

The Rising

Or: Reflections on Irish History

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1 February 2024

When I was sixteen, I flew to Galway in Ireland for my great uncle's 100th birthday party, my grandmother's uncle.

He'd fought in the Easter Rising, back in 1916, when he was probably sixteen himself. And maybe again in the war of independence, and maybe a third time in the Irish civil war. I don't know all of the details, because my Irish family didn't want to talk about politics; the 20th century did that to a lot of people there. I know a few things about my uncle though. I know he fought, and I know he was wounded, I believe shot in the leg. I know that not a lot of folks fought in the Galway part of the Easter Rising, 500–800 depending on the source you read, and not too many spent time in jail but an awful lot of the ones who did, when I checked the records, have the same names as my uncle and his brothers.

I asked my family what side he'd been on in the civil war, and I learned he would curse anytime anyone said the name Michael Collins. So I know he was on the same side that my anarchist instincts take me: against compromise, against bowing to England.

I know I shook his hand, the hand of someone who later became one of my heroes.

I also know he lived in three centuries. When the queen died at 96, the newspapers ran articles about how to live a long life like her. I'd rather live like my uncle, who made it longer than she did.

How to live a long life:

- Be raised poor as hell in a stone cottage in the hills.
- Fight in one to three wars of independence in rapid succession. Get shot.
- Stay living in a stone cottage in the hills.
- When you're 79 and sick as hell and suddenly blind, lay down in that cottage to die. A year later, get bored with dying and get up and live another 22 years in that stone cottage, now in the shadow of the modern home on the same property, which your grandchildren live in.
- Live longer than the fucking queen.

Years later, but years ago now too, I interviewed the comic writer Alan Moore about his anarchism, and he said something that stuck with me. He said Americans should have set their *V for Vendetta* movie adaptation in America if they wanted to make some heavy-handed point about their own politics. Because to Americans, England is a fantasy land. “To the Americans, we probably still have giants,” he told me, and I paraphrase.

I didn’t grow up thinking England was the land of giants and noble knights. I grew up thinking it was a land of monsters.

Ireland, though, I grew up to mythologize. Maybe they still had faeries, but more importantly, they still had rebellion. They still had right and wrong, a noble struggle. Uncomplicated heroes out of Hollywood pictures, with rifles and flat caps and brogues.

Told with sheen and shine, Irish history glows. Told in detail, same as every history anywhere in the world, it will break your heart. Mythology is fine for fable and metaphor but it doesn’t work for people, for real people, for real war. The fabled land of Eire is just a place; its people are just people.

Once they’re real people, though, you can shake their hands.

I spent this week researching the Easter Rising of 1916 for my podcast. I knew the broad strokes, and even some of the details, but I spent the week reading more about it, and I haven’t quite recovered, emotionally, from everything I’ve read.

The short of it is: Ireland had been treated like shit as a colonial subject for seven or eight centuries. Deforested. Genocided twice, once through war and once through capitalism. The culture and language driven almost to total destruction. Every generation or two, people rebelled. The English played divide and conquer, privileging the Protestants over the Catholics and pitting the Irish against the Irish. All the while, the landlords—first English, then Irish Protestant, then eventually Irish Catholic, robbed the working class, rural and urban alike. But mostly rural, which makes Marx and Engels sad because they want to tell simple stories like “urban poor good, rural poor bad.”

Two forces rose in opposition to English rule at the dawn of the 20th century, both drawing on centuries of rebellion. The socialists and the nationalists. The socialists were labor organizers, mostly syndicalists—that is, those who believed that direct action and general strikes were better than begging for political power at the ballot box. They drew from a long history of Irish direct action, like the Ribbonmen and the Molly Maguires. Who were they? The Ribbonmen and the Molly Maguires were secret societies that... look, I’m going to bring the enclosure of the Commons into it.

