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Tom Garvin

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ABSTRACT

AN IRISH REPUBLICAN TRADITION?

This paper argues that there has indeed been a long-standing republican political tradition in Ireland, dating perhaps from the American and French revolutions and certainly from the 1850s. Intellectually it has been less than coherent, and commonly it has been a very broad church indeed, containing in its ranks constitutional monarchs, communists, near fascists and national democrats. Contrary to modern claims that Irish republicanism has always favoured neutrality, it is pointed out that Irish republicans have commonly favoured alliances with great powers as counterweights to Great Britain. Republican constitutional theory has remained rather underdeveloped and cannot compete for intellectual depth with the mainline Irish political tradition represented by the constitutions of 1922 and 1937. Modern IRA associated attempts at political theory betray a fantasist style of thinking and an utter disregard for both political realities and the whole question of popular consent.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Tom Garvin is Professor and Head of the Department of Politics at UCD. He has published extensively on Irish politics, and is the author of *The evolution of Irish nationalist politics* (Gill and Macmillan, 1981), *Nationalists revolutionaries in Ireland 1858-1928* (Clarendon Press, 1987) and *1922: the birth of Irish democracy (Gill and Macmillan, 1996).* His *Preventing the future: why was Ireland so poor for so long?* was published by Gill and Macmillan in 2004.

AN IRISH REPUBLICAN TRADITION?

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INTRODUCTION

Conor Cruise O'Brien, many years ago, wrote a mock encyclopaedia article as follows:

> Irish strategy, 1014-1945: The campaign and actions of Brian Boru, Owen Roe O'Neill, Marshal Browne, Commodore Barry, Wellington, Admiral Browne, General Sheridan, Field Marshals Alexander and Montgomery, and many others (O'Brien, 1976: 132-5).

He went on to point out that a compilation of Irish verse-writers might look equally odd, citing the *Oxford book of Irish verse*, which included poems by Goldsmith, Sheridan, Emily Brontë, Fitzgerald, Wilde, MacNeice and Cecil Day Lewis. In speaking of Irish republicanism I find myself in a somewhat analogous quandary. Essentially the problem is one of continuity: not so much political continuity as intellectual or even cultural continuity.

I take it for granted that there is certainly a political tradition in Ireland that is commonly labelled "republican" and which has been around for quite a long time, certainly since the 1850s and perhaps since the 1770s, as an echo of the American and, later, French revolutions. However, what have the following "republican" figures got in common with each other intellectually: Theobald Wolfe Tone, John Mitchel, James Stephens, John O'Mahony, Arthur Griffith, Patrick Pearse, James Connolly, Liam Lynch, Eamon de Valera, Sean Russell, Sean Sabhat, Sean Mac Stiofáin, Professor John Kelly, Gerry Adams and Bertie Ahern? Mitchel was pro-slavery. James Stephens apparently aspired to be president-for-life (*à la* Papa Doc Duvalier of Haiti) of an Irish Republic. Griffith is certainly equally anomalous; he was, after all, a monarchist, but he was also president of the Irish Republic in the Second Dail from January to June 1922. Weirdly, in the logic of "IRA constitutional history" he should be regarded as the founding father of today's IRA/Sinn Fein; actually he was not only a monarchist but also an imperialist and an advocate of a permanent partnership with Great Britain.

The anomalies mount. Tone had no regard for the Irish language and despised and hated Catholicism; in 1793 he attended the last general meeting of traditional Irish harpers in Belfast, and famously noted afterwards "strum, strum and bedamned to you!". He also was a firm opponent of neutrality, being in favour of a solid alliance with France. A century and a half later, Russell was in favour of an alliance with Nazi Germany, and did his level best to engineer one, thereby endangering Ireland's neutrality and very political existence. He could quite logically be seen as a traitor, but there's a statue of him somewhere in Clontarf. To take a third example of Irish republican indifference to neutrality, Pearse and his comrades boasted in

1916 of their alliance with "gallant allies in Europe." Parenthetically, Pearse was quite happy to contemplate a Hohenzollern princeling on the throne of an independent Irish kingdom. More recently, some republicans have commonly made a fetish out of neutralism, for reasons that are partly opportunistic, partly pro-Soviet and partly anti-American. Again, back in pre-1916 days Pearse insisted that, without the Irish language, there could not possibly be an Irish nation. In Pearsian logic, by speaking English we are actually murdering the historic Irish nation.

