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Fintan Lane
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Perhaps one of the most exciting of Ireland's early socialist organisations emerged after the demise of the Socialist League in Dublin. The National Labour League (which included the senior Land Leaguer J.B. Killen) mobilised the unemployed during 1887 and brought thousands onto the streets of the capital city. The speeches made by the leaders of the Labour League were explicitly revolutionary. Killen told a crowd of some 3,000 at one rally held on Harold's Cross Green on 6 March that the land and all the instruments of production should belong to the community and that the worker was "justified in using any means whatever in order to get rid of the idle class that fattened upon his misery".(29) On 13 October, 1887 the National Labour League (at a meeting attended by, among others, Gabriel, Fitzpatrick and King) issued a manifesto to Irish workers which called on them to rise up against capitalism:

All over the civilised world the people are rising up against their tyrants, the capitalist class. Shall you, men of Ireland, remain behind in the great struggle that labour is making for its emancipation?(30)

The National Labour League was followed by a variety of socialist clubs and debating societies and, later, by the Irish Socialist Union whose members played a significant role in introducing 'new unionism' into Ireland. Despite setbacks and seemingly insuperable difficulties these socialists struggled on and laid the foundations for whatever exists of socialism in today's Ireland. They displayed tenacity and, within their groups, they also displayed an acceptance of political diversity in the socialist movement.

In 1888 John O'Gorman wrote of Ireland as a "shuttlecock between the political tricksters", this despite the fact that "the condition of the country is getting worse every day; thousands are out of employment in Dublin and all the towns; [and] the cry of distress is heard on every side."(31) O'Gorman and his friends believed that socialism could provide an alternative to this misery.

Hans Christian Andersen went weak before princesses and he was a shocking apologist for elves but when it came to trolls he had an excellent grasp of his subject. In The Snow Queen, Andersen introduced a most evil specimen of troll:

> ***One day he was in a really good humour because he had made a mirror that had the quality of making everything good and fair that reflected in it dwindle to almost nothing, but whatever was worthless and ugly stood out and grew even worse. The loveliest of landscapes looked like boiled spinach in it... now, for the first time, you could see how the world and mortals really looked.***

Sometimes, if you look hard enough (as Andersen would have put it), this troll can be glimpsed traversing the Irish socialist movement with his malignant mirror in tow. In recent years, with socialism under severe pressure, he has been a particularly busy little bastard. The history of socialism often looks infinitely miserable in his mirror of cynicism and the calamity of orthodox communism is allowed to envelop everything. But there is much in the past that should give socialists hope for the future. Unfortunately in Ireland it is a past unfamiliar to most political activists.

Irish historiography has traditionally been inadequate with regard to working-class political life and this is especially true for late nineteenth-century Ireland. For many historians, the arrival of James Connolly in May 1896 has remained a seminal event, when, in the opinion of F.S.L. Lyons, a spark was lit and Irish socialism began.(1) In fact, organised Irish socialism began in 1885 and is a tradition more diverse and more vibrant than commonly assumed.

BEFORE 1885

It could be argued that modern Irish socialism began with the establishment in 1872 of branches of the International Working Men's Association (or First International). However, these branches (in Dublin, Cork, Belfast and Cootehill) were short-lived because of the intense opposition that they encountered and their demise was followed by a complete absence of socialist organisation until 1885.

Among the Dublin Internationalists the leading figure was a cabinet-maker in his forties called Richard McKeon who the police described as "a troublesome character, and a regular fanatic in politics, having been a Chartist, a Young Irelander, a member of the National Brotherhood of St. Patrick, and a Fenian".(2) McKeon was an old friend of Joseph McDonnell, the ex-Fenian who represented Ireland on the General Council of the International in London.

The Dublin branch of the International first emerged in mid-February 1872 and was routed by April. All of its public meetings saw the section under severe attack because of the Paris Commune of 1871 during which the Catholic Archbishop of Paris had been killed. The final meeting, held at McKeon's premises in Chapel Lane on 7 April, sealed the fate of the branch when a mob of anti-Internationalists stormed the building. According to a hostile Irish Times: "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 in the windows, and every stray 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".(3) The meeting was broken up and the members chased down the stairs and up the street by an incensed mob.

Little is known about the Cootehill or Belfast branches although Canon Maguire, a Cork cleric, noted with satisfaction that "those wretched people had been expelled from Belfast".(4) The Cork

anarchists, although from contending factions. Anarchism in Britain at that time was a rather diffuse and murky affair. It later emerged that Reuss actually was the spy after he betrayed Johann Neve, an anarchist wanted in Germany. However in October 1886 The Anarchist, which was Britain's only native anarchist paper, devoted almost the whole of its front page to an article attacking the Socialist League and supporting Reuss. This dispute in Britain was noted in Dublin where members of the branch received copies of The Anarchist. The Dublin socialists contacted London to express their concern and following an exchange of correspondence they unanimously adopted a motion attacking the Council. That they took the word of The Anarchist over that of their own Council certainly points to the strong influence of anarchism among the Dublin members.

