

What was (is) it about Cork?

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January 2005

Since Peter Hart focussed on Cork in his ‘classic’ work on the War of Independence he has created an obvious question that his fellow historians have tried to answer in various ways – why was there so much activity in Cork, and by people from Cork, during the War of Independence? Cork people have been traditionally accused of overestimating their own importance but they have not sought this new prominence in the history of the War of Independence. It has been foisted on them by Hart and co. There is no doubt that if you take away, for example, Barry, Collins, Moylan, Liam Lynch, Sam Maguire, MacCurtain, MacSwiney, Deasy, the Hales, Florrie O’Donoghue, Sean O’Hegarty to name but the more recognisable names, and their associated actions, undoubtedly the War of Independence would have been quite a different event.

The attitude of Cork activists has been something of a mystery to many from the time of the war itself. In the first well-known account by Ernie O’Malley, ‘*On another man’s wound*’ he put it down to the ‘*Gascon*’ in the Cork character but did not enlighten us further as to how and why this existed.

To Hart himself the reason was self-evident. As the War itself was a sectarian event Cork was obviously the most sectarian place in the country. Why else could they possibly fight so effectively? To him it could not be otherwise because of his assumptions about Ireland.

In *The Village* (6/11/04) Brian Hanley asks ‘*Why was west Cork the most violent part of Ireland during the revolution?*’ but gives no answer.

Michael Hopkinton refers to the hilly topography of the area as a possible explanation. ‘*Many*’ he says ‘*have sought explanations in the suitability of the countryside for guerrilla*

fighting” but as Wicklow and other places are even more hilly he admits that is no explanation. (see p.200, *The Irish War of Independence*, 2002). He then refers to ‘*charismatic and effective leadership*’ as a possible explanation but the very idea of a ‘follow my leader’ mentality as the explanation does not even convince him. Why were all these charismatic leaders located in Cork in the first place– so we are back to square one.

A new book on Cork makes another attempt, “*Cork Historical Perspectives*” by Henry Alan Jeffares (Four Courts Press 2004). It has a chapter by Gerard O’Brien, ‘*Rebel Cork*’, that attempts to answer the question. He poses the problem thus: “*The prominent role to be taken by Cork in the Anglo-Irish conflict of 1919-21 and in the subsequent civil war was not foreshadowed in any obvious sense, though both city and county gave official concern in the period following the 1918 rebellion. At first it was unclear whether the unrest reflected merely a continuation in a somewhat more aggressive form the type of disorder which had characterised Cork local politics for a generation.*” (p.198-9). But this theory is not developed, no explanation of this local ‘*disorder*’ is given.

We are told that the result of the 1918 Election ‘*was a radical departure from earlier years when the city had been in the more conventional nationalist hands of William O’Brien and Maurice Healy.*” (p. 201)

This is a strange way of describing William O’Brien and his colleagues who dominated Cork politics for decades. He was in fact the most *unconventional* nationalist in the country.

For a start, he was leader of a separate party to Redmond, the *All for Ireland League* with its own daily paper, the *Cork Free Press* which was the successor to the daily *Cork Accent* and each was an alternative to *The Cork Examiner* which to its eternal shame under the Crosbys had defected from O’Brien to

Redmond attracted by what they reckoned to be the privileges of being a supporter of first Irish Prime Minister.

The *Accent* had been set up and named to commemorate the Home Rule 'Baton' Convention of 1909 where anyone with a Cork accent was barred from speaking from the platform and batoned from the Convention hall. The conventional nationalist who organised this was Joe Devlin, Redmond's hard man. What was this all about? Our historians have not touched it. I wonder why?

O'Brien had fought tooth and nail with Redmond's and the Home Rule Party's politics for years and comprehensibly defeated Redmond, and the Party which was in alliance with the sectarian AOH (The Molly Maguires), in both 1910 Elections taking all seats in Cork city and county except one in East Cork which O'Brien did not contest because the candidate there was a Protestant Home Ruler.

The conventional nationalists were therefore wiped out in Cork by O'Brien 8 years before 1918 and Gerard O'Brien is therefore writing rubbish about the 1918 Election in Cork. Also, O'Brien was closely allied and almost synonymous with the precursor of the Irish Labour Party in the area and there had been decades of political class conflict led by the *Land and Labour League* under D. D. Sheehan MP who developed all sorts of solutions to Irish social problems and had them implemented. Sheehan became one of the first Labour MPs in the House of Commons. Another 'conventional nationalist'?

O'Brien's national programme policy was a radical alternative to the Nationalist/Unionist conflict based on what was known as the 'Three Cs' towards the Unionists - 'Conference, Conciliation and Consent'. It aimed to prevent sectarian conflict and partition decades before it was formally established by the most thoroughgoing non-sectarian policies for a Home Rule Ireland. They voted against the Home Rule Bill

because of its divisiveness and Carson appealed that '*the Member for Cork*' should be listened to in the House of Commons but the attempt to establish a dialogue there was howled down by the Home Rulers. A '*conventional nationalist*'? Conventional by Cork standards, yes, but by no other standard. And all this highly unusual activity in Cork is dismissed simply as '*disorder*' by Gerard O'Brien.

