

1916-1923 - Ireland's Unfinished Revolution

Friday 8 April 2016, by [BURTENSCHAW Ronan](#), [BYERS Seán](#) (Date first published: 28 March 2016).

The revolutionary period sparked by the 1916 Easter Rising offered a vision of a truly democratic Ireland.

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There is no consensus among Ireland's historians about whether the events of 1916-23 constitute a revolution, or how the revolution should be regarded.

Fianna Fáil [1], for a long time the most successful political party in the republic, pushed a narrative that used the 1916 Rising to legitimize the contemporary state. Its telling is narrow and nationalist, tying leader Pádraig Pearse [2] and his contemporaries to the conservative Catholicism of the twentieth century.

Their rivals among the Irish bourgeoisie, Fine Gael [3], contain many partisans of the Home Rule movement's constitutional nationalism. Less critical of British rule in Ireland, they tend to downplay or even discredit the 1916 Rising as a tragic misadventure.

Ireland's left should reject both the traditional and revisionist narrative. In this moment of renewed working-class militancy on the island, what is needed is an excavation of Ireland's revolutionary period that embraces the struggle for independence in the context of the democratic and social revolutions many of its participants aspired to.

What Kind of Revolution?

Ireland's revolution was primarily national. But to view it exclusively in these terms is to overlook its complexity. This is not simply because the movement had strong working-class and internationalist dimensions. Rather, it is because the political economy of colonial rule had intertwined the national, the democratic, and the social in Ireland.

The 1798 United Irishmen uprising [4], aided by the French Republic, was an inspirational event for subsequent radical traditions. But while the politics of the rebellion are frequently referenced, its effects on the economy are often overlooked. After defeating the uprising, the British government severely limited Irish autonomy within the empire, disbanding what was known as "Grattan's Parliament" in the 1800 Act of Union. Although this measure combined the two kingdoms into a larger union, the actual effect was to instate direct, colonial rule over Ireland.

The results were devastating for the southern Irish economy. In 1800, as a seat of government, an entrepôt and financial center, and a hub of textile industry, Dublin was the second city of the world's largest empire. Direct rule, which transferred fiscal and economic powers back to Westminster and increased tariffs on Irish goods, caused an exodus of Irish peers and their investments to Britain. Within sixty years, Dublin was relegated to the sixth most populous city in the United Kingdom.

While introducing tariffs to protect their industries, the British government took a laissez-faire approach to interventionism in the economy for the public welfare. This arrangement contributed to the Great Famine of 1845-52 [5]. Produce exports continued from Ireland to mainland Britain even as a million people died and another million emigrated. As the Earl of Clarendon, lord lieutenant of Ireland, wrote to the prime minister in 1847, "No one could now venture to dispute the fact that Ireland had been sacrificed to the London corn-dealers ... and that no distress would have occurred if the exportation of Irish grain had been prohibited." [6]

As well as halving the population of the island, the famine also fundamentally changed the political economy of rural Ireland, clearing huge swathes of land that had been farmed by smallholders. In 1841, only 18 percent of holdings in Ireland were more than fifteen acres. Ten years later, it was up to 51 percent. Into this vacuum emerged a powerful tenant farmer class.

Decimated by underdevelopment and traumatized by famine, Ireland was also fertile ground for a rising Catholic church, whose clergy disproportionately came from the large tenant farming or bourgeois backgrounds — the sections of Irish society that could afford to educate their children.

Many saw the Church, itself repressed by British imperial authorities, as a more reliable ally than the government and favored participation in its institutions rather than the state. The Church's involvement in campaigns for Catholic emancipation and repeal of the Act of Union deepened this affinity.

The Church's power grew just as it took its clearest anti-modern turn with Pope Pius IX's 1864 *Syllabus of Errors* [7]. The encyclical directly attacked socialism and rejected the "totally false idea of social government," underwriting a social teaching which saw poverty as a moral issue best ameliorated through charity. Following this philosophy, the Church became a powerful opponent of progressive reform.

