

IRELAND

History's Political Prisoner

Bombings, murder,
death by starvation—
an Irish visitor turns
historical perspective on
today's most baffling civil war.

By F. S. L. LYONS



The Irish troubles of the last twelve years have occupied the headlines of the world's press so constantly that it is easy to conclude that nothing has changed in Ireland and that what we read about every day is simply the latest grim installment of a tragedy that goes back far into the past. But while it is perfectly true that the historical perspective is important, it is necessary also to insist that the Ireland which has evolved in the 1980s is a significantly different place from the Ireland of '60 or '70 years ago. There are, in short, elements in the present situation both of continuity

and of change which have to be grasped if we are to make sense of this most complex and baffling problem.

To say, as some do, that what is happening now in Ireland is the final paroxysm of colonial rule is a cliché which no doubt explains some things but leaves others still shrouded in mystery. It is indeed obvious that the whole history of Ireland, since the Normans arrived there in the 12th century, has been bound up with the history of its larger and more powerful neighbor. However, it was only with the systematic settlement of Ire-

land by English and Scottish colonists in the 16th and 17th centuries that the outline of the modern problem began to emerge. Several points are important here if we are to understand the situation as it is today.

First, the English conquest was *political*, in the sense that Ireland from the 16th century onwards was regarded as part of the defense system of the British isles. This was as true in the days of the Spanish Armada as it was true in the days of Napoleon. And even in the days of Hitler it was enough for part of the island — Northern Ireland — to be controlled by Britain for that small area to make an essential contribution to the Battle of the Atlantic.

Secondly, the English conquest was *economic*, in the sense that the land of Ireland passed into the hands of the colonizers. At the top of the resulting economic pyramid were the landlords, usually of English origin, who were the governing class. But often, and especially in the northern province of Ulster, their tenants were more or less prosperous English and Scottish farmers who, with a handful of artisans, weavers and shopkeepers, formed the nucleus of a middle class. The original, native Irish owners of the soil usually lost their title to it and became either tenants on the poorer kinds of land or even labourers

This article has been adapted for Sooner Magazine by F. S. L. Lyons from a lecture delivered at the University of Oklahoma in the spring, 1981, as part of the Scholar-Leadership Enrichment Program. Dr. Lyons is one of many distinguished scholars brought to the campus each year by SLEP for interdisciplinary public lectures, open forums and intensive seminars. Now in its seventh year, SLEP is administered by the University of Oklahoma, on behalf of the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, for the academic enrichment of outstanding upperclass and graduate students from all 21 of Oklahoma's public and private four-year colleges and universities. SLEP is directed by Dr. J. Clayton Feaver with Audrey E. Maehl as assistant director.

on estates which had once been theirs.

Thirdly, the English conquest was intended also to be — and partly was — *religious*, in the sense that it was bound up with the great European struggle between Catholicism and Protestantism in the 16th and 17th centuries. In Ireland the outcome of this struggle was by no means clearcut. Catholicism was initially defeated and outlawed for a time in the 18th century. But it was not wiped out. It remained the religion of the great majority of the people and when in the 19th century they regained their civil rights, Catholicism became an essential element in their concept of what the Irish nation should be.

Protestantism, on the other hand, not only remained a minority creed, but was itself divided into fragments. The two most important of these were the Anglican, or Episcopalian, and the Presbyterian. The former was the official religion of the State until the Church of Ireland was disestablished in 1869, though even after that it retained its social cachet as the creed of the gentry. Presbyterianism was the religion primarily of the Scottish settlers in northeast Ulster and, since they played a prominent part in the industrialization of the area in and around Belfast in the 19th century, this gave their Calvinism a significance far beyond what might have been expected from their numbers.

Next, the English conquest was *cultural*, in the sense that by sheer weight of power and wealth English cultural values were imposed on Ireland almost without deliberate intent. The most obvious result of this was the destruction (not quite total, but very nearly so) of the native or Gaelic civilization and the virtual wiping out of its language and literature. It has to be said that with mass communications these English influences have remained largely dominant, though in our own day they have themselves become partly Americanized.

One final point about the English conquest of Ireland — it was *incomplete*. Even though the native Irish were reduced to a more or less servile role, even though their numbers were halved by the Great Famine of the 1840s and mass emi-

gration in the succeeding half-century, still the idea of a separate Irish nationality began to assert itself. As it developed it took two forms which, for nearly two hundred years, have been competing for the allegiance of most Irishmen. The first of these was the ideal — propounded by a young Protestant lawyer, Wolfe

**The English conquest
was political, economic,
religious, cultural—
and incomplete.**



WOLFE TONE, 1763-98, went to his death after leading French forces against the British in Ireland.

