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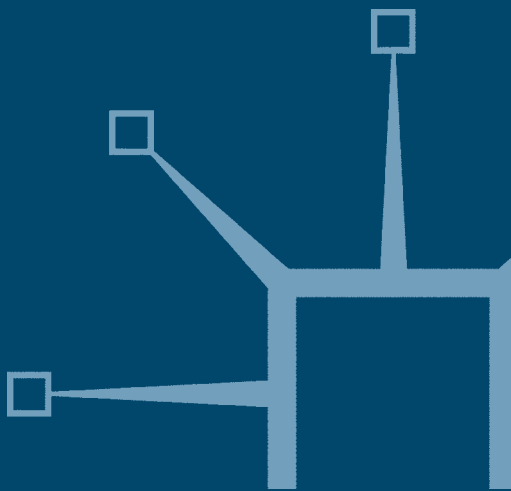
Politics and the Irish Working Class, 1830–1945

Fintan Lane and Donal Ó Drisceoil



Politics and the Irish Working Class, 1830–1945

Also by Fintan Lane

THE ORIGINS OF MODERN IRISH SOCIALISM, 1881–1896

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PEADAR O'DONNELL

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Edited by

Fintan Lane

and

Donal Ó Drisceoil

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To Patrick Galvin
poor boy, raggy boy, fly boy

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Introduction

Fintan Lane and Donal Ó Drisceoil

This collection of essays seeks to provide an introduction to the involvement of workers in Irish political life between 1830 and 1945. The contributions include surveys covering the entire period and case studies that provide new perspectives on significant movements and moments in Irish political history. While the Irish working class has received increasing attention from historians in recent years, in comparison with other Western European countries, the literature remains sparse and narrowly focused on trade union, biographical and institutional studies.[1] By concentrating specifically on the intersection of politics (understood in broad terms) and the working class, this volume aims not only to widen the focus of Irish labour history, but to redress an imbalance in Irish political history and add to the international historiography of the working class.

The limited attention to the political role of the Irish working class is directly related to the relative historical weakness of socialism in Ireland and the fact that explicit class-based politics never became a dominant feature of Irish political life. Ireland never developed a socialist tradition comparable in any serious manner with those that emerged in countries such as France or Germany, or indeed Britain, and Irish political parties, particularly those on the right, still enjoy the illusion that 'class divisions' are of little significance on the island. The explanation for this state of affairs is a recurrent theme in the essays in this volume, but they also demonstrate the extent to which workers and their organisations played a more significant role in the political and social developments that shaped modern Ireland than is generally acknowledged. The standard, linked explanations for the weakness of the Irish left and the absence of sustained class politics relate to general factors such as Irish social structure and economic development; colonialism and its legacies; the related primacy of the pan-class mobilising ideologies of nationalism and unionism; and the hegemonic and political role of organised religion. This background helped to shape Irish political culture in ways inimical to the development of class politics, a situation exacerbated by the failure of the political wing of the

labour movement to reflect the strength of its economic wing, the partition of the country in 1921, and strategic and tactical decisions taken by the labour leadership and the left at various crucial junctures.[2]

The constricted industrialisation of the nineteenth century (and, indeed, the deindustrialisation that occurred in some regions) was an important factor also. However, some points need to be made in this regard. First, it was not simply the numerical weakness of the industrial working class that militated against classic class mobilisation and politicisation, but its location and structure. The core of the Irish industrial working class was in Belfast, where religious sectarianism grounded in political beliefs militated against class unity. Second, the support base of the European left was predominantly among the 'proletarian macro-communities' associated with heavy industry, which was largely absent in Ireland.[3] Third, class politics are not the monopoly of the urban proletariat, but in Ireland rural workers, until the early twentieth century, organised primarily within the nationalist movement, which never seriously prioritised working-class concerns. Moreover, the rural labourers were a numerically declining group from the Great Famine onwards and while still capable in the early 1920s of causing serious social disruption, this power diminished along with their numbers as the century progressed.[4] The attempts, mainly by the republican left, to radicalise the socially conservative small farmer element (a creation of the land transfer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), and link it in struggle to the urban working class, were doomed from the outset.

The three most significant and successful political mass mobilisations of nineteenth-century Ireland were centred on religion, land and nation (embodied in the 'three evil geniuses of socialism': the priest, peasant and patriot).[5] It was a fateful triangle that shaped Irish political culture and left little room for secular, class-based socialist mobilisation. Despite the efforts of a small number of socialists, the dynamic of Irish nationalism, in its successively dominant Parnellite and republican phases, was consistently hostile to class politics. The pan-class approach and bourgeois leadership characteristic of Irish nationalism were replicated in the reactive movement of unionism, especially of the stronger Ulster variety. The correspondence of religion and politics, arising from the Protestantism of the British state and the increasing Catholicisation of Irish nationalism, created a further barrier to the development of class politics, especially in the north-east. This was due not only to denominational divisiveness, but to hostility to socialism from the respective churches. Emigration, a central fact of modern Irish history, was another crucial barrier. As Bill Kissane, in a recent analysis of Irish democracy, succinctly notes, 'the average Irish person lived in an international as well as a domestic labour market … Polarised class conflict could never happen if the Irish working class was content to improve its position in other countries.'[6]

Despite all these impediments, windows of opportunity repeatedly appeared for Irish socialism, but, in Stefano Bartolini's words, it 'lost a war it never fought'.[7] Bartolini makes an interesting comparison with Finland, where, despite similar structural impediments, the Finnish labour movement embedded itself and working-class interests at the heart of the national revolution and refused to accept the 'labour must wait' dictum. A crucial difference was the relative strength of the political wing of the Finnish movement, in contrast to Ireland where the trade union wing predominated: 'This organizational resource made it capable of exploiting the sudden democratization within the context of a national liberation movement', and establishing working-class politics in independent Finland. The Irish Labour Party was a politically weak appendage of the trade unions, and its surrender to the pan-class nationalist consensus and deference to Catholic social teaching made it a poor standard-bearer for Irish social democracy. It never became a 'class persuader', prioritising class appeal and alignment – a necessary precondition for class politics. The revolutionary left remained too weak to lead the translation of a widespread class consciousness and identity (reflected in strong unionisation) into class politics. The attempts to build class politics in the north of Ireland, before and after partition, were continually hamstrung by the pervasiveness of religious, ethnic and 'national' division and conflict.

In his survey of 'Labour and Politics, 1830–1945' in this volume, Emmet O'Connor argues that the endorsement of nationalism by Irish labour in the early nineteenth century was a rational response to capitalist colonisation, that it underwent a 'profound mental colonisation' in the 1890s, and that 'the colonial legacy was intrinsic to labour's underachievement in the next century'. According to O'Connor, labour-nationalism was a rational choice for Irish workers and the refusal of urban trade unionists to work from within the nationalist movement was one of labour's great strategic failures. This position is implicitly challenged in Fintan Lane's survey of rural labourers and politics in the late nineteenth century, where he explores the interaction between that section of the working class and the nationalist movement. Detailing the incorporation and dissolution of the rural labour movement in 1882 by the Parnellites, his chapter suggests that the pan-class approach of nationalism was ultimately not class-neutral but class-biased in favour of the interests of the middle class, and acted as a brake on labour militancy. The issue of nationalism and labour is also examined in Maura Cronin's study of Parnellism and workers in Cork and Limerick. Despite the unwillingness of the urban labour movement to append itself to constitutional nationalism, many individual trade unionists involved themselves and were especially active at the time of the Parnell split of 1890–1. Cronin looks particularly at skilled and unskilled workers and their attitudes to Parnellism. The neglected contribution of

women workers to the land struggle is addressed in Maria Luddy's survey of women, trade unionism and politics, which also usefully highlights many other areas for further research in the ongoing struggle for gender balance in Irish historiography.

In his essay, Vincent Geoghegan gives a glimpse of the hidden history of early Irish socialism in an examination of the working-class co-operative movement in Ulster in the early 1830s. His chapter is a useful reminder of how little we still know about the early socialist movement in Ireland and of the possibilities for further research. The Cork socialist William Thompson became the leading theorist of the co-operative movement, and his work was read by some participants in the most significant working-class movement of nineteenth-century Britain – Chartism – which was led by another Irishman, Feargus O'Connor. Christine Kinealy's essay explores the links between Chartism and Irish movements for repeal of the Act of Union in the 1840s, and the tentative alliance between Irish and British working-class radicals. Among the barriers to the development of Chartism in Ireland was the hostility of the increasingly powerful Catholic Church, and also of the man who did most to forge the link between Irish nationalism and Catholicism, Daniel O'Connell. Catherine Hirst argues in her contribution that O'Connell's repeal campaign of the 1840s, and the fierce hostility it provoked among Protestant workers, provided the background to the growth of politico-religious divisions in the Belfast working class.

William Walker, the subject of Henry Patterson's essay, was prominent among those who attempted to transcend those working-class divisions by concentrating on municipal socialism and emphasising the potential benefits for the working class of progressive unionism and closer links with British labour. Walker engaged in a famous polemical exchange with the great hero of Irish socialism James Connolly, in the pages of the Scottish socialist paper *Forward* in 1911, which touched on these key issues. Connolly's anti-imperialism and belief that 'the cause of labour is the cause of Ireland' and vice versa resulted in his execution for his part in the nationalist Easter Rising in 1916. Connolly's ambiguous and contradictory legacy is the subject of Helga Woggon's essay. Connolly's insistence on the indivisibility of the social and national struggles was not carried through by his successors at the head of the Irish labour movement and, as Conor Kostick shows in his contribution, while labour militancy played a crucial role in the partially successful Irish War of Independence, the cause of labour was politically marginalised, with fateful consequences. Invoking Connolly was one of the strategies used by Fianna Fáil in its self-presentation as the 'natural' party of the southern Irish working class. The reasons for that party's success in winning the electoral allegiance of the majority of working-class voters is the theme of the essay by Richard Dunphy. His argument that Fianna Fáil's success was partially due to failures on the part of the Labour Party and the republican left is echoed in the contributions of Fearghal

McGarry (on radical politics in the 1920s and 1930s) and Donal Ó Drisceoil (on politics and the working class in neutral Ireland during the Second World War). As Graham Walker shows in his essay, Fianna Fáil's hegemonic position in the southern polity was mirrored by that of the Unionist Party in the North, despite the best efforts of the Northern Ireland Labour Party to break the mould with class politics.

Notes

1. *Saothar*, the journal of the Irish Labour History Society (1975–), has provided the main forum for much of the ongoing work on Irish labour history. Most volumes of the journal carry a comprehensive bibliography of Irish labour history. For an index to the material published in the journal itself, see Francis Devine (ed.), *An Index to Saothar, Journal of the Irish Labour History Society, and other ILHS Publications, 1973–2000* (Dublin, 2000).
2. The clearest analysis is Peter Mair, 'Explaining the absence of class politics in Ireland', in J.H. Goldthorpe and C.T. Whelan (eds), *The Development of Industrial Society in Ireland* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 383–410.
3. See Michael Mann, 'Sources of variation in working-class movements in twentieth century Europe', *New Left Review*, vol 212 (July/August 1995), pp. 14–54; and Richard Dunphy, 'Fianna Fáil and the working class, 1926–38', in this volume.
4. On the numerical decline of the rural working class, see David Fitzpatrick, 'The disappearance of the Irish agricultural labourer, 1841–1912', *Irish Economic and Social History*, vol. VII (1980), pp. 66–92.
5. Joseph Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society 1848–1918* (Dublin, 1973), p. 151.
6. Bill Kissane, *Explaining Irish Democracy* (Dublin, 2002), pp. 54–5. Despite the curious use of the word 'content', the point is well made.
7. Stefano Bartolini, *The Political Mobilization of the European Left, 1860–1980* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 451–4.

1

Robert Owen, Co-operation and Ulster in the 1830s

Vincent Geoghegan

For a brief period in the early 1830s, it is possible to find in Ulster public traces of a largely working-class co-operative movement. The co-operative movement in Britain and Ireland owed its intellectual origins to the work of Robert Owen, and its social and political existence to the economic vicissitudes of capitalism in the post-Napoleonic War period. An examination of the way the conservative *Belfast Newsletter* tracked and commented on Owenite ideas and organisations provides a useful vantage point for understanding aspects of the political and ideological terrain of working-class activity in this period. The newspaper is also an important source of raw information on the movement. Although critical of Owen's ideas, there is a willingness to see the Ulster co-operators as a philanthropic, self-help current within the 'respectable' working class. Furthermore, in the various accounts of co-operative meetings carried in the newspaper, the participation of solid citizens from 'higher' classes is invariably mentioned. What it did not want, however, was the development of a radical working-class politics. This chapter will also attempt to provide information on the little-known co-operative societies set up at this time. J.F.C. Harrison, in a classic study of Owenism, has written of these co-operative stores that 'unfortunately almost nothing is known about them except their names and approximate total number…they left no records' and 'no very clear picture of their activities has ever been drawn'.[1] Hopefully, this small study will help in the task of providing a fuller description and explanation of this episode in British and Irish working-class history.

The reception of Robert Owen

The *Belfast Newsletter* first began to register Robert Owen and his ideas from about 1816, when the reformer was beginning a phase as the darling of socially concerned polite society.[2] It printed extracts from his addresses, initially without editorial comment. In August 1817, however, it became critical: Owen is conceptualised in reforming, philanthropic terms, as the

begetter of a scheme 'for bettering the conditions of the labouring classes' and the tone is condescending and patronising rather than fearful. The central message is that Owen is a benevolent crank whose reforming plans fly in the face of the imperfections of human nature. Thus, it refers to the 'obvious defects' of his scheme, that he has become 'the dupe of his own misdirected zeal', and that his plan is 'thoroughly absurd in principle'. There is no sense, however, that Owen's views are ideologically malicious or politically dangerous, merely that they are 'idle and speculative, and therefore useless'.[3] It was also clear from the newspaper's continuing coverage of Owen that he had the ear of individuals from the highest ranks of society, as it reported meetings held to discuss his plans, which were chaired by the Dukes of Kent and Sussex, and attended by 'Noblemen, Freeholders, Justices of the Peace…Clergy' and so forth.[4] To cope with these levels of 'respectable' support, the *Newsletter* portrayed Owen as a person who had some initially good ideas about improving the conditions of the working class, but had gradually become divorced from reality. Owen's upper-class support could then be presented as the actions of people responding to the sensible elements of benevolence to the poor in his work. Thus, in an account of a report made to Prince Frederick of Holland about an institution 'for the colonisation and employment of the poor', the newspaper claimed that it was based 'upon a plan somewhat similar to Mr. Owen, of Lanark, before he ran wild'.[5]

It certainly was the case that many of the great and good could find much that was congenial in Owen's projects. Owen himself toured Ireland from the autumn of 1822, invited by improving landlords such as Lord Cloncurry, and in the context of the failure of the potato crop and its resulting famine and rural violence.[6] More generally, in this climate rattled elites were prepared to listen to anyone who could suggest a way of bringing social peace. In the public meetings held by Owen, at which significant numbers of the 'better' classes attended, it was clearly possible to listen selectively to his plans. Although scathing about social and economic conditions in Ireland, to the question 'who is responsible for this state of affairs?', he gave the reassuring answer that 'no one' was to blame – everyone was a victim of irrational arrangements.[7] Furthermore, the immediate agenda was to create communities specifically for the poor (not for the other classes), and this could be done not merely with no loss of fortune for capitalists and landowners, but with infinitely increased returns. Such analyses and proposals could be easily slotted into existing elite philanthropic traditions, and it is significant that the body set up to try to implement Owen's plans in Ireland called itself the 'Hibernian *Philanthropic* Society'. What such readings had to ignore, marginalise or discount was Owen's scathing critique of commercial society, his ultimate intention of reconstituting the whole of society, his intense hostility to organised religion, his plans to restructure the family, and his vision of a society where

the existing legal and military systems would be superfluous. Although hostile voices were raised at one of the meetings, principally from clergymen, perhaps a more typical view was voiced by Daniel O'Connell, who had been present at Owen's talk: 'I shall become a subscriber to Owen's Society. He *may* do some good and cannot do any harm.'[8]

The *Belfast Newsletter* clearly kept a watching eye on Owen as he toured Ireland, and carried a report of his progress in Leinster.[9] It was only, however, when he ventured to Hillsborough to address the local Farming Society that the paper launched into a further instalment of its critique of Owen. The familiar elements were there, notably the semi-humorous tone of the lofty admonition of this supposed befuddled visionary:

> We are informed that the speculative philanthropist R. Owen of New Lanark, Esq. has lately visited the Farming Society of Hillsborough, and has endeavoured to diffuse amongst its members a portion of that *new mental light* which (if we may credit his disciples) is shortly to illuminate the moral world…We know not whether the Hillsborough farmers did or did not derive much information from this fountain of knowledge; but we have examined some of Mr. Owen's literary productions, particularly his plan for meliorating the state of society in Ireland, and we take the liberty of subjoining a few observations on the very amusing statements and assumptions by which he supports his schemes…Mr. Owen, we are confident, is a benevolent man, who is firmly convinced that his plans are founded on reason and the nature of things, and therefore feels much mental gratification in reflecting on the benefits which, as he believes, mankind will derive from his labours.[10]

It then proceeded to provide a quite detailed technical analysis of the purported failings of Owen's plans and calculations, 'arguing that it would be impossible to secure the necessary amounts of land, and that the scheme was based on absurd assumptions about labour productivity, had been inadequately costed and would be financially ruinous'. As in its earlier polemics, the thrust was not that Owenism presented any kind of political or social threat, but that it was simply a foolish and wasteful venture.

From about 1827, a new tendency began to appear in the Owenite movement. Up to this point the goal was to persuade governments or the wealthy to provide funds to establish the co-operative communities. In Ireland, this was to lead to the formation by another spectator at Owen's Dublin meetings, John Scott Vandeleur, of the Ralahine Community in County Clare (1831–33).[11] The new development was the attempt by working-class co-operators to generate their *own* capital via co-operative stores, and, in time to use this capital to purchase land for the full-blown co-operative community. The first such association was commenced in London in 1827 and was quickly followed by one in Brighton, and then spread rapidly, such that by

1830 it was claimed that there were 300 societies in the United Kingdom.[12] The *Belfast Newsletter* noticed this development and devoted a fairly extensive editorial to it, which brings out a number of strands in its complex relationship with Owenism, and which also sets the scene for the emergence of this new type of co-operative society in Ulster.

The *Newsletter* interpreted the new type of society as a rational reaction to the 'Quixotic project'[13] of Robert Owen, but still recognises that it has its roots in what it sees as the sensible aspects of Owen's project – those parts of his system 'that were really practicable and calculated to improve the condition of the working classes'. Indeed, at one point in the editorial the *Newsletter* seems to be fully endorsing the new trend:

> Though the ardour of the philanthropist, as he has been called, may have carried his anticipations far beyond the boundaries of reason and experience; yet we feel ourselves compelled to admit, that the moderated, cautious views of the English and Scotch co-operative associations, are likely, if persevered in, to give permanence and success to the system.

However, the *Newsletter* had serious reservations about the effects of this success. First, the new approach was in fact a 'combination' against the retail trade, and could therefore 'bring ruin and misery on thousands of families'. Second, the formation of separate communities threatened to break down the bonds of society and replace reciprocity with selfish interests. Third, and here for the first time the *Newsletter* explicitly ventilates fears about the political effects of co-operation, the co-operators have to demonstrate that they do not have broader democratic or even revolutionary tendencies:

> We are apprehensive, that it is designed to promote in an ingenious, but an effectual way, those levelling plans of policy, which sprung from the revolutionary mania of France. Will our London contemporary shew us, that under the name of co-operation, the remote tendency of the thing is not to array the combined energies of the Tiers Etat against the Aristocracy? On this head we have doubts, which we should like to see removed.

The movement has to show that it is 'a matter of pure philanthropy' with no 'political objects in view'.

The co-operators

Coincidence or not, three days before this editorial appeared, a meeting was held at the Belfast Mechanics' Institute (24 November 1829) to discuss

the establishment of a Co-operative Trading Company. A further meeting took place on 2 December, and on 31 December the First Belfast Co-operative Trading Company was formally established at an initial general meeting at the Institute.[14] Fundamental to the setting up of this enterprise was Henry MacCormac, a Belfast physician with a passionate, deeply humanitarian, but also theoretically informed, commitment to social and political reform.[15] MacCormac himself states that, with the help of others, he started the ball rolling: 'I…with assistance, have been able to induce a number of individuals (140) to act upon the suggestion [to introduce co-operation]'.[16] There is some circumstantial evidence backing up MacCormac's claim. In the first issue of the co-operative's journal, the *Belfast Co-operative Advocate* (of which MacCormac noted: 'a literary friend having kindly consented to edit a small monthly miscellany'[17]), it is stated that, at the very first November meeting, 'a number of persons met together…for the purpose of *having submitted to them* a plan for the formation of a Co-operative Trading Company'[18] – and MacCormac seems the only plausible candidate for the originator of this plan.

What then of the 140 individuals referred to by MacCormac? In an account of a social evening held by the First Belfast Co-operative in early 1832, it is said that of the nearly 200 people present, 'with the exception of probably six or seven, they were all of the working or mechanical classes'.[19] When we look at the initial officers of the co-operative, they would appear to be mainly shopkeepers or small independent producers, or engaged in some form of commerce: thus, the treasurer, Samuel Archer, was a bookseller; the secretary, Francis S. Beatty, was an engraver; while the twelve directors were a gun-maker (William Cole), a paper merchant (William Archer), a saddler (James Cumine), two auctioneers (James Anderson and John Byrn), two accountants (Thomas Rutherford and James D. O'Connor), a brass-founder (Andrew Law, junior), a printer (Hugh Clark), a bookbinder (Henry Searson), another engraver (William Miller) and a hatter (John Jardine).[20] The *Belfast Directory* for 1831–32 enables us to cast further light on these original members. The gun-maker, William Cole, turns out to be a publican as well, while one of the auctioneers, James Anderson, is described in the directory as a 'dealer in old clothes'.[21] We can also add occupations to figures mentioned elsewhere in the accounts. J. Hartley and R. Christy, who joined the group of directors to replace two standing down, are, respectively, a 'cavalry horse contractor' and a publican, while Thomas Moreland, a figure we shall meet later, is a butcher.[22] That this social location is fairly typical of the founders is corroborated by a remark made by the secretary, Francis Beatty, in his report to a meeting of the co-operative in February 1831: 'The Society', he said, 'was, at first, got up…by a few active intelligent tradesmen.'[23] Most of their premises were also relatively close to one another in the commercial heart of Belfast: Hercules Street (now Royal Avenue), Hercules Place, High Street, Pottinger's Entry, Fountain Street,

Castle Place and so forth. These were people who most likely were familiar with one another.

The evidence is ambiguous as to whether there were any female members of the co-operative. As we shall see, MacCormac strongly advocated the rights of women and, more generally, toasts were drunk to this demand in gatherings of the society. Furthermore, Rule 1 of the Rules of the Association refers to 'the equal contributions or subscriptions of its members, whether male or female'.[24] There is also one account of a meeting where it is stated that 'a Lady and several Gentlemen addressed the Members on subjects of vital importance to the Society'.[25] It is also the case that there was a strong female presence at the social events of the association. At the early 1832 gathering, previously referred to, of the nearly 200 present, 'one-half…were females'.[26] Nevertheless, we have no hard evidence of a single named female member. In the case of religion, lacking detailed biographical information, we are forced to use the (treacherous) evidence of personal names, plus the evidence we possess about the sociological and demographic patterns of Belfast in this period. This would lead us to conclude that the named members were predominantly Protestant.

The social views of Henry MacCormac

Given the importance of Henry MacCormac to the genesis of the Belfast Co-operative, it is worth spending a little time exploring his social views. Shortly before the establishment of the society, MacCormac gave an address to the Belfast Mechanics' Institute. It is suffused with the Owenite motif that ignorance is at the root of social problems. Thus, he cites the ignorance of those who look down on the working class and fail to see that this class provides the principal material support for all other classes, and he also explores the ignorance of the working class itself. He has very interesting things to say about the nature of race and gender oppression. On race, for instance:

> This will not be considered a digression from the subject, unless by those who will take it on them to affirm that the black mechanic is to be excluded from the same means of improvement, which are or should be possessed by his white brother; or else that he is incapable of benefiting by them, which last I deny, as utterly false and untenable.[27]

And on women:

> Let them buy and sell; make contracts and annul them; deny or affirm; represent or be represented; exhort or condemn…in a word, let them have the same voice in society which men have, and the same liberty to come and go, with equal independence of each other, and of the other sex.[28]

His solution is 'Co-operation'.[29] In an appendix to the printed version of this address, he provides a brief bibliography of useful books, and thereby provides an insight into his own influences. Not surprisingly, first mention goes to 'Owen's Writings'.[30] However, MacCormac was not a mere follower of Owen. One area that immediately stands out in the address is the deeply religious (if unorthodox) basis of MacCormac's world view; and, although he is deeply critical of the evil effects of sectarianism, there is none of the abiding mistrust of the religious that is found in Owen's work. MacCormac also displays a considerable admiration for the work of the Cork theorist and activist, William Thompson, citing his works on the distribution of wealth and the formation of communities, as well as his pioneering text on the oppression of women. Other authors mentioned include Frances Wright, Hall, Combe and Gray. His citation of a good number of co-operative journals also indicates that he was keeping very much abreast of recent developments in the movement.[31]

At the first general meeting of the co-operative, MacCormac gave an address where he outlined the rules and the goals of the society. It is clear from the rules that the Belfast venture was in the mould of the earlier London and Brighton developments. The members gained their share in the organisation by subscribing 20 shillings (which could be paid in a lump sum, or in monthly instalments). When sufficient capital had been raised by this means, a shop would be opened that would purchase wholesale (with priority given to goods sold or produced by members) and sell retail both to members (who would be expected to purchase as much as possible from this source) and to the general public. The resulting surplus would eventually be used in 'the purchasing of Land, setting up of Manufactories, and the establishing of Schools, Lectures, Libraries, Reading-rooms, Hospitals, Boarding-houses'.[32] However, although this ultimate goal was located in the future, in the meantime the association would foster co-operative values by establishing a reading room, subscribing to newspapers and holding meetings.

Certainly the opening weeks of the project saw a good deal of activity. A shop was opened at 56 John Street. In the first week, this shop sold £14 worth of goods, in the second £21, and in the third £30. A sum of £61 of capital was employed and £126 was paid for wholesale purchases. A 'shopman' was paid half a guinea a week, and the rent of the establishment was 12 guineas a year. MacCormac noted that the members calculated that they were generating 7 per cent profit on sales, but in a critical aside noted that 'this is but a surmise, as they did not, although advised to do so, take stock at the month's end, and keep a daily tally of the amount of each article sold'.[33] Above the shop, there was a reading room with a capacity for fifty people, where there were nightly meetings for 'mutual instruction' and weekly business meetings. Money was also spent on newspapers, and plans were in place to purchase a library of 'moral and scientific works' for the members. The first

issue of a society journal, the *Belfast Co-operative Advocate*, came out, with 24 pages containing the 'Prospectus' of the association, a long essay on co-operation (anonymous, but some evidence that it was written by MacCormac[34]), a brief account of the founding meetings, a list of officers, the rules, an educational section on anatomy and chemistry, and concluding 'axioms' on labour and co-operation. Further plans included the establishment of a house where unmarried members could 'live in common', and the setting up of a school, which would also be open to the public.

Expansion

In the course of 1830, a further six co-operative societies opened in Ulster. A Second Belfast Co-operative was established, along with societies in Armagh, Monaghan, Dungannon, Derry and Larne; and in 1831 we have evidence of a 'White-House' Co-operative Society.[35] In the case of Armagh, a meeting of the First Armagh Co-operative Society is recorded on 28 June 1830; according to the *Newry Examiner*, the 'room…was filled by the working and wealthy classes of the citizens'.[36] In this month also, the Armagh society published a volume containing an address on co-operation and the rules of the association. It was entitled *Words of Wisdom Addressed to the Working Classes; Containing Simple Directions By Which they may secure to themselves, and to their descendants for ever, an abundant supply of all the comforts and conveniences, with many of the luxuries and refinements of life*. The book was dedicated to 'Robert Owen The Benefactor of the Human Race'.[37] The author is anonymous, though the National Library of Ireland attributes the pamphlet to Henry MacCormac.[38] Certainly MacCormac had links with Armagh, having been born in the county, and he did speak at the initial meeting of the society.[39] MacCormac was not, however, the only Owenite speaker available to Armagh. At the June meeting, contributions were made by a number of individuals apart from MacCormac, including Edward Gardner.[40] Gardner was in the chair at the annual dinner of the Armagh Benevolent Society in January 1830, where he gave a speech in which his Owenite sympathies were manifest:

> After paying a high compliment to the genius and philanthropy of the celebrated Mr Owen, he said…Wealth is the production of human labour…alone…[W]hat is called 'wealth' depends, in reality, upon the ignorance of mankind. It is ignorance which renders it effective, and it is only want of knowledge which prevents the truly useful members of society, who are now plunged in poverty and all its concomitant evils, from being truly rich by enjoying the production of their own labour… My friends, the evil is competition…Do you not see, that if you were to stand together – that if you were your own employers and your own customers – if, in a word, you kept all you produced, that the wretchedness,

> and the misery…would vanish, and all would be happy?…Let the spirit of independence arise. Cease to be slaves![41]

At the opening meeting of the co-operative, he made two long interventions in a similar vein and alluded to the plight of workers in Armagh:

> Now, I assert it as a fact, that the mechanics employed in our town do not receive more, upon an average, than 1s. 6d. daily, the weaver does not earn 6d., and that the day-labourer does not receive more than 4d. while multitudes of spinners can barely earn one penny per day!…How in the name of humanity, can these, upon such a pittance, support themselves, and their families, even while able to toil.[42]

A John Burns gave a speech in which he stated that 'our object is to explain to all, but especially to the working classes, the principles of Co-operation', and, interestingly, referred to the *Words of Wisdom* pamphlet in a manner which suggests a degree of co-authorship: 'I hold in my hand a little pamphlet, which we have written and now publish: as it contains our views on this subject' – and he, and not MacCormac, proceeded to read from this text.[43] There were also speeches from a John Magowan and a Henry McKean. Whatever the truth of the issue concerning the authorship of the pamphlet, it is clear that Armagh was able to draw on a number of influences.

As with the Belfast society, the Armagh venture laid out the vision of social community to be established in time and combined it with details of a trading enterprise based on the wholesale/retail pattern already in practice in Belfast. Some elements were different – the maximum number of members was to be 100 rather than the 200 in Belfast, members were required to purchase a minimum of two shillings and sixpence worth of goods per week in the society shop, subscription was threepence a week, and so on, but in their essentials the two enterprises were very similar.[44] Of the other societies of which we have any knowledge, the Second Belfast Co-operative was set up in December 1830 to include individuals who had failed to join the first society in time.[45] The Whitehouse Co-operative Society seems to owe its existence to the activities of the important linen manufacturer James Grimshaw, who, in fact, chaired a meeting of the First Belfast Co-operative.[46]

This burgeoning of societies seems to have filled the co-operators with great heart and generated a good deal of social optimism. As James Emerson, who is recorded at a number of meetings of the Belfast Co-operative, wrote to Robert Owen in February 1831:

> Best of all there is a growing affection and brotherly love amongst our members, which is manifested more and more every day, so that the

> happy moment, the wished for object – community of property and interest – may not be so far distant as some would lead us to imagine.[47]

At the more mundane commercial level, the Belfast store continued to generate profit. By August 1830, weekly sales amounted to £34, and the net profit from the previous quarter amounted to £21 1s. 1d.[48] By February 1831, the total capital of the society was £224, and an estimated profit of 50 per cent had been made in the previous year.[49] The Belfast association also took part in the national organisation of the co-operative movement, sending a man called McClure as a delegate to the first Co-operative Congress, held in Salford in May 1831, and Francis Beatty to the second congress held in Birmingham in October of the same year.[50] Ulster was also clearly seen as fertile territory for the national organisation, for at the third congress, held in London in April 1832, it was proposed that the United Kingdom be divided into nine missionary co-operative districts, each having a council and a secretary; Belfast was chosen as one such district (the others were London, Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow, Dublin, Cork, Edinburgh and Norwich).[51]

Culture, ideology and politics

The various accounts in the press of the meetings of the First Belfast Co-operative Society enable us to piece together some picture of the culture and ideology of the members, and of their public persona. The term 'respectable' figures time and again in these accounts. One manifestation of this, again frequently mentioned, is the temperate nature of the social meetings – toasts were 'drank in coffee, (no spirituous liquors having been introduced at all)', with 'the members…proving themselves…true advocates of a rational system of temperance'.[52] The accounts also refer to the respectable clothing of the participants and, with their particular stress on the quality of the females present, clearly seek to portray solid and sound families. Thus in an account of a social meeting in 1832, the *Northern Whig* stated that 'every one present was remarkably well dressed; the ladies (many of them exceedingly handsome) appearing in even fashionable and tasteful attire'.[53] The politeness of the gatherings is also commented upon – 'good breeding, good sense, and the utmost courtesy distinguished the proceedings of the entire evening'.[54] The sensible use of leisure time is also highlighted. These are people who spend their evenings attending lectures, and improving their minds, and even their entertainment consists of the singing of traditional airs and vigorous dancing. They are also people who are able and willing to have good relations with their social 'betters' (the accounts always mention the attendance of these visitors, guests or speakers). Clearly journalistic conventions, hyperbole and ideological spin are at work here, but the underlying picture of a self-consciously 'respectable'

working class does seem an accurate one. Certainly, the *Belfast Newsletter* was prepared to let this image come through. At the end of an account of an earlier social meeting is the following:

> When we look at this meeting of the working classes, and see that its distinguishing characteristics were temperance, an ardent desire for the acquisition and distribution of knowledge, and the promotion of harmony and good feeling among all, we cannot but conclude that Co-operative Societies, and social meetings of this kind, must have a surprising moral effect; and, from the feeling of self-respect which they are calculated to generate in the minds of the labouring classes, that they will be induced to think and act for themselves, which is the only way they need ever expect to better their conditions permanently.[55]

In *social* terms these people were respectable, but what of their political views? We have quite a few accounts of the beliefs of Henry MacCormac. As a prominent Belfast citizen, he was able to have his thoughts published in book and pamphlet form, or in accounts of speeches printed in newspapers, or in letters to the same. We have considerably less evidence for the views of the 'tradesmen' co-operators. Fortunately we do have the recorded speech of Thomas Moreland, a butcher from Hercules Street, which he gave at the second quarterly meeting of the Belfast society on 18 August 1830. Moreland was an active member of the association and had also, according to the *Northern Whig*, been completely deaf for fourteen years. He spoke of the need to overcome the ignorance of all classes, the necessity of fundamental social reform, the uncertainties of working-class life, the value of co-operation, and his vision of a better world. As with MacCormac, the underlying Christianity is evident. Given the rarity of speeches by working-class Irish Owenites, it is worth quoting this speech at some length:

> We now live in an age, when, not withstanding the many difficulties with which we are now surrounded, knowledge is spreading fast. We now find classes of men…who are capable of reasoning, with precision, on cause and effect, who, a few years ago, were unacquainted with the merest elements of knowledge. But, not only does the thirst of knowledge increase with its acquisition, but men are incited to improve their condition by it. God knows, this is much to be desired. I am of [the] opinion, that the misery and distress which prevail on all sides, must continue until some radical change takes place in the constitution of society. There is a remedy by which the change can be brought about, without violence or injury to any; this remedy is Co-operative union; and I am of [the] opinion, that, by means of it, we may rid the world of poverty, ignorance, and vice. We may possess employment, but how short a time may it not so continue? – how soon may not our health

> forsake us, or accident deprive us of the power of exertion, or even cut short the thread of life, leaving our families to endure the pangs of want? But if we will join our resources and our efforts, we shall be able to create an abundance for all; and should unforeseen calamity befall us then, it will be deprived of mental pain, for we shall leave our children in the midst of kind friends and endearing connexions, who will bring them up in principles of virtue and benevolence…When Co-operation prevails, then only will the blessings of Christianity take practical effect, which cannot be the case under the present system, when every man, if he would thrive in the world, must be ready to take advantage of his unsuspecting neighbours…Let the working-classes be just to themselves, and work for each other, and not for those, alone, who, however unwilling to do so, must continue to oppress them so long as they live by competition. When they acquire wisdom enough to do so, they will undoubtedly hasten the advent of that happy period when universal peace and happiness will prevail among men; or as the prophet Micah has so beautifully expressed it, when 'They shall beat their swords into plough-shares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up the sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.' This, my friends, in my opinion, Co-operation will tend to accomplish; and may God hasten it.[56]

Both anxiety and hope are present – a sense of the precariousness of employment, the fear of destitution for one's family, but also, in the best sense of the word, a deep utopian hope for a better state of affairs – plus the belief that co-operation provided a hard-headed means of obtaining that future. One senses here the attractions of the Owenite fusion of the critical, anticipatory and practical.

Another useful source for determining the ideological mix of the association is the toast proposed at their social gatherings. We have information on this for two meetings, held in March 1831 and April 1832. A range of toasts expressed the core beliefs concerning the working classes as the source of wealth, and the value of knowledge and co-operation: 'The Working People – the producers of all wealth'; 'All institutions, having for their object the improvement of the Working Classes'; 'Knowledge and Co-operation – may they extend their influence, till ignorance, poverty, and crime, are banished from the face of the earth'; 'Voluntary equality of wealth'; 'May the withering blight of competition soon give place to the rising sun of Co-operation, under whose mild influence peace and plenty, concord and happiness, shall flourish for ever'; and 'May a more charitable feeling prevail among those who are opposed to each other in religion and politics'. There are also toasts to individuals, notably those who were deemed to be supporters of the working class, and included activists, theoreticians, philanthropists and politicians: 'Robert Owen, the benevolent

friend of the human race'; 'Messrs Thompson and Morgan [John Minter Morgan], the enlightened authors of the "Distribution of Wealth," and the "Revolt of the Bees"'; 'Dr Birkbeck, and Mechanics' Institutes'; and 'Lord Brougham [radical Whig politician and educational reformer], Monsieur Jactotot [Joseph Jacotot, radical French educationalist], and Universal Education'. There were also toasts to the rights of women: 'The more general Education of the Female Sex, by which they will be elevated to their proper rank in society'; and 'Miss Frances Wright [founder of Nashoba community for freed slaves in the USA, and sexual radical], Mrs Wheeler [Anna Wheeler, friend of William Thompson and crucial source for his radical ideas on women], and the Rights of Woman'; a third toast addressed to women seems more like a conventional 'gallantry' of the period: 'Our Female Friends, who have favoured us with their company this evening'. A fourth group of toasts were directed at visiting and supportive members of 'higher' classes: 'Our worthy guests, Mr Grimshaw, Counsellor Emerson, and Dr M'Cormac'; and finally, to the people who had lent them the venue: 'The Marquis and Marchioness of Donegall, who have ever been distinguished for their support of useful institutions.'[57]

The most public manifestation of a political stance by the co-operators was their role in the 'Reform' activity leading up to the Whigs' Great Reform Bill of 1832. MacCormac was a warm supporter of the reforms. He spoke at the large Reform meeting held in the Belfast Court House on 28 November 1830, along with other names we have already seen in connection with the co-operative meetings – S. Archer, J. Emerson and another member of the Grimshaw family. MacCormac managed to get Robert Owen's name into his speech, which was basically an attack on aristocratic government and society, and a plea for measures to raise the standard of life of the poor. Although he did not think 'that a mere Reform' would itself sweep away ignorance and exploitation, he was of the opinion that 'it is only…by a renovated system of representation, that we can expect to get men into power, who will not only understand the true interests of the country, but who will enforce those measures which will best promote these interests (*Cheers*)'.[58] In the same month, in Armagh, another Reform meeting was held where, significantly, two figures associated with the local co-operative were in prominent positions – Edward Gardner was made secretary to the meeting and Henry McKean gave the opening speech.[59]

On 29 September 1831, a great march of the trades of Belfast in favour of Reform took place in the city.[60] What is striking about this gathering of about 3,000 people is the prominent role played by the co-operators, with the two Belfast societies leading the parade, and a third, the Whitehouse society, including the manufacturer James Grimshaw, arriving first at the gathering place, with its band playing and flags flying. The iconography of the banners and flags, even the repertoire of the bands, provides further evidence of the ideological currents within the co-operators. The First Belfast

Co-operative Society led the march. On arrival, its band had played 'God Save the King', which, according to the *Northern Whig*, 'was received with cheers that rent the air'. They carried three flags. The first was of white satin, 'emblazoned with a beehive, and with other emblems of industry and co-operation'. This standard also carried the inscriptions 'W.R.' (William IV), 'Reform', 'Knowledge is Power', and 'Union is Strength' – a mixture of the patriotic, liberal–constitutional and co-operative. The second flag, also of white satin, was predominantly constitutional in content: 'We are for our King, Country, and our Rights', 'Retrenchment, Reform, Peace', and 'Grey, Brougham, Russell, and Althorpe'. The third banner was an expression of solidarity for the Poles, following the Tsarist suppression of their independence struggle. This flag was black with white letters – 'Alas! Poland!' – carried 'by an officer in deep mourning'. The Second Belfast Co-operative Society followed on behind. Its flag concentrated on the constitutional issue – depictions of Lord John Russell and of 'the King dissolving the House of Peers' accompanied mottoes such as 'The Country as it is' and 'The Country as it will be', and 'The Bill, the whole Bill, and nothing but the Bill'. The 'emblems of Commerce, Agriculture' present possibly refer to more explicitly co-operative elements on the flag.

Next in line came separate trades, with their own flags – the tailors, the weavers, the cotton-spinners and the umbrella-makers. After them was the Whitehouse Co-operative Society, who marched with the spinners and printers employed at the Grimshaw mill in Whitehouse. The *Northern Whig* report emphasised the presence of James Grimshaw and other members of his family:

> They…were attended by James Grimshaw, Esq., who on this, as on all other proper occasions, does not hesitate to join with his men in constitutionally expressing their approval or disapproval of any public measure, or in aiding any good work that might meliorate the condition of the working classes. There were also some other members of this respectable family present; who seemed equally alive to the interest of the proceedings.

Behind this body came many more trades, most carrying flags and banners, including a number of Union Jacks. Thus, there were the bakers and gilders, the butchers, chandlers and skinners, the coopers, the smiths, the sawyers, the plasterers, the watchmakers and jewellers, the cork-cutters, the ship carpenters and sail-makers, the tobacco-spinners, and the letterpress printers and bookbinders. Behind these came further workers not organised into separate trades.

When the march arrived at Donegall Place, it was attacked by a group of 80 to 90 people described by the *Northern Whig* as an 'anti-Repeal or Orange Faction'. Since this attack occurred at the head of the parade, one

assumes that the co-operators bore the brunt. In the not entirely unbiased words of the *Northern Whig*, 'the wicked ruse failed: the ranks of the Reformers remained unbroken, not a man of them offered the slightest opposition; but the crowd who accompanied the Reformers walked over the pitiable Orange faction'. After this confrontation, and after signatures had been collected for a Reform petition, the entire march accompanied the Whitehouse society a mile out of town, and then returned to town and dispersed. The *Belfast Newsletter*, which was hostile to the march and its aims, said virtually nothing explicitly about the participation of the co-operators – its sole such reference being 'a party from the White-house arrived, with an elegant flag incircled with the words "Co-operative Society", and covered with devices expressive of attachment to the reform cause. This party was attended by an amateur band, which furnished excellent music.'[61]

Debating co-operation

The *Belfast Newsletter* could surely by this time have had little doubt that the co-operators were not a mere philanthropic society without a political agenda. If so, there is no evidence in the form of editorials. It continued to take the odd shot at Owen, adding the charges of 'infidelity' and amoral determinism to the usual list.[62] The newspaper did, however, have a pointed, albeit polite exchange with Henry MacCormac. In September 1830 they ran an editorial on MacCormac's recent thoughts on co-operative communities. The tone was reminiscent of some of the earlier commentary on Robert Owen – polite rejection:

> Our townsman, Dr M'Cormac, has published a long and elaborate statement of a plan of making provision for the unemployed poor…However widely we may differ from these views, and however visionary we may in some respects regard them, we cannot avoid admiring the spirit of philanthropy by which they have been primarily suggested, and the pure and ardent desire of diffusing universal happiness which they uniformly evince.[63]

He was deemed to have got his community plans from Robert Owen's New Harmony community, adding, sarcastically, 'the success of which is well known'. MacCormac wrote a spirited letter of defence in response. He countered the 'visionary' charge by redefining the word in terms of hope rather than of simplistic practicality: 'there are thousands of individuals in the most destitute condition of mind and body…if to hope that the day will yet come when the evils shall be greatly diminished, or shall altogether cease, suffice to entitle such views to the charge of being visionary, most freely shall I grant the propriety of the imputation'.[64] On the question of

Owen's influence he portrayed himself as someone who would listen to good advice from whatever quarter it came, and that he could not 'perceive with you that because Mr Owen's plans have failed, mine, yours, or any body's else, should also fail'.

In fact, MacCormac was in no way breaking with his Owenite influences. Rather, these new reflections developing throughout 1830 and 1831 were more focused on the grander schemes of Owen, and away from the wholesale/resale co-operative shop model of the Ulster co-operators. What he did have to say on the commercial co-operatives was highly critical. This is very evident in his 1831 text, *An Appeal in Behalf of the Poor*. These types of societies 'have excited great expectations, but they have not realised their objects'.[65] There followed a string of objections, which, although explicitly referring to the generality of these societies in Britain and Ireland, surely must have some basis in his experience of the local societies: their funds were too small; it was very difficult to get members to purchase goods for ready cash in the stores; the expectations of profits were too 'sanguine'; the shop assistant could not be relied upon; and they were no match for long-established retailers. More damning still were the attitudinal changes these ventures were deemed to have created: 'in the great majority [of these societies] they have converted men who were zealously employed in divising means for improving the happiness and intelligence of their families, and their fellow-creatures into plodding speculators'. And he continued:

> If any should succeed, it will be well, but it seems a pity that the energies of the thinking portion of the working-classes should have such unproductive occupation…They have also in many places raised a competitive, money-making spirit, the most opposed to those feelings of kindness, intelligence, and good will, which should actuate all who associate together with the admirable intention of rationally bettering the conditions of themselves and their fellow-men.

Instead, MacCormac wished to see government initiate communities for the poor. And to the question: 'by whom are [these measures] to be carried into effect[?]', there came the answer, 'Mr Robert Owen…I have no doubt that this gentleman would cheerfully undertake the task…Mr Owen… has repeatedly offered his assistance in the proper quarter, to the legislature; and why, oh, why were not his proposals accepted?'[66] Indeed, MacCormac's critique of commercial co-operatives was not alien to Owen's own expressed thoughts on a number of occasions, before and after 1831. The London co-operator William Lovett noted that, when Owen returned from America in 1829, 'he looked somewhat coolly on these Trading Associations, and very candidly declared that the mere buying and selling formed no part of his grand Co-operative scheme'.[67] In 1836, after visiting Carlisle, Owen wrote:

> To my surprise I found there are 6 or 7 Co-operative Societies in different parts of the town, doing well, as they think, that is, making some profit by joint stock retail trading. It is, however, high time to put an end to the notion very prevalent in the public mind, that this is the Social System which we contemplate, or that it will form any part of the arrangements in the New Moral World.[68]

After 1833, there is no further mention in the press of the various co-operative societies in Ulster. In late 1833, there is a report of a special meeting of the First Belfast Co-operative Society, held to offer assistance to the legal team fighting the heirs of William Thompson (who wished to overturn his will leaving his estate to co-operation).[69] After this there is silence. We have, as yet, no evidence as to what was going on after this time. Certainly, 1834 was a calamitous year for the co-operative society phase of the Owenite movement, culminating in the failure to establish national structures in the Labour Exchange scheme. As Podmore wrote: 'The disastrous year 1834 broke up many of the Co-operative Societies, and reduced those that survived to quiescence.'[70] It is therefore not particularly surprising that the Ulster co-operatives cease to generate news, but the precise nature of their existence, or non-existence, is not known.

Conclusion

By 1834, the *Belfast Newsletter* was deeply concerned with trade unionism in Ulster. The context was the intensification throughout Ireland of labour unrest and employer resistance.[71] The newspaper, which had long fulminated against 'combinations', excoriated the unions with the greatest of vehemence. Here, a real threat was perceived and the paper's response was the language of class war:

> They have not a right to injure others, and to endanger the whole frame of society for their own particular benefit…In no instance has a system of this kind succeeded, and indeed ultimate success is impossible without the alternative of a plebeian and patrician civil war, and hence the misguided persons engaged in combinations have always been the eventual sufferers.[72]

And again:

> Let them recollect that if they arouse against their proceedings, the intelligence and the respectability of society, they will inevitably be the ultimate sufferers in the brief, but decisive contest that must ensue.[73]

This was how the paper treated those it really feared. There is a tantalising connection here between this trade unionism and trade co-operation. It was not simply that Owen himself was attempting to woo, if not capture, trade unionism for his projects, but that someone we know had been a member of the First Belfast Co-operative Society publicly associated himself with trade unionism. This was Francis Beatty, engraver, and long-time secretary of the First Belfast Society. A meeting of the trade unions of Belfast was held on 14 April 1834 to protest against the severe sentences given to the Tolpuddle Martyrs, and was opened by Beatty, who proposed that George Kerr, soon to be arrested himself, should take the chair.[74] In what capacity Beatty was there is not known. At the very least this trajectory is interesting and suggests further areas of research.

The tone adopted towards co-operation by the *Belfast Newsletter* was considerably different from that used against trade unionism. In the case of Owen, its predominant characterisation of him was as a kind-hearted, but dotty, schemer. Even early in 1834, we have this account of 'Mr Owen and the Operatives of Sheffield':

> A very extraordinary letter has been addressed to Mr Owen attacking in mild terms, but with uncommonly vigorous arguments, some of the visionary schemes of that amiable enthusiast. 'The Sheffield Regeneration Society' had been formed under the direction of Mr Owen himself, and at the outset its members had imbibed the impracticable philosophy of their patron; but they happened to have amongst them thinking men, and these quickly perceived that the speculations of Mr Owen were not fitted for a race of beings, who must accommodate themselves to the circumstances of the world as Providence has actually made it, and not as theorists would suppose it.[75]

Henry MacCormac, as a perceived follower of Owen, was broadly characterised in the same manner, but, as a prominent local citizen, was treated with greater respect in the pages of the newspaper – the more so after 1832 when he became something of a local hero for his brave and compassionate treatment of cholera sufferers, when that disease hit Belfast. The rank-and-file co-operators were allowed to appear in the paper, without editorial comment, as thoroughly respectable and upright members of the working class, engaged in self-improvement, and with amicable relationships with members of other classes. Taken with other sources, however, the co-operators emerge as a more complicated phenomenon, with rich and complicated ideological strands, and, as in the attacked march of 1831, willing to engage in broader political activity. Their brief, and subsequently forgotten, appearance throws light on the aspirations and fears of a section of the early Irish working class.[76]

Notes

1. J.F.C. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America* (London, 1969), pp. 200–1. These co-operative stores are to be distinguished from the far better known co-operative shops which began with the 'Rochdale Pioneers' in 1844.
2. For Owen see G. Claeys, *Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); also Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America*; an old (1907) but still useful text is F. Podmore, *Robert Owen: A Biography*, 2 vols (New York, 1971).
3. *Belfast Newsletter*, 22 August 1817.
4. Ibid., 2, 6 July, 24 December, 1819, 20 April 1821.
5. Ibid., 9 October 1818.
6. Ian Donnachie has provided the most detailed account of Owen's Irish itinerary to date, in *Robert Owen: Owen of New Lanark and New Harmony* (East Linton, 2000), pp. 190–6, including the fact that Owen called 'briefly at Belfast' (ibid., p. 191).
7. Robert Owen, *Report of the Proceedings at the Several Public Meetings, Held in Dublin* (Dublin, 1823), p. 3.
8. M. O'Connell (ed.), *The Correspondence of Daniel O'Connell*, Vol. 2 (Shannon, 1972), p. 471.
9. *Belfast Newsletter*, 29 November 1822.
10. Ibid., 18 March 1823.
11. On Ralahine, see Vincent Geoghegan, 'Ralahine: An Irish Owenite community, 1831–1833', *International Review of Social History*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1991), pp. 377–411; also R.G. Garnett, *Co-operation and the Owenite Socialist Communities in Britain 1825–45* (Manchester, 1972), ch. 4.
12. Podmore, *Robert* Owen, Vol. II, ch. 16.
13. *Belfast Newsletter*, 27 November 1829.
14. 'Proceedings of the Belfast Co-operative Joint-Stock Company', in the *Belfast Co-operative Advocate*, January 1830; *Belfast Newsletter*, 5 January 1830; *Northern Whig*, 4 January 1830.
15. On MacCormac, see Vincent Geoghegan, 'MacCormac, Henry', in Thomas Duddy (ed.), *Dictionary of Irish Philosophers* (Bristol, 2004), pp. 211–13; also Geoghegan, 'The emergence and submergence of Irish socialism, 1821–51', in D.G. Boyce, Robert Eccleshall and Vincent Geoghegan (eds), *Political Thought in Ireland Since the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1993), pp. 103–6; and also Thomas Duddy, *A History of Irish Thought* (London, 2002), pp. 236–40.
16. Henry MacCormac, *On the Best Means of Improving the Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes* (London, 1830), p. 23.
17. Ibid.
18. *Belfast Co-operative Advocate*, January 1830. My emphasis.
19. *Northern Whig*, 5 April 1832.
20. *Belfast Co-operative Advocate*, January 1830.
21. *Belfast Directory for 1831–32* (Belfast, n.d.), pp. 2, 11.
22. Ibid., pp. 10, 25, 37.
23. *Belfast Newsletter*, 25 February 1831.
24. *Belfast Co-operative Advocate*, January 1830.
25. *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 May 1830.
26. *Northern Whig*, 5 April 1832.

