labour and Irish History, Chap VII

¹⁰⁸ The Tree of Liberty, p167

¹⁰⁹ Which represented not only a revolutionary badge but also a defense of the execution of the French king Louis.

Women in 1798

Of particular note is the way the women of 1798 have either been written out of history all together or exist only as the faithful wives or sisters of the nationalist histories and the blood crazed witches of the loyalist accounts. Like other republicans of that period the United Irishmen for the most part did not see a political role for women in their future republic although “one proposal was made that women should have the vote as well.”¹¹⁰ Women did however organise, a *Society of United Irish Women* whose secretary was Lucy Sterling is mentioned in a letter in the *Northern Star*, October 1796.¹¹¹ The *Northern Star* also prominently advertised a printing of ‘*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*’, Mary Wollstonecrafts pamphlet written in 1792.

Many women either formally or informally organized as past of the United Irishmen. Court martial records indicate that a number of women were sworn into the United Irishmen, at least as far as taking the secrecy oath.¹¹² Mary Ann McCracken played an important role from an early period in promoting the organization. Later like many other women she was involved in the hiding and movement of weapons as well as the role of messenger.

In the run up to the rebellion women were particularly active in subverting the Militia. They would swear in soldiers and also spread rumours that the troops were going to be sent abroad.¹¹³ Women were active in the rebellion, not just in ‘traditional roles’ of medical aid etc but also in quite a number of cases as combatants. Sir Jonah Barrington said at Vinegar Hill many women “*fought with fury*”. However almost all of these roles seem to be ones that individual women demanded and fought for, there is no evidence of any serious effort on the part of the United Irish leadership to mobilise women.

Post rebellion republicans

In the immediate aftermath of the rising it was in the interests of those who had taken part to deny all knowledge or insist they were ignorant dupes or forced by ‘the mob’ to play whatever role they had. A popular republican song asked “*Who fears to speak of ’98*”. People researching oral histories have indicated that the answer was ‘just about everyone’ and indeed even the year of death on the gravestones of those who died in the rising was commonly falsified. The British campaign of terror before the rising carried on into the following century with chapel burning’s and deportations of cartloads of suspects.

In Wexford, where the death penalty still applied to anyone who had been a United Irish officer, it was a common defense for ex-leaders to claim they were forced into their role by mobs of rebels. This explanation was handy for both the official and Catholic nationalist versions of the history. It suggested that the Protestant portion of the leadership was coincidental in what was otherwise a confessional or sectarian rising, depending on your point of view. What made this deception possible was, unlike in most other counties, the membership roles for Wexford were never captured. This allowed ex-rebel leaders like Edward Hay to argue that “*there were fewer United Irishmen in the county of Wexford than in any other part of Ireland.*”¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ A history of the Irish Working Class, p71

¹¹¹ The Women of 1798, ed Daire Keogh, Nicholas Furlong, p53

¹¹² The Women of 1798, p70

¹¹³ The United Irishmen, p171

¹¹⁴ History of the Insurrection in the county of Wexford, 1798

The Orange Order

On the loyalist side there was a need for the Orange Order to minimise the scale of Presbyterian involvement in the rising so it could be portrayed as a sectarian and Catholic affair. So loyalist accounts have tended to focus on the Wexford massacres, often making quite false claims about their scale, who was massacred and why they were massacred. Musgrave (the main loyalist historian) in his coverage of the rebellion gives only 2% of his writing to the Antrim and Down rebellion while 62% of his coverage concentrates on Wexford.¹¹⁵ The limited accounts Loyalist historians give of the Northern rising portray it as idealistic Presbyterians being betrayed by their Catholic neighbors and so learning to become 'good loyal Orange men'. The scale of British and loyalist massacres of these Presbyterians is seldom mentioned.

The Centenary & the Catholic Church

More than anything else the nationalist (and largely Catholic) history of the rising was determined by the needs of the Catholic church when faced with the danger of socialist influence on the radical Fenian movement one hundred years later. This is a history that had several aims; to hide the role of the church hierarchy in condemning the rising (and instead claim that the church led the rising); to blame the failure of the rising on underground revolutionary organisation (as an attack on the Fenians); and to minimise the involvement of Northern Presbyterians and radical democratic ideas. In so far as these radical ideas are mentioned it is to put forward the view that "*it was the turbulent and disorderly Presbyterians who seduced the law abiding Catholics.*"¹¹⁶

This history has therefore emphasised the rebellion in Wexford and elevated the role of the handful of priests who played an active part. Father Murphy thus becomes the leader of the rising. The fight was for 'faith and fatherland', as a statue of a Pikeman draped in rosary beads which was erected in Enniscorthy on the hundred anniversary of the rising proclaims. Finally the role of the United Irishmen is minimised. The leadership role of United Irishmen like Bagnal Harvey, Matthew Keogh and Edward Lough who were Protestant is hidden. The failure of the rebellion is explained by the inevitability of revolutionary movements being betrayed by informers. Patrick Kavanagh's 'A Popular history of the insurrection of 1798' published in 1870 presents Father Murphy as the sole heart of the insurrection and the United Irishmen as "*riddled by spies, ruined by drink, with self-important leaders ...*"¹¹⁷

Issues of '98

To a large extent these histories are the accepted ones. It would be very time consuming to address all the issues they raise. But there is a need for current revolutionary organisations in Ireland to dispel the illusions created of the past. Protestant workers in the north are largely unaware that it was their forefathers who invented Irish republicanism, nor indeed that the first Republican victim of a show trial and execution was a Presbyterian from Ballymena, William Orr.

¹¹⁵ The Tree of Liberty, p138

¹¹⁶ The Tree of Liberty, p150

¹¹⁷ The Tree of Liberty, p170

In the 1990's the post cease-fires debate on the release of political prisoners might have been somewhat different if Orr's pre-execution words were remembered *"If to have loved my country, to have known its Wrongs, to have felt the Injuries of the persecuted Catholics and to have united with them and all other Religious Persuasion in the most orderly and sanguinary means of procuring Redress — If these be Felonies I am a Felon but not otherwise ..."*¹¹⁸

Was the rebellion Protestant in the north and Catholic in the south?

A sophisticated attempt to deny the reality of 1798 is to suggest that the northern and southern risings were not really connected. That the northern rising was Presbyterian and democratic while the southern was Catholic and sectarian.

Although the rebels in the north were mainly Presbyterian and those in the south mainly Catholic both armies contained considerable number of both religions. I've already mentioned some of the Protestant leaders in the south. In the south, partly to head off sectarian tension within the rebel army, United Irishmen commander Roche issued a proclamation on 7th June *"to my Protestant soldiers I feel much in debt for their gallant behaviour in the field"*. For the reasons discussed below the Wexford rising was seriously mired by sectarianism but right to the end there were Protestants among the rebels. Indeed it is still remembered around Carlow that after the battle Father John Murphy was hidden by a Protestant farmer only to be betrayed by a Catholic the next day.

It is true that in the north there were also sectarian tensions present. A catholic United Irish officer urged a column of Presbyterians to *"avenge the Battle of the Boyne"* just before the battle of Antrim! Also in the north at Ballynahinch the Defenders (who would have been overwhelmingly Catholic) fought as a distinct unit. However the figures also show that thousands of Catholics and Protestants turned out and fought side by side in a series of battles despite the obvious hopelessness of the situation. Even in Emmet's abortive 1803 rising Thomas Russell succeeded in gathering a few rebels together in Antrim.

The sectarian background in Wicklow and Wexford

There were also strong sectarian elements in the Wexford rising. To understand where these came from we need to look at events immediately before the rising. About 25% of the population was Protestant, these included a few recently arrived colonies that must have displaced earlier Catholic tenants and thus caused sectarian tensions.

The high percentage of Protestants in Wexford also made it possible to construct a militia and later Yeomanry that was extremely sectarian in composition, in the words of Dickson in Wexford *"these Yeoman were almost entirely a Protestant force."*¹¹⁹ This Yeomanry was responsible in part for the savage repression that preceded the rising and the initial house and chapel burning during it. Col. Hugh Pearse observed *"in Wexford at least, the misconduct of the Militia and Yeomanry ... was largely to blame for the outbreak ... it can only be said that cruelty and oppression produced a yet more savage revenge."*¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ William Orr, pre-hanging declaration, 2.45pm, 14 October 1796

¹¹⁹ The Wexford Rising in 1798, Charles Dickson, 1955, p13

¹²⁰ Col. Hugh Pearse in 'Memoir of the life and service of Viscount Lake' (1744 — 1808) p95 quoted in The Wexford Rising in 1798, p12

When faced with a Protestant landlord class mobilising Protestant local troops to torture them and burn their chapels it is perhaps unsurprising that many Catholics were inclined to identify Protestants as a whole as the problem. The United Irish organisation in the area before the rising was too small to make much progress in overcoming this feeling, and in fact one of their tactics added to the sectarian tension. There were Orange Lodges in Wexford and Wicklow and as elsewhere there is evidence that the United Irishmen deliberately spread rumours of an Orange plot to massacre Catholics. The intention was the Catholics would join the rebellion in greater numbers but such rumors inevitably heightened distrust of all Protestants and probably played a direct role in the massacre of prisoners at Wexford.

The role of the Catholic priests in the rising

Although by 1898 the Catholic church would choose to pretend it had led the Wexford rising in 1798 nothing could be further from the truth. Dr Troy, Archbishop of Dublin said within days of the rising (27 May 1798) that *“We bitterly lament the fatal consequences of this anti-Christian conspiracy.”*

In fact the Catholic hierarchy was opposed to the radical ideas of the rebellion and especially since the opening of the Catholic seminary at Maynooth supported the British state. Three days after the rebellion had started the following declaration came out of Maynooth

“We, the undersigned, his Majesty’s most loyal subjects, the Roman Catholics of Ireland, think it necessary at this moment publicly to declare our firm attachment to his Majesty’s royal person, and to the constitution under which we have the happiness to live ... We cannot avoid expressing to Your Excellency our regret at seeing, amid the general delusion, many, particularly of the lower orders, of our own religious persuasion engaged in unlawful associations and practises” (30 May 1798)

This was signed by the President of the Royal College of Maynooth and 2000 of the Professors and students, 4 lords and 72 baronets.¹²¹ One of the Wexford rebels, Myles Byrne, wrote afterwards that *“priests saved the infamous English government in Ireland from destruction.”*¹²²

Individual Catholic priests like Farther Murphy did play an important leadership role in the rising alongside the mostly protestant United Irish leaders. According to Dickson *“at least eleven Catholic curates took an active part and of these three were executed.”*¹²³ But their own Bishop described the rebel priests after the rebellion as *“excommunicated priests, drunken and profligate couple-beggars, the very faeces of the Church.”*¹²⁴ The leadership role some priests played in the rising was against the wishes of the hierarchy. It often arose out of a motivation to protect their parishioners from loyalist atrocities. It also has to be said that many of these rebel priests did what they could to protect innocent Protestants.

¹²¹ The Wexford Rising in 1798, p16

¹²² Memoirs, Vol. 1, p39 [1906]

¹²³ The Wexford Rising in 1798, p17

¹²⁴ ‘A vindication of the Roman Catholic Clergy of the town of Wexford during the late unhappy rebellion’ pub 1799

The Wexford massacres

Throughout the Wexford rising sectarian tensions were never far from erupting. This was expressed throughout the rising as a pressure on Protestants to convert to Catholicism, particularly in Wexford town where “*Among the insurgent rank and file ... heresy hunting became widespread ... Protestants found it prudent to attend mass as the only means of saving their lives.*”¹²⁵ When the rebels carried out massacres they often had strong sectarian undertones although the loyalist historians and indeed Pakenham, the most widely read historian of the rising are guilty of distorting the nature of these massacres by claiming only Protestants were executed.

These historians are also guilty of ignoring or minimising the causes of most of the massacres, the far larger massacres by British army and loyalist forces of civilians, rebel prisoners and wounded. The murder of over 50 United Irish prisoners at Dunlarvin and Carnew from the 24th June was almost certainly a major force in sparking the rising in Wexford. The massacres during and after the battle of New Ross were of a scale such that even the Loyalist historian Rev. James Gordon admits “*I have reason to think more men than fell in battle were slain in cold blood.*”¹²⁶ The exact scale of this massacre can only be guessed at but after the battle 3,400 rebels were buried, 62 cart loads of rebel bodies were thrown in the river and many others (particularly wounded) were burned alive in the houses of the town. According to many accounts the screams of wounded rebels being deliberately burned alive may have played a significant part in the murder of 100 loyalist civilian prisoners at nearby Scullabogue on the morning of the battle.

At Scullabogue around 100 prisoners were murdered, 74 were burned alive in a barn, (nine of whom were women and 8 of whom were Catholic) and 21 men were killed on the front lawn. A survivor, Frizel stated that the cause was the (correct) rumour that the military were murdering prisoners at New Ross.¹²⁷ At least three Protestants were amongst the rebels who carried out these killings, the presence of Protestants amongst the murders and Catholics among the victims gives the lie to the claim that this was a simple sectarian massacre.

Many other rebellions where considerable cruelty has been used by the ruling class see massacres of that class and their perceived agents. Massacres were also a feature of the rebellion in the north where no sectarian motive can easily be attached. At the start of the Down rising the rebels near Saintfield led by James Breeze attacked and set fire to the home of Hugh McKee, a well known loyalist and informer, burning him, his wife, five sons, three daughters and housemaid to death.¹²⁸

The leadership of the Wexford rebellion both United Irishmen and the Catholic priests tried to defuse the sectarian tension and prevent massacres. On 7th June Edward Lough of Vinegar Hill camp issued a proclamation “*this is not a war for religion but for liberty.*”¹²⁹ Vinegar Hill was the site of many individual executions over the 23 days the rebel camp existed there. Between 300 and 400 were executed, most were Protestant although Luke Byrne one of the organisers of the executions is quoted as saying “*If anyone can vouch for any of the prisoners not being Orangemen, I have no objection they should be discharged*” and indeed all captured Quakers were released.¹³⁰

¹²⁵ The Wexford Rising in 1798, p18

¹²⁶ The Wexford Rising in 1798, p116

¹²⁷ The Wexford Rising in 1798, p129

¹²⁸ APRN, 11 May 1998

¹²⁹ The Wexford Rising in 1798, p126

¹³⁰ The Wexford Rising in 1798, p77

A proclamation from Wexford on 9th June called to “*protect the persons and properties of those of all religious persuasions who have not oppressed us*”¹³¹ and on the 14th June the United Irishmen oath was introduced to the Wexford army in order to help impose discipline. None of this is to deny that there were sectarian tensions and indeed sectarian elements to the massacres, perhaps most openly after the rebel army had abandoned Wexford. Thomas Dixon and his wife then brought 70 men into the town during the night “from the northern side of the Slaney” and plied them with whiskey. The following day a massacre started at 14:00 and lasted over five hours. Up to 97 were murdered.

However even here not all the 260 prisoners from whom those massacred were selected could be described as innocent victims. One of those killed, Turner, was seen burning cabins in Oulart shortly before the battle there.¹³² Another prisoner who survived was Lord Kingsborough, commander of the hated North Cork Militia and popularly regarded as having introduced the pitch cap torture.¹³³ Most significantly the massacre happened when the rebel army had withdrawn from the town and stopped when they returned.

Dealing with sectarianism

It is an unfortunate feature of some republican and left histories of 1798 that the sectarian nature of the Wexford massacres is either avoided or minimised. To northern Protestant workers today this merely appears to confirm an impression that this is the secret agenda of the republican movement. The stories both true and false of sectarian massacres in Wexford that were circulated in the North before and during the rising must have undermined the unity of the Northern rising.

Although the Wexford leadership did act to limit sectarianism in hindsight it is obvious that the United Irishmen were too complacent about sectarianism amongst the Defenders and in Wexford in particular more could and should have been done. In particular the final and most blatantly sectarian massacre at Wexford bridge could probably have been avoided if the Dickson’s, the couple at the centre of it, had been removed in advance of it. They had spent the period of the rebellion in Wexford trying to whip up a pogrom and sharp action by the United Irish leadership in removing them from the scene could have prevented the tragedy that followed.

1798 and Irish nationalism

The debate around nation is in itself something that divides the Irish left. In particular after the partition of Ireland in 1922 there has been a real and somewhat successful effort to divide people into two nations. One consists of all the people in the south and the northern Catholics. Catholicism was a central part of this definition with the Catholic Church being given an informal veto for many decades over state policy.

To a large extent this definition is tacitly accepted by many parts of the republican movement. Francie Malloys 1996 election campaign posters based on their being 20,000 more nationalists (i.e. Catholics) than Protestants in Mid-Ulster being a case in point. This has led to a situation where sectarian murderers of Protestants were not treated as seriously by the republican movement as alleged informers or even those judged guilty of ‘anti-social’ crime.

¹³¹ The Wexford Rising in 1798, p126

¹³² The Wexford Rising in 1798, p62

¹³³ The Wexford Rising in 1798, p149

However in the last couple of decades the south has emerged from under the long dark shadow of Catholic nationalism. In the urban centres at least De Valera's comely maids at the crossroads and the threat of the Bishop's crozier have faded into a distant and bizarre past. In the last decade the power the Catholic Church retained in rural areas collapsed under the weight of revelations about religious child abuse.

