

1916 - 1922: IRELANDS "UNFINISHED" REVOLUTION?



The Easter Rising and the republic it declared were militarily defeated by the British authorities in 1916. This defeat was followed in 1918 by the electoral rise of Sinn Fein, in an election which saw the first woman MP (Countess Markievicz) returned to Westminster. General strikes took place against conscription in 1918, to demand the release of hunger strikers in 1920 and in opposition to militarism in 1921. Workers 'Soviets' were declared in parts of Ireland, the 'war of independence' was fought and the Irish Free State formed in 1922.

While these events were largely confined to the south and west of Ireland the north-east also saw the outbreak of sectarian conflict and the creation in 1920-21 of the Northern Ireland state.

Undoubtedly a period of flux, of struggle, increased radicalism and competing interests, opinions as to whether or not a revolution occurred, and how this revolution is defined, are largely connected with the political outlook of particular historians and more generally with political 'traditions' or 'communities' in Ireland.

Peter Hart, in his contribution to 'The Irish Revolution, 1913-1923'¹, points out the problems of definition and dating of the period:

What do we call the events of 1916 – 1923? Or should it be 1912-22 or 1917-21?²

While others have failed to define revolution or avoided the use of the term in favour of such descriptions as 'war of independence', 'struggle for independence', or 'rebellion'³ J. M. Regan begins his study of the Irish counter-revolution with the following definition of revolution:

revolution a forcible overthrow of government or a social order, in favour of a new system.⁴

This definition includes, as does David Fitzpatrick in *The two Irelands 1912-1939*, the creation of the state of Northern Ireland in 1920-21 as a second or dual Irish revolution. The success of Ulster Unionist resistance to Home Rule, against the creation

of a unitary Irish state, and the establishment of the north-eastern Home Rule state of Northern Ireland is usually portrayed as a counter-revolution. It is a counter-revolution which is, curiously although not uniquely, placed chronologically prior to the revolution itself (the Spanish revolution and civil war was preceded by the Francoist rebellion of July 1936), beginning as it does in the 1912 Unionist mobilisation against the prospect of Home Rule.

The determined opposition to the third Home Rule Bill by Ulster Unionism involved massive mobilisation, opposition to the British government of the day, the laying of plans for a provisional government to keep Ulster or a portion of it outside of any Dublin administered Home Rule Ireland, and the formation of an armed militia, the Ulster Volunteer Force in January 1913. Fitzpatrick asserts that Ireland "experienced revolution in several senses"⁵ from, as he dates it, 1912 to 1922. For Fitzpatrick:

The means by which the two revolutionary elites secured local power ranged from violence and the threat of violence to collective protest, propaganda, parliamentary and diplomatic struggle, and negotiation. The Ulster Unionists relied primarily on parliamentary agitation backed by the menace of armed resistance; the republicans shunned parliament but used propaganda even more effectively than armed force. Thus the creation of the two Irish states, though not achieved by purely revolutionary methods, entailed a revolutionary shift in power-holding.⁶

Revolutionary methods, and in large part their identification of the Irish revolution/revolutions, used by both Regan and Fitzpatrick rely on a definition of revolution in which the use or threat of violence is paramount. For Fitzpatrick:

The alterations in Irish political organisation were sufficiently lasting and profound to merit the term 'revolution'.⁷

This is based on the transformation of Ireland's constitutional status, the extension of the political influence of the churches and the securing of power by two local 'revolutionary elites'.⁸

Consensus on the process that led to the formation of Northern Ireland as one of revolution is remote, particularly as Unionism, in stressing that it has and continues to act in defence of the Union against republican and Irish national revolution, casts itself in a conservative role. This may not sit comfortably with historic events or the ongoing propensity of Unionists and Loyalists to clash with the government of the United Kingdom. However, if this was not a revolution then the definition used to portray the formation of the Irish Free State as a revolution is itself undermined.

1916 is remembered in the history and commemoration of the dual blood sacrifices of Ulster Unionism and Irish 'revolutionary' nationalism. One lays claim to an assertion of Britishness in the sacrifice of the 36th Ulster Division at the Battle of the Somme and the other to the redemption in blood of the Irish nation. In rhetoric indistinguishable from that of Irish nationalist revolutionary Patrick Pearse, James Connolly was to write in 'The Workers' Republic', less than three months before the Rising:

But deep in the heart of Ireland has sunk the sense of the degradation wrought upon its people – our lost brothers and sisters – so deep and humiliating that no agency less potent than the red tide of war on Irish soil will ever be able to enable the Irish race to recover its self-respect, or establish its national dignity in the face of a world horrified and scandalised by what must seem our national apostasy.

Without the slightest trace of irreverence but in all due humility and awe we recognise that of us as of mankind before Calvary it may truly be said:

Without the Shedding of Blood there is no Redemption.⁹

While labour, or a section of the labour movement, became identified with the cause of Irish nationalism, with Connolly and the Irish Citizen Army's role in the Rising the relationship between Sinn Fein and the southern Irish labour movement was a one-way process not a partnership. Michael Laffan, while not questioning the occurrence of a revolution, points out that events:

...did not change the relationship between one class of Irishmen and another. Its impact was nationalist and political, not social and economic.¹⁰

The central issue for Sinn Fein and the IRA was the maintenance of nationalist unity. While some seemed to believe that all

Ireland's problems would disappear with independence Sinn Fein's economic policies were based on a nationalist vision of self-reliant capitalism. As labour took the decision to stand aside in the 1918 and 1921 general elections to allow Sinn Fein a clear run:

Sinn Fein accepted labour's support as its due and offered nothing but platitudes in return.¹¹

The 'Soviets' declared in parts of Ireland were not attempts at socialist revolution or workers control but pay disputes backed by occupation rather than strike action, all were handed back to their owners on conclusion of the disputes. Likewise the three 'national' strikes that occurred were in support of Irish nationalism more than in pursuit of working class demands and as such they could not extend to the north-east:

Despite the waving of red flags and indulgence in wild rhetoric there was little sign of revolutionary views, let alone Bolshevism, in the Irish labour movement.¹²

Women were to become more politically active and enter the political arena as never before. Images of Countess Markievicz in Citizen Army uniform, revolver in hand, powerfully signified a dramatically changed role for women in political struggle. Yet the role of women in the Rising, during the war of independence and with the outcome of the revolution was contradictory and to prove transient. Despite the growing role of women organisations like Cumann na mBan were to have a supportive role in relation to male political and military activity. Moreover the revolution and civil war was followed by a concerted effort to push women out of politics:

Those in the male leadership who had proven unwilling to allow equal participation during the War of Independence were, once in government, vociferous advocates, of measures designed to return women to the private sphere.¹³

By 1932 with De Valera in power the position of women was further undermined, his 1937 constitution "defined women's contribution to the state solely in terms of hearth and home"¹⁴. Margaret Ward concluded that:

Despite the valiant efforts of women to claim agency for themselves, the public world and mainstream nationalism were as heavily gendered as they had been prior to the First World War.¹⁵

Irish republicans aimed at far reaching change in the development of Irish culture. Building on the Gaelic cultural revival of the nineteenth century, republicans did aim at fundamental change in the lives of Ireland's inhabitants:

their vision was linguistic and cultural rather than social and economic: citizens of the new Ireland would speak Irish not English.¹⁶