Many of these people were not democrats in any modern understanding of the term. Even when they did adhere to democratic values, they often did so very reluctantly and commonly after they had come to the conclusion that the democratic process would have to be used to achieve "republican" values that were often unconnected with democratic principles. "Republican" values commonly involved some kind of moral and cultural transformation of the Irish people, a people held to be unsatisfactory from some cultural or "spiritual" point of view. The core of the republican tradition seems to me to be nationalist, separatist and sometimes caesaropapist. Democracy is merely optional and clearly to be subordinated to moral principle.

TWO REPUBLICAN CONSTITUTIONS

Whatever about continuity with the United Irishmen of the 1790s, there does seem to be some validity to claims for a continuity of the republican tradition since the Fenian oath was first administered in Langan's timber yard in what is now Fenian Street in Dublin in 1858. This Fenian tradition was very clearly anti-monarchist, separatist and adhered to a somewhat whiggish theory of electoral democracy. Despite the cultural revivalism of John O'Mahony and others, the tradition was at that time far more concerned with separation from the United Kingdom and the establishment of an independent all-Ireland polity than with the kind of cultural authenticity espoused by the Gaelic League in Ireland after 1893 or by (say) Plaid Cymru in late twentieth-century Wales.

In 1862, John Pigot, a Fenian publicist, wrote a constitution for an independent Irish republic; versions of his ideas remained current in the fantasy world of Irish underground separatism generations later (Anonymous, 1862: *passim*; see Garvin, 1987: 118-20). Pigot envisaged a modernised Ireland with a strong army and navy. The Fenians were keen on sea power and an American connection or even alliance. Irish-American Fenians were later to finance the Fenian Ram, devised by John Philip Holland, an ex-Christian Brother from Clare. This was the first serious working prototype of a submarine, and was financed by John Devoy and the American Fenians/IRB in the hope of launching an attack on the Royal Navy in the Atlantic. Pigot envisaged an alliance with either France or the United States, and envisaged that the new independent country would be able to control the western approaches and be a menace to the British Empire in various unspecified and vaguely imagined ways.

Pigot also proposed a rather Bonapartist constitution, heavily influenced by American and French models. A lower chamber was to be directly elected, and the upper chamber, elected by a restricted franchise, was to elect in turn a president-for-life, presumably with James Stephens, the egomaniac Fenian leader, in mind. Executive and legislature were to be separated both legally and physically, the legislature to be situated in Athlone and the executive in Limerick. The hatred of Dublin, capital of the island and symbol of British power in Ireland, was evident and was a theme which has recurred in "republican" thought many times. The provinces were to be abolished and replaced by nearly a dozen geographically designated cantons. The rather striking modernism and "French" character of the document was exemplified in particular by its proposal of universal, secret, manhood suffrage and by the non-traditional character of the proposed cantons. Control over education was almost casually conceded to the various churches, in a very un-French (and un-American) deviation from the general trend of the document.

Versions of these ideas surfaced regularly in IRB literature. Among the separatists, the IRB appear to have been the only ones who gave serious consideration to the kinds of democratic political institutions an independent Ireland should have. In practice, all that sort of thing tended to be left to Irish Party lawyers or British civil servants, almost as though it was just a matter of housekeeping. The political institutions of the present-day Republic of Ireland owe as much to the series of Home Rule bills introduced between 1885 and 1920 as they do to Fenian ideas. This paper takes the view that the Irish constitutions of 1919, 1922 and 1937 are more democratic than republican; all three are far more concerned with representative democracy and the sovereignty of the people than they are about the virtuous citizen or government by public and equal deliberation. The word "republic" does not occur in any of the three documents.

Back in 1911, the IRB paper Irish Freedom ran an interesting and intelligent series of articles on the constitutional forms which an independent Ireland might adopt. The pseudonymous author ("Lucan") remarked that his personal preference would be for twenty years of military dictatorship by an "Irish Cromwell", a man with "patriotism, fanaticism, single-mindedness and clear hard courage".[1] Failing a new Lord Protector, a democratic republic was to be preferred, with tolerance for all religions, free compulsory education, democratic representative institutions and universal suffrage including both sexes. However, university graduates, professional men, army officers, political leaders and businessmen would be entitled to extra votes. A national militia was seen as preferable to a standing professional army. Parliament would have two houses, the lower house having a six-year term and being elected by the population, the upper house being elected by those in possession of multiple votes.[2] Military service was to be universal and obligatory, the coinage was to be decimal and both English and Irish would be recognised languages.[3] Other writers

[1] *Irish Freedom,* October 1911.

[2] *Irish Freedom*, November 1911.