However in the north the peace process has if anything reinforced the sectarian divisions by introducing the concept of a head count into the very heart of the Good Friday agreement. In any case many northern loyalists had made the political decision to start referring to themselves as British or 'Ulster-Scots'. This is a quite a remarkable turn around even in the history of loyalism, and would have been an insult to the Orangemen of 1798, one of whom James Claudius Beresford declared he was "*Proud of the name of an Irishman, I hope never to exchange it for that of a colonist.*"¹³⁴

A couple of years after the rising Britain succeeded in forcing the Irish Parliament to pass an 'Act of Union' which effectively dissolved that parliament and replaced it with direct rule from Westminster. 36 Orange Lodges in Co. Armagh and 13 in Co. Fermanagh declared against this Act of Union. Lodge No. 500 declared it would "*support the independence of Ireland and the constitution of 1782*" and "*declare as Orangemen, as Freeholders, as Irishmen that we consider the extinction of our separate legislature as the extinction of the Irish Nation.*"¹³⁵ The bankruptcy of the Irish nationalist project is demonstrated by its achievement in driving their descendants in the opposite direction.

What was the nation fought for in 1798

The rewriting of the history of 1798 by loyalists and nationalists alike has a common purpose, to attempt to define being Irish as containing a requirement to being a Catholic. The greatest defeat of 1798 was the success of this particular project, in particular after partition when the southern and northern states adopted opposed confessional definitions of themselves. The legacy of that failure is that we not only live on a divided island but the vast majority of our hospitals and schools are either Catholic or Protestant controlled.

The United Irishmen's core project, to replace the name of Irishman for the labels of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter was not an abstract nationalist one. It came from a concrete analysis that unless this was done then no progress could be made because a people divided were easily ruled. Here lies the greatest gulf with republicans today who reverse this process and imagine that such unity can only be the outcome rather than the cause of progress.

The rebellion of the United Irishmen was not a rebellion for four abstract green fields, free of John Bull. It was inspired by the new ideas of equality, fraternity and liberty coming out of the French revolution. Indeed at first it did not even necessarily mean separation from Britain, as late as July 1793 Wolfe Tone wrote in a letter to '*Freeman's Journal*' that he was "*not yet an advocate of separation.*"¹³⁶ Separatism became a necessary step once it was realised that fulfilling these ideas required the ending of British rule. For many and indeed particularly for those who rose it also represented a rebellion against the ownership of land by a few and for some move towards

¹³⁴ Revolt in North, 1960, p243

¹³⁵ Revolt in North, p243

¹³⁶ The Burden of the present, Thomas Bartlett in United Irishmen: republican, radicalism and rebellion, Ed: Dickson et al, p 14

an equality of property. Even the most aristocratic of the leaders, (Lord) Edward Fitzgerald had under the influence of experiencing life amongst the settlers and Iroquois of Canada returned “with idealistic ‘Levelling’ schemes — named after the Levellers.”¹³⁷

Those leaders who planned the rising dreamt of creating a new society. They were part of a revolutionary wave sweeping the western world, they were internationalists and indeed an agreement for distinct republics was drawn up with the United Scotsmen and the United Englishmen.¹³⁸ They corresponded with similar societies in Paris and London. Some like Thomas Russell were also active anti-slavery campaigners, others went on to fight with Simon Bolivar, the key figure in liberation of South America from Spanish rule. Exiled United Irishmen were involved in risings in Tasmania, and in South Africa in 1803 an Irish man was executed for attempting to ferment a black rebellion. Everywhere struggles for democratic rights were breaking out, in 1797 the London poor stoned George III carriage shouting “Peace! Bread! No War! No King!”¹³⁹ and in that same year 50,000 sailors were involved in the Spithead and Nore mutinies setting up delegate committees in the British fleet with the aid of United Englishmen¹⁴⁰ and of course the United Irishmen who had been sent to the Fleet.

As Connolly puts it “these men aimed at nothing less than a social and political revolution such as had been accomplished in France, or even greater.”¹⁴¹

We know a lot of the leadership of the United Irishmen were not so driven by ideals and indeed when the time came rather than risk what they had they stayed at home or even betrayed the rebellion. Few of the rank and file rebels were able to write their memoirs so we can only guess as to their motivations. None of this is to claim that socialism was on the agenda in 1798. Common ownership of the means of production would not become a logical solution for some years yet when large numbers of people started to work in situations where they could not simply divide up their workplace. But there is no denying that radical ideas that are well in advance of today’s republicans were on the agenda of many in 1798 and we know from recent history that these ideas will be the most deeply buried and hardest to recover.

The central message of 1798 was not Irish unity for its own sake, indeed the strongest opponent in that period of the British parliament had been the Irish ascendancy, terrified that direct rule might result in Catholic emancipation. Unity of all people in Ireland regardless of creed, or when their ancestors arrived, offered to remove the sectarian barriers that enabled a tiny ascendancy class to rule over millions without granting even a thimble full of democratic rights to the mass of the population.

The struggle for freedom has changed more than a little since as many of the basic democratic rights fought for in 1798 have been won, but in terms of creating an anarchist society the words of James Hope, the most proletarian of the 1798 leaders still apply

“Och, Paddies, my hearties, have done wid your parties. Let min of all creeds and profissions agree. If Orange and Green min, no longer were seen, min. Och, naboclis, how aisy ould Ireland we’d free.”

Andrew Flood

¹³⁷ Citizen Lord, p113

¹³⁸ A history of the Irish Working Class, p72

¹³⁹ A history of the Irish Working Class, p78

¹⁴⁰ A history of the Irish Working Class, p78

¹⁴¹ Labour and Irish History, Chap VII

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The development of anarchism out of European left republicanism

Micheal Bakunin was the giant of the revolutionary movement in Europe from 1848 to his death in 1876. At 6'4" and 240lbs he was a literal giant as well as the demon that stalked the bourgeois imagination. He is often cited as the father of the anarchist movement.

Bakunin followed a similar path of development to many of the other revolutionaries from a bourgeois background of that generation. Like Marx and Engels this included involvement with the left Hegalians. In 1844 he was a member of Marx's Democratic Federation in Paris where he also met and was influenced by Proudhon. When the 1848 republican revolutions (which centered on the demand for bourgeois parliaments and home rule) erupted, he served in the Workers' National Guard in Paris. When that rising was defeated he headed to Germany in March as the revolutions there started, hoping to encourage a Polish revolt.

Bakunin's political ideology at the time was fairly unformed but is usually described as 'Pan Slavist'. His writings and activity in this period bear more than a passing resemblance to what has been called left republicanism in Ireland. The idea that the 'national struggle' can be an impetus towards the abolition of class rule even as it achieves national independence is also found in many Marxist writings, including those of Connolly.

1848 also saw Bakunin participate in the Slav congress in Prague and publish '*An appeal to the Slavs*'. This appeal had many things in common with later left republican statements, for instance the call for revolutionary Slavic unity against the German, Turkish and Magyars occupations "*while we stretched our fraternal hands out to the German people, to democratic Germany*". He sought to make socialism an inevitable part of the national liberation struggle writing; "*Everybody has come to the realisation that liberty was merely a lie where the great majority of the population is reduced to a miserable existence, where, deprived of education, of liberty and of bread, it is fated to serve as an underprop for the powerful and the rich.*" The appeal ends with "*The social question thus appears to be first and foremost the question of the complete overturn of society.*"¹

Bakunin moved to Dresden where he met and befriended the composer Richard Wagner. There, in May 1849, a constitutional crisis led to another rising. With Wagner he joined the insurrection and became a revolutionary officer. Marx gives a summary of events in a letter to the *New York Daily Tribune* (October 2, 1852) on '*Revolution and Counter Revolution in Germany*' "*In Dresden, the battle in the streets went on for four days. The shopkeepers of Dresden, organised into 'community guards' not only refused to fight, but many of them supported the troops against the insurrectionists. Almost all of the rebels were workers from the surrounding factories. In the Russian refugee Michael Bakunin they found a capable and cool headed leader.*"

Bakunin was arrested after the rebellion was put down. His luck had run out. He was already wanted by the Russians, the Czar having confiscated all his property and removed all his rights in 1844. He spent 13 months in jail in Dresden under sentence of death. One night he was led out,

¹ Appeal to the Slavs [1848], in Bakunin on Anarchism, Sam Dolgoff, Black Rose Books, 1972, p63-68

he presumed to be executed, but instead he was handed over to the Austrians. They jailed him in Prague for nine months before moving him to the Olmutz fortress where he was chained to the wall for two months. They condemned him to hang for high treason. Instead he was handed to the Russians where he was jailed in the Peter-Paul Fortress. Here he lost his teeth from scurvy and came close to losing his mind.

He spent nearly ten years in the various prisons until he was exiled to Siberia in 1857. There, once he had recovered his health, he fled via Japan to the US and then to London at the end of 1861. His incredible escape from Siberia (Japan had only just opened up to the west in 1853) only added to the mystification that surrounded Bakunin.

In prison he had remained a pan Slavist and was clearly not yet an anarchist. The Czar, like later generations of Russian rulers, had a fondness for extracting confessions from his victims. Bakunin used his as a chance to outline his program which included the idea that what Russia needed was “*a strong dictatorial power*” to raise the standard of living and education. While some have correctly pointed out that what is said in such a confession should be taken with a pinch of salt, even as late as 1862 Bakunin “*thought the Tsar was capable of really working with the people, and the people capable of imposing its will on the Tsar through a National Assembly.*”²

However alongside and contrary to this he was clearly developing his thoughts in a libertarian direction. In 1862 Herzan’s journal ‘*The Bell*’ published his open letter with the title “*To my Russian, Polish and other Slav friends*”. The section addressed to university students reads “*Go to the people. This is your field, your life, your science. Learn from the people how best to serve their cause! Remember, friends, that educated youth must be neither the teacher, the paternalistic benefactor, nor the dictatorial leader of the people, but only the midwife for the self-liberation, inspiring them to increase their power by acting together and co-ordinating their efforts.*”³

He finally came to reject pan Slavism after the 1863 Polish insurrection when he saw that the Polish nationalists were more interested in Ukrainian land than the support of the Ukrainian Slavs and that they more afraid of peasant insurrection than the Czar. He visited Marx in London on his return. Marx invited him to join the 1st International and wrote to Engels (Nov 4, 1864) saying “*On the whole he is one of the few people whom I find not to have retrogressed after 16 years, but to have developed further.*”⁴

Bakunin had not yet seen the value of the 1st International (which was then in an embryonic form as a combination of British trade unions and French followers of Proudhon or Blanqui). He went to Italy where he worked on an international project of revolutionary organisation. According to Daniel Guerin “*The few members of the brotherhood were ... former disciples of the republican Giuseppe Mazzini, from whom they acquired their taste for and familiarity with secret societies.*”⁵ Brian Morris includes Polish and Russian republican exiles in this list.⁶

Bakunin comes in for a lot of criticism from modern day revolutionaries over his advocacy of secret societies in this period. The group around Bakunin had worked in similar secret societies for years, there were no legal revolutionary organisations in Poland or Russia in this period. In Italy and France these societies, often based on the Freemasons, were also the norm. It is

² Brian Morris, *Bakunin: The Philosophy of Freedom*, 1993, p26

³ Sam Dolgoff, ed, *Bakunin on Anarchy*, New York, 1973, p388

⁴ Quoted in *Bakunin: The Philosophy of Freedom*, p29

⁵ Daniel Guerin in *No Gods No Master Vol 1*, p 132

⁶ *Bakunin: The Philosophy of Freedom*, p30

thus hardly surprising that they concluded that “*an association with a revolutionary purpose must necessarily take the form of a secret society.*”⁷

They drew up sets of rules for such groupings, the first under the title Revolutionary Society/Brotherhood in 1865. Arthur Lehning, editor of the Archives Bakunin points out that such programs and statutes mirror Bakunin’s evolving thoughts, rather than “*the operation of an organization.*”⁸ They were intended to be a blueprint of an ‘ideal’ organisation rather than a description of an already fully formed one.

The first of these documents, while clearly on the path to libertarian organisation, is firmly rooted in Bakunin’s pre anarchist phase. It combines ideas of libertarian organisation with the contradictory aim of setting up a parliament; “*For the governance of common affairs, a government and provincial assembly or parliament will of necessity be formed.*”⁹

If this program cannot be considered any sort of final blueprint this does not mean that it is irrelevant. The kind of new society they advocated was a radical advance in the Europe of the 1860’s and remains surprisingly relevant. *The Program of the Brotherhood* [1865] gives a flavour of how they saw post-revolutionary society.

“the advent of liberty is incompatible with the existence of States.

..the free human society may arise at last, no longer organised ... from the top down...
but rather starting from the free individual and the free association and autonomous commune, from the bottom up

... women, different from man but not inferior to him, intelligent, hardworking and free as he is, should be declared his equal in all political and social rights ...religious and civil marriage should be replaced by free marriage, and that the upkeep, education and training of all children should be a matter for everyone, a charge upon society ... children belonging neither to society nor to their parents but rather to their future liberty

...the revolution ... can ... be effected only by the people

.. the revolution ... cannot succeed unless, sweeping, like a worldwide conflagration
.. it encompasses the whole of Europe for a start and then the world

...the social revolution .. will not ... put up its sword before it has destroyed every state ... across the whole civilised world”¹⁰

Bakunin next attempted to introduce a revolutionary socialist program into the *League of Peace and Freedom*. This was founded at a conference in Geneva in August of 1867 attended by 6,000 people, “*all friends of free democracy*”. Bakunin is described rising to speak at the conference; “*the cry passed from mouth to mouth: ‘Bakunin!’ Garibaldi, who was in the chair, stood up, advanced a few steps and embraced him. This solemn meeting of two old and tried warriors of the revolution produced an astonishing impression ... Everyone rose and there was a prolonged and enthusiastic clapping of hands.*”¹¹

⁷ Bakunin in *The Program of the Brotherhood* [1865] as published in *God and the State, No Gods, No Masters* Vol 1, p138

⁸ *No Gods No Master* Vol 1, p 132

⁹ Bakunin in *The Program of the Brotherhood* [1865], p142

¹⁰ Bakunin in *The Program of the Brotherhood* [1865], p133 – 137

¹¹ Report from a Russian positivist quoted in Brian Morris, *Bakunin: The Philosophy of Freedom*, p34

Some people date Bakunin's advocacy of anarchism from this point, not least because as part of his speech he denounced nationalism — a break with his previous pan-Slavism. Others date it from the following congress of Berne in 1868. In any case it is from this period onward that Bakunin becomes centrally involved in the building of mass revolutionary organisations, including that of the 1st International.

It is from this point that he starts to advocate methods of organisation consistent with anarchism. His last major work, written in 1873, outlines the following program for the revolutionary youth in Russia.

*“...they must go to the people, because today — and this is true everywhere, but especially in Russia — outside of the people, outside of the multi-million-strong labouring masses, there is neither life, nor cause, nor future.”*¹²

The origins of the modern anarchist movement can therefore be seen to stem from a generation of left republicans across Europe who developed anarchism to deal with the shortcomings they had identified in republicanism. These shortcomings were also relevant to the republican movement in Ireland, in particular the fear of wealthy nationalists that a republican revolution that included class questions could see them losing their wealth to the working class.

Andrew Flood

This is an extract from a longer article 'Bakunin's idea of revolution & revolutionary organisation' which can be found at www.struggle.ws Most of the texts here with a URL can also be accessed via the Bakunin web page at struggle.ws

¹² Bakunin, Statism and anarchism, Appendix A [1873], ed Marshal Shatz, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p212

1916 – Connolly, blood sacrifice and defeating British imperialism

At 11.30 in the morning of April 24 1916 Bugler William Oman, a member of a syndicalist workers militia the Irish Citizen Army (ICA), sounded the ‘fall-in’ outside his union headquarters. This was the start of an insurrection in Dublin which was to see around 1,500 armed men and women seize key buildings throughout the city, and to hold these positions against thousands of British Army soldiers for almost a week. In the course of putting down the insurrection, 1351 people were killed or severely wounded and 179 buildings in the city centre were destroyed.¹

Around 20% of those who fought were members of the Irish Citizen Army (ICA) – who were in an alliance with the nationalist Irish Volunteers. The ICA had been set up in 1913, when employers had locked out members of the syndicalist Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU) from their workplaces. The lockout lasted for 6 months before the workers were starved back to work. Near the start, a number of workers were killed or seriously wounded by police attacks on their demonstrations, pickets and homes.

In response, at a rally on November 13 1913 the revolutionary socialist James Connolly had declared “*The next time we are out for a march, I want to be accompanied by four battalions of trained men. Why should we not drill and train our men in Dublin as they are doing in Ulster?*” An ex-British army officer, Captain Jack White, offered to organise a defence militia of ITGWU members. The ICA kept peace at meetings, protected workers from the police and prevented evictions.²

Preparations for insurrection

In March 1914 the ICA was re-organised and a new constitution was ratified. The constitution was republican in character, without any explicit mention of socialism. It did however demand that “*the ownership of Ireland, moral and material, is vested of right in the people of Ireland*” and for “*equal rights and opportunities for the Irish people.*”³ The ICA was to be open only to members of a recognised union and the Dublin Trades Council gave its official approval.