Tone — that an independent Ireland must be a republic, to be won from Britain by armed rebellion and that this republic should accept with tolerance all Irishmen without distinction of origin, religion or class.

The reality was very different. Sectional and religious rivalries proved implacable and, though there was a republican rebellion in 1798, it degenerated quickly into an uprising of Catholic peasants against their Protestant landlords. It was quickly suppressed, but nevertheless it permanently changed the Irish situation.

This was partly because the security of Britain seemed to demand that the two islands should be bound together in a political and economic union which lasted from 1800 to 1921 and which still persists to this day in Northern Ireland. But partly also the Union was important because it brought Ireland into the main stream of British life when Britain was reaching its industrial and imperial peak.

Perhaps Ireland was in some respects better governed than before, but by and large its future was determined primarily with reference to British rather than Irish needs. Yet, because Irishmen were now represented in the imperial parliament by roughly 100 members, they were on crucial occasions able to hold the balance of power there, so that each country became much more than formerly an irritant in the affairs of the other.

Within Ireland the Union had a polarizing effect. The old Protestant governing class came to regard it (as many northern Protestants still do) as the one secure protection for their property and influence, even their lives. And within Ulster, where industry (linen and shipbuilding chiefly) depended on Britain for raw materials and markets, the economic advantages of the Union were so overwhelming that Belfast came to seem as if it had more in common with Liverpool or Glasgow than with Dublin or Cork.

Elsewhere in Ireland, however, the growing participation of the Catholic majority in politics after their formal emancipation, led Protestants, north and south, to view this Catholic renaissance as a threat to their way of life, believing as they did that any solution to the Irish question which gave Ireland self-government would create there a priest-ridden state.

But there was another side to the dominance of the Catholic Church in Irish life. In political as well as in social terms the influence of that Church was essentially conservative. One important consequence of this was that the old republican tradition, while it did not actually die out, was overshadowed by a more moderate form of constitutional nationalism whose highest aim was the re-

establishment of an Irish parliament in subordination to the British parliament.

There was indeed a revolution in 19th century Ireland — the so-called Land War of the 1870s and 1880s — which reversed seven centuries of conquest by transferring the land from the landlord to the peasant. But even this revolutionary change underpinned the conservatism of Irish life, for the small farmer who emerged was not only old-fashioned in his agriculture, but old-fashioned also in his attitude to the family as a socio-economic unit for preserving and adding to the farm — hence the pattern typical until our own day of late marriages, large families and heavy emigration of unmarried sons and daughters.

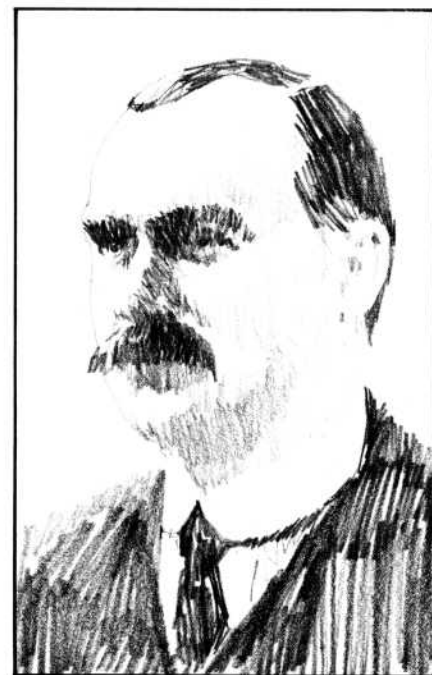
By the beginning of this century it almost seemed as if Ireland was drifting peacefully along a path of quiet, gradual reform, leading to a modest degree of self-government within the Empire. This was probably what the majority of Irishmen would have accepted, but it is often minorities who make history, and in Ireland two different minorities cut violently across this quiet evolution.

The smaller of these minorities was the one which still clung to the ideal of independence to be won from Britain by armed rebellion. It was transformed between about 1890 and 1914 by the Gaelic revival which attempted to re-establish an Irish identity that could resist the pressures of the dominant English culture by fostering the Irish language and encouraging a commitment to Irish literature, music, sports and customs. Not all of these "Irish-Irelanders" were politically extreme, but the key figures were, and they became closely identified with the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the secret society, which planned and worked for insurrection.

