

MARX AND ENGELS ON IRELAND

By T. A. JACKSON

[We start this month the first of a series of three or four articles giving extracts from the correspondence of Marx and Engels, illustrating their attitude on Ireland. These extracts have been made by T. A. Jackson, who has also provided an introduction and explanatory notes. Most of the letters have been specially translated and, except where otherwise stated, are from the German edition of the Correspondence between Marx and Engels now being published by the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute.]

ALL who know anything of the political relations between Ireland and Britain know that the present dispute between the Irish Free State and the National Government is only one more dispute in an historical series which can be traced back for centuries.

Karl Marx and his friend and collaborator, Frederick Engels, between them lived in England with only brief intervals during the course of three major Irish crises.

Engels, in the 40's, lived through the crisis of O'Connell's "Repeal" agitation (against the Act of Union, and the beginnings of the famine of 1846-8. Pre-occupation with the development of the Communist League and of the Revolution in Germany prevented him from giving very close attention to Irish affairs—and even then to consider them only in so far as they concerned the Chartist movement, of whose revolutionary potentialities he thought highly.

During the critical years from 1844 to the latter part of 1849 Engels, with Marx, was absorbed practically, as well as theoretically, in the continental revolutionary movement. Not until after the passing of these critical years, that is, by 1850, were Marx and Engels both domiciled in England and freed from continental preoccupation sufficiently to give their attention to Ireland and its relation to Britain. By then the immediate Irish crisis had passed.

Absorbed in political journalism and in economic studies—Marx exclusively so, and Engels all the time he could steal from his business—both the friends became interested in Ireland, firstly, as throwing light upon the development of British capitalism; secondly, as providing data which Engels, later, used with telling effect in his essay on the "Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State."

Their interest became acute with the coincidence of a fresh Irish crisis—the rise of the "Fenian" movement—with the formation of the

International Working Men's Association (I.W.M.A.) in September, 1864. The "Fenians" attempted an insurrection first in March, 1865, then in September, 1867. Both attempts proved abortive; each produced the usual crop of State trials and malignant sentences—and in September, 1867, occurred the famous incident of the Manchester Rescue—the rescue of two Fenian chiefs from a prison-van in the streets of Manchester—in the course of which a policeman was shot, and for which three Irish Fenians were hanged.

Marx, the leading spirit in the newly-formed I.W.M.A., seems early to have seen the revolutionary significance of the Fenian movement. Naturally, the "Fenians" (officially the Irish Republican Brotherhood) being a secret society, no correspondence is extant to establish any direct connection; but there are clear indications that from as early as 1864 the Fenians in London, Manchester and elsewhere found the I.W.M.A. a convenient camouflage and recruiting ground, and that conversely they aided the establishment of branches of the "International" in Dublin and Cork, as well as in Pendleton, Manchester.

Marx actively interested himself and the I.W.M.A. in securing the support of the British Radicals and workers for the Fenian victims of British imperialism—especially so after the Manchester rescue and the judicial murder of the three "Manchester Martyrs."

The correspondence between Marx and Engels is full of indications of this interest, and Marx's letters to Kugelmann define his attitude towards the Irish Republican struggle with precision. Marx's efforts continued through the agitation for an "amnesty" for the Fenian prisoners, and these efforts had their repercussions in the struggle with the Bakunists inside the International—one of whom, Robin, in the *Egalité*, published in the winter of 1869-70 a series of articles attacking the Central Council (*i.e.*, Marx) in the course of which he said that their action in publishing a manifesto in defence of the Fenians was "stupid."

With 1870 came the Franco-Prussian war, which led eventually to the Paris Commune of 1871, soon after which the International broke up. Moreover, in September, 1870, Engels moved from Manchester to London and the correspondence between the friends, which had been a matter of almost a daily exchange of letters, became almost wholly a verbal one.

Affairs in Ireland did not become acute again until the end of the 70's—when the co-incident, but not directly connected rise of Parnell in the Parliamentary Nationalist Party and the formation by Michael Davitt of the Land League in 1879 brought the Irish Land Question again to a head. By then, however, Marx was struggling against continuous ill health and what attention he could give, and that of Engels,

was almost completely monopolised by the formation of the National Socialist, Social-Democratic, and Labour parties on the Continent and in America. Nevertheless their continued interest in Ireland is attested by several letters of importance as for instance the letters of Engels to Bernstein in 1881.