The rise of the Catholic Church also had consequences for the status of women. While by no means liberated, women in pre-famine Ireland often had a role on the farm and even used their weaving and spinning skills to achieve a degree of economic independence. In time, industrialization rendered those skills obsolete and the rise of large tenant farms reduced the need for women's labor. The Catholic Church wrote a new role for women, as the religious head of the family, urging them to take their place in the home and raise their children in the faith.

By the early twentieth century, Ireland's economic decline had produced widespread immiseration. Dublin's slums were recognized as some of the worst in the world. The mortality rate was 27.6 per 1,000 — worse than Calcutta. More than 20,000 people lived in single-room tenements, often located in the grand Georgian houses of the departed aristocracy, a haunting reminder of the prosperity the city had lost.

The Two Camps

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the desire to free Ireland from direct, colonial rule and the destitution it produced gave birth to two traditions: the Fenians and the Home Rulers. Although

there were numerous overlaps between the movements, and common causes in struggles such as the Land War, the groups parted ways in their interpretation of the post-1798 landscape.

The Home Rulers sought to undo the damage of 1798. Led initially by the Protestant Ascendancy [8] — the Anglican ruling class of landowners, clergy, and professionals — they aimed to restore Grattan's Parliament and the political power lost to Ireland's aristocrats and capitalists. The Land War of the late nineteenth century largely replaced this Ascendancy with a Catholic ruling class in waiting: namely, the large tenant farmers, who had secured rights to tenure and purchase. After a brief split in the movement, the Catholic elite gained hegemony by the turn of the twentieth century.

This segment of Irish society was heavily represented in business and the professions, and sent their children to exclusive, often Jesuit-run schools more indebted to the Protestant Ascendancy than interested in the Gaelic cultural revival. John Redmond — the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, who boasted Catholic gentry pedigree — was their exemplar.

Under Redmond's leadership, the Home Rule Party came to be dominated by a coterie of imperialists harboring fanciful notions about Ireland becoming a junior partner in a reconceived British empire. MP Thomas Kettle best summed up their imperial dreams, arguing that Home Rule was a "biped among ideas ... marching to triumph on an Irish and Imperial foot."

The Fenians' aims were different. They wanted to realize the 1798 mission of an independent republic, declaring in 1867 that "the soil of Ireland, at present in the possession of an oligarchy, belongs to us, the Irish people, and to us it must be restored."

Composed largely of rank-and-file artisans and urban workers, the secretive Fenian movement was radical democratic, anti-aristocratic, somewhat anticlerical, internationalist by virtue of its cross-channel and transatlantic connections, and possessed a revolutionary perspective on the land question.

Fenianism, James Connolly later wrote, was "a responsive throb in the Irish heart to those pulsations in the heart of the European working class which elsewhere produced the International Working Men's Association." Indeed, the Fenians looked to the Chartists and contemporary European socialists for ideological inspiration as well as institutional support.

In their strangely neglected 1867 Proclamation [9], the Fenians are explicitly secular, eschewing appeals to religious solidarity in favor of "complete separation of Church and State." They also resist the idea that their struggle is one of Irish against English, instead reserving their harshest criticism for "aristocratic locusts, whether English or Irish" and expressing common cause with the English working class: "As for you, workmen of England, it is not only your hearts we wish, but your arms."

But the environment for attaining this program was not favorable. The two conditions that could have helped the Fenians grow into a mass movement — a developed Irish working class and a serious socialist influence in the British working class — were both absent.