The insurrection was planned by the ICA leader James Connolly, who was now also the leader of the ITGWU, and the nationalist leadership of the secretive Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). The IRB had successfully taken many of the leadership positions in the 20,000 strong Irish Volunteers without most Volunteers realising it. Even W.J. Brennan-Whitmore, who was one of the few non IRB Volunteer officers aware that the rising was planned, only learned of the IRB’s role on the morning of the rising when he saw the proclamation that mentioned their participation on the morning of the rising.

¹ The Easter Rebellion, Max Caulfield, Gill and Macmillan, 1995, p283

² James Connolly ‘A Full life’, Donal Nevin, Gill & Macmillan, 2005, p554

³ Constitution of the Irish Citizen Army, 22 March 1914, online at www.wsm.ie

From 1915 Connolly had been pushing publicly for a rising, he had even converted part of Liberty Hall (the union building) into a munitions factory which made bayonets, crowbars and bombs. He also published a number of articles in the 'Workers Republic' studying the tactics used in previous insurrections in Europe. Commenting on Connolly's article on the 1905 Moscow insurrection, a recent biographer Donal Nevin observes *"It is impossible to read without noting the remarkable similarities in the tactics to those used by the insurgents in Dublin eleven years later"*.

By 1915 the ICA was regularly engaging in training exercises around Dublin. For example, *"one night in October, when heavy fog hung over the city, the entire army, men and women, set out at midnight and for two hours engaged in 'attack' and 'defence' exercises around the Castle."*⁴ The minutes of the Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland include police reports on these armed training exercises.

Connolly and the IRB

Relationships between the ICA and the Volunteers were not always smooth. On October 11 1914 there had been clashes between Irish Volunteers and ICA over rival meetings at Glasnevin to mark Parnell's death. In Christmas 1915, Padraic Pearse said of Connolly *"Connolly is most dishonest in his methods. In public he says the war is a war forced on Germany by the Allies. In private he says that the Germans are just as bad as the British, and that we ought to do the job ourselves. As for writings in his paper, if he wanted to wreck the whole business, he couldn't go a better way about it. He will never be satisfied until he goads us into action, and then he will think most of us are too moderate, and want to guillotine half of us."*

It was, however, obvious to Connolly that an insurrection co-ordinated by both bodies would be militarily stronger than one of them acting on its own. Brennan-Whitmore claims to have been later told that *"Around the time of the outbreak of the First World War, James Connolly .. told Cathal O'Shannon .. that he wished to get in touch with the IRB and, if necessary was prepared to take the oath of that body for the purpose of establishing friendly relations between militant nationalism and Irish labour."*

By Christmas of 1915, the IRB Military Council was setting Easter 1916 as the probable date for a rising. Connolly, unaware that a date had been set, was concluding that the IRB, like earlier generations of Irish, was taking too long to act. Of the rebels of 1848 he had written *"for the most part those who undertook to give it articulate expression were wanting in the essential ability to translate sentiment into action."* In January of 1916, Connolly told JJ Burke *"that the Citizen Army would move within a week on its own and under his leadership."*⁵

Connolly met with the Volunteer leadership January 16. *"MacNeill stated that Connolly favoured an immediate insurrection and argued that the seizure of selected buildings in Dublin would ignite the whole country. He insisted that the ICA was prepared to rise alone."*⁶ Nothing came out of that meeting, but on the 19th Connolly vanished for a three day meeting with the IRB military council at which they agreed joint plans for an insurrection on Easter Sunday. At this point Connolly was co-opted on to the Military Council of the IRB. Nevin says that Connolly

⁴ James Connolly 'A Full life', p591

⁵ James Connolly 'A Full life', p628

⁶ James Connolly 'A Full life', p629

“*may have been accepted into the IRB the following month.*” Certainly this was claimed by a IRB member, who at the time was also trying to recruit Frank Robbins of the ICA.⁷

What if?

An interesting question arises as to what would have happened if the ICA had gone out on their own in January 1916, as intended. Did Connolly see such an insurrection as a token gesture doomed to defeat, or did he hope it might spark off a more general rising. Asked if the time was ripe for revolution in Ireland in 1915 he had replied with “*You never know if the time is ripe until you try. If you succeed the time is ripe, if not, then it was not ripe.*”⁸ Shortly after the deal with the IRB was reached, he wrote in the Workers Republic (Jan 26 1916) “*Revolutionists who shirk from giving blow for blow until the great day has arrived, and they have every shoe-string in its place, and every man has got his gun, and the enemy has kindly consented to postpone action in order not to needlessly harry the revolutionists, nor disarrange their plans — such revolutionists only exist in two places — the comic opera stage, and the stage of Irish national politics.*”

The program of an ICA-only rising would have been different to that of the Easter proclamation. In the previous issue of the Workers Republic, which may have been planned as the last one before the ICA rising, Connolly outlined a program for a new revolutionary government as follows “*All the railways at once to be confiscated and made public property, no compensation being given to the shareholders. All necessary ships ought at once to be taken from their owners, without compensation and without apology. Let [the Government] take the factories from the manufacturers, and immediately confiscate all the idle land (the enormous quantity of splendid land lying idle in demesnes and private estates of the nobility and gentry) and put labourers upon it to grow crops to feed the multitude. As the propertied classes have so shamelessly sold themselves to the enemy, the economic conscription of their property will cause few qualms to whosoever shall administer the Irish Government in the first days of freedom.*”

A lone rising of the few hundred ICA in January 1916 would have had even less of a chance to success than the Easter rising. A clue to Connolly’s goals thinking may be seen in his description of the ICA from August 1915; “*Its members are, therefore, of the number who believe that at the call of duty they may have to lay down their lives for Ireland, and have so trained themselves that at the worst the laying down of their lives shall constitute the starting point of another glorious tradition — a tradition that will keep alive the soul of the nation*”. A rising on the program outlined in the Workers Republic may have been intended to “*constitute the starting point of another glorious tradition*”, intended to push the general tone of republicanism to the left.

Might the Easter rising have succeeded?

Another interesting ‘what if’ concerns the Easter rising itself. Afterwards, the nationalist consensus was that it was a intentional ‘blood sacrifice’ — a fatal gesture made in order to inspire future generations but there is a counter argument that many saw a chance for success.

The rising took place in the middle of World War One and, as with other Irish republican risings “*England’s difficulty was seen as Ireland’s opportunity*”. Irish politics of the previous thirty years

⁷ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p634

⁸ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p574

had been dominated by the struggle for Home Rule. In the years before World War One this had seen the formation of rival nationalist and unionist militias, numbering hundreds of thousands, and armed with tens of thousands of smuggled rifles.

Later generations would largely accept that the rising was a 'blood sacrifice', organised to make a statement against the imperialist war or from a purely nationalist's position to keep "*faith with the past, and hand[ed] a tradition to the future*". But, as historian John A Murphy wrote, "*it should be remembered that up to the stage of the final confusion, the Military Council believed the rebellion had a real chance of success.*"⁹

The First World War meant that the British army in Ireland "*stood well below full strength.*"¹⁰ If all the 20,000 Irish Volunteers had been mobilised they would have outnumbered the army around five to one. It was only at the last minute that MacNeill, the Volunteer leader, realising the depth by which he had been tricked by the IRB, had orders printed in the newspapers cancelling the mobilisation order. German support, which did provide a diversionary Zeppelin raid on London and a naval bombardment of Lowestoft port, also supplied a huge quantity of arms, intercepted at the last minute off the Irish coast.

In his memoir of the rising General W.J. Brennan-Whitmore who believed it could have been successful wrote

"On the whole the plans for the Rising were as technically sound as the circumstances and resources available permitted. Given a successful landing of adequate arms, free co-operation and simultaneous action all over the country, they would have gone far in the attainment of the ultimate objective. That they could have resulted in a complete victory for the Volunteers and the Citizen Army is certainly open to conjecture."

*"The basic idea was to seize Dublin by a swift surprise attack and immobilise the British forces not so much by dint of the attack as by threat and manoeuvre .. This, it was confidently expected, would gain the necessary margin of time not only to land the arms and distribute them but also to get the provincial brigades properly in motion."*¹¹

The plan for the rising

The rebels had well thought out military preparations. They had studied street fighting and seized, and fortified, well-chosen positions from which they ambushed the British army. Instead of using the streets to move around, they tunnelled through the walls of adjoining buildings, and barricaded the doors and windows of their strong points. Some units of the British Army deployed against them seemed to have had little or no training for urban warfare, allowing, for instance, a tiny rebel force of less than 17 insurgents at the canal at Mount Street to catch the Sherwood Foresters in a crossfire and inflict over 240 casualties. Despite the vastly better equipment of the British army, including armoured cars and artillery, their better medical facilities, and the fact they outnumbered the rebels 3 to 1 Irish Volunteer and ICA combined deaths were only 40% of those of the British army and police.

⁹ The Insurrection in Dublin, James R Stephens, 1916, Intro John A Murphy, p xv

¹⁰ The Easter Rebellion, , p16 + p28

¹¹ Dublin burning; The Easter rising from Behind the Barricades, W.J. Brennan-Whitmore, Gill & Macmillan, 1996, p16

The IRB military leadership made a considerable attempt at keeping the specific plans for the insurrection secret. The historian Max Caulfield, who interviewed many survivors for his history of the insurrection, noted that some of the rebels taking part that morning “*presumed .. this was only an ordinary route march, or, at best, a tactical exercise.*”¹² Of course the planned mobilisation was not itself a secret, in fact “*Practically everyone in the city who knew anything about nationalist affairs was aware, for days ahead, that the Volunteers and Citizen Army had planned a full muster parade through the principal streets for Easter Sunday.*” But the political background of the previous years meant that both the British authorities and the general population were used to the sight of armed bodies of men drilling in public, in fact “*To lull officialdom, many marches and mock ‘manoeuvres’ had been held in the city from time to time.*”¹³

Why the Castle failed to act

However, despite these efforts, British intelligence knew a good deal about what was planned and when it was timed. On April 19 an informer reported that Thomas MacDonagh had said “*We are not going out on Friday, but we are going on Sunday .. Boys, some of us may never come back.*”¹⁴ The directions to the German navy had been intercepted, and the British were expecting the arms landing over Easter. This “*now open evidence of the connection of the Irish Volunteers with Germany led Lord Wimborne to insist on Sunday night that from sixty to one hundred of the leaders be arrested .. Nathan however postponed the arrests until permission was given by the Chief Secretary, Augustine Birrell, in London. Permission was only received on Easter Monday.*”¹⁵

The hesitation was because although the British knew something was up they feared the consequences of a premature move against the rebels. Chief Secretary Augustine Birrell “*saw as his paramount task the need to keep a balance between prevention of a nuisance and the inflation of nuisance value into something more important than that it was.*”¹⁶ The Castle hoped that the interception of the German guns, and the subsequent countermanding of the mobilisation order by MacNeill, meant that the threat of a rising was over. They had spent the evening before the rising debating moving against the rebel HQ at Liberty Hall but had concluded they did not have sufficient forces to hand. On the first day of the rising, Lord Wimborne could only regretfully write that “*If we only had acted last night with decision and arrested the leaders as I wanted, it might have been averted.*”¹⁷

Part of the reason the British administration in the Castle felt secure was that they knew that the rebel cause was not that popular with the population. A huge number of Irish men were serving in the British army, 170,000 Irish men had enlisted, 41% of the male population between the ages of 10 and 44. Around half were from Ulster and many of these would have been loyalists, but of the 40,000 to 50,000 killed in the war at least half were Catholic.¹⁸ Even the ITGWU, the

¹² The Easter Rebellion, p7

¹³ Dublin burning, p6

¹⁴ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p637

¹⁵ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p637

¹⁶ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p636

¹⁷ The Easter Rebellion, p94

¹⁸ A History of Ulster, Jonathan Bardon, The Blackstaff Press, 1996, p461

syndicalist union from which the ICA had emerged, believed that half of its 1914 membership had joined the British army by 1916.¹⁹

The lockout, ending only months before the outbreak of war, meant that many of the strikers were driven by poverty into the army. Connolly also claimed that one of the major employers, Jacobs, had dismissed all men of military age at the start of the war. Writing in the Workers Republic of February 26 1916 he recognised that *“The trenches in Flanders have been the graves of scores of thousands of Irishmen, a large proportion of whom were born and reared in the slums and tenement houses of Dublin, slums notorious the world over .. From out of these slums these poor misguided brothers of our have been tricked and deluded into giving battle for England.”* The Castle reckoned, not without reason, that the relatives of these soldiers were unlikely to look favourably on a rising.

The rising

The military events of the rising are well known. The rebels successfully seized most of their objectives. Then, over the following six days, the British army brought in re-enforcements, including artillery and the gun boat Helga, and proceeded to destroy selected rebel positions, in particular the GPO and O’Connell Street area. The British army were *“occupying strategic positions, possibly throwing up barricades and drawing a ring of fire tighter and tighter around us. We had no effective reply to that plan.”*²⁰

Brenan – Whitmore’s eyewitness account of the start of the rising demonstrates that not all Dubliners were hostile. He recorded that *“as we marched up to the junction with O’Connell Street pedestrian traffic paused to let us pass and we received several cheers.”* And that, while initially fortifying the GPO, *“We had not long been at this work when a great cheer from the crowd outside informed us that the tricolour had been hoisted on the top of the building fronting the street.”*²¹

He also claims that when commanding the North Earl street position, on the first night *“I could have quadrupled my little garrison in a short time if I had taken in all those who were volunteering their services.”* He turned those who were not already members of the ICA or Volunteers away, but in the GPO those taken in included a Polish and a Finnish sailor as well as a British conscientious objector (possibly called Allen) who wore the button of the international syndicalist union, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). He was wounded during the evacuation of the GPO and died on Saturday.²² Also on Friday a *“cockney socialist called Neale”*²³ was mortally wounded. Although the rising was nationalist even some of the leaders, including Connolly, had been born outside of Ireland. Padraic Pearse’s final words to his pupils were reported as being remember if we succeed it was the son of an Englishman who set you free.

Many of the British army units involved in the suppression of the rising were Irish regiments, this meant that members of the same family were on both sides of the barricades. One of the first British casualties was Lieutenant Gerald Neilan, shot by a sniper on Ushers Quay. His younger brother Anthony was taking part in the rising.²⁴ In the South Dublin Union’s fierce fighting

¹⁹ Syndicalism in Ireland 1917 – 1923 Emmet O’ Connor, Cork University press, 1988, p21

²⁰ Dublin burning, p87

²¹ Dublin burning, p41

²² James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p646

²³ The Easter Rebellion, p260

²⁴ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p646

Richard O'Reilly was one of the first casualties on the rebel side, he had another brother was also in the SDU but two other brothers were in the British army. *"That day there were two of us fighting for England, two of us against."*²⁵

Reasons for public hostility

The insurrection took place on the first anniversary of the 2nd battle of Ypres, in which the Dublin Fusiliers, which many of the ITGWU men would have joined, had suffered very heavy losses. Eyewitness James Stephens noted, in his account written just after the rising, that *"It is considered now (writing a day or two afterwards) that Dublin was entirely against the Volunteers, .. Most of the female opinion I heard was not alone unfavourable but actively and viciously hostile to the rising. This was noticeable among the best-dressed classes of our population; the worst dressed, indeed the female dregs of Dublin life, expressed a like antagonism, and almost in similar language. The view expressed was 'I hope every man of them will be shot'."*²⁶

Towards the end of the rising, as Brennan-Whitmore's unit tried to sneak through British lines near Sean MacDermott Street, he recalls the ICA men present saying *"we were in the middle of a very hostile area, being full of 'dependents' allowances' women who would certainly betray us."* They were betrayed while hiding in a tenement, where *"the majority of the inhabitants of the tenement had congregated on the first landing and showered curse upon us as we appeared. Several of the women called on the soldiers to shoot the '**** Sinn Feiners'."*²⁷

Max Caulfield wrote that as the rebel prisoners were being marched away the poor working class women attacked them, *"Shoot the traitors they cried' .. the shawlies pelted them with rotten vegetables, the more enthusiastic disgorging the contents of their chamber pots."* On a more measurable level, Caulfield points out that during the rising *"Not a single trade, political or municipal society anywhere in Ireland had declared for the republic."*²⁸

A terrible beauty is born?

Despite this initial public hostility, within two years the republicans were to win the overwhelming majority of seats in the 1918 election, and within five years the British were forced to sign a treaty and then leave 26 of the 32 counties. The 1916 insurrection almost seems designed as a perfect case study of how an insurrection can radicalise the population and change public opinion.

Even during the insurrection James Stephens noticed that public opinion was changing. He wrote that on the Wednesday *"There is almost a feeling of gratitude towards the Volunteers because they are holding our for a little while, for had they been beaten the first or second day the City would have been humiliated to the soul."*²⁹

After the rising, the British establishment made up for their lack of action beforehand; 3439 men and 70 women were interned, 92 sentenced to death³⁰. 'Only' 16, including Rodger Case-

²⁵ The Easter Rebellion, , p80

²⁶ The Insurrection in Dublin, p36

²⁷ Dublin burning, p110

²⁸ The Easter Rebellion, p184

²⁹ The Insurrection in Dublin, p39

³⁰ Conor Kostick, Revolution in Ireland: Popular militancy 1917 to 1923, Pluto Press, 1996, p23

ment, were executed, but many observers recorded public opinion changing as the executions were dragged out. When they culminated with the execution of Connolly on May 12, who was so wounded that he had to be shot sitting in a chair, the foundation was laid for the nationalist myth that it was the insurrection, and in particular the blood sacrifice of the leaders, that had 'freed Ireland'.