After Marx's death in 1883, Engels, as is well known, became absorbed in the task of preparing the second and third volumes of *Capital* for the press. Moreover, the transformation of the Irish struggle after 1882, from a directly agrarian into a predominantly parliamentary one, may have caused it to lose interest in his eyes. His correspondence for the period from 1885 to 1895—the year of his death—has it would seem been imperfectly preserved. He could hardly have failed to comment on the two Home Rule Bills of 1885 and 1893, or upon the Land Acts of 1891.

It will be seen that a prime source of information upon the attitude of Marx and Engels towards the "Irish Question" is their correspondence which has not yet been fully translated into English. Moreover, this correspondence is richest for the period of the Fenians—the militant Irish Republicans, whose outlook and methods most closely resemble those of the Irish Republicans of to-day.

This resemblance is much more than a superficial one. In 1862-5 the American Civil War not only shut off the normal flow of emigration from Ireland to the U.S.A., and simultaneously the return of remittances from the emigrants to their homes in Ireland which were of vital importance to the poorer peasant farmers: it also precipitated an economic crisis in Britain, which cut off the openings for casual labour in its labour market and harvest fields. The rise of the Fenian movement has its base in this crisis. Rigidly Nationalist in form, Fenianism was noticeably proletarian, and revolutionary in its content—alike in respect of the social composition of its forces, and in its attitude towards landlordism and clericalism.

A similar recurrence of economic crisis affecting both Britain and the U.S.A. has produced the neo-Fenianism of recent years in Ireland. Again, emigration to the U.S.A. has been checked; again the flow of remittances from the U.S.A. has been cut off; again the British labour market fails to provide an escape for the "redundant" population. Predominantly agrarian though the immediate objectives of this neo-Fenian movement may be, and agrarian likewise the centres of its agitation, it is like its predecessor clearly marked with proletarian characteristics.

For these reasons the correspondence of Marx and Engels on Ireland seems well worth a study; and it is proposed therefore to give in the *LABOUR MONTHLY* a selection of the more important references to be found therein. The extracts are given in chronological sequence and such notes as may be necessary are added.

ENGELS' TOUR IN IRELAND IN 1856.

MANCHESTER.

May 23rd, 1856.

DEAR MARX,

In our tour in Ireland we went from Dublin to Galway on the west coast and then twenty miles north inland, then to Limerick and down the Shannon to Tarbert, Tralee, Killarney and back to Dublin again. In all we travelled about 450 to 500 English miles in the country itself and have thus seen about two-thirds of the whole country.

With the exception of Dublin, which bears the same relation to London as Dusseldorf to Berlin, and has throughout the character of a one-time small capital and built in an entirely English style, the whole country, and especially the towns, look like France or Northern Italy. Police, priests, lawyers, bureaucrats, owners of demesnes are there in delightful profusion, but there is a total absence of all and every industry so that it would be hard to understand how all these parasites live, were it not that the poverty of the peasants supplied the corresponding contrast.

"Strong measures" are visible in every part of the country. The government meddles in everything, there is no trace of the so-called self-government. It can clearly be seen that Ireland is the first English colony and one which is still ruled directly in the old way on account of its proximity. Indeed it can be noted here that the so-called freedom of the English citizen depends on the oppression of the colonies. In no land have I seen so many police,¹ and the drink-sodden type of the Prussian gendarmerie has been developed here to perfection into a constabulary armed with carbines, bayonets and handcuffs.

A distinctive feature of the country is its ruins, the oldest of which date from the 5th and 6th centuries and the most recent from the 19th century, with all the intervening periods represented. The most ancient are churches only; but dating from 1100 there are castles and churches; and since 1800, peasants' cottages. Throughout the west, but especially in the region round Galway the country is covered with such ruins of peasants' cottages, most of which have been abandoned since 1846.²

I had never believed that famine could have such palpable reality. Whole villages are deserted and between them lie the splendid demesnes of the petty landlords, mostly lawyers, almost the only people who live there now. Famine, emigration and *clearances* have together brought this about. Here there are no cattle in the fields. The land is a regular wilderness which no one wants. In County Clare to the south of Galway things are somewhat better. There are still cattle there and towards Limerick there are hillsides excellently cultivated for the most part by Scottish farmers; there the ruins are cleared away and the land looks

civilised. In the south-west are many mountains and bogs, but also a marvellously luxuriant growth of timber forests and, after this, splendid grazing again, especially in Tipperary; and, around Dublin, a country which obviously is gradually falling into the hands of the large farmers.