Consequently, when their 1867 rebellion failed and the subsequent bombing campaign proved unpopular, the Fenians breathed life into their rivals instead of fomenting social revolution. Their violent acts supplied martyrs to the national cause and at the same time concentrated British minds on the necessity of reforms to redress historic grievances, particularly on the land question. Having redefined the most pressing issues in Irish politics, the Fenians were gradually marginalized or co-opted by an ascendant Home Rule Party.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the majority of nationalists supported the parliamentary route to Home Rule. Even with the failure of two such bills, in 1886 and 1893, nationalist Ireland kept the

faith that the Irish Parliamentary Party would persuade Westminster to grant them self-government. A series of land acts, delivering security and proprietorship to large numbers of Catholic tenant farmers while hastening the decline of the Protestant Ascendancy, seemed to demonstrate that constitutional nationalism was capable of meeting the aspirations of important constituencies.

Ulster Unionism

Against the twin projects of Irish nationalism there also existed a unionist tradition, opposed to any self-rule for Ireland, most strongly concentrated in the northeast. During the course of the nineteenth century the lines between nationalism and unionism, which had previously crossed sectarian boundaries, became increasingly confessionally aligned.

The 1798 rebellion had been led by Protestant republicans like Wolfe Tone [\[10\]](#) and called for a unity of “Catholic, Protestant and dissenter.” Despite this, it inspired a reaction by defenders of the Protestant Ascendancy in areas with large Catholic populations.

Orange societies emerged in Armagh and spread across the northern counties, bringing together Anglican landlords and tenants that had previously been at odds in a project to defend confessional privilege from Catholic usurpation. In an act which was to foreshadow later conflicts, the British state absorbed the Orange Order into its army reserve to defeat the rebellion and the ideals of its progenitors.

The Act of Union and the development of Catholic nationalism, coupled with British elites’ willingness to use Protestant fears to offset Catholic revolt and advance imperial interests, ushered in a period of intensified divisions between the northeast and the rest of Ireland.

An economic schism had arisen as well. As the economy of the south languished, a Belfast-Glasgow-Liverpool industrial triangle linked the economic fortunes of the northeast to those of the empire.

The emergent Protestant industrial bourgeoisie belied James Connolly’s view, expressed as late as 1911, that “there is no economic class in Ireland whose interests as a class are bound up with the Union.” [\[11\]](#)

Seeing Orangeism as a declining phenomenon of landlordism, Connolly was blind to the material underpinnings of Ulster Unionism and the success of the industrial bourgeoisie in asserting political control over a movement rife with class, geographical, and ideological contradictions. The shared aversion to empowering a Catholic or Dublin-based ruling class provided the basis for a cross-class, Ulster British identity that would eventually become the fundamental tenet of Irish unionism.

The 1905 establishment of the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC) [\[12\]](#) — encouraged by the Orange Order, with its Tory connections — both confirmed the organizational decay of southern Irish unionism and gave formal political expression to an Ulster British identity that cut across class.

This led to the development of a distinctly sectarian ethnic politics, which was brought to the fore when over 237,000 men and 234,000 women signed the 1912 Ulster Covenant opposing Home Rule. In 1913 the Ulster Unionists, backed by prominent British military figures and the Tory opposition leader Andrew Bonar Law, established a paramilitary unit, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), to coordinate armed resistance.

Home Rule nationalists responded to this the following year with their own show of force, establishing the Irish Volunteers. By mid-1914 they had almost two hundred thousand members,

prompting Redmond to step in and take effective control of its provisional committee.

It was at this moment that World War I intervened, sending the two bourgeois nationalist traditions to continental Europe to compete for empire's affection: the Home Rulers hoping to win support for their limited self-governance; the unionists hoping to prevent it. This left behind a space for more radical traditions to benefit from the growing unpopularity of the war.

The Rising

The remaining nationalist Volunteers adhered to an Irish republicanism closer to the Fenian movement of the nineteenth century. They included sections of a new educated petty bourgeoisie — foremost among them the Catholic schoolteacher, poet, and Irish language activist Pádraig Pearse.

The leadership of this separatist contingent were supportive of an armed uprising against British rule in Ireland. They were divided on the question into a “passive” camp, led by Bulmer Hobson and Eoin MacNeill, who supported a rising only if there was an attempt to disarm the Volunteers or impose conscription; and an “active” camp, led by veteran Fenian Tom Clarke and Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) [13] organizer Seán MacDiarmada, who were determined to instigate a rising while England was at war.

