

THE DICTATORSHIP OF THE DEAD

An essay prompted by a reading of (1) "The Evolution of Sinn Fein," by R. M. Henry, and (2) "An Economic History of Ireland," by D. A. Chart (Dublin, Talbot Press, 6s. and 5s. net respectively).

MAN is born not only into a physical environment but also into a mental one. Around him in his earliest years are not only walls and trees and roofs and stones—things of use and things of nature—but his kinsfolk, the lights and shadows in their eyes, the tones of their voices, and the tales they tell to beguile his tedium and instruct his youth.

From them he learns to fear all the things that they fear; and to desire that which they have come to think desirable. From them he derives his idea of the shames which are too shameful for a man to bear, and of the honours which are all but out of mortal reach. If his ways are cast not in the jumble and scurry of a crowded town but in the isolation of a rural settlement separated by stretches of field or bog, moor or hillside from other and similar homestead clusters—towns a day's march distant and the populous places of the earth still further away beyond the "vacant spaces of the sea"—he will absorb into the texture of his emotions the gossip and legend of the countryside. When that gossip is of political rather than of personal ambitions, and the legends those of the patriot strivings of heroic forbears who had every virtue but success; and when the sombre splendour of their story is supplemented by bitter remembrance of agonies incidental to their strife, and cumulative with their woes, it will be little wonder if the Passion of the Past grows into a haunting prepossession pressing every energy of youth into the channel of a righteous revolutionary zeal. Once engendered, this high and holy zeal—though change of scene may modulate it, idealising a biting pain into an abiding melancholy, and tinging the horrors and angers of strife and defeat with the fascination of tragic romance—once engendered, this impulse will endure with little feeding even to the third and fourth generations. Given abundance of its appropriate food and it will glow like a concealed fire except when it rages like a tempest.

The young men who are now actually or in sentiment the rank-and-file of the Army of the Irish Republic are the sons of victims of the rack-renting absentee landlords and their striking arm—an eviction party, with battering-ram, crowbar, pick, and armed escort equipped with Uniform and Authority from an alien Government. Their imaginations will have been fed in their youth with tales of the Land League; of the gaol, the packed jury, the proclaimed meeting, the baton-charge and of the fusillade at Mitchelstown when the constabulary, under express orders from Mr. Secretary Balfour, "did not hesitate to shoot."

And the fathers, from whose lips they will have learned these things—along with legends of the fitful romance of the Fenian Brotherhood—were, in their turn, themselves sons of famine-stricken, fever-tortured, charity-insulted survivors from the horrors of the Black Forty-Seven, across which had gleamed for a moment, like marsh fires over a bog, the glow of Young Ireland.

These survivors, too, were sons and grandsons of the dragooned and half-hanged, lashed and picketed victims of the property-mad Protestant conquerors of 1798. And, yet again, these "men of '98" (who "rose in dark and evil days") were the torn and tortured outcome of a protracted process of persecution which, originating far back in the tangled treachery of feudal marauding has for persistence no equal and for brute folly and black malice no rival in all the crimes that have hitherto defiled the earth.

An acute consciousness of Nationality—and it thwarted, goaded, and irritated into a chronic inflammation—possesses or pervades, in consequence, the whole mental and moral being of Irish men and women, to whatever class they may belong. A natural self-satisfaction supplementing and extending the healthy personal pride of the average man or woman constitutes, in an unconquered country, the normal and not unpleasing patriotism of a small nation. In over-grown Plutocratic Empires this "patriotism" becomes, under State manipulation, a blatant and sycophantic vulgarity which replaces both dignity and decency for the socially-enslaved and mentally-debased petty-bourgeois and slum proletarian mobs that such Empires perforce beget.

These pleasures, alike of an enlarged family pride and of the intoxicating bombast of Jingoism, are denied to a subject nation. Its members can win public dignity and rewards at the hands of the powers-that-be only by a cynical surrender of all the illusions that make such honours, normally, acceptable. Among their fellows they can win esteem only by either a crude reiteration of inherited wrongs (a mechanical insistence on the villainy of the conqueror and the sorrows of the conquered which soon grows into a baneful political hypochondria—the whine of the beggar—the wail of the broken slave) or, alternatively, by embarking upon a course of revolutionary adventure whose success will risk a repetition of the very horrors it was designed to avenge.

To *blame* Irishmen for being rebels and revolutionaries is, therefore, to condemn them for their chief title to honour—to stigmatise them for choosing the road of dignified danger rather than that of slavish safety. To expect Irishmen—who by virtue of circumstance and tradition are exalted as far above normal "patriotism" as the Jingo is debased below it—to desert their inherited ideal in favour of political propositions whose sole recommendation is that they are safe, sane, and reasonable is to abuse patience and outrage human decency. Even class struggles in Ireland must wear a National uniform.

When conscious of weakness and debilitated by despair, the general mass of Irishmen have tolerated, and only just tolerated, a parliamentary struggle for a local legislature. And even then they have tolerated it partly as a means of rousing the enthusiasm which would make possible a struggle for the *real thing*. "Home Rule," beloved of English Liberalism, was, in Irish eyes, at best a beginning. At worst it was a treacherous surrender. When the Irish people became convinced that Redmond and

his party were, at the price of Home Rule, willing to accept the inclusion of Ireland in the British Empire as a final and concluded fact, the Irish people repudiated Redmond and his party with contempt and loathing.

