

94th ANNIVERSARY KILMICHAEL AMBUSH COMMEMORATION



**ADDRESS
BY
JACK LANE**

30th NOVEMBER 2014

Aubane Historical Society

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94TH KILMICHAEL COMMEMORATION ADDRESS

I want to thank the Committee for giving me an opportunity to address this commemoration here today. The ambush that occurred here was a pivotal event in the War of Independence and it is a privilege to be involved in a commemoration of such an event. It changed the character of that war because after it all involved realised that this was a real war and the Crown Forces and Whitehall realised for the first time that they were up against a competent army because they were so thoroughly defeated. Because of that, it was a tremendous psychological boost to the struggle for Independence and this was its lasting impact. It concentrated minds wonderfully. Nothing like it had happened before in that war. Whitehall continued to pretend it was a police matter, a law and order issue, but they knew very well it was a real war which they recognised in reality but never, ever, admitted officially even when agreeing to a Truce with the IRA.

Anyone who takes an interest in our history will know that there is an ongoing debate about the War of Independence and it is appropriate that this Ambush has been central to this debate. The Ambush has been the subject of detailed discussion and every minute and every blow of the Ambush has been analysed, researched, interpreted and misinterpreted ad

nauseum. You might say there has been a concerted attempt to ambush Kilmichael and the reputation of Tom Barry but it has been repulsed.

The fact is that the War of Independence has been fought all over again in recent years, without guns this time, fortunately, but a no less significant war because of that. It is just a different kind of war. In the context of this new 'war' events such as this commemoration here and similar commemorations elsewhere have a vital importance because they present opportunities for putting the record straight about the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence. Opportunities for doing so are few and far between these days. You will very rarely find such opportunities in forums such as the media, in academia, in the educational system and in 'history books' and in mainstream political parties. And when the mainstream politicians commemorate such events they give the distinct impression that they are simply going through the motions. In those forums you will get everything from outright condemnation of the Rising and the War of Independence to an acknowledgment of these events but with all sorts of reservations, qualifications and regrets and a negative tone throughout. The end result is to seek to give us a bad conscience about the whole thing.

One of the latest efforts, that is typical, but also the most extraordinary, is that coming from an ex-Taoiseach, John Bruton. It is mind-boggling to hear an ex-Taoiseach condemning the foundation events and the founding fathers of this state of which he was a leader.

I cannot imagine a leader of any other Republic, e.g., that of the France, America, China or wherever, where a leader of those countries would say anything similar about their state's origin. It is unimaginable. And there was a lot more war and bloodshed in establishing these and other states than was the case here.

Overwhelmingly popular support here for independence minimised the bloodshed.

But when an ex-Taoiseach feels the need to claim that all this was misguided, and campaigns seriously to promote this view, it is necessary to consider what he says and if there is any merit in it. This is necessary also because what he says probably seems very plausible to anyone who has learned their history in recent years.

He says that the Volunteers of 1916 should have trusted in Home Rule, as it was on the Statute Book and it would have evolved into a Republic. And there was therefore no need for war and bloodshed. Of course, if wishes were horses we would all go for a ride. No sane person wishes for war if there is a viable alternative.

So was there a viable alternative in the context of the time? Bruton

implies there was and that the Volunteers deliberately chose the road of war in preference to a peaceful road. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Well, very briefly, let's start at a time when the Volunteers of 1916 *did* trust in Home Rule, and it seemed another course was possible.

Because there *was* time when the people of 1916 did trust in Home Rule. Home Rule was of course a very, very limited form of devolved government – for example a lot less than what Scotland has today. It appeared possible to have this in 1912 after nearly 30 years of Parliamentary effort. That mountain of Parliamentary labour had produced a mouse.

In 1912 Pearse shared a platform with Redmond in support of Home Rule. What happened? Pearse changed his mind. Why? Keynes was once accused of changing his mind and he responded by saying: “*When circumstances change I change my mind. What do you do, sir?*” What changed Pearse's mind?