The conflict between the Dublin branch and London was eventually resolved at a special meeting held in Dublin on 9 November to discuss the issue. John O'Gorman let Sparling in London know that his letters "and assurances considerably lessened the hostility to the Council (practical Anarchists, we) that was displayed at other meetings" and the matter was left drop.(28) Nonetheless, the dispute would not have encouraged the Dublin members to maintain the Irish section.

AFTER THE SOCIALIST LEAGUE

This article set out to outline the emergence of modern Irish socialism with particular emphasis on the Socialist League. It is necessary to understand the politics of the League branch before one can fully understand the groups and clubs which followed. Most of the Socialist Leaguers remained politically active through the next few years and some like Arthur Kavanagh, John O'Gorman and George King had connections with Connolly's ISRP.

power of one man to govern another should be swept away under the socialist system."(24)

Unlike the International the Socialist League, despite suffering some attention from the police, was largely unmolested at its public meetings, although its March social evening to celebrate the Paris Commune was, according to Gabriel, "a small private meeting" because of the fear of it "being broken up" if openly advertised.(25) Nonetheless, such trepidation was uncommon and when a man named Magennis lectured in the Rotunda on the topic of socialist "snakes in the grass", the League advertised its following meeting under the same title and specifically invited Magennis to attend.(26)

Apart from its public meetings the branch raised the profile of socialism in Dublin by its involvement, through Fritz Schumann, in the bottle-makers' lockout in early 1886 and in April the lectures in Dublin of William Morris generated some interest in socialist ideas. However, April marked a high point for the League in Ireland and as summer approached the Home Rule issue seems to have impacted on both the members' morale and activity. April had seen the introduction into the House of Commons of Gladstone's doomed 1886 Home Rule Bill and the rest of the year was completely dominated by the controversy and the hopes that it generated. The socialists admitted this to be a problem in May when Fritz Schumann wrote to London that it was proving "extremely difficult just now to get people to think of anything but Home Rule".(27) By late 1886 the branch was terminally ill but it staggered on until March 1887 when it finally collapsed.

In October 1886 the Dublin branch clashed with the Central Council of the League in London and this probably accelerated the demise of the section. The Council had on 17 May expelled Charles Reuss as a spy for the German police. Reuss and some supporters counter-charged Victor Dave, another League member, with being a spy and this accusation was backed by a Reuss-biased 'commission' which exonerated Reuss himself. Both Reuss and Dave were

branch had rather more success but it too was eventually driven into extinction. In Cork the Internationalists had established links with local workers (primarily the coach-builders) before the local clergy declared them antagonistic to religion and called on Cork workers to crush them.

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.(5) In fact, the strength of the group can be roughly gauged from its ability to effectively disrupt a meeting called on 24 March in order to distance the city from the International. Over three thousand people turned out for this rally but the Internationalists arrived shortly before it commenced with "a body of men, perhaps about one hundred in number, composed of working men, and in parts of roughs, nearly all of whom wore green neckties".(6) In the ensuing free-for-all the meeting-hall was wrecked: "They rallied at both sides repeatedly, and the taking and re-taking of the platform was conducted by leaders who were armed with bludgeons… The building was very much damaged".(7) After several hours of rioting the Internationalists emerged as victors. Within weeks, however, a 'red-scare', exacerbated by the riot, caused the branch to collapse. The main organiser was forced to leave the city.

DUBLIN DEMOCRATIC ASSOCIATION

There were socialists in Ireland during the 1870s and early 1880s but it was not until late 1884 that they again attempted to organise together. In a sense, Irish socialism from 1885 onwards is best seen as an outpost of the British 'socialist revival'.

In 1881 the Democratic Federation was founded in Britain by radicals (and some socialists) who opposed the use of coercive legislation against the Irish Land League. The Land League, which sought the diminution of landlordism and the promotion

of peasant-proprietorship, was ultimately banned in October 1881 and many of its leaders interned. The 'land war' of 1879–82 was a politicising experience for many in Ireland and in Britain. The Democratic Federation, which had formed as a result of the Irish agitation, went on to develop into Britain's first 'nation-wide' socialist organisation and in 1884 was renamed as the Social Democratic Federation (SDF).