Their greater commitment to Irish independence was made clear by the line of their split from the majority tendency: participation in Britain's imperial wars. Following a tradition that dated back to Wolfe Tone's 1790 pamphlet on the Spanish War, those who refused to fight were opening up a political space for a movement advocating a complete break with Britain.

This tradition also accommodated radical forms of republicanism. Among their ranks were militants inspired by socialist ideas, such as Thomas Ashe, a Kerry-born teacher who became principal of a school in north Dublin. He went on to lead the Volunteer battalion in Fingal and, in 1912, his support for trade union organizing of local farm laborers brought him into direct conflict with Home Rule MP Thomas Kettle, who owned land in the area.

As the unofficial nationalist tradition before the war, republicanism was less influenced by the Church. Although Catholicism was central to Pearse's political thought, the Fenian IRB was governed by a secular constitution, and within its ranks were liberals, atheists, Protestants, and Jews. What's more, where Catholic nationalism did exist, it was more likely to be private — i.e. confessional — than clerical, particularly as the clergy was vehemently opposed to Fenianism and its methods of struggle.

This relative freedom from clerical influence meant far more progressive positions on women in the struggle. Whereas the Home Rulers opposed women's suffrage, republicanism included among its ranks women's suffrage activists such as Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington and Mary MacSwiney. The vast majority of the newly formed women's army, Cumann na mBan [14], rejected Redmond's call to war in 1914.

The other radical tradition to emerge into the space vacated by the Home Rulers was labor. Coming of age during the temporary defeat of the 1913 lockout in Dublin [15] — when twenty thousand workers faced off against three hundred employers led by Home Ruler William Martin Murphy — labor now had a militia of its own, the Irish Citizen Army (ICA) [16], to protect striking workers.

It also had a formidable leader in James Connolly [17], who had synthesized the national-democratic, social, and economic questions into a republican-socialist ideology, marking him out as one of the

outstanding theorists of Second International Marxism. Through his writing and founding of the Labour Party, Connolly worked to shape the emerging class consciousness in Ireland.

A proponent of revolutionary insurrection who had written extensively about the radical traditions of Fenianism, Connolly was ideally placed to bring labor into collaboration with those parts of the Irish national movement that had refused to partake in Britain's imperial adventures on the continent.

In his attempt to create the space for this confluence Connolly made some major concessions, the most important of which was a softening of his position on German imperialism. This put him at odds with others in the international socialist orbit.

Still, Connolly was able to influence leading figures like Pádraig Pearse and organizations like the IRB, imbuing the Easter Rising with a plebeian spirit that separated it sharply from the conservative nationalism it displaced.

Describing the 1916 Rising, prominent Irish writer AE (the pseudonym of George William Russell) wrote that "it was labour [which] supplied the passionate element in the revolt. It has a real grievance. The cultural element, poets, Gaels, etc., never stir more than one percent of a country. It is only when an immense injustice stirs the workers that they unite their grievances with all other grievances."

Although situated to the right of Fabianism and radical Fenianism, the 1916 Proclamation envisaged an independent Ireland that was to be more open to women's participation, social equality, and popular sovereignty. Defending the Rising against critics of its alliance of the petty bourgeoisie and workers, Lenin argued that "whoever expects a 'pure' social revolution will never live to see it."

He correctly observed that the participation of around 210 ICA volunteers during Easter Week, combined with the executions of Connolly and his deputy Michael Mallin [18], would buy the labor movement a more influential stake in the post-Rising dispensation.

The Revolution

The Rising did not initially enjoy widespread popular support. But two years after its suppression, the views it represented were hegemonic in Irish politics.

The threat of conscription sparked the largest strike in Irish history in April 1918, almost completely shutting down the country. By December, Sinn Féin — the political representation of the nationalist movement largely by force of circumstance — was trouncing the Irish Parliamentary Party, winning seventy-three seats to the Home Rule Party's six in the general election.

