

**The
Drishanebeg
Ambush
Centenary Commemoration
Address**

by
Jack Lane

Aubane Historical Society

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**(Not delivered because of the Lockdown
restrictions to deal with Covid-19)**

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ADDRESS TO COMMEMORATE THE CENTENARY OF THE DRISHANEPEG AMBUSH

I want to thank the Committee for organising this event and inviting me to speak. A good indication of their efficient and professional approach was to ask me to speak here some months ago. That is much appreciated. I also want to thank the Committee for doing this and making such an event as we have today.

I think many of you will agree that this type of event was unimaginable a few years ago. Irish history writing by our academics and commentators went through a very bad period for a number of years.

There was an attempt to give us a bad conscience about the war of independence and these types of commemorations were seen as in bad taste. The only disagreement I have with the commemorations is that they should be called celebrations but never mind.

There was an attempt to create a narrative of the War of the Independence that was designed to give us bad conscience about the whole thing because it was alleged to be a sectarian episode; that it was war against Protestants. This was incredible to anyone who had any knowledge at

all of the people who fought that war or the events of the war. It was an attempt to try to prove that our state was deformed at birth, so to speak.

When I used to read such stuff I often used to think to myself of the volunteers who waited here on that cold day on 11th February 100 years ago and to try to imagine that they could possibly have something else in their minds rather than the disarming and defeating the troops on that train.

The last thing that they would have considered was anything to do with Protestants. Such a notion was too absurd to even imagine. And furthermore if the Volunteers had any such sectarian notions they should not have ever fired a shot at all the good Catholics in the RIC Barracks in the town.

Weasel words.

This other narrative was full of weasel words. There were appeals to acknowledge that any accounts of ambushes like Drishanebeg should emphasise what is called our shared or inclusive history.

How any war where each side seeks to defeat and destroy the other could be shared or inclusive is mind boggling.

It defies common sense. And as the centenary commemorations are not yet over we will hear these weasel words again and again.

If we could make an analogy to best illustrate this – if one of us was assaulted on the way home here this evening and we turned up in court black and blue tomorrow could our assailant defend himself before a judge by saying ‘*But your honour it was shared experience for both of us. It was an inclusive event?*’ A rapist could try the same about his victim – “*It was a shared sexual experience, it was very inclusive, your honour.*” We can judge the reaction.

Did the uniformed arsonists who burned Cork city create a shared experience with the people of the city!

Another typical criticism of this type of commemoration was they should emphasise reconciliation. Yes indeed reconciliation is fine but reconciliation between what and what? The real reconciliation that was and is needed is reconciliation between the facts of the situation then and the way our historians and commentators should account for them.

But our historians and commentators seem to be on another planet sometimes. Reconciliation

should be calling a spade a spade and not going in for weasel words.

The purpose of this kind of talk, these weasel words, is to explain *away* rather than explain situations. It makes nonsense of things, a mockery of our history. It is an insult to our intelligence

Fortunately these notions and this kind of narrative are on the back foot at the moment. And a person who has made a great contribution to this and could almost be described as a local woman was Meda Ryan from West Cork, because she attended Drishane Convent over the road.

What really put this new narrative on the back foot was the Government’s decision to hold an event to commemorate the RIC’s role in the war of Independence last year. I think many people finally woke up to what all these weasel words actually meant. This would have made our history a joke – commemorating a force that fought to prevent the state coming into existence. There was an outcry and the obscenity was abandoned. Our history was liberated from a lot of nonsense.

There may be some people who believed or were led to believe that the RIC were just policemen doing a policeman’s job - but they were not.

They were never policemen. It was another weasel word to call them policeman. The British Government itself made this perfectly clear during the war. In early 1919 it was proposed by some MPs in Westminster that the RIC be allowed to join the Police Union of the UK and the Chief Secretary, McPherson, refused point blank and explained that:

"It was decided by the Government that the Royal Irish Constabulary could not be permitted to join the National Union of Police and Prison Officers, in as much as the Royal Irish Constabulary is a semi-military force directly under the control of the Crown, and subject in many respects to the same conditions of employment as the army and navy forces." (March 6, 1919, Hansard, Volume 113, Series 5, column 626.)

That's calling a spade a spade!

For my sins I wasted my time by writing a letter to the *Irish Times* pointing this out but it was not published – surprise, surprise!