What really built the IRA?

Here I will sketch out an alternative explanation, details of which will be developed in future articles. The executions certainly gave the public cause to think again, but it was the slaughter of World War One, and the need for the British army to conscript Irish men to fight its war that really recruited for the IRA. This is recorded in Kerry police estimates that "*the rate of affiliation to the republican movement was highest between October 1917 and November 1918 when the threat of conscription loomed largest.*"³¹ Ernie O'Malley who rose to OC of the Second Southern, the second largest division of the IRA was in Donegal at the other end of the country. He recorded the same phenomenon there in reverse, that once "*Fear of conscription passed away with the European war. The numbers in the Volunteer companies decreased and we had more opposition.*"³²

Michael Collins reckoned the IRA never had more than around 5,000 active volunteers during the war while the British administration built up a force of tens of thousands of armed men. In comparison with World War One, British casualties were so light as to be insignificant. Foster gives figures for the War of Independence showing only 400 police and 180 soldiers killed. In comparison, the British armed forces lost one million men during World War One³³.

Yet, by 1921, the British ruling class was in a panic. Field Marshall Sir Henry Wilson recorded in his diary for 18 May 1921 "*I said that directly England was safe, every available man should go to Ireland that even four battalions now serving on the Rhine should ought also to go to Ireland .. I was terrified at the state of the country, and that in my opinion, unless we crushed the murder gang this summer we shall lose Ireland and the Empire.*"³⁴

The cause of the British panic

Two things combined in to create this panic. Across the world these were years of revolutionary struggle for the working class. In most countries workers were defeated by the forces of 'law and order'. The republican armed struggle in Ireland, which was largely directed at making it impossible to police the country, created a 'law and order' vacuum. By the end of April 1921 800 police barracks and courts had been attacked.³⁵ Into that 'law and order vacuum' created by the IRA's military campaign, the working class stepped and occupied land and workplaces. The unique situation in Ireland meant in the southern 26 counties the force of law and order that were able to repress workers struggles elsewhere were largely ineffective.

³¹ The IRA in Kerry 1916 – 1921, Sinead Joy, The Collins Press, 2005, p32

³² On another Man's Wound, Ernie O'Malley, Colour Books Limited, 1936, p88

³³ BBC, www.bbc.co.uk

³⁴ The Real Chief: Liam Lynch, Meda Ryan, Mercier Press, 2005, p46p92

³⁵ Revolution in Ireland, p97

There were 5 general strikes in Ireland between August 1918 and August 1923, and 18 general local strikes, twelve of these in 1919. For example, the general strike of 14th April 1920 saw workers take over the running of the country and it had been called overnight by the union leadership. The Manchester Guardian reported from Waterford that *“the City was taken over by a Soviet Commissar and three associates. The Sinn Fein mayor abdicated and the Soviet issued orders to the population which all had to obey. For two days, until a telegram arrived reporting the release of hunger strikers, the city was in the hands of these men.”*³⁶

In January 1919, the London Times wrote of fear that the radicals would *“push aside the middle class intelligentsia of Sinn Fein, just as Lenin and Trotsky pushed aside Kerensky and other speech makers.”*³⁷. The ruling class really started to panic when the loyalist workforce of Belfast started using similar tactics during the great Engineering strike of 1919. Mutinies also broke out in the Irish Regiments of the British army stationed in India.

In Glasgow, pitched battle were fought in George Square and 6 tanks and 100 lorry loads of troops with machine guns were brought in to prevent rallies.³⁸ it is not hard to see why the British ruling class was in something of a panic. The Director of Intelligence at the Home Office Basil Hugh Thomson wrote *“During the first three months of 1919 unrest touched its high-water mark. I do not think that at any time in history since the Bristol riots we have been so near revolution.”* Winston Churchill recorded *“We had a considerable number of mutinies in the army .. We had a number of strikes and a great many threats of strikes .. there were serious riots in Glasgow which required the presence of a large number of troops.”*³⁹

The cost to the British establishment of pursuing the war in Ireland was not military but political. They felt that *“If England goes on like this she will lose the Empire .. The coming year looks gloomy. We are certain to have serious trouble in Ireland, Egypt, and India, possible even with the Bolsheviks. At home those who know best say we are going to have a strike of the triple alliance and the Post Office. This will be a direct threat and attack on the life of the nation.”*⁴⁰

Panic leads to compromise with Sinn Fein

The level of panic from the British state about the threat of revolution shows why the Sinn Fein leadership came to be seen by the British state as a reasonable alternative that could be treated with. They reckoned — correctly as it turned out — that a sufficient amount of the leadership would settle for a deal that left key British interests, including the naval ports protected. Through the land courts, Sinn Fein was demonstrating that it posed no threat to capitalism in Ireland. In 1921 the treaty offered a way of stabilising a dangerous situation at little apparent cost.

The treaty led to the civil war, and as the Free State government won this civil war it used the forces of the Free State to crush the workers movements. Labour historian Emmet O’ Connor describes how thousands of paramilitary police (Special Infantry Corps) were deployed so that by the Spring of 1923 *“military intervention was becoming a routine response to factory seizures or the disruption of essential services”*. During the Waterford farm strike of 1923 *“600 SIC were billeted in a chain of posts throughout the affected area.”*

By the Autumn these forces were being deployed to defeat a postal strike, triggered by the Free State government rejecting the findings of its own commission of enquiry into the cost of

³⁶ Revolution in Ireland, p123

³⁷ Revolution in Ireland, p139

³⁸ Revolution in Ireland, p56

³⁹ Revolution in Ireland, p54

⁴⁰ Sir Henry Wilson quoted in Conor Kostick, Revolution in Ireland, p27

living for postal employees. During the strike the government used armoured cars to disrupt pickets and arrest officials. *“Numerous arrests and re-arrests of pickets were made until the right to peacefully picket was asserted in the courts. Even then, troops continued to intimidate strikers with armoured vehicles and rifle fire. On 17 September a lady telephonist was shot in the knees. Raids took place on union offices and arrests of officials continued.”*⁴¹ This was to demonstrate to the workers that ‘law and order’ had returned, as the Post Master General described it *“at this critical juncture to smash such a well organised strike was a salutary lesson to the general indiscipline which just then seemed to run riot through the land.”*⁴².

Conventional nationalist histories of the period after 1916 do not provide a rational mechanism for how British imperialism was defeated. There is almost no mention of mass struggles, of the general strikes and of the occupations. Instead we are to believe that the ‘blood sacrifice’ of a few men transformed public opinion and then that the actions of another gallant few in fighting the black and tans imposed a military defeat on the British Empire. The real force, in Ireland and internationally that imposed a compromise on Britain are carefully hidden away.

Andrew Flood – April 2006

First published on indymedia.ie at www.indymedia.ie where you can read comments on this article.

⁴¹ Syndicalism in Ireland 1917 – 1923, p159

⁴² Syndicalism in Ireland 1917 – 1923, p159

1916, left republicanism, anarchism and class struggle in the south

An introduction to class struggle during the war of independence

This article is an anarchist analysis of the 1916 insurrection and the war of independence in the context of the struggle for socialism in Ireland and internationally. It concentrates on the 'unknown' but intense class struggle that ran alongside the war of independence and the role republicanism played in the suppression of that struggle. It asks 'what is freedom' and shows how anarchism originated amongst earlier European left republicans as an answer to the limitations of republicanism

1916 — just what are we celebrating

There is something very odd with the official commemoration of 1916. The same government which is celebrating an insurrection against imperialism 90 years ago is today — against the wishes of the majority of the Irish people — allowing Irish airports to be used in support of an imperialist war. And whereas the 1916 proclamation referred to "*the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland*" successive southern governments have shown themselves to be on the side of international corporations. Currently this has manifested itself in the manner in which the Corrib gas fields off Co. Mayo have been handed over to the Shell corporation.

The program of the insurrection

The reason they can get away with this hypocrisy is because the 1916 proclamation is long on rhetoric about "*dead generations*" and "*august destiny*" but short on any sort of concrete program, never mind one that addressed the needs of the working class. The 1916 proclamation says very little about the sort of Ireland the rebels wanted to see. This has allowed every party in the south to claim to stand in its tradition in the 90 years since it was first read out.

The rising was heroic and it did shape the face of modern Ireland, but is there much in the rising for anyone on the left to celebrate? This blow against imperialism after all is somewhat undermined by the description of German imperialism in the second paragraph of the proclamation as "*gallant allies in Europe.*" And the promise that "*The Republic guarantees .. equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens*" holds no threat to European capitalism of today which also claims to stand for such things.

Despite the fact that the Ireland of the time was deeply divided, right down to the formation of two rival and armed militias the proclamation simply "*claims the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman*" despite "*the differences*" .. "*which have divided a minority from the majority.*"

The bitter sectarian divisions that already existed in the Belfast working class were unlikely to be overcome in such a manner!

The left and 1916

Connolly has been quoted as saying at an Irish Citizens Army rally a week before the rising that “.. *if we should win hold on to your rifles because the Volunteers may have a different goal. Remember we’re out not only for political liberty but for economic liberty as well*” so certainly the left at the time was aware of the missing equality from the proclamation. As usual in reaching a compromise between socialism and republicanism the socialist element had to be pushed to one side.

Despite this sections of the Dublin left made a real contribution to the rising. Not only was James Connolly a socialist but around 20% of the combatants were from the Irish Citizen Army whose origins lay in a revolutionary syndicalist union, the ITGWU. Other participants in the rising recorded that for at least some of them “*this military revolution was to be followed by the industrial revolution.*”¹ But that left was destroyed by the rising and although the ICA was to be reborn in name, in reality, as Frank Robbins imprisoned for 2 years after 1916, said “*the majority of the new members, strange as it might seem, did not hold or advocate the social and political views that had motivated those who fought in 1916.*”²

The state which arose was hostile to the interests of Irish workers and even during the War of Independence the IRA was to act against the struggles of those workers again and again. As Ernie O’Malley (OC 2nd Southern Division, IRA) summarised “*There was land trouble in the South and West. The Dail, afraid of the spread of land hunger, used the IRA to protect land owners; the IRA who were in sympathy with those who wanted to break up estates carried out the orders of the Minister of Defence.*”³

Class struggle during the War of Independence

The events of 1916 are quite well known – what most people, even those on the left, are unaware of is that intense class struggle was waged in the years between 1918 and 1923. There were 5 general strikes in southern and western Ireland between August 1918 and August 1923 and 18 general local strikes, twelve of these in 1919. In the course of these workers took over the running of towns and cities across Ireland, most famously with the 1919 Limerick Soviet but this happened even in the small town of Dungarvan. In 1918 for one month in Dungarvan;

*“Nothing could be bought or sold without a union permit. Nothing could enter the town without union permission. People who tried to break the blockade had their carts overturned and their goods destroyed .. The strike committee set up its own rationing and distribution system.”*⁴

¹ The Easter Rebellion, Max Caulfield, Gill and Macmillan, 1995, p97

² Conor Kostick, Revolution in Ireland: Popular militancy 1917 to 1923, Pluto Press, 1996, p175

³ On another Man’s Wound, Ernie O’Malley, Colour Books Limited, 1936, p161,

⁴ Syndicalism in Ireland 1917 – 1923 Emmet O’ Connor, Cork University press, 1988, p30

Landless labourers across Ireland took part in land occupations and in cattle drives. Workers occupied their workplaces and sought to keep production going.

Pitched battles were fought between workers and police, republican police and even self styled 'white guards' set up by employers. Of the General Strike of April 1920 the Manchester Guardian noted "*the direction of affairs passed during the strike to these [workers'] councils, which were formed not on a local but on a class basis. In most places the police abdicated, and the maintenance of order was taken over by the local Workers Council .. In fact, it is no exaggeration to trace a flavour of proletarian dictatorship about some aspects of the strike.*"

Yes as historian Emmet O'Connor notes "*Despite the proved value of the strike .. Dail Eireann never sought to invoke it, or attempt to manipulate political strikes once they had begun. Employing a weapon of social conflict would have run counter to Sinn Fein's integrationist strategy.*"⁵

This was a time of militant syndicalist struggle across the European working class. In Ireland some of these workers would have been IRA members but the methods of struggle they used were not those of the Irish republicanism but of Italian anarchists, French syndicalists, British trade unionists and even Belfast shipyard workers. The sole contribution of the War of Independence, and in particular the IRA's targeting of the forces of 'law and order', was the creation of a vacuum in which these workers' struggles could progress much further than might have been otherwise possible.

The price of success

This lack of 'law and order' meant that for the British and Irish capitalist class Sinn Fein came to be seen as a way of returning to business as normal. The forces of the crown could no longer guarantee the law and order needed to keep business as usual, perhaps the IRA could play that role. Sinn Fein started to prove that it could be trusted to manage capitalism in southern Ireland on May 17 1920 in Ballinrobe, Co Mayo. That day the first public Arbitration Court was held by Sinn Fein. This found against small holders who had occupied a 100 acre farm. Although the small holders defied the court decision and remained in occupation, in the words of a Dail pamphlet "*the Captain of the local company of the IRA descended upon them with a squad of his men- sons of very poor farmers like themselves — arrested four of them, and brought them off to that very effective Republican prison — an unknown destination.*"⁶

Peadar O'Donnell who was OC of 2nd brigade IRA (Derry and East Donegal) writing in 1963 observed "*Many an IRA man in jail in '22 and '23 cursed his use as a defender of pure ideals to patrol estate walls, enforce decrees for rent, arrest and even order out of the country leaders of local land agitation.*"⁷ In other words the IRA could protect the rich in a way that the RIC were no longer capable of.

This was Irish republicanism at its most militant period, it was simultaneously a period when Irish workers were at their most militant. Yet the direct actions of these workers were seen as a hindrance to the republican struggle — something that threatened unity. Breaking these workers' struggles was the way that the Dail won the allegiance of a large section of Irish capitalism.

⁵ Syndicalism in Ireland, p88

⁶ Revolution in Ireland, p104

⁷ Revolution in Ireland, p106

It demonstrated that unlike the British state it could maintain law and order and protect the property and land of the wealthy from the working class.

It's worth noting that these accounts from senior IRA officers emphasise either that the rank and file IRA men involved in suppressing the land occupations were themselves poor labourers or that they were unhappy with the role they were ordered to play. Ernie O'Malley further observed that "*The farm labourer could understand the city workman, and was organised in labour unions with him. The movement as a whole was hostile to labour claims even though labour had helped to prevent conscription, had not contested the last election, and was now refusing to carry armed troops.*"⁸

The limits of left republicanism

So while left republicanism may look like an attractive short cut to socialism it is one based on building on sand. The weakness of republicanism is not in its failures but in its successes because success requires building nationalist unity, whether that be military as during the War of Independence or political as in the Peace Process. The price of such unity is constant — the marginalisation and removal from the agenda of any prospect of social revolution.

Anarchism arose out of an understanding of the limits of socialist republicanism. Because of this it didn't reject the core concepts of the republic, it built on them. What do we mean by this?

What is Freedom?

Everyone, from George Bush and Michael McDowell talks of being for freedom but what does freedom mean? We have already seen how the 1916 proclamation talked only of "*equal rights and equal opportunities*" but left aside any mention of economic equality even though at least one of the signatories, James Connolly, knew this was a requirement for any real freedom.

Liberty, Fraternity, Equality was the slogan that encapsulated the French revolution and captures the debate that was to follow, a debate out of which anarchism eventually emerged. The words sound fine but what do they mean? Does equality simply mean equality before the law, something that now exists in theory in the western world. Or does it mean equal access to all that is produced. In that debate is the gulf between Bush's Republican party and anarchist communism.

In the context of Ireland republicanism really starts just before the 1798 Rebellion. Rebellions before this date were about a return to more traditional rulers or whether we would be ruled by a protestant King of England or a catholic King of England. Whatever the mythologies built up by loyalism on the one hand and Irish nationalism on the other freedom, for the mass of the people, was never really on the agenda.

The 1798 rebellion however aimed at bringing in a new and democratic form of society. Contained within some of the various rebel factions was a 'levelling' agenda that talked in the language of the times of economic liberty. The Poor Man's Catechism, published anonymously in the 1790's included

⁸ On another Man's Wound, p138

“I believe in a revolution founded on the rights of man, in the natural and imprescriptible right of all citizens to all the land ... As the land and its produce was intended for the use of man ‘tis unfair for fifty or a hundred men to possess what is for the subsistence of near five millions ...”

National unity V the ‘men of no property’

In the South today we live in a ‘republic’ but it is one where not much more than fifty or a hundred men possess what *“is for the subsistence of near five millions.”* In our republic 10 families owned almost all of the land suitable for housing around Dublin and because of this in the last decade they have become multi millionaires.

Right from the origins of republicanism across the globe it represented an alliance which included those who wanted to go a lot further than political liberty and recognised that equality also required fundamental changes in property laws etc. The men of no property are not just key figures in 1798, they appear in every republican insurrection on the globe.

