A NATION AND NOT A RABBLE

THE IRISH REVOLUTION 1913–1923

DIARMAID FERRITER

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INTRODUCTION

In January 1922, George Gavan Duffy, a barrister and Sinn Féin TD who had served as an envoy for the Irish republican movement in Paris during the War of Independence, was appointed Minister for Foreign Affairs in the southern Irish provisional government, formed after the Anglo-Irish Treaty had been ratified to bring an end to that war. The Treaty offered, not the Irish Republic Sinn Féin had sought, but an Irish Free State as a self-governing dominion within the British Commonwealth, with continued subordination to the British Crown represented by an oath of allegiance to that crown. In April of that year, Gavan Duffy articulated a fear that the looming civil war had the potential to do lasting damage to Ireland's reputation abroad and the fledging Free State's dignity. He concluded there was urgency that those on both sides of the Treaty debate should ensure Ireland was seen 'as a nation and not a rabble'.[1]

That particular word – 'rabble' – and other versions of it, frequently surfaced in assessments of the breakdown of the established order and the mayhem often apparent in the period of the Irish revolution from 1913 to 1923 that ultimately led to the creation of the state of Northern Ireland in 1920 and the Irish Free State in 1922, subsequently the Irish Republic. A horrified unionist, writing to her friend at the end of 1918, remarked: 'This is a very unpleasant country to live in now. We are going through so many changes. The democracy in Ireland are a very bad lot, they are so low and uneducated, only a rabble led by the priests.'[2] Likewise, the diaries of Elsie

Henry, who worked with the Red Cross charity in Dublin and had friends and brothers fighting in the First World War, include a letter written by a contemporary in April 1918 about growing tension over possible conscription of Irish men into the British army. It included the observation 'the peasants and labourers of Ireland are inflammable material, who are now led by skilful leaders, backed up by the late insurrection, by song, ballads and what passes for history and by a literature; and they are out or will be out soon – if conscription is imposed'.[3]

The playwright and Abbey Theatre director Lady Augusta Gregory, when corresponding from her home in Galway with poet W. B. Yeats in the immediate aftermath of the 1916 Rising, commented: 'It is terrible to think of the executions and killings that are sure to come ... yet it must be so – we had been at the mercy of a rabble for a long time, both here and in Dublin, with no apparent policy.' And yet, as the executions of the Rising's leaders were carried out, she changed her tone. Her mind was now 'filled with sorrow at the Dublin tragedy'; the execution of John MacBride, a long-standing republican activist and Boer War veteran, who was not involved in the planning of the Rising but who joined the fighting at its commencement, was 'the best event that could come to him, giving him dignity'. The leaders, she concluded, were 'enthusiastic ... and I keep wondering whether we could not have brought them into the intellectual movement'.[4]

This concern with and admiration for dignity was partly what propelled Lady Gregory and other cultural nationalists to do what they did for Ireland, but it also left them feeling uncertain and ambiguous in their responses to the Irish revolution. Gregory had different views of what was happening at different stages. So did many. The idea of the 'rabble' and the fear of it also reflected class divisions and the threat of class conflict, so obviously manifest in the Dublin Lockout of 1913, when employers refused to recognise the right of unskilled labourers to be members of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU): 'This is why the ITGWU was seen as such a threat. It organised outside of the craft unions, and brought together as a powerful industrial force the workers who were dismissed as rabble.'[5] With a home rule Ireland on the horizon, the 1913 Lockout was also a power struggle in relation to who would control a self-governing Ireland.