In England, there was this common land that peasants could use that no one owned. It was called... the Commons. Slowly, it was “enclosed.” It was privatized at the dawn of capitalism... one could say this act WAS the dawn of capitalism. The English peasants did a lot of things to stop it, including plenty of revolts and the super cool Digger movement I won’t get into here, but overall, the English resisting the enclosure of the commons developed what became the modern

labor movement. That was their response. Workers organizing together as a class, leveraging their ability to withhold their labor, their ability to strike, to build power. It's a cool thing, a good thing. It's not the only method of resistance.

The Irish faced a similar problem. Landlords started enclosing the commons, destroying traditional Irish land practices that shared huge swathes of land between communities equally. This practice, called "rundale," was pretty cool... they didn't pool together all the product of their labor, they pooled together the means of production, without Marx or anyone telling them how to do it. So they didn't necessarily pool together everything they grew and share it equally, but instead they looked at all the land and animals available to the community and made sure everyone got an equal share of the actual stuff you need in order to work in order to get food. So everyone got a bit of the good growing land and a bit of the shitty rocky hills where you'd graze your sheep or whatever.

The landlords wouldn't let them do it anymore. The Irish, throughout the medieval and early modern period, they weren't quite so civilized as the English, and I mean this as a compliment. They didn't unionize. Instead they met at pubs, put on strange costumes (often crossdressing), and went out and killed the motherfucking landlords in the middle of the night. These secret societies had a lot of names over a lot of time, but the Ribbonmen and the Molly Maguires are the ones we hear the most.

So the modern Irish labor movement, it came from a history of secret societies and direct action. It also came from indigenous cultural practices of land redistribution. It also came from international activists, including plenty of Irish folks who'd studied the labor movement in the UK and the US, but it had its own flavor for certain: the international socialist press is full of condemnations of the Irish socialists who refused to abandon Catholicism (though they fought against the Church hierarchy plenty; they just weren't all atheists). The Irish socialists of the 1910s also tended towards cooperativism and against looking for a transitional "dictatorship of the proletariat," but instead for direct worker's control of society—or if there was to be a transitional state, it would be a republic.

Then you've got the nationalists, and one day I'll write more about them, but they were all these cultural groups, fighting for the preservation of the Irish language and culture. Decolonization, de-anglicization. Some of them were culturally and/or fiscally conservative. Some of them were antisemites and cultural chauvinists. But plenty of socialists and internationalists and antiracists were in their ranks too—a bunch of them met at the local Esperantists league, learning an artificial universal language developed by an antizionist Jew from Poland as well as their native Irish.

I promised the short version of the story, and yet here we are. I love context, it's the flavor of history. Historical events without context is like tofu without seasoning—I guess you could eat it but if you give it to kids they'll think they don't like tofu at all.

These two groups (not always distinct from one another) both started paramilitary organizations in the 1910s... the unions started the Irish Citizen Army in response to cops and soldiers and bosses fucking over striking workers during the great Lockout of 1913. The nationalists started the Irish Volunteers as a counter-force to the reactionary Ulster Volunteers, which were basically the Proud Boys of Ireland—the illegal militia that wanted to lick the government's boots.

Both groups let women in, and a third all-women paramilitary organization, Cumann na mBan, was around too.

England got involved in World War One, and the rebels were like “we gotta fucking do it now while England’s army is in Europe” They all got together, temporarily forgetting their differences and planned a revolution.

It didn’t go well.

See, this gay Irish anti-colonial knight, Roger Casement, was trying to get guns from the Germans, 20,000 rifles, but the British were onto the plan and the German boat was scuttled and Casement was arrested. Incidentally, he’d previously stopped one of the greatest mass murderers of history, Leopold II of Belgium, who was busy genociding the Congo, but that’s a different story.

So the rebels didn’t have the guns. And one of the leaders of the Irish Volunteers tried to call off the plan at the last minute, but he found out quickly he wasn’t as in charge as he thought—all he managed to do was fuck everything up a bit. Easter Monday, 1916, a few thousand people across the country said yeah fuck it what if we declare the Irish Republic anyway, so they did. They took over central Dublin and held out for six days, rifles and shotguns and revolvers versus armored cars and artillery fresh from the western front of World War One.