Much louder and much more in the public eye was the other minority, the Ulster Protestants, who threatened their own armed uprising to secede from the United Kingdom if, as seemed likely just before 1914, the British government conceded Home Rule to nationalist Ireland. Backed as they were by the British Conservative party, they were too formidable

to coerce, and when the world war came it was decided that Home Rule should be suspended while the war lasted and in any event should not be put into operation until the interests of Ulster Protestants had been protected — a safeguard which foreshadowed the ultimate partition of the country.

Meanwhile in the south, the I.R.B. pursued its plans for an uprising during the war and was able to call upon two private armies — the Irish Volunteers and the labour-based Citizen Army — when it was decided to strike in Easter Week, 1916. The insurrection that then took place was in one sense a traditional republican ges-



JAMES CONNOLLY, 1868-1916, Irish Marxist labor leader, executed by the British after the Easter Rising.

ture, designed more to impress posterity than to win a victory in the field. But, much more than its predecessors, it was both Gaelic and Catholic in its inspiration. And, since the socialist James Connolly was part of the inner group which launched the Rising, the Proclamation of Independence also contained some, not very precise, indications of social radicalism.

Within a week the Rising had been crushed and while it had lasted it had been intensely unpopular, especially in Dublin which had suffered heavy

damage. But this was changed by the secret trials and executions of the leaders, which were spread over several weeks. Also, by arresting and internmenting many thousands who had had no connection with the Rising, the government created among Irishmen a sympathy for the cause that had not previously existed.

Other mistakes followed. The opportunity to defuse the situation by achieving a Home Rule settlement was lost. Later, the threat of conscription (the draft) was held *in terrorem* over the Irish people, and this inflamed nationalists still further. It was not surprising that when the war ended and an election was held nationalist Ireland voted massively for Sinn Féin, meaning by that the winning of a republic independent of Britain.

Since this was something Britain was not prepared to concede, a collision was inevitable and gradually the two countries drifted into the Anglo-Irish War, or War of Independence as it is usually called in Ireland. The British, indeed, officially regarded it as a police action rather than a war, but the semi-military recruits they gathered to reinforce the police — the Black and Tans — so outraged British as well as Irish opinion as to lead eventually to a truce in 1921, marking the end of what might fairly be called a drawn battle.

From the protracted and difficult negotiations which then began there emerged two consequences which have colored Anglo-Irish relations ever since. The first was that Conservative and Ulster pressure was strong enough to ensure that the six north-eastern counties should not be included in the Anglo-Irish settlement. Instead, they were given a kind of Home Rule of their own (which they didn't really want) and thus was created a Northern Ireland entity which had its own parliament and executive but remained a part of the United Kingdom. The second consequence of the negotiations was the conclusion of an Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921 which did *not* concede republican status to the south, but instead conferred full self-government (i.e. dominion status) upon 26 of the 32 counties under the name of the Irish Free State.

At once a bitter dispute broke out between those who regarded the Treaty as a betrayal of the republican ideal and those who maintained that dominion status not only gave 'the freedom to achieve freedom' in the future, but was the best that could be got, given that the Treaty itself was concluded under the threat by the British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, of 'immediate and terrible war' if it was not accepted.

In fact, its acceptance by a narrow majority of the Dáil or Irish parliament led straight to a ferocious civil war between the republicans, led ostensibly by de Valera (though effectively by local I.R.A. commanders) and those who wanted to build on the Treaty, led by Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins. The republicans



EAMON de VALERA, 1882-1975, chief survivor of the Rising; Irish Republican prime minister, president.

were defeated on the ground, but retained a hold upon the Irish imagination.

The pro-Treaty party paid a heavy price for victory. Not only did they lose both their leaders within a few days in 1922 (Griffith worn out by strain, Collins shot dead in an ambush), but the reprisals they felt bound to take against republicans, which included the execution of prisoners in return for the murder or attempted murder of pro-Treaty nota-

bles, opened a deep chasm in Irish life that has only begun to be bridged in our own day.

The events of 1921-22 marked a watershed in Irish affairs. For Britain it seemed as if the Irish question had at last been solved, though we now know only too well how naively optimistic this assumption was. For Northern Ireland, launched upon a course of partial self-government, the supreme necessity seemed to be to preserve the Protestant Unionist ascendancy in an area where about a third of the population was Catholic and nationalist. For the Irish Free State the problem was also one of survival, in both political and economic terms, for it remained to be seen whether the 1921 settlement could possibly be made to work.