The militancy of the marginalised was feared, and the adoption of their cause by some of Ireland's elite was abhorred by others of the same

ilk. Elsie Mahaffy, daughter of the Provost of Trinity College Dublin, for example, wrote about the involvement of Constance Markievicz in Irish republicanism in 1916, to the effect that she was 'the one woman amongst them of high birth and therefore the most depraved ... she took to politics and left our class'.[6] But Markievicz, a member of an Anglo-Irish aristocratic family, despite her reputation for radicalism, hardly exhibited much solidarity with those less well off who were with her in Aylesbury prison after the 1916 Rising, and later complained to her sister that she had been imprisoned with 'the dregs of the population'.[7] (Yeats was later to complain that Markievicz, who died at the age of fifty-nine, had sacrificed her beauty and burned herself out campaigning on behalf of those who were 'ignorant' – another rebuke of the 'rabble'.)[8]

Some of the correspondence highlighted above underlines the danger of generalising about the Irish revolutionary period and the inadequacy of its traditional narratives, reflected in the recent observation of Roy Foster that 'we search now, instead, to find clarification through terms of paradox and nuance; we have become interested in what does not change during revolutions as much as what does'.[9] This is partly due to the abundance of new source material that throws up such a variety of perspectives, admissions and ambiguities. These sources, discussed in Part I of this book, challenge the following notion, articulated by Irish novelist Colm Tóibín in his introduction to a collection of Irish fiction:

> Those central moments in French history are communal and urban, but the critical moments in Irish history seem more like a nineteenth-century novel in which the individual, tragic hero is burdened by the society he lives in. We have no communards, no rabble in the streets. Instead, we have personal sacrifice as a metaphor for general sacrifice.[10]

Likewise, it has long been contended that while the revolution transformed Anglo-Irish relations, 'it did not change the relationship between one class of Irishmen and another. Its impact was nationalist and political, not social and economic.'[11] That assertion about a primarily political revolution, however, is also problematic; more probing of sources that highlight the 'history from below' of the period suggest that social and economic forces did have an impact; while radical impulses may have been resisted, they had an ongoing presence, and the fear of the 'rabble' and its potential to destabilise the 'political' revolution was often apparent.

Concerns and disputes over land – a central theme throughout the revolutionary period and discussed in Part II of this book – the cost of living, unemployment and victimisation abounded. There were also difficulties in reconciling the priorities of the Sinn Féin and labour movements, and local feuds simmered both during the revolution and in its aftermath. As a result of the revolution, some clearly fared better than others, which underlines the fact that the revolution *did* 'change the relationship between one class of Irishmen and another', not through the creation of a new socialist regime, but through the existence a hierarchy of benefit. As the writer Francis Stuart, interned during the civil war, saw it, 'we fought to stop Ireland falling into the hands of publicans and shopkeepers and she had fallen into their hands'.[12]

During the revolution and after it, there were many groups that could be and were identified as 'rabble', including those who took up arms and were wary of centralised control, in both Ulster and southern Ireland; those suspicious of constitutional politics and its practitioners, women demanding the vote, and those who laboured in the city and rural areas and agitated for greater status and wages. Other relevant groups included those who volunteered for service in the British army during the war, the 'separation allowance women' they left behind, and those who rejected the Anglo-Irish Treaty and took up arms against it. All, in their own ways, created difficulties for those seeking to control and direct the revolution, and their experiences involved a multitude of personal motivations and expectations.

If it is true that events of this period in Ireland, especially the 1916 Rising, amounted to 'Ireland's 1789',[13] how relevant are international studies of the 'rabble' or 'crowd' to the Irish situation? George Rudé's work on this theme from the 1960s in relation to popular disturbances in England and France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was influential and pioneering. Using Marx's description, he was interested in the ideas that 'grip the masses' and the role they play in the peaks and troughs of a popular movement. Rudé was praised for 'putting mind back into history', as he looked at leaders but especially followers, at whether their motivations could be seen as involving 'backward' or 'forward looking' concepts, and whether the crowds could develop a distinctive sociopolitical movement of their own.[14] Rudé focused on the needs of the groups and classes that absorbed ideas, the social context in which these ideas germinated and 'the uses to which they put them'.[15] His framework of inquiry was further

developed and challenged in subsequent decades by the study of different types of crowds; those who assembled for religious reasons, or on state occasions or for funerals; not necessarily 'the masses', but different groups of various sizes that assembled, influenced each other's behaviour and who could be marshalled by elite factions.[16]