Like I said, it didn’t go well. Six days later, they surrendered. Sixteen of them—seventeen with Roger Casement—were executed. My uncles and thousands of others spent time in jail.

Then there was a war for independence, and they fought the English to a standstill—brought the most powerful empire in human history to the bargaining table. But what they got at that table was a compromise: a partition of Ireland and even the southern chunk of the country had to swear allegiance to the crown. Michael Collins, the man my uncle cursed the name of, supported the compromise, as did slightly more than half of the elected candidates of the new republic. The other half, including more of those connected to the rising and all of the women in the government, refused it. One war ended, another began.

My sympathies are, of course, against the compromise. But the older I get, the more I understand the people who just wanted the fighting to be over. Which is hard for me to sit with: because while I wouldn’t have supported the compromise, would I have been willing to kill my fellow rebels over it? Or were the anti-treaty rebels defending themselves from the repression they faced from the new government?

The thing is, the fighting can’t be over while colonization, and its shadow, remains. Not because people are stubborn assholes who won’t accept compromise (though that’s true too) but because of the very conflict created by colonization. The British Empire, not this side or that side of the civil war, is to blame for the civil war and the resulting Troubles.

After the partial departure of the colonial force, violence and hatred remained in its wake, where it remains, to greater and lesser degrees.

So my family there doesn’t want to talk about politics. They want, understandably, desperately, to let the past be the past.

It’s also why there’s no easy black and white romantic figures I can draw from, once the civil war started. I could easily see myself fighting for the anti-treaty side in that war, but you can’t escape the sheer horror of what was happening.

My uncle had been sixteen, best as I can tell, during the Rising. And there I was, sixteen, and I didn't know shit about shit. He probably didn't know shit about shit at the time either. All his brothers fought, and he fought. All the brothers except my great grandfather, who'd already fled, penniless, to Boston. Fleeing colonization to go become a settler in another colony.

In Galway, on my uncle's birthday, there were a few hundred people gathered in the community hall to celebrate him. He'd been blind for decades, wheelchair-bound for decades. He held my hand, and I told him who I was, and he seemed happy, and I was happy.

Distance does strange things to generations, and I spent the evening talking to my aunt, sort of, my second cousin once removed, who was my age, and her friends. It was my own aunt, a regular-aunt (my father's sister) who'd arranged the whole thing, or at least the American half of the family showing up. She'd stubbornly tracked down our family, across a name change or two and she just flew there and said "I'm Mary's daughter" and that was enough.

The big picture stuff of history is a nightmare of blood and death and compromise and resentment. It's the little stories where you get heroism, where you get individual acts of courage. It's the little stories where you get victory, like this man's hundredth birthday party surrounded by family, including family thought lost to diaspora.

At the time, Ireland depressed me. I was sick of America, sick of the suburbs. Sick of mass manufactured homes and strip malls consumerism. I didn't have a label for my politics, but they were growing inside me.

I'd wanted Ireland to be magical. I wouldn't have put it this way at the time, but I'd wanted it full of faeries and rebels and not-America.

In Ireland, I saw two things, and both broke my heart. Both, even then I knew, were the result of colonization. First, there were no trees. England had cut them all down centuries before. Second, everywhere you looked, there were McDonald's. There were mass manufactured homes. There was consumerism. America and suburban consumer horror had long since broken containment.

I'd wanted there to be an outside of the empire.

There *is* an outside of the empire, I've learned since. But when you're in the imperial core of North America and western Europe, you have to find it in the cracks. Behind the 7/11, where the stream runs through a storm drain, you'll find yourself outside the empire. Inside crowded apartment buildings in the cities, you'll find yourself outside the empire. In shacks in the hollers of Appalachia, you can step, however briefly, outside the empire.