The Democratic Federation had sent a delegation to Ireland in the summer of 1881 but it made no serious attempt to recruit members. There were certainly socialists in Ireland at this time but it was not until the formation of the Saturday Club in 1884 that they began to work together. This Club, which met on Saturday evenings in the Rotunda in Dublin, provided a debating forum which was independent of the nationalist movement. Social and political issues were discussed by radical Dublin workers and the attendance was generally impressive with hundreds at some debates. Its formation and the links it engendered probably encouraged those who attempted in December 1884 to form an SDF branch in Ireland.

On 20 December 1884 Justice, the SDF weekly newspaper, carried a letter signed by Samuel Hayes, R.G. Russell, and Alexander Stewart signalling their intention to found an SDF branch in Dublin. In the event an inaugural meeting held in the Oddfellows Hall, 10 Upper Abbey Street on 18 January 1885 saw the formation of a Dublin Democratic Association which stated that its objective was "to promote and defend the rights of labour, and to restore the land to the people".(8) Alex Stewart was elected secretary and James Doyle was made treasurer. Both were officials in the local branch of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE).

According to Samuel Hayes, the crowded meeting at the Oddfellows Hall had decided not to form an SDF branch "because it would frighten away any who would be disposed to consider our principles, besides that all the influence of the Roman Catholic Church would be levelled against us, as also of the National League".(9)

age," he said, "is towards internationalism not nationalism. It is absurd to think that the separation of Ireland from England would alone benefit the working men of Ireland".(20) Fitzpatrick did not dismiss Irish anti-colonialism in this statement but, in the main, these early socialists equated separatism with a narrow-minded nationalism (which they correctly saw as harmful to the interests of the working-class). John O'Gorman summed up this attitude in 1891 when he contended that Home Rule would entail "the rule of the farmer, the publican, the clergyman and the politicians".(21) However, rather than oppose Home Rule with an alternative, as James Connolly was later to do, the Socialist Leaguers tried to stand above what was the primary political issue of their day. This attitude, needless to say, did not bring them either recruits or popularity.

The socialists' dislike of the Home Rule movement was partially an objection to the notion of change through constitutionalism. In January, Gabriel argued at the Saturday Club that the "idea of looking to Parliament, whether Irish or English, to do anything for them was a mistake", and that "everything depended on the organisation and co-operation amongst the working class".(22) Gabriel's anarchism included a distaste for piecemeal reforms and even extended to the dubious assertion that a suggested "agitation about rack-renting would not do them any good at all."(23) Such 'realism' must have appeared rather cold comfort to the many victims of rack-renting in Dublin at that time. Anarchist ideas exerted a real influence on these pioneers of Irish socialism, although it would be a mistake to presume that all members of the Dublin Socialist League adhered to these ideas. Some were Marxists and other, undoubtedly, were ill-defined in their socialism. This diversity was acknowledged and accepted by the members of the branch. "Socialism," said Michael Gabriel, " was capable of a good many interpretations". Nonetheless he went on to state that in his opinion "all the evils were caused by class government. He was opposed to a million men ruling one man, or one man ruling a million. The

whose interests were different from theirs. As working men they would never get anything by using a vote."(17) This raw anti-parliamentarianism represented both Gabriel's anarchism and the general policy of the Socialist League. William Morris held precisely this opinion.

Fritz Schumann also made an impact at the Saturday Club when he tried to defend the merits of atheism during a debate on Charles Bradlaugh. (Bradlaugh was a Radical MP excluded from the House of Common in London because of his atheism.) "The chairman," declared Schumann, "has allowed atheism to be assailed with not a word in support of it (groans)." The chairman's response was swift: "This gentleman has said now that he will defend atheism and I say I won't hear it! (applause)".(18) Religious sensibilities in Ireland provided an enormous impediment for socialist organisers during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Nevertheless, the Dublin socialists received a good hearing at the Saturday Club and over the following years they played a prominent role in the organisation of the debates and provided many speakers. In April 1886, the Dublin Socialist League was instrumental in bringing William Morris to Dublin and, among other meetings, he spoke on socialism to a packed meeting of the Saturday Club.

At most the Socialist League in Dublin had just over 20 members at its height. It was a minuscule organisation but this small group was enough to raise the spectre of socialism in Ireland. During its existence it held a number of public meetings although, following a dispute with the Oddfellows Society in January 1886, the branch had difficulty in finding halls for its lectures. Samuel Hayes estimated an attendance of sixty at its first public meeting on January 7 and The Freeman's Journal carried a long report on its proceedings.(19)

During a general discussion at this meeting, Thomas Fitzpatrick, a young anarchist who was to become an energetic socialist agitator, accentuated one aspect of Socialist League politics which became a serious problem in the years ahead. "The tendency of the

They decided to advance their principles "without calling them by the name of socialism".(10) In fact, of the Democratic Association's sixty members, it would seem that only some fifteen were committed socialists: the majority were land nationalisers and political radicals of varying types. At least one, Adam O'Toole, was a former member of the Dublin branch of the International. Two, Amos Varian and P.A. Tyrrell, were formerly leading Dublin Land Leaguers.