What happened? There was a rebellion against the Government's plans for Home Rule. And this was a real rebellion. In 1912 the British and Irish Tories/Unionists organised themselves to set up a provisional government, an alternative government to prevent Home Rule. An illegal army was set up in 1913, the UVF, to prevent by force the Government implementing the law it was about to pass, Home Rule. Tons of arms and ammunition

were imported for the Ulster Unionist Volunteers.

The Irish Volunteers were set up afterwards to *support* the Government in implementing Home Rule - to assist in implementing the law not to break it as the Ulster Volunteers were planning to do. In 1914 the British Army supported this rebellion when in the Curragh mutiny it would not obey the Government on Home Rule implementation – they refused to enforce the law! They said they would not enforce Home Rule in Ulster.

And the important thing was that the government allowed all this to happen and conceded all along the line.

But then in 1915 a most important thing happened. Something that is never mentioned these days though it was a crucial event. At the time no UK Parliament could run for more than five years and the last election had been in 1910 so one was constitutionally due in 1915. The Government's mandate had run out.

But the Government decided that an election may not suit them so they did a deal with the Opposition, the Tories/Unionists, to bring them into Government and avoid an election. These were the people who had openly and proudly broken the law against the Government over the prospect of Home Rule. Now the lawbreakers were the lawmakers! It was a Parliamentary coup d'état.

The Unionists had their own Army, with plenty arms, they had British Army support, and now they

were in Government. They had won and it was absolutely clear that Home Rule or any form of Irish Government was off the agenda. There was no two ways about it. If that Government had its way we would still be waiting for Home Rule. The Home Rule Act was already suspended on the day it was passed on 18th September 1914, and that is where it would remain.

As a result, this new government lost all moral authority in Ireland. In fact it only had legal authority because the British House of Commons is above the law. Because whatever it does is legal. It can do whatever it likes and it is automatically legal - this is the essence of the British Constitution.

The beauty of the British Constitution is that it does not exist! Unlike other countries there is no Court or Law that the Parliament is accountable to.

But in his current campaign, John Bruton, tries to obscure this basic fact about a non-elected Government being in power in 1916.

He is quoted as follows:

“Referring to 256 Irish civilians killed during the Rising, as well as 52 Irish members of the British army, 14 RIC members and three members of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, he said: “These Irish men were acting on the orders of a duly constituted Government, elected by a parliament, which had already granted home rule to Ireland, and to which Ireland had democratically elected its own MPs.”

(Irish Times, 2 November 2014).

The Government was not *'duly constituted'* and there were no Irish MPs in the Government or elected in support of that Government.

Some of the Irish Volunteers were not slow learners when they saw this happening. It was clear that parliamentary democracy had become a sick joke and that the only reality the Government responded to was rebellion.

To use management-speak, rebellion was best practice when it came to political success at the time.

It is true that 1916 had no mandate. But the existing Government had no mandate either. It was not an elected Government. The electoral mandate of the British Parliament, given in 1910, ran out in 1915. But it decided to carry on without an Election. The Ulster Rebellion had no mandate either except what the Unionists gave themselves. They had set out to break the law and had won. And the Irish Volunteers who had been set up to uphold the law had been treated with contempt.

There were no mandates all round.

John Redmond committed the Home Rule party to a war of the British Empire on Germany and Turkey. He did this without an electoral mandate.

He never put it to the Irish electorate that he would take Ireland into Imperial wars if the Empire gave him Home Rule. But he took Ireland into the Empire's war in 1914, even though he had not got Home Rule.

Redmond's Volunteers went to war without an Election mandate. Just like Redmond had done. They went to war just on the word of their Leader, who acted like a man overcome by frenzy.

These Volunteers could not have got an electoral mandate in the circumstances of 1914. The Home Rule Party could. It could have resigned its Parliamentary seats and re-fought them on an Imperial war mandate. It chose not to do so. And, after the 1910 mandate ran out in 1915, it continued sitting in Parliament and supporting the Imperial war.

The Irish Volunteers sought an electoral mandate for their 1916 action as soon as they could. When the British Parliament returned to electoral politics after a three-year gap they fought the Election and they won it.