The story of anarchism starts with the republican revolts that broke out all across Europe in the year 1848. These revolts saw the emergence of very distinct working class movements that sought to introduce socialism as part of fight for the republic — the development of what today and in the Irish context we might call socialist republicanism.

The origins of anarchism in left republicanism

One republican active in those years was the Russian left republican Michael Bakunin who was later to become an anarchist. At this time the Slavic people were under the yokes of no less than four Empires, those of the Russian Czar, Austria-Hungary, the Ottomans (modern day Turkey) and the Prussians.

The republican revolts of 1848 saw Bakunin participate in the Slav congress in Prague and publish ‘An appeal to the Slavs’. This appeal has many things in common with later socialist republican statements, for instance the call for revolutionary Slavic unity against the German, Turkish and Magyars occupations *“while we stretched our fraternal hands out to the German people, to democratic Germany.”* As Connolly was to do later he sought to present socialism as an inevitable part of winning the republic. Bakunin at this time, like Connolly before 1916, expected the best republicans to become socialists once they realised this — Bakunin going so far as to claim that; *“Everybody has come to the realisation that liberty was merely a lie where the great majority of the population is reduced to a miserable existence, where, deprived of education, of liberty and of bread, it is fated to serve as an underprop for the powerful and the rich.”* The Appeal to the Slavs ends with *“The social question thus appears to be first and foremost the question of the complete overturn of society.”*⁹

Bakunin began to reject left republicanism after the 1863 Polish insurrection when he saw that the Polish nationalists were more interested in Ukrainian land than the support of the Ukrainian Slavs and that they were more afraid of Polish peasant insurrectionists than the Czar. In other words if they could not keep the working class in check the Polish capitalists were willing to sacrifice the republic.

⁹ Appeal to the Slavs [1848], in Bakunin on Anarchism, Sam Dolgoff, Black Rose Books, 1972, p63-68

The anarchists break with left republicanism

Bakunin went to Italy where he worked on an international project of revolutionary organisation with republican exiles from many countries. They sought a way to develop republican organisational structures and a set of principles that would see the abolition of class society rather than just swapping a foreign boss for a domestic boss.

The sort of new society they advocated was a radical advance in Europe of the 1860's and remains both relevant and radical today. They argued that

“the advent of liberty is incompatible with the existence of States.”

“the free human society may arise at last, no longer organised ... from the top down... but rather starting from the free individual and the free association and autonomous commune, from the bottom up”

“labour being the sole producer of social assets, anyone enjoying these without working is an exploiter of another man's labours, a thief, and work being an essential underpinning of human dignity, the only means by which man actually conquers and creates his freedom, all political and social rights must henceforth be extended to workers alone.”

Thus Anarchism emerged in an organised form as a result of a group of experienced left republican revolutionaries drawing the conclusion that the achievement of real freedom meant breaking with nationalist class alliances and looking instead to international working class rebellion. But they carried some of their republican tradition with them, not least the emphasis on individual freedom. Perhaps the best one sentence summary of anarchism expresses this, again from Bakunin that

“Liberty without socialism is inequality and injustice”

but this is not simply a critique of republicanism, it is part of a couplet, the other half of which is a republican criticism of the tendency of socialists to see individual freedom as an irrelevancy, that is

“Socialism without Liberty is brutality and slavery.”

The lessons of 1916

If the goal of the 1916 insurrection was freedom for the people of Ireland then it failed, and not just because of the treaty and partition. Because the left sacrificed all mentions of economic equality the state that arose in the south could and does base itself on the proclamation. Ironically writing some 17 years before 1916 Connolly himself had highlighted what this would mean when he wrote *“After Ireland is free, says the patriot who won't touch socialism, we will protect all classes, and if you won't pay your rent you will be evicted same as now. But the evicting party, under command of the sheriff, will wear green uniforms and the Harp without the Crown, and the warrant turning you out on the roadside will be stamped with the arms of the Irish Republic. Now, isn't that worth fighting for?”*

In 1916 amidst the imperialist slaughter of the First World War Connolly decided that this limited program was worth fighting for. 90 years on we can admire those involved in the insurrection but at the same time the insurrection is a demonstration that even the most left of republicans, as Connolly then was, find themselves forced to drop the working class elements of their program in the interests of nationalist unity. Anarchism argued left republicanism was a dead end in the fight for freedom in 1866, Connolly's sacrifice in 1916 only served to confirm this.

Andrew Flood — 12 April 2006

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Nationalism, socialism and partition

Class struggle in Belfast 1880–1920

Today is the 88th anniversary of the largest ‘Mayday’ demonstration in Irish history, when what the *Belfast Newsletter* described as “*a little band of disgruntled Red-Socialists*” led 100,000 workers through the streets of Belfast. Everywhere else in Ireland in 1919 had also seen massive Mayday demonstrations, with 10,000 demonstrating in Burr Co. Offaly.

Outside of the North East, these had been called for the 1st of May in order “*to demonstrate the solidarity of workers and to reaffirm their adhesion to the principles of self-determination*”. But Belfast marched to a different theme on the 3rd May. Both North and South a massive wave of working class militancy had grown and although these struggles shared a common rhythm they happened in isolation from each other.

In the south these were often connected but in the north the sectarian division of the working class necessitated a separation. This means in conventional nationalist histories of the period the north is simply ‘missing’ – it is absent for most of the history until the sectarian violence of 1920 and partition.

This article, which is a follow up to the two I published on indymedia around the 90th anniversary of 1916, continues the theme of looking at the connections between the struggles of the working class and the nationalist movement. (See end for links to these articles) **The missing north**

The period of Irish history from the 1880’s to the 1920’s defined and divided politics including socialist politics, on the island for the rest of the century. The most militant workers struggles occurred in the second half of that period, north and south, concentrated in the last five years. This was also the period of the 1916 insurrection in Dublin, the 1918–21 War of Independence, the treaty and partition of Ireland in 1921 and then in the south the bloody Civil War ending in 1923.

The year 1919 saw the greatest demonstration of the potential of Irish workers, north and south to take over the running of society but the events of the following years cemented the division that would do much to end workers militancy. In terms of working class struggle the periods of militancy of northern and southern workers coincide. Yet the working class was divided and these struggles remained almost completely isolated from each other.

Events in the north in this period are almost absent from southern nationalist history outside of some key events that had profound effects in the south like the 1914 UVF Larne gun running. Apart from a small number of left academic books the history of working class struggle in the period is almost unknown.

The reason is not hard to understand, the events of those years do not readily fit into the Irish nationalist presentation of history. Irish nationalism like nationalism elsewhere has sought to create a powerful unifying history that combines fact and myth to create a sweeping story

leading up to and justifying the actions of the present day. The northeast and in particular the protestant population doesn't fit easily into this history and so is largely ignored.

The mythology of nationalism

The great central theme of Irish nationalism is 800 years of oppression by a foreign crown and a rebellion in every generation against that crown. In reality much of that 800 years is really the story of civil war within Ireland and foreign intervention on one or the other side. Or Irish involvement in British civil wars, which in turn spilled over onto this island. The syndicalist left republican James Connolly¹ writing of the Williamite Wars at the end of the 17th century said *“The war between William and James offered a splendid opportunity to the subject people of Ireland to make a bid for freedom while the forces of their oppressors were rent in a civil war. The opportunity was cast aside, and the subject people took sides on behalf of the opposing factions of their enemies.”*²

In Ireland as elsewhere the imagining of a unified Irish nation was a project of the capitalist period, really only getting underway in the last decades of the 18th century. It was initially a project of a mostly protestant leadership drawn largely from the more privileged classes and radicalised not by the imaginings of a return to a Celtic Ireland but rather by internationalism, in particular the radical republicanism that had seen the French and American revolutions. Independence for Ireland was presented not so much as an end in itself but rather as a way of opening up a political space free of the reactionary British monarchy, a space in which a democratic republican experiment could then be staged.

This culminated in the great rebellion of 1798, which was largely led by radical protestant republicans, and where the blood spilt fighting for the republic was as likely to be presbyterian as catholic. Yet this moment at which the republican project appeared to about to succeed in forging a unified Irish nation was also the moment at which that nation was sundered. The brief and incomplete unity of ‘catholic, protestant and dissenter’ of that year faded to sectarian division and eventual partition. See my article on the 1798 Rebellion — at struggle.ws — for more detailed analysis of this.

The period immediately after the defeat of the 1798 rebellion is often presented as the point at which any potential for radical northern protestants siding with catholics ended forever. Unionist histories of the rebellion create their own nationalist myth of progressive protestants tricked into a rebellion where they were betrayed by their catholic allies.

By the opening years of the 20th century any mass support for republicanism amongst protestants was extinguished, north and south. There were individual protestant nationalists, Bulmer Hobson editor of ‘Irish Freedom’ the main journal of the Irish Republican Brotherhood was one of the better known. But there was no mass support amongst Irish protestants for the Irish nationalist project.

¹ The description of James Connolly as a syndicalist should be of no controversy given his writings, see ‘The ideas of James Connolly’ by Oisín Mac Giollaímoir from *Red & Black Revolution* 8, online at struggle.ws

² James Connolly, *Labour In Irish History*, Chapter II, *The Jacobites and the Irish people*, 1910, online at www.marxist.net

Irish speaking Orangemen and the Land League

Yet as late as the 1880's things were not so straightforward. The Orange Order was still very much a self identified Irish cultural-political organisation. When on 12 July 1867 a 30,000 strong parade Orange Order parade from Newtownards to Bangor took place the Belfast Newsletter reported that they marched "*without interruption save the cead mille failtes' of hosts of sympathisers*".³ This use of the Irish language by loyalists was to fade as the Irish nationalists sought to solidify the nationalist political agenda through a cultural revival which laid claim to the Irish language. The unionist Ulster Convention of 1892 would be the last time the slogan "*Erin-go-Bragh*"⁴ would be on display.

This same period saw a demonstration that the common interests of the labouring classes could overcome the Irish nationalist and Unionist division. In the years after the famine of the 1840's the fact that most land in Ireland was held by a tiny number of often-absentee landlords became the burning issue of mass mobilisations. The struggle of the Land League spread across Ireland, which often was a struggle that denied the 'right' of ownership to the landlords at all. Michael Davitt, secretary of the Land League insisted "*the land question can be definitely settled only by making the cultivators of the soil proprietors*". Evictions were met by mass mobilisations and agrarian outrages become commonplace as Irish peasants mobilised in ever increasing numbers.

In 1880 and 1881 "*northern protestants as well as catholics thronged to attend Land League meetings*".⁵ At the time 100,000 tenants were threatened with eviction. The land struggle divided even the Orange Order. On the one hand in October 1880 the Orange Order mobilised 50 labourers from counties Cavan and Monaghan to work the lands of Charles Boycott (whose tenants with the support of the local population were refusing to work his land). On the other in parts of Ulster the Land League was able to use Orange halls as the venues for meetings.

Lord Deramore warned "*A weeks since, the Land League invaded Ulster .. men who voted for the Conservatives last April are now openly fraternising with democrats whom six weeks ago they would not have touched with a long pole, and the wave of communism has spread like wildfire*". Lord Deramore's fear of communism seems misplaced to those schooled in the conventional rival Irish nationalist and unionist histories of Ireland. However for the next 40 years Ireland would see a now almost forgotten upsurge of worker and farmer militancy, a wave that would really only be ended with and, at least in part, through partition.

Historian David Fitzpatrick observed of this period "*Landlords and employers were confronted by ever more formidable combinations of tenants or workers; men became aware that there were women demanding equal rights. All of these oppositions tended to disturb the solidarity of nationalists and loyalists alike, since they cut across communal loyalties and solicited support without regard for religious affiliation*".⁶

Davitt addressing 2000 Protestant farmers at Letterkenny, Co Donegal on 21 January 1881 said "*You are no longer the tame and superstitious fools who fought for their amusement and profit with your equally foolish and superstitious catholic fellow workers .. No, my friends, the landlords*

³ A History of Ulster, Jonathan Bardon, The Blackstaff Press, 1996, p355

⁴ A History of Ulster, p422

⁵ A History of Ulster, p367

⁶ The two Irelands:1912-1939, David Fitzpatrick, Oxford University Press, 1998, p18

*of Ireland are all of one religion — their God is Mammon and rack rents, and evictions their only morality.”*⁷

The British anarchist paper *Freedom* had a correspondent in Ireland covering the land struggle. They noted “*the effect of the teaching of Michael Davitt is to be traced in many a cottier’s hut and small shopkeeper’s house and though that teaching is not so sound economically as might be wished, it yet leads by stages to the recognition of the truth that all wealth is produced through the pressure of society, and is the joint property of the community*”. Reporting on the furious resistance to evictions they reported “*At Kilrush the police used their rifles against the men threatened with eviction, and were bravely attacked by the crowd, who carried on the fight with stones until the evening. A pity the Irish peasants are so inadequately armed; but, as it is, their brave spirit of revolt is inspiring a glowing sympathy and emulation amongst the Kelts and English of the larger island.*”⁸.

The choices made by nationalism

In the 1790’s the United Irishmen were able to use radical democratic demands, including ones that held up the promise of land redistribution, to unite workers and peasants who were previously divided by deep sectarian divisions. In the 1880’s those Irish nationalists who claimed to be travelling in the footsteps of the United Irishmen failed to even try to repeat this despite circumstances being in many ways more favourable. Indeed they went in the opposite direction. The Land League was dissolved in favour of the founding of the National League in 1882, which by 1884 even had the public support of the catholic church. This helped build the nationalist Irish Parliamentary Party under Parnell across most of Ireland but in the North East it resulted in protestant land leaguers turning to the Irish Unionist Party. The path chosen by the nationalists at this time led towards eventual partition and the further entrenchment of sectarian reaction.

The choice of the Irish nationalists to move away from popular agitation was not unique, but rather mirrored across Europe. In the 1790’s and as late as the 1840’s the working class was not well enough organised to demand the implementation of those sections of republican programs that appeared to promise redistribution of wealth as well as equality before the law. Such demands had been raised in Ireland and elsewhere from the 18th century but the bulk of bourgeois republicans did not yet fear that the labouring classes could impose on their new republic such programs of redistribution.

However by the European republican revolts of 1848 distinct working class organisation had started to take shape. For this reason in the *Communist Manifesto*, published in the aftermath of the 1848 European republican revolts, Marx wrote of the spectre of communism stalking Europe. This spectre was not simply stalking the minds of the old aristocracy. It also stalked the imaginations of the bourgeois republicans who feared that the working class could take advantage of the chaos of republican insurrection to impose a redistribution of property. Over the next 20 years republican ideology and movements would be forced to make choices for or against the possibility of insurrections becoming struggles for economic freedom as well as political liberty.

By the 1860’s this conflict within European republicanism were increasingly out in the open. Left republicans like the Russian Michael Bakunin were coming to realise that bourgeois republicans would not risk revolt if there was a danger of the labouring classes coming to power. The

⁷ A History of Ulster, p366

⁸ *Freedom* reports from this period archived at www.wsm.ie

production of the initial documents of the anarchist movement happened in these years within a group of former left republicans who in recognising the short coming of left republicanism as a strategy for working class liberation constructed a new strategy, anarchism, based on their experiences. As importantly the foundation of the First International, which the anarchists soon joined, illustrated that the labouring classes were becoming increasingly organised in pursuit of their interests on the international as well as national level. The question of what classes would be in power in the new republics was one that could no longer be avoided by those who claimed to stand for freedom.

The first international in Ireland

Mainstream Irish history of all varieties conceals these new forces and the impact they were having, even in Ireland. In fact these ideas reached Ireland almost immediately, a small section of the First International was founded in 1872 with branches in Dublin, Cork, Belfast and Cootehill. According to Fintan Lane *“The Freeman’s Journal assessed the Cork membership to be as high as three hundred within a few weeks of the branch’s formation in late-February 1872.”*⁹ As elsewhere the International was repressed in the panic that spread though the establishment in the wake of the Paris Commune. In Ireland individual catholic priests played an important part in the suppression of the international, mobilising mobs to attack the internationalists. The last Dublin meeting of the international took place at Chapel lane 7th April 1872. According to an Irish Times report it was attacked and *“The defenders of the Communists of Paris were set upon and a hand-to-hand encounter ensued. Chairs and tables were upset, the glass was smashed on the windows, and every strong piece of wood was availed of as a weapon for attack or defence. Several members of the detective force were in the room at the time, but, exercising a wise discretion, allowed the parties to fight it out.”*¹⁰

The period from 1880 to 1920 sees members of the British, Unionist and emerging Irish nationalist ruling class worry again and again about the influence of communist ideas on workers in Ireland. Even the left republican Constance Markievicz in a memorandum for cabinet written towards the end of the War Of Independence *“forecast violent revolution unless the Dail moved to forestall direct action by ‘disaffected’ workers”*¹¹ IRA commander Ernie O’Malley noted in the same period that *“There was land trouble in the South and West. The Dail, afraid of the spread of land hunger, used the IRA to protect land owners; the IRA .. carried out the orders of the Minister of Defence”*¹²

In relation to the earlier struggles of the 1880’s Michael Davitt in his book ‘The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland’ claimed Parnell had warned him that the formation of Trade Unions would *“Frighten the capitalist liberals and lead them to believe that a parliament in Dublin might be used for furthering some kind of socialism. You ought to know that neither the Irish priests or the farmers would support such principles.”* Somewhat later Sinn Fein wrote of the strikes of 1911 that *“Against*

⁹ Fintan Lane, The Emergence of Modern Irish Socialism 1885–87, Red & Black Revolution 3, online at www.wsm.ie

¹⁰ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, Donal Nevin, Gill & Macmillan, 2005, p52

¹¹ Syndicalism in Ireland 1917 – 1923 Emmet O’ Connor, Cork University press, 1988, p93

¹² On another Man’s Wound, Ernie O’Malley, p161, Colour Books Limited, 1936

*the Red Flag of Communism...we raise the flag of an Irish nation. Under that flag will be protection, safety and freedom for all.*¹³

Nationalisms logical hostility to socialism

More confirmation of the fear of all factions of the bourgeois and petit bourgeois of revolution will be found in my other articles on 1916, some more will be provided in this article in relation to the north. For now I want to note that the first reason for the failure of the republican leadership of 1916–20 to appeal to radical northern protestants was that they were indifferent or more often opposed to the radical economic policies that such an appeal would have been required.