27. MacCormac, *On the Best Means*, p. 11.
28. Ibid., p. 13.
29. Ibid., p. 21.
30. Ibid., p. 24.
31. This interest was in turn reciprocated: the *British Co-operator* (1830) described MacCormac as 'one of the illuminati of the age'. See G.J. Holyoake, *The History of Co-operation in England*, Vol. 1 (London, 1875), p. 137.
32. *Belfast Co-operative Advocate*, January 1830.
33. MacCormac, *On the Best Means*, p. 24.
34. In particular, the essay contained MacCormac's characteristic pen-portraits of the sick poor he had visited as a physician.
35. *Northern Whig*, 13 December 1830, 3 October 1831.
36. *Newry Examiner*, 7 July 1830.
37. *Words of Wisdom Addressed to the Working Classes; Containing Simple Directions By Which they may secure to themselves, and to their descendants for ever, an abundant supply of all the comforts and conveniences, with many of the luxuries and refinements of life* (Newry, 1830), p. 2.
38. As does J.F.C. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America*, p. 322.
39. *Belfast Newsletter*, 13 July 1830.
40. An Armagh directory of 1840 includes an Edward Gardner amongst the Commissioners for the Local Government of the City. It also indicates that the owners of an Iron, Lead, and Zinc Factory were S. and E. Gardner (a Samuel Gardner was also a Commissioner for the Local Government of the City). Moreover, under 'Ironmongers and Hardware Merchants', it refers to an Edward Gardner. *The New Commercial Directory of Armagh, Newry, Omagh, Strabane, Dungannon, Lisburn, Lurgan, Portadown, and Neighbouring Towns* (Derry, 1840), pp. 33, 35.
41. *Belfast Newsletter*, 22 January 1830. According to Holyoake: 'The *Newry Telegraph* reported two fervid speeches on Co-operation by Edward Gardener [*sic*] and John Stephenson' at this event. Holyoake, *The History of Co-operation in England*, Vol. 1, p. 147.
42. *Newry Examiner*, 7 July 1830.
43. Ibid. John Burns, who wrote an enthusiastic letter to Robert Owen when the co-operative was founded ('My soul is too full of admiration and gratitude for the goodness of your heart and the value of your labours'), is listed in an Armagh directory as an 'engineer'. See Podmore, *Robert Owen*, Vol. II, p. 397, and *The New Commercial Directory of Armagh*, p. 40.
44. *Words of Wisdom*, pp. 18–20.
45. *Northern Whig*, 13 December 1830.
46. Ibid., 3 October 1831; *Belfast Newsletter*, 25 February 1831.
47. Podmore, *Robert Owen*, Vol. II, p. 399.
48. *Belfast Newsletter*, 27 August 1830.
49. Ibid., 25 February 1831.
50. Ibid., 3 June 1831, 14 October 1831.
51. Holyoake, *The History of Co-operation in England*, Vol. 1, p. 191. It is not known if Belfast ever got its council and secretary.
52. *Belfast Newsletter*, 11 March 1831.
53. *Northern Whig*, 5 April 1832.
54. Ibid.

55. *Belfast Newsletter*, 11 March 1831.
56. *Northern Whig*, 23 August 1830. The newspaper calls him J. Moreland, but this is probably a misprint or a mistake of the reporter. All other references to Moreland in connection with the society call him Thomas, and he was a butcher.
57. *Northern Whig*, 5 April 1832; *Belfast Newsletter*, 11 March 1831.
58. *Belfast Newsletter*, 29 November 1830.
59. *Newry Examiner*, 17 November 1830.
60. *Northern Whig*, 3 October 1831.
61. *Belfast Newsletter*, 30 September 1831.
62. Ibid., 29 January 1830.
63. Ibid., 7 September 1830.
64. Ibid., 14 September 1830.
65. Henry MacCormac, *An Appeal in Behalf of the Poor* (Belfast, 1830), p. 24.
66. Ibid., pp. 25–6.
67. Podmore, *Robert Owen*, Vol. II, p. 421.
68. Ibid., p. 453.
69. *The Belfast Newsletter*, 4 October 1833.
70. Podmore, *Robert Owen*, Vol. II, p. 452.
71. John W. Boyle, *The Irish Labor Movement in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, D. C, 1988), pp. 38–41; Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland 1824–1960* (Dublin, 1992), pp. 17–18.
72. *Belfast Newsletter*, 14 March 1834.
73. Ibid., 11 April 1834.
74. *The Guardian, and Constitutional Advocate*, 15 April 1834. For Kerr, see Andrew Boyd, *The Rise of the Irish Trade Unions* (Tralee, 1985), pp. 40–1, 122–40. See also Mel Doyle, 'Belfast and Tolpuddle', *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, vol. 2 (1976), pp. 2–12. The 'Tolpuddle Martyrs' were six Dorset agricultural labourers who, in 1834, were transported to Australia for attempting to set up a trade union.
75. *Belfast Newsletter*, 28 January 1834.
76. I would like to thank Liam Kennedy, Graham Walker, Lorna Davidson, Ian Donnachie and Emmet O'Connor for their comments on drafts of this chapter.

2

Labour and Politics, 1830–1945: Colonisation and Mental Colonisation

Emmet O'Connor

Mental colonisation is what happens when a people reject their own values as 'backward' and try to fit themselves into the 'modern' paradigms of the metropolitan country. It is not the same as external influence. The mentally colonised do not adapt ideas to their own reality: they try to live in other people's reality. The process is most effective when underpinned by the economic integration of a colony into the metropole, and that in turn is most effective when the metropole has developed a capitalist economy. Whereas political colonisation may incorporate a native elite, capitalist colonisation generates economic inducements for the assimilation of the masses. Paradoxically, capitalist colonisation may also be so complete, or so ruthless, as to create major differences between the economic development of the colony and that of the metropole, and thereby intensify political resistance to colonialism. Such was the case with Ireland under the Union, when anglicisation and nationalism both consolidated, and in no organisations was the paradox more evident or more dysfunctional in its consequences than in the trade unions.

The great puzzle of Irish labour history is the contrast between a relatively strong trade union movement and a weak political left. As with so much in Irish historiography, explanations have hinged around positions on nationalism, and invariably been informed by modernisation theory or James Connolly. Ignoring capitalist colonisation, liberals and revisionist Marxists have focused on economic backwardness and the power of reaction, embodied par excellence in those three villains of socialist demonology: the priest, the peasant and the patriot.[1] Connolly, by contrast, complained of labour not linking the national and social struggles; but he saw that failure as due to conservatism rather than mental colonisation. Fundamentally, for Connolly, the problem *was* conservatism and the answer was socialist republicanism, and to this end he exaggerated the conservatism of the constitutional nationalists and the radicalism of the republicans. While rejecting the application of British models to Ireland on occasion, he was scathing about trade union support for the likes of Daniel

O'Connell and John Redmond.[2] Neither liberals and revisionist Marxists nor the Connolly school do justice to labour's achievement in surmounting the considerable problems posed by Irish industrial conditions, or explain why a movement so effective in trade unionism could be so inept in politics. It will be argued here that labour was not apolitical in the nineteenth century, that it endorsed nationalism as a rational response to capitalist colonisation, that it underwent a profound mental colonisation in the 1890s, and that the colonial legacy was intrinsic to labour's underachievement in the next century.

Capitalist colonisation

The impact of capitalist colonisation may be stated briefly. Supplying food and textiles to emergent industrial Britain and provisioning the transantlantic trade in the eighteenth century stimulated an 'economic miracle' in Ireland. A growth in population, from 2.5 million in 1753 to 6.8 million in 1821, encouraged the development of trades and trade unions. In the decade following the repeal of the anti-trade union Combination Acts in 1824, Dublin was regarded as the strongest centre of trade unionism in the United Kingdom (UK). Labour bodies were active too in other Irish cities and among agricultural workers.[3] The political union of Ireland and Britain in 1800 was followed by customs and monetary union in 1825. Unable to compete with the 'workshop of the world', Irish proto-industries sank into decay. Economic decline, the Great Famine and high emigration reduced the population from 8.2 million to 4.4 million between 1841 and 1911. Only in the Belfast region did capitalist colonisation generate a limited industrialisation, in textiles, engineering and shipbuilding. Elsewhere, the economy became massively dependent on agricultural exports to Britain. When the Free State was established in 1922, agriculture employed over half the labour force, agriculture, food and drink accounted for 86 per cent of exports, and 98 per cent of exports went to the UK.[4]

Irish labour was therefore unique in nineteenth-century Europe in two respects. First, Ireland was subordinated not merely to another country, but to the world's first capitalist economy, and its working class faced an overwhelming problem of deindustrialisation, long before most other countries had begun to industrialise. Second, the national question in Ireland was as much a labour issue as a middle-class one. One could not long defend wages, conditions or employment in a declining economy; one could not reverse decline without tariff protection; one could not have tariffs without self-government. Dublin craft unions were the first bodies in Ireland to demand repeal of the union with Britain, and Daniel O'Connell's repeal campaign would be labour's inaugural involvement with electoral politics. Over the next sixty years, labour would support successive national movements. There was, however, a significant change in the relationship after

the Confederate rising of 1848. The year 1848 was the last time that republicans would trust in revolutionary spontaneity and prepare for revolt on a near open basis. Henceforth, they would go underground in military conspiracy. By contrast, trade unions were moving in the opposite direction. Although decline persisted, trade unionism became weaker as a force and workers became weaker as a class; popular living conditions improved more over the next fifty years than they had over the previous 500; and unions became more sophisticated in organisation and more accepted socially. Trade union politics lost its revolutionary edge as their new-found status militated against engagement with republican illegality. Even Connolly was unable to resolve this contradiction in 1916, when he had to separate his Citizen Army work from the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU). The incongruity was evident in the 1860s, when workers were heavily involved with Fenianism, but trade unions officially kept their distance until the post-1867 amnesty campaign allowed them to express Fenian sympathies without preaching sedition.

Engagement with nationalism served too as a means of consolidating public acceptance of trade unions and raising other grievances. The National Trades Political Union, founded originally by Dublin artisans in 1831 to demand repeal, also agitated against tithes, petitioned for triennial parliaments and the secret ballot, and prepared reports on the decline of trade since 1800. For their part, national movements were usually sympathetic to trade unions. Even O'Connell, who, as a liberal and a pacifist, was critical of unions for their restrictive practices and violence, was careful to cultivate their favour.[5] There are numerous examples of Fenians redirecting their energies into trade unionism after 1867. Cork's Working Men's Association, Labourers' Society, and Grocers' and Wine Merchants' Working Men's Society, all formed in 1868–9, were Fenian dens, as was the Waterford Federated Trades' and Labour Union, founded in 1889. Fenians were also behind the brief presence of the International Working Men's Association in Ireland.[6] Parnell's party has been described as 'the most consistently radical and democratic of the parliamentary groups' in the 1880s. And Redmond's party regularly boasted that 'long before the existance of the [British] Labour Party, the cause of the workers in the House of Commons found constant, enthusiastic support from the Irish Party, which was essentially a Labour party'.[7] This is not to deny that labour's strategy marginalised the question of class in politics, or to suggest that national movements were in any way socialist. But the nationalists were not far to the right of contemporary labour. Before labour lurched to the left under the influence of Jim Larkin, remarkably few workers showed any interest in socialism. The joke about Connolly's Irish Socialist Republican Party having more syllables than members could be applied equally, if not quite as literally, to any of the dozen or so cognate groups that operated in Ireland from the 1880s, and which themselves drew heavily on British ideas and offer some prize examples of mental

colonisation.[8] But one could scarcely speak credibly of a socialist future when capitalism was not making, but unmaking, the working class.

Colonised labour

The anglicisation of labour was but one component of the broader anglicisation of Ireland after the Great Famine, reflected most obviously in the language shift from Irish to English, the growing economic dependency on Britain, and the increasing anglo-centrism of the Irish media. Labour felt the effect directly in the development of British labour law and the growth of British trade unions in Ireland. British craft unions had maintained Irish branches in Ireland from the 1840s, but the major British intervention came with 'new unionism' in 1889. The new unions catered for unskilled operatives and held out the hope that joining cross-channel societies would answer the problem of how to organise the mass of workers in an economy where the craft elite was too small to act as a 'leading sector'. The dimensions of this problem may be grasped from the 1911 census, when out of 900,000 employees, 350,000 were classed as agricultural or general labourers, 170,000 were in domestic or related service, and 200,000 worked in textiles and dressmaking. Thus, over seven out of every nine employees were located in largely unorganised, subsistence-waged employment. Though new unionism was largely crushed in Ireland in 1891, the experience accelerated the assimilation process. Thirteen Irish unions merged with British societies in 1896, and six more between 1898 and 1900. By 1900, about 75 per cent of the 70,000 trade unionists in Ireland belonged to British unions, and they saw themselves as part of a UK labour movement.[9] The effect was to make Ireland reliant on British organisation and the rhythm of British militancy. Outside the Belfast shipbuilding and engineering industries, however, the British unions could not surmount the obstacles presented by Irish employer militancy or the Irish employment structure. Nor did they make a concerted effort to do so.

British unions brought to Ireland not just their organisation, but their conceptions of industrial relations, labour concertation and the form of politics appropriate to trade unions. Though most British trade union leaders thought home rule to be the best way of settling the Irish question, they had no understanding of labour nationalism in Ireland: in England, the Tories were the party of the flag, and Scottish and Welsh nationalism were seen as a threat to the integration of the emerging British labour movement. The consequences of anglicisation were evident in the gestation of the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC). After its foundation in 1868 the British Trades Union Congress (BTUC) included Ireland within its remit. Inevitably, the interests of the small Irish affiliates were swallowed up in the BTUC agenda, and a limited Irish involvement denied it any effective representative role in Ireland. The resurgence of labour after 1888 encouraged four

attempts at establishing a national federation. Each inclined to one of two contending models of progress. Labour nationalists favoured a congress which would be geared primarily to legislative reform, inclusive in its definition of labour organisation and open to tactical engagement with the nationalist party. The other option, one with no rationale other than the English example, was to replicate the BTUC, concentrate on building industrial strength in a congress confined to orthodox trade unions, and develop a strictly labour politics, discrete from nationalism. There were radical and conservative dimensions to both options. The essential difference between their protagonists was one of cultural orientation. At rank-and-file level and in the provinces, labour nationalism remained strong. Crucially, however, Dublin Trades Council was acquiring a more anglocentric outlook, and its honorary status as Ireland's premier labour forum gave it a pivotal role. When the BTUC established a Labour Electoral Association in 1888, the council maintained regular contact with the association through its long-serving secretary, John Simmons. Though a nationalist himself, Simmons consistently championed the British model and its assumed dichotomy between labour and nationalism. Undoubtedly the Parnell split complicated the labour nationalist option. Whereas urban workers were Parnellite in the main, and radicals welcomed the possibility of an alliance with Parnell, who addressed a conference of the socialist-led Irish Labour League in 1891, Dublin Trades Council saw only problems in the schism and declared its neutrality on the subject. Michael Davitt, arguably Ireland's greatest living labour champion, deplored the penetration of British unions, and urged labour to assert its place within the national movement, recommending seven candidates in the 1892 general election, which returned four labour nationalist MPs. But Davitt had been the first to call for Parnell's resignation, and was in any case unwilling to devote himself to the leadership of Irish labour.[10]

In 1894 Dublin Trades Council finally acted decisively, and launched the ITUC. The Congress affirmed the need for a specifically Irish labour voice:

> Like the Imperial Parliament, the [BTUC] has become overladen…they cannot be expected to understand the wants of a community largely agricultural [or] expected to help revive Irish manufacture.[11]

At the same time, oblivious to the vast differences in economy, employment structure, trade unionism and politics between industrial Britain and undeveloping Ireland, the ITUC replicated the BTUC, and thereby deepened anglicisation. As the president declared in 1900:

> We are not ashamed to admit that we took as our model the procedure and methods which resulted in bringing material benefits for the workers of England during the past quarter of a century.[12]

Implicit in this statement lay errors so blatantly obvious that they can be explained only by mental colonisation. What sense, for example, did it make for a congress representing about 5 per cent of waged workers to restrict itself to 'bona fide' trade unions and exclude local societies of urban and rural labourers? Above all, what sense did it make to place a strategic emphasis on strength through industrial organisation, where labour was weak, rather than politics, where it might have had some leverage? Not surprisingly, the early ITUC had scarcely any progressive impact. It offered no leadership to labour up to 1918. During the 1913 lockout it was to the BTUC that the ITGWU turned for help. The ITUC played no part in the struggle. If anything, Congress was a treacherous illusion. In the vain assumption that the British model could be applied in Ireland, it narrowed the concept of labour to trade unions and stymied the evolution of labour politics.

The colonised mindset is clearest in the ITUC's dysfunctional stance on politics. Congress was supposed to be, *inter alia*, a parliamentary lobby: its executive was called the parliamentary committee, though the title was, like so much else, a copy from the BTUC. There were repeated overtures from Nationalist MPs to form a labour caucus within the party. When J.P. Nannetti, MP, a founder, secretary and president of Dublin Trades Council, who acted as the ITUC's unofficial liaison with the parliamentary party, arranged a meeting with John Redmond in 1902, Redmond offered to hold regular conferences with Congress, and represent its interests at Westminster. No equivalent rapport developed with the Unionists. A balancing approach to the Ulster Unionist leader, Colonel Saunderson, drew no response. Nonetheless, Congress deemed a formal labour nationalism to be illegitimate, and its next meeting with Redmond did not occur until 1909.[13] From 1901 to 1911, with the solitary exception of 1906, and that as a gesture of respect to an address from Nannetti, Congress passed Belfast-sponsored resolutions calling for 'non-political', that is, independent labour, representation or for affiliates to set up branches of the British Labour Party; even though the British party had no desire to become embroiled in Irish affairs and regarded the Nationalists as their 'natural allies' at Westminster. Each year the resolutions were passed, and each year nothing happened – outside Belfast at least. It was a typical example of how colonialism creates a fractured consciousness, in which people felt obliged to behave differently in different contexts, and abjure as trade unionists what they believed in as citizens.

Because Belfast was exceptional – only a separate chapter would do justice to the complexities of Ulster – it has been argued that Congress policy stemmed from a desire to avoid a breach with the Unionist North. In reality, the unity of North and South was tenuous and limited. Up to the 1930s, northern participation in Congress was confined chiefly to Belfast Trades Council and the tiny, local-based, unions in textiles. The big British-

based unions in shipbuilding and engineering regarded the ITUC as a disloyal splinter from the BTUC. When some interaction with nationalism became irresistible after 1917, the ITUC gave short shrift to the circumstances of Ulster Unionist workers.

The consequence of the ITUC's self-denying ordinance was not a seedling socialism, but depoliticisation. While farmers, agricultural labourers and merchants all received something in return for their nationalism, urban workers got nothing. Apart from some input into the extension to Ireland of the Trade Boards Act 1909, which dealt with the enforcement of minimum wages in 'sweated' industries, the ITUC's record on legislation was abysmal. By contrast, the land and labour associations, dismissed by Congress as soapboxes of Nationalist MPs, were instrumental in securing decent housing for 250,000 rural workers and their families.[14] Nor did rural labour nationalism diminish class consciousness: agricultural workers were the most militant and politicised sector of the trade union movement between 1918 and 1923. Both Tom Johnson and T.J. Murphy would later attribute the fact that from the 1920s to the 1960s more Labour TDs were elected from rural Munster than Dublin to the influence of the land and labour associations.[15]

A partial decolonisation

The foundation of the ITGWU by Jim Larkin in 1909 marked a turning point. The prompt was a mixture of the subjective – Larkin's suspension as an agent of the Liverpool-based National Union of Dock Labourers – and the objective – the Liverpool union was opposed to the syndicalist tactics of mass sympathetic action which Larkin thought necessary to fight Irish employers. Larkin quickly grasped the strategic implications, and was by no means alone in concluding that British unions would never commit sufficient resoures to Ireland to build a bargaining power for a small, disparate working class in a backward economy. Nor did he hesitate to embrace the concomitant politics. The preamble to the ITGWU's first rule book asked:

> Are we going to continue the policy of grafting ourselves on the English Trades Union movement, losing our identity as a nation in the great world of organised labour? We say emphatically, No. Ireland has politically reached her manhood.[16]

As the ITGWU expanded, Larkin identified it with the emergent 'Irish-Ireland' movement, using his paper, the *Irish Worker*, to emphasise 'again and again that the Irishising of everything within the four seas of Ireland is our object'. Like Connolly, he argued: 'the national forces of Ireland were ever composed mainly of working men, and if there is a future in Ireland it is the working men will achieve it'.[17] And like Connolly, he understood

'the national forces' to be the separatist tradition, and was trenchantly hostile to the Nationalist Party. By 1911 Larkinites were dominating the ITUC, and in 1912 the Congress ended its policy of calling for British Labour Party branches in Ireland and voted to form its own party. In keeping with the syndicalism of Connolly and Larkin, it was decided not to create a separate political structure. The Congress and party were to be one and the same, taking the name ITUC and Labour Party in 1914.

The First World War and revolution at home and abroad transformed Labour. The war economy created a labour shortage and wartime social conditions pushed workers to the left. Between 1916 and 1920, union membership rose from about 70,000 to 250,000, with the ITGWU taking the lion's share, and jumping from 5,000 to 120,000 members. The example of the ITGWU powered a revival of Irish trade unionism, and substantially the modern Irish labour movement was formed during these years. When the ITUC met in 1916, nineteen of the 37 affiliates were British-based. Five years later, the number of affiliates had risen to 42, while the number of British-based unions had fallen to thirteen, and they now represented under 25 per cent of total membership. Congress itself acquired a permanent secretariat, and offered a leadership to the movement for the first time, adopting a socialist programme in 1918, restyling itself the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (ILPTUC), and voting to become a single 'Irish Workers' Union' in 1919. The last initiative was stillborn, with dreadful consequences for labour unity.

The colonial legacy persisted. While Labour ended its neutrality on nationalism, its outlook remained qualified by conservatism and by a sense that the national question was a discrete issue. In practice, that meant tailing the prevailing consensus on nationalism – whether it take the form of Sinn Féin, the Free State or Fianna Fáil. The famous decision to withdraw from the 1918 general election semaphored Labour's abiding concern to walk within the bounds of consensus and, if possible, constitutionalism. In April Congress had joined Nationalists and Sinn Féin in the anti-conscription campaign. The success of its general strike against conscription on 23 April was a major boost to both the political and industrial self-confidence of trade unions. As late as September, Labour leaders remained sanguine about contesting the forthcoming general election. But the sudden collapse of Germany, a peacetime election and the return of Nationalist MPs to Westminster would again divide nationalist Ireland. If Labour contested independently and fared badly, it might burst the bubble of trade union confidence. If it did well, it might be caught between joining the Nationalists in parliament, or siding with Sinn Féin and non-constitutionalism. On 1 November a special conference of Congress endorsed an executive recommendation to withdraw by 96 to 23 votes.

Once the Sinn Féin landslide created a new consensus, Congress gave freely what it had just refused to sell. Over the next two and a half years

Labour assisted Sinn Féin in a variety of ways. Congress nominated delegates to Dáil commissions, lobbied the British and European left on Ireland, declared a general strike on May Day 1919 for international self-determination and proletarian solidarity, and called a general strike in April 1920 for the release of political prisoners on hunger strike. There were too numerous local or sectional protests, notably the Limerick soviet, the railway munitions strike and the motor permits strike; and extensive collaboration between Sinn Féin and Labour in the 1920 local elections. None of this support was demanded by Sinn Féin. It derived from pressure within the labour movement, and in some respects was used to provide a safe outlet for rank-and-file militancy. It is no coincidence that the four general strikes of these years occurred on or near 1 May and provided an excuse for celebrating or cancelling the May Day holiday.[18] Aside from the Democratic Programme, adopted by Dáil Éireann as its social manifesto in return for Labour delegates asserting Ireland's claim to self-determination at the international socialist conference in Berne in February 1919, Congress never sought concessions from Sinn Féin. It is highly likely that Sinn Féin would have been happy to treat, but having seen what had happened to the ITGWU in Easter Week, labour leaders were reluctant to tie their unions to the chariot wheel of the Republic. Congress never recognised Dáil Éireann until 1922, lest it prejudice industrial relations with British state agencies. What Labour really wanted, and secured, from Sinn Féin, was the benevolent neutrality of Dáil Éireann and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) towards wage movements, and the Republic's toleration of direct action by trade unionists during these 'red flag times' contrasted sharply with its suppression of the much less widespread and disruptive land agitation of small farmers in the congested districts.

Congress had sought to cloak the fudge on the 1918 general election with high-flown rhetoric about putting the country first. As Labour moved left, its detachment from the independence struggle was justified on the ground that whereas Sinn Féin stood for a republic, Labour was out for a workers' republic. Congress leaders also exploited the syndicalist ideology of contemporary Labour to argue that politics was merely 'the echo of the battle' and Labour would realise political power in its own time through its industrial muscle. Their interests lay with the unions, and they were happy to leave the politics to Tom Johnson, the only senior Congress officer unencumbered with a union job. There appeared to be no urgency. Whichever way the national revolution unfolded, Labour seemed set to be a major player in the new Ireland. When the economic boom yielded to a slump in mid-1920, and the red tide receded throughout Europe, the moment of opportunity had passed.

The pattern of Labour tactics was repeated in relation to the Anglo-Irish treaty and the Civil War. The ITGWU organ, the *Voice of Labour*, acknowledged that Labour had more in common with the political and social

views of the anti-treatyites, and a early draft of a Congress executive resolution recommended an alliance with republicans should Labour hold the balance of power in Dáil Éireann after the 1922 general elections.[19] Labour decided instead to contest the elections on the basis of neutrality on the constitutional question. In practice, this swung Labour behind the treaty, and as the official opposition in Dáil Éireann up to 1927 it would serve as an important prop of the Free State. For Johnson, who would lead the parliamentary Labour Party up to 1927, the treaty promised an end to the national question and the evolution of a 'normal', that is, British-type, party system. In this instance, the British influence was unmistakable. After all, Johnson *was* English, born and bred. One Redmondite acknowledged:

> He brought to the political development of the Free State that sense of responsibility…that is characteristic of the English 'moderate' trade union leader. It is hard to imagine that any Irishman could have filled the position in the same way…[Johnson] having been educated in the English constitutional labour agitation.[20]

Labour paid a price for Johnson's stolid constitutionalism. Its impressive 21 per cent of the vote in the June 1922 elections was grounded on the post-1917 advance of trade unions and their relative success in resisting wage cuts since the onset of the slump. Once the provisional government established some degree of order in the country in September 1922, the employers' offensive resumed with state backing. Johnson's refusal to threaten the state – even to withdraw the party from Dáil Éireann in protest at the partisan deployment of the army in strikes – made Labour seem redundant to the industrial struggle. In the 1923 elections, held during the final phase of the industrial war, the Labour vote dropped to 11 per cent of the poll.

The prospects for trade unionism under Cumann na nGaedheal were not good. A government intent on pursuing economic growth through maximising beef exports had little time for unions, and the labour departments established by Dáil Éireann and the British Ministry of Labour in Ireland in 1919 were discontinued. Membership of the ILPTUC had declined to 92,000 by 1929. Labour's woes were compounded by the increasing fractiousness of its affiliates as they competed for a shrinking pool of members. Particularly damaging was the venomous split instigated by Jim Larkin on his return from the United States in 1923. It would earn him the undying enmity of William O'Brien, who replaced him as general secretary of the ITGWU. Big Jim was now in cahoots with the Communist International in Moscow, and it seemed that the Larkins – Big Jim, his brother Peter, and son, young Jim – would continue the struggle the ILPTUC had abandoned. In 1924, 16,000 workers, two-thirds of the ITGWU membership in Dublin, defected to the Workers' Union of Ireland, which became the biggest

anglophone affiliate of the Profintern, the trade union equivalent of the Comintern. The revolutionary spirit of 1917–23 had not disappeared completely, and something of significance could have been made of 'red Dublin'. Big Jim's Irish Worker League, the Irish section of the Comintern, outpolled Labour in Dublin in September 1927 and again in the municipal elections of 1930. Moreover, as a passionate nationalist, Big Jim was ideally placed to ally with elements of the post-Civil War republican movement, which itself was traumatised by the Free State's facile victory, casting about for a way forward, and a rich source of radical energy. But Big Jim was no longer the hero of prewar vintage: plagued with personality problems which left him consumed with jealousy, he proved incapable of cooperation with any but the most uncritical admirers. After making enemies on all sides, he broke with Moscow in 1929 and abandoned revolutionism in 1932.[21]

For the ILPTUC there remained one ace in the pack: Labour was in Dáil Éireann, the republicans were not, and their abstentionism was an electoral liability. The sensible thing would have been to keep them withering on the vine and steal their thunder. Indeed, this scenario was a factor in prompting de Valera to decamp from Sinn Féin and found Fianna Fáil. But, convinced that democracy depended on it, Johnson persisted with Labour's unconditional support of the Free State regime. Republicans were left to go their way, some to collude with the communists, more to join Fianna Fáil. Johnson both recoiled from the faintest republicanism – 'We have had one revolution and one revolution in a generation is enough' was his response to a suggestion that he might oppose the oath of allegiance – and worked hard to entice de Valera into Dáil Éireann.[22] When Fianna Fáil entered Leinster House in 1927, Labour's fate was sealed.

Fianna Fáil's genius lay in its ability to blend economic and political nationalism with an amorphous social radicalism. Politics now assumed a classic post-colonial format, with Cumann na nGaedheal, later Fine Gael, representing those with a material interest in existing economic relations with Britain, and Fianna Fáil appealing to those who wished to reduce Ireland's ties with the metropole. Labour never understood this politics as anything other than an irrational continuation of the Civil War divide. Johnson and the more ideologically conscious elements in the party believed that sooner or later constitutional stability and modernisation would produce a class-oriented party system. Labour deputies took a more immediate, pragmatic view. The average Labour TD of 1922 vintage was a trade union official, elected on his record as an agitator. As union membership plummeted after 1923, and collapsed in rural areas, most TDs rebuilt their electoral bases along clientelist lines. Over the next forty years the party was dependent on highly personalised constituency machines, led by politicians for whom ideology meant looking after the forgotten people of Ireland's property-obsessed society: urban and rural labourers,

public housing tenants and social welfare recipients. Socialism, in so far as they considered it, was a threat to their election prospects.

Unfinished business

In 1930 Labour separated from Congress. Plainly, the ILPTUC structure had become dysfunctional. Syndicalism was dead, and its format survived as a coffin. Instead of politicising the unions, it was depoliticising the party. Johnson had lost his Dáil seat in 1927, and his successor, T.J. O'Connell, general secretary of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, argued that the party should respect the opinions of trade unionists through 'strict neutrality' on 'purely political' issues. In the watershed election of 1932, O'Connell pleaded for 'five or ten years truce' on questions relating to the Anglo-Irish treaty.[23] Extreme moderation in a moderately extremist climate paid no dividends, and the Labour vote fell to 8 per cent. O'Connell himself was unseated, and replaced by William Norton, general secretary of the Post Office Workers' Union, who would lead the party until 1960. That Labour survived the nadir of 1932–3 at all was due in part to Norton. Synonymous with the aching conservativism of his TDs in the 1950s, he showed himself to be a shrewd tactician in the preceding decades. Labour gave conditional support to Fianna Fáil from the backbenches up to 1938, extracting a few social reforms in return. Ditching neutrality on the constitution for a mild left-wing republicanism allowed Norton to exploit the disappointments that government inevitably entailed for some of de Valera's followers, and glean a few adherents from the fissiparous militant republican movement.

Trade unions would pose the biggest problem for Labour. Provision had been made for unions to affiliate to the party, and Labour continued to see itself as the political wing of the trade union movement. The power of this comforting image was rooted in British experience, and it served to cloud Irish realities. Even if most trade unionists voted Fianna Fáil, and most Labour voters were not trade unionists, unions still provided the party with finance, organisation and activists. On the other hand, a party with little hope of forming a government was of dubious value to trade unions, and just thirteen of some forty unions in the ITUC had bothered to affiliate to the new-style party in 1930. The election to power of Fianna Fáil created a novel set of difficulties for Labour–union relations.[24] Fianna Fáil's industrialisation programme gave unions a new importance. Membership expanded and Congress affiliation reached 161,000 by 1938. Strike activity also increased, as did inter-union competition for members. Fianna Fáil's initial response to the upsurge in militancy was to appeal for patriotic restraint and enourage workers to join Irish, rather than British, trade unions. It would soon identify multiplicity, wherein two or more unions competed for the same members, as the root cause of militancy, and call

for the rationalisation of trade unions. This in turn would divide unions between traditionalists favouring the inherited mode of sectionalist trade union organisation and an antagonistic labour–state relationship, and reformists favouring industrial unionism and – in the 1940s – a more collaborative relationship with the state. Norton sought to keep the party detached from internal ITUC divisions. In practice, that meant siding with the traditionalists, and it would drive the reformists closer to Fianna Fáil.

Between 1936 and 1945, inter-union division confronted Norton with four crises. The first he negotiated successfully, the second worked to his advantage, but the third would have devastating consequences for Labour. In 1936, Seán Lemass, Minister for Industry and Commerce from 1932 to 1939 and 1941 to 1948, advised the ITUC that the government would intervene unless something were done about inter-union conflict. Congress acknowledged the problem, having tried to address it intermittently over the preceding ten years, and responded with a high-powered commission of inquiry into trade union organisation. The only serious reform plan came from William O'Brien, who proposed the dissolution of all ITUC affiliates and their replacement with ten industrial unions. O'Brien's plan secured remarkably wide support until the British unions realised it would entail their demise in Ireland. In 1939 it was narrowly rejected by a combination of British unions – who were boosting their voting strength by affiliating their members in Northern Ireland – and a few Irish unions. Norton diplomatically tabled his own proposals, but implicitly he refused to back O'Brien.

Furious that the British should hamstring the movement for their own sectional interests, O'Brien led the formation of a specifically Irish lobby, the Council of Irish Unions (CoIU), within Congress. From this point onwards, the traditionalists and the reformists began to go their separate ways. In 1940 O'Brien warned, publicly, that the failure to reform could lead to anti-strike legislation and suggested, secretly, to the government that statutory rationalisation of trade unions was the way forward. The latter could offer a mutual accommodation, reducing strike activity through creating a smaller number of bigger, more effective, but more centralised and 'responsible' trade unions.

Acting on O'Brien's advice, the government replaced draft anti-strike legislation with the Trade Union Act 1941, the state's first attempt at reforming industrial relations. The bill as introduced on 30 April 1941 sought to eliminate trade union multiplicity by discriminating against the small fry, making no distinction between Irish and British unions. The government's assumption that the bill would be broadly acceptable to the ITUC was upset by the untimely promulgation of the Wages Standstill Order on 7 May. Wartime had brought shortages and price rises, living standards were falling, and unions were incensed at profiteering and the general inequality of hardship. An ITUC special conference, on the 16th, linked the

wage freeze and the bill as a coordinated assault on trade union freedom and workers' living standards. In the face of an unexpected level of opposition, and critical but constructive comments from the CoIU, the thrust of the bill was then redirected against the British unions. As intended, the amendments divided the ITUC, leaving the CoIU much less enthusiastic about campaigning against the act. However, as the CoIU baulked at endorsing government policy, the ITUC passed the burden of resistance to the Labour Party. Norton was happy to oblige, and the trickle of trade unionists joining the party since 1939 swelled substantially. In the 1943 general election the Labour vote jumped from 10 per cent (1938) to 16 per cent nationally, and from 7 per cent to 16 per cent in Dublin.

In one respect, success was to be Labour's undoing. Big Jim Larkin's election and admission to the Parliamentary Labour Party were more than O'Brien could stomach. In January 1944 O'Brien disaffiliated the ITGWU from the Labour Party. Five of the union's eight TDs then formed the National Labour Party. Whether to camouflage his vindictiveness, or create an ideological rationale for a new labour movement, O'Brien then colluded with the Catholic weekly, the *Standard*, to destroy Labour with allegations that the Dublin organisation was communist-controlled. Larkin of course had been a communist, and communists had entered the party on the dissolution of the Communist Party of Ireland in 1941. When de Valera called a snap election in May, the Labour vote plummeted to 9 per cent. National Labour won 3 per cent. It was a disastrous setback for a party that had seemed poised to displace the stricken Fine Gael as the main opposition, and when the conventional wisdom was moving left in tune with heightened interest in Britain's Beveridge Report and the dream of building a social democracy in the postwar world.

Having split the Labour Party, it was that much easier for O'Brien to push the divisions in the ITUC to their logical conclusion. When the British unions, expanding with the growth of the war economy in the North, won a majority on the ITUC executive in 1944, Congress became, more than ever, an obstacle to the reform of trade unionism and labour–state relations. In 1945, the CoIU separated from the ITUC to become the Congress of Irish Unions (CIU). The split is usually remembered in the way the ITUC would have it, as one between right-wing nationalists and left-wing internationalists. In its quest for an organic ideology, the CIU made much of its nationalism and anti-communism. But the make-up of the rival congresses illustrates the material basis of the split. Fourteen of the fifteen unions that formed the CIU operated mainly in the private sector. They were elements with something to gain from change: those like the ITGWU with a membership potential closely dependent on national industrial policy, or like the Irish Union of Distributive Workers and Clerks, with a high proportion of members for whom wage militancy was not an viable option. The ITUC represented those with a vested interest in the status quo: the British

unions who had filleted the labour force in the nineteenth century and were better placed for wage militancy in free collective bargaining, and who feared that a shift from the voluntary mode of industrial relations would include a bias in favour of Irish-based unions; and public sector unions who had aleady maximised their membership and had little to gain from state intervention. Around the material divide there were also those who sided with the CIU for its nationalism, or the ITUC for its 'internationalism', or who were guided simply by pro- or anti-ITGWU proclivities.

The CIU's project was supposed to be based on three elements: industrial unionism, government recognition of the CIU exclusively and legislation to eliminate the British unions, and a constructive engagement with public policy. The first remained an aspiration, as affiliates chose to await state action. The second depended on Fianna Fáil. Embarrassingly, National Labour, now the CIU's political wing, rejected CIU instructions to vote for de Valera as Taoiseach after the 1948 general election, and joined the inter-party government, pleading that its constituents put welfare reform before union politics. Both Labour parties united in 1950. In any case, Fianna Fáil decided that legislation to favour the CIU was more trouble than it was worth. The third objective met limited success. Basically, there were only two ways in which the CIU project might have been realised: radical militancy or neo-corporatism. Ultimately, it was not ready for either. By 1953 it was clear that the CIU was not going to replace the ITUC. Both congresses merged as the Irish Congress of Trade Unions in 1959.

Conclusion

In that extraordinary faction fight between Caravats and Shanavests during the Napoleonic wars, the Caravats – mainly landless labourers – defined their message as the unity of the poor against the 'middle class', while the Shanavests – mainly tenant farmers – invoked the vestiges of 1798 nationalism to forge their class unity and legitimate their counter-terror.[25] And so the story might have gone in Ireland generally, with politics evolving around contending appeals to class and nation, had it not been for the Act of Union and the economic decline that followed. Trade union support for nationalism was a mature response to deindustrialisation. Had labour nationalism prevailed in the 1890s, unions would have created a more effective form of concertation than the awful ITUC and sustained the politicisation of their members. In many respects, the story of labour in the twentieth century was one of gradual and awkward rectification of the mistakes made in the 1890s. The process was largely successful in the industrial field, and very much less so in politics. The Labour Party recoiled from the great challenges of stepping outside the consensus on nationalism and guiding the reform of the trade union movement. And the two were surely linked: at least it is more likely that a republican Labour Party would have

grasped the need for a decolonised trade unionism. Instead, Labour TDs fell back on clientelism, while the Labour left pinned its hopes on modernisation. Rather than change its socialism to suit Ireland, it would wait for Ireland to change to suit socialism.

Notes

1. See, for example, Fergus D'Arcy and Ken Hannigan, *Workers in Union: Documents and Commentaries on the History of Irish Labour* (Dublin, 1988); John W. Boyle, *The Irish Labor Movement in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, DC, 1988); Paul Bew, Ellen Hazelkorn and Henry Patterson, *The Dynamics of Irish Politics* (London, 1989); and Fintan Lane, *The Origins of Modern Irish Socialism, 1881–1896* (Cork, 1997).
2. James Connolly, *Labour in Irish History* (Dublin, 1910). The pillars of the Connolly school are T.A. Jackson, *Ireland Her Own* (London, 1947), Peter Berresford Ellis, *A History of the Irish Working Class* (London, 1972), and the work of C. Desmond Greaves. Modern editions of pamphlets in the Connolly tradition are available in the Cork Workers' Club's Historical Reprints Series.
3. Except where stated, the following account is based on Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824–1960* (Dublin, 1992).
4. Mary E. Daly, *Industrial Development and Irish National Identity, 1922–39* (Dublin, 1992), p. 15.
5. See also Fintan Lane, *In Search of Thomas Sheahan: Radical Politics in Cork, 1824–1936* (Dublin, 2001), pp. 43–6.
6. See Seán Daly, *Cork: A City in Crisis. A History of Labour Conflict and Social Misery, 1870–1872,* vol. 1 (Cork, 1978), and *Ireland and the First International* (Cork, 1984).
7. Alan O'Day, *The English Face of Irish Nationalism* (Dublin, 1977), p. 157, and the *Freeman's Journal*, 9 July 1910, quoted in James McConnel, 'The Irish parliamentary party, industrial relations and the 1913 Dublin lockout', *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, vol. 28 (2003), p. 25.
8. See Lane, *The Origins of Modern Irish Socialism*.
9. British Parliamentary Papers, Board of Trade, *Reports on Trades Unions*, 1896, 1901 (C.8644, xcix.275, 1897; Cd.1948, xcvii.377, 1902).
10. Lane, *The Origins of Modern Irish Socialism*, pp. 167–79.
11. National Library of Ireland (NLI), ITUC, *Report*, 1894.
12. Quoted in Boyle, *The Irish Labor Movement*, p. 151, fn. 32.
13. Dermot F. Keogh, 'Foundation and early years of the Irish TUC, 1894–1912', in Donal Nevin (ed.), *Trade Union Century* (Dublin, 1994), p. 23.
14. Dan Bradley, *Farm Labourers: Irish Struggle, 1900–1976* (Belfast, 1988), pp. 26–31.
15. Arthur Mitchell, *Labour in Irish Politics, 1890–1930: The Irish Labour Movement in an Age of Revolution* (Dublin, 1974), p. 241.
16. Emmet O'Connor, *James Larkin* (Cork, 2002), p. 25.
17. Quoted in John Newsinger, '"A lamp to guide your feet": Jim Larkin, the *Irish Worker* and the Dublin working class', *European History Quarterly*, vol. 20 (1990), pp. 87–8.
18. On 7 April 1923 the *Voice of Labour* suggested that 'As there was no "National" issue likely to give us an excuse for celebrating Mayday this year' union members give a day's pay to a national strike fund.

19. *Voice of Labour*, 17 December 1921, 7–14 January 1922; Charles McCarthy, 'Labour and the 1922 general election', *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, vol. 7 (1981), pp. 115–21.
20. Denis Gwynn, quoted in Mitchell, *Labour in Irish Politics*, p. 173.
21. O'Connor, *James Larkin*, pp. 70–93.
22. Henry Patterson, *The Politics of Illusion: Republicanism and Socialism in Modern Ireland* (London, 1989), p. 36; Mitchell, *Labour in Irish Politics*, p. 245.
23. O'Connor, *Labour History of Ireland*, p. 128.
24. For a comparative treatment of labour–state relations in Ireland and elsewhere see Stefan Berger and Hugh Compston (eds), *Policy Concertation and Social Partnership in Western Europe* (Oxford, 2002).
25. Paul E.W. Roberts, 'Caravats and Shanavests: Whiteboyism and faction fighting in east Munster, 1802–11', in Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly Jr, *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780–1914* (Dublin, 1983), pp. 64–101.

3

Working Women, Trade Unionism and Politics in Ireland, 1830–1945

Maria Luddy

Among the episodes of Irish women's trade union activism rescued from the archives by Theresa Moriarty is an account of a strike in Carroll's tobacco factory in Dundalk. About 200 women worked in the factory in 1912 and were paid around four shillings a week. The Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU), which had organised the women workers, sought an increase of one shilling a week for them. Carroll's responded by telling the women that they were being put on piecework, something the management promised would enable the women to increase their weekly wages by 50 per cent. The women refused and 50 workers went on strike on 5 January 1912. The strike lasted for nine weeks. In that period the town witnessed a group of women picketing the factory daily, confronting those women workers who continued to work in the factory, attending weekly union meetings held in the town square, and engaging in what the local newspaper termed 'discreditable' conduct. Their actions were reported with horror by the local press. On 13 January, the *Dundalk Democrat* observed:

> There were some exciting and discreditable incidents in Dundalk on Saturday night in connection with the strike at Messers Carroll's tobacco factory. A number of girls who had worked during the strike, whilst engaged in the usual Saturday night promenade or shopping were attacked by those who had left off duty, and came in for rough treatment. One girl, whose name was stated to be Lennon, came in for a good deal of abuse at the hands of the strikers and she was obliged to find refuge in Messers Fakin's shop in Clanbrassil street. It was only when the Very Rev. Father Corcoran interceded for her that she found it possible to make her way home, in the company of the Rev. Gentleman. Another girl was pursued into a shop and the windows smashed. The father of a girl who remained at work was assaulted by some of the girl strikers and male friends. Still another girl was badly mauled going home through Church Lane. As a consequence of this violence Messers

> Carroll have made arrangements for their employees to sleep and eat on the premises. The girls who went to work on Monday morning – about 150 – did so an hour earlier than usual, so that the strikers who had assembled at the usual hour to indulge in what they called 'peaceful picketing' were disappointed.
>
> On several evenings the girl strikers and their sympathisers paraded the town in crowds, booing and hissing at the houses of those who remained 'on'. Some stones were thrown and the windows of the workers' houses (which were guarded by the police) broken. Messers Carroll's are protected by over a dozen police. It is stated that some 50 extra police are stationed in Dundalk during the week with two district inspectors. The rate payers will have to pay for these.[1]

This strike, one of many in which women were involved, reveals how female networks encouraged by trade unionism provided women with a base for militant action, action that would shape their working lives and their working identities. Women resisted exploitation by striking, and in striking performed a political act that broadened the power of trade unionism generally in Ireland, created alliances on occasion between working-class women and working-class men and middle-class women, and added to the repertoire of activism that shaped working women's engagement with political life. Trade union activism also allowed for the emergence of a number of individual women activists whose politics were informed by both class and gender. While it is relatively easy to trace women's involvement in strikes throughout this period, the links between the 'working woman' and political activism in the period between 1830 and 1945 go much wider than this. My intention in this chapter is to explore the range and extent of these links and to analyse their broader significance.

Definitions

How do we define and identify working women in this period? The definition of work itself has often proved problematic, since its meanings vary over time and place. Labour historians have usually defined 'work' as waged or paid work. This has proved troublesome to historians of women, as it leaves no space for examining the impact of women's unpaid domestic labour in the home and in family businesses on the local and national economy. It is generally agreed that women's employment, particularly as it is enumerated in census data, is under-recorded. Employment was defined in a very narrow way within the Irish census. Wives or daughters were classified as non-productive from 1881, immediately hiding the very real contribution made by women to the family business or farm. Whatever might have been revealed or hidden in the census data it was recognised in some quarters that women were often essential, if unpaid, workers. In 1907, for

instance, an official of the Congested Districts Board stated that the success or failure of the small farm largely depended upon the skill and industry which 'wives and daughters brought to bear on the management of the poultry, pigs and dairy'.[2]

Women managed difficult household budgets, reared poultry, and earned money as washerwomen, charwomen, paid homeworkers, outworkers and lodging-house keepers. They worked seasonally as agricultural labourers and prostitutes, occupations that did not always appear on the census forms. Within Northern Ireland thousands of women were employed in the home as sewers, knitters and seamstresses for large manufacturers. In 1902 it was believed that, with the inclusion of homeworkers, the total number employed in shirt-making was around 80,000.[3] In the south of Ireland domestic service was the largest single source of female employment until the 1950s.[4] However the census data might be interpreted, Mary E. Daly has noted that between 1841 and 1991 there was a pattern of declining employment opportunities for women, which coincided with a shift in the nature of women's employment.[5] Between 1891 and 1911, for example, the percentage of rural women with designated occupations dropped from 23 to 15 per cent. In 1891, 640,000 women were employed, compared with 430,000 twenty years later.[6] In the 1926 census just over 90 per cent of married women described themselves as being engaged in home duties. While it became unusual for married women to engage in paid employment in independent Ireland recent research reveals that many did return to work on a part-time basis and others engaged in income-generating schemes from home.[7] Any definition then of working women must be broad.

In this essay working women who engaged in factory work, or were the wives of tenants or small farmers in rural and urban environments, together with those women who were to be found in the lower echelons of the civil service, will be discussed in some detail. By focusing on these workers in particular, I hope to explore the significance of collective action by women workers, whether in trade unionism or other group organisations. Such collective action led usually to the advancement of women workers in Ireland and added to their sense of collective identity.