The sympathies Lenin had exhibited towards Ireland were reciprocated in the winter of 1918, when a thousands-strong rally in support of the Bolshevik Revolution took place at the Mansion House in Dublin. It featured speakers like Constance Markievicz [19] of Sinn Féin, soon to be elected the first woman minister of a government in the Western world; Tom Johnston of the Labour Party; and William O'Brien of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU) [20]. It was also addressed by a Soviet representative and closed with a rendition of the "Red Flag," written by the Irish socialist Jim Connell.

In January 1919, newly elected Sinn Féin MPs, who refused to take their seats in the British Parliament, assembled in Dublin to formalize this independence. They declared their allegiance to the 1916 Proclamation and established an independent Dáil (parliament) for Ireland, notifying the

“free nations of the world” that there was an “existing state of war between Ireland and England.” The movement militias were reconstituted as the Irish Republican Army (IRA). The War of Independence had begun.

Despite the Labour Party standing aside from the 1918 elections to allow Sinn Féin to claim it as a referendum on independence, it was their leader Tom Johnston who wrote the program of the independent Dáil. Reflecting the democratic and social revolutions propelling the national revolution forward, it declared that “the Nation’s sovereignty extends not only to all men and women of the Nation, but to all its material possessions, the Nation’s soil and all its resources, all the wealth and all the wealth-producing processes within the Nation.” The program also stated that “all right to private property must be subordinated to the public right and welfare.”

A month later, trade unionist Peadar O’Donnell hoisted the red flag over an insane asylum in Monaghan and declared one of the first soviets outside Russia. The workers’ demands — met with panic by the authorities — were a work week reduction by nearly half, and equal pay for men and women.

The unrest was only beginning. In April 1919, the fourth-largest city on the island came under workers’ control with the formation of the Limerick Soviet [\[21\]](#). After an IRA attempt to rescue a hunger-striking volunteer and trade unionist ended in the death of a policeman, the British imposed martial law on the city. Unbowed, the Limerick United Trades and Labour Council declared a general strike and began to coordinate the affairs of the city, from food distribution to printing money.

Nor were these methods of struggle limited to nationalist areas. In January 1919, the northeast city of Belfast was at the center of a general movement for shorter hours that affected Britain’s major industrial cities. Just days after twenty thousand shipyard and engineering workers walked out for a forty-four-hour week, a workers’ committee took over the city’s power supply and set restrictions on transport and trade.

The strike ended with a partial settlement, but for those few weeks, the city had taken on many of the characteristics of a soviet, and the sight of one hundred thousand people marching on May Day that year showed that Belfast workers were not immune to the revolutionary wave sweeping across Europe.

Aided by a central state so incapacitated that it was unable to collect income taxes, as well as the existence of a people’s army that could contest authority by force, workers’ organizations briefly flourished. In total, over one hundred soviets were declared across the island in these years — from gasworks in Tipperary to mines in Leitrim, foundries in Dublin to flour mills in Cork.

Agitation in rural Ireland also reached new heights, catalyzed by the desire of small farmers and tenants for land redistribution, and of laborers for better working conditions.

In June 1919, big farmers in the rural counties of Meath and Kildare locked out nearly three thousand laborers. The Battle of Fenor, as it became known, escalated into an armed confrontation that ultimately required four hundred British soldiers to ensure cattle transport could proceed. Similar confrontations exploded in Castletownroche in the southwestern county of Cork the following year, with British authorities decrying the influence of “reds” in the agriculture industry.

Cattle drives and land seizures in the west of the country spread with “the fury of a prairie fire, in historian Desmond Greaves’s words, reaching Galway, Mayo, and Roscommon. In total, around seventy “big houses” were set ablaze during this period, as hatred of landlords and large tenant

farmers came to the fore.