Irish nationalism was in fact often hostile to the cause of labour. This was particularly clear during the 1913 Dublin Lockout when the employers led by William Martin Murphy locked out tens of thousands of members of the Syndicalist ITGWU in order to smash the union. During the lockout the Irish Times of the 4th October observed, “*Today Mr Murphy’s press and the official Nationalist press are at one in condemning Larkinism.*”¹⁴

After the 1913 lockout a Sinn Fein paper, Irish Freedom wrote;

“We have seen with anger in our hearts and the flush of shame on our cheeks English alms dumped on the quays of Dublin; we have had to listen to the lying and hypocritical English press as it shouted the news of the starving and begging Irish to the ends of the earth; we have heard Englishmen bellowing on the streets of Dublin the lie that we are the sisters and brothers of the English.. and greatest shame of all, we have seen and heard Irishmen give their approval to all these insults.. God grant that such things may never happen in our land again.”

As with republicans elsewhere in Europe, nationalists reacted to the rise of radical working class movements by retreating into a mystical nationalism that sought to deny class differences beneath the fiction of a common nation united by culture and an ancient history. The earlier Irish republican movement of the 1790’s was built as part of a common international movement with links to radical British republicans like the United Englishmen. Freedom in previous republican rebellions had been a matter of democratic rights, often with a more radical fringe of property redistribution. From the 1880’s the meaning of ‘freedom’ was much less clear, perhaps no more than the absence of imperialist domination. In this way an ideology of mystic nationalism that sought to maximise differences between populations replaced the earlier republican ideology based on radical democracy.

For this reason 1880’s Ireland saw an explosion of cultural nationalism based around creating an image of an Irish nation that was catholic, peasant and Irish speaking. It sought to divide and exclude any other culture, for instance those who continued to play cricket, rugby or other ‘foreign’ games could not even join the G.A.A., the nationalist sports body. This movement was not confined to a few intellectuals. By 1906 the Gaelic League had 900 branches and 100,000 members.¹⁵ The historian Thomas Hennessey argues that cultural nationalist leaders like D.P. Moran “*succeeded in making cultural nationalism the dominant ideological force in Irish society*

¹³ Mags Glennon, “Against the Red Flag”, Socialism and Irish Nationalism 1830 – 1913, online at struggle.ws

¹⁴ Mags Glennon,

¹⁵ Conor Kostick, Revolution in Ireland: Popular militancy 1917 to 1923, Pluto Press, 1996, p10

between 1900 and 1906. He wrote that non-catholics who wished to throw in their lot with the Irish nation 'must recognise that the Irish nation is de facto a Catholic nation.'¹⁶

In the 1790's the mainly protestant republican leadership made enormous efforts to win over catholic peasants going so far as to provide lawyers to represent Defenders (brought up in court for battling the Orange Order) and housing the catholic refugees of that Orange Order terror in Armagh. In the 1890's the nationalist leadership made no effort to win over the northern protestant working class. Appeals were limited to convincing them they were really Irish, as David Fitzpatrick puts it "*Nationalist rhetoric emphasized the racial admixture of the inhabitants, the tendency of successive invaders to become more Irish than the Irish, and the prominence of protestants in previous insurrections and campaigns.*"¹⁷

The pope and the nationalists

In his history of the 1916 rising Brennan-Whitmore who commanded the Earl street garrison reproduced a letter Count Plunkett has sent to the press about a meeting he claimed to have had with the Pope in advance of the rising. "*The Pope was much moved when I disclosed the fact that the date for the rising was fixed, and the reason for that decision. Finally I stated that the Volunteer Executive pledged the Republic to fidelity to the Holy See and the interests of religion. Then the Pope conferred His Apostolic Benediction on the men who were facing death for Ireland's liberty.*"¹⁸ Plunkett's claim demonstrates the depth of the connection the nationalists tried to build with catholicism. Quite how publishing such a claim would win over northern protestants who were afraid that Home Rule would be Rome Rule is not clear!

Another more trivial but still telling illustration of the depth of the catholic element of Irish nationalism was the number of left republican protestants and widows of republicans who converted to catholicism in the period after 1916. These included Constance Markievicz, Grace Gifford and Lillie Connolly, the widow of James Connolly. The American historian George Dangerfield observed of her husband that "*Connolly died a 'convinced' catholic, because catholicism had become the religion of Irish nationalism*"¹⁹ Lillie Connolly told Annie M.P. Smithson that Connolly had asked her to convert on her last visit before his execution²⁰.

In the 1918 elections the nationalist leader de Valera ran in Belfast for Sinn Fein. The Sinn Fein manifesto declared "*As Irish Catholics we will .. urge the Church and Nation to oppose .. a demoralizing and Godless educational system which a Foreign Parliament would impose upon a partitioned North-East corner.*"²¹ This manifesto was distributed in protestant areas of Belfast including St Annes, Woodvale and Ormeau²² Ironically Devlin, his opponent, who was the leader of the sectarian Ancient Order of Hibernian's in the city, was able to attack the republicans from the left in this election in the competition for the catholic vote. Devlin declared "*I decline to tell*

¹⁶ Dividing Ireland: World War I and Partition, Thomas Hennessey, Routledge, 1998, p30

¹⁷ The two Irelands, p34

¹⁸ W.J. Brennan-Whitmore, Dublin burning: The Easter rising from Behind the Barricades, Gill & Macmillan, 1996, p30

¹⁹ James Connolly 'A Full life', p686

²⁰ James Connolly 'A Full life', p688

²¹ Revolution in Ireland, p44

²² Labour and partition: The Belfast Working Class 1905 — 23, Austen Morgan, Pluto Press, p210

the shipwrights and mill workers, the street sweepers or any section of the working people that they must wait 50 years on a republic before their grievances are addressed."²³

Far from any attempt to reach the protestant working class on the grounds of an improved life for all some republicans simply issued threats that would have been seen to be directed against protestants in general. In the earlier February 1918 Co Armagh by-election deValera speaking at the rally at Bessbrook described unionists as "a rock in the road" "which must if necessary blast it out of our path".²⁴ In January of 1920 when Unionists lost control of Derry corporation, Hugh O'Doherty the cities first catholic mayor said in his inaugural speech "Ireland's right to determine her own destiny will come about whether the protestants of Ulster like it or not". In September 1921 Eoin O'Duffy Treasurer of the IRB Supreme Council, who was later to found the fascist blue shirts, declared that if the population of Belfast would not accept being part of the Irish nation "they would have to use the lead against them." This was during a speech in Armagh where he was accompanied by Michael Collins.²⁵

It is little wonder that earlier James Stephens in his eyewitness account of the 1916 rising had asked "What has the Irish party ever done to allay Northern prejudice, or bring the discontented section into line with the rest of Ireland? The answer is pathetically complete. They have done nothing. Or, if they have done anything, it was only that which would set every Northerner grinding his teeth in anger."²⁶ The success of the unionist leadership in mobilising in arms tens of thousands of northern protestant workers can be explained in part by the political positions and rhetoric of the Irish nationalists.

Socialism and sectarianism

The left in the south also offered little resistance to these catholic nationalist arguments. Indeed because the left often came under attack by the Catholic church they sometimes responded by trying to prove the solidness of their catholicism. In 1899 the minutes of the Irish Socialist Republican Party (ISRP) recorded that "Connolly suggested that the secretary should enter on minutes for the benefit of posterity that the ISRP instructed all its members to attend Mass on Sunday, Jan 8 1899."²⁷ James Connolly also put much effort into trying to prove the compatibility of catholicism and socialism in his writings. Yet even Dublin at the time had a substantial protestant working class likely to be alienated by such appeals.

Connolly did however also argue for a separation of nationalism from catholicism on occasion. For instance in 1898 Connolly complained that date of laying for the foundation stone for the Wolfe Tone monument was "a festival of the Catholic Church, and therefore, if not absolutely prohibition to, at least bound to raise grave suspicions in the minds of our non-Catholic fellow-countrymen."²⁸ And as we shall see both Connolly and Larkin tried to unite catholic and protestant workers in Belfast.

If the republican movement did little to try to attract protestant workers the same is not true of the unionist bosses. Historian David Fitzpatrick notes that in particular after 1903 "The Ulster

²³ Labour and partition, p210

²⁴ A History of Ulster, p459

²⁵ Eoin O'Duffy – A Cautionary Tale, Irish Political Review, May 2006, online at www.geocities.com

²⁶ The Insurrection in Dublin, James R Stephens, 1916, p107

²⁷ James Connolly 'A Full life', p66

²⁸ James Connolly 'A Full life', p118

*Unionist leaders, though conservative to a fault on social and sexual issues, took care to provide separate loyalist bodies within which radical murmurings could be uttered, heard and placated.*²⁹ They even formed a Ulster Unionist Labour Association (UULA) in 1918. Which is not to suggest protestant workers were in control, the UULA had Edward Carson as president and John Millar Andrews, a linen manufacturer as Chairman.³⁰

The general approach of the unionist leadership was to elevate the common bond of Orangeism above any suggestion of class struggle as the following rhyme demonstrates

Let not the poor man hate the rich
Nor rich on poor look down
But each join each true Orange Order
For God and the Crown.³¹

So it would be very wrong to simply lay the blame for the sectarian division at the door of the nationalists or the Dublin based left. Nationalism as we have seen was not after all about class politics but about the opposite, creating an all class alliance of Irishmen. Berating the nationalists for not modifying their nationalism to facilitate workers unity would be rather missing the point.

The Dublin left was tiny in number and faced with both a low level of working class political consciousness and high level of hostility from the catholic church. The two in fact went hand in hand, the mobilisation of the catholic church against the starving children of strikers during the 1913 lockout played a key part in the defeat of the locked out workers. The church could only risk alienating such a large number of its own members in this way because of the low level of political consciousness of most union members.

The diffusion of the land struggle

The British and Unionist establishment were also taking care to mend the gaps that the Land League struggle had opened up. From the 1880's the British government introduced some very real land reforms in Ireland that would transform the land issue during this period. Landlords were first persuaded and then from 1909 forced to sell out to their tenants. This shifted the class struggle in the countryside from one between the great mass of the population and a few often-absentee landlords to one between a large but smaller number of landless labourers and a sizeable minority of farmers living on the land.

Alongside these reforms the unionist ruling class were using the Orange Order to once more divide the movement in the countryside. The Orange Order established the Orange Emergency Committee in 1881 to oppose the Land league and to aid landlords. An Orange appeal of 1883 asked "*Are you prepared to allow Parnell, the leader of the enemies of our united empire, the champion of the principle, Ireland for the Irish .. meaning Ireland for the Romanists .. Are you prepared to accept the doctrine of the English radicals that the Protestants of Ireland are aliens in their land and should be swept out of it by fair means or foul?*"³²

²⁹ The two Irelands, p36

³⁰ The two Irelands, p40

³¹ Revolution in Ireland, p8

³² A History of Ulster, p372

This propaganda could be credible because as we have seen the growing wave of cultural nationalism did seem to mean 'Ireland for the Romanists'. As cultural nationalism advanced in the north so the use of the Irish language by the unionist Irish organisations came to an end.

Politics was dominated for most of this period by the attempts to win Home Rule. Home Rule bills were prepared in 1886, 1893 and 1912–14. The first two were defeated but the 1912–14 bill passed on its third reading as the Lords could no longer veto a bill passed by the Commons twice. It was to have been implemented in 1914 but the start of the First World War saw implementation postponed. But each Home Rule attempt was used by the northern protestant ruling class to bind protestant workers ever closer to them. As we shall see this culminated in 1920 with a bloody pogrom in Belfast when protestant workers encouraged by their employers were used to smash the left and the union movement.

As the Home Rule crisis dragged on the Unionist elite staged larger and larger popular mobilisations culminating in 1912. On Easter Tuesday 70 British MP's attended a demonstration of 100,000 loyalists in south Belfast. The 28th September was proclaimed as 'Ulster Day' and the Unionist elite launched the Ulster Solemn League and Covenant on that day, signed by them and by 218,206 Ulstermen of all classes, three quarters of all Ulster protestant males. Women were not allowed to sign it but 229,000 signed a parallel women's declaration expressing "*desire to associate ourselves with the men of Ulster in their uncompromising opposition to the Home Rule bill.*"³³ By the end of that year the UVF had 90,000 members, a large percentage of the protestant population of Ulster.

The first and second expulsions

Alongside these land reforms and the building of all class Unionist institutions like the UVF, sectarianism was being encouraged or at least given a wink by the employers in many workplaces. In the year of the first Home Rule bill, 1886, a mob of unskilled protestant workers in the giant shipbuilders Harland and Wolff attacked and expelled from the shipyard almost all of the 8% of workers employed there who were catholic. Harland not only claimed to be powerless to stop such expulsions he actually denied that "*the taking of 'Belfast confetti', rivets, bolts, etc. for use in street rioting, was theft.*"³⁴ Yet in the previous two years he had closed the yard twice to impose wage cuts.

A second round of expulsions happened in 1912 as the third Home Rule got underway. This set of expulsions as we shall see followed a period where labour struggles saw workers unity across the sectarian divide so those targeted this time included protestant socialists as well as catholics. Once again these expulsions were not spontaneous events beyond the control of the unionist bosses. Before the sequence of events that led to the 1912 expulsions it was reported that "*All Fenian's clear out*" was painted up in the Workman, Clark shipyard³⁵ Drilling for the massive unionist show of force at Balmoral Easter 1912 when Carson reviewed 100,000 loyalist demonstrators had been allowed to take place in the yard and Sir George Clark of Workman, Clarke was "*one of the most militant leaders of the unionist mobilisations. He later chaired the*

³³ The two Irelands, p36

³⁴ Labour and partition, p16

³⁵ Labour and partition, p128

*committee responsible for gun-running and even landed arms at his yard.*³⁶ Those targeted in the 1912 expulsions were not just the catholic workers but also included *“English and Scottish workers, trade union and labour men and all protest and dissidents of the Edwardian years, such as liberals and independent orangemen.”* These totalled 20% or 600 of those expelled.³⁷

It's important to understand that the various round of expulsions were neither spontaneous acts of the protestant working class as a whole or simply occurring in reaction to events. Rather they involved a minority of protestant workers as active participants and were often orchestrated or at the very least encouraged by unionist employers. By 1920 such encouragement was coming from the tops ranks of unionism and the British cabinet.

“bloodshed is a cleansing and a sanctifying thing”

It is not surprizing that looking at these historical facts and the depth of popular unionist mobilisation that many left republicans simply wrote off the protestant working class. The nationalists also tended not to take the threat of the unionist mobilisation very seriously, the more militant nationalists instead seeing them as useful in encouraging their side to arm as well. When the UVF ran guns ashore in Larne in 1914 one of the northern leaders of the IRB went so far as to lend them his car to help transport the weapons to local hiding places.³⁸

The nationalist mystic Padraic Pearse who would declare himself president during the Easter rising said of the Larne gun running *“I am glad that the Orangemen are armed, for it is a goodly thing to see arms in Irish hands .. We must accustom ourselves to the thought of arms, to the sight of arms, to the use of arms. We may make mistakes in the beginning and shoot the wrong people; but bloodshed is a cleansing and a sanctifying thing.”*³⁹

Nationalist thinking on the north was at best based around the hope that northern protestants would see the light when faced with the reality of British withdrawal or that they would be forced into a united Ireland by the collapse of the northern economy after partition. This is probably the reason why partition hardly appeared in the bitter debates on the treaty in the south that were to lead to civil war. Of the 338 page official Dail report only a handful of pages dealt with partition. De Valeras alternative to the treaty, ‘Document Number 2’ simply endorsed the existing Ulster clauses of the treaty.⁴⁰

Could things have been different?