Working women and political activity

What then of working women and politics? As I have noted elsewhere women in nineteenth-century Ireland engaged in political activity on a formal and informal basis.[8] My definition of political activity is again broad and includes any action by an individual or group, in a formal or informal way, intended to affect or alter either the policy of government or the behaviour of individuals or groups within the local community, for the apparent benefit of a particular group or community. Ruth Ann Harris has shown

how tenant women used petitions to landlords to challenge the authority of their menfolk, to improve their economic position and to protect themselves and their children from abusive situations.[9] There appears to have been a strong tradition of women writing letters for the advancement of themselves or members of their family. Files in the Department of the Taoiseach, for instance, contain numerous requests from women writing for 'favours' or to receive compensation or their 'due' for services rendered to the state, particularly during the period of the struggle for independence. For example, in 1927 a Miss Hickey wrote to President Cosgrave regarding the appointment of a caretaker to the Courthouse in Enniscorthy. She believed the post was to go to another woman and wrote: 'I think it most unfair if she is appointed as she is a woman of very good means and her family all done for owning plenty of property, who never suffered or lost one iota in either wars and is now since the Treaty a strong and active opponent of the present Government.' She promised, if she were awarded the post, to carry out the duties entailed 'faithfully'.[10] The activism of women writing such letters is worthy of further study but lies beyond the scope of this essay as they are, most often, concerned with personal and familial gain.

Working women, both rural- and urban-based, were prominent in food riots and election mobs throughout the nineteenth century. While we still have no definitive examination of the extent of protest during the famine period it is clear that women played a role in such protests. In April 1846, carts carrying flour from Cahir to Clonmel in County Tipperary were attacked outside Clonmel by women and children who stole a number of flour bags. This was the beginning of a number of such raids in the town.[11] September 1846 saw a large crowd of men, women and children march into Macroom in County Cork, striking terror into the townsfolk and shopkeepers.[12] These types of actions were sometimes spontaneous reactions in times of extreme crisis. However, it appears that sometimes such actions were also premeditated. In October 1846, the *Cork Examiner* reported that sixteen people had been arrested 'for intimidating the farmers and others to pay back con-acre rent received by them this year'. In October 1848, 300 people in Kinvarra built a barricade against police and soldiers who were attempting to assist in the collection of rates in the town.[13] Such protests, which are essentially made to benefit the group, also had political meanings, forcing a response to local conditions from the government or local authorities. Working women also played their part in election riots. There are a number of examples of women leading mobs. Ann Brien, for instance, was a Dungarvan mob leader in 1868; the Claddagh fishwives constituted guards of honour for Michael Morris in his election campaign in Galway in 1872.[14]

The Ladies' Land League was established in New York in October 1880 for the purpose of collecting money for the Land League. On 31 January

1881, Anna Parnell presided over the first official meeting of the Ladies' Land League in Dublin. From that time until its formal dissolution on 10 August 1882, the women of the League raised funds, oversaw the housing of evicted tenants and took a very visible role in the public and political life of the country. Janet K. Tebrake argues that 'hundreds of peasant women were fighting the Land War on a daily basis' long before the formation of the Ladies' Land League.[15] Women tenant farmers could become members of the Land League but women's involvement in the land war is most often discussed through the activities of the Ladies' Land League. The writer Katharine Tynan had been amongst those present at the first meeting of the League and suggested that the organisation be called the Women's Land League but was told that this was 'too democratic'.[16] Yet, while many of the activists within the Ladies' Land League may have been the wives and daughters of relatively well-to-do tenant farmers, less well-off women also played their part. For example, 17-year-old Kate Beirne, one of seven children and the daughter of a blacksmith and tenant farmer, had been shot and wounded by an Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) member as she tried to prevent a process server from posting an eviction notice on neighbouring tenants. The process server had arrived under the protection of armed police to serve the notice and was set upon by a band of women who threatened and threw sticks, mud and stones at the police. The police and process server tried to make their escape and were chased by the crowd. In the ensuing confusion Beirne had been wounded.[17] At a meeting of a branch of the Ladies' Land League in County Mayo it was reported that there were a hundred members who 'all belong to the peasant class'.[18] James Bryce, noting what he had witnessed in Mayo and Roscommon in 1880, observed that when 'process servers are resisted, it is frequently by the women, who hustle or pelt them'.[19]

While we still need to know much more about women's roles within the Land League and the Ladies' Land League there is enough evidence available to show that working women played what may have been a significant role in the land movement. It seems also that women continued to be active within rural protest throughout the period of the National League. For instance, a police report of 1889 noted that three women had been summoned and ordered to provide for their good behaviour. The women had been arrested after an incident when a group of police, on leaving the chapel at Coolagown on 20 January 1889, were mobbed by a group of women and boys who followed them along the road hooting at them and 'calling them opprobrious names'. According to the report this was a repetition of the 'same conduct carried on Sunday after Sunday (the usual expressions used towards the police on those occasions being "Balfour's blood hounds" "Mitchelstown murderers" and filthy expressions not fit to be repeated)'. The arrested women were identified as the ringleaders of the mob.[20] Anna Parnell played a significant role in galvanising the Ladies' Land

League and providing it with a sense of national coherence. However, it was the work of the activists in the localities, of the peasant women and female tenant farmers, and the wives of tenant farmers which made the Ladies' Land League such a force to be reckoned with. The history of working women's involvement in the land war is still awaiting its historian.

Much of the political activity of working women, in the pre-Famine period, focused on community and family interests, rather than national or gender issues. Evidence of such activity is apparent also throughout the Famine period.[21] Key questions to be addressed are: when do working women become politically active? How do they express their political opinions? While we might think of working women in the 'collective' it is also necessary to look at individual women who played leading roles in improving and politicising working women. The impact of women such as Helena Molony, Mary Galway and Cissy Cahalan tells us about how individuals shaped working women's political activism in Ireland. Clearly strike action was a significant undertaking for working women. Strikes are relatively well-documented from the 1870s; from the 1890s women began to be progressively active in trade unions and such activity revealed both their disputes and alliances with male union leaders. The most significant union for women was the Irish Women Workers' Union, formed in 1911.

Women and trade unionism

It is a little easier to observe working women's activism when we come to look at trade unionism. It is commonplace to note that it was difficult to unionise women workers. There were many reasons for this: the traditional areas of women's employment, domestic service and agriculture, for example, offered solitary or seasonal employment and did not easily lend themselves to unionisation. The isolated and isolating nature of such work did not create or foster bonds of community action amongst women, unlike in the linen and textile industries. Women were less able to pay union dues because their wages were often meagre, and family responsibilities often meant they had less time to devote to union matters.[22] The difficulties faced in organising working women slowed their recognition of an identity based on their collective interests. The trade union activist Cissy Cahalan noted in 1914 that 'A woman has no tradition behind her, she enters the labour market with the quiet hope of leaving it on marriage. When she did wish to become unionised most of the men's unions refused to admit her.'[23] Likewise Mary Galway, in a talk on trades unions and women's employment, observed that 'The task of organising women in Ireland is one of extreme difficulty…Irish girls are not brought up in a trade union atmosphere, as boys in well organised trades are; the girls never hear trade unionism as it affects herself and her sex discussed, because her mother and her grandmother had no trade union in their day, and therefore know

nothing about it.'[24] The formation, in 1885, of the Lurgan Hemmers' and Veiners' Trade Union by female workers in the Lurgan handkerchief industry was the first successful attempt to organise women workers.[25] It organised strikes in 1889, which saw 3,000 women workers come out. The union, however, had gone by the 1890s.

The Textile Operatives' Society formed in Belfast in 1893 was more long-lived. By 1895, this union had 1,600 members and its best-known advocate was Mary Galway, who had started her working life in the mills of Belfast and became secretary of the union in 1897.[26] However, women did not always need a union to negotiate wage increases for themselves. In 1891, female spinners in Lurgan demanded wage increases and appointed their own delegation, without the assistance of a union, to meet with employers and successfully negotiated to have their demands met.[27] As Tina Hynes has noted, the struggle of the Dublin seamstresses was not so successful.[28] These women often worked in appalling conditions and between 1869 and 1872 argued their case through the public forum of the *Freeman's Journal*, calling for the implementation of the Workshop Regulation Act of 1867. There was not much support for the women's case amongst tailors who feared competition from the women workers. One commentator was to note that the women 'were as powerless to help themselves as though they were in a state of African slavery'.[29] Their campaign did little other than highlight the harshness of their working conditions. Even in 1914, needlewomen in Dublin were described as being in 'absolute want'. An over-abundance of labour continued to set the wage levels and conditions of needlewomen throughout the period.[30] Needlewomen were extremely difficult to organise because many of them worked from home. Unionisation at least gave workers a fighting chance at changing their circumstance. One of the first unions in Dublin to accept women was the Drapers' Assistants Association, founded in 1901. Amongst the issues fought for by the union were shorter working hours, higher pay, an end to fines for small breaches of discipline, and an end to the 'living-in' system. By 1914, 1,400 of the nearly 4,000 members were women.[31]

Without doubt unions fostered a sense of collective right amongst the workers. They also offered working women a means of individual and collective advancement as workers and activists. Mary Galway, for instance, was the first prominent female trade unionist in Ireland and the first woman to be elected as vice-president of the Irish Trade Union Congress in 1910. Catherine Mahon, daughter of an agricultural labourer, became the first woman president of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). During her period of involvement with the union between 1906 and 1920, equal pay was adopted as part of the INTO policy. Mahon also organised a successful recruitment drive doubling women's membership of the union; her battles with the commissioner of national education in Ireland allowed the INTO to bolster its status as an independent union.[32]

Working women expressed their concerns with working practices, sometimes through the press, but most often through evidence given at various commissions of inquiry and through their trade union activity.[33] Providing evidence to a committee of inquiry was one means of communicating the harshness of working life, but the conclusion of an inquiry might not necessarily produce any immediate tangible benefit for the worker. Recommendations from committees depended on the willingness of governments to legislate for changes in employment practices and on employers to abide by the legislation. The Dublin seamstresses noted the laxity with which Dublin Corporation implemented workshop regulation acts. This, they observed, was due to 'delicacy of interference…personal friendships, [and] domestic associations'.[34] Through trade union activity women could bring direct pressure to bear on employers and in successful strikes win more immediate benefits.

The Irish Women Workers' Union

The first general union for women in Ireland, the Irish Women Workers' Union (IWWU), was inaugurated after a successful pay strike by 3,000 women at Jacob's biscuit factory in Dublin in August 1911.[35] The first public meeting of the IWWU was held on 15 September 1911. Jim Larkin was elected president and Delia, his sister, general secretary.[36] There appears to have been little solidarity amongst women workers in Dublin at this time. The *Irish Worker* was to note in 1911 that:

> The existence of distinctions of class amongst the women workers of Dublin is deplorable. Each different section of workers keep entirely to themselves…you find a girl who earns her living as a typist stands aloof from the girl in a shop and the trades girl; they in turn look down haughtily on the factory hand, and again you do not find the factory girl associating with the girls who hawk their goods in the street. Women can do away with these cliques by joining the new union IWWU.[37]

The attempt by the union to support women workers was hindered by the fact that it suffered a number of upheavals and internal disputes in its first few years. In 1912 the union had about 1,000 members but this had fallen to about 600 in 1913. The year 1913 was a momentous one for the Irish labour movement and the turmoil of the period undoubtedly affected the growth of the Irish Women Workers' Union.[38] Padraig Yeates has noted that more than 40 women were arrested for committing offences associated with the disturbances.[39] Delia Larkin resigned as secretary of the IWWU in July 1915 and her place was taken by Helena Molony. Molony, from a working-class background, combined her nationalist and trade union activities throughout her career and was secretary to Inghinidhne na hEireann and

edited *Bean na hEireann*.[40] She worked closely with, and was greatly influenced by, James Connolly. As a member of his Citizen Army she took part in the Easter Rising. A police report on her activities recorded that she had been arrested in City Hall on 24 April 1916, 'having in her possession an auto pistol and ammunition'. The detective further noted that Molony 'has great influence over women workers'.[41] In the spring of 1918, the Irish Women Workers' Union was officially registered, after much reorganisation, with Louie Bennett and Helen Chenevix becoming honorary secretaries.[42] From its inception, the IWWU initiated the clearest alliance of working-and middle-class women in Ireland. Individually its members played a role in the cause of Irish nationalism, and collectively through union activity shaped Irish women's working lives.

In 1918, Louie Bennett observed that the most notable development of the women's movement in Ireland was the growth in trade unionism amongst women workers:

> A year ago the IWWU numbered only a few hundreds: now there are over 2,000. The munitions workers are strongly organised under the National Federation of Women Workers; tailoresses, shirtmakers and other workers with the needle are enrolling in great numbers…in the Society of Tailors and Tailoresses. Women clerks are now amongst the keenest and most active members of the Irish Clerical Union and the National Union of Clerks, although this time last year the women clerks of Dublin were still in doubt whether they were not too nice for anything even resembling a union.[43]

The expansion of women's trade unionism was believed to 'the best possible contribution to the whole cause of feminism. There can', it was argued, 'be no real freedom or independence for women until they are economically free.'[44] The IWWU began a sustained recruitment drive and initiated strikes to improve the working conditions of its members. In mid-1918, the IWWU made a concerted effort to get the women at the Dublin Laundry Company to organise, and to ensure that the company gave fair treatment to its employees. In August 1918, the IWWU began to negotiate on behalf of the workers at Goodbody's tobacco factory. Initially the IWWU had only sought an increase in the wages of the tobacco-spinners but after two weeks it sought an all-round increase for all the 120 women working there. Within four weeks Goodbody's agreed to a new minimum wage scale for its workers, an agreement viewed as a substantial victory for the IWWU.[45] More strikes were to follow. One of the most widely publicised strikes of 1918 was the strike of hotel and restaurant workers, including many women waitresses and charwomen, that took place in August and September. On Friday, 30 August 1918, all of the hotels, restaurants and cafés in

Dublin were closed by strike action. Employers offered a small increase in wages but would not agree to union recognition or to the wage demands of the unions. Eventually some employers settled and by 6 September hotel and restaurant employees returned to their work.[46] The period between 1911 and 1925 saw a tremendous growth in union representation of women. In 1915, for instance, the National Union of Clerks accepted women on equal terms with men.[47] Temporary government clerks could join or affiliate with the Clerical Union by 1918.[48] The Irish Nurses' and Midwives' Union was formed in 1919.[49] The growing numbers involved in the trade union movement signifies working women's commitment to collective activism and recognition of their identity as workers. Many had become outspoken and militant trade unionists.

Women workers, the suffrage issue and national independence

While trade unionism won the support of a growing number of women workers, another great campaign of the early twentieth century, the suffrage campaign, seemed to have little to offer working women. The suffrage campaign in Ireland was dominated by middle-class women and it was not until the formation of the Irish Women's Reform League (IWRL), in 1911, that specific attention was given to the needs of working women. The organiser of the IWRL was the middle-class activist Louie Bennett, who was to remain for many years a force in Irish trade unionism.[50] Indeed, it has been argued that Bennett's role in the suffrage campaign brought her to trade unionism.[51] The league investigated working conditions in Dublin factories, and publicised through the *Irish Citizen* and public meetings the plight of women workers. It campaigned for, among other things, the provision of school meals, and initiated a 'watching the courts' committee to report on cases of the abuse of women and children particularly where they felt injustice had been done.[52] Bennett clearly saw suffrage as an essential component in improving women's working lives. With reference to the 1913 lockout she wrote, 'the question of women's suffrage is closely woven with the Labour question. Had the woman's point of view been allowed to influence legislation in the past decade or so, much of the bitterness which characterises the struggle of the working class against capitalism would have been averted.'[53] Overall, though, we know little about how working women perceived the suffrage cause, or how relevant they believed it to be to their lives. Some of the reforms advocated by the suffrage groups, including the IWRL, were resisted by the working class. In 1914, the Dublin Women Patrols began operations. Supported by a number of suffrage and philanthropic organisations, the purpose of the patrols was to safeguard young women from the 'dangers' of the streets, particularly at a time when soldiers were more in evidence. *The Irish Worker* observed:

> We are to be inflicted with a new form of inquisition. This is to take the form of an organisation to place upon the streets of Dublin Women Patrols whose function it will be to look after the morals and behaviour of Dublin women and girls…this project is simply an impertinent attempt of a number of 'ladies' to interfere with the lives of the poor; to boss, and direct, and control, and supervise, and regulate, and order, and rule, and determine, and discipline, and arrange, and keep in subjection as they would not submit to themselves the actions and conduct of their poorer sisters.[54]

Such interference by the middle classes was resisted with an assertion of working-class autonomy.

We still have no real idea of what part working-class women played in the fight for Irish independence. For instance, over 200 women played a role in the 1916 uprising.[55] Some were certainly of the working classes. Women like Winifred Carney, a significant trade unionist, whose mother ran a sweet shop to support the family after the collapse of her marriage, became James Connolly's secretary and was a member of Cumann na mBan.[56] Connolly's daughter, Nora, was a founding member of Cumann na mBan in Belfast and remained active in republican politics throughout her life.[57] Many hundreds of women were members of Cumann na mBan but no detailed analysis of membership or of the class backgrounds of these women yet exists. The relationship of their political beliefs to their identity as workers would prove an interesting area of study.

Competing with men?

The idea that working women were competing with men and, as a consequence, lowering the wages paid to men had been common throughout the nineteenth century. It was a belief that resurfaced with renewed vigour in the newly independent Irish state. From the 1920s to the 1940s Irish working women were faced with numerous attempts by government to restrict their right to work through the implementation of 'protective' legislation. Women's role in the civil service had proved problematic from the 1920s. A report from 1920 noted, in a section on the recruitment and status of women in the civil service, that 'it is not possible at this stage to attempt a final solution of the novel and complex problems involved in the employment of women, side by side with men, throughout the several classes of a graded service of the Crown'.[58] Through the Civil Service Regulation (Amendment) Bill of 1925 the newly established Free State government attempted to statutorily prohibit women from entering higher grades of the civil service solely on the grounds of sex. Through an alliance of women trade unionists and women senators the bill was defeated in the Senate.[59] While working in the civil service was seen as a 'good' job many

women civil servants found it difficult to maintain a decent standard of living on their meagre wages. A Miss O'Connor, providing evidence to the Commission of Inquiry into the Civil Service in 1933, noted that those women she spoke of:

> have very heavy responsibilities. They have dependants. For instance in my case I represent 35 writing assistants. I keep house, maintain an invalid sister, keep up an appearance in the office, and subscribe to the numerous collections in the office, on £2-12-9 per week. As our service increases, it seems that our wages decrease. We hold that 34/- is inadequate for a woman with 27 years' service who is 51 years of age.[60]

O'Connor represented her co-workers, having organised an informal group as a means of ordering their grievances.

Neither was the government concerned with levels of unemployment amongst women workers when it established, in 1927, a committee, with no female representative, to inquire into unemployment in the state. Louie Bennett, writing on behalf of the Irish Women Workers' Union, stated forcefully that 'the problem of unemployment as it affects women cannot receive adequate consideration from a Committee which lacks the point of view of women as such, on a subject of even more vital concern to them than to men, and lacks also the specialised knowledge and interest which only a woman could give to the problem of unemployment as it affects women'. The letter continues:

> I am also to add that my Committee are extremely indignant at the implication contained in your letter that no woman can be found in Ireland who has as intimate a knowledge of general conditions in the country as the men now selected for the Unemployment Committee. My Committee assert that such a point of view certainly betrays a strangely inadequate knowledge on the part of the Government on the intellectual resources of this country.[61]

It was through the Irish Women Workers' Union that working women found their strongest ally in attempts made by the government to limit their employment opportunities.

The greatest challenge to women workers was to come with the introduction of the Conditions of Employment Bill in 1935. Mary E. Daly has noted that in the 1930s, with the establishment of new industries, the number of women employed in industry had steadily increased, with most located in semi-skilled or unskilled jobs.[62] It was a common belief at this time that women were successfully competing against men for jobs. Working women and girls, it was noted, 'grew up without adequate experience of housework, and were ill fitted for marriage, while unmarried women at work

were inclined to postpone marriage, or not to marry at all because they were not inclined to sacrifice their independence or wages'. Women at work meant men out of work.[63] Seán Lemass, the Minister for Industry and Commerce, introduced the Conditions of Employment Bill on 11 April 1935. His intention in introducing the bill was to 'to institute in relation to all occupations, where undesirable exploitation of labour might occur, machinery for the regulation of working conditions, which will prevent abuses, and which will enable the State to exercise a general supervision over these conditions of employment'.[64]

Principally, the bill provided for the restriction of working hours and registration of agreements between employers and employees, and placed restrictions upon the employment of juveniles and women.[65] W.R. O'Hegarty, writing on behalf of the Joint Committee of Women's Societies and Social Workers, noted that the Conditions of Employment Act was 'one of the most reactionary pieces of legislation in recent times, and has placed the Irish Free State at the head of an international black list prepared for the League of Nations at Geneva, of countries in which women in employment are penalised and restricted'.[66] The Irish Women Workers' Union engaged in battle. It sought support for its case from the Labour Party, but such support was not forthcoming.[67] An intensive campaign of lobbying, public meetings, delegations to government and pressure from various women's groups failed to stop the bill. Lemass argued that while his bill had been 'rather violently attacked by representatives of the Irish Women Workers' Union' they had misunderstood its intention with regard to the employment of women and juveniles. He was adamant that 'there are certain classes of work on which it is undesirable that women should be employed and for which they are not suited'. According to the minister, it was the aim of the bill:

> To have machinery established by which industrial employment can be regulated and to arrest any tendency which may develop in future to substitute female for male labour in consequence of alterations in the mechanical methods of production in any industry.

Lemass observed that recent large-scale employment of women in industry represented 'the transfer of work that was done in the home to factories'. 'Processes', he noted, 'which were done by men, and could only be done by men, can now be carried on by women, because these processes have been mechanised.' 'It was desirable', he added, 'that we should not get altogether into the position in which, I am told, the city of Derry is where the great bulk of the men stay at home minding the children and the women go out to earn the daily bread.'[58] The debates on the employment bill made evident common understandings of women's work. Deputy Norton, for instance, stated that women were not employed for reasons of equality but 'because they are cheap, because they can be adapted to new

mechanical processes and because they are, from the employer's point of view, very docile and, from the Trade Union point of view, extremely difficult to organise'.[69] Women were, he stated, 'birds of passage'. The bill did meet with substantial opposition from the women members of the Senate. Senator Kathleen Clarke observed that the legislation was 'a very dangerous thing' and 'if the only reason that Labour can put up for being in favour of this is that women are driving men out of the labour market, then I think it is a very poor reason'.[70] Senator Jennie Wyse Power, recognising the value and importance of women's waged labour to the family, observed, 'if you are going to put women out of employment you are going to take out of the homes these few shillings a week which are now a blessing to them'.[71] The bill became law in 1936. The campaign over the Conditions of Employment Bill united women workers and women trade unionists. It also revealed the divisions that existed between male trade unionists and their female members. The Irish Women Workers' Union alliance with the Labour Party was severely damaged by the party's lack of support for the women's stand.[72]

The Irish Women Workers' Union remained the strongest defender of working women's rights throughout the 1930s and 1940s. By the late 1930s, the motions discussed at the annual meetings of the union included the need to introduce a forty-hour working week and two weeks' annual holiday; and the council of the union was urged to wage an active campaign, including a no-rent campaign, in favour of slum clearance and the state provision of suitable housing for workers.[73] While many feminists were active in the women's union, the union's leaders, particularly Louie Bennett, expressed a preference for women to remain in the domestic sphere, at the centre of family life.[74] While alliances might have been formed among women in the women's trade union movement, the values of class had a powerful impact in shaping those alliances. Middle-class feminist activism in Ireland shaped the suffrage campaign, and to an extent the trade unionism of women workers. Women workers were viewed by law-makers and policy-makers, almost always male, and by many women activists, as temporary workers, whose primary function was to marry and have children and remain in the domestic sphere. The collective action of working women, seen most clearly in trade union activity, sometimes gave them a collective strength that did help to shape their relationship with employers. It seems to have rarely affected or influenced their relationship with government policy-makers.

Alice Kessler Harris has argued that, in America, by the 1930s, ideas about gender and women's role in the family had become so entrenched that Americans had difficulty in seeing women as 'rights bearing individuals'. Women were understood only in their capacity for reproduction and their function as homemakers.[75] It appears that women in Ireland may have had similar difficulties. Social policy was framed narrowly, supported by

government, unions and even middle-class women activists, serving class interests and often undermining women's roles as workers while strengthening their roles as wives and mothers.[76] The subjects of class, gender and identity require further study before we can come to any real understanding of how these forces shaped Irish women's political and trade union activism.

Notes

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4

Politics, Sectarianism and the Working Class in Nineteenth-Century Belfast

Catherine Hirst

The Belfast working class is famous for its unionist/nationalist division. Some historians consider that this divide developed late in the nineteenth century as a result of nationalism being imported from the south of Ireland during the home rule campaign. Up until this time, it is argued, some other kind of political division could have developed.[1] In fact, the unionist/nationalist division dates back to the 1840s when Catholic and Protestant workers were involved in campaigns for and against the repeal of the union with Great Britain. This political conflict was grafted onto the existing sectarian divide evident in the form of the Orange Order and the Ribbon society. The nationalist convictions of the Catholic working class were confirmed by their active participation in the Fenian society and the home rule movement in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Working-class Protestant opposition to these movements was equally fierce and manifested itself in rioting and unionist politics. There was little chance of anything other than unionism and nationalism being the defining features of working-class politics in Belfast.

Origins of sectarianism in working-class Belfast

Before the 1830s, the inhabitants of working-class areas, such as the Protestant Sandy Row and the Catholic Pound, had little contact with ministers, priests or middle-class Belfast.[2] The sectarianism of these districts was initially due to the importation of conflict from the Ulster countryside, which was reflected in the establishment and growth of the Orange and Ribbon societies in Belfast.[3] Clashes between Orangemen and Ribbonmen occurred in many parts of Ulster in the 1820s, a time of heightened tension coinciding with the 'Second Reformation' (an attempt by Protestant missionaries and voluntary societies to convert Catholics whose church was, in turn, becoming more organised and self-confident). Sectarian hostility was particularly strong in Counties Londonderry, Tyrone, Down, Armagh, Cavan and Monaghan and took the form of riots at fairs or on the Twelfth

of July, house-burning and military drilling at night.[4] In 1825, the Inspector General of Police reported that:

> Throughout almost the whole of the province, the lower orders of the Protestants and Catholics appear to be pitted at each other and the slightest commencement of hostilities on either side would…be attended with the loss of many lives. Great alarm and terror…has for some time past existed, the Protestants fully satisfied that an attempt would be made to assassinate and exterminate them and the Catholics…equally convinced that the Orangemen mediated an attack on the lives of all their persuasion. In many places, both parties stay up at night with dread but this has much abated, although confidence is far from being restored.[5]

This tension was also apparent in Belfast with 'Twelfth' riots occurring in 1822, 1824 and 1825.[6]

A description of the state of Ribbonism submitted to Dublin Castle by a Catholic barrister in the 1830s testifies to the organisation's strength in Belfast.

> The system prevails to a greater extent in Belfast than in any other town in the kingdom. There are 53 companies of Ribbonmen in that town… [and generally each had 36 members]. The entire body is very large as shown by gatherings at the funerals of its members on several occasions – They have regular meetings, dances etc. but they have never committed any crimes…They consist of the poorer classes, tradesmen and servants, with many publicans at their head.[7]

In 1839, a number of suspected Ribbon leaders were arrested in Belfast, and in the 1840s the society was still strong in Belfast with an estimated 1,000 members.[8] Although the number of Orange lodges in Belfast was not particularly large (10 in 1823, 27 in 1828–9 and 42 in 1856[9]), they were concentrated in the weaving districts of Sandy Row, Brown's Square and Ballymaccarret, so in these districts the number of Orangemen could have been quite substantial.[10] The Orangemen had only limited middle-class support in the early nineteenth century, particularly during the institution's dissolution between 1836 and 1845. Its local leaders, like those of the Ribbonmen, were mainly publicans and others from within the working-class communities.[11]

The existence of secret sectarian societies in Belfast was encouraged by the absence of an impartial system of law and order. Prior to the establishment of the system of centrally appointed magistrates in 1835–6, the administration of justice rested with local landlords[12] whose sympathies were often conservative and Orange.[13] The sympathy of the local magistrates and police made Orange crowds bolder in their actions while the

absence of any reliable protection from the state against the Orangemen made the Ribbon society seem even more essential within working-class Catholic districts.

Catholic Emancipation

The excitement of the mid-1820s had hardly subsided when sectarian tensions were raised again by the campaign for Catholic emancipation. In Armagh Lawless, O'Connell's northern representative, was prevented from collecting the Catholic rent by a large crowd of armed Protestants. In other parts of Ulster, such as Counties Down and Antrim, there was great excitement and tension at the prospect of Lawless entering the district which took a long time to decline.[14] In County Tyrone, 'the great body of the population of both persuasions appear[ed] to be in the utmost alarm and dread of attacks from each other and both evince[d] much anxiety to provide themselves with arms for their own defence'.[15] In County Londonderry, Brunswick Clubs were established in the main towns and 'the minds of all classes in every part of the county' were declared to be 'much agitated by party feeling which becomes more inveterate every day'.[16] Belfast could not escape this upsurge in sectarian hostility and continued to feel its effects as migrants from these districts flooded into the town over subsequent decades.

Although the Catholic workers of Belfast were not mobilised in support of emancipation (which in Belfast remained a mixed, middle-class affair), relations between Protestant and Catholic workers appear to have been soured by the campaign. The triumph of Catholic emancipation increased the determination of Belfast Orangemen to march on the Twelfth despite the ban on processions and against the advice of their leaders. As the undersecretary at Dublin Castle feared, 'nothing will prevent the Orangemen of the North from walking in procession on the twelfth of July. The persons of rank who formerly had influence over them have lost it and they are in the hands of inferior men, who are as violent as the lowest of their order.'[17] After the procession in Belfast, Catholics attacked Orangemen's houses in Brown's Square and a serious riot ensued. According to the *Belfast Newsletter*, 'the vigour of the attack was met by a proportionally vigorous defence in which persons of all ages, and of both sexes, indiscriminately engaged'.[18]

The increase in tension following Catholic emancipation is shown not only by the determination of the Orangemen to parade but by new manifestations of violence such as sectarian murders, St Patrick's Day disturbances and funeral riots.[19] The tendency of some scholars to consider only the 1813 riot and then those after the December 1832 election (when people actually died) obscures the extent to which the sectarian rivalry of the countryside was reproduced in Belfast and the effect of Catholic emancipation in exacerbating tension.[20]

The influence of evangelical ministers

From the 1830s onwards, Protestant working-class areas felt the increasing influence of evangelical ministers who legitimised existing sectarian attitudes, inflamed potentially riotous situations and mobilised them in support of the union. The churches constructed for the working class in the 1830s, such as Christ Church, Fisherwick Place Presbyterian Church and Townsend Street Presbyterian Church, were all evangelical and, by their very nature, hostile towards the Catholic Church.[21] The gains of the evangelical churches were consolidated further during the Ulster revival of 1859 with the Sandy Row district acquiring three new churches, two of which were served by ministers who were chaplains in the Orange Order.[22]

From the 1830s to the 1850s, Dr Drew, the minister of Christ Church in Sandy Row, ensured that Sandy Row and Belfast as a whole were made aware of battles being fought against the perceived increase in power of the Catholic Church. He frequently arranged special lectures for his congregation, given by clerics, such as the convert Mortimer O'Sullivan, who described the oppression of priests and the threats facing Protestants in the south. The 75 per cent church attendance rate for Church of Ireland inhabitants in the Sandy Row district in the 1850s is testament to the influence wielded by Drew.[23] Church of Ireland ministers, such as Drew, and the Presbyterian minister, Rev. Dr Cooke, were regular speakers at the Protestant Operatives' Association, founded in April 1843 by Tresham Gregg, an evangelical Dublin preacher.[24] The working-class members, said to be predominantly from Sandy Row and Ballymaccarret, listened to topics such as:

> How many Protestants were slaughtered in Ireland on the night of the 23rd of October 1641?; Can a Papist consistently with the principles of his church be a good member of society or a loyal subject in a Protestant state…or a good husband to a Protestant wife or can a Papist woman be a good wife to a Protestant husband…?[25]

Such discussions could only increase and legitimise the sectarian attitudes of working-class Protestants which were already well-established in districts such as Sandy Row, Ballymaccarret and Brown's Square.

The fiery sermons of preachers such as Drew and McIlwaine played an important role in some of the serious riots in the nineteenth century. Prior to the riots of 1835, during which two people were killed, special services for the Orangemen had been held for the first time in Christ Church and St Anne's Cathedral.[26] Although Drew should not be seen as the sole cause of the riot,[27] his sermons were notorious for their violent hostility towards Catholicism and he undoubtedly provided the Orangemen with an inspiring sermon for the Twelfth. Ministers, such as Drew and McIlwaine, encouraged attendance at Orange railway excursions on the Twelfth which were permitted with the lapsing of the Party Processions Act between 1845

and 1850. The nature of these excursions meant that the town centre and the railway station became Orange territory for the day, a challenge which working-class Catholics found hard to ignore, resulting in riots in 1846, 1848 and 1849.[28] The Twelfth riots of 1857 became particularly severe after Drew, McIlwaine and the Presbyterian firebrand, Hugh Hanna, announced their intention to preach at the Customs House steps which resulted in an attack on Hugh Hanna's service (the others were convinced by the magistrates to desist).[29] In 1872 Hugh Hanna encouraged Protestant crowds to assemble to protect his church from a home rule procession which led to serious rioting.[30]

Protestant ministers also played an important role in the development of Protestant working-class opposition to repeal. The tradition of sectarian rivalry ensured that working-class Protestants would probably equate repeal with the elevation of their hereditary enemies. However, ministers, such as the Rev. Dr Cooke and Rev. Dr Drew, reinforced this by declaring that repeal would inevitably lead to Catholic ascendancy and the subjugation of Protestants.[31] The subsequent espousal of Catholic causes by the Belfast Repeal Association would have confirmed Protestant workers in their opposition to repeal.[32]

Protestant working-class opposition to repeal manifested itself in the activities of the Protestant Operatives Association and in serious rioting during O'Connell's visit to Belfast in 1841 and on the Twelfth during the 'repeal year' of 1843. The Protestant Operatives' Association organised a public meeting against repeal in 1843 attended by 2,000–3,000 workers and collected 17,000 signatures for a petition opposing the scheme.[33] Unlike previous riots which were of much shorter duration, the Twelfth riots in 1843 continued intermittently for nearly two weeks and involved extensive house-wrecking and intimidation often accompanied by the burning of effigies of William of Orange, Daniel O'Connell and Father Mathew. The serious nature of the riots reflects the heightened tension surrounding repeal and the Protestant workers' desire to demonstrate that 1843 would not be the 'repeal year'.[34] Although there was no organised 'unionist' movement, apart from the banned Orange lodges and the Belfast Protestant Operatives Association, working-class unionism clearly dates from this period. In the early 1840s, Protestant workers displayed their conviction that the union was necessary to safeguard their position in Ireland.

The Belfast Repeal Association

In the same period as Protestant ministers were legitimising the sectarianism of the Protestant working class and rallying them behind the union, the Belfast Repeal Association was fostering the development of nationalism among Catholic workers and mobilising them in support of repeal. By June 1843, the weekly meetings of the association were being attended by

2,000–2,500 people[35] and although the total amount of 'rent' collected was relatively small (£8 to £18 per week), poor members were allowed to contribute one penny per month so the small total does not necessarily reflect low levels of support.[36] The success of the Belfast Repeal Association was assisted by the active support of four parish priests (despite the disapproval of Dr William Crolly, Archbishop of Armagh, and Dr Cornelius Denvir, bishop of Down and Connor) and the financial support of some middle-class Catholics.[37] The most active members of the Belfast Repeal Association were the tradesmen, workers and the lower middle class in the Catholic community.[38] The repeal newspaper, *The Vindicator*, described the repeal wardens as 'all of them hard working men, yet forgetting the labours of the day', regularly collected the 'rent' and attending the weekly meetings.[39]

The success of the Belfast Repeal Association in mobilising the Catholics of Belfast has not been recognised in the literature. This is partly due to the practice of looking at the low amount of rent collected in Ulster as a whole. The fact that no 'monster meetings' were held in Belfast during the 'repeal year' of 1843 is also put forward to demonstrate the weakness of the repeal movement.[40] However, the reason why no outdoor rallies or monster meetings were held in Belfast was because O'Connell strongly disapproved of anything likely to lead to sectarian strife and riotous behaviour on the part of repeal supporters which could give the government an excuse for suppressing the repeal movement.[41] Belfast was one of only two towns that held weekly repeal meetings and these were attended by over 2,000 people.[42] This demonstrates that although there were no spectacular displays of support for repeal in Belfast in the form of 'monster meetings', there was a firm, consistent base of support and the campaign in the form of a penny a month rent touched more people than has previously been realised.

The Belfast Repeal Association fostered the development of Irish nationalism among the Catholic working class in Belfast. This was the nationalism of O'Connell, not the pure, romantic, uncompromising nationalism of the Young Irelanders. The majority of the leadership and membership of the Belfast Repeal Association supported O'Connell's policy of cooperation with the Whig government in exchange for reform in Ireland after 1846. However, this does not mean that O'Connell and the Belfast repealers were not nationalists. Ideally, they wanted an Irish parliament but after the anticlimax of the Clontarf meeting it was clear that they were not going to win repeal by 'moral force'. As O'Connell and his followers were not prepared to resort to violence and the nature of the parliamentary franchise meant that they did not have the opportunities that the home rule movement had to exert influence later in the century, they had little choice but to extract as many reforms as possible from the government. As the head repeal warden, Thomas McEvoy, declared when O'Connell temporarily supported the plan for a federal solution, 'We will accept all we can get by way

of instalment' but would 'never be fully satisfied with anything less than the legislative independence of our country'.[43]

While the Belfast Repeal Association involved the Catholic working class in politics proper for the first time and fostered the development of Irish nationalism, it also reinforced Catholic workers' sectarianism by mobilising them in support of specifically Catholic issues. The *Vindicator* itself saw a close connection between Catholicism and nationalism, as evidenced by its description of the absence of nationalism in Belfast before the founding of that newspaper in 1838:

> The Protestants had no nationalisation, they were merely Protestant and their politics were sectarian. On the other hand, there was a certain nationality among the Presbyterians. To be sure, it was anything but Irish – it smacked of Scotch feeling and strongly savoured of the plantation of Ulster. The Catholic party, strong only in the ancient patriotism of their creed, were without power, consolidation or organs.[44]

The *Vindicator* constantly carried reports of converts to Catholicism in England and elsewhere and it was reprimanded on one occasion by the National Repeal Association leadership for describing the Protestant church as an 'insignificant heresy'.[45]

The Belfast repeal leadership maintained a strong commitment to defending Catholic interests, including opposition to the Charitable Bequests Board. Although the Archbishop of Armagh, along with two other bishops, had joined the Charitable Bequests Board, the Belfast repealers supported O'Connell's and Bishop MacHale of Tuam's opposition to the board on the grounds that it put church property under the control of the state.[46] During the split between O'Connell and the Young Irelanders, the Belfast repeal leadership showed no hesitation in supporting O'Connell and denouncing the secular nationalism of the Young Irelanders with little thought to the effect this might have on the few Protestant supporters of repeal.[47]

It has been argued that as the Ribbon society was strong in Ulster and the repeal movement was generally weak, sectarianism must have hindered the development of political movements such as repeal.[48] However, the fact that Ribbonism coexisted with the Repeal Association in Belfast suggests that sectarianism did not necessarily hinder the development of political movements like repeal.[49] In September 1845, the *Vindicator* revealed that there were as many as 1,000 Ribbon society members in Belfast, including some repeal wardens and rank-and-file repealers who were subsequently purged from the association. It was possible that a Catholic worker could support the repeal campaign and still feel that a secret society was necessary to protect their community from the Orangemen, particularly as the forces of law and order were not considered to be impartial.[50]

Fenianism

Fenianism had significant support among the Catholic working classes of Belfast, probably numbering well over 1,000 members at its height in 1865. County Antrim's arrest rate of 33 (most of them in Belfast) per 10,000 of the population under the Habeas Corpus Suspension Act was comparable to other Fenian strongholds such as County Cork with 35 and Limerick with 31.[51] In 1866, the Belfast Resident Magistrate, Orme, declared to Dublin Castle, 'It is well known that there was an extensive organisation here [in 1865] and that drilling and other military preparations were carried on.'[52] The head 'centre' of Belfast, Frank Roney, maintained that he had no problems recruiting the first thousand members in Belfast in the early 1860s and that by 1865, after the coup of recruiting William Harbison, a sergeant, and several soldiers of the local garrison and gaining access to their weapons, Belfast was never in a more perfect condition for revolution.[53] However, between 1865 and 1867 the Catholic Church and the local authorities dealt the movement severe blows and the Belfast Fenians did not participate in the failed rising of 1867 although regular meetings continued until 1869.[54]

In his study of the composition of the Fenian society, Comerford has established that the Fenians were predominantly from the artisan/lower white-collar class.[55] Comerford argues that this indicates that the society was fulfilling the social and recreational needs of an artisan elite who would otherwise have had no outlet for their talents. He places the Fenian society in the context of Victorian self-improvement and recreational organisations and describes how Fenian groups would often drill openly and go to picnics and sporting events which seem contrary to the nature of a secret society.[56] In relation to the Belfast Fenians, Comerford's comparison with British artisan organisations is misleading. The artisans and white-collar workers may have been over-represented considering their numbers in the town as a whole but the society still had too many members who were unskilled workers to be equated with British artisan organisations.[57] Self-help organisations in Britain, such as mechanics' institutes and co-op stores, were composed of men who had little contact with labourers and those living in very poor streets.[58] The Fenians in Belfast were meeting in squalid streets of the Pound, such as Nail Street and Hamill Street, as well as better locations such as Derby Street.[59] Comerford also reads too much into the use of cricket and racing to cover Fenian meetings, suggesting that the meetings themselves were primarily of entertainment value. Sporting events were a cover not just for Fenian meetings but for Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) and Irish Republican Army meetings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[60] Roney and other leaders were trained in military matters by Harbison and other members of the organisation spent long hours melting

lead over fire in order to make bullets.[61] The military preparation appears to have amounted to more than the recreational activity allowed for by Comerford.

Comerford asserts that 'Fenianism found a following not because there were tens of thousands of Irishmen eager to take up the gun but because there were tens of thousands of young Irishmen in search of self realisation through appropriate social outlets'.[62] Every organisation offers a sense of belonging. In this, the Fenian society was no different from the Orange Order, the present republican movement or a football club. It is not a unique quality or what is most important about Fenianism. Unlike brass bands and football clubs, the Fenian society was a revolutionary movement and its members faced the possibility of imprisonment, exile, transportation and even death as John Newsinger has pointed out in his criticism of Comerford.[63] The emotional appeal of nationalism and the experience of living in a society divided on sectarian lines was what made the Belfast Fenians take the risks which led to their imprisonment and their families' suffering.

Fenianism in Belfast should be seen in the Irish context of the merged tradition of Ribbonism, republicanism and constitutional nationalism rather than in the British context of Victorian artisan organisations. The merging of Ribbonism into the Fenian movement in Belfast is indicated by its absence from police and magistrates' reports after 1864 once Fenianism took hold. The leader of the Belfast Fenians, Frank Roney, claims that the Fenians took part in the 1864 riots, fulfilling the role of defenders against the Orangemen previously undertaken by the Ribbon society.[64] The Fenian society in Belfast also fulfilled the mutual aid society function which had previously been provided by the Ribbon society.[65] Although some of the Fenian leadership in Belfast were hostile to the sectarian principles of Ribbonism,[66] Fenianism's duplication of Ribbon activities and its presence in Ribbon strongholds like the Pound suggest that it drew on membership of the Ribbon society. The membership of both organisations came predominantly from the same social class, that is, the working class but not generally the most destitute.[67] The Ribbon society, whilst being sectarian, also shared a commitment, if somewhat hazy and undefined, to Irish independence[68] so Fenianism would have been attractive to its members just as the earlier repeal movement had been. According to Roney, only in County Monaghan was the commitment to the sectarian nature of their society so strong that a section of Ribbonmen refused to join with the Fenians.[69]

The leaders of the movement in Belfast were republicans who admired the United Irishmen and the Young Irelanders.[70] Frank Roney's mother, who was a Presbyterian before she converted to Catholicism at the time of her marriage, knew Mary Joy McCracken, the sister of the executed United Irishman, Henry Joy McCracken, and told the young Frank stories of the heroism of the young woman watching her brother's execution and after-

wards taking a lock of his hair. Roney stated that this story was recited to him 'time and time again' and 'I felt that if, when I became a man, I failed to avenge his death, I would be derelict in my duty to my God and my country'.[71] John Griffith, another leading Belfast Fenian, had been a Young Irelander in his youth. These men, together with other leading Fenians, climbed to the top of Cave Hill outside Belfast and, in imitation of Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen, pledged themselves to fight for an Irish Republic.[72]

While being predominantly part of the republican and Ribbon tradition in Belfast, Fenianism should not be seen as a completely separate development from the tradition of constitutional nationalism. Some nationalists may have become Fenians in the 1860s as constitutional nationalism seemed to offer no way forward at that time. After the failure of the Fenian rising in 1867 and the new possibilities offered by the home rule movement in the 1870s, some Fenians appear to have become involved in constitutional politics.[73] Comerford concludes that, 'Certainly the Fenians of the mid nineteenth century were not answering the call of any inexorable national spirit, but rather they were, by and large, trying to find, through the invocation of nationalism, a more significant place for themselves in the world.'[74] Possibly Roney, Griffith and even the rank-and-file Belfast Fenians were searching for 'a more significant place for themselves in the world'. However, they were also part of a well-established nationalist tradition. Roney grew up with stories of United Irishmen martyrs and Griffith was a Young Irelander. The rank-and-file men came from the Ribbon tradition of primitive republicanism and sectarian defence against loyalist Orangemen. The nationalism of the Fenians was more than the 'cloak' allowed by Comerford. It was the driving force behind the society.

Home rule

The Belfast Home Rule Association was one of the first branches established in Ireland and its establishment in 1872 was a local initiative.[75] It was an early and enthusiastic supporter of obstruction tactics at Westminster[76] and, after the understanding reached between Parnell and the IRB in 1879, succeeded in recruiting some Fenians to the movement.[77] In late 1884, the Belfast Home Rule Association fell out with Parnell due to their support of land nationalisation and their implied criticism of the pace of setting up Irish National League (INL) branches throughout Ireland.[78] This conflict led eventually to the resignation of the local leadership in 1885 and the establishment by Joseph Biggar of an INL branch with Father Pat Convery, the administrator of St Peter's, as president. This conflict with the national organisation confirms that far from nationalism having to be imported into Belfast, a nationalist ideology with independent socio-economic policies (such as land nationalisation) had developed in the town. The extension of

the franchise in 1885 and the creation of the mixed West Belfast constituency allowed Catholics in the Pound and Falls Road area to demonstrate their support for home rule with the INL candidate Thomas Sexton winning in 1886 after narrowly losing to the Conservative candidate the previous year.[79]

From the early years of the movement in Belfast the association was linked with a mass of supporters whose aims and methods were more extreme. These supporters were not necessarily members of the Home Rule Association[80] but used the home rule slogan, attended special home rule meetings and held processions in favour of home rule sometimes in opposition to the Home Rule Association and/or the Catholic Church. One police report describes them as 'not exactly the Home Rule party but the lowest section of the Catholic party'.[81] These 'real nationalists', as they came to be known, had more advanced nationalist views, supported the idea of the use of force and believed they should challenge the territorial dominance of the Orangemen. On one occasion the police described some members of a parade organising committee as 'suspected Ribbonmen'.[82] These characteristics suggest that some of them were ex-Fenians or members of the IRB.

These 'real nationalists' seem to have had considerable support. Their St Patrick's Day parade in 1879 (described by the *Belfast Morning News* as a 'Fenian parade') numbered about 5,000 people according to the resident magistrate.[83] Most Catholic districts of the town were represented and eight nationalist bands took part. In the Pound, Smithfield and the Falls Road area, green arches were erected and the processionists 'wore sashes of green and gold and rosettes of the same material'. On the banners,

> which were handsome and costly, were representations of St Patrick, O'Connell, the Manchester Martyrs, Erin with the harp and round tower, etc. and such inscriptions as 'Hereditary Bondsmen, know ye not, Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow', 'Ireland for the Irish', 'God Save Ireland', 'Emmet', 'Grattan', 'Sarsfield', and in one or two instances 'Home Rule'. The streets were crowded along the route of the procession…[and] the processionists were cheered from the windows of the houses in Mill Street, Divis Street and the Falls Road and green ribbons and handkerchiefs were waved to them as they passed.

The bands played tunes such as 'The Wearing of the Green', 'God Save Ireland', 'The White Cockade' and 'The Marseillaise Hymn'.[84] The speeches advocated the use of force to gain nationalist concessions for Ireland which prompted the *Belfast Morning News* to characterise the parade as consisting not of 'Home Rulers proper' but of 'Real Nationalists' or 'Fenians'.[85]

The parade was rerouted by the magistrates from Smithfield directly down the Falls Road to avoid a clash with the Protestants of Brown's

Square. The processionists were not willing to change their route and serious clashes with the police took place. One of the leaders, addressing the magistrates, declared, 'it was a disgrace that the Orangemen were at liberty to march through any part of town they chose, while the Catholics were restricted to certain districts'.[86] The fact that these 'real nationalists' considered it to be part of their duty to challenge the territorial domination of the Orangemen shows the link between these men and the Fenians, and the Ribbonmen before them. They appear to have been slowly reabsorbed into the mainstream nationalist movement following the new departure as 1880 was the last occasion when a parade was organised in opposition to the home rule leadership.

Even after organised nationalist processions were abandoned in the early 1880s, the informal parading of individual nationalist bands and their supporters served to maintain the nationalist spirit of ghettos like the Pound. These bands paraded nearly every weekend during the summer months from 1877. They were named after nationalist heroes such as Wolfe Tone, Robert Emmet and Henry Grattan and had special uniforms in national colours (the green uniforms of the Emmet band were said to particularly enrage the Sandy Row crowd). When they paraded, they were usually accompanied by a crowd of (sometimes rowdy) supporters and many others came out of their houses to watch them pass.[87] The bands also held special dances to which their members, their supporters and their girlfriends were invited.[88] The nationalist bands succeeded in subtly indoctrinating the population into nationalist ideology, completing the work done by the Fenians/IRB and the home rule movement amongst the more politically active.

The vast majority of the Belfast home rulers were clearly motivated by the desire for Irish independence, whether they were home rulers or separatists. They were not primarily motivated by 'a search for material benefits' as historians such as Comerford have suggested.[89] Invariably, speakers at home rule meetings emphasised Ireland's right as a nation to its own parliament rather than the need to address specific grievances. On the contrary, the government's remedying of grievances such as the 1869 disestablishment of the Church of Ireland and the 1870 Land Act were cited as early as 1873 as arguments *in favour* of home rule as some of the causes of divisions between Irish Catholics and Protestants and landlords and tenants had been ameliorated or removed.[90] Grievances, such as emigration, were mentioned as additional justification for an Irish parliament. It is natural that the home rulers would attempt to portray an independent Ireland as more prosperous but in reality Belfast's prosperity probably depended on the union. This shows the secondary importance of economic arguments. They were moulded to suit positions determined by political and sectarian reasons.