The parting of the ways between north and south means that it will be necessary for a brief space to consider them separately, beginning with the evolution of the south from the status of Free State to the status of independent republic. Broadly speaking, we can say that up to the outbreak of the Second World War there were four main objects of policy in the south and that, although there was continuing hatred between the two main parties on the issue of the civil war, there was no fundamental difference between them as to these main objects of policy.

The first object was to exploit to the uttermost the *de facto* independence conceded by the Treaty, especially by loosening the remaining imperial ties as far as possible. This process was greatly accelerated when de Valera entered constitutional politics in 1927 with his newly formed Fianna Fáil party. After he achieved power in 1932 he dismantled the Treaty so effectively that by 1937 the 26 counties were a republic in all but name, and actually becoming a republic formally recognized by Britain in 1949.

The second object was to become economically independent of Britain. This was much more difficult because the two economies were, and have remained, closely interlinked. But gradually, behind tariff barriers, Irish industries were built up and Irish agriculture was developed so that the country was able to be more or less sufficient during the Second

World War. But this position was reached at a time of financial stringency and international depression, so that Irish society was marked, right up to the 1950s, by a low standard of living, much extreme poverty and very meager social services.

The third object was to recreate the values of Gaelic and Catholic Ireland. Catholic values were the primary responsibility of the Church, but its teaching was upheld by the State in such matters as divorce, family planning, and censorship, while the special position of the Catholic Church was acknowledged in the Constitution of 1937. Although this clause was deleted a few years ago, the republic is still governed by that constitution, and it still reflects the strongly Catholic ethos of a society in which



ARTHUR GRIFFITH, 1872-1922, founder of Sinn Féin, accepted the 1921 Treaty; briefly Irish president.

Protestants are now only about three per cent of the population.

The restoration of a Gaelic culture was more difficult. Both compulsion and encouragement have been tried over the years, but the purely Gaelic speaking areas have continued to dwindle and even bilingualism is on the decline. It had always been difficult to compete with the pressures of English — latterly Anglo-American — culture and with the arrival of radio, films and television the flood

has become irresistible.

Perhaps the vision, which de Valera held so strongly, of a simple, godly, rural and self-sufficing community came nearest to being realized between 1939 and 1945, when Ireland's precarious wartime neutrality seemed to insulate her from all the 20th century forces that were so violently changing the world. In the last two decades, however, though military neutrality remains the official policy, the country has in other ways emerged from its isolation. It has done this partly through becoming a part of the world order, first as a member of the United Nations and more recently as a member of the European Economic Community. Partly also, the rapid economic — and, more particularly, industrial — development of the 1960s, precarious though it may be, has had a revolutionary impact upon Irish society. Poverty, though still a reality, has been much reduced; the social services have been vastly improved, and, despite the current recession, there is still a sense of real, if modest, affluence.

All through this transformation there remained the fourth and most fundamental object of policy, to which all parties were ostensibly committed — the reunification of the island. But although this was a constant theme of politicians' rhetoric, it remained an aspiration which no Dublin government ever made any effective move to realize. No doubt it was difficult to see what could be done, but a dire consequence of this official inaction was that the I.R.A.—the embodiment of the republican tradition — not only remained in being, but made sporadic attempts to 'solve' the problem by attacks upon the northern regime.

These were quickly seen to be potentially a threat to order in the south as well as in the north and repressive action has been taken repeatedly on both sides of the border against what has long been a proscribed organization. Nevertheless, it has to be said that the politicians' addiction to futile rhetoric, combined with their failure to devise an effective policy to end partition, have together introduced into the life of the republic an air of unreality and an increasing political instability which is perhaps the

gravest issue now facing the country.

That no progress has been made towards ending partition is due primarily to the intransigence of Ulster Unionism. The new state of Northern Ireland was born in controversy and from the start never attracted the allegiance of one-third of its citizens. This meant that the deeply ingrained insecurity of the Protestants (which goes back to the 17th century) was reinforced and that they therefore took drastic steps to preserve their monopoly of power. These included the creation of special police, the passing of a Special Powers Act which gave the government wide authority to deal with actual or anticipated unrest, the gerrymandering of constituencies to ensure Unionist majorities (especially in local gov-



MICHAEL COLLINS, 1890-1922, Irish military hero whose signing of the Treaty led to his assassination.

ernment) and a fairly consistent policy of discrimination in such matters as jobs and housing.

The province over which the Unionists ruled was economically disadvantaged and very poor, but the Second World War had a catalytic effect upon it. Its contribution to the Battle of the Atlantic was such that in 1949 (when the republic was formally inaugurated in the south) a British guarantee was given that the status

Continued on Page 32

Alice Spann in OCCE will coordinate Elderhostel in 1982. Alice is already probing minds for subjects to be offered and faculty to do the job. She would be glad to have your suggestions, either subject or instructor, or both . . . about 7.5 hours (of instruction) during the week. And with three topics offered. The cost for one week — board, room, instruction — for 1981 was only \$140. How many nights in motels can you match that?