There were a number of traditions in Ireland well before the early twentieth century that were relevant to 'crowd' themes; the proliferation of crowd activity during the era of Daniel O'Connell, leader of the successful movement for Catholic emancipation in the 1820s and the unsuccessful subsequent movement for repeal of the Act of Union in the 1840s, agrarian unrest, the Land War of the 1870s and 1880s and the attendant mass meetings organised by the Land League, Fenian uprisings, commemorations, funerals and election rallies. Ulster also had its own traditions of agrarian and urban mobilisation to draw on, including campaigns against home rule in the late nineteenth century. Developments in communications, the use of partisan newspapers, increased literacy, the priorities of a younger generation and greater public prominence for women all played their part in mobilising groups.

The important point is that increasingly in nineteenth-century Ireland, various groups 'saw crowd strength as a sign of the seriousness of their intent', and there is no doubt that this impulse gathered momentum in the 1913–23 period; mass rallies, funerals, election meetings, military drilling and protests were paramount. Crucially, these assemblies heightened the sense of 'the other' or being on the 'right' or the 'wrong' side, and increasing invective was employed in relation to how those deemed to be on the 'wrong' side could be described. During the Irish revolutionary period militia forces were established, most notably the Ulster Volunteers and Irish Volunteers (subsequently the IRA) in 1913; for their members and those they declared to be defending they were noble and courageous, to their opponents they were an ignorant rabble being duped or used by corrupt leaders.

A growing scepticism about constitutional politics was also relevant here; as was recalled by IRA member Christopher ('Todd') Andrews, the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) that took its seats in the Westminster Parliament, and fought for home rule rather than an Irish Republic, became discredited to the point that 'the word "politician" was never applied to a member of the [republican] Movement. It was a word of ill-repute.'[17] In retaliation, some of those IPP politicians, particularly as a new Sinn Féin

political mass movement began to threaten the IPP's very survival, turned on the 'rabble' with a panicked snobbery. This was particularly apparent in one of the last letters written by IPP leader John Redmond, who in criticising his own party for not uniting around him in early 1918 suggested the result of such disloyalty in Ireland would be 'universal anarchy, and, I am greatly afraid, the spread of violence and crime of all sorts, when every blackguard who wants to commit an outrage will simply call himself a Sinn Féiner and thereby get the sympathy of the unthinking crowd'.[18]

The mistake here was in asserting that those embracing the new politics and resistance were dupes; they were in fact far from 'unthinking'; they were young and determined to reject Redmond's generation, and with confidence and purpose, 'knew that they were different from their parents'.[19] But their revolution was, in turn, while propelled by much idealism and courage, also multi-layered, complicated, messy, brutal and sometimes compromised as a result of competing impulses at national but also local level, as smaller 'crowds' or independent-minded 'rabbles' pursued their own agendas. The revolution could serve as a useful cloak for the settling of scores that had little to do with ideas of nationalism or 'the nation'.

The fear political leaders had was that they would not be able to control these movements; that the 'rabble' might go its own way. There were strong tensions in relation to centralisation and local initiative in both the unionist and republican movements that were at odds with the images these groups wanted to portray of themselves, and attempted to portray in earlier partisan accounts of the revolution, as united and monolithic. Tensions between different social classes always bubbled beneath the surface and sometimes boiled over. For those who wanted to defend the union with Great Britain and those who wanted to break it, mobilisation was deemed imperative to pressurise British governments, but such activity could not completely mask internal fractiousness: 'although such mobilisations were portrayed by the media as highly disciplined non-violent affairs, there was always an underlying element of threat, namely, that the leadership could not hold the masses in line indefinitely'.[20] This was even more complicated during the War of Independence from 1919–21, when republicans fought a guerrilla campaign, and before that, many UVF members had found themselves in a different theatre of war altogether as soldiers in the trenches of the First World War, as did thousands of recruits from southern Ireland. The difficulties of control also became

acutely apparent during the civil war in the south from 1922–3, but also in the new state in Northern Ireland from 1920.