At the turn of the century Belfast was the centre of industry on the island and hence important in both union and left organisation in Ireland. In 1899 half the affiliated trade unionists of the Irish Trade Union Congress were working in and around Belfast.⁴¹ At the outbreak of world war one Belfast had both the worlds largest shipbuilder and the worlds largest linen mill. The working class was already divided along sectarian lines. As we have seen the first mass expulsion of

³⁶ Labour and partition, p128

³⁷ Labour and partition, p130

³⁸ Labour and partition, p202

³⁹ The two Irelands, p48

⁴⁰ Labour and partition, p299

⁴¹ A History of Ulster, p417

catholics from the shipyards had happened in 1886 when 190 of the 225 catholics working there were expelled. It would happen again in 1912 before the culmination in the 1920 pogrom.

But there was also a socialist movement and from time to time workers came together to struggle for better conditions. Although the socialist movement reflected the sectarian reality of the divided working class at times it could rise above this reality. There were significant strikes in 1907 and 1919 — some have argued the 1919 strike was “*the greatest industrial struggle in Irish history*.”⁴².

The socialist movement in Belfast dates from the same period as that in Dublin. A Christian socialist Revd. J. Bruce Wallace was active in the 1880’s and brought the radical USA flat taxer Henry George to the Ulster Hall in 1884. The Independent Labour Party (ILP) was active from 1893 although trouble at a trade’s council demonstration that year showed how close to the surface sectarianism was. It apparently started when a gasworker was seen wearing a union sash, which happened to contain the colour green.⁴³ In the 1897 local election 6 Trades Councils candidates were elected, the first leftists to be elected in Ireland.

One of the more prominent of these early socialists was William Walker, mostly remembered today as being the other pole of the Walker — Connolly controversy⁴⁴. In 1894–5 “*Walker had to be almost continuously under police protection, because of his advocacy of the principles of socialism*”.⁴⁵ By 1904 he had been elected to the city council as a trades council candidate and he ran unsuccessfully in the 1905 and 1907 elections. But in these elections he also reflected the sectarian domination of politics, saying in 1905 “*that he was against transubstantiation, for the inspection of convents and monasteries and for the exclusion of catholics from the office of Lord Lieutenant of Ireland*”⁴⁶ and in 1907 “*that I must again declare that I am, as I always have been, a supporter of the legislative union*.”⁴⁷

This highlighted a problem that remained throughout the period. To a considerable extent both the left and the union movement tended to be divided along sectarian lines. Even where workers appeared to be in the same industry the reality was often that internally they would be divided into different areas as was found with the division on the Belfast dock into catholic deep sea dockers and protestant cross channel dockers. The organised left reproduced this division, the ILP was mostly composed of protestants, the Socialist Party of Ireland (SPI) and later the Independent Labour Party (Ireland) was mostly composed of catholics.

The degree of separation is suggested in the recollections of one ILP member of that period, William McMullen, who said “*Our school of socialist thought had no nationalist tradition, and was not conscious of, and even if it had been would have been contemptuous of, a Socialist movement any other part of this country.. The members of the Socialist movement in the City were Protestants, as the Catholics were in the main followers of.. Devlin*.”⁴⁸

⁴² Labour and partition, Preface, pxiv

⁴³ Labour and partition, p61

⁴⁴ This was an exchange of articles in 1911, see www.marxists.org

⁴⁵ Labour and partition, p61

⁴⁶ Labour and partition, p74

⁴⁷ Labour and partition, p82

⁴⁸ Labour and partition, p147

Barriers to left unity

The sectarian politics of the period tripped up efforts at workers unity on an all island basis. In 1912 Connolly got four of the five branches of the Belfast Independent Labour Party and the Belfast branch of the British Socialist Party to go to Dublin for a Socialist unity conference with the SPI. But when they travelled down in Easter 1912 for the first all Ireland socialist conference “*Some Dublin members, in what they may have taken to be a joke, placed a Union Jack on the door-mat of the conference room, thereby driving back to Belfast some members of the British Socialist Party.*”⁴⁹ Those who remained set up the Independent Labour Party (Ireland) but its Belfast members mostly consisted of just the existing Belfast SPI members. The Independent Labour Party not only continued its separate existence but also went from strength to strength.

This was not the only attempt at unity that collapsed over such a seemingly trivial matter. Earlier Belfast Trades Council had initially “*welcomed an Irish attempt to set up a trade-union centre, until its Dublin advocates held a sports day on the Sabbath.*”⁵⁰

James Connolly may have argued for a fusion of the ILP and SPI but the barriers even he erected to such unity become obvious when you read his article ‘Socialist Unity in Ireland’ written in 1911 in which he declares “*I have a great admiration for Comrade Walker, of Belfast .. but I am glad that he was defeated in North Belfast. This victory would have killed the hopes of Socialism among Irish Nationalists the world over. Not only in Ireland, but also all over the continent of America and Australia, wherever Irishmen live and work, a vote given by Comrade Walker in the House of Commons against Home Rule would have filled the Irish with such an unreasoning and inveterate hatred of the cause that they would be lost to it for a generation. But imagine what our situation would have been in the rest of Ireland if the only Irish Socialist M.P. had voted against Home Rule.*”⁵¹

McMullen a protestant Harland & Woolf worker who did cross the sectarian divide to join the ILP observed “*In those times it was difficult enough for one to break with the Unionist family tradition and embrace socialism, but much more difficult to swallow the hook, line and sinker of Irish Republicanism as well.*”⁵² Both parties in other words tended to define their attitude to the constitutional question around what would be acceptable to their constituency. There seems to have been very little discussion of developing, from scratch, a socialist position on this question independent of the nationalist / unionist divide.

This sectarian division in the politics of the left in Belfast was further exasperated by the fact that the electoral representative for much of the catholic population throughout this period was Joe Devlin. In 1905 Devlin had become the president of the Ancient Order of Hibernians⁵³ a catholic version of the Orange Order that like the Orange Order was also opposed to socialism. Despite this in 1906 Devlin narrowly received the Trades Council endorsement⁵⁴ and was able to run as the “*Irish Nationalist and Labour Candidate*”.

In this same period the AOH was involved in anti-trade union activity in Dublin and Cork where it drove Connolly out of Cobh/Queenstown. It published the pamphlets ‘Socialism: A warning to the workers’ and ‘Larkinism: What it is and what it stands for’. Despite this a good

⁴⁹ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p149

⁵⁰ The two Irelands, p64

⁵¹ James Connolly, Plea For Socialist Unity in Ireland, [1911] online at www.marxists.org

⁵² James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p435

⁵³ Labour and partition, p36

⁵⁴ Labour and partition, p33

parts of Devlin's electoral success was down to his successful portrayal of himself as a friend of the workers, in particular the Catholic worker. In the 1910 election he staged a rally of 3000 female workers in St Mary's Hall, many wearing cards bearing the slogan "Vote for Devlin and Labour" surrounded by green and orange flags.⁵⁵ In the December 1910 election he was even reported by the Irish News to have had a rally of Protestants in St Mary's Hall. The Irish News claimed 5/6 of the audience were "*Protestant artisans and labourers*" although the accuracy of this claim has been questioned.⁵⁶

Class struggle in the Orange Order

From the account so far it should be easy to see why many saw a monolithic unionist / nationalist divide which made class unity an illusory demand. But up close many fractures can be seen in the supposed unity of both unionist and nationalist blocks, fractures that ran along class lines.

Within the Orange Order the class forces woken by the Land League continued to come to the fore but this time contained within loyalism. Official unionist opposition to the 1903 Land Act had the effect of radicalising the rural lodges of the Independent Orange Order (IOO) set up after a row in 1903. This radicalisation allowed the adoption of the 'Magheranorke Manifesto' in 1905 which not only called for ultimate ownership of houses and plots of land by the rural labourers but also for the ending of clerical control of education and the ending of Protestant control of Trinity College. Some of the leadership, Lindsay Crawford in particular, quite clearly moved to the left. In 1907 along with another leader Alex Boyd he had an "*active involvement in the strike.. when he became a regular speaker on strike platforms*"⁵⁷ After the collapse of the IOO, Boyd would appear again as an Independent Labour Councillor in 1920 but would also be a supporter of the shipyard pogroms of that year. Crawford on the other hand migrated to Canada where he founded "*the Protestant friends of Irish freedom*" and became president of the Self Determination for Ireland League of Canada.⁵⁸

Larkin and the 1907 strike

Although the working class in Belfast was often segregated into workplaces and even sections of industry that were overwhelmingly Catholic or Protestant this segregation was not absolute. And the needs of struggle could cause workers to unite in solidarity across several industries, breaking down the effect of the segregation found in individual workplaces.

The nature of industry in Belfast meant that early on it developed a large industrial working class, which was driven from quite early times to organise and take action in defence of its interests. So there were significant engineering strikes in 1895-6 and again in 1897-8 along with linen strikes in 1897 and 1906. But it was the 1907 strike, which started on the docks that seemed to hold out the promise of workers unity.

⁵⁵ Labour and partition, p37

⁵⁶ Labour and partition, p38

⁵⁷ Labour and partition, p54

⁵⁸ Labour and partition, p56

At the time there were 4600 dockers, quay labourers and dock working carters in Belfast⁵⁹. This was an example of an industry where individual workplaces were segregated. As we have seen catholic and protestants tended to be employed in different firms, and even in different sections of the docks. Cross channel dockers were mostly protestant, deep-sea dockers were mostly catholic.

James Larkin was sent from Liverpool to Belfast as an organiser for the National Union of Dock Labourers. Larkin brought new ideas with him, historian Emmet O'Connor even points out that *"As an international port Liverpool stood in the van of new influences; the anarcho-syndicalist Liverpool Direct Action Group was formed in 1907"*⁶⁰.

Larkin was certainly no anarchist but he was influenced by syndicalism and would become the personification of syndicalism in the history of the Irish union movement. This came to be known simply as Larkinism, defined by O'Connor as having *"three salient characteristics; a workerist mentality, a technique in conflict based on sympathetic action, and a broad ambition to promote class solidarity."*⁶¹.

Larkin rapidly recruited over 3000 workers on the docks, both Catholic and Protestant. When the bosses Shipping Federation imported scab labour in response to minor strikes Larkin called an all out strike for 26 June 1907. As the strike escalated on July 13 the coal merchants locked out 1,000 labourers and crowds of up to 8,000 attended meetings. By 11 August serious riots had started to break out, on the 12th the army killed two people on the Falls road. On 30 July 1200 troops had been deployed in Belfast in anticipation of a police strike, by early August there may have been 6000 troops in the city.⁶²

The workers were defeated with the strike collapsing by mid September. But it did go some way to forging workers unity across the sectarian divide in the working class. Larkin claimed in Derry that 7 out of 10 of the strikers were Orangemen and that these were the 'best men we had'. 23 of 29 members of the strike committee(s) were protestant⁶³ and when faced with the threat of communal rioting the strike committee issued a leaflet reading *"This is not a fight between Protestant and Catholic but between the employers, backed by the authorities, and the workers .. don't be misled by the employers game of dividing Catholic and Protestant."*⁶⁴

In what was to become a familiar pattern the unity built up during the strike was not to survive the years ahead.. In the aftermath the *"employers moved quickly to reinforce sectarianism by sponsoring a yellow union, the exclusively Protestant Belfast Coalworkers' and Carters' Benefit society."*⁶⁵ Larkin fell out with the NUDL and as a result formed the Irish Transport and General Workers Union. This only really succeeded in recruiting the catholic workers from the deep sea docks⁶⁶ and in 1908 was described by Alex Boyd who was active during the strike as *"a Sinn Fein organisation that not even a decent nationalist in Belfast would have anything to do with."*⁶⁷ Boyds intervention split the Belfast ITGWU with the Protestant dockers going back to the NUDL.⁶⁸

⁵⁹ Labour and partition, p94

⁶⁰ Syndicalism in Ireland, p. 9

⁶¹ Syndicalism in Ireland, p 13

⁶² Labour and partition, p108

⁶³ Labour and partition, p116

⁶⁴ Labour and partition, p111

⁶⁵ Syndicalism in Ireland, p. 12

⁶⁶ Labour and partition, p118

⁶⁷ Labour and partition, p118

⁶⁸ Syndicalism in Ireland, p172

Connolly in Belfast

After returning from a period in the USA where he had organised for the revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) James Connolly became Belfast Branch Secretary of the ITGWU from 1911. On the 19 July 1911 Connolly brought out the 300 mostly catholic deep-sea dockers in sympathy with sailors and firemen who were on strike for the same wages as their English equivalents. The deep-sea dockers were also looking for higher pay, shorter hours and less speed up for themselves. Connolly organised members of catholic and Orange bands to form a Non-Sectarian Labour Band, which paraded through the streets while collections, were taken up. When the sailors returned to work Connolly seized on a modest offer from the employers to end the strike and proclaim victory.⁶⁹

In October 1911 there was a spontaneous spinners strike at a mill in Henry street resulting in a company lockout, Connolly had some involvement and was condemned from the pulpit in the local Catholic church on Sunday 15 October for “his syndicalist agitation” The strike was lost but Connolly organised the spinners into the Irish Textile Workers Union which was in effect a section of the ITGWU. This led in 1912 to Mary Galway of the (mostly protestant) Textile Operatives Society of Ireland (TOSI) accusing Connolly at the Clonmel TUC conference of dividing the working class in Belfast along sectarian lines.⁷⁰ The ITWU faded away while the TOSI grew to 10,000 members by 1918.

Mary Galway’s accusation is worthy of serious consideration. The problem was that an industry that employed catholic and protestant women workers was again internally divided. The spinners whom Connolly organised were mostly catholic while the weavers in the TOSI were mostly protestant.

Some years later in 1919 the left republican Peadar O’Donnell was to become an ITGWU organiser in Derry. He showed a willingness to be pragmatic when faced with an employer playing the Orange card during the Fulton mill strike. O’Donnell established a band with Orange and catholic bandsmen, and “*was happy to parade behind Union Jacks until they gave way to red flags.*”⁷¹ All the same years later O’Donnell described the ITGWU entry into Derry in 1919 as mistaken “*and ultimately divisive. Unionisation in Derry was already adequate and the ITGWU’s identification with Irish nationalism .. only served to heighten divisions between workers of different political and religious persuasions.*”⁷²

At times the ITGWU under Connolly did manage to recruit protestant workers but then its nationalist ethos proved to be a liability. In 1913 in Larne a strike by 300 workers at the British Aluminium Company, who had to work 12 hours a day 7 days a week, ended when after church on Sunday the minister told the protestant workers who comprised the majority to return to work. Connolly reported in *Forward* that “*The fires of sectarian and political bigotry had been let loose, the chief argument used being that as the headquarters of the union are in Dublin it is a ‘Fenian’ and ‘Papist’ organisation .. the twin forces of scabism and Carsonism won a glorious victory.*”⁷³ Connolly claimed that this happened at a point at which the strike had been almost won on the basis of an 8 rather than 12 hour day.

⁶⁹ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p395

⁷⁰ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p399

⁷¹ Peadar O’Donnell, Donal O’ Drisceoil, Cork University Press, 2001, p14

⁷² Peadar O’Donnell, p15

⁷³ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p406

The Home Rule crisis built up, peaking in 1912 with the mobilisation of a huge percentage of Ulster's protestant population and the expulsion of catholics and radical protestant workers from the docks. Some 20% of those expelled were protestant socialists or those who had been involved in the IOO. The deputation put together at a meeting of the expelled workers was 75% protestant.

The rise of sectarian tensions made it increasingly difficult for the ITGWU to attempt to organise protestant workers. In July 1913 the annual outing of ITGWU and ITWU was attacked by mill and shipyard workers both as it left and returned to Belfast⁷⁴ This was at the end of Connolly's period in Belfast.

The sectarian build up was interrupted in 1914 by the start of the First World War. Huge numbers of both nationalist and unionist workers were led into the army, and to the slaughter of the trenches by their respective leaderships. Both nationalist and unionist leaderships saw sacrificing their rank and file supporters as the best way of gaining a position of strength to negotiate from after the war.

The northeast remained quiet during the 1916 rising with the slaughter of the Somme a few weeks later coming to form an alternative mythology of 'blood sacrifice' for loyalists. The UVF had been allowed to form the 36th Ulster Division and they went 'over the top' on the 1st July – the date on which under the old calendar the Battle of the Boyne had occurred. Although they were among the most successful at achieving their objectives the slaughter was terrible, in the first two days of the Somme 5,500 men of the Ulster Division were killed or wounded and "Blackers' boys" which consisted of UVF men from Armagh, Monaghan and Cavan returned with only 64 of the 600 who had gone over the top.⁷⁵

The later years of the war saw a significant economic boom as the army required supplies and the navy ships to replace those sunk by U Boats. The fact that large numbers of men were away at the front meant that employers were forced to make concessions to retain workers even if they were also able to use appeals to support those at the front to drive up working hours. It was widely realised that the end of the war was not only likely to see the end of the boom but also tens of thousands of demobbed soldiers seeking work.

The war also saw the Russian revolutions of 1917 and what at first seemed like the constructions of a 'workers' state. Then in 1918 as the slaughter ground on the working class in the German navy mutined, in effect bringing the war to an end. This was a highpoint for socialism around the world – workers were both organised and had what appeared to be concrete examples of it being possible to defeat capitalism and construct socialism. Class struggle had broken out in many of the armies on both sides with significant mutines in both the French and British army.