Increases in the scale and intensity of industrial disputes coincided with an escalation of the IRA's campaign, and republican leaders such as Mick Fitzgerald, secretary of his local ITGWU branch, encouraged direct action in land and wage struggles.

Developing in parallel, though without a political strategy to bring them together, the independence movement and labor struggle united most powerfully in the general strikes of 1919 and 1920 — the first called for international working-class unity and self-determination, the second for the release of political prisoners.

The War of Independence [22] did nothing to diminish the working-class challenge to the social order. In January 1920's local elections Labour took 324 seats, compared to Sinn Féin's 422, the Unionists' 297, and the Nationalist Party's 213. For a brief moment, as nation and class intersected, the possibility of not only independence but social revolution existed in Ireland.

A Forgotten History

One hundred years after 1916, many of the most radical events that made Ireland's revolution a profound challenge to the social order will not be commemorated. The debate over the Easter Rising remains largely limited to one between narrow nationalism and pro-imperial revision.

Yet the ghosts of Ireland's revolutionary past continue to haunt its rulers. When Taoiseach Enda Kenny referred to water charge activists as a "mob" in 2014, he was using the same terminology antisocialist polemicist Father Robert Kane leveled against the working class in 1910.

In response to Kane, James Connolly, channeling the revolutionary spirit of the era, didn't pivot to respectability. He defended "the political and social record of the mob in history as against the record of the other classes." [23]

"In its upward march the mob has transformed and humanised the world... with one sweep of its grimy, toil-worn hand, it swept the stocks, the thumbscrew, the wheel, the boots of burning oil, the torturer's vice and the stake into the oblivion of history... In this civilising, humanising work the mob had at all times to meet and master the hatred and opposition of kings and nobles."

In Ireland's national revolution, as in so many others, the propertied men who would benefit from independence had the fighting done for them. A century later, the social revolution against that class remains to be fought.

In mounting that effort, we should recall Ireland's tradition of struggle from below and the words James Connolly wrote in its defense: "All hail, then, to the mob, the incarnation of progress!"

Ronan Burtenshaw and Seán Byers

P.S.

* "Ireland's Unfinished Revolution". Jacobin. 3.28.16:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/easter-rising-ireland-james-connolly/>

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Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.fiannafail.ie>
- [2] <http://www.ireland-information.com/articles/padraigpearse.htm>
- [3] <http://www.finegael.ie>
- [4] <http://global.britannica.com/event/Irish-Rebellion-Irish-history-1798>
- [5] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Famine_\(Ireland\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Famine_(Ireland))
- [6] <https://books.google.ie/books?id=d9YcBQAAQBAJ&lpg=PA109>
- [7] <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/P9SYLL.HTM>
- [8] <http://www.discoveringireland.com/the-protestant-ascendency/>
- [9] <http://www.wsm.ie/content/fenian-proclamation-1867>
- [10] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolfe_Tone
- [11] See available on ESSF (article 37640), [Plea For Socialist Unity in Ireland](#).
- [12] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/easterrising/profiles/po19.shtml>
- [13] <http://www.historyireland.com/18th-19th-century-history/the-irish-republican-brotherhood/>
- [14] <http://www.rte.ie/news/2014/0328/605079-cumann-na-mban-centenary/>
- [15] http://multitext.ucc.ie/d/Dublin_1913Strike_and_Lockout
- [16] http://www.1916rising.com/pic_ica.html
- [17] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/>
- [18] <http://www.irishcentral.com/roots/-michael-mallin-remembering-a-forgotten-leader-from-the-1916-rising-159930455-237512301.html>
- [19] http://multitext.ucc.ie/d/Countess_Constance_Markievicz
- [20] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish_Transport_and_General_Workers%27_Union
- [21] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Limerick_Soviet

[22] <http://www.theirishstory.com/2012/09/18/the-irish-war-of-independence-a-brief-overview/>

[23] See available on ESSF (article 37641), [Labour, Nationality and Religion – Chapter II The Rights of Man](#).