The speech by Rev. Dr McCashin of St Malachy's College, Belfast on the occasion of Parnell's release symbolises the outlook of the Belfast home rulers:

> 'Why did Mr Parnell throw off his coat? Was it for the land question? No. He said in Cork that he threw off his coat in order to get a government for Ireland, and that that coat would never be put on until he had achieved his purpose…Lop off as they liked all the branches of the tree of injustice, in the land question and every other question, there would never be peace in Ireland while England ruled the Irish people. Let the government give them what they might, either willingly or unwillingly, until they ruled themselves they would never have peace and contentment – they would never rest until that end had been attained.' Even if the English were willing to rule them justly, 'they knew not the necessities; they did not know that there was something in the human breast, something implanted by God himself, and that the Irish would never feel that they were free until they had the power vested in them of legislating for themselves'.[91]

By ignoring Fenianism and the early home rule movement in Belfast, A.C. Hepburn, in his study *A Past Apart*, has come to the erroneous conclusion that:

> until the last decade of the nineteenth century…the minority in Belfast was defined fairly narrowly by its Catholic religion, was under clerical leadership in social and political as well as spiritual life, and had more in common with Irish migrant groups in British and overseas cities than with the rest of Ireland…*In particular the popular political nationalism of the late nineteenth century was developed entirely in the south and subsequently imported into the north*.[92]

These claims are clearly refuted by the evidence that Belfast was one of the Fenian strongholds in Ireland. It had established its own Home Rule Association in 1872, it was an early and enthusiastic supporter of the policy of obstruction, it contained a group of influential advanced nationalists who mobilised the population for great nationalist processions and it supported a popular culture of nationalist bands, whose constant parades filled ghettos such as the Pound with music and imagery celebrating Ireland's struggle for independence. The religious composition of Belfast did make it different from other parts of Ireland, but it did not make it any less nationalist. In fact, the hostility between Catholics and Protestants was one of the driving forces behind the nationalism of working-class Catholics.

Brian Walker's claim that Ulster politics could have developed into something other than a unionist/nationalist divide during 1868–86 is equally fanciful.[93] Walker maintains that Ulster politics could have developed into a division between all of Ulster and the rest of Ireland based on the industrial nature of the province and its custom of tenant right. A Liberal/Conservative and, eventually, a Labour/Conservative division could then

have become the defining feature within Ulster politics. The strength of the Orange Order among working-class Protestants and the existence of the Ribbon society, the repeal movement and the Fenian society among working-class Catholics shows that the Protestant/unionist, Catholic/nationalist divide was already well-established in Belfast prior to 1868. The religious divide in the countryside was also too deep to prevent anything other than unionism and nationalism from being the long-term political allegiances. Wright stresses that the Catholic peasants of Ulster always rejected the plan, sometimes entertained by Protestant peasants, of securing the Ulster custom in the province without insisting on its implementation elsewhere in Ireland.[94] The religious link with Catholic peasants elsewhere in Ireland was always stronger than any shared economic interest with their Protestant neighbours. Peasants from both communities supported Liberal candidates on the land issue, but with the transformation of the Land League into the National League, politics was again divided along religious lines. The sectarian realities became clear in electoral terms during Walker's period but they had long existed and ensured that politics would take a unionist/nationalist form.

The Belfast Protestant Working Men's Association

The 1867 Reform Act enfranchised a significant number of Protestant working-class men who displayed their independence and initiative in establishing the Belfast Protestant Working Men's Association (BPWMA) to organise the return to parliament of a candidate who would advance their interests. The BPWMA invited William Johnston to run as he had taken a stand against the Party Processions Act by organising a Twelfth of July parade in 1867, which resulted in him spending some weeks in jail. The local aristocracy and conservative leaders were regarded as having let down Johnston by declaring their intention as grand jurors to enforce the Party Processions Act. A bitter electoral contest took place between Johnston and the two official Conservative candidates, Charles Lanyon and John Mulholland, whose main preoccupation was the prospect of the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland. Johnston secretly did a deal with the Liberal candidate, Thomas McClure, who agreed to finance Johnston's campaign. Johnston and McClure beat the two official Conservative candidates in what some hoped would be a watershed in Belfast politics.[95]

The BPWMA had widespread support in working-class Protestant areas.[96] Johnston's canvassing on the Shankill and Sandy Row 'met a most enthusiastic reception in both places' and in Sandy Row, he recorded, 'crowds of children caught my hands'.[97] Johnston emphasised his absolute commitment to the repeal of the Party Processions Act and the attention he would give to the concerns of the working class. At one meeting of 4,000–5,000 of his supporters in front of Linfield mill, he declared that he trusted that the electors will:

> know how to discriminate between those who have stuck by them through thick and thin in days gone by, and those who, for the first time, have declared themselves in favour of the repeal of the Party Processions Act…There are some gentlemen…[who] are offended and greatly disgusted with the Orange democracy, while at the same time…[they] would not hesitate to talk about the Orange aristocracy…We are here today to sound the death knell to tyranny and hypocrisy and to seek protection for the artisan against tyranny and dictation of all sorts; and we'll keep an eye on those men, whether in foundries or factories, who seek to tyrannise over or deprive the artisans of Belfast of their freedom.[98]

His message was popular. The BPWMA claimed that 'there is not a voter in Sandy Row that is not going to vote for Johnston'.[99]

The denunciation of the BPWMA by Church of Ireland ministers had little effect on its supporters, which suggests that it is simplistic to give the entire blame to ministers for the sectarian attitudes of the Protestant working class in Belfast. They only listened to ministers when they liked what they heard. At a BPWMA meeting in the Music Hall, one speaker declared that it was said that the church is against us. 'That's a sure and certain sign of our success (*hear, hear and laughter*).' The speaker compared the clergy's doctrine of submissiveness with that preached in Derry before the apprentice boys shut the gates. 'That was the answer they gave to the clergy when they told them not to do what was right, and let us give a similar answer when we are asked not to vote for Mr Johnston, let us cry "no surrender" (*loud applause and kentish fire*).'[100] At a meeting in Northumberland Street, a clergyman, despite being an Orangeman, could not get a hearing for the Conservative candidate, Mulholland. He appealed to the audience, 'I appear here as a working man and an Orangeman.' A voice replied, 'come out and I'll give you a smoke'. The minister persisted, 'I am a Conservative and by the blessing of God I'll always continue one'. A voice interrupted, 'three cheers for William Johnston of Ballykilbeg', and the cheers drowned out the minister.[101]

Did the BPWMA represent a new departure in Belfast politics? It demonstrated a political awareness among Protestant workers and a determination to utilise their newly won right to vote. They were determined to act independently if the Conservative candidates did not take account of their concerns. The widespread support for the BPWMA in Sandy Row and the fact that two of the association's leaders lived in the district shows that Sandy Row Protestants did have the capacity to act independently in political matters. Peter Gibbon's claim that the Sandy Row district produced no political leaders and that they blindly followed Conservative mill owners is not supported by the evidence.[102] In fact, Frank Wright found in Sandy Row the clearest correlation between occupation and voting patterns. Sixty-

five per cent of labourers in Sandy Row voted for William Johnston only, whereas shopkeepers voted overwhelmingly for Johnston and one of the other Conservative candidates.[103] The labourers were far from being the tools of the Conservative mill owners such as Mulholland. Not only did they vote for Johnston, they decided not to vote for either of the other Conservative candidates.

The philosophy of the BPWMA was less of a new departure than some observers, such as the *Northern Whig*, had hoped.[104] It did not have the potential to develop into a liberal working men's organisation such as those which existed in Britain. The speeches of BPWMA activists demonstrate that they were uncomfortable with the suggestion that they were radical.[105] Although one prominent member of the BPWMA attended a reform meeting and shared a platform with the editor of a Catholic newspaper, resulting in his expulsion from the Orange Order, this willingness to leave aside sectarian prejudices to further the cause of reform was not typical, particularly in Sandy Row.[106] Likewise, although an Orange Order master campaigned for the Liberal candidate McClure in one part of Sandy Row, which resulted in him receiving a few votes, the general feeling towards McClure was one of hostility.[107] McClure's support for reform and tenant right was not enough to override the perceived Liberal softness towards Catholicism. The Liberals' financing of Johnston had to be kept secret and any suggestions that workers should support McClure as well as Johnston due to his support of tenant right led to uproar.[108] During the election, a pro-Johnston mob gathered outside his committee rooms and cheered before moving on to attack McClure's rooms as well as those of the official Conservative candidates.[109] Once Johnston's victory was announced, a crowd gathered in Sandy Row with music and tar barrels and attempted to enter the Pound but the police and a heavy shower of rain discouraged them.[110] Johnston's Sandy Row supporters did not see his victory as marking any new departure in their attitude towards their Catholic rivals. Johnston may genuinely have believed in equal marching rights for Catholics and Protestants and in 1870 the two Catholic newspapers noted an improvement in community relations which it put down to Johnston and the BPWMA's influence within Orangeism.[111] However, the riots of 1872 following a home rule parade showed that enough Protestant workers were not willing to accept equal marching rights and this was enough to destroy the illusion of improved community relations.

The future of the BPWMA and its successor organisations also demonstrates how important pan-Protestantism was for challenging Conservative candidates. Independent candidates representing Protestant workers could only compete with Conservative candidates if they could outbid them on commitment to Protestantism. Advocating the economic interests of workers was never enough. In 1874, Johnston, short of money and suffering from a decline in popularity due to his support of the secret ballot,

agreed to be the official Conservative candidate and toned down his radicalism accordingly.[112] In 1878, Johnston left politics to take up the position of inspector of fisheries and the linen baron, William Ewart, easily beat the BPWMA candidate, Robert Seeds, QC, with Johnston's support. Johnston himself ran again as the official Conservative candidate for South Belfast in 1885 and easily beat Seeds who was again supported by the BPWMA. In 1885, Seeds campaigned on class issues, such as housing, as well as emphasising his commitment to Protestantism, but it was not enough to beat a candidate with the impeccable Protestant credentials of Johnston.[113] In the early twentieth century likewise, the Independent Orange Order could only challenge Conservative candidates if pan-Protestantism was combined with class issues.[114]

The defeat of the Home Rule Bill in the House of Commons in 1886 delayed the development of mass unionist organisation in working-class Protestant communities, but there is ample evidence of opposition to home rule. Kane, the minister of Christ Church, was one of the leaders of the Ulster Loyalist Anti-Repeal Union, an organisation formed in January 1886 to campaign for unionist candidates both in Ulster and in Britain.[115] The organisation formed local fund-raising committees and, although there are no surviving records, it can be assumed that Kane ensured that members of his congregation in Sandy Row were involved. The huge number of loyalist bands shows the support for unionism at the grass-roots level. By the late 1870s, there were at least ten bands in the Sandy Row district alone holding regular parades, such as the 'Lily of the North' band, the 'Go in True Blues' and the 'Sandy Row Conservative Flute Band'.[116] The bands all had impressive uniforms and their parading and music undoubtedly inspired the political passions of the inhabitants. The severe riots of 1886 demonstrate the degree of opposition to home rule in key Protestant working-class districts such as Sandy Row and the Shankill. The inhabitants believed that the (mainly Catholic) country police had been sent to Belfast to put down Protestant opposition to home rule. They were determined to resist and attacked the police and police stations, sparking riots that lasted from early June until late September and claimed the lives of 32 people with over 370 injured.[117]

Conclusion

The unionist/nationalist divide among the working class in Belfast dates to the 1840s when Protestant and Catholic workers were involved in campaigns for and against the repeal of the union. This political division, encouraged by evangelical ministers and repeal leaders, was grafted onto the existing sectarian divide imported from the Ulster countryside in the early nineteenth century in the form of the Ribbon and Orange societies. The subsequent Catholic working-class support for Fenianism and home rule confirms their

commitment to Irish nationalism. While working-class Protestants' support of the BPWMA proved their capacity to act independently of Conservative leaders, it did not represent the beginnings of a liberal working men's movement with pan-Protestantism, rather than class, being the overriding theme. The importance of repeal, Fenianism and the early home rule movement has not been recognised in much of the literature on Belfast politics, which erroneously asserts that nationalism had to be imported into Belfast from the south of Ireland and that some other division apart from unionist/nationalist could have developed in the 1870s and 1880s.

Notes

1. Brian Walker, *Ulster Politics: The Formative Years, 1868–86* (Belfast, 1989), p. 46; A.C. Hepburn, *A Past Apart: Studies in the History of Catholic Belfast, 1850–1950* (Belfast, 1996), pp. 147–8.
2. There were no churches and very few schools in these districts at this time. See Catherine Hirst, *Religion, Politics and Violence in Nineteenth Century Belfast: The Pound and Sandy Row* (Dublin, 2002) for a full account of the development of these districts where much of the nineteenth-century rioting occurred.
3. The Ribbon society was a secret society that had as its objects the defeat of Orangeism and Protestantism and a commitment to an Irish Republic, hazily defined as the separation of Ireland from England. After the 1820s, the emphasis on insurrection declined and the Ribbon society's main objectives were to resist the Orange Order and to provide mutual aid to their members. See M.R. Beames, 'The Ribbon societies: lower class nationalism in pre-Famine Ireland', *Past and Present*, no. 97 (1982), pp. 128–43.
4. State of the country reports 1822–24 (National Archives of Ireland (NAI) SOC 2358/10, SOC 2358/17–18, SOC 2358/21, SOC 2358/27, SOC 2358/32, SOC 2358/34, SOC 2358/37, SOC 2358/41, SOC 2360/7, SOC 2360/29, SOC 2360/36, SOC 2360/41, SOC 2360/45–6, SOC 2520/8–9, SOC 2520/35–41, SOC 2622/17–19, 23, SOC 2623/2, SOC 2623/5–6, SOC 2623/8–9, SOC 2623/14, SOC 2623/17, SOC 2623/ 20, SOC 2623/24, SOC 2623/30–2).
5. *Reports brought from the Lords viz minutes of evidence on the state of Ireland*, PP 1825 (181) IX, p. 20.
6. *Belfast Newsletter*, 14 July 1825, *Northern Whig*, 15 July 1825.
7. Memo on the origin and development of Ribbonism from W. Hagan (CO 904/7; Public Records office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) MIC 448/1). Ribbonism in Belfast, and in other northern and eastern towns, made most of its converts among the lower classes (but not among the destitute) and many of its leaders were publicans who profited from the society's meetings which took place in public houses. Beames, 'Ribbon societies', p. 129.
8. John Houston, a publican from Divis Street, was accused of being a county delegate and the other two were alleged to be lodge masters. Other leaders mentioned by informers included a shoemaker and an iron dealer from Smithfield and a chandler from Carrick Hill. Report of Ribbon Informer, 8 November 1839 (CO 904/8, MIC 448/2 in PRONI); Report of W. Maloney, RM, to Dublin Castle, 31 January 1842 (CO 904/9, MIC 448/3 in PRONI); *Vindicator*, 20 September 1845.
9. Grand Lodge Registry of Warrants, 1823, 1828–9, 1856.

10. The conservative *Belfast Newsletter*, the liberal *Northern Whig* and the Catholic *Vindicator* all describe districts such as Brown's Square, Sandy Row and Ballymaccarret as being main Orange areas. *Belfast Newsletter*, 14 July 1829; *Northern Whig*, 2 June 1825, 19 July 1825; *Vindicator*, 7 February 1844, 5 February 1845. A sympathetic source, *The Repealer Repulsed!*, an anonymous contemporary pamphlet, refers to the main opponents of O'Connell's visit to Belfast as being 'the loyal opposition of the sons of Brown Street, Sandy Row and Ballymaccarret'. *The Repealer Repulsed!* (Belfast, 1841), p. 151.
11. *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the nature, character, extent and tendency of Orange lodges, associations or societies in Ireland*, PP, 1835 (377) XV, p. 113; *Minutes of evidence on the state of Ireland*, p. 269.
12. The sovereign, Thomas Verner, acted as the chief magistrate before the appointment of resident magistrates. He was appointed by the Donegall family, who owned much of the land in Belfast. The other justices of the peace appear to have been landowners from the surrounding countryside such as Sir Robert Bateson Bart, MP, JP and deputy lord lieutenant for County Down. *Northern Whig*, 23 April 1832.
13. For example, in 1825, the police arrested 23 Catholics for rioting, whereas no Orangemen were charged with any acts of violence or for parading illegally. In 1832, two local magistrates and the deputy lord lieutenant for County Down attended the funeral of an Orangeman who had been murdered. The next day, a Catholic was murdered in retaliation. The magistrates offered a reward for the capture of the Orangeman's murderer but not for the capture of the Catholic's murderer. *Belfast Newsletter*, 14 July 1825; *Northern Whig* 15 July 1825, 23 April 1832, 3 May 1832; Memorial of special constables to lord lieutenant (NAI, CSORP/1833/Private Index/277).
14. Statement of Outrages, County Armagh, September 1828 (NAI, SOC 2882/7), Statement of Outrages, County Down, September 1828 (NAI, SOC 2882/20), Statement of Outrages, County Antrim, September 1828 (NAI, SOC 2882/2), Statement of Outrages, County Monaghan, November 1828 (NAI, SOC 2882/69).
15. Statement of Outrages, County Tyrone, September 1828 (NAI, SOC 2882/72).
16. Statement of Outrages, County Londonderry, December 1828 (NAI, SOC 2882/30).
17. Herewald Senior, *Orangeism in Britain and Ireland, 1795–1836* (London, 1966), p. 225.
18. *Belfast Newsletter*, 14 July 1829, 9 July 1830.
19. In 1830 and 1833, serious disturbances occurred on St Patrick's Day which culminated in clashes between Catholic and Protestant rioters and the wrecking of houses. In 1832, riots surrounding funeral processions (especially those of sectarian murder victims) caused such concern that a number of 'respectable' Belfast citizens of all religious persuasions presented a memorial to the lord lieutenant outlining the recent sectarian clashes and requesting (unsuccessfully) a judicial inquiry into the causes of the unfortunate state of Belfast society. *Northern Whig*, 18 March 1830; *Belfast Newsletter*, 19 March 1833; Memorial to lord lieutenant, 28 April 1832 (NAI, CSORP/1832/Private Index/859).
20. W. Maguire, *Belfast* (Staffordshire, 1993), p. 50; I. Budge and C. O'Leary, *Belfast: Approach to Crisis: A Study of Belfast Politics, 1613–1970* (London, 1973), p. 75.
21. Annals of Christ Church (T1075/11, PRONI); Rev. James Morgan, *Recollections of my Life and Times* (Belfast, 1874); Townsend Street Presbyterian Church, history of the congregation, 1833–1933 (PRONI, CR3/27).

22. Gaunt, the minister of St Andrew's, declared to his congregation that he may be a hindrance to fund raising as he was regarded as 'some kind of Lucifer match to set the combustible material of Sandy Row on fire (*applause*), that he was too much of an Orangeman though he did not show half the Orangeism that he intended had opportunity presented (*loud applause*)'. *Belfast Newsletter*, 6 October 1868. Montgomery, the new Presbyterian minister, was an Orangeman and a close associate of Hugh Hanna. *Belfast Newsletter*, 16 January 1861.
23. Annals of Christ Church (PRONI F1075/11) pp. 139–41, 145–9; Census of Christ Church district (PRONI, CR1/13/D1).
24. Reports of resident magistrate, 4 April 1843, 5 April 1843 (NAI, Outrage Papers, County Antrim, 1843).
25. *Vindicator*, 24 June 1843, 26 June 1843.
26. *Belfast Newsletter*, 14 July 1835.
27. The riots followed six years of determined parading by the Orangemen since Catholic emancipation and occurred against the backdrop of the increasing proximity of the Pound and Sandy Row districts.
28. *Belfast Newsletter*, 17 July 1846; *Northern Whig*, 13 July 1848, 14 July 1849; Report of resident magistrate, 13 July 1849 (NAI, Outrage Papers, County Antrim, 1849).
29. *Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry, Belfast Riots 1857*, p. 13.
30. Report of resident magistrate, August 1872 (NAI, CSORP/1873/1022).
31. *The Repealer Repulsed!*, p. 20; *Northern Whig*, 13 July 1848; *Belfast Newsletter*, 14 July 1848.
32. See the section that follows on the Belfast Repeal Association.
33. Reports of sub-inspector of constabulary, 21 June 1843, 27 June 1843 (NAI, Outrage Papers, County Antrim, 1843); *Vindicator*, 24 June 1843, 26 June 1843.
34. Scholars, such as Sybil Baker, maintain that the Catholics were the most enthusiastic participants, if not the initiators, of the 1843 riots. This, it is argued, reflects their confidence derived from their increasing numbers. However, both the Protestant *Belfast Newsletter* and the Catholic *Vindicator* agreed that the initial violence was perpetrated by the Orangemen and the resident magistrate declared it was impossible to tell who the main aggressor was. The riots were not caused by an increasingly confident and aggressive Catholic population. Catholics mistakenly felt confident that repeal would be granted. Moreover, the Belfast repeal leaders worked hard to try to prevent outbreaks of violence of which their leader O'Connell disapproved. This is not to suggest that Catholics were not involved in violent acts such as stone throwing and house wrecking. They obviously were but they had less reason to initiate the rioting. It was the Protestant workers who felt insecure and, as in 1829, in the face of opposition from their leaders, insisted on a show of strength. The false assertion that it was the increasingly aggressive Catholics of the Pound who caused the 1843 riots obscures the degree of anti-repeal feeling among the Protestant working class and the origins of working-class unionism. Sybil Baker, 'Orange and green, Belfast 1832–1912', in H. Dyos and M. Wolff (eds), *The Victorian City*, Vol. 2 (London, 1973), pp. 795–6; *Belfast Newsletter*, 14 July 1843; *Vindicator*, 15 July 1843; Reports of resident magistrate, 16 July 1843, 18 July 1843, 24 July 1843 (NAI, Outrage Papers, County Antrim, 1843).
35. *Vindicator*, 31 May 1843; *Vindicator*, 2 June 1843. Although the *Vindicator* may be considered likely to have exaggerated the attendance figures, the mayor of Belfast, an unsympathetic source, estimated the attendance at a regular weekly meeting in 1845 as being 1,000. Therefore, the *Vindicator*'s attendance figures for 1843 at the height of the repeal agitation do not seem unreasonable. Report

of the Mayor of Belfast, 14 May 1845 (NAI, Outrage Papers, County Antrim, 1845).

36. For example, in one week in September 1844, 443 penny subscriptions were collected. *Vindicator*, 4 September 1844.
37. *Vindicator*, 1 March 1843.
38. The head repeal warden, Thomas McEvoy, was a publican, as were three others; two prominent repeal wardens were booksellers/publishers; two wardens, including the secretary Bernard O'Dempsey, were painters/glaziers; two other wardens were clothes dealers from Chapel Lane; one warden was a hardware dealer from Marquis Street; one was a builder from the High Street area; one was a pawnbroker; one was a ship master; two were grocers, one from the Falls Road and the other from Pound Street; one was a brick manufacturer from Cullingtree Road in the Pound; two were flax dressers, one from Barrack Street in the Pound; and two were labourers, one from an entry off Durham Street. The other repeal wardens lived in houses which were too poor to be included in the Belfast street directories. Only those repeal wardens whose identity in the street directories could be established beyond reasonable doubt have been included in this list. If the surname and Christian name were very common or if there were more than one entry for a particular name, these individuals have not been listed. *Belfast Street Directory*, 1841–42, 1843–44, 1846–47; *Vindicator*, 1 March, 1 April, 31 May, 13 September 1843, 19 June, 31 July, 4, 11,18, 25 September, 16 October 1844, 7 May 1845, 23 September 1846.
39. *Vindicator*, 18 September 1844.
40. S. J. Connolly, 'Catholicism in Ulster 1800–50', in P. Roebuck (ed.), *Plantation to Partition: Essays in Honour of J. L. McCracken* (Belfast, 1981), p. 168.
41. *Vindicator*, 8 October 1842.
42. *Vindicator*, 6 November 1844.
43. *Vindicator*, 23 October, 13 November 1844.
44. *Vindicator*, 8 May 1844.
45. In response, the *Vindicator* claimed that it had to tell the truth about the 'Church of blood and crime' due to its persistent attacks on the Roman Catholic Church. *Vindicator*, 17 December 1842. Whilst ridiculing the paltry amounts of money collected by 'Trash' Gregg's Protestant Operative Society, the *Vindicator* noted that 'the day is not far distant when Catholicism will lift up its venerable head in high places. In Ireland, it has the giant's strength. In England, its daily increase is great; while state Protestantism is hated by the millions in both countries from its repulsive tyranny – and that other motley thing called dissenting Protestantism is nearly broken up – a thing without principle or vitality, exhibiting sad disfigurements and degraded below contempt by the frantic fanatics, who only take it up when they lose their reason.' *Vindicator*, 20 December, 1843.
46. *Vindicator*, 4 January 1845; J.C. Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland, 1603–1923* (London, 1981), pp. 328–9.
47. The *Vindicator* declared 'the war party [i.e. the Young Irelanders] would banish religion altogether from their deliberations – the peace party [i.e. O'Connell and the Repeal Association] would make it the basis of all their councils; the war party would have what is called infidel education – the peace party would have Christian education; the war party inculcate the right to dissent – the peace party urge the utility of unanimity; the war party would have recourse to arms even while the constitution was left to them, and by way of aggression – the peace party would not have recourse to arms until they were driven from

the constitution, and then by way of defence; the war party would not prefer the Whigs to the Tories – the peace party think there is some difference'. *Vindicator*, 1 August 1846.

48. Connolly, 'Catholicism in Ulster', p. 171.
49. *Vindicator*, 17, 24 September 1845.
50. *Vindicator*, 20 September, 4 October 1845.
51. R.V. Comerford, *The Fenians in Context: Irish Politics and Society, 1848–82* (Dublin, 1985), p. 208.
52. Report of resident magistrate, 5 May 1866 (NAI, CSORP/1866/9687).
53. F. Roney, *Frank Roney: Irish Rebel and Californian Labour Leader* (Berkeley, 1931), p. 57.
54. Report of resident magistrate, 5 May 1866 (NAI, CSORP/1866/9687). Reports of resident magistrate, 6 May 1867, 24 January 1868 (NAI, Fenian Papers, 564R, 706R); *Ulster Observer*, 17 September 1867. Report of resident magistrate, 5 January 1868 (NAI, Fenian Papers, 284R); Police report, 1 November 1869 (NAI, Fenian Papers, 4677R).
55. R.V. Comerford, 'Patriotism as pastime: the appeal of Fenianism in the mid-1860s', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. LXXXVII (March 1981), p. 241.
56. Comerford, 'Patriotism as pastime', pp. 244–5.
57. All classes of people who lived in the Catholic ghettos of Belfast were represented in the Fenian society such as shopkeepers, clerks, shop assistants and skilled tradesmen as well as labourers, mill workers and chimney sweeps. Of the leaders who can be identified, the Belfast 'head centre' Frank Roney was a moulder, William Harbison, the main military strategist, was a sergeant in the Antrim militia, John Griffith, a 'centre', was a clerk, Michael Hanlon, a suspected 'centre', was a gardener, Henry O'Hagan, a suspected 'centre', was a bricklayer and Francis Rea, also a suspected 'centre', was a power loom tenter. In total, the occupations of the identifiable Fenians were; shoemakers 4, labourers 4, clerks 4, draper's assistants 3, blacksmiths 2, mechanics 2, pawnbrokers 2, weaver 1, hackler 1, chimney sweep 1, tailor 1, gardener 1, moulder 1, compositor (unemployed) 1, tenter 1, spirit grocer 1, publican 1, barber 1, bricklayer 1, soldier 1 (the magistrates suspected that more soldiers were involved). Of the 34 identifiable Belfast Fenians, only 18 were artisans or white-collar workers while the remainder were mainly semi-skilled workers or labourers. Reports of resident magistrates, 6 May 1867, 24 January 1868, 5 January 1868, 1 January 1867, 1 April 1867, 11 January 1868 (NAI, Fenian Papers, 564R, 706R, 284R, 1920R, 3114R, 2261R); Report of resident magistrate, 25 February 1866 (NAI, CSORP/1866/17917); *Belfast Street Directory*, 1865–6, 1870; *Northern Whig*, 1 January 1867, 18 January 1867; *Ulster Observer*, 31 March 1866.
58. Robert Gray, *The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 108–10, 141–2; G. Crossick, *An Artisan Elite in Victorian Society: Kentish London, 1840–1880* (London, 1978), pp. 130–1.
59. Report of resident magistrate, 5 January 1868 (NAI, Fenian Papers, 284R).
60. W.F. Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics, 1884–1924* (London, 1987), pp. 68, 192–3.
61. Roney, *Irish Rebel*, p. 76; *Northern Whig*, 1 January 1867.
62. Comerford, *Fenians in Context*, p. 112.
63. John Newsinger, *Fenianism in Mid-Victorian Britain* (London, 1994), p. 88.
64. There is no reason to suppose that Roney was lying about this as, being avowedly non-sectarian, he admits that it pained him to be fighting fellow Irishmen. It was 'not a pleasant undertaking…especially when we had been

preaching the doctrine of National unity and the destruction of sectarian prejudice'. Roney, *Irish Rebel*, p. 87.

65. Informers revealed that unemployed Fenians were entitled to unemployment benefit paid out at a barber's office of 10/- per week for single men and 12/- per week for married men. Report of resident magistrate, 25 February 1866 (NAI, CSORP/1866/17917). In his article on Ribbonism, M.R. Beames, speculating about the possible links between Ribbonism and Fenianism, mentions that it would be interesting to find evidence of the mutual aid function in Fenianism. Beames, 'Ribbon societies', p. 142.
66. Roney, for example, refused to join the Ribbon society in Britain although he was told this would facilitate the organisation of Fenianism there. Roney, *Irish Rebel*, p. 102.
67. Beames, 'Ribbon societies', p. 142.
68. Beames, 'Ribbon societies', p. 137.
69. Roney, *Irish Rebel*, p. 97.
70. Roney, *Irish Rebel*, pp. 52–3.
71. Roney, *Irish Rebel*, pp. 12–13.
72. Roney, *Irish Rebel*, pp. 56, 65.
73. In Belfast, as in the rest of Ireland, Fenians appeared on home rule platforms particularly after the 'new departure', the understanding reached between Parnell and the IRB leader, John Devoy, in 1879 which allowed individual Fenians to participate in the home rule movement in exchange for Parnell abandoning the policy of federalism in favour of some form of independence under the crown. See the section on the home rule movement below. At the leadership level, the home ruler Joseph Biggar had secretly given substantial funds to the Fenian society in the 1860s and John Griffith, another prominent home ruler, was probably a Fenian 'centre' in the 1860s. Roney, *Irish Rebel*, p. 59. I cannot be certain that these two John Griffiths were the same man. However, it was not a common name and there were only three recorded in the Belfast street directory in 1870. There is no evidence in the Dublin Castle records of the Fenian John Griffith emigrating to the United States and the fact that the Belfast Home Rule Association held a testimonial for John Griffith suggests that he had an illustrious career behind him. The Fenian Griffith was a Young Irelander in his youth and the fact that the home ruler Griffith tended to quote Thomas Davis also suggests he was the same person. *Belfast Street Directory*, 1870; *Belfast Morning News*, 21 June 1872.
74. Comerford, *Fenians in Context*, p. 249.
75. *Belfast Morning News*, 17 April 1872; *Belfast Morning News*, 21 June 1872.
76. In September 1877, Parnell and Biggar spoke at a home rule meeting in Belfast attended by over 3,000 people which passed unanimous resolutions in favour of obstruction. *Belfast Morning News*, 27 September 1877.
77. In 1882, the prominent Fenian, Edward Gilmore, appeared on a home rule platform and in 1885 Patrick Doran, another prominent post-1867 Fenian, was listed as a home rule election agent. *Belfast Morning News*, 6 May 1882, 26 October 1885.
78. The Belfast leaders had organised an Ulster convention of home rulers in July 1884, which was scuttled by Parnell who disapproved of two of the resolutions to be adopted. One resolution denouncing landlordism favoured the nationalisation of land instead of peasant proprietorship. The other resolution called on the organising committee to accelerate the organisation of the Irish National League in every town and village which Parnell interpreted as a criti-

cism of the work of the organising committee. There was also no customary declaration of confidence in the Irish parliamentary party. The correspondence between Parnell and the Belfast leaders also shows a degree of misunderstanding between north and south. Parnell accuses the Belfast men of not understanding the need for caution in expanding the organisation due to the coercion legislation, which applied in the south. The Belfast nationalists were insulted and declared that they had had more experience in facing violence as a result of their political beliefs. The convention was stillborn as Parnell sent a circular to all Ulster branches denouncing it. *Belfast Morning News*, 30 July 1884.

79. Budge and O'Leary, *Belfast, Approach to Crisis*, p. 103; *Belfast Morning News*, 7 December1885, 18 May 1886.
80. Membership cost five shillings per annum, a sum that some Catholic working men could not have afforded. *Belfast Morning News*, 17 April 1872.
81. Police report, 21 July 1873 (NAI, CSORP/1873/10,008).
82. Police report, 21 July 1873 (NAI, CSORP/1873/10,008).
83. Report of resident magistrate, 17 March 1879 (NAI, CSORP/1879/5161). According to the *Belfast Morning News*, also a hostile source, 1,500 people took part in the procession and five times that many accompanied it to Hannahstown in very bad weather. *Belfast Morning News*, 18 March 1879.
84. *Belfast Morning News*, 18 March 1879.
85. The chairman, Neal Boyle, declared that 'they were not content with the present dilatory method which was being pursued by many of those who professed such a strong attachment for Ireland. There was another system which could be practised with far more success, and which he thought would be much more likely to succeed if they were only unanimous in their views of carrying it out. What they wanted now was something which they could adopt with satisfaction to themselves and that would prove a gentle reminder to their legislators that it would be in their interest that they should concede something on behalf of Ireland (*cheers*).' The other speaker, Thomas Connolly, declared, 'If they settled upon Home Rule, they would have it or else they would know the reason why it was refused. There was a growing spirit in the country which would brook no defeat…' *Belfast Morning News*, 18 March 1879.
86. Report of resident magistrate, 17 March 1879 (NAI, CSORP/1879/5161). *Belfast Morning News*, 18 March 1879.
87. Bands file (NAI, CSORP/1882/20807).
88. *Belfast Morning News*, 18 March 1885.
89. Comerford, *Fenians in Context*, p. 194.
90. *Belfast Morning News*, 16 August 1873.
91. *Belfast Morning News*, 6 May 1882.
92. Hepburn, *A Past Apart*, pp. 147–8 (my emphasis).
93. Walker, *Ulster Politics*, p. 46.
94. F. Wright, *Two Lands on One Soil: Ulster Politics before Home Rule* (Dublin, 1996), p. 475.
95. Wright, *Two Lands on One Soil*, pp. 288–330.
96. The treasurer, Richard Johnston, was a grocer from Durham Street and another leader, John Williams, was a publican from Sandy Row. When Williams spoke at meetings, three cheers for Sandy Row were given by the audience. *Belfast Newsletter*, 5 March 1868.
97. William Johnston's diary, 15 September 1868, 10 October 1868, 19 October 1868 (PRONI, D/880/2/19).

98. *Belfast Newsletter*, 16 September 1868.
99. *Belfast Newsletter*, 14 October 1868.
100. *Belfast Newsletter*, 14 October 1868.
101. *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 October 1868.
102. P. Gibbon, *The Origins of Ulster Unionism* (Manchester, 1975), p. 90.
103. Wright, *Two Lands on One Soil*, p. 330.
104. Wright, *Two Lands on One Soil*, p. 325.
105. At a BPWMA meeting, one member declared, 'God speed the day when Ultramontanism, Romanism and radicalism will be buried in the same grave, when every thing opposed to our grand old Conservative principles will be buried in the dust, when the old man shall leave the Vatican forever, and when the death knell of Popery shall be tolled, and from out a million voices the gladsome music of a disenthralled, emancipated and Protestant world.' Another member, John Reid, declared, 'it was said that William Johnston was a radical; but if he was, they were all radicals and agreed with him (*hear, hear and laughter*)'. *Belfast Newsletter*, 5 November 1868.
106. Wright, *Two Lands on One Soil*, pp. 288–9.
107. Wright, *Two Lands on One Soil*, pp. 330–1.
108. Such a suggestion was made at a Sandy Row Orange soirée and the resulting uproar led Johnston to make a speech repudiating any link with McClure. *Belfast Newsletter*, 14 November 1868.
109. *Belfast Newsletter*, 19 November 1868.
110. *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 November 1868.
111. The *Northern Star* declared that on 12 July 1870 'the conduct of the Belfast Orangemen was better than it was wont to be; they were exceptionally sober and kept within the usual limits of traditional offence'. The *Ulster Examiner* noted 'the very credible feelings of tolerance and forbearance which for some time past have distinguished the brethren of Belfast in their relations with their Catholic fellow citizens'. Wright, *Two Lands on One Soil*, p. 351.
112. The Orange Order, including many members of the BPWMA, in Belfast was opposed to the introduction of the secret ballot because they feared that while Protestant landlords would lose their influence, Catholic priests would continue to exercise an influence through the confessional. A. McClelland, *William Johnston of Ballykilbeg* (Lurgan, 1990) p. 79.
113. McClelland, *William Johnston*, pp. 79, 96.
114. Henry Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism: The Protestant Working Class and the Belfast Labour Movement, 1868–1920* (Belfast, 1980), p. 45.
115. D.C. Savage, 'The origins of the Ulster Unionist Party 1885–86', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. XII, no. 47 (March 1961), pp. 193–5.
116. Bands file (NAI, CSORP/1882/20807).
117. *Report of the Belfast Riot Commissioners, 1886*, pp. 4–9.

5

'Brethren in Bondage': Chartists, O'Connellites, Young Irelanders and the 1848 Uprising

Christine Kinealy

The 1840s was a decade of intense political activity within the United Kingdom, ranging from single-issue campaigns such as the Anti-Corn Law League to the wide-ranging Chartist movement, which desired manhood suffrage but was concerned also with trade union rights, working conditions, working-class education and land reform.[1] Three of the most influential mass movements were led by Irishmen – Chartism (founded in Britain in 1838 and led by Feargus O'Connor), the Loyal National Repeal Association (formed in Ireland by Daniel O'Connell in 1840) and the temperance movement (founded in Preston in 1832 by Joseph Livesey, but reinvigorated by Father Mathew in Ireland in 1838).[2] Each of these groups had an impact that extended beyond the United Kingdom, with the former two being regarded by European radicals as models for building mass political movements among the politically excluded. The moderate anti-Corn Law movement copied the organisation of the Irish Repeal Association.[3] Yet, while the Anti-Corn Law League achieved its objective in 1846, neither Chartism nor the repeal movement survived their confrontation with the British government in 1848, a year of revolutions throughout Europe.

This chapter explores the relationship between Chartism and the Irish repeal movements, which culminated in the failure of the Third Charter in London in April 1848 and the easily defeated nationalist uprising in County Tipperary in July that year. The defeat of the Third Charter was surprising as Chartism was one of the few radical movements in Europe that had the ability to mobilise a mass movement. Leslie Mitchell, however, has suggested that it was not a serious threat to the British state and that 'the great Chartist demonstration of 10 April proved not that England was threatened by the same violence that disturbed Europe, but precisely the opposite'.[4] Because by April it had become clear that the English were not going to revolt, Mitchell argues that, from this time, the government's concern was directed at 'two groups only, the Irish and foreigners resident in London'.[5] John Saville, however, argues that Chartism presented a real threat to the British state, and that it was only

'finally broken by the physical force of the state, and having once been broken it was submerged, in the national consciousness, beneath layers of false understanding and denigration'.[6] Recent studies have demonstrated that regardless of the decline of working-class radicalism after 1848, Chartism remained strong locally until the late 1850s.[7] Despite the public defeat and humiliation of these movements, the debates that had taken place in the 1840s shaped subsequent political developments in both Britain and Ireland. Yet, in the short term, as John Belchem has demonstrated, the response to the 1848 revolutions 'accentuated cultural, ideological and class tensions within British radicalism'.[8] Significantly, a further outcome of the defeat in 1848 was that the links and unanimity that had been forged between British and Irish radicals in the 1840s evaporated and the 1850s were marked by an increase in anti-Irish rioting in Britain. However, while British radicalism was moving towards a period of reformism, with confrontational politics being replaced by associations that were willing to negotiate with the state,[9] in Ireland the next major phase of radical nationalist activity, Fenianism, believed that parliamentary agitation had been discredited and that a violent rising was the only method by which to defeat the British state.

Radicalism and reform

Within Britain, Chartism was undoubtedly the most successful working-class movement of the nineteenth century, despite not achieving its aims.[10] Moreover, as Linda Colley has pointed out, 'in 1832 Great Britain was one of the most democratic nations in Europe. But by 1865 – and despite the Chartists – this had ceased to be the case. By then, Austria, France, Greece, Hungary, Portugal and Switzerland, as well as the Scandinavian nations, all had more generous franchises than the British or the Irish enjoyed.'[11] Although Chartism has generally been characterised as a British political organisation, a sister organisation was founded in Ireland, and the Irish presence – both as leaders and rank-and-file members – within the British movement was significant. Two of the most important Chartist leaders were Irish: Feargus O'Connor from County Cork (1794–1855), unofficial Chartist leader and founder of the Chartist newspaper, the *Northern Star*, and James Bronterre O'Brien of County Longford (1804–64), a political journalist who edited the *Poor Man's Guardian* from 1831 to 1835, and briefly, in 1843, the *Poor Man's Guardian and Repealers' Friend*. He also founded the *Southern Star* to complement O'Connor's paper.

Irish immigrants were significant participants in Chartism at the local level and it was in the agitation for the Charter that, according to Rachel O'Higgins, 'the Irish made their most important contribution to the growth of political radicalism among the working classes in nineteenth century Britain'.[12] Dorothy Thompson similarly suggests that 'there was a very con-

siderable Irish presence in the Chartist movement', although she argues that the movement had little support in Ireland.[13] Gregory Claeys has stated more recently, 'The Irish played an extraordinarily important role in the movement, but not everyone appreciated it.'[14] Nonetheless, many general accounts of Chartism have tended to marginalise, ignore or denigrate the Irish contribution to British radical politics, following the precedent set by Mark Hovell, an early Chartist historian in 1918. He categorised the Irish input, ranging from that of O'Connor to rank-and-file members, as generally negative and rabble-rousing.[15] Other accounts have focused on Irish immigrants as being unskilled, willing to accept low wages and act as strike-breakers, thus emphasising the divisions rather than the unity between English and Irish labourers.[16] Throughout the 1830s, however, and before the formation of Chartism, many British radicals expressed support for justice for Ireland and condemned the introduction of the draconian Coercion Act of 1833, fearing that such legislation could easily be extended to the rest of the United Kingdom. Moreover, the poverty of Ireland was not only regarded by some as a proof of British bad government but, following the introduction of the 1834 'New' Poor Law in England, a reminder that poverty was regarded with little sympathy by the state.[17]

The Chartist movement originated in 1838 and its desire for political reform was based on its demands for universal suffrage, annual parliaments, no property qualifications for MPs, equal electoral districts, payments for MPs and the secret ballot. Like many other political movements, Chartism was informally split into physical and moral force sections, although the importance of this division may have been exaggerated by some historians.[18] Furthermore, its main strategy was the presentation of monster petitions, known as Charters, to parliament: in 1839, 1842 and 1848. Not only did the Chartist leadership contain a large number of Irishmen, but the involvement of the Irish working classes in political organisations in Britain had increased as a consequence of large-scale emigration, even before the Famine. The Irish influence was especially apparent in a number of local organisations in areas with large Irish populations, including Barnsley, Manchester, London and Lancaster. Many of the local leaders in these areas were Irish.[19] As a consequence, the repeal of the Act of Union became a general demand of many Chartists. The national leadership was divided on the issue of Irish independence. Nonetheless, the repeal of the Union was mentioned in the preamble to the Second Chartist Petition of 1842, largely due to the energy of Feargus O'Connor, who fought for its inclusion, despite the opposition of William Lovett and some leading Scottish Chartists.[20] The latter were opposed, not because they were averse to repeal, but because they did not want the Charter to be diluted with other demands.[21]

Feargus O'Connor provided an important link between British radicalism and Irish nationalism. His uncle, Arthur O'Connor, who was a United

Irishman, had been deported to France in 1802 where he remained until his death in 1852.[22] Significantly, the title of the British Chartist newspaper was taken from the paper of the United Irish movement in the 1790s.[23] O'Connor had been a Repeal MP for Cork from 1832 to 1835, when he failed to make the property qualification on a technicality.[24] His focus then moved from parliamentary to radical politics, believing that political change, including repeal, could only be achieved if there was universal suffrage. He established the *Northern Star* in 1837 in Leeds, which was a centre of radical agitation.[25] The paper was the most influential of the Chartist newspapers and its success meant that O'Connor became the informal leader of the Chartist movement.[26]

Regardless of O'Connor's position as a leading British radical in the 1840s, his Irish experiences and aspirations continued to inform his political actions. Through his newspaper, he promoted his ideas for land reform, based on a redistribution of large estates into small farms. The land scheme, which had roots in O'Connor's dislike of Irish landlordism, found an outlet in his series of 'Letters to Irish Landlords' that appeared in the *Northern Star* in the summer of 1841.[27] O'Connor also used the *Northern Star* as a vehicle for promoting repeal, frequently linking it with the demand for universal suffrage.[28] Yet, while a number of Chartist leaders believed that Daniel O'Connell (1775–1847) had provided a model for building a mass movement, O'Connor regarded him as a traitor to the Irish people. His disillusionment was consolidated when O'Connell entered into an alliance with the Whigs in 1835, known as the Lichfield House Compact. As early as 1839, O'Connor sent a weekly letter to O'Connell, via the pages of the *Northern Star*, accusing him, amongst other things, of not supporting working men and doing little to win repeal, while simultaneously lining his own pockets with money raised from the Irish poor.[29] O'Connell's winning of Catholic emancipation in 1829, however, had made him virtually unassailable as the leader and liberator of Irish Catholics. The antagonism was mutual and only ended with the death of Daniel O'Connell in May 1847. In the same year, O'Connor was elected MP for Nottingham and he openly supported repeal in parliament.

The relationship between the repeal movement and British radicalism was ambivalent, largely due to the increasing opposition to radical causes by Daniel O'Connell, who after 1835 had entered into a tacit understanding with the Whigs. In 1836, O'Connell voted against the 'ten hour' bill, which led to accusations by Feargus O'Connor that he had been 'bought' by the mill owners.[30] It also led the radical Richard Oastler to describe him as a 'political economist Malthusian Whig'.[31] O'Connell's social conservatism became more noticeable after 1837, following the Glasgow spinners' strike, of which he disapproved. According to Dorothy Thompson, in that year 'he made a sharp break with the English radicals, and endeavoured to take the whole of the Irish movement with him'.[32] Yet,

O'Connell had been a signatory of the Charter and was alleged to have stated, 'He who is not a chartist is either a knave who profits by the evils of misrule, or a fool, on whom facts and reason make no impression.'[33] Despite his early support of the Charter, O'Connell became an implacable enemy of the Chartist movement, opposing the decision to have a national petition and a national convention.[34] He also ordered Irish immigrants in Britain to stay away from Chartism. In some towns, especially in Lancashire, this was a significant loss to the movement as, according to the historian Asa Briggs, his supporters had a reputation of being 'so strictly organised that, in the twinkling of an eye, one or two thousand can be collected in any given spot'.[35] However, O'Connell's interventions in British radical politics angered the London Working Men's Association who accused him of 'baseness and villainy' in denying the working people of England their rights.[36]

Irish Chartism

Inevitably, O'Connell opposed the extension of Chartism to Ireland and his supporters showed themselves willing to use violence in order to prevent leading British Chartists from speaking in the country.[37] Despite this opposition, Chartism did take root and in the summer of 1839 a Chartist association was founded in Dublin by Patrick O'Higgins (1790–1854), a Dublin wool merchant and friend of William Cobbett. Within two years, the Dublin police reported that the association was spreading 'rapidly' in Dublin and had spread to other towns including Belfast, Newry, Drogheda and Loughrea. A number of small farmers had also joined the movement.[38] Education was regarded as an important aspect of the work of the Irish Chartists. The Dublin Charter Association made its journals and newspapers freely available to the public at its meeting place, the Democratic Reading Rooms in Henry Street.[39] The secretary of the association each week distributed 200 copies of the *Northern Star* to local barbers and publicans.[40] By 1842, the weekly sales of the *Northern Star* had risen to 400.[41]

The early success of Chartism in Ireland led to the establishment of a coordinating body, the Irish Universal Suffrage Association, in August 1841, with Patrick O'Higgins as the president. It was modelled on the National Charter Association, which had been formed in Britain in 1840 in response to the defeat of the Chartist campaign of 1839. The principles of the Irish Universal Suffrage Association (IUSA) maintained 'That every male inhabitant of Great Britain and Ireland (infants, insane persons, and criminals only excepted) is of common right and by the laws of God, a free man, and entitled to the full enjoyment of political liberty…therefore the right to UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE is an inherent right.' In addition to universal suffrage, they demanded other rights on the grounds that 'in order to

protect the poor elector against tyranny, the voting shall be by *ballot*; that the parliaments shall be *annual*; that the *property qualification* shall be abolished; that the whole empire shall be divided into *equal electoral districts*; and that the representatives of the people shall be *paid*'.[42]

The IUSA's motto was 'Peace–Law–Order' and, like the repeal movement, the association supported moral and constitutional methods to win their aims, namely, by creating public opinion that was favourable to such changes and by getting supporters into parliament.[43] Building a base of working-class support was an important aspect of the Irish Chartist mission; consequently the rules of the IUSA stated that the standing committee of thirteen members had to include seven 'working men', and that five members of the committee made a quorum, but only if three of them were working men.[44] Nonetheless, a fee was charged, albeit a small one: every member had to pay an entrance fee of twopence and then continue to pay a weekly subscription of one penny. Clergymen of all religious denominations were given free membership.[45]

Although Irish Chartists supported repeal, they believed that democracy had to be part of the struggle for independence on the grounds that 'no mere change of masters will suffice; tyranny would not be a bit more amiable by being brought closer'.[46] Many Chartists were critical of O'Connell's methods for achieving repeal. O'Higgins disapproved of O'Connell's pact with the Whig government, believing that legislative independence could only be achieved by the means that O'Connell 'affected to repudiate', namely 'by an extension of the franchise…[and] by fighting for it'.[47] The tension did not lessen following the formation of the Loyal National Repeal Association in 1840 when repeal moved to the top of the Irish political agenda. Nonetheless, despite their disagreements, when O'Connell was imprisoned in 1843 the Chartists suspended their meetings in deference to national feelings.[48] In 1847, W.H. Dyott, a printer and secretary of the IUSA, explained that his hostility to the repeal movement was due to O'Connell's alliance with the Whigs and his 'flounderings' on the issue of suffrage, but added, 'I did not cease to be a repealer – I never shall – but I lost all faith in Mr O'Connell.'[49] Dyott also accused O'Connell of attacking him for being a Protestant.[50]

British Chartists, encouraged by Feargus O'Connor, attempted to forge stronger links with their Irish counterparts. In August 1839 the British Chartist Council published an 'Address to the Irish Working Class' that averred: 'in speaking of your grievances you have been thought to attribute them to the English people, while you have lost sight of the fact, that in the people there is no representative power, and therefore for the people there can be no legal protection'.[51] It concluded that they needed to act together to crush the government by peaceful means, because 'a union of our moral power is sufficient to gain a bloodless victory'. The Chartist Council also proffered their support for Irish independence but envisioned

that the new legislature would be returned by universal suffrage.[52] A similar message of unanimity was offered by the Chartists of Bristol who explained that they, as Englishmen, were not thieves and plunderers, as many Irish people believed, but that 'we are men, suffering as you do, from the evil effects of bad government, which we are determined to reform'. They added, 'we request the assistance of our brethren in Ireland, for united we stand, divided we fall'. The address was signed from 'your brethren in bondage'.[53] The Council of the Chartist Convention sent Mr Lowry to Ireland in the summer of 1839 to act as a 'missionary' and he reported that he had been received enthusiastically in Dublin, promising that Irishmen 'will join head and heart with their brethren on this side of the channel'.[54] Irish radicals welcomed this fraternisation. The Repeal and Radical Association of Dublin sent an address to the London Charter Association accusing the government of 'playing nation against nation, and kingdom against kingdom'. They believed that by acting together they could overthrow the British government.[55] O'Connell, however, continued to reject all attempts at fraternisation or support and insisted that all Chartists should be expelled from the repeal movement and their subscriptions returned.[56] He maintained that his opposition was based on the support of many Chartists for physical force.[57]

Although Chartism had support within Ireland, it remained less extensive than in Britain. This was partly because its political programme had less relevance in a predominantly rural, subsistence society and because trade unions, which were the backbone of the movement in Britain, were less extensive in Ireland.[58] More seriously, in Ireland Chartism was overshadowed by the repeal movement and repeal was regarded by many radicals as being the first step in securing a more general political reform. Yet, Irish Chartists were less visible than their British counterparts, as they 'did not take part in militant processions or public meetings, but confined their activities to the distribution of Chartists periodicals and to holding weekly political discussions'.[59] While W.H. Dyott, the secretary of the IUSA, claimed that in the wake of its establishment 'several thousand members were enrolled', by 1843 the association had only 1,055 members.[60] The number of Chartist members, however, was not representative of the full support for universal suffrage as the Second Charter of 1842, for example, drew 2,000 signatures in Belfast alone.[61] The relatively small base of support, however, meant that the Irish Chartists were never strong enough to establish their own newspaper and instead had to rely on the *Northern Star* to promote their activities. After 1840, Chartism also had to compete with the newly formed Loyal National Repeal Association, whose prominence was assured not only by the leadership of O'Connell, but by the achievement of newspapers such as the *Freeman's Journal*, the *Belfast Vindicator* and the *Pilot*. The success of the new repeal movement was helped by the return of a Tory government led by Sir Robert Peel in 1841.