British-oriented critics say electoral support for 1916 two and a half years after the event is no good. Democratic authorisation should have been got beforehand. Well, the Home Rule Party which sacrificed tens and tens of thousands of Nationalist Irishmen in the Empire's war didn't get democratic authorisation before the event — or after it either.

You cannot advertise a military insurrection and look for signatures on a Petition in support of it — not under the Defence of the Realm Act anyway. But the Volunteers fought the General Election when the British Government eventually decided to hold one. They asked for a democratic mandate to

establish an independent Government in Ireland. And they got it.

The British-oriented criticism then is that Sinn Fein did not in their election programme say that, if they were given a mandate to set up independent government, they would defend it if the British Government made war on it. This is the kind of criticism made by the defeated Home Rulers. They had supported Britain's World War for more than four years, saying that it was a war to establish democracy and the rights of small nations throughout the world. And all the time it was in their minds that Britain would make war on the Irish if they voted for independent government and set it up!

The Irish Volunteers decided that a Rebellion was the only way to get that Government to respond. That had been proved by the success of the Unionists. That is the political and moral case for the 1916 Rebellion. Rebellions by their nature cannot have any electoral mandate. You cannot advertise, announce or vote for a rebellion.

But the rebellion was electorally sanctioned two years later in the overwhelming electoral support for Sinn Fein.

And the Government's response confirmed that they still had no respect for Irish Democracy. The Mother of Parliaments totally ignored the result and began to suppress the new Dáil by all available means - and not just ignore it.

Now it is important to remember that, to add insult to injury, this rejection of the 1918 Election result coincided with the end of the war that was supposed to be for '*the freedom of small nations*'. About a quarter of a million Irishmen volunteered and up to 50,000 were killed. But a recent estimate by a retired Irish Army Officer, Tom Burnell, has put the figure at 50% higher, about 75,000. We could assume they also killed as many Germans, Turks, Austrians, Hungarians, Bulgarians, etc. who had done no harm whatever to them or to this country. On the contrary, the Turks had sent food in Black '47 and German scholars had helped create the Gaelic revival.

In fact the Irish in the British Army are likely to have killed a lot more if the actions of the local winner of the VC, Mick O'Leary from nearby Inchigellagh in the Gearagh, is anything to go by. The citation he got for being awarded the VC from King George V himself at Buckingham Palace in early 1915 explained that he got it because "*he rushed to the front and himself killed five Germans who were holding the first barricade, after which he attacked a second barricade, about 60 yards further on, which he captured, after killing three of the enemy and making prisoners of two more.*"

Rudyard Kipling wrote the history of O'Leary's regiment and said about the same event: "*Eye-witnesses report that he (O'Leary) did his work*

quite leisurely and wandered out into the open, visible for any distance around, intent upon killing another German to whom he had taken a dislike.” That makes it 9 in this one incident alone.

George Bernard Shaw wrote “*O’Flaherty VC*” based on O’Leary’s escapade.

On February 20, 1915 the “Cork Examiner” interviewed him as he was the man of the moment and he said: “*We captured a machine gun, killed the gunners and took some prisoners. The Huns lost terribly... On the 6th inst. we attacked them again with the bayonet and took all their trenches ... When the Irish Guards charge, they do charge, and the Huns knew that too. You would laugh if you saw us chasing them, mowing them down by the hundreds.... We have not yet properly started on them. God help them when we do, for there will be some slaughter*” (See “*Michael O’Leary, Kuno Meyer and Peadar Ó Laoghaire*” by Manus O’Riordan in the Ballingearry Historical Society Journal, 2005)

As they used to say, he was a broth of a boy! And now there are plans to erect a monument to him!

As O’Leary did his VC killing in just one sortie, one can only imagine how many he killed across four years of war. But the mind simply boggles at the number he and *all* his 250, 000 compatriots may have killed across that period. No wonder they were flattered as the “Fighting Irish.”

But it’s worth giving it some thought to try to imagine how many people were killed in total for what was believed to be the freedom of Ireland under the slogan of “*the freedom of small nations.*” I have not seen any effort to record or acknowledge these numbers among all the remembering that we are being asked to do. How many people allegedly died for Ireland across the world in that war?