They were part and parcel of the Crown Forces; in fact they were central to the Crown Forces as described very accurately at the time. The Tans were recruited as a special reserve for the RIC; the Auxiliaries were a Division of

the RIC. So in commemorating the RIC we were commemorating all of these. They were all part of the RIC. The RIC being locally based acted as bloodhounds for the others as they did not have a clue about the country – where to go or who to find. The killing of Mikie Dineen above in Ivale is an example of the RIC's role in history.

There were decent men in it of course but they resigned during the war and there was no planned commemoration for them and the one planned did not specify them though they *should* have been commemorated. They bravely resigned en masse and some mutinied.

So this planned commemoration was also a commemoration of the Tans and Auxiliaries, but it was a step too far and had to be withdrawn and played a significant role in the defeat of that Government in the subsequent election. It had become embarrassing that any Irish government would have proposed such a thing. (However, a similar event on a bigger scale is planned for this July.)

That episode is important because it changed the tone of the public discourse on the war for the better and how the events of the War should be commemorated. And it was therefore a

very good thing to have happened. Some of the old nonsense had to take a back seat. It cleared the air and so once again the plain facts could be stated and prioritised properly. Spades could be called spades again.

So what were the main facts that caused the war in the first place? It did not start because we felt like a war - WWI provided enough war for everyone and they did not want more. Anyway, that was supposed to be 'the war to end all wars.' But it resulted in more wars than ever before right down to the wars of the present day. My grandmother used to say that the world went mad in 1914 and has never been right since. There was a profound truth in that because the declaration of that war on Germany and then Turkey was the most important and most disastrous event in modern history.

The Elephant in the room - the British General Election of 1918

The most basic fact of all about the war of independence is that it need not have happened at all. The most important event of all was the British General Election of 1918. That is the overwhelming fact that can never be over emphasised. The handle on which all the rest turns. That was the most democratic of all elections up to then because for the first time adult men had the vote and many women.

The electorate here elected about 75% of the seats for candidates who stood for Independence. The result could not be cleaner. No need for recounts or legal challenges that we heard so much about in other elections. Even if Donald Trump was around he could not say a word of objection.

This was more important than the 1916 Rising which would have been considered a failure if not endorsed by that election. It's simply the most important event of all.

Now a strange thing is that I have never come across a specific book on that election. A lot of references to it but just passing references. There have never been so many historians in our Universities and never so many books about the war but none on this election and its significance for Ireland.

There are dozens, hundreds, about the war for Irish Independence but a book called '*The vote for Irish Independence*' is a book yet to be written.

A good example of this treatment of that election occurred last year when UCC produced one of the biggest books I ever saw called "*The Atlas of the Irish revolution*." It has the famous portrait of Roger Kiely from Cullen on the cover. Probably because he looked

so handsome. But his name never appears in the book. It weighed in at over 11 lbs., over 5 kilos with just under a 1000 pages, introduced by President Higgins. Glowing reviews by everybody; prizes galore, contributions by over 100 historians, the cream of the present crop, over 160 chapter headings according to subjects.

But not a single chapter/subject heading or subheading devoted to the 1918 Election. Just passing references as usual that played down its significance in every possible way – again explained away rather than explained. So despite all the work and cost our historians will not see the wood for the trees and so do many more. And therefore they miss out completely on cause and effect. Any historian worthy of the name will prioritise the facts, as well as provide them, but not in this case.

The 1918 General Election remains the elephant in the room. Everybody knows it's there but eyes are averted from its real significance. Without due regard for the 1918 Election the story of the War of Independence is Hamlet without the Prince.

Why did people vote that way?

Did they just get the notion into their heads? No. People were told that

a World War had just been fought and won for '*the freedom of small nations*'. The greatest war ever fought. People generally believe what governments tell them over and over again and what they claim to be fighting a war for. And not only that, the people's own party, the Irish Parliamentary Party, was in total agreement with the government on this. On the promises made about a quarter of a million Irishmen from home and abroad fought in that war and anything up to 50,000 were killed. About 10 million others were killed. Think about that!

And spare a thought for all the Germans, Turks and others the Irish killed. They are rarely mentioned. If the Irish in the British Army killed at least one each of the '*enemy*' we are talking of hundreds of thousands being killed for "*the freedom of small nations*" – for the freedom of Ireland!

Mick O'Leary from Inchigeela killed 8 Germans in one incident and got the VC for it from King George at Buckingham Palace. If he was in any way typical the numbers they killed are huge indeed.

And what had the Germans and Turks ever done to Ireland to deserve killing them by the thousand? The only intervention by the Turks was to give money towards the so-called famine and German scholars almost created

the Gaelic revival and they certainly never hindered Irish freedom.