Peel's implacable opposition to Irish independence (and O'Connell's personal animosity to Peel) served to reinvigorate the repeal movement. Moreover, within Ireland, Chartism faced not only the opposition of the British authorities and that of O'Connell's supporters, but also the antagonism of the Catholic Church.[62]

The Catholic Church was overwhelmingly opposed to Chartism, denouncing it from the altars of Ireland, using the tactics and language more commonly associated with their treatment of Fenians twenty years later. In 1843, however, the Irish Universal Suffrage Association issued a public address to Roman Catholic archbishops and bishops of Ireland asking that they disassociate themselves from the devious and dishonest claims made by O'Connell about the association.[63] The address was particularly critical of the fact that the church hierarchy allowed its priests and its churches to be 'the medium through which the means of supporting those vagabonds shall be wrung – shamefully and disgracefully wrung, from an impoverished, oppressed and deluded people'. They also described the tactics of the 'evil-disposed collectors, who place themselves as sentinels at the doors and entrances of those sacred edifices' as unscrupulous and intimidating.[64] The address closed with a declaration that 'we are neither infidels, nor socialists, nor miscreants; that we do not belong to any unlawful association or confederacy, or secret society; and that we do not, nor did we ever, tender, exact, or encourage, or sanction the taking of unlawful oaths; and that the whole of the accusations made against us by Daniel O'Connell, are utterly false and unfounded'.[65] Copies of the Objects and Rules of the Association were enclosed to demonstrate the openness of the organisation.[66]

Repeal of the Union

Despite the antagonism of O'Connell, Irish Chartists continued to be enthusiastic supporters of repeal, and Chartist meetings usually closed with 'cheers for the [Chartist] Convention and for Repeal of the Union'.[67] Irish Chartists sought to bring about a union between the Irish repealers and the British Chartist movement, even though reconciliation between the respective leaders, O'Connell and Feargus O'Connor, appeared unlikely.[68] The support of Chartists for repeal was evident from the exhilarating atmosphere during the early months of 1843, the year that O'Connell had declared to be the 'Repeal Year'. O'Connell's retreat at Clontarf, however, disheartened not only repealers, but also Irish Chartists, with some of the latter arguing that they should act separately from the repeal movement.[69] The tension between the Chartists and the repealers only relaxed in 1848, when briefly both Chartism and repeal became a threat to the British state.[70]

O'Connell's retreat at Clontarf, when he acceded to the government's request to cancel a monster meeting, lost him both political and personal support. Increasingly also, the dynamism and direction of the repeal movement was being sustained by a group of young, radical intellectuals, who became collectively referred to as Young Ireland. Those who were not part of this group became known by default as 'Old Ireland', a division that was to become formalised in 1846. Young Ireland's support and status were aided by the popularity of the *Nation*, a weekly newspaper founded in 1842, which combined agitation for repeal with the promotion of cultural nationalism. A number of women (writing under pseudonyms) were important contributors to the paper.

Many of the Young Ireland leaders were Protestant and they regarded the winning of Protestant support as crucial to the success of the repeal movement.[71] They were drawn from a diverse range of backgrounds: William Smith O'Brien and John Martin were Protestant landlords, John Mitchel was a Unitarian lawyer, Charles Gavan Duffy a Catholic journalist and Thomas Davis, a Protestant writer. After 1847, the formation of political clubs, mainly in towns and cities, provided the group with an urban working-class base of support. O'Connell's attitude to trade unionism lost him support amongst both Irish and British radicals and many Irish trade unionists moved closer to Young Ireland. This union strengthened after 1846 when O'Connell renewed his alliance with the Whig government, and it resulted in trade unionists and Young Irelanders presenting a 'Remonstrance' to the repeal movement, signed by 15,000 people in Dublin. The response of John O'Connell, Daniel's son and heir apparent to the Repeal Association, was to suggest that it be thrown into the gutter.[72] The episode demonstrated that Young Ireland were adopting an increasingly inclusive and democratic approach to politics, which contrasted starkly with the increasingly authoritarian attitude of Daniel and John O'Connell. Old Ireland resisted the challenge and Daniel O'Connell, largely at the urging of John, attempted to regain the political initiative in 1846 by forcing members of the Repeal Association to renounce the use of violence during a debate over what was referred to as the 'Peace Resolutions'. The supporters of Young Ireland, while believing that there was no likelihood of rebellion in the foreseeable future, refused to do so and withdrew from the association in July, regrouping under the leadership of Smith O'Brien. In reality, substantial divisions had emerged between Young and Old Ireland that had little to do with support for moral or physical force, but were a façade for deep disagreements over O'Connell's alliance with the Whigs, with the Catholic Church, and over the introduction of non-denominational universities. Leading Young Irelanders, however, believed that O'Connell was about to make a new pact with the Whigs and, therefore, to abandon repeal. The Peace Resolutions were an attempt, therefore,

to neutralise the opposition from the radicals within the Repeal Association before he did so.[73] Ironically, following the split, members of Old Ireland frequently used physical force tactics to prevent Young Ireland from holding meetings.[74]

On 13 January 1847 the Irish Confederation was established, which was a formal acknowledgement of the divisions within the repeal movement. The main difference between the two repeal movements was not over support for the use of physical force, but on the question of remaining independent from the British government and not accepting 'place or pension' in return for support. Following the formation of the Irish Confederation, tradesmen in Dublin formed a sister organisation, the Trades and Citizens Committee, led by William Bryan and A.P. Barry. The two new organizations worked for closer cooperation between the Chartists and the Confederates, both in Ireland and in England, predominantly through the creation of confederate clubs.[75] This alliance indicated that, despite covering a wide spectrum of opinion, Young Ireland was willing to embrace 'the trades', unlike either Daniel or John O'Connell. The importance of winning the support of artisans and tradesmen, especially those in the north-east of the country, was recognised by some of the Young Ireland leaders, including John Mitchel who in 1848 published a series of appeals to 'the Protestant farmers, labourers and artisans of the North of Ireland'.[76]

The Confederation grew quickly, helped by its club structure which resulted in confederate clubs being formed amongst Irish communities in Britain, notably in Liverpool, Manchester and London. Within these clubs, demands for Chartism and Irish independence were frequently linked. Yet, the leaders of the Confederation in Ireland showed little interest in Chartism, with Smith O'Brien and Thomas Francis Meagher declaring their opposition to universal suffrage. Even John Mitchel, often regarded as the most radical of the Confederates, in August 1847 publicly declared:

> We desire no fraternisation between the Irish people and the Chartists, not on account of the bugbear of physical force, but simply because some of their five points are to us an abomination, and the whole spirit and tone of their proceedings, though well enough for England, are so essentially English that their adoption in Ireland would neither be probable nor at all desirable. Between us and them there is a gulf fixed, and we desire, not to bridge it over, but to make it wider and deeper.[77]

In turn, the Irish Chartist leaders accused the upper-middle-class leaders of the Confederates of not supporting the Charter because they did not want to offend the Irish landlords, with whom they hoped to make an alliance.[78] Feargus O'Connor denounced them as being as insincere as O'Connell.[79] Nonetheless, despite the opposition of some of the leaders, the attitude of the Irish Confederation towards Chartism and other radical

working-class organisations was more varied and ambivalent than that of the Repeal Association. Even before the French revolution in February 1848, individual members of the Confederation were taking a radical stand on various social issues and attempts were being made to involve more working-class radicals in the organisation. In 1847 the Trades and Citizens Committee was formed within the Confederate Party, composed of tradesmen and enthusiastically supported by Richard O'Gorman, senior and John Mitchel. Although their primary goal was parliamentary reform, in the 1840s Irish Chartists gave their support to tenant right, a policy not supported by O'Connell's followers in Conciliation Hall but by many members of Young Ireland.[80] In Ireland there were some indications that the Confederates and the Chartists were moving closer together, despite the opposition of some leaders, and in January 1848 the Confederates and Chartists held a joint meeting in Dublin.[81]

However, there were significant divisions within the Confederate movement. More radical members, including John Mitchel and James Fintan Lalor, disillusioned by the Whig government's response to the Famine and the apathy of the Irish landlords, believed that a social revolution was a necessary component of the demand for independence. Mitchel resigned from the *Nation* at the end of 1847 and from the Council of the Irish Confederation at the beginning of 1848, establishing his own radical journal, the *United Irishman*. In the third issue, in a reversal of what he had declared only seven months earlier, Mitchel was urging closer unity on the grounds that 'Every Chartist is a Repealer, to begin with; and all English labourers and artisans are Chartists.'[82]

The French revolution

At the beginning of 1848, despite the growth of the Irish Confederation in the previous twelve months, internal divisions persisted, especially regarding the Confederation's relationship with landlords. The repeal movement, since the death of Daniel O'Connell in May 1847, had been led by John O'Connell, and it was in the doldrums, with falling attendances and income. Consequently, in January 1848, Lord Clarendon was optimistic that the demise of the Repeal Association was imminent: the decline being expedited by a number of critical articles in *The Times* and by the character of John. Clarendon averred, 'if we could knock up the Association it would be a heavy blow and great discouragement to agitation. With little money in their till, and that vapouring fellow, J. O'Connell, for their champion, such an establishment ought not to exist much longer.'[83] Events in France in February 1848, however, reenergised radical politics in both Britain and Ireland, contributing to a revival of Chartism and repeal, although in regard to the latter it was Young rather than Old Ireland that seized the initiative.

The French revolution was a catalyst for more unity both in Ireland and Britain, helped by the more progressive social policies adopted by prominent Young Irelanders. Since the revolution had been achieved with little bloodshed or damage to property, Irish radicals hoped that their political objectives could be achieved without recourse to violence. The revolution brought the various radical movements closer together, creating a new mood of cooperation, not only between Old and Young Ireland, but between the repeal movement and British Chartists, and between the Irish Chartists and the Dublin Trades and Citizens Committee. As early as 9 March, Smith O'Brien addressed the Irish Confederates on the theme of 'Forgiveness and Fraternity' and he appealed to Young and Old Ireland to become an 'All Ireland' group, while Charles Gavan Duffy publicly held out his hand of friendship to John Mitchel.[84] Smith O'Brien, however, wanted to maintain some distance between the Confederates and Mitchel, believing that the latter's extremism would deter Old Irelanders from an alliance.[85] John O'Connell, though, did not support a reunion. And, while more mutual support seemed probable, many of the leaders of the Confederation remained opposed to universal suffrage, believing that it was unsuited to Ireland.[86] Nonetheless, in the months after the French revolution there were numerous examples of cooperation and conciliation between the different radical groups in both Ireland and Britain, while new links were sought with sympathisers in France and the United States. A development that particularly worried the British government was the formation, in April 1848, of the Protestant Repeal Association, which stated that its members did not desire ascendancy over their fellow countrymen but 'equality with them'.[87]

The inspiration for this renewed political activity had come from France and inevitably leaders of radical groups throughout Europe travelled to Paris to pay their respects to the new provisional government. The British Chartists were one of the first groups to do so; their delegation (which included Julian Harvey and Earnest Jones, but not Feargus O'Connor) was welcomed at the Hôtel de Ville on 5 March.[88] The Irish delegation, which included Smith O'Brien, Meagher and William Holywood, a silk-weaver, did not visit Paris until the beginning of April. Their visit appeared to cement the recent political alliances. In addition to the Confederation address, at the meeting with Alphonse de Lamartine, addresses were made by Richard O'Gorman on behalf of the citizens of Dublin, Meagher on behalf of the repealers of Manchester and Martin McDermott on behalf of the Irish Confederates in Liverpool.[89] To Lamartine, a leader of the provisional government, it was natural that Chartism and the Confederate movement should unite and in his memoirs he recorded that 'Irishmen, united with English chartists, rushed to the continent, and sought insurrectionary complicity in France, both among the demagogues in the name of liberty, and among the Catholic party in the name of Catholicism'.[90] The British

authorities were worried that a triangular relationship might develop between French republicans, British Chartists and Irish nationalists. Even if they did not act jointly, there was a belief that their separate actions would be mutually reinforcing, the repealers sharing 'the popular assumption that the Chartists might seize power in London and this would facilitate the independence of Ireland'.[91]

The British government determined that such a triangular alliance should not develop, secretly intervened and threatened to withdraw support to the French government. This was regarded as necessary because there were rumours that O'Brien was looking for military support from the French government. Even before the Irish delegates arrived in France, therefore, Lamartine had promised the British Ambassador that France would not intervene in Irish affairs. The British government, delighted by this decision, had copies of the French reply printed and displayed around Ireland.[92] Following this visit, French intervention in an uprising appeared to be neutralised, which made support from British Chartists and Irish-Americans even more significant. Smith O'Brien, however, put a positive spin on the response of the French provisional government, stating that 'sympathy may be to us later a great assistance; but we feel that the liberty of Ireland should be conquered by the energy, the devotion and the courage, of her own children'.[93]

The Chartist challenge

The French revolution led to a renewed attempt to forge close links between Chartists and repealers in both Ireland and Britain, the impetus for the union largely being the Irish Confederates in Britain. An early example of this mood of collaboration was evident with a mass meeting of Chartists and repealers convened by the Manchester and Salford Confederates in the Free Trade Hall in Manchester on 17 March. Their guests included Feargus O'Connor, William Smith O'Brien, John Mitchel and Patrick O'Higgins. O'Higgins initially accepted on the grounds that the meeting 'will, I hope, lay the foundation of a cordial union between the English and the Irish people…which, in my humble opinion, will ultimately, and at no very remote period, overthrow tyranny and repression in both countries'.[94] On 13 March, however, he informed the organisers that he would not be attending because the resolutions had not included support for the franchise. The editors of the *United Irishman* pointed out that if this resolution had been included, other speakers might not have wanted to attend. With regard to repeal, O'Higgins objected to the fact that the resolutions of the meeting did not include any means to achieve this end, but were 'merely declarations of notorious grievances'.[95]

Chartists in England, however, did not appear to share O'Higgins's reservations and the meeting in Manchester went ahead. The speakers

included Feargus O'Connor, as well as Thomas Francis Meagher and Michael Doheny, both from the Irish Confederation. They spoke to an estimated 8,000 people. The declarations made by the Irish delegates suggested that the two movements were in full support of each other. Most of the resolutions concerned supporting a repeal of the Union and constant references were made to the newly found unity between English Chartists and Irish repealers.[96] Feargus O'Connor, one of the first speakers, reported that he had been followed by government informers on his journey from London. He described the meeting as the first occasion that British and Irish radicals had come together to repeal the Union and admitted his surprise that it had taken them 48 years to do so.[97] Meagher apologised for the absence of Smith O'Brien and John Mitchel, explaining that 'nothing save the critical position of circumstances in Ireland, at this moment, would prevent them from being present here this evening'. He also spoke in favour of Chartism, explaining his change of heart thus: 'The revolution of France has made me a democrat.'[98]

The meeting in the Free Trade Hall was followed by an open-air meeting at Oldham Edge, addressed only by O'Connor and Doheny and Mitchel, as Meagher had returned to Ireland. It was attended by between 40,000 and 50,000 people, despite intermittent heavy rain. The local magistrates demonstrated their concern by swearing in 400 special constables.[99] Again, the theme of many of the speeches was the ties between British and Irish radicals. The new spirit of cooperation was emphasised by Doheny who declared: 'I am an Irish Chartist.' And, outdoing O'Connor for fiery rhetoric, he also declared: 'this is the time for freedom…We join you in everything – I say with you "The charter, the whole charter, and nothing but the charter." I ask you to join us in saying "Ireland, all Ireland, and nothing but Ireland".' Moreover, Doheny claimed that he was 'accredited from Ireland to make this offer to you'.[100]

Before they returned to Ireland, both Meagher and Doheny assured the Confederates that they would have the support of the British Chartists in any forthcoming struggle.[101] Similarly, throughout March and April, Chartist organisations, from as far apart as London and Edinburgh, passed resolutions supporting the repeal struggle in Ireland, significantly, with declarations of goodwill being predominantly directed at the leaders of the Confederation rather than Old Ireland.[102] The Glasgow Chartists, for example, ended their meeting with 'three cheers for Repeal, Mr Mitchel, Feargus O'Connor, John O'Connell, Smith O'Brien [and] the People's Charter'.[103] Political meetings in Ireland began to adopt resolutions celebrating the union between Irish repealers and English radicals, it being explained that both had been 'treated with injustice' by the British government. The key supporters of the union were Patrick O'Higgins, Richard O'Gorman, senior and John Mitchel.[104] Throughout Britain, the number of confederate clubs began to grow rapidly, helped by an influx of former sup-

porters of Old Ireland.[105] Although Smith O'Brien's rhetoric was becoming increasingly uncompromising, his main purpose remained to bring about an alliance of Young and Old Ireland; John O'Connell, however, continued to disassociate himself from all radical activities. Furthermore, not all British supporters of Chartism liked the alliance, the *Leeds Times* warning that 'the wilder and more extreme Irish elements' would ruin the good sense hitherto shown by the British Chartists.[106]

The *Northern Star* reported that the meetings in Manchester and Oldham had started a new era in British radical politics and had proven to the leaders of the Irish Confederation that 'the leaders of Chartism were right in advocating a union of the English and the Irish people against the tyranny of class legislation'.[107] In the short term, this optimism appeared justified, but the British government was watching events and had already put in place a number of measures to undermine and isolate the various groups. According to Duffy, 'The British Cabinet were watching the two enemies, and resolved to strike them separately.'[108] While Meagher was lecturing in England and Smith O'Brien was making arrangements to visit the French provisional government, the British government was making plans to arrest both of them and John Mitchel on charges of sedition. Their arrests had an unplanned outcome, which worried the government as it resulted in new alliances being formed between Old and Young Ireland, with John O'Connell and his brother Maurice offering to stand bail for Smith O'Brien and Meagher.[109] The arrests of Smith O'Brien, Mitchel and Meagher also united radical opinion in both Ireland and Britain, with pledges of support coming from repeal groups throughout Ireland, British Chartist groups and other democratic organisations such as the Democratic Confederation of Barnsley.[110]

On 10 April, a monster meeting was convened on Kennington Common in London for the purpose of presenting the third Charter petition to the government. The government refused to allow the participants to proceed to the Houses of Parliament. The Chartist leaders conceded, thereby disappointing some of their followers and replicating the action of O'Connell in Clontarf five years earlier. Yet O'Connor argued that this action was a judicious one in order to avoid bloodshed.[111] Confederates were present at Kennington Common when 5,000 Irishmen marched behind a green banner with the Irish harp insignia.[112] The fact that the day ended ingloriously for the Chartists was regarded positively by the British authorities with regard to Ireland, Sir George Grey opining in the evening, 'The manner in which this day has, up to the present time, proceeded here will have a good effect in Dublin.'[113] But while the humiliation of the Third Petition weakened Chartism, it reassured the British government. According to Charles Gavan Duffy, one of the Irish Confederates, 'The Government, who had been uneasy and alarmed, were triumphant at this collapse.'[114] What it meant was that Ireland and the Confederates were now

the main focus of British apprehension. And, although Chartism had suffered a severe blow on 10 April, Chartist activity continued and links with Ireland remained strong.

On 13 April, the agitation committee of the National Chartist Convention voted to send a delegation to Ireland to win support for the Charter. It also passed a motion stating 'that the passing of the people's Charter and the repeal of the Legislative Union between England and Ireland were inseparable, and that it was believed that the Irish people and the government would ere long be tried, not in the courts of law, but in the battle field'.[115] A week later a large meeting, convened by the 'Citizens of Dublin', to welcome a deputation of English Chartists, was held in Lower Abbey Street in Dublin. Irish Chartists, including Patrick O'Higgins, attended, as did John Mitchel and Thomas Francis Meagher. Mitchel preceded his speech by claiming that, 'There is nothing more feared by the English government than an alliance between the Irish and English people' and he accused Dublin Castle of placing stories in the Irish press that denigrated the Chartists.[116] The English Chartist representatives, in turn, declared their support for Irish independence, using the current famine as an example of British misgovernment. One of the delegates claimed that when he recently sailed from Dublin to Liverpool, the boat was filled with emigrants:

> endeavouring to push their way amongst fat bullocks, sheep and pigs, presenting the extraordinary anomaly of fat cattle and lean men, and human beings flying from starvation, while cattle were crammed to obesity, under what were called free institutions and a happy and civilised state of society.[117]

The meeting concluded by unanimously adopting all of the points of the Charter. A few days later John Mitchel and Michael Doheny travelled to Liverpool where they convened the first in a series of repeal meetings. A local newspaper reported that the purpose of their visit was to undertake 'a martial tour through this country' and admitted that they had never known a meeting advertised at such short notice to be so well attended.[118]

In May 1848, the Irish Confederation sent Michael Doheny to represent them at the Chartist Convention in England and to convey their support. These joint meetings continued throughout June, carefully monitored by the British government.[119] In July, a new newspaper was launched by James Leach, an English supporter of the alliance, called the *English Patriot and Irish Repealer*, which supported an even closer union.[120] At the same time, the *Irish National Guard* was launched in Ireland to promote both Chartism and the Confederation.[121] Moreover, regardless of the setbacks suffered by the Confederates their club structure was buoyant: in May 1848 there had been 72 clubs in Ireland and a month later the number had grown to

almost 150, which represented nearly 50,000 members.[122] Nor was the growth confined to Dublin. In July, the constabulary recorded that in County Cork alone, there were 15 clubs with 4,000 members, and they were purchasing guns in Birmingham.[123] At the same time, the confederate clubs in Britain were experiencing similar rapid growth.[124] Although some clubs started to drill and prepare an uprising, the members of the clubs, as Gary Owens has indicated, often 'lacked a clear political focus'.[125]

The confederate threat

On the day the Charter was presented to parliament, William Smith O'Brien appeared in the House of Commons, the first time since his return from France. The mood of the House was generally hostile and throughout the course of his speech he was continually hooted and derided. He explained the visit to France by saying that he had not gone to seek armed aid but to congratulate the French people. He also spoke in support of the Charter. He added, 'it gives me great satisfaction to think that amongst the Chartists, from five millions of whom there has been a petition presented this evening, there is scarce an individual who does not sympathise with the cause of Ireland'.[126] When he opposed the second reading of the Crown and Government Security Bill, which facilitated the arrest of political offenders and raised the offence to treason to one of treason-felony, he was 'assailed with the most violent bursts of yelling which lasted fully ten minutes'.[127] Lord Clarendon, the Irish viceroy, informed the prime minister that when Smith O'Brien returned to Ireland, he appeared to be 'dejected'.[128] Nonetheless, Smith O'Brien's rhetoric became increasingly militant and he openly spoke of the need to establish a National Guard and to organise a Council of Three Hundred.[129] Smith O'Brien's dejection was probably because he was simultaneously preparing to face his own trial for making a 'seditious speech'.[130]

If the British government was pleased with the response of the French government and the conclusion of the Third Charter, they were to be disappointed by the outcome of the trials of Smith O'Brien and Meagher, which commenced on 15 April. Both Smith O'Brien and Meagher were acquitted. The government did not want to risk defeat again and so ensured that Mitchel would be convicted by packing his jury with conservative Protestants who were unlikely to be sympathetic to Mitchel. This intervention drew opprobrium on the government from a wide section of public opinion. The government was successful in getting Mitchel convicted and within an hour of the judgment, they had conveyed him to the convict depot at Spike Island. On 1 June, he was transported to Bermuda for fourteen years his property was confiscated and his newspaper, the *United Irishman*, suppressed.[131]

Following Mitchel's hasty transportation to Bermuda, the Confederation claimed that the country was on the verge of an uprising, but urged patience. As Ireland was still in the midst of the Great Famine, it was agreed that a rising should not take place until the harvest period, thus allowing the people to obtain food. But following the harvest, they warned, 'armed resistance to the oppressors will become a sacred obligation'. This declaration was printed in newspapers in Ireland, Britain and America.[132] The transportation of Mitchel elevated him to the status of popular hero with massive demonstrations taking place in Ireland and Britain.[133] Lancashire was in the forefront of protests: 15,000 people gathered in Oldham on 23 May, and 7,000 in Stephenson Square in Manchester on 29 May.[134] A mass meeting planned to be held in Manchester on 31 May, however, was banned by the mayor. Protestors from Oldham were not allowed to enter the town, but clashes did take place between protesters and police and some arrests were made.[135]

The trials of Mitchel, Meagher and O'Brien galvanised support for Confederates in Britain, especially in the Lancashire area. Between 11 April and 16 July, the local police recorded 38 Confederate meetings in the Manchester area alone.[136] The number of confederate clubs grew rapidly; in mid-June, the government suspected that at least twenty confederate clubs were operating in Liverpool and that they were in regular contact with Dublin, using carrier pigeons. A few weeks later, the number of clubs in Liverpool had grown to 40 and the members appeared to be preparing for a conflict, with much talk of arming. The local police were informed (by a Confederate who allegedly wanted to avert violence) that there was to be an uprising in the north-west on 12 June, to be followed by risings throughout Britain. Like many events in 1848, however, nothing came of this rumour.[137] Nonetheless, the seriousness with which the British government viewed the revolutionary threat is evident from a number of legislative measures passed in parliament. On 22 April, the Crown and Government Security Bill was introduced, which created a new offence of treason–felony. Treason was extended to include 'open and advised speaking' in such a way as would encourage rebellion. The sentence was transportation. The bill had an easy passage through parliament.[138] An Aliens Removal Bill was also passed, largely in response to constant rumours in the press concerning foreigners – especially Frenchmen – coming into the country. This Act gave the Home Secretary the power to remove any foreigner from the United Kingdom if their conduct could be regarded as injurious to the peace of the realm.[139]

At the beginning of June, John O'Connell, who for so long had been an impediment to a union of Repealers, contacted Smith O'Brien to bring about a merger between Old and Young Ireland. He willingly agreed to end the practices that Young Ireland had found objectionable, such as 'place-hunting', that is, receiving government positions in return for political

compliance. His only condition was that 'direct incentives to war be avoided; and this is simply for the safety of the Association'.[140] By seeking this alliance, O'Connell lost the support of a minority of his followers who saw it not only as a betrayal, but as the official abandonment of moral force.[141] In general, however, it was welcomed by all repealers, and many Catholic priests and bishops openly declared their support.[142] The new association, the Irish League, had an inauspicious beginning because shortly after negotiations commenced, there was violent unrest in Paris with an attempt to overthrow the provisional government. The British government used the descent into violence as an opportunity to undermine the alliance.[143] Even more seriously, the murder of the Archbishop of Paris reawakened fears of 'red republicanism' and was a reminder of the anti-clericalism of the original French revolution. Although the Irish League was inaugurated, it had lost the support of moderate repealers and of many Catholic clergy. According to Gavan Duffy, this was a crucial moment in the year of revolutions, as 'The moment it became certain that the negotiations for union had failed, the Government resolved to strike the Confederates while they were isolated.'[144] Perhaps just as important as the actions of the British government were those of the Catholic Church hierarchy who – partly alarmed by recent events in France – issued a declaration expressing 'their utter disapproval of the confederate clubs and the doctrines inculcated in them'.[145]

By the beginning of July, it appeared that an uprising was inevitable, although the Confederate leaders still urged that nothing should be done until the harvest was in. As the summer progressed, the prospects for harvest were poor, as blight was reappearing on the potato crop. The government, however, seized the initiative from the Confederates and, from the beginning of July, began arresting leaders of the movement, including those involved in the radical press. The government had planned even more draconian measures. On 22 July, Russell announced the suspension of habeas corpus in Ireland. This pronouncement was the trigger for action as, in the words of the *Manchester Guardian*, 'the leaders of the rebel movement in Ireland are now fairly driven to the wall. They must either fight or conceal themselves, or submit to be apprehended and lodged in prison until the government shall feel satisfied that their power of doing mischief is at an end.'[146] Within Ireland the suspension of habeas corpus intensified the general feeling that an uprising would take place, probably in the south of the country. There was also a rumour in some British newspapers that 'the agitators in Dublin have again been urging their confederates in this country to create a diversion in their favour by setting fire to the factories and warehouses in Manchester and Liverpool'.[147] The fact that Irish Confederate leaders had visited Manchester recently gave strength to this rumour.[148] The local authorities in Britain were taking precautions against an uprising, with Liverpool, the main port to and from Ireland, assumed to

be the centre of Confederate activity. The police force of the city was increased by 500, and 700 army pensioners were placed in readiness for a rising. The headquarters of the north-west military district was moved to Everton, on the edge of Liverpool. The 2,000 troops already in the town were augmented with additional artillery and 2,000 stands of arms. As a precaution, magistrates across the River Mersey in Birkenhead prepared to enrol 1,000 special constables.[149] Consequently, Liverpool, a major British city, was in a state of high alert in response to the perceived threat from Irish nationalists.

On 25 July, the suspension of habeas corpus received royal assent, which meant that arrests could be made without trial. A number of Young Irelanders went on the run and some of the leaders persuaded William Smith O'Brien that if an uprising was to take place, it would have to be immediate, otherwise their numbers would be too depleted. A decision, therefore, was made to rise within a few days, although, because Dublin was so well guarded, County Tipperary and County Kilkenny were chosen. Although the Confederates had much support in these counties, it was mostly from peasants who were unarmed. Nor had the leaders made any plans for feeding their followers. More seriously, when faced with clerical opposition, the peasants dispersed, leaving Smith O'Brien with fewer than 200 followers. The rising, therefore, consisted of a confrontation with the constabulary at a small farmhouse in Ballingarry in County Tipperary on 29 July. When additional police arrived, the rebels scattered, some attempting to escape to America, although most of the leaders, including Smith O'Brien and Meagher, were captured. The rising lasted for approximately 24 hours and there were few casualties with only two of the insurgents being killed. The immediate response of the British authorities and the press was to treat the uprising with scorn. The cabbage patch provided an ongoing source of amusement and derision. Smith O'Brien was the butt of many of the attacks in *The Times*, which pointed out that, 'King Charles hid himself in the oak, and King O'Brien in the cabbages', and reminded their readers that 'if he crept out the way of the bullets, [he] betrayed no fear of the slugs'.[150]

Smith O'Brien and two other Confederate leaders were charged with high treason and found guilty by carefully chosen Protestant judges. They were to be 'hung by the neck until you be dead, and that afterwards your head be shall be severed from your body, and your body divided into four quarters'.[151] The sentence was later commuted to transportation to Van Dieman's Land. The Irish Confederates were not the only ones on trial. A special commission was held in Liverpool to try what were called 'the English Confederates'. Nine men were found guilty of having conspired to 'purchase arms to transmit for rebellious purposes to Ireland; and also an intent to raise an insurrection in Ireland, and to procure arms for the purpose of obstructing the law in this country'. Their sentences ranged from three months' to two years' imprisonment.[152]

Conclusion

The revolutionary euphoria that followed the February revolution in France created a demand for political change throughout Europe. It had immediate repercussions on radical politics in both Britain and Ireland, heralding a period of change as new alliances formed and unity appeared amongst various sections of the repeal movement. The main beneficiaries were the Chartists and the Irish Confederates, with the latter adopting a more radical and progressive stance on many social issues, including universal suffrage. Ironically, Daniel O'Connell's repeal movement, which had been regarded as a model mass movement throughout the 1840s, played little part in the debates and activities of 1848, yet was as effectively destroyed as the groups that did.

Despite the debates that had taken place on physical versus moral force, the majority of radicals remained committed to peaceful means of achieving change, hoping they could emulate the example of France (in February) and have a largely bloodless revolution. From the perspective of the British government, however, the method was secondary to the outcome, which was a dismemberment of the British Empire. Such an outcome was totally unacceptable. To a large extent, the rising in Ireland was precipitated by government interventions, with Smith O'Brien proving to be a reluctant revolutionary leader. Not for the first time, however, Irish nationalists underestimated the resolve of the British government, the latter being determined to keep all cooperation – between radicals in France, Britain and Ireland – to a minimum. The year 1848 did not achieve the end of the nationalist movement in Ireland and, in fact, sowed the seeds for the next phase: James Stephens and John O'Mahony who founded the Fenian movement had both been youthful participants in the 1848 uprising. Irish Chartism, however, was a casualty of the conflict. Patrick O'Higgins was arrested in August 1848 for possessing arms and was held in prison without trial until March 1849 when he was released due to public protest. But his arrest did not mark the end of Chartism in Ireland.[153] Under new leadership, a new Chartist organisation emerged that even founded its own newspaper, the *Irishman*. The question of its relationship with Irish nationalists continued to cause tensions and by the mid-1850s the newspaper and the movement were defunct.[154]

Although the alliance between the Chartists and Confederates achieved little and dissolved in the face of government repression, the Irish presence in Chartism possibly strengthened the physical force element. British Chartists, largely due to O'Connor, kept the British working class informed about the situation in Ireland and possibly made workers more sympathetic than they would otherwise have been.[155] More significantly, for a brief period, it appeared that Irish and British radicals could put their differences aside and work together to achieve their aims. The non-sectarian approach of the leaders of the Young Ireland movement, combined with

the formation of the Protestant Repeal Association, briefly raised hopes that religious questions could be separated from political ones. The years after 1848, however, were marked by a rise in sectarian tension, with the Orange Order characterising the 1848 rising as an exclusively Catholic rebellion.[156] A longer-term, but similarly underestimated, outcome of the Ballingarry rising was the effect on politics within Britain. John Belchem has suggested that, 'The volume and nature of anti-Irish propaganda underwent significant change once the events of 1848 demonstrated Irish "apartness". Paddy appeared in new and defamatory guise denied his former benign and redeeming qualities.'[157] This prejudice fed into the emergence of popular Toryism in Britain. Nor was this revised view of the Irish confined to Britain. Belchem argues that '1848 proved an important point of closure… Through the misperceptions of 1848, the "outcast" Irish were deemed incapable of political and cultural conformity.'[158] The period when the Irish and British working classes regarded themselves as 'brethren in bondage', therefore, was short-lived, but a significant development in the radical history of both countries.

Notes

1. See F.C. Mather, *Chartism* (London, 1980) and John Walton, *Chartism* (London, 1999).
2. The Manchester Cotton Spinners' Union, one of the most successful early trade unions, was led by an Irishman, John Doherty, who was born in Donegal in 1798. He had emigrated to England at the age of 18 and in 1828 was elected leader of the Manchester Cotton Spinners' Union, which he attempted to extend into a national union. Doherty founded many radical journals, including the *Poor Man's Advocate*. He campaigned for social and political reforms until his death in 1854. See R.G. Kirby, *The Voice of the People: John Doherty, 1798–1854, Trade Unionist, Radical and Factory Reformer* (Basingstoke, 1975).
3. Sir James Graham to Sir Robert Peel, 7 May 1843, in Charles Stuart Parker, *Sir Robert Peel from his Private Papers* (London, 1899), p. 47.
4. Leslie Mitchell, 'Revolutions in 1848', in R.J.W. Evans and Hartmut Pogge Von Strandmann (eds), *The Revolutions in Europe* (Oxford, 2000), p. 91.
5. Mitchell, 'Revolutions in 1848', p. 94.
6. John Saville, *1848: The British State and the Chartist Movement* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 202.
7. Miles Taylor, *Ernest Jones: Chartism and the Romance of Politics, 1819–1869* (Oxford, 2003).
8. John Belchem, *Popular Radicalism in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 102.
9. Ibid., p. 99.
10. Saville, *1848*, p. 202.
11. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1817–37* (New York, 1996), p. 370.
12. Rachel O'Higgins, 'The Irish influence in the Chartist movement', *Past and Present*, no. 20 (November 1961), p. 83.
13. Dorothy Thompson, 'Ireland and the Irish in English radicalism', in James Epstein and Dorothy Thompson (eds), *The Chartist Experience: Studies in Working Class Radicalism and Culture, 1830–60* (Basingstoke, 1982), p. 123.

14. Gregory Claeys (ed.), *The Chartist Movement in Britain* (London, 2001), Vol. 1, p. xxxvi.
15. Mark Hovell, *The Chartist Movement* (Manchester, 1918), pp. 92–3, 270–1.
16. For example, J.L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond in *The Age of the Chartists, 1832–1854: A Study of Discontent* (London, 1962) state that Irish workers 'brought also the friction that is inevitable when immigrants labourers can underbid the natives…and it was often found impossible to put the English and Irish to work together' (p. 25).
17. Thompson, 'Irish in English radicalism', p. 126.
18. Taylor, *Ernest Jones*, *passim*.
19. Thompson, 'Irish in English radicalism', pp. 128–9.
20. O'Higgins, 'The Irish influence', p. 92.
21. Anonymous, 'An Address to the Repealers of Ireland by a member of the Irish Universal Association' (Dublin, 1842), reprinted in Claeys (ed.), *The Chartist Movement*, p. 4.
22. On Arthur O'Connor, see Jane Hayter Hames, *Arthur O'Connor, United Irishman* (Cork, 2001).
23. The original *Northern Star* had been launched in Belfast in 1792 and was edited by Samuel Neilson. Publication ceased in 1797 when its place of publication was destroyed in a government raid.
24. On Feargus O'Connor's time as a Repeal MP and as a political radical in County Cork, see Fintan Lane, *In Search of Thomas Sheahan: Radical Politics in Cork, 1824–1836* (Dublin, 2001), pp. 42–3, 47, 51–4.
25. In November 1844, publication of the *Northern Star* moved to London.
26. Chris Yelland, 'Speech and writing in the *Northern Star*', *Labour History Review*, no. 65 (2000), p. 22.
27. *Northern Star*, 10 July to 24 August 1841.
28. Ibid., 27 July 1839.
29. Ibid., 26 January, 16 February 1839.
30. Saville, *1848*, p. 73.
31. Angus D. MacIntyre, *The Liberator: Daniel O'Connell and the Irish Party, 1830–1847* (Basingstoke, 1965), p. 165.
32. Thompson, 'Irish in English radicalism', p. 133.
33. Anonymous, 'Address to Repealers of Ireland', p. 15.
34. Belchem, *Popular Radicalism*, p. 74.
35. Asa Briggs, *Chartism* (Stround Gloucestershire, 1998), p. 51.
36. *Northern Star*, 12 January 1839.
37. O'Higgins, 'The Irish influence', p. 89.
38. Ibid., pp. 80–90.
39. *Northern Star*, 27 July 1839.
40. Ibid.
41. Thompson, 'Irish in English radicalism', p. 136.
42. *United Irishman*, 4 March 1848.
43. Ibid.
44. Rules of IUSA, in appendix to 'Address of the Irish Universal Suffrage Association to the Most Reverend Roman Catholic Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland' (Dublin, 1843), reprinted in Claeys (ed.), *The Chartist Movement*, p. 17.
45. Ibid.
46. *United Irishman*, 11 March 1848.
47. Ibid., 4 March 1848.
48. *United Irishman*, 11 March 1848.

49. W.H. Dyott, 'Reasons for seceding from the "Seceders" by an ex-member of the Irish Confederation' (Dublin, 1847), reprinted in Claeys (ed.), *The Chartist Movement*, p. 4.
50. Ibid., p. 4.
51. *Northern Star*, 10 August 1839.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., 31 August 1839.
54. Ibid., 17 August 1839.
55. Ibid., 5 October 1839.
56. Dyott, 'Reasons for seceding', p. 5.
57. Ibid.
58. Pickering, *Anti-Corn Law League*, *passim*.
59. O'Higgins, 'The Irish influence', p. 87.
60. Dyott, 'Reasons for seceding', p. 5; 'Address to the Archbishops', p. 15.
61. See Thompson, 'Irish in English radicalism'.
62. Dyott, 'Reasons for seceding', p. 5.
63. 'Address to the Archbishops', p. 1.
64. Ibid., p. 14.
65. Ibid., p. 15.
66. Ibid., pp. 16–20.
67. *Northern Star*, 27 July 1839.
68. O Higgins, 'The Irish influence', p. 88.
69. Ibid., p. 89.
70. Saville, *1848*, *passim*.
71. John Mitchel, *An Ulsterman for Ireland, being letters to the Protestant farmers, labourers and artisans of the North of Ireland*, with a foreword by Eoin MacNeill (Dublin, 1917). For details of Young Ireland's visit to Belfast in 1847, when they were attacked by members of Old Ireland, see Christine Kinealy and Gerard MacAtasney, *The Forgotten Famine. Poverty, Hunger and Sectarianism in Belfast, 1840–50* (London, 2000).
72. Rachel O'Higgins, 'Irish trade unions and politics, 1830–50', *The Historical Journal*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1961), p. 216.
73. Charles Gavan Duffy, *Four Years of Irish History* (London, 1883), p. 110.
74. Two of the most publicised incidents occurred in Belfast in November 1847 and in Limerick on 29 April 1848. John Mitchel resigned from the Confederation following Limerick. *United Irishman*, 6 May 1848.
75. O'Higgins, 'Irish trade unions', p. 216.
76. Reprinted in John Mitchel, *An Ulsterman for Ireland*.
77. Duffy, *Four Years*, p. 450.
78. Dyott, 'Reasons for seceding', p. 18.
79. Duffy, *Four Years*, p. 450.
80. *United Irishman*, 11 March 1848.
81. O'Higgins, 'The influence of the Irish', p. 92.
82. *United Irishman*, 26 February 1848.
83. Clarendon to Reeve, 21 January 1848, in John Knox Laughton, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Henry Reeve*, 2 vols (London, 1898), p. 194.
84. *Northern Star*, 18 March 1848.
85. Duffy, *Four Years*, p. 591.
86. *United Irishman*, 4 March 1848.
87. Ibid., 6 May 1848.
88. *Northern Star*, 25 March 1848.

89. *United Irishman*, 8 April 1848.
90. Alphonse de Lamartine, *History of the Revolution of 1848* (London, 1849) part II, p. 87.
91. D.N. Petler, 'Ireland and France in 1848', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. XXIV, no. 96 (1985), p. 494.
92. Clarendon to Grey, Clarendon Papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford, 6 April 1848.
93. *United Irishman*, 8 April 1848.
94. Ibid., 4 March 1848.
95. Letter from Patrick O'Higgins dated 13 March 1848, Dublin, printed in *United Irishman*, 18 March 1848.
96. *United Irishman*, 25 March 1848.
97. *Northern Star*, 25 March 1848.
98. *United Irishman*, 25 March 1848.
99. *Northern Star*, 25 March 1848.
100. *United Irishman,* 25 March 1848.
101. Ibid.
102. *United Irishman*, 1 April 1848.
103. From *North British Mail*, quoted in *United Irishman*, 1 April 1848.
104. *United Irishman*, 22 April 1848.
105. *Northern Star*, 25 March 1848.
106. *Leeds Times*, quoted in Briggs, *Chartism*, p. 95.
107. *Northern Star*, 25 March 1848.
108. Duffy, *Four Years*, p. 587.
109. *United Irishman*, 25 March 1848.
110. Ibid., 1 April 1848.
111. *Northern Star*, 22 April 1848.
112. *Nation*, 15 April 1848; *The Times*, 11 April 1848.
113. George Grey to Prince Albert, Royal Archives C.56, quoted in Briggs, *Chartism*, p. 395.
114. Duffy, *Four Years*, p. 588.
115. *United Irishman*, 22 April 1848.
116. Ibid., 29 April 1848.
117. Ibid.
118. From *Liverpool Courier*, reported in *United Irishman*, 29 April 1848.
119. *Manchester Guardian*, 8 and 15 July 1848.
120. O'Higgins, 'The Irish influence', p. 91.
121. The *Irish National Guard* had a short lifespan, being published in June and July 1848.
122. Duffy, *Four Years*, pp. 595, 632. In May, the location of the clubs was: 30 in Dublin County and City; 11 in Cork City and 6 in the county; 4 in Kilkenny City; 1 each in Limerick and Waterford; 10 in County Tipperary; 4 in County Wexford; 1 in Ennis; 1 in Galway City; and 3 in Ulster.
123. Confidential report of George Grey to T. Redington, Abstract of Constabulary Reports, PROL, HO45 2416A, 15 July 1848.
124. *Manchester Courier*, 3 June 1848.
125. Gary Owens, 'Popular mobilisation and the rising of 1848: the clubs of the Irish Confederation', in Laurence M. Geary (ed.), *Rebellion and Remembrance in Modern Ireland* (Dublin, 2001), p. 53.
126. *United Irishman*, 15 April 1848.
127. Quoted in *United Irishman*, 15 April 1848.
128. Clarendon to Russell, Clarendon Letter Book, 13 April 1848.

129. Duffy, *Four Years*, p. 590.
130. Ibid., p. 202.
131. *Fraser's Magazine*, June 1848, p. 729.
132. Duffy, *Four Years*, p. 609; *Liverpool Mercury*, 6 June 1848; *Boston Pilot*, 1 July 1848.
133. Home Office Papers, Chartism, HO 45, file 2, 1848.
134. *Manchester Courier*, 27 May 1848, 31 May 1848.
135. Ibid., 3 June 1848.
136. *Wexford Independent*, 22 July 1848; PRO, HO 45 2410, *Queen* v. *Archdeacon*.
137. W.J. Lowe, *The Irish in Mid-Victorian Lancashire* (New York, 1989), pp. 181–3.
138. Hansard, lxxxviii, 10 April 1848.
139. Saville, *1848*, p. 127.
140. Quoted in Duffy, *Four Years*, p. 615.
141. Ibid., p. 617.
142. *Nation*, 9, 16 June 1848.
143. Duffy, *Four Years*, p. 619.
144. Ibid., p. 622.
145. *Manchester Guardian*, 15 July 1848.
146. Ibid., 26 July 1848.
147. Ibid.
148. Ibid.
149. Ibid., 22, 26 July 1848.
150. *The Times*, 28, 29 July 1848.
151. J.G. Hodges, *The Trial of William Smith O'Brien* (Dublin, 1849).
152. *New York Nation*, 6 January 1849.
153. Rachel O'Higgins suggests that it does; see O'Higgins, 'The Irish influence', p. 89.
154. See Paul Pickering in Owen R. Ashton *et al*. (eds), *The Chartist Legacy* (London, 1999); also Michael Huggins, 'Irish Chartists and Irish Nationalists in the 1840s', paper presented at Ireland and the Victorians conference, Chester College, 3 July 2004.
155. O'Higgins, 'The Irish influence', p. 92.
156. Christine Kinealy, 'A right to march? The conflict at Dolly's Brae', in D. George Boyce and Roger Swift (eds), *Problems and Perspectives in Irish History since 1800* (Dublin, 2003).
157. John Belchem, 'Nationalism, republicanism and exile: Irish emigrants and the revolution of 1848', *Past and Present*, no. 146 (Feb. 1995), pp. 103–35.
158. Ibid., p. 135.

6

Rural Labourers, Social Change and Politics in Late Nineteenth-Century Ireland

Fintan Lane

Since the late 1960s, considerable scholarly research has been carried out on the interaction between land and politics in nineteenth-century Ireland, especially regarding the post-Famine period and the agrarian policies of constitutional nationalism. Parnellism, in particular, has received much attention and there have been major political biographies of several leading agrarian activists, as well as important general studies such as those by Paul Bew, Samuel Clark and Philip Bull.[1] In addition, a number of substantial local studies have appeared, notably James S. Donnelly's survey of nineteenth-century Cork and Donald E. Jordan's meticulous examination of popular politics and the land in County Mayo.[2] The books just mentioned constitute a mere fragment of the literature on agrarian activism produced over the past four decades and this body of work joins an already significant corpus generated since the late nineteenth century. In many crucial areas, nuance and complexity have been introduced, enhancing our understanding of rural society and the political interplay between farmers, landlords and the state.

However, in one important respect, at least, there has been little progress and that is regarding one of the largest segments of nineteenth-century Irish society – the rural working class and, more specifically, the labourers, who overwhelmingly outnumbered artisans, domestic servants and clerks in most rural districts. In fact, the dedicated historiography of the rural labourer still comprises a handful of articles, several of which were written over twenty years ago, and, regrettably, not a single book-length study has been published.[3] In recent years, Pádraig Lane, in a series of articles based on his 1980 doctoral thesis, has been almost alone in pursuing the subject.[4] Certainly, the level of interest shown in the labourers is not commensurate with their numerical presence in nineteenth-century Ireland: in 1841, for instance, rural labourers outnumbered farmers nationally by a ratio of 2.71 to 1 and in many counties the statistic was considerably higher. The figure was 8.03 in County Dublin, 5.74 in Kildare, 3.55 in Cork, 4.64 in Waterford, 3.88 in Galway, and so on. Indeed, with the exception of Ulster

(1.74), which served to depreciate the national ratio, the provincial figures are significantly in excess of the national average: 3.5 (Leinster), 3.12 (Munster) and 3.3 (Connaught).[5] The labourers suffered terribly during the Great Famine and the data from 1851 onwards show a marked and gathering depletion in their numbers, but, according to David Fitzpatrick, they still formed the largest segment of rural society in the final decade of the century, with a national ratio in 1891 of 1.52 labourers to each farmer and provincial figures of 2.07 (Leinster), 1.99 (Munster), 1.25 (Ulster) and 1.12 (Connaught).[6] Of course, these figures are baldly presented and some historians have disputed the claim that labourers remained a majority after the Famine, arguing instead that landless relatives of actual farmers (those that held land) should be enumerated with 'farmers' rather than 'labourers' in an analysis of social class.[7] This is an attractive argument in some ways, and is certainly relevant with regard to social attitudes among labourers, but ultimately crashes on the rocks of the impartible inheritance custom that dominated land succession in the late nineteenth century. Farms were no longer subdivided to the extent they were before the Famine and consequently most farmers' relatives never inherited a single blade of grass and, crucially, never expected to. Some emigrated or joined the professions, priesthood and religious orders, while many others were 'proletarianised' in the countryside and cities.

The limited attention paid to rural labourers is almost certainly related to a perception that their impact on the course of Irish history was minimal. Indeed, some historians have argued that their importance derives principally from their absence, in so far as their reduced presence in the post-Famine period meant less class conflict with the tenant farmers, thus allowing that group to concentrate more fully on their struggle with the landlords.[8] But, what of the labourers themselves? Did they have any independent political existence in late nineteenth-century Ireland? Interestingly, both Bew and Fitzpatrick have suggested that historians may be understating the potential influence of rural labourers at that time, especially for the 1879–82 period.[9] This chapter, which looks particularly at the 'land war' of 1879–82, provides evidence in support of these suspicions and argues that rural labourers were significantly more active, and more of a difficulty for middle-class nationalists, than previously believed.