And what did he and the other Irish soldiers get for their sacrifices and their mass killing? Instead of the ‘*freedom of small nations*’ they got Martial Law, the British Army, the Auxiliaries, the Black and Tan thugs and the RIC doing what they had always done but with knobs on.

The Auxiliaries, who were defeated here, were of course officers from the Great War who had fought it allegedly for this ‘*freedom of small nations.*’

What a peculiar idea of ‘freedom’ they must have had!

The Great War was the greatest con job in Irish history as far as Ireland was concerned.

It was this insult that created the mass support for the War of Independence. People were outraged.

The people had sought independence for decades. They had been promised Home Rule. They had fought and killed for Home Rule in WWI. They were killed for Home Rule by the tens and tens of thousands. Then

they voted overwhelmingly for independence.

And then they were treated with contempt.

People can only take so much. That is why there was committed support in every corner of the country for the War of Independence.

You need only read the daily paper of the first Dáil, the "*Irish Bulletin*," to see the extent and depth of this support. Aubane has begun republishing this and it is the first time this has been done since the original was published during the War itself. I would recommend you to read it.

It was this mass support that ensured the success of Tom Barry here and elsewhere. Barry was a military genius but he could not have won without mass support.

These days we are asked to remember those who fought and died in WWI. And of course it is understandable that people would want to remember their family members and friends who lost their lives. But we must also remember how those people were betrayed, and cynically betrayed, by the Government they fought for. They were killed twice, physically and politically as their belief in the "*freedom of small nations*" was treated with contempt. For Ireland the Great War was a Great Fraud. But this is not what we are encouraged to remember these days.

Those who ask us to remember WWI also want us to forget a lot about it. With Bruton we are given glib

phrases such as that we should appreciate our shared history with Britain, our shared experience. It's nice to share – it sounds so comforting. My wife is a Nursery Teacher who encourages children to understand that sharing is caring.

But some things cannot be described exactly as a shared experience.

If one of us was mugged on the way home tonight I wonder how the Gardai or a judge would respond if the assailant claimed it was all just a shared experience. Likewise, what would a judge's reaction be if a rapist claimed that his action was really just a shared sexual experience? Would it not also be a sick joke to describe the ongoing war that Israel wages on Palestinians as a shared experience? Would anyone who fought at Kilmichael have described it as a shared experience?

This is really a technique to explain away our history rather than explain it and to get us to forget our historical memory.

But amnesia is never a virtue. A people, like a person, who lose their memory is a sad, pathetic sight because if you don't know where you have come from you are not likely to know where you are going or indeed who you are.

The fact is that the War of Independence was not a war of choice for us. John Bruton would lead you to believe it was. The British threw everything they had to suppress the

new democratically elected government – but failed.

There was a war for independence only because of the war that was launched against independence.

If the people had accepted the Government's reaction to the way they voted in the 1918, Election and not responded by defending their legitimately elected Dáil, it would have meant they did not take themselves seriously and that they had no self-respect. The defence of the first legitimately elected Dáil by its legitimate army, the IRA, was an assertion and a defence of the people's self-respect. That was its *raison d'être*.

And this commemoration, and others like it, is an opportunity to honour those people for having had the courage of their convictions, maintaining their own self-respect and thereby getting the respect of people across the world - and our respect. They thereby defined Ireland's positive role in the world for the past century for which it is known and respected everywhere.

The people of 1916 and the War of Independence fought for what they were entitled to, were promised, had fought for, died for and voted for. In doing so they were as Samuel Ferguson said of Davis "*Self-respecting, self-relying, self-advancing.*" **They should be honoured without qualification or reservation.**

And honouring the Boys of Kilmichael is our way of asserting our own self-respect today because if we ever disown them we would be disowning ourselves and what we are. We would become self-haters.

As Michael O'Callaghan said here recently, Kilmichael is our Thermopylae. Its fame will long outlive the participants, and all of us, and rightly so.

That is why it gives me great pleasure to be here and I thank the Committee again for inviting me and I wish them all the best for the future and I am sure that they will ensure this annual commemoration becomes an even bigger and bigger event.

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