The whole thing was an obscene, monstrous fraud. This affected everybody in the country. Naturally people expected that after such massive sacrifices of dead and injured and promises made that getting independence would be a walk in the park. They did not vote for more war. They had enough of that.

Also, the whole world was for national independence. The Americans joined the war to ensure the same with their declaration of '14 points' which boiled down to the rights of nations to self determination. The new Russian government left the war for the same reason and encouraged national independence in all the colonies of the European Empires and they are all now independent states in the world. National freedom was the flavour of the era, its *zeitgeist*. The British, the Americans and the Russians were all for it.

And we sometimes forget that there had been an example of another country voting for independence and getting it a few years earlier in Europe – without any war, without a shot being fired. And that happened not a million miles away. In 1905 Norway voted to

be independent of Sweden which had ruled it since medieval times and it was conceded without a shot being fired. It was accepted that this was the civilised way to deal with this type of issue – self determination.

The British response - contempt

But what was the British government's attitude to the Election-their Election? Not only did they ignore the result - there was total contempt for it. The Irish will get over it. And the British had good reason to believe this. They had put down such notions by the Irish before. This was spelt out clearly. A Major Street wrote a book to make the point. The Irish would come to their senses and forget this notion that they could run an independent country; so the elected government was proscribed and hunted down.

Some people keep insisting today that there was a peaceful way to deal with this but there was not. Where is the evidence for that possibility? No doubt most people wished there was a peaceful way and if wishes were horses we would all go for a ride.

The unexpected happened. The Irish did not vote for war but they took to war to defend the government that they had voted for. I think we surprised ourselves. The Irish took themselves seriously. Citizen soldiers emerged all over the country. And the

war was sanctioned by more elections during the war – the urban and rural local elections during 1920 and an even more impressive result is general election in June 1921 when Sinn Fein were returned unopposed in every single seat in the 26 counties. And after about two and half years of war and these elections in support of it the British conceded a Truce to people they had just recently described as a “murder gang.” An admittance that they could not militarily win despite being the greatest power the world had ever seen on whose Empire the sun never set.

But there is no more experienced state for waging war than the British. That was how it had become the most powerful Empire the world. And for Britain wars don't end when the shooting stops if the objective has not been achieved. It simply takes another form. There is more than one way to skin a cat. Politics become war by other means and this happened here. For example, WWI did not end on 11 November 1918. There was a food blockade of Germany that starved about ¾ million of the German population; that's how the war finished and planted the seeds for the next one.

After the Truce the British government decided that at all costs

Ireland was not going to be ‘lost’ as they would put it. The secret of Irish success had been the unity of all the forces military and political. And it's not rocket science to decide how that could be frustrated and stymied – create a division in that unity. And that technique was a tried and tested one – split the opponent's forces; split the Independence movement.

Lloyd George

And the British had a particular genius in charge for a task like that in David Lloyd George, the *Welsh Wizard*. And wizard he was. He was fit for anything - war, threats of war, terror, promises, lies, cajolery, flattery, trickery, guile, bluff, etc. You name them Lloyd George had them all and would use them all and play them all like the notes of a musical instrument. He was an artist at it. There was ditty composed about him, by a fellow Welshman I believe, who knew him well and he assumed that when he passed to the other side he would go straight to hell and the ditty went:

Lloyd George no doubt

When his life runs out

Will ride in a flaming chariot

He'll sit in state on a red hot plate

Between Satan and Judas Iscariot

And on that day the Devil will say

'My place of pre-eminence fails

So I'll move a bit higher

Away from the fire

To make room for this fellow from

Wales.'

That's who the Republican government was faced with.

Negotiations ended after five months under the threat of '*immediate and terrible war*' by Lloyd George unless what is called the '*Treaty*' was signed.

And who has not heard of the Treaty? But read it and the word treaty is not mentioned in any of its 18 clauses or in the Annex list.

What is a Treaty?

For a start it is very odd for something that is called a treaty not to say itself that it is a treaty -because it was not a treaty. Paper never refused ink but calling it a treaty is another weasel word. It was called officially *Articles of Agreement between Great Britain and Ireland*. But not every agreement is a treaty. The Republic of Ireland was not mentioned or recognised as a party to the agreement.