The Dublin Democratic Association retained strong links with the SDF in Britain although it never affiliated. On 25 January it decided to hold a series of public meetings "for the advancement of democratic principles".(11) Over the following months Adam O'Toole spoke on 'Democracy Defined', Amos Varian on 'Franchise And Representation', Edward O'Connor on 'the Social Question', Alex Stewart on 'Democratic Demands', and Andrew Byrne on 'The Social Revolution'. Members of DDA also utilised the Saturday Club in order to put forward their arguments. A foreign socialist, the Danish Marxist Fritz Schumann, spoke at the Club on 31 January provoking Michael Cusack, the GAA founder, to charge Marx with being the creator of an organisation in which "such destructive agents as petroleum oil had been employed" and he implored Dublin workers to leave such "international business" alone.(12) After a rambling speech and a confrontation with Alex Stewart, Cusack stalked out of the Rotunda. There were other less dramatic opportunities for the socialists to argue their politics.

The Dublin Democratic Association 'adjourned' in May for the summer but it was never to reconvene. Samuel Hayes blamed attacks from the nationalist party "who did all they could to crush it", but also admitted that it had become a financial failure and its membership had gradually diminished.(13)

SOCIALIST LEAGUE

The emergence of the Dublin branch of the Socialist League in December 1885 can be said to mark the real beginning of modern organised socialism in Ireland. An unbroken continuity of organisation exists between this first socialist group and the Irish Socialist Republican Party of 1896. Moreover, the libertarian socialism of the Socialist League remained influential within Dublin socialism until, arguably, the arrival of 'new unionism' and the subsequent establishment of branches of the Independent Labour Party in the mid-1890s.

The Socialist League in Britain formed in December 1884 as a breakaway from the SDF. The reasons for the split are complex but many had to do with the politics and personality of H.M. Hyndman who was determined to maintain his grip on the leadership of the SDF. Hydnman's socialism was a most dogmatic and unimaginative variety of Marxism and he held a condescending view of the working class. His apparently cynical view of workers' political and industrial self-activity was one of his chief weaknesses and it greatly irritated many of those who split to form the Socialist League. For Hyndman, to use E.P. Thompson's phrase, social reforms "were the carrot for the donkey; and the donkey was the people."(14) The Socialist League, in contrast, under the leadership of libertarian Marxists (like William Morris and Andreas Scheu) and anarchists (like Joseph Lane), declared its immediate objective to be social revolution and saw social reforms as palliatives made by capitalism, in the words of Morris, "with the intention of …being a nullity or a bait to quiet possible revolution".(15)

From the beginning the Socialist League saw itself as primarily a propagandist organisation which would help to sow the seeds of revolution in working class minds. It also declared itself, like the SDF, in favour of Irish Home Rule and its secretary, John L. Mahon (of Irish extraction), made efforts to recruit in Ireland. These efforts bore fruit mainly because of the arrival of an English Socialist Leaguer in Dublin in 1885. Michael Gabriel, an anarchist, moved to Bayview Avenue in the North Strand area of Dublin and in June he began to distribute League leaflets and the group's newspaper, The Commonweal.

Samuel Hayes had already, earlier in the year, distributed material advertising The Commonweal but the Dublin Democratic Association, which had existed until May, showed no real interest in the Socialist League. However, George King, a former member of the Dublin branch of the International (and probably also of the DDA), contacted the League in London in July expressing his interest in the organisation. Samuel Hayes subsequently evinced a similar interest and he sent a list of former DDA members to H.H. Sparling, now secretary, in London. Nevertheless, while sending the list he struck a pessimistic note: "Most of the persons mentioned are rather disheartened as far [as] the propagation of socialism is concerned…It is impossible to get the people in this country to think for themselves — they believe everything they hear both from their political leaders and clergy".(16)

Despite such pessimism, Michael Gabriel managed to form a Dublin branch of the Socialist League at a meeting in December 1885. The first monthly membership report gave membership as ten among whom were a number of members of the former Dublin Democratic Association. Samuel Hayes became branch secretary and John A. Ryan was made treasurer. Other founding members included George King, Fritz Schumann, Thomas Fitzpatrick, John O'Gorman, Auguste Coulon, Michael Gabriel and Arthur Kavanagh. (Ryan, King and O'Gorman were all former Internationalists.) The branch selected the Oddfellows Hall in Upper Abbey Street for its weekly meetings which were held at 8p.m. on Thursday night. By December Gabriel had already made his presence felt at the Saturday Club when he argued against returning workingmen to parliament: "What would be the use of sending labour candidates to Parliament? It would be no use whatever to send them to talk to capitalists and landlords