Problems of political agency and activism

Before discussing the political import of the rural labourers, it is necessary to clarify what we understand by political agency. Understood in a conventional sense, political agency refers to purposive collective, or individual, action in political life that leads to discernible change. A conventional interpretation, therefore, could conclude that because the labourers were marginal to formal political discourse in the late nineteenth century, they

lacked political agency and subsisted as an ineffectual social interest group. Indeed, this minimal involvement with formal politics has meant that, in many general histories of nineteenth-century Ireland, the labourers are visible primarily as victims of poor social conditions and are characterised, particularly with regard to the post-Famine period, as passive and of little political significance. Such a narrow reading of political agency, however, draws too sharp a distinction between social and political activism, and the modes through which one affects the other. Localised industrial disputes, for example, with explicitly limited objectives (such as a wage claim), can have a politicising effect on those participating if, say, the state and employers are seen to act in unison against the workers. Such politicisation can feed an oppositional culture. Likewise, a series of such disputes, even if not intentionally political in their aims, can cause political movements and governments to alter policy and behaviour in order to avoid, or exacerbate, social disruption. All of this may seem obvious, but the point here is that political agency can be subtle and need not be dependent on an engagement with formal political life.

Political activity (understood in its broadest sense) by rural labourers typically occurred not through political parties or even trade unions, but via localised groups and informal social movements, which were generally spontaneous, fragile and ephemeral. Interaction with the dominant political blocs – nationalism and unionism – was complex and conditional, and unskilled rural workers (who were excluded from the vote until 1885) were slow to engage with constitutional political projects, such as the home rule movement, before the 'land war' of 1879–82. However, there is evidence of rural labourer participation in the clandestine Ribbon societies of the 1850s and in the revolutionary Fenian movement, both before and after the failed 1867 rising, and it is clear that an empathy existed between significant numbers of labourers and the artisan-dominated republican movement.[10] Certainly, the Amnesty Association of the late 1860s and early 1870s, which sought the immediate release of Fenian prisoners, attracted large numbers of labourers to the mass demonstrations that occurred across the country from the summer of 1869.[11]

In terms of assuming leadership roles in political organisations, the labourers were at a distinct disadvantage, compared to farmers, shopkeepers and artisans. First, while social status was less important in the Fenian movement than it was in constitutional bodies (such as the National Association or the Home Government Association), it still mattered. With the exception of the 'tinkers' (or travelling community), who were easily the most marginalised in late nineteenth-century Ireland, the labourers were typically viewed as the lowest social group – a designation that meant much in a decidedly hierarchical society. The unionist social commentator, Michael J.F. McCarthy, drawing on his own upbringing on a Munster farm in the late nineteenth century, perceived tangible divisions within rural society:

> The class distinction between even the small farmer and the labourer, who lives in a mud cabin or in a new cottage, is very sharply drawn. The man who works for wage for another is an infinitely lower caste than the man who works for himself. I have known farmers so poor that they had to send their sons to work occasionally in the town, or to do carting with their horses for traders. It was considered a great disgrace… Intermarriage between small farmers and labourers is rare, and, when it occurs, is deemed a 'downfall' for the small farmer's family; while the gulf between the strong farmers and the labourers is as impassable as the chasm between the nobleman and the farmer.[12]

These attitudes existed across the country; in Ulster, for example, intermarriage between farmers and labourers was similarly frowned upon and small farmers there also viewed the labouring people as social inferiors.[13] Class prejudice worked against labourers assuming positions of leadership, even at local level, within ostensibly pan-class political bodies, though in conspiratorial organisations, such as the Ribbon societies and the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), there was some room for ability, initiative and daring to overcome this bias. Such attributes rarely overcame class prejudice in mainstream constitutional bodies.

Second, the labourers were hampered by the nature of their work, which was generally from sunrise to sunset, six days a week, and limiting in terms of interaction with other workers. A labourer, unless unemployed or underemployed, had little freedom of movement until nightfall and restricted opportunities for political activity. Tenant farmers, even those engaged in subsistence farming, were effectively self-employed and clearly in a better position to control their own hours, while artisans and shopkeepers, who largely lived within towns and villages, had far greater scope for social interaction and political organisation. Moreover, labourers did not work together in large groups. In fact, although many farmers employed up to four or five labourers, many also employed just one or two at a time. Only estates and very substantial tillage farms had large numbers of labourers in consistent employment. This diffusion had obvious implications for political organisation during the workday. Third, labourers subsisted on low incomes and, as individuals, did not have the financial resources to undertake the travel and organising work required to build and sustain a political movement. Finally, and importantly, many labourers were in particularly dependent positions, where political activity disapproved of by their employer could lead directly to a loss of livelihood and, in some instances, to eviction from a cottage.

In these circumstances, it is scarcely surprising that rural labourers played little part in formal political organisations. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to assume that they were wholly uninterested in the questions posed by such organisations – most labourers (outside of east Ulster) were probably

elemental nationalists, at the very least, and the engagement with Fenianism is clear evidence of a nationalist political consciousness. However, collective mobilisation, when it happened, almost invariably focused on immediate socio-economic issues such as wages, working conditions, housing, access to 'gardens', unemployment and underemployment; tension between labourers and the farmers was a constant reality and at times erupted into open conflict. In short, the political history of the nineteenth-century Irish rural labourer is one of class conflict and social resistance.

After the Famine

The Great Famine had a devastating effect on the rural labouring population, who had few resources and limited cash reserves to fall back on during difficult times. Large numbers of labourers (men and women) were among the million who died and many more emigrated with their families, causing a significant shift in the social composition of rural Ireland.[14] The overwhelming majority of the two million Irish who emigrated in the decade 1845–55 were from the unskilled rural working class: in fact, of those Irish who sailed into New York City in 1846, roughly 75 per cent were rural labourers and farm servants, while just 9.5 per cent were farmers. The proportion appears to have increased after 1847 and it is estimated that between 80 and 90 per cent of all Irish emigrants in 1851–5 were from rural labouring backgrounds.[15]

In addition to death and emigration, rural labourers suffered widespread evictions during the Famine from the plots of conacre – usually between a quarter and one statute acre – commonly held in lieu of wages. Indeed, these 'cottiers', and the poorest farmers (who sometimes took waged work), were effectively squeezed off the land, through both evictions and involuntary surrenders, as landlords and tenant farmers engaged in significant land consolidation, a process that continued for two decades after the Famine. The number of holdings amounting to one acre or less (almost invariably labourers' conacre) reduced from 73,016 in 1847 to 37,728 in 1851.[16] Indeed, this dramatic decrease probably fails to give the full measure of the shift, as clear data are not available for the early to mid-1840s, and it is certain that evictions were under way before mid-January 1847 when the mass clearances began.[17] The total number of these holdings improved slightly in the 1850s and was at 48,448 in 1871, but this is explained partly by an increased number of garden plots close to towns and cities. Some labourers had holdings measuring above one statute acre, particularly in regions with poor quality land; between 1847 and 1851, the number of holdings of between one and five acres decreased from 139,041 to 88,083.[18] It should be borne in mind, however, that the decline in conacre holdings was by no means uniform across the country and regional differences saw a county such as Wexford actually increase its number of

holdings of one acre or less by 67 per cent between 1844 and 1847, a phenomenon that may have resulted from small farmers accepting plots of land, having lost their farms through involuntary surrenders.[19] Nonetheless, despite regional disparities, the general effect was that rural labourers in the post-Famine period had less access to land and were consequently more wage-dependent. Demands for half-acre or acre gardens were commonly made by labourers' representatives throughout the late nineteenth century, but they received short shrift from a majority of farmers and landlords; the clearances were felt by many to be a social good in that the perceived gross overcrowding of land prior to the Famine had been eliminated, and a return to multitudinous small holdings was seen as economically undesirable. Moreover, tenant farmers were naturally inclined towards acquiring land rather than relinquishing it.

The diminution of the labouring population produced a tighter labour market, which should have led to a significant improvement in the living standards of those who remained after the Famine. In fact, while average nominal wages did increase, this did not improve matters by a great deal as prices rose and employment prospects were uneven; underemployment became a constant for many labourers, particularly as the drift from tillage to pastoral farming accelerated in the later decades of the century.[20] November to March each year was a difficult time when work was not easily obtained. The reduced access to vegetable gardens increased the need to build up cash reserves for such periods of unemployment, while changing consumption patterns added to expenditure. Moreover, regardless of an actual increase in the average wage rate, the rate received by Irish labourers was still abysmal compared to that earned by agricultural labourers in Britain – in 1870, for example, the nominal weekly wage of a labourer in England and Wales was more than twice that of his counterpart in Ireland.[21] Irish labourers, and their families, were also forced to live in squalid housing conditions that appalled contemporary commentators and improved only very slowly after the Labourers' Act of 1883. In summary, despite wage-rate improvements, the rural labourers' standard of living after the Famine remained at a very low level, with many labouring families living in hovels and tottering on the edge of social destitution.

The high level of discontent among labourers in the 1850s and 1860s was plain to many contemporary observers, though constitutional bodies such as the Tenant League and the National Association doggedly ignored their plight; the Tenant League, conveniently, believed that the labourers' wretched condition could only be improved when the tenant farmers achieved their own objectives with regard to land tenure.[22] Alienated, and disregarded by middle-class nationalists, the labourers occasionally deployed the mode of resistance they knew best – collective social violence. Labourer involvement with Ribbonism consolidated during the 1850s to the extent that, according to K.T. Hoppen, agrarian 'outrages' (which meant anything from a threatening letter to a murder) 'became more than

ever before the preserve of the declining labourer and cottier class', and farmers bore the brunt of the attacks.[23] The participation of labourers in Ribbonism and the complex nature of that social movement in the post-Famine period are topics that require deeper research, but it is clear that the network of Ribbon societies, while locality-centred in practice and rudimentary in organisational terms, offered labourers a sense of unity with similar-minded workers in neighbouring districts and beyond. Ribbonism was a meshing of Catholic nationalism and socio-economic protest, and in some regions provided many recruits to the ranks of the more sophisticated Fenian movement of the late 1850s.[24] The labourers were great believers in the efficacy of secret societies and from the outset provided the backbone of Fenianism in agricultural districts.[25] The farmers, by and large, were uninterested in the republican project.

Why were the labourers attracted by Fenianism? What did they expect from the movement? These are questions that would require considerably more space to explore properly, but it is probable that the challenge posed to hierarchical society played some part in attracting labourers and artisans, including many trade unionists. Fenianism did have an implicit social agenda – it did, after all, promote democratic republicanism in an undemocratic age – though this received considerably less emphasis than its separatist policy and was never taken seriously by the leadership.[26] Nonetheless, there were rhetorical flourishes such as the appeal to the English working class in March 1867 to 'remember the starvation and degradation brought to your firesides by the oppression of labour…Avenge yourselves by giving liberty to your children in the coming struggle for human freedom.'[27] In fact, democratic republicanism in the 1850s and 1860s was seen by many, both friends and enemies, as akin to a levelling programme in a country where the aristocracy held sway; this perception almost certainly won it supporters among the ranks of an alienated rural working class. Ultimately, however, the Fenians were led largely by middle-class radical nationalists, who had no desire to exacerbate class conflict, and the labourers' social concerns were not considered relevant to the struggle for national independence.

One of the labourers' chief concerns in the decades after the Famine was the introduction onto farms of new labour-saving machinery.[28] The frustration of labourers expressed itself in the late 1850s through occasional attacks on farm machinery, sometimes carried out clandestinely by small groups and sometimes openly by large crowds of enraged workers. A particularly serious episode occurred in 1858 when on Sunday 8 August almost 4,000 labourers – many of them unemployed, demobilised militiamen – converged on Kilkenny city to protest about the use of machinery in the county. Many of the protesters were armed with reaping hooks and it is clear that this was an organised gathering; the labourers took over the streets and paraded through the city 'shouting and yelling'. The following morning, they assembled an open meeting (a 'council of war' according to

the *Kilkenny Journal*) and collectively decided that 'all the machinery in the county should be forthwith destroyed, as the only chance of employment for the labourer', before marching two miles to Oldtown and Pigeon Park (near Danesfort), where they destroyed reaping machines belonging to a large farmer named James Walsh and a Scottish settler called William Howison.[29] The reaction of some of Walsh's own workers to the invasion is interesting, and can be read at least two ways; it also reminds us of the presence of waged women workers in the fields, a neglected topic in Irish historiography:

> He was at the further end of the field when the first body of rioters entered it; and the moment they made their appearance, some of the women in his own employment rushed upon Mr Walsh [who was armed with a revolver], pinioned his arms to his sides, and made a close prisoner of him while the mob remained; not, as they alleged, from having any sympathy with the rioters, but to prevent blood from being shed on either side.[30]

The crowd broke into sections after visiting Walsh's farm and descended on a number of farms in Outrath and Ballynaline where they seized and destroyed scythes and cradles, implements resented because of the ability of one scythe to do the work of several men equipped with reaping hooks.

The labourers returned en masse to Kilkenny city following the day's destruction, where they held a triumphal procession through the town before dispersing. However, they appeared on the streets again the next day and, according to a local journalist, their anger remained palpable:

> There was a large assemblage of reapers in our streets on Tuesday, but such as were there for hire showed an exceedingly dogged disposition, and refused all wages lower than the prices they chose to arrange for themselves, threatening all farmers with dire consequences if they dared go against the popular feeling, and hire mowers or use machines. They openly proclaimed that if they did not get employment on their own terms they knew where bread was to be had and they would have it.[31]

In fact, reduced wage rates were an important causal factor in these events – local labourers, who had received four to five shillings a day in 1857, were being offered just one shilling to one shilling and sixpence a day, a dramatic decrease that they blamed on the increased use of machinery and scythes.[32] The *Kilkenny Journal*, while hostile to the actions of the crowd, accepted that significant distress lay behind the events:

> Their acts were the acts of disappointed, hungry, and, perhaps, hopeless men, and not those of lawless desperadoes…and, if our voices could reach these poor people, who have our warmest sympathies, not in their

> lawless proceedings, but for their distressed condition, we would earnestly advise them to refrain from all violence, as such proceedings only bring ruin upon themselves and their families.[33]

The paper went on to plead with farmers and landlords to be more generous to the labourer, though it offered no practical suggestions, referred to the previous year's wages as 'high' (which they were for the time), and did not call for a renewal of those rates. Moreover, the deployment of armed forces to suppress the protesters was depicted as normative and appropriate. Soldiers and police were drafted into Kilkenny to quell the disturbances and on Monday 16 August cavalry and infantrymen were also dispatched to the Callan area to control a crowd of 1,200 labourers assembled there.[34] The Callan demonstrators were angry at the low rate of wages offered to them and a bread riot was threatened. In the event, the heavy military presence had an immediate effect, though further labour disturbances were reported later in the month; at Derrinboy, near Frankford, a number of men called at the houses of five labourers to warn them not to use scythes instead of the slower reaping hook, while at Urlingford an attempt was made to destroy a reaping machine.[35]

The new machinery was resented for many years afterwards, but labourers were ultimately forced to accept its presence. Certainly, the farmers recognised the labour- and cost-saving benefits, and also the new industrial-style work regime it introduced to the field. Indeed, the warm reception given to these changes by the rural middle class is well represented by an article in the *Munster News* in August 1859 on the arrival of a new threshing and winnowing machine on a farm at Ballykeefe, County Limerick:

> Untiring itself, the Machine allowed none of those who attended it to desist from his duty for an instant, and no better instructor in the regularity of labour ever came to the aid of industry and enterprise. No loiterers and no laggards could have a chance of indulgence for laziness beside the unerring task-teacher; and no steward need scold and row working people when, thus occupied, they find they can neither dodge nor budge. The beauty of this machine…is the busy vivacity which it appears to breathe from its very labouring breast…and then hear the really musical hum – the hum of industry – of the whole mechanism, so to say, singing in a subdued tone at its progress, and you cannot but feel that this is an 'innovation' in Irish Agriculture.[36]

A brave new world for commercial farming, but a bleak one for the labourers whose employment prospects were undermined by these technological advances.

The first organisation focused on doing something specifically for the rural labourers emerged in September 1869 with the establishment of the Kanturk Labourers' Club in north-west Cork. Significantly, this initiative

emerged from within the local branch of the Amnesty Association and most, if not all, of the leading figures were Fenian sympathisers; the chief organiser and spokesman for the club, Philip Francis Johnson, was a notable amnesty activist who went on a speaking tour of England with Isaac Butt and John 'Amnesty' Nolan in October 1872.[37] Neither of the club's two most prominent leaders, Florence O'Riordan (chairman) and P.F. Johnson (secretary), were labourers – the former was a surveyor, the latter a hotel keeper – and from the beginning the emphasis was on effecting legislative change with regard to housing and gardens. The club argued publicly for the insertion in what became the Land Act 1870 of a clause that would provide a decent house for every labourer, with an acre attached at the farmer's rent or at a 'fair rent'.[38] In general, the club discouraged conflict with the tenant farmers and paid little attention to the question of wage rates.

Fenians were behind a number of the meetings that took place around the time that the Kanturk club was formed and in some areas they faced stiff opposition from local Catholic clergymen. In County Meath, the clergy of Kinnegad and Killnean condemned in advance a labour meeting that occurred at the Hill of Down on 26 December 1869, which was calling for 'fair rents, fair wages, small plots of land, legal protection, and decent homes'. The chief organiser of this demonstration was a young labourer named Daniel Ennis, who was almost certainly a Fenian, and, unlike those in Kanturk, he was forthright in demanding increased wages and in criticising the farmers. In an angry letter to the *Irishman* afterwards, he wrote:

> The moment the bills were posted on every public place, the Catholic clergy of Kinnegad and Killnean commenced their altar denunciations, and consequently denounced the originators of the movement. I collected twenty-one shillings from a few respectable farmers, so that the meeting was not started for an evil purpose. I am a labourer. I organised the meeting, as well I could, but the meeting was crushed, because the labourers attempted to speak on their own behalf. I am not speaking against the clergy. I am not in opposition to them; but you will understand me when I say it is a miserable thing to hear a priest on the altar of God depriving a young man of his character…Some of the kind and generous farmers howled at the idea of labourers holding their own meeting, but man, woman and child were invited to attend the Navan Tenant-right meeting, and even the farmers offered modes of conveyances to the labourers gratis…Irishmen, such is the love and friendship some of our farmers have for us. Why not, then the hardy sons of toil, speak in their own behalf, and make public their rights and wrongs, and hold our own meetings which shall be held, but legally and wisely, and as orderly as any other meeting…[We] have a right to be considered as well as they; and we want the right to live as men, not as serfs.[39]

The clergy and the farmers, however, succeeded in stamping out the labourers' movement in Ennis's district and a labour league was not formed. The situation in Kanturk, of course, was different because the group there was sponsored by important local nationalists, led by men from the middle class, and less interested in confrontation with the tenant farmers.

The Land Act, not surprisingly, was a disappointment for P.F. Johnson and the other members of the Kanturk Labourers' Club, but they persisted throughout the early 1870s in encouraging the formation of labour clubs in other parts of the country. In fact, clubs were established in localities in Cork, Limerick, Kerry, Clare and Dublin at various times, though all were ephemeral.[40] Thousands of labourers attended a rally organised by the Kanturk club in October 1869 and actual membership appears to have numbered hundreds.[41] However, the organisation's unwillingness to deal with the wages issue almost certainly hindered its development. This weakness was accentuated in the summer of 1870 when rural labourers spontaneously struck across Cork, particularly in the north and east of the county, for higher wages, better working conditions and restrictions on the use of farm machinery.[42] The strikes, in fact, occurred in large part as a domino effect from a wave of strikes in urban Cork, though the recent appearance of rural labourers' clubs probably added to their confidence. In early July, there were attacks on machinery at Ballinhassig, near Cork City, and at Liscarroll, near Kanturk, with reaping machines a particular target.[43] The response of the Kanturk leaders to the wave of wage disputes was tepid and, using the club as a platform, Thomas Nunan (chairman of the local Amnesty Association, a merchant and close friend of Johnson's) called on the labourers to pursue their claims by appealing to reason; more specifically, he asked them to refrain from strikes, which were deemed to have 'evil effects'.[44] The endorsement of this position by the Kanturk Labourers' Club indicated not simply social moderation, but a self-perception of the organisation as being a political association rather than a rural trade union.

The Kanturk activists, however, were responsible for the formation in August 1873 of the Irish Agricultural Labourers' Union (IALU), which was inaugurated at a conference in Johnson's hotel and attended by prominent rural labourers' leaders from England including Joseph Arch and Henry Taylor of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union (NALU).[45] Large numbers of labourers, mostly from Munster, were present at the conference, but again the leadership positions were taken entirely by men from the middle class: Johnson became general secretary, while Nunan was made treasurer. More interestingly, the leading home rule MPs Isaac Butt (a friend of Johnson's) and P.J. Smyth attended and were elected president and vice-president respectively; neither subsequently did much to promote the IALU and it is clear that their involvement was primarily about solidifying links to the home rule movement. In fact, the close-knit group of activists that

formed the club in 1869, initiated the IALU and later was active in the land war of 1879–82 was composed largely of Fenians and Fenian sympathisers who were supportive of the home rule movement as it grew in the early 1870s. Indeed, the Kanturk Labourers' Club openly associated itself with Butt's Home Government Association, a body that Johnson promoted in public speeches.[46]

The IALU failed to take off, though large rallies were held in towns such as Thurles, Maryborough (now Portlaoise) and Dunmanway in late 1873.[47] Activists from the amnesty movement were chiefly responsible for organising the demonstrations, which centred on demands for better housing and access to land. In many ways, the IALU was the Kanturk club writ large and, though labourers made up the membership and played a role at local level, policy was influenced hugely by the middle-class organisers. Wage rates and working conditions were referred to occasionally (and even with vehemence), but not as policy priorities because these issues guaranteed conflict with the rural middle class and, consequently, a disruption of the pan-class unity that nationalists believed essential if home rule was to be achieved. Nonetheless, the IALU was a crucial milestone for rural working-class politics; for the first time, labourers were tentatively invited inside the tent of constitutional nationalism as an organised sectional lobby. In the short term, their impact on the home rule movement was minimal, as the IALU failed to develop into a genuinely national organisation, but this changed during the 'land war' of 1879–82 when labour nationalism emerged as an ideology with considerable force.

Rural labourers and the Land League movement

The Land League arose from the agricultural depression of 1878–80. It was, in various measures, a visceral revolt by the distressed small farmers of the west, a calculated challenge to the state by Fenian and ex-Fenian political activists, and an opportunity grasped by home rule politicians expecting to make political progress by hitching their wagons to the engine of land reform. Within the space of three years, however, it became much more than this; indeed, from the first meeting of the 'land war', held at Irishtown in County Mayo on 20 April 1879, the Land League had grown by the autumn of 1880 into a nationwide social movement pitted against the landlord class and the civil authorities. Its objectives of rent abatements and peasant proprietorship through compulsory purchase were fought for using diverse tactics, but the league's strength clearly lay in the power of collective mass action – evictions were resisted, rents withheld, recalcitrant landlords and farmers boycotted, processions and mass rallies organised.

In formal terms, the Land League existed as a network of branches, with a central authority in Dublin, but as a movement it was multifarious and

gave rise to the Ladies' Land League, children's leagues, house leagues, Land League schools, musical bands, prisoner support groups and much more, including acts of agrarian violence. It was also intrinsically linked to the home rule movement and the Irish parliamentary party. The labourers' plight, however, was not initially on the agenda of this social movement – which, in essence, was constructed for the benefit of their employers – though their presence at Land League demonstrations was encouraged. Such an attitude towards the labouring population was viable to an extent in Connaught, where labourers were relatively few, but problems arose as the Land League spread into Munster and Leinster, as both these provinces still contained high proportions of labourers, many of whom had suffered much worse than the farmers during the bad winter of 1879–80. In 1881, there were 2.07 labourers to every farmer in Leinster, while the figure was 1.96 in Munster.[48] It was fertile ground for anti-farmer antagonism, a danger that P.F. Johnson warned against when speaking at a Land League rally in September 1880.[49]

The example of the Land League was plainly an important factor in encouraging rural labourers to form the labour leagues that sprang up organically across the country between October 1880 and late 1882. It was also a source of irritation for some labourers who saw nationalist Ireland mobilising in the interest of tenant farmers, while they remained downtrodden and forgotten, often under the heel of farmers who were active members of the Land League. Anti-farmer placards appeared in County Wexford on 12 October attacking the farmers and calling on labourers to 'rise up…[and] wrest part of the soil from our oppressors'.[50] In Shanagarry in east Cork, crowds of labourers confronted local farmers on several occasions during October and early November, and obstructed the running of Land League meetings in the area: their leader, a 42-year-old Ballylongane labourer–fisherman named Patrick Barry, accused the Land League of trying to manipulate labourers for the benefit of the farmers.[51] The immediate context was farmer opposition to labourers receiving portions of a vacant farm from a local landlord, Peter Penn Gaskill, but the vehemence displayed by the labourers patently had deeper origins.[52] This concerted opposition to the Land League at Shanagarry was widely reported, with the hostile *Evening Mail* remarking acidly that the lesson it drew from the confrontation was 'that the power of the League is an overgrown bubble'.[53] Johnson, now a leading Land League activist in north Cork, suspected the events were an attempt by landlords to drive a wedge between the league and the labourers: 'The new-fangled sympathy the landlords learned for the labourer was that his interest may be made to clash with those of the farmer.'[54] In Dublin, Charles Stewart Parnell, in his role as president of the Land League, reacted to the Shanagarry difficulties by insisting that the labourers would gain land if the farmers were successful; he was vague on details, but seemed to suggest that graziers' farms would be broken up for the benefit of labourers:

> The giving a labourer half an acre of land…was not the way to settle the question. Nor had he any more favour for the proposal to place them on the waste lands. There was plenty of good land in Ireland before they came to the waste lands, and one of the most important works of the league would be to undo the work done at the time of the famine and to replace the people on the land [on] which bullocks and sheep were then placed.[55]

The first rural labour league to emerge during the 'land war' appears to be that formed in October 1880 at Ardagh in west Limerick.[56] The prime mover was a carpenter and cabinet-maker called William C. Upton, a leading local IRB member who played a key role on 5 March 1867 during the Fenian assault on Ardagh police barracks. Following the failure of the 1867 rising, Upton became a wanted man and was forced to go on the run to the United States, only returning in September 1869 (at which stage the crucial witness against him had left the country).[57] From the outset, the Ardagh Labour League was supportive of the Land League, but adamant that something should be done for the labourer; the league's main demands were for a cottage and an acre of land, with fixity of tenure, for every labourer. In Kanturk, the group around Johnson and O'Riordan was also active and may have influenced the emergence of the Ardagh league; Johnson spoke, for example, at a land agitation rally at Abbeyfeale, County Limerick, on 26 September, where he proposed a resolution declaring that 'the Irish question would be incomplete without the labourers'.[58] He repeated this belief at a land rally in Castleisland, County Kerry, two weeks later and on 2 November he gave evidence on behalf of the labourers at a sitting in Cork of the Bessborough Commission.[59] In addition, Johnson became embroiled in a dispute in late November with the home rule MP John Dillon because of a speech in Limerick during which the latter seemed to rule out fixity of tenure for labourers. Dillon quickly backed down, pleading that he had been misunderstood, but also that he had spoken 'without having carefully considered what I proposed to say'.[60] A few weeks later, at a 10,000-strong land rally in Glin, at which Upton was present, Dillon insisted that the cause of the labourer was as important as that of the farmer and suggested that 'if they combined as the farmers had done, justice should and would be done to them'.[61]

In fact, the inclination of the Land League was for integration rather than a separate rural labour movement – Parnell had called on the labourers to 'trust' the league to win them their demands – but by the end of 1880 it was clear that something more substantial had to be done. The labourers were suffering worst from the poor economic conditions and activists such as Johnson, Upton and Daniel John Hishon (a Fenian tenant farmer from Shanagolden) were genuinely concerned that they were being forgotten in the land agitation. Labourers themselves were beginning to

organise and, particularly from the beginning of 1881, labour leagues began to appear in various Munster counties, some begun organically by local labourers and their supporters, others formed by the group of agitators that included Johnson, Upton and Hishon. North-west Cork and west Limerick were the heartlands of this inchoate movement. Elsewhere, a rural labour organisation composed of herdsmen, the Herds' Association, was in existence by late 1880 in the Oughterard and Clonbur districts of County Galway; the police associated this group with a spate of agrarian violence and it was also suspected to have 'the cordial support of the Land League', which allegedly saw it as 'a valuable ally for the commission of outrages'.[62] Despite 'cordial support' in localities, the Land League as a national organisation continued to deal in vagaries when referring to the labour question and, although ostensibly in favour of inserting a clause in the 1881 Land Bill to give labourers easier access to plots of land, it was an issue that was not seriously pursued. Indeed, the labourers were scarcely discussed at the Land League convention held on 21 April, despite a strong intervention in their favour from the Waterford Quaker Joseph Fisher.[63]

The rural labour movement progressed slowly in the early months of 1881 and by early May it had been decided by Johnson and others to establish a central organisation in an effort to give some focus to the agitation.[64] At a conference in Limerick, held on 19 May, over 300 delegates, mostly from Limerick, Cork and Tipperary, met to form the Munster Labour League, which, while loyal to the Land League, immediately began to act as a pressure on Parnell and the land agitators to do something tangible for the labourers.[65] The conference itself was attended by Andrew Kettle and the Rev. Harold Rylett (a Unitarian) on behalf of the Land League and there were at least eight Catholic clergymen in attendance, as well as a number of local Land League leaders. Upton was among those who stressed that it was not 'a schism from the Land League movement', though a voice immediately interjected that it was certainly 'a schism from the ingratitude of the farmers'.[66] Hishon gave an interesting exposition of the new organisation's relationship to the Land League, in which he drew a very sharp distinction between the Land League's national leadership and its local membership:

> The labourers of the country should put their shoulders to the wheel and not be dependent on the farmers or anyone else. The only dependence they could have would be on the executive of the Irish National Land League, whose object was the regeneration of the labourers as the farmers (*applause*). They felt that heretofore they had not been properly recognised in the movement, though they had attended Land League meetings when the patriotism of some of the farmers was oozing out from their finger ends (*cheers*)…He (Mr Hishon) would no more trust the labourers to the mercy of some farmers he knew than he would trust them to the devil himself (*cheers*).[67]

In fact, while the emphasis of the Munster Labour League was on legislative change (securing a cottage and a plot of land for the labourer), there was increased attention to the behaviour of the farmers and to poor wages and conditions. This frustration with the farmers was centred on a belief that labourers continued to be treated in an extremely shabby manner despite their support for the Land League agitation. Indeed, this growing hostility to the farmers was increasingly evident at labour meetings. For example, at a mass land and labour rally held at Sixmilebridge, County Clare, on 15 May, one of the speakers, James Halpin, pointed to the few farmers present (no more than six), remarking sarcastically that he supposed they were 'at home taking their glass of grog – or idly about their farms'. A voice from the crowd declared that the farmers 'would work the shirt off our backs', while another speaker opined that the labourers would be better off under the landlords than the farmers.[68] Ironically, the rally was organised for the benefit of the labourers by the Sixmilebridge and Cratloe branches of the Land League.

Tensions between labourers and farmers finally exploded into open conflict during the summer of 1881 with a wave of strikes for higher wages across County Cork. Reporting on the situation in late July, the *Irishman* commented:

> Strikes against present wages are threatening to spread all over the country, and now, as the harvest-time is near, the farmers should succumb to increased demands or lose more than if they paid the higher rate required. In the west of Cork, from Ballincollig to Macroom and farther on, the agricultural labourers are in revolt. It is reported that their attitude is most determined, and pitiable details of harsh treatment are recited by the speakers. Large numbers of labouring men, engaged in field work, have left their work to join the strikers, and numerous bodies of workmen have been forced to quit their employment.[69]

In the event, the farmers were generally quick to capitulate because, unlike previous disputes, the strike was regional rather than local. According to the *Cork Examiner* of 18 July:

> The movement, which has been spreading quietly and unnoticed for some weeks past, promises in a short time to attain proportions almost as gigantic as that organised by the farmers themselves. Already great strikes, of which the public have heard nothing, have taken place in this extensive district [Macroom], and settlements have been made in which the farmers, to a great extent, have recognised the reasonable demands made.[70]

The success of the strike wave in Cork did not, however, lead to mass strikes elsewhere, though it did add to a perception that the rural labour

movement was on the rise. The Land League began to take more of an interest, almost certainly because of the strikes in Cork, but also because Johnson and his friends were pushing hard within the wider nationalist movement. There was widespread sympathy for the labourer, as evinced by the two newspaper reports above, and the credibility of the farming class was under severe pressure. Moreover, it was clear that a reluctance to deal with the moderate organised labour leagues could encourage yet more direct action and turn generalised anti-farmer hostility into a specific antipathy to the Land League. The sentiments expressed at a labour meeting in July by Timothy O'Callaghan, a labourer from Ballincollig, County Cork, summed up the danger:

> The labourers had worked hard in assisting the farmers to make the Land League movement a success, and if the farmers and the Land League did not come to their assistance now, they would 'Boycott' the farmer and work for the landlord (*hear, hear*). They would work for anyone who gave them the highest pay (*applause*).[71]

The Land League's convention of 14–18 September indicated how the events of the summer had forced rural labour onto the agenda of the land agitators – a labour conference was held in conjunction with the convention (and attended by Parnell and other MPs), while a day of discussion at the convention itself was dedicated to the labour question. Johnson, Hishon, Upton and other labour advocates addressed the gathering, insisting that the labour issue be taken up actively by the league. The outcome was that the Land League agreed to campaign for legislative provisions for the labourer, with regard to housing and a half-acre (wages were left to the market), and Parnell promised to include a labourers' representative on the executive.[72] It was also agreed that, pending legislation, farmers should hand over half an acre of every 25 acres held for use by labourers. Likewise, the title of the organisation was expanded to read 'Irish National Land League and Industrial Union'. In the event, a Catholic priest from Limerick was selected as the labour representative and – despite rhetorical adherence to the labourers' cause – little was done before the league was suppressed and Parnell jailed in October.

Incorporation

The suppression of the Land League opened up new opportunities for the rural labour movement. Initially, it was feared that the labour leagues would also be suppressed, but this did not happen. There were localised suppressions, such as at Brosna in north-east Kerry, where the male labourers were prevented from meeting – this, however, was circumvented by their wives forming a Brosna Ladies' Labour League which met and passed resolutions condemning the farmers.[73] In fact, the labour leagues had

begun to spread beyond Munster as early as August 1881 and this process was accelerated as sympathetic Land League activists, unable to continue their own agitation, threw in their lot with the labourers.[74] Leagues were formed in Clare, Kerry, King's County (now Offaly), Meath, Tipperary, Wicklow, Waterford and Leitrim, among other counties, between August 1881 and February 1882.[75] Some of these leagues were quick to adopt the lexicon of the Land League, such as the Kiltyclogher Labour League, based on the Leitrim/Fermanagh border, which resisted attempts by the police to suppress its meetings in November 1881, declaring its intention to see 'the Irish people the owners of the Irish soil and landlordism buried'.[76]

In addition to the spread of organised groups, labourers were on the march again during January and February 1882. Intimidation and violence were used against farmers in disputes to the north and south of Cork city in February.[77] At Mullinahone in County Tipperary, the local labour league engaged in coercion through mass action. Led by a musical band, 300 labourers marched out of town on 14 January in the direction of Modeshill. According to a report:

> They called on each farmer along the route who held upwards of 25 acres and asked them to sign a pledge promising to give a half-acre to married labourers. Not a farmer refused, and each and every one signed willingly, and during the day many cheers were given for Parnell, Davitt, Dillon and the Land League.[78]

Such marches, which occurred particularly during the second half of 1882, are evidence that the labourers effectively adopted Land League methods for their own purposes. Moreover, the participants could cogently argue that they were simply imposing the agreement reached at the second national convention of the Land League, that is, half an acre for every 25 acres. The agitation gathered pace from late March onwards with labour meetings held in many towns and villages across the country, including Kildare, Toomavara, Templemore, Moyne, Waterford, Glin, Cloonegormican, Miltown-Malbay, Oola, Cloghan, Templetouhy, Balboyle, Barntown, Clara, Baltinglass, Ardagh, Dromconrath, Ballingar, Edgesworthstown, Killavullen, Tulsk, Craanford, Brosna, Clareen, Frankford, Longford, Castlecomer, Powerstown and elsewhere.[79] By the summer of 1882, the labour leagues, and herds' associations, had spread throughout Munster and Leinster and into significant parts of east Connaught. Rural labour activity was less obvious in Ulster.

The number of local leagues continued to multiply during the summer and, though it is difficult to put a precise figure on them, there seems to have been between 100 and 130 local societies by the end of August 1882. The spread is indicated by Figure 6.1, which is based on reports in *The Irishman* and *United Ireland*, and, while by no means comprehensive, does

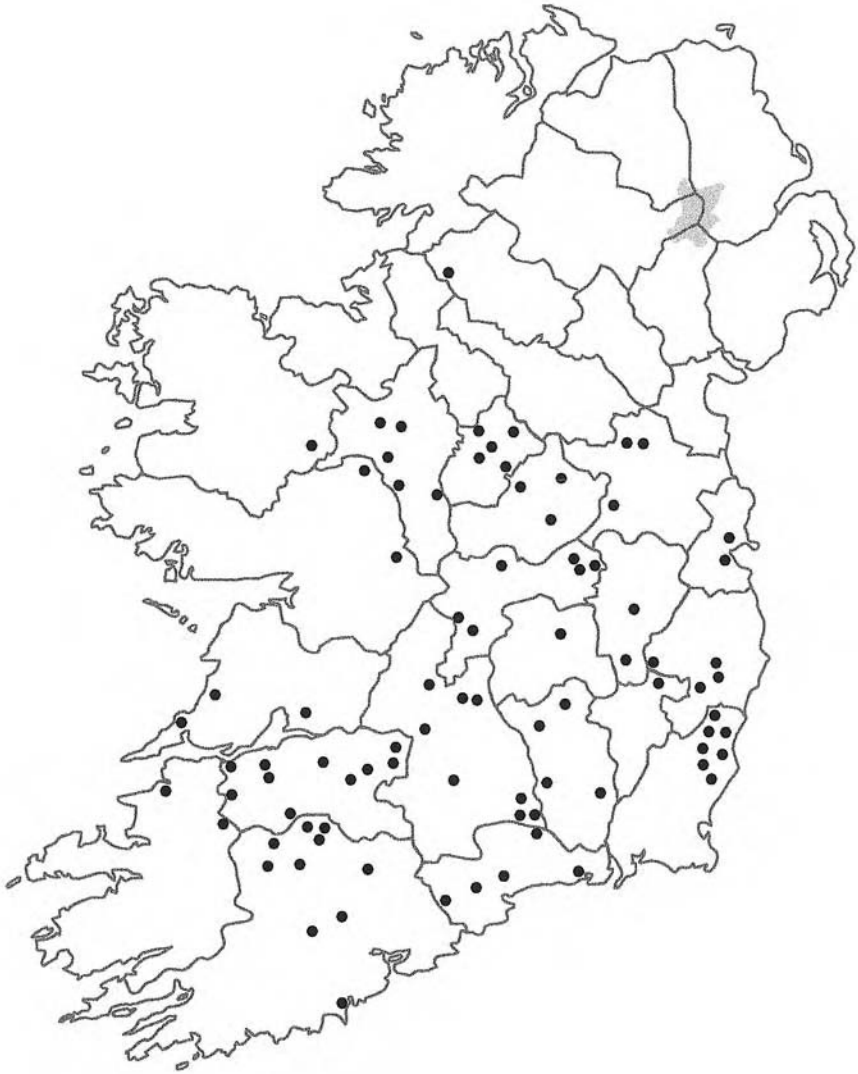

Figure 6.1 Distribution of labour leagues in Ireland, summer 1882
Source: *United Ireland* and *The Irishman*, May–September 1882.

give a sense of the strength of the social movement under way. Clearly, the Munster Labour League, formed the previous year, was not in a position to coordinate on this level and it seems that some sort of 'central executive' appointed itself in Dublin in mid-1882 in order to bring cohesion to the

expanding movement; indeed, there is much to suggest that this 'executive' was a conscious attempt by Land League activists to bring the labour bodies under their control. At least three organisers representing the 'Dublin' or 'Central' executive began appearing at meetings from June – a man called Cosgrave, Thomas Fenlon (a leading and active IRB member in Longford) and Laurence Charles Strange (a radical solicitor from Waterford city, who was temporarily based in Wexford).[80] It is clear, however, that centralisation was an aspiration rather than a reality; in early July, for example, a meeting of the Castledermot Labour League in County Kildare passed a motion expressing their readiness 'to become a branch of the Great Labour League of Ireland as soon as the Leinster executive has been appointed'.[81] The mover of this motion, George O'Toole, was a former local Land League leader, and appears to have been central to the shadowy 'Dublin executive'. Interestingly, he informed the meeting that he had a 'communication' from Michael Davitt and John Dillon urging a halt to public meetings, which lays open the possibility that these men wanted an end to the labour agitation.[82]

In the event, those involved with the centralisation plan managed to win Parnell's endorsement for the project and a conference was held in the Antient Concert Rooms, Dublin, on 21 August 1882 to form the Irish Labour and Industrial Union (ILIU).[83] There was a huge attendance, including seven home rule MPs and a number of former local leaders of the Land League. Daniel Hishon travelled from County Limerick, but neither P.F. Johnson nor William Upton was present. Johnson had decided to scale down his labour activities, partly because he felt there had been too much inaction on the labour issue by the Land Leaguers. It is unclear why Upton stayed away, though his labour advocacy had begun to take a more literary form: his book, *Uncle Pat's Cabin*, was published by Gill and Son, Dublin, around this time. An uncompromising depiction of the labourer's plight, this novel is an important example of working-class literature written in the cause of social reform, though completely overlooked to date by historians of the 'land war'.

The ILIU conference, which was chaired by Justin McCarthy, MP, drew up a set of objectives that involved working to secure plots of land and improved housing for the labourers; better treatment from the farmers; legislation to enable labourers to acquire land; extension of the franchise to include the rural working class; and the encouragement of native industry. In organisational terms, the intention was clearly to incorporate the many local labour bodies now scattered throughout the country in order to bring them under Parnellite discipline (Parnell became president of the ILIU). On reflection, it is not surprising that Parnell, never a natural or happy agitator, allowed himself to be persuaded to participate in this organisation as it was the only way of controlling the labour agitation now widespread in the country. The rural labour movement, if it continued to grow, had the potential to cause a severe split along class lines in nationalist Ireland.

Was Parnell genuinely interested in 1882 in promoting the cause of rural labour? Or did he view the ILIU as a device to shut down a social movement currently beyond his control? Many labourers certainly believed that he was concerned for their welfare and expected great things when he was released from prison in May that year. However, his behaviour towards the Ladies, Land League, which he effectively dissolved, indicates a difficulty with sections of the movement deploying what he considered to be the wrong tactics at the wrong time.[84] The rural labour movement was certainly disruptive and had the potential to be even more so. Obviously, we cannot know with certainty what Parnell planned, but the trajectory of the ILIU is telling.

An executive was appointed at the inaugural conference and it began to meet weekly at rooms in 62 Middle Abbey Street. Among those who attended these meetings were Daniel Hishon (who moved to Dublin to work for the ILIU), John Dillon, T.D. Sullivan, James F. Grehan, Thomas Sexton, J.G. Biggar, J. Wyse Power, Mathew Harris and J.P. Quinn (secretary). None were labourers and all (including Hishon) had strong connections to the suppressed Land League. In fact, one could be forgiven for confusing it with a meeting of the Land League leadership. More to the point, these men had almost no track record on the labour issue, were social moderates and unlikely, to say the least, to pursue a policy of anti-farmer agitation. The movement, however, continued to grow and by late September the ILIU had as many as 120 branches.[85] This, of course, was not the full measure of the movement as the herds' associations continued to operate independently in Connaught and it is not clear that all local labour leagues actually affiliated to the ILIU. Meanwhile, Parnell and Davitt were planning a replacement for the Land League that, unlike the labour leagues, was attractive to the rural and urban middle class. The ILIU did establish branches in Dublin city but, for obvious reasons, its attraction there was primarily to social radicals and working-class nationalists. On 17 October, the National League was founded, with the achievement of home rule as its first priority and peasant proprietorship a close second.

The arrival of the National League meant that the ILIU was finished. Business was formally concluded at a meeting in 39 Upper Sackville Street on 16 December when Michael Davitt proposed a motion, seconded by Biggar, that the ILIU merge with the National League and 'that secretaries of branches of the union throughout the country be requested to communicate henceforth with the honorary secretaries of the Irish National League'.[86] In fact, Hishon and other ILIU stalwarts were already on the executive of the National League, which met in the same building as the labour organisation. Following the 'merger', branches of the ILIU throughout the country were requested to transform into National League branches, which most did. In effect, the rural labour movement was incorporated by the Parnellites and effectively neutralised. There were, naturally, some who resented this turn of events and at a meeting of the Brosna

Labour League in north-east Kerry, on 21 January 1883, the following motion was proposed by William Webb and passed:

> That the workingmen of this parish persist in trumpeting their grievances, and in demanding a full acknowledgement of their just rights as men – equal to any other man. That no branch of the National League, [no] better than a withered limb of the late Farmers' Club, can be successfully established in this parish, until those miserable plots so often promised to our labourers and tradesmen are cheerfully given away, and these harassing law suits going on at present against farm labourers for the recovery of impossible rack-rents totally abandoned.[87]

Brosna, however, was an exception and there is evidence of a high level of class consciousness in the labour league there, or at least among some members such as Webb who may have been a socialist. In February, the same group passed a motion declaring that they were 'fully convinced that the emancipation of the working classes must be achieved by the working classes themselves, as no other class has any interest in improving their condition'.[88]

Local labour leagues, such as the one at Brosna, continued to be active through the 1880s, but the rural labour movement was much reduced and lacked cohesion. It had been severely undermined by the formation and dissolution of the ILIU. A South of Ireland Labour League existed, for instance, but, despite its ambitious title, it was confined mostly to County Waterford. Kanturk, which had established a strong tradition of labour activism, remained an important centre and it was from there that the Irish Democratic Trade and Labour Federation emerged, receiving Davitt's support at a conference in Cork city on 21 January 1890. This organisation, which sought to unite rural and urban workers, began with great promise, but ultimately was stunted by the internecine feuding that affected every section of the home rule movement following the Parnell split of 1890–1. Another organisation that suffered because of the split was the short-lived Irish Labour League, which was formed in 1891 by Dublin socialists in an attempt to attach rural and urban workers to a radical platform.[89] An Ulster Labourers' Union was established near Lurgan, County Armagh, in May 1892, with the aims of achieving higher wages, cottages with plots of land and shorter working hours. Three branches were in existence by December that year and by May 1893 it had six branches – three in Armagh, one in Donegal and two in Tyrone. Membership stood at 513. However, its development, according to the police, was severely undermined because it adopted an explicitly non-sectarian and non-political stance, refusing to append itself to either the nationalist or unionist blocs.[90] A similarly small rural labourers' organisation was the Knights of the Plough, established in Narraghmore, County Kildare, in 1892 by 40-year-old Benjamin Pelin, the

son of a local farmer. Pelin, who acted as president and chief organiser for the Knights, was a genuine radical who advocated land nationalisation and was sympathetic to socialism. He later emigrated to Australia where he continued his political activism.

A more successful body than all of these was the Irish Land and Labour Association (ILLA), which was formed in 1894 and based mainly in Munster. Though dogged by the divisions within constitutional nationalism – it ultimately split on political grounds – the ILLA survived and continued to exist well into the twentieth century. Its formation conference at Limerick Junction, County Tipperary, on 15 August 1894 saw the coming together of a number of smaller groups, including Pelin's Knights of the Plough and a National Labour League, based in Kanturk, whose most prominent leader was the journalist Patrick Joseph Neilan. The Land and Labour Association is an important organisation in the history of the rural working class, but also in terms of the home rule movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The total of affiliated branches was substantial by the beginning of the twentieth century, with 98 in 1900 rising to a peak of 150 branches in 1908.[91]

Conclusion

By early 1883, the rural labour movement that emerged during the 'land war' was almost entirely incorporated into the National League and few local bodies remained in existence. The Labourers' Act of 1883, which allowed boards of guardians to erect housing for labourers and to prosecute farmers for providing substandard housing, was a small achievement, though it had little real impact on the conditions that labourers were forced to endure. However, it did allow constitutional nationalists to feel that something had been done for the labourers, and the National League, which began with a strong labour component, never really saw their plight as a policy priority.

How much the labourers gained or lost from their adhesion to the home rule movement is an open question. It is true that they moved from a position of political isolation to one where they had the occasional attention of mainstream nationalism. Equally, however, in an attempt to win influence within the nationalist movement, they had to subscribe to the belief that class interests are less important than the 'national interest' and this clearly acted as a brake on labour militancy; the pan-class alliance promoted by the home rule movement was not class-neutral, it was class-biased in favour of the interests of the middle class. The relationship, at any rate, was strained rather than symbiotic and rural labourers, who were subservient within the alliance, remained a source of anxiety for bourgeois nationalists desperate to construct an Irish 'nation' in their own image. A prioritisation of working-class concerns would have threatened the very *raison d'être* of constitutional nationalism.

The rural working class, nonetheless, did succeed during the 'land war' in placing itself centre-stage, if only for a brief period, through its use of methods of collective mass action. The success of this mass mobilisation, and the labourers' willingness to clash with the farmers, meant that labour nationalism thereafter had to be taken more seriously by the middle-class leadership of constitutional nationalism.

Notes

1. Paul Bew, *Land and the National Question in Ireland, 1858–82* (Dublin, 1978); Samuel Clark, *Social Origins of the Irish Land War* (Princeton, 1979); and Philip Bull, *Land, Politics and Nationalism: A Study of the Irish Land Question* (Dublin, 1996).
2. James S. Donnelly, *The Land and the People of Nineteenth-century Cork: The Rural Economy and the Land Question* (London, 1975) and Donald E. Jordan, *Land and Popular Politics in Ireland: County Mayo from the Plantation to the Land War* (Cambridge, 1994).
3. Pamela Horn, 'The National Agricultural Labourers' Union in Ireland, 1873–9', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. XVII, no. 67 (March 1971), pp. 340–52; David Fitzpatrick, 'The disappearance of the Irish agricultural labourer, 1841–1912', *Irish Economic and Social History*, vol. VII (1980), pp. 66–92; and John W. Boyle, 'A marginal figure: the Irish rural labourer', in Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly (eds), *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780–1914* (Dublin, 1983), pp. 311–38.
4. Pádraig G. Lane, 'The Land and Labour Association, 1894–1914', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, vol. 98 (1993), pp. 90–108; 'Agricultural labourers and rural violence', *Studia Hibernica*, vol. 27 (1993), pp. 77–87; 'Perceptions of agricultural labourers after the Great Famine', *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, vol. 19 (1994), pp. 14–26; 'The organisation of rural labourers, 1870–90', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, vol. 100 (1995), pp. 149–60; 'Agricultural labourers and the land question', in Carla King (ed.), *Famine, Land and Culture in Ireland* (Dublin, 2000), pp. 101–15; and 'The Irish agricultural labourer in folklore and fiction', *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, vol. 28 (2003), pp. 79–89. However, also see Frederick H.A. Aalen, 'The rehousing of rural labourers in Ireland under the Labourers (Ireland) Acts, 1883–1919', *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol. 12, no. 3 (July 1986), pp. 287–306; E. Margaret Crawford, 'Diet and the labouring classes in the nineteenth century', *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, vol. 15 (1990), pp. 87–96; Enda McKay, 'The housing of the rural labourer, 1883–1916', *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, vol. 17 (1992), pp. 27–39; Fintan Lane, 'William Upton', *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, vol. 26 (2001), pp. 89–90 and 'P.F. Johnson, nationalism and Irish rural labourers, 1869–82', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. XXXIII, no. 130 (November 2002), pp. 191–208. Incidentally, despite the shared surname and interest, Pádraig Lane and the author are not related.
5. These figures are culled from Table II in Fitzpatrick, 'The disappearance of the Irish agricultural labourer', p. 88.
6. Ibid.
7. Clark, *Social Origins of the Irish Land War*, p. 113; K.T. Hoppen, *Elections, Politics and Society in Ireland, 1832–1885* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 103–4.