This week, I felt some of that same disillusionment I felt when I'd been sixteen and visiting Ireland. Reading about the Rising, and the war of independence, and then the civil war, I wanted easy heroes. I wanted to be from this great noble line of oppressed people who fought back valiantly in a clean right-and-wrong narrative, like every book and every movie promised me I could have.

You won't find that in history.

England doesn't have giants and Ireland doesn't have faeries. Both are, instead, full of people.

The closest to cleancut moral rebellion you can find in the Irish revolution is the Rising, before things got really messy. But some of the fuckers who planned it were right wing as hell and

antisemitic. Some of the socialists refused to join in because they wouldn't join forces with the very same people who'd beat them and starved them while they'd been striking just three years prior. You can paint a romantic picture of all these social classes and political positions coming together under the motto "fuck England, this is our country motherfuckers" and that's beautiful and it's even true but it's just part of it.

Then there was the war for independence, which is noble in its way, but an awful lot of the socialism of the Irish Republic died with the martyrs of 1916, paving the way for the McDonald's that broke my heart 75 years later.

When I read about the Galway part of the Rising, the division was laid bare. The commander of that Rising came in from Dublin and he was very clear that the rising was about kicking out the British. The rank-and-file, though, they knew what it was actually about, or what it should have been about: land redistribution. It's the same pattern you see in revolution after revolution, the world round, during those decades. The revolutionaries, the rank-and-file, the women and men with revolvers and their family's shotgun, they were fighting for land redistribution and the end of economic oppression, but the folks who took power, in the end, were the rich.

You can look at the Easter Rising and say it lost, because they got shelled by artillery and surrendered and a bunch of them died. You can look at the Easter Rising and say it won, because it lit the fuse that led to the war of independence. You can look at the Easter Rising and say it lost, because compromise won the day and Ireland is still divided.

I went through each of those stages.

There's a final stage I've hit upon, though, and it's the one on which I want to rest. It's the one I'll leave you with.

My uncle won the Easter Rising. Not "won it for the Irish People," but for himself. He fought to free his country and for land redistribution, and yeah, he died "poor" in a stone cottage, but he died rich as shit as hundreds of descendants and well-wishers celebrated his hundredth birthday. That man was alive for every second of the 20th century.

James Connolly, the Irish Socialist who helped plan the rising, he won the Easter Rising, even though it was the end of his life. Because every one of us dies, and he could face his God—that he seemed to go back and forth about believing in—with his head high, knowing he did everything he could to help humanity live as equals. His legacy was twisted every which way after he died as his name is bandied about for political capital. I don't want to tell you the "true" version of the man, except that he won because he lived his life by his values and that's all any of us can hope to do.

Roger Casement even won the Easter Rising, even though his plan for German guns failed spectacularly, even though his name was dragged through homophobic mud at his trial, even though he was hanged and left out of most accounts of the Rising for years. He won because he'd lived a wild life and done more than any other individual to end King Leopold II's reign of terror. Roger Casement is like if there was a single guy who'd killed Hitler and most people didn't know his name. He also fucked hundreds of men around the world and kept notes on all of them. He proved that the war for Irish independence is not and should never be conceived of as a Catholic versus Protestant fight. He lived a proud and full life.

It's important to have goals and to work towards them. It's important to be strategic and do our best to accomplish what we wish to accomplish. But the process is, and always will be, the only thing that matters. Because the end result of life is death. "Living" is what we call the process of moving towards our own death. We ought to do so nobly and bravely, so that when we die, we die on our own terms.

To live to a hundred is one kind of wealth, to be sure, but my uncle's greatest wealth—according to me, his distant relative who hung out with him all of once 25 years ago—was that he, when afforded the chance, lived up to his values.

It's also pretty cool that helped destroy a whole-ass empire.

Hope we get to do that too.

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Retrieved on 19th February 2024 from margaretkilljoy.substack.com

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