[3] *Irish Freedom*, November 1911.

in nationalist papers, most notably perhaps John J. Horgan of Cork, proposed political institutions for an independent Ireland. Horgan proposed several that actually materialised, most notably proportional representation, a modernist and hyper-democratic idea that seems to have had immediate appeal. He also proposed a second chamber which would be specifically designed to protect the rights of minorities.[4]

Electoral democracy, moderated by a bourgeois franchise, was accepted as the form an independent Irish polity should take. There were those who proposed a theocratic constitution and others who demanded a socialist republic, but they never became mainstream. There was, however, a certain hankering after a cult of the leader, understandable in a country which had had two great charismatic nationalist leaders in the nineteenth century, Daniel O'Connell and Charles Stewart Parnell. Furthermore, the violence of the years after 1913 encouraged a political authoritarianism among many "republican" separatists, which sometimes congealed into a settled and perversely idealistic contempt for democracy.

Despite all this, electoral republican democracy was to win out in most of Ireland, but in a rather qualified form. The two obvious qualifications I wish to discuss are those generated by the British monarchical system and the power system of the Catholic Church, Joyce's twin tyrants of Thames and Tiber. The ostensible cause of the Irish Civil War of 1922-23 was the British insistence on all of Ireland remaining, at least in theory, within the United Kingdom; not only was there to be a partition of the island, but the "free" part was to remain technically part of His Majesty's dominions. Most republicans swallowed this latter condition, but resolved to move to a true republic as quickly as possible, whether by violence or by constitutional means. By 1950, independent Ireland had gone republican in title as well as in reality (Garvin, 1996; Kissane, 2002). The second qualification was the power of priests and bishops, exercised in an authoritarian, obscurantist and top-down fashion, and in ways that went completely against the ideas of classical republicanism. Clerical rule was secretive and the decisions of bishops commonly were imposed on a government technically responsible to the electorate rather than to clerics. As time went by, political subservience to clerical opinion waned and eventually faded away.

MODERN REPUBLICANISM AND DEMOCRACY

However, these residues of what had been the British regime in Ireland lasted long enough to leave a sneaking sense that Irish democracy was somehow incomplete, lacking or flawed. An ancient material inequality persisted during the generations after independence. The evident mediocrity of some political leaders and the obvious financial corruption of some others obscured the equally evident fact that democracy in Ireland merely reflected rather accurately the virtues and the faults of the Irish people. Irish republican democracy was clientelist, localist, secretive and

[4] *Leader*, 5 August 1911; *Catholic Bulletin*, August 1911.

sometimes pathologically short-termist because Irish people were that way. To put it rather differently, many Irish people were not really very republican.

To some, Irish republican democracy looked too top-down, centralised and generally uncomfortably reminiscent of the centralised British state that had been constructed in Ireland in the decades after the catastrophe of the Great Famine. Some republican writers have suggested massive decentralisation or even the virtual dismemberment of the centralised Irish state and a drastic federalisation. Most conspicuous among these proposals is, perhaps, the Provisional IRA's proposal for a four-province federation of 1974 in *Peace with justice: proposals for peace in a new federal Ireland*, a pamphlet published by Provisional Sinn Fein (Sinn Féin, 1974). It is usually ascribed to Desmond Fennel.

The document proposed a four-tier pyramid of government, with local councils at the bottom, regional councils staffed by experts and local councillors at a sub-provincial level, a democratically elected "Dáil" for each of the four traditional provinces and a federal parliament for all of Ireland at the apex, seated in Athlone in an apparent echo of the Fenian document discussed earlier. This would involve the abolition not only of the present-day Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, but also the abolition, for political purposes at least, of the 32 traditional counties of Ireland. Presumably these entities were to be doomed because of their historical English or British provenance. Their abolition also flew in the face of the evident fondness for the county as a unit of the Gaelic Athletic Association. The total disregard for the fact that most Irish people live in towns and cities was possibly reflective of the historical fact that Irish cities are mainly of Viking or English provenance. The idea of placing government in a small town has certain attractions; it separates government from academia and business, and works well in the United States. It also would have helped to balance the country demographically.

Ireland has become habituated to centralised government in both parts of the island, and the simple fact that Irish government has been like this for a very long time is in itself an argument against change; "if it works, don't fix it" is a useful adage. The reason the United States is extremely decentralised and federal is rooted in the country's origins in an alliance of separate colonies against an outside power. Germany's federalism has analogous historical roots. Ireland's centralised system is rooted, by contrast, in a well-meant British attempt to revolutionise the government of the country in the decades after the Great Famine by rationalising and bureaucratising a failed aristocratic system.