8. Joseph Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society, 1848–1918* (Dublin, 1973), p. 92; K.T. Hoppen, 'Landlords, society and electoral politics in mid-nineteenth century Ireland', *Past and Present*, no. 75 (1977), p. 64; Paul Bew, 'The Land League ideal: achievements and contradictions', in P.J. Drudy (ed.), *Ireland: Land, Politics and People* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 77.
9. Bew, *Land and the National Question in Ireland*, pp. 174–5; Fitzpatrick, 'The disappearance of the Irish agricultural labourer', pp. 83–4.
10. Hoppen, *Elections, Politics and Society in Ireland*, pp. 358–61; F. Lane, 'P.F. Johnson, nationalism and Irish rural labourers', pp. 195–8.
11. F. Lane, 'P.F. Johnson, nationalism and Irish rural labourers', pp. 196–7.
12. M.J.F. McCarthy, *Irish Land and Irish Liberty* (London, 1911), p. 121.
13. Frank Thompson, *The End of Liberal Ulster: Land Agitation and Land Reform, 1868–1886* (Belfast, 2001), p. 28.
14. For an estimate of the death toll, see Joel Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved: A Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800–1850* (London, 1983), pp. 263–8. Joseph Lee has suggested that the figure might be as high as 1.1 to 1.2 million dead (*The Examiner*, 10 October 1997).
15. James S. Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Stroud, Gloucestershire, 2001), pp. 181–2.
16. L.A. Clarkson, E.M. Crawford, Paul Ell and Liam Kennedy, *Mapping the Great Irish Famine: A Survey of the Famine Decades* (Dublin, 1999), p. 163.
17. Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy and Memory* (Princeton, 1999), pp. 44–5.
18. Clarkson *et al.*, *Mapping the Great Irish Famine*, pp. 163–4.
19. Michael Turner, *After the Famine: Irish Agriculture, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 71–2.
20. For a useful examination of wage rates through the nineteenth century, see A.L. Bowley, 'The statistics of wages in the United Kingdom during the last hundred years, Part III, Agricultural wages continued: Ireland', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, vol. LXII, part III (June 1899), pp. 395–404. With regard to the collation of data, Bowley sums up the matter nicely in his remark that the 'estimation of agricultural wages in Ireland teems with difficulties' (p. 395). Foremost among these difficulties is the fact that rural labourers were not an unvariegated group and included farm servants, day labourers, seasonal labourers, cottiers, ploughmen, herds, and so on. Wage rates varied for each sub-group and across regions. Bowley's figures, moreover, refer only to male labourers and this is particularly misleading in the Irish context for the pre-Famine period when female labourers had a substantial presence. Child labour was also common at the time and this is a topic that has received almost no attention from historians.
21. A.L. Bowley, 'The statistics of wages in the United Kingdom during the last hundred years, Part IV, Agricultural wages concluded: earnings and general averages', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, vol. LXII, part III (September 1899), diagram interposed between pp. 558 and 559.
22. *The Nation*, 10 August 1850; P.G. Lane, 'Perceptions of agricultural labourers after the Great Famine', pp. 18–19.
23. Hoppen, *Elections, Politics and Society in Ireland*, p. 358.
24. R.V. Comerford, *The Fenians in Context: Irish Politics and Society, 1848–82* (Dublin, 1985), pp. 118–19.
25. Desmond Ryan, *The Fenian Chief: A Biography of James Stephens* (Dublin, 1967), pp. 80, 327; F. Lane, 'P.F. Johnson, nationalism and Irish rural labourers', pp. 196–7.

26. For the interaction between Fenianism and socialism, see Seán Daly, *Ireland and the First International* (Cork, 1984), *passim*.
27. Quoted in Leon Ó Broin, 'Revolutionary nationalism in Ireland: the IRB, 1858–1924', in T.W. Moody (ed.), *Nationality and the Pursuit of National Independence* (Belfast, 1978), p. 104.
28. Reaping machines were exhibited in Belfast in 1852 and Dublin in 1853, and from the mid-1850s they began to appear more frequently on Irish farms; see Jonathan Bell, 'The improvement of Irish farming techniques since 1750: theory and practice', in Paul Ferguson, Patrick O'Flanagan and Kevin Whelan (eds), *Rural Ireland: Modernisation and Change, 1600–1900* (Cork, 1987), p. 28.
29. *Freeman's Journal*, 12 August 1858. The reports are taken from the *Kilkenny Journal* and the *Kilkenny Moderator*.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. *Kilkenny Journal*, 14 August 1858; *Freeman's Journal*, 16 August 1858; *Cork Examiner*, 18 August 1858.
33. *Kilkenny Journal*, 14 August 1858.
34. *Freeman's Journal*, 14, 17 August 1858.
35. *Freeman's Journal*, 24, 31 August 1858.
36. *Munster News*, 27 August 1859.
37. F. Lane, 'P.F. Johnson, nationalism and Irish rural labourers', pp. 194–5.
38. *Cork Examiner*, 28 September 1869.
39. *The Irishman*, 8 January 1870.
40. Boyle, 'A marginal figure: the Irish rural labourer', pp. 323–4; P.G. Lane, 'The organisation of rural labourers, 1870–1890', pp. 150–1; F. Lane, 'P.F. Johnson, nationalism and Irish rural labourers', pp. 195–9.
41. *Cork Examiner*, 26 October 1869; *The Irishman*, 22 January 1870.
42. On the County Cork labourers' strikes of 1870, see Seán Daly, *Cork, a City in Crisis: A History of Labour Conflict and Social Misery, 1870–1872* (Cork, 1978), pp. 109–38.
43. *Cork Examiner*, 5, 6 July 1870.
44. Daly, *Cork, a City in Crisis*, pp. 116–17.
45. On the IALU, see Horn, 'The National Agricultural Labourers' Union in Ireland', pp. 340–52; and F. Lane, 'P.F. Johnson, nationalism and Irish rural labourers', pp. 199–203.
46. *The Irishman*, 22 July, 11 November 1871.
47. *The Irishman*, 6 September 1873; *Leinster Express*, 11 October 1873; *The Irishman*, 20 December 1873.
48. Fitzpatrick, 'The disappearance of the Irish agricultural labourer', p. 88.
49. F. Lane, 'P.F. Johnson, nationalism and Irish rural labourers', p. 204.
50. *The Irishman*, 16 October 1880.
51. *Cork Examiner*, 11 October 1880. For Patrick Barry's age, see National Archives of Ireland (NAI), 1901 census household schedule for Patrick Barry, townland of Ballylongane, parish of Kilmahon, County Cork.
52. F. Lane, 'P.F. Johnson, nationalism and Irish rural labourers', pp. 204–5.
53. *Evening Mail*, 11 October 1880.
54. *Cork Examiner*, 4 November 1880.
55. *Cork Examiner*, 20 October 1880.
56. F. Lane, 'William Upton', p. 90; *Munster News*, 16 August 1882.

57. *Hue and Cry*, 4 June 1867; F. Lane, 'William Upton', pp. 89–90; NAI, Fenian Files, R Series, 4,696R, 'Police report from Rathkeale, Co. Limerick, 3 October 1869'. Upton continued his involvement with Fenian politics on his return to Limerick; see, for example, *The Irishman*, 15 June 1878.
58. *The Irishman*, 2 October 1880.
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61. *Munster News*, 18 December 1880.
62. Public Record Office, London (PRO), CO 904/16/401, 'Memorandum as to the working of the Shepherds or Herds Association in County Galway, WR' (28 October 1891).
63. *Freeman's Journal*, 22 April 1881.
64. *Cork Daily Herald*, 4 May 1881; *Cork Examiner*, 20 May 1881; F. Lane, 'P.F. Johnson, nationalism and Irish rural labourers', p. 205.
65. *Cork Examiner*, 20 May 1881; *Freeman's Journal*, 20 May 1881; Munster *News*, 21 May 1881.
66. *Cork Examiner*, 20 May 1881.
67. Ibid.
68. *Cork Examiner*, 16 May 1881; *The Irishman*, 21 May 1881.
69. *The Irishman*, 23 July 1881.
70. *Cork Examiner*, 18 July 1881.
71. Ibid.
72. F. Lane, 'P.F. Johnson, nationalism and Irish rural labourers', pp. 206–7.
73. *Cork Daily Herald*, 15 February 1882.
74. NAI, CSORP, 1882/2807, 'Report on Labour League meetings'.
75. *The Irishman*, 27 August, 3, 17 September, 1, 8, 15 October, 12 November, 21 January 1882; *United Ireland*, 10, 17 September, 1 October, 3 December 1881.
76. *The Irishman*, 12 November 1881.
77. *Cork Daily Herald*, 23, 27, 28 February 1882.
78. *The Irishman*, 21 January 1882.
79. See references to labour league and herds' association meetings in *The Irishman* between late March and early July.
80. *The Irishman*, 24 June, 1, 15 July 1882.
81. *The Irishman*, 8 July 1882.
82. Ibid.
83. *United Ireland*, 26 August 1882.
84. Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism* (London, 1983), pp. 30–5.
85. *The Irishman*, 30 September 1882.
86. *The Nation*, 23 December 1882.
87. *The Irishman*, 27 January 1883.
88. *The Irishman*, 17 February 1883.
89. On the Irish Labour League, which received Parnell's endorsement, see Fintan Lane, *The Origins of Modern Irish Socialism, 1881–1896* (Cork, 1997), pp. 172–6.
90. PRO, CO 904/16/417, 'Report on the Ulster Labourers' Union'.
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7

Parnellism and Workers: The Experience of Cork and Limerick

Maura Cronin

Introduction

The political movement for Irish home rule and agrarian reform led by Charles Stewart Parnell in the 1880s collapsed in disarray with the O'Shea divorce case of 1891. This case revealed many of the internal fissures within Parnell's movement, but it did not cause them. During its decade-long existence, the movement had been held together by a potent mix of centralisation and flexibility, Parnell maintaining tight control through a pledge-bound party and a centralised leadership, yet simultaneously encouraging the multiple expectations of the many interest groups within the rank and file.[1] Thus, the meaning of Parnellism varied from one constituent group to the next. To farmers it meant anything from mere rent reduction to a complete revolution in land ownership. To party activists and the non-farming public its interpretation ranged from limited political independence, through the 'restoration' of the Irish parliament of 1782, to the establishment of a separate republic. To Catholic churchmen, suspicious though many were of both Parnell's socio-denominational background and his authoritarian leadership style, Parnellism nonetheless meant a clerical share in political power.[2]

This chapter considers the interpretation of Parnellism among another group, the skilled and unskilled workers in the cities of Cork and Limerick, exploring Parnellism's combined unity and fissure, as well as its capacity to reflect and emphasise peculiarly local attitudes. The limitations of such research must, however, be admitted, since workers' political attitudes are difficult to pinpoint, not only because they were divided along the lines of skill, income and locality, but also because they were liable to change erratically according to circumstance. While the political outlook of the unionised trades is more easily identified, recorded as it was in union records, trades council reports and the visual imagery of trade union banners, that of the broader working class is more elusive, traceable only in

periodic reports of popular rioting, catcalls at public meetings and participation in political demonstrations.

Cork and Limerick, some seventy miles apart, shared a number of characteristics. Both were chartered cities, the administrative centres of their respective counties and regions. Denominationally, they were replicas of one another, with populations between 84 and 88 per cent Roman Catholic, less than 15 per cent Church of Ireland, and a sprinkling of 'others' including tiny Jewish enclaves. Politically, the two cities were closely linked with the home rule movement, Limerick being represented in parliament by Isaac Butt from 1871 to 1879 and Cork by Parnell himself from 1880 until his death in 1891. Occupationally, also, the two centres were alike, with declining manufacturing industries, a growing service and transport sector, and (in the Irish context) some large companies employing from 200 to 500 workers. Both cities experienced the depression of the early 1880s, which aggravated the negative effects of importation, mechanisation and deskilling, and resulted in high rates of unemployment in both cities, reputedly as high as 50 per cent among Cork's skilled artisans and even higher among the unskilled and casual workers.[3]

Trade unions and Parnellism

Parnellism, with its several possible interpretations, promised a political panacea for these ills, and was responded to enthusiastically by working people in both cities. At election time, voters and non-voters alike vociferously supported Parnellite electoral candidates with all the carnivalesque means at their disposal, accompanying them to the poll in noisy processions headed by bands, celebrating victory with blazing tar barrels and burning effigies of their electoral opponents.[4] Popular support for the successive demonstrations welcoming Parnell to both Cork and Limerick during the 1880s was equally enthusiastic. Though the success of these demonstrations depended on the participation of a wide variety of public, political and social bodies ranging from temperance societies to town councils, their impact ultimately hinged on the support of the local (largely working-class) musical bands and the trade unions carrying their banners and regalia. Such participation was an expensive business. The Cork trade unions calculated that a big demonstration cost about £300, and some indication of the level of popular support for Parnell and his movement can be seen in the staging of eight such demonstrations (some, admittedly, less lavish than others) in the city between 1880 and late 1891, with almost as many in Limerick.[5] Unionised workers' support for such demonstrations was based on their belief in home rule and economic revival as a natural tandem. This belief also underlay their efforts to awaken public support for local manufacture through the organisation of industrial exhibitions modelled, though on a

more modest scale, on that at the Crystal Palace three decades earlier. The 1882 Dublin Industrial Exhibition, for instance, was given considerable support by both the Cork and Limerick trades, who also marched in full regalia at the opening of a subsequent Cork exhibition in 1883 and at a special Artisans' Exhibition in Dublin two years later.[6]

But despite intitial hopes in politico-economic revival, skilled artisans soon came to cast a jaundiced eye on exhibitions as the key to national regeneration. By the mid-1880s moral and financial support for such ventures had dried up considerably, and more pragmatic measures, independent of party politics, were taken in facing economic decline. This approach was already visible earlier in the decade, when a more forceful and organised brand of trade unionism emerged, inspired by two contemporary developments. The first was the sense of solidarity generated by amalgamation and federation among unions in the United Kingdom as a whole. The second was the concern aroused at local level by the undermining of traditional trade safeguards, especially union control over apprentice numbers. This growing assertiveness was expressed in a number of major strikes. Some, like the Cork printers' strike of 1888, were confined to a single workplace in one urban centre; others, like those of the Cork bakers in 1883 and 1890, affected several workplaces in the city.[7] Even more widespread strikes affecting several business concerns and urban centres occurred among the emerging 'new unions' of the unskilled and semi-skilled. Typical were the the railway workers on the Great Southern and Western Railway and the pork butchers of Cork, Limerick and Waterford, who, inspired both by their British parent organisations and by the current Irish land agitation, used a combination of boycott and sympathetic strikes to push for improved pay and working conditions.[8]

Parallel to the development of this more organised unionism was the formation of trades councils to represent the collective interests or trade societies at local level. Both Cork and Limerick had a long history of such efforts. Cork's first attempt was in the late 1850s, but it was not until the early 1880s, in response to the prevailing depression, that the United Trades Association was established. Despite this late start and a number of early hiccups, this body survived as the main organ of organised labour in Cork into the twenty-first century, publicising the grievances of its constituent trades, lobbying public bodies on trade-related matters, intervening (though seldom assertively or successfully) in labour disputes, and – above all – acting as a political mouthpiece for skilled labour in the city.[9] The evolution of a Limerick trades council is more obscure. From the 1820s onwards, there had existed in the city an umbrella body loosely termed the Congregated Trades. This body, like its Cork counterparts, took a prominent part in political demonstrations from the repeal processions of the O'Connellite period to the Parnell receptions of the 1880s, and lobbied

the local authorities on labour and employment-related matters.[10] But, despite its apparent continuity – it was always referred to as the Congregated Trades – this Limerick body seems, up to the later years of the century, to have lacked the formal structures of the Cork United Trades.[11] Finally, despite passing lip-service by public men to its long pedigree and patriotic leanings, the Limerick Congregated Trades got far less coverage in the local press and lacked the political clout of the Cork body.[12]

By the 1880s, the organised artisans of both Cork and Limerick saw themselves as a distinct politico-economic group, the mainstay of local Parnellism. This sense of superiority, however, far from acting as a unifying element in local popular politics, actually brought unionised artisans into conflict with other Parnellite elements. First, tension between them and non-union artisans, handymen and labourers came to a head with the establishment of trade and labour councils in small county towns throughout Munster.[13] Some of these bodies had actually been established under the umbrella of the Cork United Trades in the early 1880s as part of a projected province-wide trades council, others were offshoots of the National League rather than of trade unionism, and still others seem to have been set up by benevolent landlords anxious to improve the lot of local artisans and labourers. These small bodies had little economic clout, but by the late 1880s they were regarded with considerable suspicion by the established trades because their membership included non-union artisans and handymen whose willingness to work for less than union rates threatened to undermine both the status and the earning capacity of the unionised trades.[14] The fiercest resistance to such general unionism was in Cork, where the United Trades waged an all-out campaign against the South of Ireland Labour Union. Originally set up in 1884, this latter body had fallen into obscurity to reemerge in 1890 with some 300 members drawn principally from among the foundry and mill workers. Its leaders, mostly unskilled workers but including one prominent cooper–publican and active Fenian, Cornelius P. O'Sullivan, hoped to recruit widely among the city's unskilled general workers, hitherto neglected by the emerging 'new' unions. The organised trades, however, determined to maintain the superiority of unionised artisans, actively opposed the recruiting efforts, mercilessly campaigned against a strike organised among the local foundry workers and ultimately contributed to the demise of the new body.[15]

Another divisive issue within workers' ranks was the law regarding the Saturday and Sunday opening hours of public houses. A series of parliamentary inquiries from the late 1860s onwards, partly driven by the temperance lobby, saw a confused array of forces drawn up on either side in this debate.[16] Organised labour, reflecting the vital role of the pub in working-class leisure and economic life, generally ranged itself against the proposed restrictions, but some prominent trade unionists in Cork shattered this

solidarity by taking the opposite side. In Limerick a divisive liquor-related controversy, which had been simmering for some time, came to a head in the mid-1890s. This concerned the proposed building of a new brewery in the city and led to a complicated popular rift where the trades supported the project, but found themselves opposed by the local Redemptorists. As the local Arch-Confraternity, centred in the Redemptorist church and including a large number of working men in its ranks, was expected to take an anti-brewery stance, individual artisans were forced to choose between their trade and religious allegiances. Though the crisis was defused when the Redemptorists withdrew their opposition to the brewery scheme (which, in any event, fizzled out when the London investors withdrew their funds), it indicated that worker solidarity was a fragile growth which could be broken if brought into conflict with other loyalties.[17]

Even more serious was the conflict between the organised trades and the National League. Though membership of the league and the local unions did overlap, both Cork and Limerick's city-based league membership ranging downward socially from professionals and prominent businessmen to 'artisans, labourers and shopkeepers', the unions as collective bodies held themselves aloof, while the league accused them of a blinkered apathy.[18] This tension between league and unions was partly economic, the trades particularly resenting the perceived failure of league members, individually and collectively, to patronise local industry. Thus, the Limerick trades condemned National League members of the local Poor Law Board who failed to give the workhouse leather contract to local tanners, while in Cork the United Trades railed against leaguer farmers who bought cheap imported zinc buckets and butter boxes in preference to locally coopered items.[19] Employer–worker tensions also coloured relations between league and trades. In Cork, a prominent leaguer and proprietor of a cork-cutting business made himself obnoxious to the United Trades because of his penny-pinching attitude towards his workers, while in Limerick a number of prominent National League members who allegedly charged high rents in their capacity as city house landlords were berated by those members of the trades who supported the city's emerging House League.[20] At another level, the enmity between trades and league centred on competing claims to represent the political opinions of the local working class. The Limerick league, for instance, though many artisans neglected to join its ranks, described itself as 'representing the trades and working men' of that city.[21] The Cork league, in particular, roused the ire of the local trades in 1880 when it failed to give them a large enough role in organising the demonstration welcoming Parnell to Cork, and though the subsequent disruption of the event was the work of the local separatist nationalists (infuriated by the league's condemnation of a recent Fenian arms raid), the trades derived considerable satisfaction from the discomfiture of the league leaders and their supporters in the town council.[22]

The illusion of unity

In fact, Parnellite 'unity', when examined under the local microscope, was something of an illusion. In Limerick, major tensions emerged between the National League and the Chamber of Commerce in 1885 regarding the Prince of Wales's visit to the city, while the two National League branches in the city tussled with one another over the choice of a Parnellite candidate for the election of the same year.[23] In Cork, the squabbles between trades, league, separatists and town council were even more disruptive. The conflict which in the early 1880s concerned the league's attempted monopolisation of political demonstrations centred in the following decade on control of the local Manchester Martyrs' Memorial Committee.[24] Moreover, there were also tensions between the local rank and file of both cities and Parnell himself. Much local unease was occasioned by the centralising tendencies of the home rule movement, and particularly by Parnell's tight rein on the choice of election candidates and his picking of non-locals to represent provincial constituencies – something which was actually due as much to the difficulty of finding local candidates as to Parnell's undoubted wish to control. Resentment against this undermining of local pride and independence was most obvious among the popular elite. Bishop O'Dwyer of Limerick, for instance, had always been suspicious of Parnell, partly because of the latter's apparent collusion with violent agrarian agitation and subversive separatist nationalism, but also because of his tendency to patronise outsiders as candidates in Limerick city elections.[25] In Cork, when Parnell himself stood for the representation of the city in 1880, there was some initial opposition to the introduction of an outsider, and he was returned only second to the local merchant and moderate nationalist, John Daly. Even at the height of Parnell's career in 1885, though he headed the city poll, his margin over his local running mate was less than 3 per cent.[26] These tensions between localism and centralisation were concealed by the holding of county conventions of the National League to 'select' the most suitable candidate. But though ostensibly free debate took place on the merits of potential candidates, the tendency was to select the individual most obviously backed by Parnell, the decision being reached by public consensus with little room for dissenting voices.[27] It is not clear to what extent the organised and wider working classes of Cork and Limerick shared the resentment of the popular elite against such imposition of 'outsider' representatives. Those directly involved in local National League branches participated in the debate on candidates' merits and the Congregated Trades of Limerick took an active part in the local convention of 1885, attending with their banners and even recommending a candidate to Parnell, while in 1888 the Parnellite candidate's nomination paper was signed by the trades' secretary, but whether in his individual or official capacity is not clear.[28] In Cork, though the trades kept their feelings under

wraps until the split of 1891, there was no mistaking their dissatisfaction with their treatment at Parnell's hands. He had been made honorary president of the United Trades in 1880, but apart from paying vague lip-service to the interests of labour during his visits to Cork in the early 1880s, Parnell never concerned himself with the trades over the intervening decade and even neglected to answer their letters.[29] Yet, despite such serious internal tensions, Parnellism survived for a decade, binding workers, farmers and popular elite together in an impressive (if illusory) unity.

One factor preventing the disintegration of the movement was the limited size of the centres and communities in which Parnellism flourished. Smallness made for cohesion and control. Cork and Limerick, though officially designated as cities, both exhibited many of the characteristics of smaller country towns. While this was particularly true of Limerick, whose population was half that of Cork's, both centres were small enough for considerable familiarity (not, as already discussed, to be confused with harmony) between individuals and groups of differing social background.[30] Both cities, moreover, lacked any clear-cut demarcation between country and town. The city centres were less than two miles from the countryside, the parliamentary electorates extended up to seven miles into the rural 'liberties', the urban economies and leisure pursuits were inextricably linked with the agricultural hinterland, and the local populations included many immigrants who still maintained economic and family ties with the surrounding rural areas.[31] These links with the hinterland helped to forge urban–rural unity within local Parnellism, a unity further cemented by the National League network which, despite the tensions surrounding it, doubled as an effective parliamentary constituency organisation and co-ordinator of land agitation. These branches' role in linking urban and rural was underlined by their sizeable contributions to the Evicted Tenants' Fund, and by their weekly discussions which centred as much on evictions, boycotting and coercion as on issues more directly relevant to an urban membership. Even outside this league network, there was considerable popular familiarity with, and intense interest in, the contemporary land agitation, and land-related incidents happening within a forty-mile radius of either city could be harnessed to more immediate popular urban concerns. By the late 1880s, for instance, the Bodyke evictions in County Clare and the Mitchelstown 'massacre' in County Cork had entered the vocabulary of popular abuse, as crowds in both Cork and Limerick taunted the police and certain unpopular army regiments with catcalls of 'Bodyke' and 'Mitchelstown Murderers'.[32]

Religion

Equally effective in papering over the urban–rural and worker–elite divisions in Parnellism was the religious element. The fusion of Catholic and

Parnellite identity at popular level was evident in both cities, where election platforms in the 1880s provided an opportunity to direct sectarian hostility against Protestant anti-home rulers brave enough to stand as candidates in the face of almost inevitable defeat – William Goulding in Cork in 1880 and 1884, and James Spaight in Limerick in 1880, 1883 and 1885.[33] Since both Goulding and Spaight were extensive employers of unskilled labour, some of the abuse hurled by the crowd may have reflected employer–worker tensions, but it was the sectarian card which most effectively whipped up popular animosity against them. In 1884, one platform speaker in Cork got the crowd going when he accused Goulding of refusing to entertain Catholics in his home, but the sectarian animosity against him paled into insignificance when compared with that manifested in Limerick against Spaight. The main charge against him was that he had stated to an 1868 parliamentary commission that the secrecy of the proposed electoral ballot would be negated by knowledge gleaned by priests in the confessional.[34] In fact, Spaight had not directly mentioned the confessional at all in his evidence, and his contribution actually referred to the priest's local knowledge of his flock's political inclinations – something openly acknowledged by priests themselves.[35] But the Limerick crowd, enthusiastically egged on by platform speakers, lay and clerical, preferred the interpretation presenting Spaight in an anti-Catholic light, and any mention of the unfortunate candidate's name drew howls of 'Remember the Confessional!' and 'Orangeman!' though Spaight had, in fact, no connection whatever with the Orange Order.[36]

It is unclear whether such a denominationally charged popular support of 'Parnellism' was more characteristic of some centres than of others, but the evidence suggests that this attitude was more common in Limerick than in Cork. While any comment critical of the bishop or priests in Limerick roused public indignation, Cork workers seem to have been less circumspect and there were several occasions when the Cork trades and wider working class openly condemned the local Catholic clergy on economic and political grounds. On a number of occasions, the Cork United Trades denounced priests who refused to patronise local manufacture, while in 1885 when a number of senior Catholic clergy followed the lead of the bishop, Dr Delaney, in welcoming the Prince of Wales to the city, they were hooted in the streets for so doing.[37] Perhaps this difference in attitude was, in turn, linked with the apparently more prominent electoral role of the Catholic clergy in Limerick, though whether as cause or effect is difficult to decide. While Catholic priests in Cork city did occasionally sign candidates' proposal forms, they did not appear on election platforms, where leadership lay with the businessmen and professionals of the city. In Limerick, however, over the course of five elections between 1880 and 1891, hardly a speaker failed to refer to Limerick as 'a Catholic city' while no platform was without its phalanx of priests, who made some of the most resounding and well-received speeches.[38] These speeches constantly

reiterated the priest's role as 'supporter' rather than 'leader' of the people and, in view of some Limerick priests' championing of social issues like working-class housing and fair wages (though not militant unionism), there is no reason to doubt either the sincerity of their stance on election platforms or their claim to echo rather than shape popular loyalties, though some contemporaries cast a more jaundiced eye on the marrying of religion and party politics:

> O religion! Thou heavenly Seraph Flame!
> What myriad fools are humbugged in thy name?
> The heat of one election – so't appears –
> Can feed and warm them all for seven years.[39]

Nationalism

But the factor which did most to reinforce such popular 'oneness' was the intensely anti-English version of Irish history shared by Parnellite elite and rank and file alike, an outlook which coexisted happily, if incongruously, with an enthusiastic servitor imperialism. Thus, while platform orators laced their speeches with references to the bravery of Irish (especially Cork and Limerick) soldiers in foreign fields, they also presented history as a 'seamless garment' woven of Saxon tyranny and Gaelic resistance, linking Irish patriots of different centuries in an unbroken succession, with no hint of their frequently conflicting ideals.[40] This version of the past was endlessly reiterated in many arenas where working people gathered. At election meetings, platform speakers harped on the curse of 'English rule', particularly the coercion policies of the late 1880s, omitting any reference whatsoever to the reforming efforts of the Imperial Parliament over the previous half-century. The theme was also taken up at the public lectures organised locally by political and religious organisations.[41] It was propagated through widely known nationalist songs and airs, especially 'The Wearing of the Green' and 'God Save Ireland', the latter sung by Limerick crowds as much to aggravate unpopular regiments (who responded with 'God Save the Queen') as to proclaim any deeply felt political loyalties.[42] The seamless nationalist past was also portrayed in the iconography of trade union banners, on which portraits of individuals as politically disparate as O'Connell, Tone, Davitt and Parnell himself were ranged side by side.[43] The promulgation of such a historical view was especially effective where a peculiarly local narrative was linked to the national one. Limerick, with its central place in the saga of the Williamite Wars, was at a distinct advantage over Cork in this regard. As 'the gallant Old City of Sarsfield', heroically defended by the local women, Limerick's 'glorious and historic past' was made immediate in the local Treaty Stone. This provided an emotive and place-centred historical context in which to interpret current events

and confrontations, and it was significant that crowds at Limerick election meetings in 1883 cheered as lustily for Fontenoy as for home rule.[44]

Cork had no comparable local past with which to rouse popular political enthusiasm, though it shared with Limerick a more recent patriotic narrative – that of militant separatism – which could be tapped on the occasion of Fenian funerals, Amnesty meetings, and the annual commemoration of the Manchester Martyrs.[45] Far from being a closed book, this particular past reached into the Parnellite present in the form of 'advanced' or separatist nationalism, whose proponents, despite posturing as members of a secret society, were equally well-known to public and police. By the late 1880s, this advanced nationalism had put down its public markers by erecting memorials to the Martyrs in several provincial centres, Ennis unveiling its 'Maid of Erin' monument in late 1886 and Limerick following with a large Celtic cross in Mount St Laurence Cemetery in November 1887. Cork's monument was delayed for over a decade by a combination of financial problems and infighting, the foundation stone being laid only in 1898 and the imposing monument on the Grand Parade unveiled in 1904. Though the planning and forwarding of the monument schemes was largely orchestrated by the separatists, the monument projects became a common ground on which diverse groups within Parnellism – nationalist town councillors, trade unionists, literary societies and even marginalised socialist groups – could meet. The militant nationalism represented by the Martyr commemorations struck a particularly strong note at popular level. At meetings in both Cork and Limerick during the 1880s there were cheers from the crowd for 'the Fenians' and ''Sixty-Seven', while in Limerick the banning of the demonstration to mark the unveiling of the Martyrs' monument in 1887 led to running battles in the streets between the crowds and the police.[46]

While elements within the popular elite went to considerable lengths to distinguish between commemorating brave deeds on the one hand and condoning sedition and civil disorder on the other, few such distinctions were made among the rank and file. The popular anti-Englishness prompting Limerick crowds to abuse members of the Derbyshire Rifles as 'English Bastards' was replicated at the Cork meeting in 1885 to protest against the visit of the Prince of Wales. Here the crowd's impartial cheers for the Fenians, the Mahdi, Dr Croke of Cashel, Parnell and the Tsar of Russia suggested that in the popular mind there was no distinction whatsoever between Fenianism, Parnellism and hostility to England as the 'old enemy'.[47]

Conclusion

When the O'Shea scandal came into the open in late 1890, the reaction of Cork and Limerick workers was initially confused. The split touched practically every organisation in which workers were involved – trade unions,

temperance societies, musical bands and other associational bodies. In Limerick, St Mary's Temperance Society declared against Parnell while that of St Michael's stuck with him.[48] In Cork the trades council was so evenly divided along pro- and anti-Parnellite lines that a ban on all political discussion had to be introduced lest the organisation fall to pieces. Some workers' bodies remained particularly loyal to the discredited leader, particularly the carpenters and coopers in Cork and the pork butchers and pig buyers in Limerick.[49]

But the alacrity with which many abandoned the 'Chief', however, suggests that worker Parnellism over the course of the previous decade had very little to do with loyalty to Parnell himself. Workers, of course, had very little reason to be loyal to him, since he had largely ignored their economic interests during the ten years of his preeminence, though he had been happy enough to recruit them as foot soldiers in his campaigns for home rule and land reform. Parnellism as a movement, however, had provided those at the lower end of the social scale with a mouthpiece for the articulation of grievances and an opportunity to feel part of an unstoppable popular crusade. Ironically, much of what motivated workers in this movement had very little to do with the objectives of the central leadership. On the other hand, it was these same factors which turned Parnellism at local level, at least in the two cities of Cork and Limerick, into a powerful catch-all movement. Urban workers, themselves deeply divided along the lines of skill and organisation, certainly subscribed to the long-term objectives of home rule and the industrial revival which would surely accompany it. One is tempted to conclude, however, that they saw Parnellism as a mouthpiece through which to express local loyalties, to air a particular view of history, and to give vent to long-standing sectarian animosities. Moreover, as the experience in the two cities also suggests, Parnellism actually meant different things to the workers of different centres, its interpretation depending on population size, the nature of social control, the influence of religion and the predominant local historical narrative.

Notes

1. See, in particular, Parnell's renowned 'March of a Nation' speech delivered at Cork in 1885, which was geared to appeal to all strands of Irish nationalist opinion from parliamentarian to separatist. *Cork Examiner*, 22 January 1885.
2. Emmet Larkin, *The Roman Catholic Church and the Creation of the Modern Irish State 1878–1886* (Dublin, 1975), pp. 267–301.
3. The denominational breakdown of the two cities was as follows:

   Roman Catholic: Cork 84 per cent; Limerick 88 per cent
   Church of Ireland: Cork 13 per cent; Limerick 9 per cent
   Others: Cork 3 per cent; Limerick 2.6 per cent

   Cork breweries employed between 300 and 500 men, the three bacon factories in the city employed 450 men between them, the gas works employed between

80 and 100 men, the local railways had over 500 workers in all, and in the tobacco, clothing, footwear and match factories, the workforce ranged between 50 and 200 women and boys. Census of Ireland, Province of Munster, County of the City of Cork, County of the City of Limerick, 1881, 1891; *Cork Examiner*, 10, 12, 19 January, 3 February 1880; Maura Cronin, *Country, Class or Craft: The Politicisation of the Skilled Artisan in Nineteenth-Century Cork* (Cork, 1994), pp. 24–6 and 69–70; *Cork Examiner*, 19, 27, 28 February, 18 March 1890.

4. Cork's electorate rose from 4,500 to 14,500 (from 22.4 per cent to 75 per cent of the adult male population) between 1880 and 1890, and though it is not entirely clear who got the vote in this franchise extension, the contemporary consensus was that working men, particularly the skilled, benefited most of all. Cronin, *Country, Class or* Craft, p. 239; *United Ireland*, 13 June 1885; *Munster News*, 3, 10 April, 2 November 1880, 17 November 1883, 18 March 1885.
5. *Cork Examiner*, 22 March, 4 October 1880, 11 April, 3 October 1881, 18 March, 11 October 1890, 18 March, 6 October 1891; *Munster News*, 3 November 1880, 19 March, 2 July 1890.
6. *Cork Examiner*, 8 February, 15 March, 11, 14 August 1882, 19 January, 29 March, 4 July 1883, 20, 27 April, 25 May 1885.
7. *Cork Examiner*, 14 February, 10, 12, 13 March 1883, 4, 23 June, 4 July, 10 September 1888, 9, 11, 16 December 1889, 24 April, 1, 8 September, 2 October 1890.
8. *Cork Examiner*, 22 March, 9 December 1889; *Seafaring*, 30 March 1889; *National Amalgamated Seamen's and Firemans' Union of Great Britain and Ireland Annual Report*, 1889, p. 11; *Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales Reports*, 1889–92.
9. *Cork Examiner*, 29 July 1857, 2 January 1862, 2 November 1864, 19 October 1871; Webb Trade Union Collection, London School of Economics, Sec. A, Vol. III, f. 45. The first Cork trades council, established in 1859, fell into disarray in the early 1860s, to be revived briefly in 1864. In 1870, another association was set up, but petered out again in an obscure squabble between Fenians and moderate nationalists within the body.
10. *Limerick Chronicle*, 2 November 1880; *Munster News*, 3 November 1883, 26 November 1890.
11. *Munster News*, 8 March 1890; *Limerick Leader*, 12 June 1893.
12. The meetings of the Cork United Trades were reported weekly in the *Cork Examiner*, while there are only periodic reports in the *Munster News* regarding the meetings of the Congregated Trades. With the establishment of the *Limerick Leader*, however, there was more coverage of the trades' business.
13. *Munster News*, 5 June 1886; *Cork Examiner*, 1 January, 21 February, 10 March, 11 July, 2, 3, 10 September, 17, 18 October 1881.
14. *Cork Examiner*, 1 January, 12 February, 10 March, 11 July 1881.
15. *Cork Examiner*, 3, 24 February 1890.
16. *Report of the Select Committee on the Sale of Liquor on Sunday (Ireland) Bill*, HC 1867–68 (280) xiv; *Report of the Select Committee on the Sale of Intoxicating Liquor on Sunday (Ireland) Bill*, HC 1877 (198) xvi; *Proceedings of the Select Committee on the Sunday Closing Acts (Ir) Bill*, HC 1888 (255) xix.
17. *Cork Examiner*, 4, 24 April 1888; *Limerick Leader*, 15, 17 April, 10, 15, 22 May 1895. I am indebted to John Friend-Pereira for bringing these references to my attention in the course of his work on the alcohol industry in nineteenth-century Limerick, as part of his Final Year undergraduate dissertation for the History Department, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, 2003.

18. *Munster News*, 13 March 1886; *Cork Examiner*, 29 October 1885, 22 October, 11 November 1886; *United Ireland*, 13 June 1885.
19. *Cork Examiner*, 28 September 1888; *Munster News*, 17 March 1888.
20. *Cork Examiner*, 26, 30 October, 2, 3, 6, 7 November 1883.
21. *Munster News*, 17 November 1886, 28 January 1890.
22. The local advanced nationalists scuppered the parade escorting Parnell from Blarney to Cork by stepping in front of the procession and slowing it to a snail's pace. *Cork Examiner*, 4 October 1880.
23. *Munster News*, 7, 11 November 1885; *Limerick Chronicle*, 6 November 1885; *Cork Examiner*, 2 February, 15, 22 September, 13 October 1893.
24. *Cork Examiner*, 28 September 1888; *Munster News*, 17 March 1888.
25. The representatives elected in 1880 were locals – Richard O'Shaughnessy and Daniel Fitzgerald Gabbett – who had hastily taken up the home rule standard to ensure their election. On O'Shaughnessy's 1883 appointment as Registrar-General of Petty Sessions, Gabbett, now in disfavour because of his failure to toe the party line, was replaced by Edward McMahon, a Dubliner. He proved no more satisfactory than the former two representatives and was replaced by another Dubliner, Henry J. Gill in 1885. Considerable dissatisfaction was voiced at the failure of the local businessman and mayor, Stephen O'Mara, to stand for election, but in 1888 there was a return to a local candidate when Francis O'Keeffe was elected unopposed. *Munster News*, 17, 31 March, 10 April 1880, 17, 24, 27 October, 10, 17, 21, 24 November 1883, 14, 28 November, 5 December 1886, 4 April 1888; Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Parnell and his Party 1880–1890* (Oxford, 1957), p. 25.
26. *Cork Examiner*, 20, 29 March 1880. This John Daly, a general merchant, is not to be confused with John Daly of Limerick, a convicted dynamitard, who strongly influenced popular politics in that city from the mid-1880s until his death in July 1916. Parnell's vote in 1880 was 1,505, Daly's 1,923. In the election of 1885, Parnell polled 6,716 votes, while his running mate, John Deasy, polled 6,536. Brian M. Walker, *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland 1801–1922* (Dublin, 1978), pp. 265, 334–5.
27. *Limerick Chronicle*, 6 November 1885; Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Parnell and his Party*, pp. 127–9, 131. The National League was dominated by Parnell's parliamentary party. This domination extended to the county conventions, at which four members from each branch were entitled to attend, along with whatever Catholic clergy wished to participate, and two to three parliamentary representatives. Most of the decision-making was done in private before the meeting, and little room was left for dissent.
28. *Munster News*, 4, 7 November 1885, 18 April 1888. The individual recommended for the city representation by the Congregated Trades in 1885 was William Abraham, but as he was chosen to represent the county, the trades seem to have agreed with the ultimate choice of Henry Gill as city candidate. The unopposed Parnellite candidate for the city in 1888 was the mayor, Francis A. O'Keeffe.
29. *Cork Examiner*, 11 April 1881, 1 November, 11 December 1882; *Cork Daily Herald*, 22, 23, 24 February 1885.
30. Cork's population in 1881 was 80,000, falling to 75,000 by 1891. Limerick's population was 38,000 in 1881 and 37,000 in 1891.
31. *Munster News*, 17 November 1883, 21 November 1885.

32. The resistance to evictions at Bodyke, Co. Clare, caused considerable excitement in 1887, while in the same year the shooting of protestors at a land-related meeting in Mitchelstown, Co. Cork, became another *cause célebré*. *Munster News*, 25 March, 11 November 1885, 30 November 1887, 1 November 1888; *Cork Examiner*, 4 December 1886, 3, 4, 7, 8, 11, 13 June 1887; John S. Kelly, *The Bodyke Evictions* (Ennis, 1987), pp. 72–98; James S. Donnelly, Jr, *The Land and People of Nineteenth Century Cork: The Rural Economy and the Land Question* (London, 1973), pp. 344–5.
33. The Cork City election was contested by two anti-home rule candidates, Joseph Pike and John Hugh Bainbridge, in 1885 and by Dominick Ronayne Sarsfield in 1891, but there were no recorded sectarian catcalls at these elections. James Spaight, who had been elected for Limerick city in 1858, also unsuccessfully contested the elections of 1859, 1865, 1874 and 1879. Walker, *Irish Parliamentary Election Results*, 265, 292–3, 334–5, 360; *Cork Examiner*, 18 February 1884, 30 October 1891.
34. *Munster News*, 3 April 1880.
35. Priests themselves confirmed that they knew how their parishioners would vote. At the 1880 election Rev. Daniel Fitzgerald, parish priest of St Mary's in the city, told the crowd that 'so far as the Parish of Saint Mary's was concerned, over which he had the happiness of presiding, every voter here would poll to a man' for the popular candidates. *Munster News*, 13 March 1880.
36. *Munster News*, 3, 7 April 1880, 14 November 1883, 1 January 1890.
37. *Cork Examiner* 7, 8, 10, 19 September 1881, 24 April, 2 September 1888; *United Ireland*, 18 April 1885.
38. *Munster News*, 20 March, 3 April 1880, 1 January 1890.
39. *Munster News*, 16 June 1886, 9 January 1889.
40. *Munster News*, 17, 27 March 1880, 14 November 1883.
41. See, for instance, lectures on Brian Boru to the St Michael's Temperance Society and on Poets and Poetry of Munster to the Sarsfield Branch of the National League, Limerick, in 1883 and 1885. *Munster News*, 3, 7 April 1880, 24 October, 14 November 1883, 10 December 1887; *Cork Examiner*, 20 February 1884; *United Ireland*, 24 January 1885.
42. *Munster News*, 30 November 1887, 18 April 1888.
43. *Cork Examiner*, 11 August, 21 September 1882, 4 July 1883.
44. *Munster News*, 17 November 1883.
45. Crime Branch Special Reports, 1890, 94/S, 631/S; 1891, 9001/S, 2792/S.
46. *Munster News*, 16, 24, 30 November, 3, 10 December 1887.
47. Bishop Dwyer of Limerick, for instance, while giving guarded support to the campaign to release John Daly, the convicted Limerick dynamitard, warned against any involvement in secret societies. *United Ireland*, 18 April 1885; *Munster News*, 12 March 1890.
48. *United Ireland*, 18 April 1885; *Munster News*, 19 September 1885.
49. Cronin, *Country, Class or Craft?*, p. 116.

8

William Walker, Labour, Sectarianism and the Union, 1894–1912

Henry Patterson

Belfast: industry and politics

William Walker was born into Belfast's skilled working class in 1871. His father worked in the Harland and Wolff shipyard and was a trade union official.[1] The first 30 years of Walker's life coincided with two processes whose intertwining would dominate his experiences as a trade unionist and political activist. The first was the major expansion of its shipbuilding and engineering industries, which, together with its already substantial linen and engineering industries, would make Belfast the industrial heartland of Ireland. The Harland and Wolff yard, which had a workforce of 1,500 in the 1860s, when it was the only yard in Belfast, employed 9,000 people by 1900.[2] In the 1ate 1870s, another shipbuilding enterprise was set up by Frank Workman, a local businessman, who was joined by George Clark from Glasgow in the Workman Clark 'Wee Yard'. Clark, like Edward Harland and Gustavus Wolff, would become involved in Conservative and Unionist politics and Walker was to challenge him for the North Belfast parliamentary seat in 1907.

By the outbreak of the First World War, the two shipyards employed 20,000 workers, the greatest concentration of unionised skilled labour in Ireland.[3] The city's dignitaries could boast of it being 'The Commercial and Industrial Capital of Ireland'.[4] It had the largest linen-producing centre in the world. Harland and Wolff was the largest single shipyard in the world and the two yards between them outstripped all other British yards in their rates of growth right up to the outbreak of war in 1914. To these were added an engineering industry which grew from 900 workers in 1865 to 9,000 by 1900.[5] By the turn of the century, the city also had the largest rope-works in the world as well as being a major producer of whiskey, soft drinks and tobacco. This rapidly expanding manufacturing sector was the basis for Belfast's spectacular population growth. Its population grew between the census of 1861 and the death of Queen Victoria from 121,000 to just under 350,000.

This process of economic and demographic expansion was a central theme in the discourse of the political movement that emerged during this period and with which Walker would have an antagonistic, if ambiguous, relationship – Ulster unionism. Although there is some dispute over when popular unionism and nationalism developed, there is none about the existence of sectarian conflicts between Protestants and Catholics in Belfast as far back as the early decades of the nineteenth century.[6] The first riot in the town – a conflict between Orangemen and Catholics – occurred on 12 July 1813.[7] By the time of Walker's birth, Belfast had an established reputation for periodic outbreaks of serious intercommunal violence. These were so prolonged and intense in 1857 and 1864 that they had been the subject of parliamentary inquiries. The riots of 1864, which lasted for eighteen days and caused twelve deaths, had been precipitated by attacks on a contingent of Belfast Catholics attending a demonstration in Dublin for the unveiling of a monument to Daniel O'Connell.[8]

The sensitivity of popular Orangeism and proto-unionism to developments in Catholic Ireland meant that when home rule emerged as a central political issue in the mid-1880s, it initiated a fundamental realignment of Protestant and unionist politics, which would define the limits of Walker's brand of labourism until the partition of the island. Although unionism as an ideological tradition can be traced at least back to the opposition to the repeal movement, as an organised political movement it dates from the disruption of the dominant Conservative/Liberal cleavage in Ulster's politics brought about by Gladstone's support for home rule. Ulster liberalism continued to exist, relying on a mixture of Presbyterian anti-establishment sentiment and traditions of tenant farmer radicalism in parts of Antrim and Down, but a substantial number of former Liberals joined with the Conservatives and the hitherto despised Orangemen to form the Ulster Loyalist Anti-Repeal Union. Although the conflict over the home rule issue would wax and wane throughout Walker's trade union and political involvement, it would be in a brief period when political and sectarian tensions had subsided that he and his supporters came closest to a political breakthrough.

The shipyards, where Walker began his working life as an apprentice joiner in Harland and Wolff, had the largest concentrations of craft unions in Ireland. Metal and engineering workers were some of the longest-organised groups of workers in Belfast: the Ironmakers had a branch from 1826, the Boilermakers from 1841 and the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) from its inception in 1851.[9] By the end of the century, the proportion of unionised men in the Belfast shipbuilding and engineering trades exceeded the UK average.[10] Skilled workers were a high proportion of shipyard employees: 43 per cent of those in Harland and Wolff's shipyard and 28 per cent of those in the engine works.[11] These workers were amongst the highest paid in the UK although it needs to be pointed out that, because of the abundance of unskilled labour in the city, the differential between

skilled and unskilled rates of pay exceeded the UK average, sometimes reaching a 3:1 ratio.[12]

Protestants dominated the skilled trades. According to the 1901 census, Catholics, although they accounted for 24 per cent of Belfast's population made up 8 per cent of 'ship, boat and barge builders', 6 per cent of shipwrights, 10 per cent of engine and machine workers, 11 per cent of fitters and turners, and 10 per cent of boilermakers. In Walker's own trade, they constituted 15 per cent of carpenters. In contrast, they accounted for almost half of poorly paid female linen spinners, a third of general labourers and 41 per cent of dockers.[13] The Belfast Trades Council established in 1881 was dominated by skilled Protestant workers. Like trades councils throughout the UK, it adopted in its rules a clause forbidding the discussion of political issues, which meant that during the first and second unionist mobilisations against home rule in 1885–6 and 1892–3, it made no pronouncements on the issue. Although its membership was dominated by unionists, the fear was constantly expressed that the infant labour movement would be disrupted by party affiliations.

The politics of labour

The dangers were apparent during the 1885 general election when Alexander Bowman, the secretary of the trades council and a prominent working-class Liberal, stood as an independent labour candidate in North Belfast against the prominent linen industrialist William Ewart. He was the first trade unionist in Ireland to seek election to parliament. However, his Liberalism was not shared by many of his fellow council members and the Conservative candidate was able to enlist as a supporter Thomas Johnston, vice-president of the trades council, who branded Bowman 'a republican of the deepest dye'.[14] Bowman's openly declared support for Gladstone was too much for some union branches, which disaffiliated from the council, and he was consequently forced to resign.

While this episode demonstrated the fragility of Belfast labourism at times of heightened political and intercommunal tension, the election also revealed the strength of a populist Orange tradition that articulated a degree of class antagonism within a framework of loyalist contractualism. The 1884 Franchise Act increased the number of Belfast parliamentary seats from two to four. Prominent Orangemen demanded that the Conservative Association accept two Orange candidates for the next general election. The refusal by the Tories brought a popular Orange hero back into politics. The 'indomitable' William Johnston of Ballykilbeg, a minor landlord from south Down, had been imprisoned in 1867 for leading an illegal Orange march. The author of anti-Catholic novels, Johnston posed as a champion of both working-class and Orange interests. When the 1867 Reform Act extended the franchise to a section of the working class, he stood as a

candidate of the Orange and Protestant Workingmen's Association and in 1868 inflicted a significant blow on the town's Conservative machine by topping the Belfast poll in the general election of that year. Johnston, who was in severe financial difficulties, was later bought off with a minor offer of government patronage and reached an accommodation with the local Tory machine. However, the election of 1868 had established a populist Orange tradition – pro-working class, democratic and sectarian in tone – that would later have a significant effect on Walker's political career. The two Orange candidates defeated their Conservative opponents in East and South Belfast.[15]

As a port, Belfast was integrated into a UK-wide movement of capital and labour and, for all its intensely localist set of sectarian rivalries, there was, for a minority at least, also a more cosmopolitan albeit imperial and Britannic sense of being part of a wider world. In the 1880s, the Reverend J. Bruce Wallace, a Congregationalist minister and Christian socialist, was active in bringing Henry George, the American agrarian socialist, to the Ulster Hall for a debate with leading Presbyterian minister Hugh Hanna. A branch of the Fabian Society was in existence by the early 1890s and, at a meeting in the Engineers' Hall in September 1892, a 'Belfast Labour Party' was established.[16] This latter group, in fact, was one of 44 branches of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) set up prior to the party's inaugural conference at Bradford in 1893. In the wake of the British TUC annual conference, held in Belfast in September 1893, this local branch of the ILP increased its public profile.[17] By 1895, the ILP was able to hold a weekly lecture in their hall in Donegal Street in the city centre and two open-air propaganda meetings at the 'steps': Belfast's Palladian Custom House and the surrounding square where every Sunday afternoon, weather permitting, crowds would gather to hear a mixture of lay preachers and those socialists brave enough to risk physical attacks for their 'disloyalty'.