A Treaty is an agreement between two or more independent states mutually recognised as such and freely entered into. This was not the case here. Ireland was treated not as an independent Republic which it was but as a subservient Dominion of the British Empire and threatened with war if they did not sign, '*immediate and terrible war,*' and what Lloyd George had in mind was the method used to defeat the Boers. Blockhouses and the

first concentration camp were invented by Britain, to win that war. Also one side was asked to take oath of allegiance to the other. Such threats and oaths are not part of any treaty worthy of the name. The British Empire never made a treaty with one of its Dominions because they were not equal to the Empire. It would be oxymoronic to suggest any such thing as a treaty. A good example of a real treaty is the Treaty of Rome.

TDs in the Dáil, including Seán Moylan, and particularly Dr. Francis Ferran* questioned calling it a Treaty and pressurised Griffith into consulting Lloyd George about it and other issues for clarification. And he did so via Austin Stack and Lloyd George confirmed it was not a Treaty. But like the RIC being called policemen, the name sticks.

Griffith explained to the Dáil:

"MR. GRIFFITH:

The questions, I think, which the Deputies refer to were sent across by Mr. Stack. They are:

'(1) whether he had any communication, direct or indirect, from the British Government, in connection with the Treaty?'

The only communication I had was this produced here, except one where he (Lloyd George, J.L.) stated it was not a Treaty, and I got the official title:

‘Articles of Agreement between Ireland and Great Britain’.”

(Dáil debate, 10/1/1921).

Birkenhead defended it on the same basis in the House of Lords, see e.g., the debates there on 16/12/1920 and 23/7/1923.

The Earl of Midleton and others were aghast at the idea of a treaty with a Dominion.

So what was this agreement? It was repeatedly called an ‘*instrument*’ in the text itself– never a treaty. An instrument for what? An instrument like a hatchet to split the Republican forces. It was what it said on the tin!

The imposition of this instrument by the threat of war led to a conflict within the united Irish forces. And already the doomsters are at it to give us a bad conscience by describing this conflict as a civil war.

And again paper will never refuse ink about a so-called ‘civil war’ that followed this threat of renewed war. But it is was not a civil war no matter how often it is said - no more than the ‘*Articles of Agreement*’ was a Treaty or that RIC were policemen.

What the conflict was about was how to respond to the threats that went with the *Articles of Agreement*. The reaction to it is what we read about but

the cause is what matters. The cause was and is a bigger issue than the conflict itself.

Here today is not the context to pass judgement on how different people reacted to the threat of renewed war. They were all faced with what would now be called an existential threat and these are not easy to deal with. I do have sympathy with all politicians facing such dilemmas and dealing with millions of people in the process.

Trying to get these Articles accepted depended on those threats of renewed war. Liam Mellows put it very well - acceptance was dependant on the fear of the people not the will of the people. Votes based on fear and terror have no moral authority whatsoever. And the Dáil could debate the Agreement forever but could never ratify or approve it.

The winners of the debate had to traipse over to Dublin Castle and become the unelected *Government of Southern Ireland* to approve it and thereby deny the legitimacy and authority of the Dáil. That was perfectly clear in the *Articles of Agreement*. Therefore the Dáil never did approve or ratify these Articles because it simply could not.

De Valera was clear on this:

"We have said from the start that there could be no question of ratification of this Treaty. It is altogether ultra vires in the sense of making it a legal instrument." (Dáil Éireann, 20 Dec. 1921)

And the Free Staters, in their hearts, agreed. Kevin O'Higgins said: *"I first wish to say a few words as to my personal views. I do believe and agree that ratification of the Treaty is technically a breach of the mandate of this Dáil and is technically ultra vires."* (Dáil Éireann, 7 Dec 1921)

What is a civil war?

There have been many. There has been civil war in several countries - England, America, Spain, Russia, China etc. What were these about? They were wars between people of a country who wanted totally different systems of government for their countries. In England, there was the Puritan Parliament (of Cromwellians) versus a monarchy; in the U.S.A. an American federation of states or a Union; in Spain a republic or fascism, etc.

In other words completely different systems of government.

But here that was not the case. Because both sides here were Republicans and had fought together for four years to establish a Republic and wanted a Republic and all agreed to have a Republic later.

The threats created a real dilemma. And people reacted differently to the threat of renewed war. That does not make it a civil war. Different policy conflicts do not make a civil war. But 'civil war' is used with abandon by our commentators. Civil war wrecks societies.

But calling it a civil war has a purpose, a psychological purpose. It is again a very good way to give us a bad conscience about ourselves. Like the effort to give us a bad conscience about the war of independence itself.

The subliminal purpose is that we could not really cope and went in for a form of faction fighting or 'the fighting Irish' syndrome took over once we were on our own. We could not cope.