We are then told that '*Social, economic, and cultural factors, whether taken collectively or separately, provide few clues as to why Cork became synonymous with revolution and die hard republicanism during these years.*' (p.201). Note the omission of politics as a factor. And political differences is what Cork was renowned for in the decades before the War of Independence. One need only study the Cork scene for any single day in those decades and that fact becomes obvious and yet our historian of Rebel Cork misses it completely. How could one see two parties in conflict and two daily papers dealing with every issue from its own perspective and not realise that something significantly political was going on?

And if it was not any or all of the above factors what was the explanation? Here our historian realises he has to be a little coy and delicate because if one cannot give any rational explanation why the people of an area act in a particularly vigorous political way over a period of time then the conclusion must be that they are simply mad. Or to put it another way - "*The close association of political expression and the need to physically assault one's opponent already existed in the Cork psyche.*" - which is how O'Brien puts it. So there you have it. There was something wrong with their psyche and what does that mean except that they were basket cases. There was nothing whatever of any substance at issue in Cork politics before the War but they fought like hell about it! And this loony aggression simply found a new outlet in the War of Independence.

He says “*It is entirely possible that, with the collapse of the Irish Parliamentary Party and the temporary passing away of the familiar context for riot and revenge, the pent-up energies of Cork’s large politically-active minority was transferred to the only nationalist outlet available after 1918...the rowdier element of the ‘All-fors’ and ‘Mollies.’ fell quickly into the pattern of pre-emptive strikes and retaliatory counter-blows.,,*’ So the War of Independence was just a continuance of nonsensical violence, as before.

All this is a pathetic excuse for history as well as insulting but this book was launched and praised to the skies by that retiring Professor John Murphy as ‘*one of the most important books on Cork in recent times.*’ For this alone, Murphy deserves a verse all to himself in ‘The Langer Song’ as the langer of Cork historians. The current Lord Mayor of Cork, Sean Martin, (brother of Micheál), joined in the praise at the launch and there must have been movement in a couple of local graves.

So what gave rise to two competing parties, two competing daily newspapers and sometimes violent conflict with each other for a generation before the war of Independences? There was clearly something fundamental at issue. Such parties did not exist elsewhere. These politics were there because of the politicians that were there. A crippling leftover of academic Marxist thinking is that as politics is not the primary force in political life you don’t really need to take the politicians seriously. They are simply the puppets of other forces. But politicians make the politics of any era, they are the primary element but academics never seem to accept this simple fact.

O’Brien coming from and representing Mallow was very consciously an inheritor and practitioner of the Young Ireland and Davis approach to Irish politics. Modern popular political life took shape in the area under the influence of *The Nation* and *Young Ireland* . The determinedly secular Republican citizenry

of the Fenians were the immediate successors. The O'Brienites and the *All for Irelanders* were the next manifestation after the Fenians. This was an inherently non-sectarian, generous, open-ended nationalism that has kept remanifesting itself in new situations. The *All for Ireland League* supported Sinn Fein in the 1918 Election and effectively became Sinn Fein in Cork after that. They then evolved into Fianna Fail – O'Brien being asked to stand for Fianna Fail in 1927. Frank Gallagher who worked for the '*Cork Free Press*' also helped found '*The Irish Press*' and he is another personification of that evolution. His book, '*The Four Glorious Years*', written under the pseudonym David Hogan, describes that evolution very well.

The background to the conflict was that the plans to kill Home Rule with kindness was a devastating blow to the conventional nationalists. Take away the land and other social grievances and the national movement was dead in their view. All they had then to offer was the fact that Ireland was different only in being Catholic and the substance of Home Rule Ireland would be its Catholicism. Hence the growth of the AOH which filled the ideological vacuum at the heart of Redmondism and also provided the backbone, literally and metaphorically, of the Home Rule Party.

They swept all before them until they came to Cork. This development horrified O'Brien's Young Ireland instincts. He welcomed all the land reforms wholeheartedly and demanded and achieved more and far from meaning the end of the national movement he saw all this as the beginning of a new Ireland. But he saw a new divisive Catholic Ascendancy being created by the Redmondites and the AOH which was anathema to his vision of a new Young Ireland. There was therefore a fundamental conflict on what Ireland was and what it should be. There was nothing at all local about it and the conflict spread far beyond Cork. That was why it was so intense and despite this all our historians are blind to it. Cork and Munster fought the War of Independence in the spirit of Davis and Young Ireland and

that was its direct commonality with pre-War Cork politics and that was the reason for its total uninhibited involvement and it is a total perversion to see it as sectarianism. Sectarianism was introduced by the other side to try to stymie it.

Unfortunately because of the split over the so-called Treaty the Redmondite/AOH vision was given an unexpected opportunity to come back into being under the Free State and Cumann na nGaedhall because of the setback suffered by the Republicans in the war over the so-called 'Treaty.' But Young Ireland manifested itself again with Fianna Fail in power.

It is fashionable now to stand amazed at an Ireland today without a powerful Catholic Church and commentators wonder where it came from and how it came about. There is no mystery about it. It was always part and parcel of the polity and thinking created by Young Ireland and the society did not have to wait for 'Europe' or The Irish Times to bring it about. It is another manifestation of Young Ireland and it is no accident that it came about in the period when the inheritors of Young Ireland and the All for Ireland League, i.e., Fianna Fáil, dominated the politics of the society in the latter half of the 20th century.