These two proposals for root-and-branch transformation of the Irish political system, separated from each other by a century, have one thing in common: a wish to destroy the actual governmental system of Ireland in favour of a system imagined as being completely different and owing little or nothing to previous political experience or practice. To that extent they are both indeed revolutionary. Edmund Burke, commenting on the French Revolution over two centuries ago, reproached the French revolutionaries for contemning everything that they had inherited, in particular the traditional local and national assemblies which would have permitted a re-

version to the politics of compromise and negotiation. These institutions the revolutionaries had abolished.

> You had all these advantages in your antient states; but you chose to act as if you had never been moulded into civil society, and had everything to begin anew. You began ill, because you began by despising everything that belonged to you. You set up your trade without a capital … respecting your forefathers, you would have been taught to respect yourselves. You would not have chosen to consider the French as a people of yesterday, as a nation of low-born servile wretches until the emancipating year of 1789 (Burke, 1968:122-3).

Burke was, of course, arguing for the wisdom of the past and the learning process of past generations to be permitted to inform the present. The fact that most of Ireland has had a successful electoral democracy for over two generations was ignored by the Provisional Sinn Fein document of 1974. Despite its undoubted shortcomings, Irish democracy was very well established and the population of the Republic was unwilling to see it dismantled in favour of a system based on tiny localities and pyramids of representative bodies; the country had had such local councils (rural district councils) up to 1926, when they were abolished, mainly because they presided over steadily shrinking populations and had very little to do. In both parts of Ireland local government has been reshaped pragmatically to react to the fact that the country was urbanising. Going back to the four provinces, identification with which was very weak, would have been regarded as reactionary; the provinces had not been used as administrative units since the seventeenth century. Furthermore, the consent of Northern Ireland to amalgamation with the rest of Ulster and the rest of Ireland would not have been forthcoming. Again, the giving of a complete parliamentary assembly to the tiny province of Connacht would have been extravagant treatment for a small and impoverished entity in financial thrall to the rest of the Republic. Furthermore, Leinster is a questionable entity; it naturally divides into north and south (“South Leinster” and “Greater Meath”); in early history, the distinction between Cuala and Bregia was very real, the dividing line approximating to the Dublin/Wicklow border. Dublin and Belfast would deserve statehood; Cork deserves statehood as much as Connacht from the point of view of population, and would probably agitate for it.

The unreality of the Provo proposal reflects two things: a fantasist style of thinking and an utter disregard for popular consent. There is also an absence of historical sensitivity and sociological awareness. One does not have to be a Burkean to accept that the future must be built on the past; even post-war Germany, dismembered and recovering from a horrific war and an equally horrific and murderous regime, built on its own past, a past understood in very immediate and concrete terms. The Länder, destroyed by Hitler, were re-established in both the eastern and western regions. Later the German Democratic Republic abolished them, and significantly the dissolution of the communist regime there was marked by the immediate and spontaneous reestablishment of the eastern Länder. Modern Germany is determinedly and happily provincial, despite the half-artificial character of some of the modern Länder.

Similarly, in Ireland the counties are now traditional, whatever their original provenance. People have county patriotisms. Everyone knows which one is the Kingdom, which one the Model County, the Rebel County, the Banner County or the County God Help Us. We all know where the Wee Six are. Dubliners, whether thought of as Jackeens, Jacks or Dubs, have a very strong sense of local patriotism, as do the inhabitants of other Irish towns and cities. The provinces, although of archaic provenance, are not as culturally immediate as are the counties and towns, and Leinster, the largest of the provinces, is easily the least immediate. Connacht is scarcely an entity at all. In fact the provincial map of Ireland is more reminiscent of a Victorian whiskey bottle than of anything else.

THE POVERTY OF THEORY

Political theory without reference to political science and its allied disciplines, sociology, history, anthropology and economics is rather like trying to fly by flapping your arms up and down; you have the right idea, but utterly inadequate means. That is why the intellectual descendants of Aristotle are so important. Montesquieu, Burke and de Tocqueville all, in their different ways, remind us that human beings are always to be seen in a social and historical context, and there are no Robinson Crusoes. Thus, in Ireland, we are not only stuck with the counties and very little else; we are also stuck with Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Perhaps these two entities can be used to construct something bigger and finer than either, but neither can be simply demolished, treated as though they never had existed and replaced by something new and, because of that very newness, pseudo-traditional. Neither can they be replaced by something which is neophile; “North-west Province” sounds a little too much like an Irish answer to Airstrip One.

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