It is in effect an insult, another weasel word, and a way to dismiss the real issue and its source originating in the *Articles of Agreement* - and nowhere else.

Why do we celebrate this Ambush in the war of Independence?

The Volunteers in this Ambush helped set up a state that lasted for over a 100 years, 102 and one month old to be exact. That is an achievement in itself. States have come and gone in that time. Empires have come and gone. And some have been destroyed before our eyes in recent years. No

state is guaranteed an easy life. International relations between states are dog eat dog. Some peoples have not yet achieved statehood despite great efforts and they would dearly love to be in our position today - ask the Scots, Basques, Catalans, Palestinians, Kurds - and many other stateless nations that we do not hear much about.

But not only has it survived it is a state that has maintained a democratic system intact for all that time. It never succumbed to totalitarianism of the right or the left; has not been destroyed by war and invasions; has not waged war on anybody; has sought the very opposite. It avoided the world Depression of the 1930s and the destruction of WWI. Have a think about how many other states can claim the same?

The vast majority of states today did not exist in 1919. You will find that the number of states that can claim such an unbroken record of continuous democracy for over 100 years are few and far between – you will not need all your fingers to count them.

This is therefore a very successful state. It had and has of course all the problems that states have - crimes, corruption, scandals, horrors, economic problems, etc.; some are unique to us;

and some are the problems of success. But every state dealing with millions of people has these types of problems and we have dealt with them as well or as badly as anybody else. All states have permanent, ongoing problems to solve.

But our commentators report our problems as if they were unique to us and tend to use them as a condemnation of the state itself and give us the impression that maybe we took a wrong turning in going for Independence. That we are some sort of failed state as the jargon has it. We are not. We have met the test of any state – we have survived and thrived and we have done so thanks to the men and the women who helped them carry out this Ambush 100 years ago and the ongoing conviction of the people for independence that they showed in the Election of 1918.

For that we are right to commemorate and celebrate what they did. And this is why I am delighted to be part of these celebrations.

*Dr. Francis Ferran was TD for the Sligo–Mayo East constituency and re-elected in 1922. He died while imprisoned in the Curragh by the Free State in 1923.

The Glebe* Ambush

The news has spread throughout the land
It rings from shore to shore
Of such a deed no living man
Has ever heard before.

When the shades of eve were falling
On the eleventh of February
'Twas in a place they call the Glebe
This ambush was to be.

'Twas plotted out by men of brains
They being so calm and cool
They got the troop train boarded
At the station of Rathcoole.
'Twas there two men were waiting
Until the train steamed in
And they sprang upon the engine
They being courageous men.

With pistols drawn and loaded
On the driver they did call
'You're now held up by armed men.
Our orders you must obey.'
They told him drive full steam ahead
And had he disobeyed them
He would surely get a ball
And meet the fate of Sergeant John Boxold.

And there, they stood unnoticed,
By the soldiers or the guard.
The train steamed out as usual
As you may plainly see
A light along the railway line
The signal was to be.

The train it stopped to the troops' surprise
And a volley soon rang out
"Put up your hands, your guns we want"
Was what our "boys" did shout.

And when the shooting started
A soldier he did fall
And by the papers you will see
His name was John Boxold
And the rest of them being a cowardly lot
They walked out of the train
And handed up their rifles
To the leaders of Sinn Fein

And while the firing lasted
'Twas heard in Millstreet town
But "Spotty" **and his Black and Tans
Were afraid to venture down.
But if they came, 'twas all the same
A worse fate they would meet
They would ne'er again see the Barracks
Nor the town of sweet Millstreet

Our "boys" they then got ready
To take away their spoil
Of rifles and ammunition
They had a mighty pile
They gathered up their bandoliers
Equipments large and small
Away they sped, no tear was shed
For Sergeant John Boxold.

Composed by Maurice Bourke,
North Horesmount, Kilcorney

*The traditional name for the Ambush
** RIC Sergeant Mulcahy

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Above: The train afterwards, 3rd class 6-wheel carriage No. 663 at Tralee Bay platform, blood-stained and with bullet holes, Saturday 12 February 1921. The platform side of the coach with substantial window damage. (Photo: Museum of the Royal Fusiliers, HM Tower of London)

*

Below: the location of the Ambush at this cutting, just over 90 years later, Tuesday 8 March 2011, near MP17½, looking towards Millstreet where, on Friday 11 February 1921, the 5:15pm train from Cork to Tralee was ambushed. (Photo: Oliver Doyle)