The labour movement was also relevant here, as part of a broader development in the UK of conflict between the 'socialist' and the 'national' interest, creating obvious class divisions that British liberals struggled with. Labour unrest, combined with tension over home rule, armed resistance in 1916, suffragism, as well as the rising cost of living, complicated British rule in Ireland.[21] In responding, British governments struggled with their Irish policy, initially granting concessions through, for example, land reform and the expansion of access to education and local government, and increased welfare provision for the 'rabble', but preoccupied with so much else, they also turned a blind eye to growing militancy and gunrunning. Their perspective was also undermined by lazy racial stereotyping about a 'peculiar kind of [Irish] patriotic impulse', and by applying different standards to the threat of Ulster violence and the threat of southern Irish republican force.[22]

And what of ideas of 'the nation' during the revolution, the term that, along with the 'rabble', so preoccupied George Gavan Duffy? Ten years previously, Tom Kettle, who had been elected an MP for the IPP in 1906 but at the end of 1910 left Parliament to pursue his writing, in *The Open Secret of Ireland* (1912), declared: 'the open secret of Ireland is that Ireland is a nation'. This had earlier been given credence by Alice Stopford Green in *Irish Nationality* (1911) and *The Making of Ireland and Its Undoing* (1908), books that insisted on the unbroken continuity of a national tradition in Irish history. Green was the wealthy daughter of a Protestant archdeacon and married the social historian John Richard Green; financial security allowed her to develop her own interest in history, and in the 1890s she was converted to Irish home rule through a growing distaste for British imperialism:

> She contended that pre-Norman Ireland [before the twelfth-century invasion] was not a home to barbarians but to an admirable civilisation, which, she insisted, was marked by an attachment to spiritual rather than material values. This argument was clearly motivated by, and had implications for, contemporary politics. She sought to prove that, before interference from England, the Irish had successfully governed themselves and should be allowed to do so again.[23]

But that did not mean that Green was comfortable with the violence of the Irish revolution; it troubled her greatly.

Tom Kettle, killed in action with the British army at the Battle of the Somme in 1916, exemplified some of the dilemmas for those who resisted narrow definitions of nationalism. While he had maintained the moral right of Ireland to rebel 'if it were possible', he did not think it wise to build 'an impossible future on an imaginary past', an approach that, historically, had led English parties to wipe Ireland 'off the slate of popular politics'. A liberal Catholic, he also admired European civilisation, and regarded it as a greater cause than Ireland's.[24] Such perspectives came under increased pressure in Ireland during the First World War, but what linked many of the militant or military-minded who went in different directions were similar ideas: 'militarism, honour, patriotism, self-sacrifice, manhood, adventure ... spiritual yearnings defying the grey calculations of a secure and cautious life'.[25]

Also in 1912, librarian and Jesuit Stephen Brown, in the Jesuit-published journal *Studies*, maintained that the word 'nation' was too glibly used and that its uses were 'untroubled by any consciousness that the idea which this word claims to express presents special difficulties of definition'.[26] It could be defined, he suggested, according to race, language, customs, religion, history, a national government or just common interests, or to those living in a common territory in organised social relations 'held together in a peculiar kind of spiritual oneness'. This definition was certainly relevant to those who proclaimed a republic at the outset of the Easter Rising in 1916; after all, Patrick Pearse, chosen as president of that republic by the rebels, wrote an article two months before the Rising entitled 'The Spiritual Nation'. But Brown suggested 'there can be no precise or final formula'.[27]

This absence of an accepted definition was in itself significant in the decade of revolution; notions of the nation became divisive in what was a plural as opposed to a unitary society, as represented by the experiences and allegiances of the majority in Ulster who claimed to be part of another nation, in contrast to southern Ireland. Conflicting definitions led to aggressive exclusion, or as the historian Nicholas Mansergh put it: 'The greater the success in translating the inner feelings of a community into language, almost inevitably to be communicated in part in emotional imagery, the more likely it is for those who are not members of that community to have a feeling of alienation.'[28] These feelings of alienation, when

combined with other tensions, developed a momentum of their own which could also exacerbate the sense of a 'rabble' that needed to be contained or resisted.