The country is completely ruined by the pillaging wars of the English, lasting from 1100 to 1850. (They have actually lasted this time, and the "state of seige"³ on the top of it.) Most of the ruins are known to have been destroyed during the wars. It is this that has given the people themselves their distinctive character. With all the national fanaticism which the people have acquired, they feel no longer at home in their own country. *Ireland for the Saxon!* That is now being achieved. The Irishman knows that he cannot compete with the Englishman with his superior weapons against him in every respect; emigration will continue until the predominating, indeed, almost exclusively Celtic character of the population has gone to the devil. How often have the Irish begun to achieve something and each time they have been crushed, politically and industrially. They have been artificially transformed by persistent and thoroughgoing oppression into a completely demoralised people and are now notoriously fulfilling the rôle of providing England, America, Australia, &c., with whores, day-labourers, bullies, pickpockets, swindlers, beggars, and other demoralised elements. This demoralised character persists also in the aristocracy. The landlords, everywhere else "bourgeoisified," are here completely demoralised. Their houses are surrounded by enormous and wonderful demesnes: but outside these, the country is a desert, and where their money comes from is nowhere to be seen. These fellows want shooting. Of mixed blood, mostly big, strong, handsome scoundrels, they all wear colossal beards under enormous Roman noses and put on the pseudo-military airs of retired colonels, travel over the country after every sort of pleasure and, if you make enquiries, they haven't a half-penny, but a pile of debts, and live in fear of the *Encumbered Estates Court*.

I must tell you later about the manner in which England rules this country—repression and corruption—Bonaparte tried it, a long time ago,⁴ and will do it again, if you don't come up here soon. What about it?

Yours, F. E.

EXPLANATORY NOTES.

³The police in Ireland were of two kinds. The larger towns such as Dublin, Belfast, Limerick and Cork had their town poliee. The countryside and the smaller towns were policed by the Royal Irish Constabulary, a semi-military force officered from the British Army List. In 1852, four years before Engels' visit, the R.I.C. numbered 12,501, distributed in 1590 stations, giving an average of 48 stations to each county and 8 constables to each station. Part of the force was mounted. All habitually carried arms—carbines, ball cartridges and bayonets for the infantry; carbines, pistols, and sabres for the cavalry—on occasion cutlasses were also served out. The population of Ireland

at the census of 1851 was 6,515,794. At the time of Engels' visit it was probably only a little over 6 millions. For comparison we note that the police force (unarmed with firearms) for Greater London in 1932, with a population of 8,202,818 was 20,274.

²The Great Famine of 1846-8 was attributed to the potato blight. The actual deaths from famine and famine-fever have never been established with complete accuracy. What is certain is that whether by death or emigration the population was reduced from a little under nine millions to a little more than six-and-a-half. One contributory cause of the desertion of homesteads was the "quarter-acre clause," which forbade the giving of poor law relief to any holder of more than a quarter-acre holding. The explanation of the "ruined" cottages noted by Engels may not have been perceived by him at the time. To prevent the homesteads from being re-occupied the landlords, aided by the police, removed the roofs, windows and doors of all such dwellings as fell into their hands by these defaults.

³"State of seige" = virtual martial law.

⁴This sentence is obscure in the original, but the allusion is clearly to Louis Napoleon Bonaparte (Napoleon III.), who in the period of his Presidency of the Second French Republic (1848-1852) issued a series of statements in which he outlined a world-policy for the re-establishment of "Napoleonic France." In the course of the articles, which dealt with each of the victors of Waterloo in turn, "Bonaparte"—as Marx and Engels, like all revolutionary republicans continued to call him—dealt with the methods of English rule in Ireland and the possibility of repeating the French aid given to the United Irishman of 1798. Nobody took these flamboyancies seriously, least of all Marx and Engels; but the trick of posing as a friend of Socialistic-revolutionaries and as an agrarian reformer, was so much a stock-in-trade with Louis Napoleon that Engels' jest has a spice of earnest in it.