Whether you choose to Elderhostel at OU, you can find the national program has many offerings and alternatives. You Oldsters, why don't you consider incorporating Elderhostel somewhere, sometime in your vacationing and traveling? But you youngsters, just drool until you mature enough to enjoy this kind of a week back in familiar surroundings.

Horace Bliss

Professor Emeritus of Chemistry
Norman, OK

The Sooner Story

Through the kindness of my friend Jack Brandenburg of Taos, I have just had the pleasure of reading *The Sooner Story* with its accounts of many of those whose memory I cherish. I am also honored to be mentioned despite my too brief term of a decade on the faculty of the University. Incidentally, I am just a year older than that amazing institution.

For your record I take the liberty of noting that on page 54 my term of service is recorded as 1927-1928 instead of 1927-1938. In the event that the *Story* is reprinted, a correction would make me look less like a hit-and-run operator.

Paul B. Sears
Taos, NM

Editor's Note: The Sooner Story (see "Books for Christmas" on Page 30) was prepared by the Sooner Magazine staff and published by the University of Oklahoma Foundation in November, 1980, in celebration of the University's 90th anniversary. Dr. Sears was featured as one of the faculty giants whose renown lingered long after he had left the campus. His colleagues always considered his tenure at OU as too brief, but not as brief as our proofreading would have it appear.

of Northern Ireland should not be changed without the consent of the Northern Ireland parliament. That guarantee now runs that there shall be no change without the consent of a majority of the *people* of Northern Ireland, and it remains the chief protection of the the Unionist position.

In other ways, however, the north has proved more mobile. While it has remained very vulnerable to economic depression, it has benefited since the war by sharing on equal terms in the British reforms in health, education, and the social services. This has had two important consequences. One is that the incentive to emigrate was reduced, and this kept many young people at home who in other times would have gone elsewhere. The other is that these young people were more educated and better able to articulate minority grievances than previously. Out of this semi-emancipation came the Civil Rights movement of the late 1960s which, as the world knows, prepared the way for the violent upheavals of the last decade.

The end of that story is not yet, and how it may all turn out no man can predict. I shall content myself with venturing a few propositions in conclusion:


- (1) The present troubles are of greater duration and intensity than any that have gone before. Therefore, they will not die away through exhaustion, so that a radical solution must be found.
- (2) It will have to be a solution that involves both communities in the six counties, which probably means that it may have to be imposed from without.
- (3) If that be so, and since Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, the British government has an inescapable responsibility. Just as now it has a duty to maintain order, so also in the future it has a duty to propound a solution.
- (4) Although such a solution will doubtless take account of the whole Irish situation, the role of the republic in the foreseeable future must be extremely restrained — partly because of northern resentment at the anti-partition policies of the past, and partly because the preoccupation

of the south with its own economic and social problems seems to preclude a dynamic or dramatic intervention.

The question is always asked, but must remain open, whether a solution will involve the final undoing of the Treaty and the reunification of the whole island. In the short term this appears highly unlikely and has in any event been rendered almost impossible by the campaign of the Provisional I.R.A. If there is to be a solution through reunification, it cannot come by force. It has to come by consent, and it has to take account of the deep and genuine differences of culture and outlook between the two parts of Ireland.

In this most fundamental sense, the involvement of Britain in the crisis, though historically a necessity, is at the same time almost a distraction. For the issue is not simply, or even mainly, one of 'Brits out' of Northern Ireland — it is much more a question of what will happen when they go, which sooner or later they will. Then, very different kinds of Irishmen will be face to face as might so easily have happened in 1914.

Will that encounter be a civil war which will make the earlier one pale into insignificance? Or will it result in a process of reconciliation and enlightenment spread over many years and leading north and south nearer to that 'common name of Irishman' with which Wolfe Tone wished long ago to counter sectarian animosities?

Time alone will tell — and time is running out. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Irish scholar and educator F. S. L. Lyons retired this fall as provost of the University of Dublin to devote full-time to his teaching and writing. He does both admirably. With historical objectivity and scholarly wisdom, he has been a force for calm, sympathetic understanding of the complex "Irish Question." His acclaimed works on 19th and 20th century Irish history and politics have striven mightily to "separate myth from reality," as one reviewer has stated.