The process of elementary education to-day consists in great measure of the selection of the mental environment calculated to fix in the young the emotions and prejudices deemed desirable and salutary by their ruling elders. The art of government, whether it employs sermons, newspapers, proclamations, pageants or parliamentary speeches, consists in little else. It is, therefore, not surprising that the proximate roots of the more recent rebellions in Ireland are to be found in a struggle to free the minds of Irishmen, young and old, from the effects of the system of education as by law established in Ireland. At about the same time that Keir Hardie was setting up an Independent Labour Party in England a small company of scholarly enthusiasts in Ireland were founding a society to strike at the roots of the process of Anglicisation (conducted by the public elementary schools) which threatened to obliterate, by its official English language, literature, history, and teaching, all the essentials of inherited Irish feeling.

The Gaelic League set itself, by the revival of the practice of writing and speaking the native language of Ireland, to undo all this—to nullify the invading influence that (for example) excluded even Scott's lines on "my native land"—"breathes there a man," etc.—from the school-books because of their *dangerous tendency*. It challenged the worth of a Parliamentary Nationalism that made a show of resisting the enemy at Westminster while simultaneously surrendering to its agents the mind of every child in Ireland. It demanded of the Revolutionary Party what was likely to be the worth of Irish Independence if the men who gained it had Englished brains? Or how they hoped to win it until the men who strove to bring it to being fought, not for external rewards, but in obedience to the compelling impulsion of their cultivated Irish consciousness—fought because they felt themselves wholly and utterly parts of a distinctively Irish World?

By making Irish speaking and writing a point of honour among Irish men the Gaelic League built up a movement for an Independent Irish Education—a culture purged from every taint of alien bias and suppression. They created a body of positive Irish opinion totally distinct from the mere anti-Englishism which had boggled at the *form* while it swallowed the substance of defeat and conquest. It was, as Patrick Pearse acclaimed it, "the most revolutionary force that ever came into Ireland." For in keeping clear of "English" bias and going for their inspiration to native Irish literature they were not merely taking the line of greatest psychological impulse, they were, albeit unwittingly, in going for their inspiration to the legendary love of the Gael, throwing back from the ideology of the dominant bourgeois order to that of a time when the memory and culture of tribal communism was still fresh and living. They turned their backs on Samuel Smiles and his progeny, and by way of the love of the cabin fireside and the legends of the thatched houses adventured into the shining glory of the gods and heroes of pre-historic Ireland.

Even to an alien who knows Ireland only as a mark on a map, and its mythology through the refracting medium of a translation; even to dwellers in towns who can conceive hillside and bog, heath, hazel and rowan, the salmon's leap and the blackbird's song, only as vague guesses built up from the materials of picture-palace and railed-in park; even

to the proletarian rebel who yearns to make an end of all the Dead and Damnable Past, this wonderful Gaelic Mythology comes as a revelation of a fresher and a brighter world. It was, rightly handled, a force calculated not merely to weld into one all the Fellowship of the Gael, but to give it the tone and the temper necessary for a high and heroic endeavour.

The economic and social consequences of English rule helped to smooth the path for the Irish Revival. The 18th century policy which struggled to prevent Irish domiciled commerce and industry from competing on anything like equal terms with those of England perforce had kept the more distinctly Irish population fastened down to agrarian life. The industrial revolution (which made England for the nonce the workshop of the world) and its consequences have emphasised this; and since the Land Acts (1878-1903) the agrarian population has become one of smallish farmers and peasantry who by various devices were gaining a homely prosperity from the rise of the demand for, and the price of, foodstuffs in the English and West European markets. Co-operative Agriculture and Dairy-Farming, the Home-Industries Movement, Sinn Fein (in its earlier forms) and the Gaelic League were all expressions of this economic readjustment and the permutations of the traditional ideologies induced by this agrarian revival. And the rise of a Labour Movement, too, dating as it does from James Connolly's return to Ireland in 1896, points to the greater consolidation of a proletariat which is its inevitable counterpart. Connolly noted and formed his policy in the light of the fact that the Irish National tradition had been preserved by and was most vital in the peasantry, the proletariat and the rural semi-proletariat.

There is no room here to speak of the why and the wherefore of Easter Week, or of what has happened since. We can if we are fools enough dismiss the question by supposing the Irish to be inflamed with a madly irrational hatred of England and the English. To that John Mitchell as long ago as 1848 gave reply. His hatred, as Patrick Pearse shows, was "not of English men and English women but of the English thing that called itself a Government in Ireland, of the English Empire, of English commercialism supported by English militarism, a thing wholly evil—perhaps the most evil thing that there ever has been in the world." What would be a class fight elsewhere must in Ireland perforce be a National one.

Over Ireland, radiating from and resurging against Dublin Castle, extends the Dictatorship of the Dead. Always the question, posed anew by each day's happenings, arises clamouring for an answer—On whose side are you? Do you take sides with the Black-and-Tans?—or with their victims? Are you inspired by Robert Emmett?—or by those who hanged him? By James Connolly?—or by those who shot him?

For the Dead, clustering thicker and faster, dwell ever in the land. On Irish lips are the words they coined, in Irish hearts are the emotions they engendered, and in Irish souls the fires that they kindled. And while the Dominion of the Dead endures, and to-day's woe and yesterday's sacrifice keeps fresh and living the woe and sacrifice of 700 rebel years, all that is Ireland will call alike to her sons and her daughters and those who share sorrow with them—"On whose side are ye? Choose ye this day whom ye will serve!"

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