The 1919 strike

As elsewhere in Ireland and indeed many parts of Europe the high point of working class radicalism in Belfast was in 1919. The director of Intelligence at the Home Office Basil Hugh Thomson wrote of this period in relation to Britain that *"During the first three months of 1919 unrest touched its high-water mark. I do not think that at any time in history since the Bristol riots we have been*

⁷⁴ James Connolly 'A Full life', p410

⁷⁵ A History of Ulster, p455

so near revolution”⁷⁶ Sir Henry Wilson had walked out of a cabinet meeting in December 1918 when it “refused to consider that either that a state of war existed or that a Bolshevik rising was likely.”⁷⁷

The immediate issue of the 1919 strike was the length of the working week. During the war this had been pushed up and up until in some cases it was 65 hours. As the end of the war came in sight a movement for 44 hour week began in Belfast when on 21 August 1918 a rank and file meeting was organised by James Baird, James Freeland and Robert Weir⁷⁸ Such a shorter working week would not only be good for the workers themselves it would also open up jobs for demobilised soldiers and lessen the impact of the post war slump.

In Belfast those organizing for the 44-hour week carefully went out of their way to avoid being accused of being disloyal. On December 4th they called a meeting to be addressed by the election candidates. The meeting opened with the singing of the British national anthem ‘God save the King’ and James Baird introduced the meeting by saying its object was “to assist the workers apart altogether from politics, in obtaining short hours of labour”. Neither Devlin nor any of the Sinn Fein candidates were present but Carson was and he spoke without of course really committing himself to anything, when the strike broke he would be part of the behind the scenes move to undermine it.⁷⁹

With the employers only offering a 47-hour week the strike ballot was set for Tuesday 14 Jan 1919. At lunchtime some 30,000 workers marched into the city centre with banners reading “44 hours means no unemployment”, “44 means work for demobilised soldiers”, “47 be hanged we want 44”⁸⁰ 92% of workers voted against the employers offer of a 47 hour week. 97% voted for “drastic action in the way of an unofficial strike”.

The strike was set for January 25th and on that day the shipyards and engineering plants in the town shut down. The electricity plant also closed down meaning that trams ground to a halt at 4pm and at midnight the gas works shut down.

Some 40,000 workers were directly involved in the strike and an additional 20,000 indirectly involved. At 3pm on that Saturday a General strike committee of 150 delegates met and elected a 15 strong district committee, which “was heavily protestant” although the president, Charles McKay may have, been a catholic.⁸¹ It included the 3 organisers of the rank and file meeting the previous August.

On the Monday members of this committee met Belfast corporation who agreed in return for the resumption of electric power that only the hospital would be allowed to use power and not businesses or private homes. In this period only the homes of the rich would have had electric power. However some businesses broke this agreement and as a result a mob smashed their windows in. This resulted in the commissioner enrolling 300 strikers as special constables who “actively assisted in the protection of property in the central district of the city.”⁸²

The strike committee continued to try to demonstrate its loyalty in other ways. When three socialist agitators started to hold public meetings around Belfast the strike committee denounced them. All three were subsequently charged with unlawful assembly and sentenced to 6 months

⁷⁶ Revolution in Ireland, p55

⁷⁷ Labour and partition, p237

⁷⁸ Labour and partition, p230

⁷⁹ Labour and partition, p231

⁸⁰ Labour and partition, p231

⁸¹ Labour and partition, p233

⁸² Labour and partition, p235

hard labour. When at the start of the 3rd week of the strike James Baird sent a letter to the Northern Whig in which *“he advanced, without attribution, some of Connolly’s ideas on industrial unionism, and portrayed the strike committee, somewhat romantically, as being engaged in a historic struggle for socialism”* it appears he was removed from the strike committee.⁸³

When the Glasgow strike which had started at the same time was crushed with the use of troops and machine guns were set up in the centre of Glasgow McKay the president of the Belfast committee presented Glasgow as *“a warning to their men of the folly of unconsidered action”*. Solidarity was limited to a meeting of Belfast strikers calling for the release of the Glasgow arrestees.⁸⁴ When on Saturday 8 February Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress conference in Dublin offered *“Moral and financial support”* the Belfast strike committee declined to approach the national exec of the ILPTUC.⁸⁵ In turn it should be pointed out that the ILPTUC should have been aware that somewhat more than the sending of a letter would be required to overcome the divisions that had arisen between the northern and southern union movements!

Despite all these precautions and compromises the strike was still attacked as a Sinn Fein plot by the unionist establishment. The Belfast Newsletter of Saturday 25 January proclaimed *“The threat to paralyze the public services of the city, if carried out, will rejoice the heart of Sinn Fein and will play most powerfully into its hands”* and The Northern Whig claimed that members of the strike committee *“spoke with accents not generally associated with the North of Ireland”*.

The Orange Order tried not to publicly appear to be taking sides for fear of losing influence in the protestant working class but a Grand Lodge document produced in the Belfast Weekly Telegraph on the 8th February claimed *“the condition of affairs today had been to a great extent engineered by parties who are neither employers nor employed but have taken advantage of a trade dispute to attempt to bring discredit on the fair fame of Belfast”*⁸⁶ Unionists also seem to have circulated leaflets claiming the strike was part of Sinn Fein plot to bring about an all-Ireland strike. On Monday 3rd February Col. Wallace the Belfast grandmaster of the Orange Order issued a manifesto described to Carson as designed *“to get the decent men to secede from the Sinn Fein Bolshevik element.”*⁸⁷

On the 7th February the Lord Lieutenant Lord French endorsed the view of GOC Northern command that the strike was organised by Bolsheviks and Sinn Feiners.⁸⁸ On Saturday 15 Feb a proclamation was published by the Lord Mayor and fully armed infantry with machine guns and armoured cars moved into gasworks and power station with full services being returned that Monday. The town employers announced they would open Tuesday 18 and the shipyards reopened on the 20th with 80% of workforce, the rest returning by the 24th. After a few short weeks the workers were defeated.⁸⁹

Part of the significance of the way the strike was defeated was that the extreme lengths the strike committee had gone through to demonstrate their loyalty was in the end of the day no protection. Being really careful to not only appear neutral but actually pro-unionist neither protected the strike nor individual committee members.

⁸³ Labour and partition, p235

⁸⁴ Labour and partition, p237

⁸⁵ Labour and partition p238

⁸⁶ Revolution in Ireland, p60

⁸⁷ Labour and partition, p239

⁸⁸ Labour and partition, p244

⁸⁹ Labour and partition, p244

Speaking after the expulsions of the following year John Hanna who had become the leader of the expelled workers described the protestant workers who were expelled as “*the backbone of Trade Unionism in the North*”. Hannah had been an Orange Lodge master before becoming a syndicalist, he told the ILPTUC “*During the strike for 44-hrs week the capitalist classes saw that the Belfast workers were one. That unity had to be broken, it was accomplished by appeals to the basest passions and intense bigotry.*”⁹⁰

Down but not out, the last fling of Belfast radicalism

The militancy that had been born during the strike did not die immediately despite its defeat. On Mayday 1919 Belfast did not take part in the ILPTUC strike of 1st May, probably because it was called “*to demonstrate the solidarity of workers and to reaffirm their adhesion to the principles of self-determination*”. But on Saturday 3rd May the trades council march was the biggest Labour demonstration in the cities history. The Independent Labour Party activists were prominent in the organisation of the demonstration. The Belfast Newsletter estimated 100,000 took part and attributed it to “*a little band of disgruntled Red-Socialists .. who figured prominently in the strike*”.⁹¹

Sam Kyle believed the Belfast general strike “*gave the biggest scare to the Tories they ever had, and probably led to the engineering pogrom of 1920.*”⁹² That January the 1920 council election saw 35 ILP or trade union candidates taking 12 of the 60 seats in Belfast.⁹³ Sam Kyle who opposed partition topped the poll in the Shankill and in fact a majority of the 22 Belfast Labour Party candidates were anti-partition.⁹⁴

Carson and the northern ruling class were facing a defeat for British imperialism in the south and a radicalized working class in the north. All the effort that had gone into creating a northern protestant nation in the last 40 years looked fragile in the face of class struggle. At a time when the War of Independence was intensifying in the south a large percentage of the protestant working class in Belfast was not only voting for socialist candidates but many of these candidates were known to be anti-partitionist.

The tactic the unionist elite fell back on was one that would be used again and again when faced with working class radicalism. A sectarian mobilization of the most reactionary elements of the protestant working class against both catholic workers and the progressive elements of the protestant working class.

The exact timing for the offensive was dictated by decades of tradition, July 12. Yet it did not occur in July of 1919 in the aftermath of the 44-hour strike and the 100,000 strong May Day parade. The election results of 1920 suggest that in July 1919 a large percentage of protestant workers still held radical ideas. Between that July and the next the war of independence escalated in the south. The unionist establishment was able to use the events of that war and in particular the support of the southern union movement for the nationalists to drive home the idea of the labour movement as little more than a nationalist plot. In some ways the ground had been prepared for them in the portrayal of protestant involvement in the radical democratic rebellion of 1798 as a foolishness in which they had been betrayed by the supposed catholic allies.

⁹⁰ Revolution in Ireland, p156

⁹¹ Labour and partition, p248

⁹² Revolution in Ireland, p154

⁹³ Labour and partition, p250

⁹⁴ Labour and partition, p259

Loyalism re-imposed

On the 12 July 1920 Carson set events in motion by declaring that *“these men who come forward posing as friends of Labour care no more about Labour than does the man on the moon. Their real object and the real insidious nature of their propaganda is that they mislead and bring disunity amongst our people.”*⁹⁵

The 20 July was the first full day of work after the July holidays. Notices were posted for ‘Protestant and Unionist’ workers to meet outside the gates of the shipyard. *“The call to drive out ‘disloyal’ workers was enthusiastically supported.. Sam Kyle later noted that the meeting was “at the shipyard .. though meetings have always been prohibited there .. this one was winked at by the authorities, whom must have known what was coming.”*⁹⁶

At the end of the meeting hundreds of apprentices and rivet boys from Workman, Clark’s marched into Harland & Wolff’s yard and ordered out Catholics and socialists. Some were *“kicked and beaten, others were pelted with rivets, and some were forced to swim for their lives”*. There were three days of rioting in the city in which 7 Catholics and 6 Protestants were killed. Catholics were *“driven from the Sirocco Works, Mackie’s, McLaughlin and Harvery’s, Musgrave’s and Combe Barbour’s”*.⁹⁷ At the same time Loyalists attacked Catholic owned businesses and homes in Banbridge and Tramore and drove Catholics out of mills and factories. The entire Catholic population of both these towns was forced to flee.

The shipyard pogrom were followed by the unrolling of huge union jacks in the various workshops and the setting up of vigilance committees to prevent Catholics or trade unionists getting back into the shipyards. One of the leaders of the pogromists Alex McKay who was also a UULA councillor for Bangor, while unfurling the largest union jack said *“we are all Imperialists. And the reason we meet today is because we believe in imperial authority.”*⁹⁸ According to the Irish News Sir James Craig, at the time still a member of the British Government, was present at an unfurling in Harland and Wolff on the 14 October. He said *“Do I approve of the action you boys have taken in the past?. I say yes.”*⁹⁹ Carson in parliament said *“I am prouder of my friends in the shipyards than of any other friends I have in the whole world.”*¹⁰⁰

A committee estimated 11,000 Catholics had been expelled from work and very few were to get their jobs back in later years. Yet there was no contact between the ILPTUC and British TUC on combating the expulsions. In fact the TUC delayed action for months and its delegation to Belfast even criticised the ASCJ, the one union that tried to do something about the expulsions. The ASCJ had blacked the employers who refused to combat the expulsions and then expelled from the union the majority of ACSJ members who continued to work for these employers.¹⁰¹

The expulsions devastated the left and the union movement. James Baird said *“Every man who was prominently known in the labour movement, who was known as an ILPer was expelled from his work”*.¹⁰²

⁹⁵ Revolution in Ireland, p155

⁹⁶ Revolution in Ireland, p155

⁹⁷ A History of Ulster, , p472

⁹⁸ Labour and partition, p276

⁹⁹ Labour and partition, p277

¹⁰⁰ Revolution in Ireland, p157

¹⁰¹ Labour and partition, p279

¹⁰² Labour and partition, p270

An ILPTUC report of 1921 showed that the workers who remained in the shipyards had seen a significant drop (12s) in wages in the shipyards after the pogroms¹⁰³ In the two years after the expulsions employment declined from 20,000 to 15,000 at Harland and Wolff and 7,000 to 1,800 at Workman Clarke's¹⁰⁴ If the pogromists had hoped to protect their jobs through their actions they failed.

Conventional left histories of the period often conclude by suggesting that if the republican movement had adopted a left wing program this history could have turned out differently. This alternative history however suffers from a failure to understand why the nationalist movement had moved in the 1880's to a promotion of mystical nationalism over radical republicanism. The nationalist movement of that decade was a movement that rejected a strategy of uniting workers and peasants around a radical program. Its program instead was one of submerging all class differences into the quite successful creation of a cultural nationalism based around 'traditional' values including Catholicism. It was not that it was unaware of a potential for workers unity, rather as we have seen it rejected that path and sections were very hostile to it, precisely because it would have undermined the nationalist all class alliance they sought to create.

If we step back from the specifics of the Irish situation this was part of the same process that saw republican movements across Europe divide on the question of what Freedom meant. Those that saw it in terms of radical democracy including the redistribution of property set up new working class organizations to fight for these demands. This included the anarchist movement. In most cases they didn't reject national liberation as a concept but rather insisted it must be subsidiary to the class struggle.

Those who saw Freedom as meaning the right of local capitalists to make decisions in the interests of the local economy (and themselves) constructed a movement hostile to the left based instead on cultural similarities within a given population. Inevitably this had a mystic tinge due to the need to construct a common history that would culminate in independence or in some cases fusion as the nationalism of this period included 'big nation nationalists' who argued for fusion. In that context the unionists were also nationalists, as one southern unionist argued in a 1912 letter to the Irish Times "*The Unionist who thinks that the inhabitants of the two islands should be regarded as forming a single nation is, I think the true Nationalist... the name of Nationalist properly belongs to the man who recognises but one nation, and wishes to keep that nation whole and unimpaired.*"¹⁰⁵

Some, including James Connolly in Ireland, tried to stand on both sides of the socialist / nationalists divide simultaneously. They tried to convince the separatist nationalists that due to imperialism there was no room left for an independent capitalist nation to develop so that real nationalists should throw their lot in with the socialists. Although the nationalists were not convinced by this argument these left nationalists consoled themselves with the idea that the bulk of the mainstream nationalists would learn this lesson in the course of the independence struggle

Unfortunately in Ireland prior to world war one the left under the pressure of events simply divided into a small nation Irish nationalist faction, typified by James Connolly that was mostly based in the south and a big nation Unionist nationalist faction typified by William Walker that

¹⁰³ Revolution in Ireland, p157

¹⁰⁴ Labour and partition, p269

¹⁰⁵ Dividing Ireland, p9

was based in Belfast. The weak attempt to overcome this in 1912 failed because it was simply based around a demand to change sides rather than an attempt to develop a new program.

There is a common anecdote in Ireland about a tourist driving in the countryside who gets lost and stops to ask a farmer for directions. On hearing where they want to go the farmer replied “Well if I was going there I wouldn’t start from here”. This was the problem of the left for much of Irish history, it found itself in a place where class struggle was frequently dominated by the national question and it never really developed either the program or the organization to deal with this. Again and again fragile workers unity won in times of relative quiet fractured as soon as the national question reared its head.

Anarchism contains no magic bullet to overcome that problem. Indeed there were anarchists in Dublin, at least in the 1880’s. A Dublin branch of the Socialist League in formed in December 1885 shortly after Michael Gabriel, an anarchist, moved to the North Strand. However they failed to come up with a program on the national question, Fintan Lane writes that they “*tried to stand above what was the primary political issue of their day*”. With the introduction of Gladstone’s 1886 Bill they admitted in a report to the Socialist League in London that it was “*extremely difficult just now to get people to think of anything but Home Rule*”. It collapsed in March 1887, this appears to be the last attempt at libertarian organisation in Ireland until the 1960’s.¹⁰⁶

The question of partition continues to divide the working class on the island and like it or not if we want to get to anarchism we have to start from here. In the 130 plus years that have passed since the collapse of the Socialist League no anarchist organization has produced a convincing map, indeed few have even been willing to try to go beyond a set of standard slogans. The most advanced attempt by far has been the work of my own organization, the Workers Solidarity Movement, but even this effort is considered by others on the left to merely reflect either the unionist or nationalist standpoint depending on where they place themselves.

I’d hope these articles in general and this one in particular aid in the debate amongst anarchists and those on the left about how to overcome the sectarian divisions in the working class on the island. These divisions flow from our shared history but that history is also the story of the struggles of ordinary workers overcoming for a time the divisions and opening a view of an alternative politics that promises freedom for all. Some 91 years after 1916 and 88 years after that Belfast Mayday the task of completing that struggle remains before us.

Andrew Flood

3rd May 2007

My other articles on the period:

- www.indymedia.ie
- www.indymedia.ie

WSM position paper on partition: www.wsm.ie

¹⁰⁶ Fintan Lane, The Emergence of Modern Irish Socialism 1885–87, Red & Black Revolution 3, online at www.wsm.ie

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The Rising of the Moon
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