For some, nationalism was about will and spirit and antiquity, an appeal to the dead generations; for others it was something that needed to be called into being and could include social aims, an obvious priority for the leading Labour intellectual of this era, James Connolly, for whom 'the Irish question' was 'a social question'.[29] Small radical groups and wordy polemical journalists who fuelled 'the little newspapers and magazines of the nationalist fringe'[30] went to great lengths to excoriate what they regarded as the failures of the contemporary order, but what they wanted to see it replaced with depended on perspectives that could be informed by many things, including age, class, gender and political inheritance.

It was also the case that separatist language and sentiment would only gain a broader acceptance when linked to grievances such as urban poverty, rising food prices and taxes, cessation of land distribution and emigration.[31] As a result, the balance to be struck between political separatism and social advance was delicate and rarely satisfactorily achieved. These material questions also pervaded the process after the revolution of compensation and the quest for military service pensions and recognition, discussed in Part III of this book.

Those looking for evidence of broad, sophisticated ideological debate during the decade may be disappointed, but perhaps in that search, they are misguided in projecting later preoccupations on to a generation that were not republican theorists and saw no reason to be. Those who propelled the republican revolution were more focused on the idea of separation from Britain 'rather than implementing any concrete political programme'. Ideology does not feature strongly in most accounts of the revolution and, in the words of Charles Townshend, 'the new nationalist leaders did not see it as necessary to analyse the "self" that was to exercise self-determination', or as Mansergh had asserted at a much earlier stage, the republican leaders 'do not appear to have debated what may have appeared to be potentially dividing abstractions'.[32] Political scientist Tom Garvin's estimation was that 'Irish republicanism was not a political theory but a secular religion'.[33] So too was Irish unionism, but for British politicians dealing with both perspectives, any theories of nationalism were unwelcome intrusions, 'because at almost every point behind the argument lay the deeper question: were there in Ireland two nations? Or two

communities? Or only contrived divisions?'[34] When asked by the founder of Sinn Féin, Arthur Griffith, why the British government had abandoned the idea of 'Irish oneness' or treating the island as an entity, British prime minister David Lloyd George replied: 'we could not coerce Ulster'.

But alongside pragmatism, such assertions also hid double-dealing, false promises and inconsistency in relation to what Britain would decide merited coercion. The Irish revolution threw up obvious dilemmas: what rights do majorities and minorities have and how can they be asserted or vindicated? Such questions were never resolved to the satisfaction of most during the revolutionary period and remained unresolved long after it. They were also relevant to how the revolution was remembered and commemorated, who should control that process and who the 'true' inheritors of its legacy were, as also discussed in Part III of this book.

There is little doubt that in its aftermath, a social analysis of the revolution struggled to find space on the crowded canvas of political and military writing on the period. This has been somewhat countered in recent times and has included an increased focus on regional and micro studies, as well as a probing of the social composition of those involved.[35] The Canadian historian Peter Hart has made the point that, because of the range of source material available, Ireland is a great laboratory for the study of revolution:

> Ireland's is quite possibly the best documented revolution in modern history. For "a secret army", the guerrillas left an extraordinary paper trail through their own and their opponents' records as well as in the daily and weekly press. This continued long after the war was over, as gunmen claimed pensions, wrote memoirs and commemorated themselves and their comrades.[36]

Hart also suggested in 2002 that, as a result of such archival riches, the revolution 'needs to be re-conceptualised and to have all the myriad assumptions underlying its standard narratives interrogated', to include examinations of 'gender, class, community, elites and masses, religion and ethnicity, the nature of violence and power'.[37] There is now also much more focus on the key role women played in cultural, political and military awakenings and finding new outlets, and what they suffered on account of their gender; no longer is their documented involvement just a case of 'fleeting glances of these shadowy female characters'.[38]