Socialist campaigning

William Walker was the most prominent local ILP speaker. Fluent and aggressive, he combined broader ILP themes with attacks on the corruption of the local economic and political elite. He had to face considerable verbal and physical abuse from a large and vocal anti-socialist group, which regularly attempted to break up ILP meetings. The group was led by a tough working-class loyalist called Arthur Trew who was himself often a speaker at the 'steps' where he specialised in anti-Catholic diatribes. He would later claim to have founded the Belfast Protestant Association (BPA) to 'counteract the baleful influence of certain socialist speakers who delivered speeches at the Custom House steps. He had been called on to repel charges against the employers.'[18] The ILP's paper, *The Clarion*, reported on the travails of the Belfast branch in dealing with such attacks as the Orange parading season drew near in 1895:

> We think it advisable to discontinue the Custom House meeting until the spirit of the pious immortal William cools down. On Saturday morning we went to the Queen's Bridge. As usual bigotry and brutality were well represented in the audience, but amidst cries of 'Throw him in the dock!', 'You're a Home Ruler!', 'Drown Him!', Walker held his ground…We sold fifty *Merrie Englands* by Blatchford at the meeting. We advertised it as an exposure of Socialism, that sells it and minimises the risk of getting hit with something.[19]

The Belfast Protestant Association, which was in the forefront of attempts to silence Walker in the 1890s, would later intervene with damaging effects in Walker's first parliamentary election attempt. Walker was at this time clearly identified with the more radical elements on the trades council. He had first been elected to the council as a delegate of a branch of a Scottish carpenters' union, although he soon transferred to the larger Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners (ASCJ).[20] He played an active part in the spread of the 'new unionism' – the organisation of the unskilled or unorganised – to the city, assisting in the organisation of platers' helpers in the shipyard into a branch of the National Amalgamated Union of Labour. He was also at the centre of efforts by the council to organise amongst female linen workers and became temporary secretary of the Textile Operatives' Society in 1894–5. He also assisted the efforts of the National Union of Dock Labourers and helped Alexander Bowman to establish the Municipal Employees' Association.[21]

During a prolonged strike by ASE members in Harland and Wolff in 1895, Belfast employers linked with those on the Clyde to resist the union with a lockout that led to many other workers, 10,000 in all, being unemployed, many of them labourers who received no lockout benefit. The trades council used its limited resources to help, but Walker and the minority of ILP supporters favoured a more militant policy and attempted to use the strike to further the cause of the unionisation of the unskilled and to promote a more radical politics in the city. When Sir Edward Harland (the MP for North Belfast) died, Walker criticised leading members of the trades council for attending the funeral and the decision of the chairman of the council to act as secretary to a fund-raising committee for a statue to Harland. He also led an ILP campaign to get the council to support the candidature of Pete Curran, a leader of the Gasworkers' Union, who had visited Belfast as an organiser and had spoken at ILP meetings. However, there was strong opposition to Curran, who was described as an 'outsider' whose political views were not shared by the workers of North Belfast. He was denounced as an 'extremist' whose views on home rule were suspect and the council refused to support him as a candidate.[22]

Even though Walker was clearly more radical than most of the other delegates to the council, and it has been depicted as a bastion of conservative and sectional craft unionism, Belfast Trades Council nevertheless did

pioneer the cause of labour representation in Ireland. In 1892, it established a Labour Electoral Association and in the Belfast municipal elections of 1897 the six trades council candidates were elected. Their campaign had focused on the city's high death rate – there had just been a typhoid epidemic – and blamed it on jerry-building of houses on badly drained land, which, it was claimed, the existing corporation had ignored because it was dominated by landlords and estate agents. The Belfast Conservatives were depicted as the defenders of property speculators and jerry-builders.[23] The issue of corruption and jobbery attendant on one-party control of the city would continue to dog unionism in the period after partition. In 1941, it was a key issue in Harry Midgley's victory for the Northern Ireland Labour Party in the Willowfield by-election, an event which shook the Unionist government and eventually forced it to appoint city commissioners to take over the functions of the corporation.[24]

Although Walker may have been regarded as having too high a political profile to be a trades council candidate in a campaign where they emphasised trade union issues, he had clearly established himself as a leading figure in labour circles. By 1899, he was secretary to the council and, from that year on, was also a regular delegate to the annual Irish Trade Union Congress. From 1901, he was a delegate to the British TUC, representing Belfast joiners. His trade union work, however, sometimes had personal repercussions. During the Boer War, for example, he wrote to the War Office as secretary of Belfast Trades Council to complain that the firm for which he worked was not observing a fair wages clause in its contract. He was dismissed and subsequently blacklisted. Forced to rely on the trades council's victimisation fund for a period, he was elected a full-time official of the ASCJ in 1901.[25] Walker has been criticised for pursuing 'the narrow interests of the ASCJ to the detriment even of unity amongst skilled workers'.[26] It is certainly the case that his union was involved in a series of demarcation disputes, some of them bitter. However, these were a very common occurrence particularly in the shipbuilding industry where, in 1900, there were twenty major unions and up to 200 if the local and short-lived societies are included.[27] It is difficult to see how he could have maintained his position within the ASCJ – he had to be reelected every three years – if he had not defended the interests of his members in inter-union disputes, even if he earned a reputation for 'ruthlessness' in the process. As John Lynch has noted of such disputes: 'Although now they can appear petty and pointless, it should be remembered that the main reason for such action was to try and safeguard the employment of skilled workers in a rapidly changing industry.'[28]

Labour and sectarianism: North Belfast

Two events that occurred within a month of each other in 1903 would have major effects on Walker's subsequent political trajectory. The first was

the establishment in Belfast in June of a local Labour Representation Committee (LRC). The second was the formalisation of the first major split in the Orange Order with the establishment of the Independent Orange Order (IOO) in July. One reflected the identification of the local labour elite with the historic developments across the Irish Sea while the other, which in part reflected class tensions within the Orange/unionist bloc, was also fuelled by a strong Protestant reaction to what were seen as the 'Romanisation' policies followed by successive Conservative administrations in Ireland, particularly in the areas of local government and education.[29] The return of a Conservative administration in 1895 would take the home rule issue out of UK and Irish politics for a decade, depriving Irish unionism of its great mobilising issue. This loosening of the bonds of pan-Protestant unity in Ulster led to the opening up of a set of class and sectarian fissures within the Protestant community, which certainly assisted a range of dissident forces from Presbyterian tenant farmers to Protestant socialists and Orange rebels. Professor Leland Lyons provides a telling description of the conjuncture: 'For a brief period…it seemed that Ireland might witness a new staggering phenomenon – the emergence of a third force divorced equally from orthodox Unionism and Nationalism and pledged to a settlement by consent of all contentious issues short of Home Rule.'[30]

The IOO's key figure in Belfast was Thomas Sloan, MP for South Belfast. Sloan had been an unskilled worker in Harland and Wolff's and a strong evangelical who held meetings of the Belfast Protestant Association (BPA) during breaks in the yard. When the leader of the BPA, Arthur Trew, was imprisoned for attacking a Catholic religious parade in 1901, Sloan took over. He was an Orangeman and he and other members of the BPA had heckled the Grand Master and leader of the Irish Unionists at Westminster, Colonel Saunderson, at the Twelfth of July demonstration in 1902. When the sitting MP for South Belfast, William Johnston of Ballykilbeg, died in 1902, Sloan stood against the official Conservative Association candidate who, he claimed, was fighting 'Protestantism, Orangeism, total abstinence, trade unionism…in a word, Protestant Belfast.'[31] Sloan's victory led to the expulsion of him and his supporters from the Orange Order and the formation of the IOO. Although Sloan's support was heavily concentrated in the Sandy Row area of South Belfast, his populist Orangeism had supporters in other parts of the city including that heartland of proletarian unionism, the Shankill Road. The IOO also developed a wider ideological assault on mainstream unionism through the writings and speeches of Lindsay Crawford, its Grand Master, who edited the *Irish Protestant*, which attacked the unionist and Orange elites for allegedly acquiescing in the 'Romanisation' of Ireland by the Conservative government through its appeasement of the Catholic Church.[32]

The populist Orange assault on the loyalist integrity of the Belfast Conservative Association gave a short-term boost to Walker's attempt to

develop British labourism in the city. The first meeting of the LRC had been addressed by the leading cross-channel figures Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald, and, after the adoption of Walker as the official LRC candidate for North Belfast in November 1903, a steady stream of British labour notables came to Belfast to support him. There was considerable optimism, given the relatively relaxed state of the 'national question' and the apparent disarray of mainstream Unionism and Orangeism. The LRC and the trades council began to produce a monthly paper, the *Labour Chronicle*, in October 1904. Its articles gave much coverage to the progress of the LRC in the rest of the UK and provided features on leading figures and on the main national issues from the legal position of trade unions to Chinese labour in the Transvaal.

However, Walker was well aware that, although the LRC did not have a policy on home rule, many of its most prominent figures were on record as supporters of the policy. His response was that the best defence of the Union was the return of progressive unionists to Westminster, who would demonstrate to the labour movement in the rest of the UK that unionism was not simply the reactionary creed of landlords and capitalists. At the same time, he made clear that from the Belfast labourist perspective the demand for home rule was reactionary. His arguments were put forward in a debate with Captain John Shawe-Taylor on devolution. Shawe-Taylor was an Irish landlord of a reformist bent who had helped sponsor the conference of landlords and tenants out of which had come the Wyndham Land Act of 1903, which provided for the peaceful and paid expropriation of the Irish landlord class. He had been subsequently associated with the Irish Reform Association, which in 1904 published a manifesto supporting devolution in the form of the creation of legislative and financial councils for Ireland to be endowed with considerable powers of local government. While not home rule, it was a considerable step in that direction, and when it was discovered that the permanent head of the Irish administration, a Catholic, had been involved in drafting the manifesto, there was an enraged response from unionists. This led to a major shift in the dynamics of Irish Unionism towards the Northern Protestant community with the formation in 1905 of the Ulster Unionist Council.[33]

In the debate in Belfast, which mainstream unionist MPs refused to attend, Shawe-Taylor painted a most optimistic picture: 'the Irish nation has left behind it the sectarian and social strife of the past and is embarking on a positive process of development…Religious antagonisms in Ireland were less acute than they had been.' His two main critics were Sloan and Walker. Sloan depicted the devolution proposals as yet more evidence of the dishonesty of the Protestant landlord class and their attempts to manipulate the loyalist rank and file: 'These men shouted "Derry, Aughrim, Enniskillen and the Boyne" and then had private dinners with the like of Captain Shawe-Taylor.' He attacked the Conservative policies on Ireland for

'the influence they had given to the priests'. Walker denounced Shawe-Taylor's proposals for a settlement of the demand for a Catholic University and claimed that 'as the Land Question could be solved without an Irish parliament, other problems could also be solved without it'.[34] In a later ILP pamphlet titled *The Irish Land Question*, he criticised the land reforms for creating a class of reactionary peasant proprietors and argued that in a home rule parliament the forces of agrarian conservatism would dominate to the detriment of the Irish working class – not a bad prediction of the history of the independent Irish state![35]

Walker firmly believed that the development of a labour movement in Ireland, with organic links to that in Britain, was the only means of transcending the sectarian divisions within the working class and those between unionists and nationalists: 'Their mission was to try and unite the best elements of the Shankill with the best elements from the Falls. It was a unique mission, their movement was a movement to wrest Ulster, Munster, Leinster and Connaught from party strife. It was a movement to redeem Ireland.'[36] While nationalism was depicted as a narrow, inward-looking creed, unionism had a progressive potential as long as it was recognised that there were two sorts of unionist:

> There is the type, so prevalent in Ulster, which has opposed all social legislation…the reinstatement of trade unions to the position they were in before the Taff Vale decision and to Old Age pensions. All of these have been voted and canvassed against by the Ulster Landlord Party who call themselves Unionists.
>
> But there is another type…the type that whilst maintaining the legislative Union, are determined that that Union shall be beneficial to Ireland and that every advantage which can be obtained through the Union shall be conferred upon the Irish people.[37]

Contesting elections, 1905–7

Walker represented a formidable challenge to the Conservative machine in North Belfast and he contested the Westminster seat in a by-election in September 1905. In 1904, he had been elected to Belfast Corporation for the North Belfast ward of Duncairn and he used his municipal position, and the pages of the *Labour Chronicle*, to flay the Conservative candidate for the constituency, Sir Daniel Dixon. Dixon, who was lord mayor for the seventh time, was a shipowner and timber merchant and chairman of the Harbour Commissioners. He had made a fortune in building contracts and land speculation, including the sale of some sloblands to the corporation. Walker attacked him in the *Chronicle*, alleging corruption and,

although Dixon successfully sued the paper, the charges damaged him. Dixon was also attacked for his heavy consumption of alcohol, while Walker's campaign literature emphasised the temperance theme and pointed out Walker's membership of the Ancient Order of Rechabites – a temperance fraternity.[38] During the by-election campaign, the Conservatives concentrated on the home rule sympathies of his election agent, Ramsay MacDonald, and his main cross-channel supporter, Arthur Henderson. A victory for Walker, it was alleged, would be used to suggest that the resolve of Protestant working men to maintain the Union had been fatally weakened. Walker, however, was clearly benefiting from the Sloanite disruption of Belfast unionism and it was reported that in many Orange Lodges there was substantial support for him.

However, populist strains of Orange and protestant militancy had their dangers for Walker. As the result within the Protestant community looked to be close, Walker needed a substantial share of the 1,000 or so Catholic votes in the constituency. These were the circumstances in which Walker was confronted by Richard Braithwaite, secretary of the Belfast Protestant Association, and asked to answer a questionnaire. His responses included his opposition to any attempt to abolish or amend the declaration that the Sovereign makes against transubstantiation on accession to the throne and to likewise oppose repeal of the law that prevents Catholics from holding the positions of Lord Chancellor or Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. Within days, an anonymous leaflet was circulating addressed to 'The Catholic Voters of North Belfast' detailing his replies and asking 'How can you support this man?'[39] This intervention was most likely organised by the Conservative machine as Braithwaite was a close associate of Arthur Trew who had links with the Tories. It probably cost Walker the seat for Dixon won by less than 474 votes in a poll of 8,406.

When the resources that the Tories poured into the election are considered – 1,000 paid canvassers, 725 vehicles and funds to pay the rail fares and expenses of those returning to vote – the labour vote, in an Irish context particularly, was remarkable.[40] It bore witness to the deep fissure of class antagonism that existed within Ulster's dominant ethnic group. It was this that ensured the continued interest of cross-channel labour leaders in promoting the Belfast organisation despite a chorus of disapproval of Walker's campaign by Liberal and nationalist-inclined members of the LRC. Pete Curran denounced Walker's description of himself as a 'Unionist in politics' as a violation of the constitution of the LRC, although his own open support for home rule was not seen as having any similar constitutional implications. Walker's campaign was publicly vindicated by the LRC executive when it declared that he had not violated the constitution which did not take a position on home rule. However, the chairman, Arthur Henderson, was asked to convey privately to Walker the committee's

feeling that it was 'improper to accentuate religious strife during the contest'.[41]

In the general election of January 1906, Walker narrowed Dixon's margin of victory to 299 votes in an increased poll, winning a significant 3,966 votes.[42] When the Labour Party held its annual conference in Belfast a year later, Walker was cheered when he told his audience that 'neither he nor the Labour men of Belfast would rest till they won every seat for the Labour and Socialist cause'.[43] However, when Sir Daniel Dixon died in 1907 and a by-election was declared, Walker proved a reluctant candidate and made it clear to Ramsay MacDonald at Transport House that he did not want election agents from Britain or Labour Party election literature that did not take account of the 'peculiarities' of the Belfast constituency.[44] However, as in his previous contests, Walker's campaign was presented as part of a broader UK-wide Labour advance and he did have the support of prominent labour figures from Britain, including Keir Hardie, Arthur Henderson and George Barnes. The Conservative response repeated their previous attacks on the home rule sympathies of many of the Labour MPs, but their campaign was given an added intensity because the Labour Party was supporting Campbell-Bannerman's Liberal government. Their candidate was George Clark, co-founder of the Workman Clark shipyard and a prominent leader of the Ulster Unionist Council. Clark specialised in unblushing eulogies on his contribution to the well-being of the city's working class. At a mass meeting in the Ulster Hall, he reminded the audience he had started off employing '200 hands in 1880' but now his yard employed between 7,000 and 8,000:

> The total amount of money paid in wages since the firm started was about £4 million. If they placed the men in line to receive this money and paid £1 to each man the line would extend a distance of about 1,500 miles or five times the length of Ireland. The weight of the wages paid, if in gold, would be over 30 tons, and would take five railway trucks to carry it.[45]

The influence of Protestant working-class deference to a self-confident bourgeoisie has been emphasised in some interpretations of class relations in Ulster.[46] It is clearly a factor of some importance and would be a key element in the establishment of the Ulster Unionist Labour Association to combat working-class radicalisation at the end of the First World War. However, it can be exaggerated: William Pirrie, a leading partner in Harland and Wolff, who was an Ulster Liberal, was not able to turn his role as employer into significant political capital. Explanations of working-class Unionism, which emphasise deference or the relative material privileges of particularly the skilled section of the Protestant working class, are deficient. Such explanations ignore the fact that, while such a core group

of working-class unionists as skilled shipyard workers were an elite within the working class, their industry suffered from violent oscillations of capital goods industries with frequent bouts of heavy unemployment, and that working conditions were harsh and frequently dangerous.[47] More importantly, they ignore the autonomous significance of the forces of religious and ethno-national identity in a context where conflicts of national belonging exist.

It is not at all clear that if the Conservative candidate had been one with a 'flawed pedigree' like Dixon that the result would have been any different. The determinant issue was the spectre of home rule. Although there was no Liberal commitment to it at the time, the election took place just before the government was to introduce an Irish Council Bill, a Liberal version of the 1904 devolution proposals.[48] The Ulster Unionists, with the support of British Conservatives such as F.E. Smith, depicted the bill as merely the first instalment of home rule.[49] Clark opposed the establishment of devolution in any form: 'it carries with it the seeds of disastrous results in respect both of our civil and religious liberties and of the social, intellectual, commercial and industrial well-being of Ireland'.[50] Walker made clear that he opposed home rule, devolution and the Irish Council Bill:

> He was as opposed to a parliament in Dublin as he was opposed to a parliament in Edinburgh or Cardiff because once they set up separate national parliaments they started a spirit of national strife between the different peoples concerned. He also opposed such a scheme because there was no measure which would benefit the English working man that would not benefit the Irish working man.[51]

However, the central problem for Walker was evident when at another meeting Arthur Henderson, in response to Unionist attacks on the Labour Party's home rule sympathies, openly admitted them and then attempted to calm fears in his audience by proclaiming that home rule would not threaten the empire or lead to separation: 'They believed in trusting the people, trusting them to work together in one unbroken Imperial family.'[52] This Liberal imperialist vision, like much of *bien pensant* thinking on Ireland in Britain at the time and since, simply ignored the darker realities of sectarian suspicions and animosities that so deeply penetrated both the unionist and nationalist traditions.

Marginalisation

Clark's easy victory seems to have confirmed Walker in a conviction that there would be no real possibility of electoral success in Belfast and he increasingly concentrated on building up his profile in the Labour Party in Britain. He was a member of the party's executive as a trade union

representative and regularly attended meetings – sixteen out of the seventeen in 1909 for example. With the support of his union he stood as the Labour Party candidate against the Liberals in the Leith Burgh constituency of Edinburgh in the general election of January–February 1910. His political past was brought up by a group of 'Irish Socialists' who opposed him, although what role this played in his defeat is not clear.

Back in Belfast, the increased power of the Irish Party at Westminster was increasing unionism's embattled militancy and although the local Labour Party had chosen the mild and conservative Labour Unionist, Robert Gageby, to stand in North Belfast, the unionist response was an aggressive appeal to Protestant and Orange solidarity. Typical was the address of Colonel R.H. Wallace, Grand Master of Belfast, to the Orangemen of the city: 'Any candidate who opposes the properly selected Unionist candidates and calls himself a Unionist acts the part that Lundy took at the Siege of Derry and every man who votes for such a person voted for Home Rule…They are wolves in sheep's clothing who seek to hand the keys of the fortress over to our enemies.'[53] The unionist majority in North Belfast increased while the populist Orangeman, Thomas Sloan, who had supported the Liberal budget, opposed tariff reform which all the unionists supported, and proclaimed the need to tax the rich,[54] lost his seat in South Belfast.[55]

The increasing polarisation of politics in Ulster provides the context for the debate carried on by Walker and James Connolly in the pages of the Scottish socialist newspaper *Forward* in 1911. The spark was Walker's role in the defeat of a resolution in support of the creation of an independent Irish Labour Party at the annual conference of the Irish Trade Union Congress. Connolly responded with a frontal attack on Walker and the Belfast ILP for their allegedly pseudo-internationalism which 'seems scarcely distinguishable from Imperialism, the merging of subjugated peoples in the political system of their conquerors'.[56] This was a rather overblown response to Walker's argument at the congress that Irish workers would be in a stronger position to struggle against the conservative social and economic policies of the Irish Party if they were allied with workers in the rest of the UK.[57] It is true that the ideology of Belfast labourism was at times expressed within an imperialist framework. An article in the *Belfast Labour Chronicle* that attacked an early manifestation of Sinn Féin, which had supported breaking links with British-based unions, had proclaimed: 'Nationalism is dead or dying and Imperialism is the transition change to international union of the proletariat all over the world.'[58] However, as David Howell has pointed out, the 'pro-imperialism' for which Connolly castigated Walker and the ILP was not simply the product, as Connolly portrayed it, of a parochial capitulation to Orange bigotry: 'The analysis of Labour Unionism demonstrates a working class movement attached materially and ideologically to

an imperialist state. It was a problem whose ramifications extended far beyond Ulster.'[59]

It was a problem that neither man had an answer for. In fact, one of the revealing aspects of the polemic was the fact that both denied the possibility of a serious outbreak of sectarian violence in the workplaces of Belfast, just a year before such an outbreak actually occurred in the shipyards. For Connolly, the fundamental reason was the fact that 'there is no economic class in Ireland today whose interests as a class are bound up with the Union…Only the force of religious bigotry remains an asset to Unionism.' However, even the Orangemen of Belfast would not 'lose time by rioting when he might make money by working…in this he shows the good sense which pre-eminently distinguishes the city by the Lagan'.[60] Here, economic reductionism melded with the common Irish nationalist stereotypes of Ulster Protestants, which shifted uneasily between portraying them as dour religious zealots and practical men who put rational calculation of material interests first. Whether Walker really believed that 'it has now become impossible in Belfast to have a religious riot', or was simply making the claim to bolster the claims to influence of the local labour movement, is impossible to say.[61] His own part in the struggle to establish a British Labour Party presence in Belfast ended in early 1912 when he took employment as an official under the new National Insurance Act.

Legacy

By the time of his polemic with Connolly, Walker was on the defensive in labour circles in Belfast. The spread of the 'new unionism' associated with James Larkin had already begun to impact on the Irish Trade Union Congress and, with Connolly's return from America, the proponents of an independent Irish Labour Party were increasingly vocal and influential. Walker's own focus on his involvement in the British party may have accelerated an increasing marginalisation in Belfast where supporters of Connolly, such the future leader of the Irish Labour Party, Thomas Johnson, and Harry Midgley, who would dominate Northern Labour in the interwar period, were critics of Walker. Even before Connolly's arrival in 1911, the initiative in the city's labour politics had passed to those like Johnson, David Campbell and William McMullen who favoured Connolly's analysis.[62] In 1912, the Irish TUC passed a resolution supporting the setting up of an independent Irish Labour Party. Its proponents in Belfast argued that as home rule was 'inevitable', Irish labour needed independent representation in the new parliament. The trades council supported the resolution by a narrow majority and was denounced as a 'Home Rule Clique' in the unionist press. With sectarian animosities rampant, labourism, whether Walkerite or Connollyite, was marginalised.

Walker's reputation long suffered from a dominant view of Irish labour history, which understood labour's past only in relation to nationalism. The history of labour struggles and forms of organisation were understood and assigned their significance only in relation to nationalism and labour's political development was treated as a narrative subordinate to that of the history of the nationalist movement. From this perspective, Walker was doubly handicapped: by entering into a dispute with one of the few figures in the Irish labour movement with an international reputation and also with someone who became a revolutionary martyr. The result was an image of a rather grey provincial figure, propounding the 'mere parochialism of the gasworks and waterworks variety' of municipal socialism.[63]

Since the 1960s, the major increase in academic research and publications on both Irish labour history and on the history of Ulster unionism and Protestant politics has created the basis for a more nuanced view of the major difficulties that confronted any attempt to build a labour politics within a situation of deep and continuing ethnic and national conflict. There has been the beginning of a serious attempt to reappraise his reputation. It is not simply a question of balancing his one serious compromise with Protestant sectarianism with his courage in braving the attacks of loyalist hooliganism at the Custom House steps in the 1890s, or the barrage of Unionist Party and Orange criticism when he challenged their municipal and parliamentary dominance in the 1900s. As Bob Purdie has convincingly argued, Walker's belief that 'the interests of the working class of Ireland were best served within the United Kingdom' was neither poorly argued nor grounded in religious prejudice.[64] Walker's fundamental problem was that he adhered to a tradition of socialist thought, shared by both the Fabians and the ILP in the United Kingdom as well as by many Marxists, that had little serious to say about nationalism and ethnic identity. This led to the assumption that nationalism and unionism were forms of 'false consciousness' that would be dissipated by the advance of socialism.[65] Instead, it turned out that he and his comrades were living through a period when such issues were becoming more, not less, important.

However, his failure was a far from ignoble one. Harry Midgley, in his Connollyite phase a bitter critic of Walker, later, after decades of bitter experience of the grinding power of sectarian identities in the Northern working class, wrote of Walker: 'He was a man of inspiring personality, a magnificent orator, a veritable giant among men.'[66] In his polemic with Connolly, one of Walker's strongest points was that 'The ILP have enabled the Irish in Belfast to unite, James Connolly (a Catholic) can – thanks to the spade work of the ILP – come to Belfast and speak to audiences mainly Protestant, and be patiently heard.'[67] The tradition of Northern labourism established by Walker failed to break the grip of nationalism and unionism on the working class, and neither did all the varieties of Connolly socialism and left-wing republicanism. Nevertheless, despite its limited practical

effects, it represented the only serious and rooted opposition to the destructive polarising logic of what Professor Liam Kennedy has termed 'ethnic autism'. In his brilliant comparative analysis of Ulster's sectarianism, the late Frank Wright provided a fitting epitaph for the tradition founded by Walker:

> Working-class solidarity was both a constructive instrument of class power and a way of bringing out the grisly fact that national conflict was both an unpleasant evil (rather than a righteous cause) and something that could suck everything worthwhile down into the gutter. The history of these societies is apt to bury efforts of this kind and in doing so bury their most redemptive moments. The greatest achievements of socialism in ethnic frontiers was to erect barriers of restraint against the real possibilities of madness…These barriers erected by international socialism were nowhere near absolute, but they were stronger than anything else available…their failure is a tragic statement about their societies, not a condemnation of themselves.[68]

Notes

1. Austen Morgan, *Labour and Partition: The Belfast Working Class 1905–23* (London, 1991), p. 61.
2. W.A. Maguire, *Belfast* (Keele, 1993), p. 63.
3. John Lynch, 'Harland and Wolff: its labour force and industrial relations, autumn 1919', *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, vol. 22 (1997), p. 47.
4. Belfast Chamber of Commerce, *Commercial Year Book for 1909* (Belfast, 1910), p. 1.
5. Maguire, *Belfast*, p. 64.
6. See Catherine Hirst, *Religion , Politics and Violence in Nineteenth Century Belfast: The Pound and Sandy Row* (Dublin, 2002).
7. Hirst, *Religion, Politics and Violence*, p. 20.
8. Peter Gibbon, *The Origins of Ulster Unionism* (Manchester, 1975), p. 71, and Henry Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism: The Protestant Working Class and the Belfast Labour Movement 1868–1920* (Belfast, 1980), p. xvii.
9. Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism*, p. xiii.
10. Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824–1960* (Dublin, 1992), p. 37.
11. John Lynch, 'Harland and Wolff', p. 48.
12. O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland*, pp. 37–8.
13. John W. Boyle, 'The Rise of the Irish Labour Movement, 1881–1907' (unpublished PhD thesis, Trinity College, Dublin, 1961), p. 54.
14. Terence Bowman, *People's Champion: The Life of Alexander Bowman, Pioneer of Labour Politics in Ireland* (Belfast, 1997), pp. 45–6.
15. On the populist Orange tradition, see Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism*, pp. 1–18, and Aiken McClelland, *William Johnston of Ballykilbeg* (Lurgan, 1990).
16. Fintan Lane, *The Origins of Modern Irish Socialism, 1881–1896* (Cork, 1997), pp. 192–3.
17. Ibid., pp. 193–6.

18. Speech by Trew to meeting of BPA, *Belfast Newsletter*, 16 November 1897.
19. *The Clarion*, 1 June 1895.
20. Morgan, *Labour and Partition,* p. 61.
21. Morgan, *Labour and Partition*, p. 63.
22. *The Clarion*, 18 January 1896.
23. Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism*, p. 40.
24. Graham Walker, *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party: Protest, Pragmatism and Pessimism* (Manchester, 2004), p. 92.
25. John W. Boyle, 'William Walker', in J.W. Boyle (ed.), *Leaders and Workers* (Cork, 1978), p. 60.
26. John Gray, *City in Revolt: James Larkin and the Belfast Dock Strike of 1907* (Belfast, 1985), p. 30.
27. Henry Patterson, 'Industrial Labour and the Labour Movement, 1820–1914', in Liam Kennedy and Philip Ollerenshaw (eds), *An Economic History of Ulster, 1820–1939* (Manchester, 1985), p. 177.
28. John Lynch, 'Harland and Wolff', p. 56.
29. On the Conservative policy of 'killing Home Rule by kindness' see Alvin Jackson, *Ireland 1798–1998* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 148–58.
30. F.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine* (London, 1971), p. 215.
31. Morgan, *Labour and Partition*, p. 46.
32. On the IOO see John W. Boyle, 'The Belfast Protestant Association and the Independent Orange Order', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. XIII (1962), pp. 117–52. For a critique see Henry Patterson, 'Independent Orangeism and Class Conflict in Edwardian Belfast', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, vol. 80, section C, no.1 (1980), pp. 1–27.
33. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine*, pp. 216–18.
34. *Northern Whig,* 16 December 1904.
35. The pamphlet was summarised in the Scottish socialist paper *Forward*, 20 June 1908, and published as a pamphlet by the North Belfast branch of the ILP.
36. Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism*, p. 57.
37. Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism*, pp. 55–6.
38. Boyle, 'William Walker', pp. 60–1.
39. The leaflet is reproduced in Gray, *City in Revolt*, p. 37.
40. Morgan, *Labour and Partition*, p. 76.
41. Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism*, p. 63.
42. The results of his three contests of the constituency were:
    1905: Dixon 4,400, Walker 3,966
    1906: Dixon 4,907, Walker 4,616
    1907: Clark 6,021, Walker 4,194
    See *Northern Whig*, 18 April 1907.
43. Gray, *City in Revolt*, p. 38.
44. Gray, *City in Revolt*, p. 39.
45. *Belfast Newsletter*, 2 April 1907.
46. See Gray, *City in Revolt*, p. 22.
47. Lynch, '*Harland and Wolff*', p. 48.
48. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine*, p. 261.
49. See Smith's speech to the mass meeting in Ulster Hall in support of Clark, *Belfast Newsletter*, 2 April 1907.
50. *Belfast Newsletter*, 2 April 1907.
51. *Belfast Newsletter*, 11 April 1907.
52. *Belfast Newsletter*, 13 April 1907.

53. *Northern Whig,* 7 January 1910.
54. *Northern Whig*, 1 January 1910.
55. The result in North Belfast was: Robert Thompson (Unionist) 6,275; Robert Gageby (Labour) 3,951. See *Northern Whig*, 20 January 1910.
56. James Connolly 'A plea for socialist unity in Ireland', *Forward*, 27 May 1911, reprinted in The Cork Workers' Club, *The Connolly–Walker Controversy: On Socialist Unity in Ireland* (Cork, n.d), p. 2.
57. Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism*, p. 78.
58. Quoted in Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism*, p. 49.
59. David Howell, *A Lost Left: Three Studies in Socialism and Nationalism* (Manchester, 1986), p. 104.
60. James Connolly, 'A plea for socialist unity in Ireland', p. 1.
61. William Walker, 'Rebel Ireland: and its Protestant leaders', *Forward*, 3 June 1911, reprinted in *The Connolly–Walker Controversy*, p. 5.
62. See Graham Walker, *The Politics of Frustration: Harry Midgely and the Failure of Labour in Northern Ireland* (Manchester, 1985).
63. Gerry Adams, *The Politics of Irish Freedom* (Dingle, 1986), p. 129.
64. Bob Purdie, 'An Ulster Labourist in Liberal Scotland: William Walker and the Leith Burghs election of 1910', in Ian S. Wood (ed.), *Scotland and Ulster* (Edinburgh, 1994), p. 116.
65. See an interesting discussion of these issues in Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 187–8.
66. Walker, *The Politics of Frustration*, p. 4.
67. William Walker, 'A socialist (sic) symposium and an evasion', *Forward*, 8 July 1911, in *The Connolly–Walker Controversy,* pp. 26–7.
68. Frank Wright, *Northern Ireland: A Comparative Analysis* (Dublin, 1987), pp. 84–5.

9

Interpreting James Connolly, 1916–23

Helga Woggon

> *'The red flag of the peoples of the world has no room in it for a single patch of green?'*[1]

This question is put into James Connolly's mouth by Margaretta D'Arcy and John Arden, the authors of a 24-hour dramatic cycle on his life, in the context of the poor support offered by British trade union leaders for the Dublin lockout of 1913. Though written in the 1970s, the puzzlement embodied in this query echoes Connolly's own words in 1913:

> I have spent a great portion of my life alternating between interpreting Socialism to the Irish and interpreting the Irish to the Socialists. Of the two tasks, I confess, that while I am convinced that the former has been attended with a considerable degree of success, the latter has not. At least as far as the Socialists of Great Britain are concerned, they always seem to me to exhibit towards the Irish working-class democracy of the Labour movement the same inability to understand their position and to share in their aspirations as the organised British nation, as a whole, has shown to the struggling Irish nation it has so long held in subjection.[2]

For over 20 years, in Ireland, Britain and the United States, Connolly exerted himself in an effort to place a green patch on the red flag of socialism and, concurrently, to give a red tint to the green flag of Irish nationalism. Indeed, in terms of Irish nationalism, he argued that the 'true' green must be red and throughout his life he saw himself as a 'translator' between the languages of Irish nationalism and of international socialism, defending each against attacks from the other. However, in August 1914, his role as interpreter was undermined, with international socialists capitulating *vis-à-vis* the war, and he came to believe that the time was right for a national uprising. Consequently, he switched to a pro-German stance in the *Irish Worker*, while praising Karl Liebknecht's resistance to German militarism in the Scottish socialist paper *Forward*.[3]

Connolly's belief that his 'interpretation' of socialism for the Irish was appropriate and a success is open to question. In the end, he was content with leaving a patch of red on the green flag – a patch which, according to the rules of Irish nationalist tradition-building, had to be painted with his own blood to be enduring. In truth, his political legacy created problems for both his willing and unwilling legatees for the remainder of the twentieth century, and this afterlife is as much part of the Connolly story as his writings and political activity. Therefore, an analysis of his politics must be linked to the history of his impact (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) and interpretations of his work need to be placed in their respective contexts. By the mid-1980s, at least 340 books, articles, pamphlets and newly prefaced editions of his writings had appeared – mostly of a partisan nature – with more than half of them published after 1966, of which a rapidly growing number were scholarly works. It is a phenomenon that deserves serious study.

Syndicalism, nationalism and two parties

During the final years of his life, James Connolly's political activity involved simultaneous work in the Socialist Party of Ireland (SPI), the Irish Labour Party (ITUCLP), the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU) and the paramilitary Irish Citizen Army (ICA), organisations that embodied the central elements of his politics – their propagandistic, political, trade union and military aspects. In fact, these commitments were ostensibly separated from each other, organisationally and ideologically. The SPI was not attached to the Labour Party, nor was the Citizen Army part of the ITGWU; indeed, the ICA was programmatically nearer to the Irish Volunteers than to the union with which it is forever associated. The Irish Labour Party had no clear socialist programme, nor did the ITGWU have a revolutionary syndicalist programme. In 1914–16, the ITGWU and the ICA were scarcely connected and real differences existed. Arguably, the involvement of the ICA in the 1916 rebellion might have caused serious conflict with the union but for the fact that, at the time, half of those registered as ITGWU members in 1914 were fighting at the front, at least ten times more members than participated in the Easter Rising.[4]

The Citizen Army's belief in itself as the labour movement's avant-garde in the national struggle embodied the essence of Connolly's integrative socialism, while the two political parties had no immediate function. The Labour Party (or, to give it its full title, the Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party) awaited its oppositional role in the future Irish nation-state, while the SPI limited itself to propaganda work. As it happened, the Labour Party executive was identical with the trade union leadership, which was focused on building the unions during these years of a 'new departure' in trade unionism. A belief in the spontaneity of revolutionary developments replaced purposeful propaganda, party-political activity and

programmatic commitment. It would not be going too far to say that without the uniting link of Connolly's personality, and his role as a socialist and trade union leader in the national uprising, the constituent parts of his ideologically complex, ambivalent and organisationally divergent life-work did not form a cohesive entity.

Integrative socialism disintegrated – Connolly multiplies after 1916

The history of the impact and interpretations of Connolly's politics is marked by numerous attempts to claim him as the exclusive heritage of particular political groups. Generally, this is done either by (a) uniting the diverse and, at times, contradictory elements of his politics into an idealisation that is set against the shortcomings of his successors; (b) invoking crude analogies of him as an Irish Lenin, Mao, or whoever, as if he needed such parallels to enhance his importance; or, most often, (c) dissecting him into two or three Connollys in order to (partially) uphold a model Connolly for the respective group or party, while denouncing unsuitable aspects ('ultra-leftism', syndicalism, socialism, nationalism and so on) as temporary aberrations of the second or third less useful Connolly. Ironically, this latter approach, rather than affirming Connolly, tends to suggest that his politics meandered somewhat erratically and it undermines his importance as a socialist thinker.

Of course, the actual Connolly knew perfectly well where he was going.[5] He adapted socialist politics to the situation of a dependent country on its way to national independence, presenting socialism as a 'true' national concern by deriving it from national history and tradition. The idea that a 'true' nationalist could only be a socialist was meant to place a tiny minority of socialists in the centre of the nation and to constitute labour as the avant-garde in the national struggle, which was to be transformed into a socialist revolution. Structurally, as I have argued elsewhere, his approach resembled that of socialists in other dependent nations as a variant of 'integrative socialism', which works to integrate socialism into national tradition and to link national liberation and socialist revolution.[6] If this link is undone or reversed by the anti-socialist nationalist majority, the socialist and labour positions are weakened rather than strengthened.

However, Connolly's complicated legacy was a chance for the ideologists of national harmony and a burden for the labour movement, which, since 1916, was on the defensive ideologically and, to avert attacks from Sinn Féin, particularly eager to affirm the sincerity of Connolly's and its own national commitment. Its leaders tried to keep the Labour Party politically neutral, an ostrich-like policy that encouraged individual trade unionists in their activity on behalf of Sinn Féin. It seemed reasonable to interpret Connolly's identification of labour and the nation in the way Sinn Féin

propagandists demanded after 1917. Indeed, despite formal neutrality, the Labour Party and trade unions supported the national struggle with general strikes; Sinn Féin, in return, advocated their right to exist and promised future reward for labour's national commitment. Sinn Féin was to represent the political interests of the nation, Labour its trade union interests. This 'division of labour' only superficially resembled Connolly's parallel syndicalist and nationalist activity, but he could be invoked in support of such a position.[7] Comfortable in their non-political role, post-1916 labour leaders were timid in their dealings with the Sinn Féin movement and no attempt was made to coordinate the unprecedented growth in spontaneous economic strike movements between 1917 and 1922 – the labour leaders acted as mere arbitrators between the workers and the employers or the underground government.

Importantly, however, because of Easter 1916 and Connolly's martyrdom through execution, non-labour nationalists, Gaelic enthusiasts and clerical scholars could no longer openly pour scorn on James Connolly, the socialist radical. Instead, they worked to neutralise him through integration into the nationalist tradition; this welcoming in of Connolly, of course, served the dual function of facilitating the incorporation of the labour movement into the national revolution. In practice, it meant that Connolly was separated from the 'less useful' aspects of his politics (such as his Marxism) – a process determined by both political strategy and the patriotic ideas flourishing at the time. W.K. Anderson has used the fitting image of 'a vessel into which each man could pour his own dream' to describe what became of Connolly's legacy, and in 1916–21 there was an abundance of such vessels and dreams.[8] A most lucid, almost poetic, description of labour's situation at the time was given by W.P. Ryan in his book *The Irish Labour Movement from the Twenties to Our Own Day* (1919):

> Irish Labour, after a shattering and inhuman history, is being called to come forth and work with mind and soul as well as body. It is responding to the call, though a goodly element of it yet is like a tired sleeper, suddenly awakened, whose frame is still weary, whose mind is confused, whose spirit is scarcely conscious: it does not seem entirely sure for the moment that the [Co-operative] Commonwealth may not be a dream of the departing night rather than a fact of the rising day.[9]

'No Lenins, Trotskys, Krassins, Radeks or Litvinoffs'

There is no reason to assume that Connolly would have abandoned class politics had he lived beyond 1916. However, his style of politics had no supporters among the first-rank leaders of the labour movement. Connolly left no prominent and able successor. Irish labour, as Thomas Johnson wrote anonymously in 1922, had 'no Lenins, Trotskys, Krassins, Radeks or

Litvinoffs', and this was a deficiency that troubled few Labour Party or trade union leaders.[10] James Larkin was in the United States and by 1920 safely locked up in Sing-Sing for subversive communist activities.[11] Back in Ireland, Connolly's erstwhile lieutenant, William O'Brien, attacked the absent leader, employing negative stereotypes claiming that Larkin was 'in Greenich [*sic*] Village, New York' standing behind 'the banner of long-haired men and short-haired women'.[12] Moreover, Irish-Americans had long-since presented a Sinn Féin Ireland as a bulwark against communism, a project worthy of US support.

Up to 1919, socialist propaganda in Ireland was limited to a few pamphlets by individual socialists plus several reprints of Connolly's books and pamphlets, and his poetry and songs. Without doubt, the socialist activists lacked support and funds.[13] Nevertheless, in June 1919, ITGWU president Thomas Foran wrote to a doubtful Larkin:

> The [national] movement here is more advanced than you seem to think, and every day becomes more infected with Bolshevik propaganda…A big section of Sinn Féin is favourable to our propaganda and we are getting recruits every day from that quarter.[14]

It is a claim that seems markedly out of touch with reality. The socialist movement remained small and the republicans were effectively getting on with a national revolution. However, the writings since 1916 on Connolly by Sinn Féin propagandists may help to explain the exaggerated optimism of Foran and others. After 1916, a number of Sinn Féin intellectuals had recognised the needs of the time, studied Connolly, shifted emphases from the socialist to the nationalist ideas, and translated Gaelic ideas into socialist terms. They had the huge body of newly enfranchised working-class voters to consider.[15] Moreover, they had to placate those who insisted that if Labour was to stand back as an independent political party, Sinn Féin had to accept Connolly's politics. In the view of one contemporary commentator, Connolly's contribution was that of 'saving Sinn Féin by allying it with Labour' and a dividend was expected.[16] In addition, the revolution in Russia in 1917 was a widely reported event in Ireland and there was an element of enthusiasm that led to a series of workplace occupations, styling themselves 'soviets', during the War of Independence. In short, political expediency mixed with euphoria in times of historic change in the formulation of a form of politics that might attract all classes of the nation and combine the best of capitalism and socialism. This euphoria undoubtedly affected those who drew up the supposedly left-wing *Democratic Programme* for the first Dáil Éireann.

Sinn Féin treated labour with caution and its leadership avoided conflict with both the Labour Party and the wider trade union movement. *Irish Opinion*, one of a number of new papers of Sinn Féin sympathy, provides a useful illustration of the change from anti-labour rhetoric to a position of

flattering labour. In autumn 1916, the paper had demanded 'home rule' in Irish trade unions and tough measures against strikes because:

> the proportion of property owners to the total population is relatively so high in Ireland that no Irish Parliament, no matter how democratically elected, would dare to vote for the wholesale transfer of private property to the State…[and that, if violence were used] the social revolutionaries of Belfast, Lurgan, Portadown, Dublin and Cork, would make a poor show in the field against the armed forces of the State, backed up by the farmers and other property owners of the country.[17]

In spring 1917, however, the newspaper made its first reference to Connolly, albeit as a supporter of the Irish language movement, and went on to state:

> Without not merely the sympathy but the living, personal co-operation of the workers, no movement can succeed in Ireland. The workers are the backbone of the nation.[18]

By then, absurd notions of fusing trade unions with the Gaelic League or replacing them by Church-controlled Leo Guilds had given way to recognition of the ITGWU. This recognition was coupled with continual reminders that workers must sever all connections with British organisations – a concept that met the interests of the aspiring One Big Union. The left, by and large, reciprocated and even the Scottish socialist paper *Forward* succumbed to the Sinn Féin sympathies of Glasgow's Catholic socialists. Connolly served as a meeting point for nationalists and socialists.

Connolly and Father Kane united

The *Dublin Saturday Post*, subtitled the official organ of the Dublin Gaels, had – within a few weeks – changed from an uninteresting family weekend paper before the Easter Rising to a publication with discernible Sinn Féin and labour sympathies by June 1916. It announced a series of articles on Connolly's ideas, in the first of which the author 'J.J.' (probably J.J. O'Kelly, editor of the *Catholic Bulletin,* who was soon to be active in reorganising Sinn Féin) tried not to criticise either Connolly or his erstwhile opponent, Father Kane. Connolly, in his pamphlet *Labour, Nationality and Religion* (1910), had firmly rejected Kane's anti-socialism. The article, regardless of its sympathy for Connolly, was unable to countenance criticism of a Catholic clergyman:

> His [Father Kane's] name is known in every Irish household; it is dear to the hearts of the Irish people. A brilliant scholar, a powerful preacher, an orator, and *a Jesuit*; his name has long since spread throughout the length and breadth of the land.[19]

As Connolly could not compete with this picture of Kane, the promised series was tacitly dropped. This episode highlights the real parameters that surrounded nationalist engagement with Connolly's ideas and socialist activism.

In May 1917, Gerald O'Connor (alias Seán Forde or MacGiollarnath, former editor of the Gaelic League paper *An Claidheamh Soluis* and teacher at Pearse's school, St Enda's) was more daring. For him, the only reason why Connolly, the nationalist and Catholic, was a socialist was because he saw socialism as second best to the old Gaelic system that, he thought, could not be revived. Yet, though 'all his nationalism was tinged with Socialism…he never sought to make true Nationalism subservient to a Socialism which would be imposed from without Ireland'.[20] O'Connor praised Connolly for paving labour's way into the national movement, but regretted that he had not recognised in time that it was wrong to abolish private property, as the author saw happening in the British war economy. He concluded triumphantly:

> Were he [Connolly] now alive he would certainly be as stout an opponent of the Socialism which we see coming into being as Father Kane was of that socialism which many brilliant writers believed would liberate and elevate the dispossessed millions of the earth.[21]

With Connolly and Father Kane united, the author praised the ITGWU and proposed a Gaelic co-operative social organisation following the ideals of A.E (George William Russell), Sir Horace Plunkett and Connolly 'up to the point where Socialism should come in'.[22] This point seemed reassuringly far away.

'The Labour Movement as the last refuge of a scoundrel'

During, and after, the Sinn Féin convention of October 1917, which in its new constitution advocated 'a living wage' for Irish workers, four pamphlets were published about Sinn Féin and socialism. The three socialist authors – Rose MacKenna, 'Ronald' and Charles Russell of the SPI – either argued that political change was irrelevant to workers, who would still be the bottom dogs, or assumed that 'true' Irish nationalism would necessarily revive the Gaelic social system which, following Connolly, they equated with communism.[23] Russell attacked Sinn Féin for using a national guise in order to establish a foreign system – capitalism.

An unknown author under the name 'Spálpín', a pseudonym used at times by both Connolly and Arthur Griffith, articulated the official Sinn Féin line in a 1918 pamphlet.[24] The writer warned the labour movement to break all connections with British organisations, demanded that it use its economic power in general strikes to support nationalist demands (which

eventually happened), and threatened that if the Labour Party took part in the upcoming elections and did not abstain from taking seats in Westminster, this would be 'a declaration of war upon Sinn Féin which Sinn Féin could not possibly ignore'. Attacking Larkinites (such as P.T. Daly and Seán O'Casey) who allegedly 'misused' Connolly against Sinn Féin, 'Spálpín' described such people as:

> the type of man who, being kicked off every other platform, adopts the Labour Movement as the last refuge of a scoundrel…that type of 'Labour' man who never labours…and that type of 'Socialist Revolutionary' who fled from the revolutionary organisation and adopted 'Pacifism' as the last refuge of a coward.[25]

As Connolly had fought under the Sinn Féin flag, argued 'Spálpín', Labour should accept Sinn Féin's political leadership, but could hardly expect Sinn Féin to favour one section of the nation by promoting socialism. As Sinn Féin was broad enough to admit every Labour man, 'Spálpín' hoped that Labour would be nationalist enough to admit every Sinn Féiner:

> Men suffering from economic discontent do terrible things – men inspired by patriotism do great things. Men inspired by patriotism came out to die for Ireland in Easter Week – men moved by economic discontent came out to loot. The disease of economic discontent may be cured, but the inspired gift of patriotism can never be destroyed.[26]

Despite such sentiments, it is clear that many Sinn Féiners were deducing that criticism of labour would do more harm than good. On the labour side, there was little appetite for a squabble with the nationalist movement. The new labour paper, *Irish Opinion: the Voice of Labour*, which first appeared about five weeks after the Sinn Féin convention of 1917, rejected middle-class 'perversions' of 'true' Irish nationalism, as understood by Connolly. However, while the paper insisted on labour's right to engage in industrial activity, it also indicated its willingness to support Sinn Féin in the political sphere. The paper's position aroused suspicion among some people and, inevitably, speculation about its mysterious financier led to assumptions that it was either out to capture Irish workers for Sinn Féin or to undermine the republicans in the interest of the British or the home rulers.[27] The upcoming general election, to be held after the end of the First World War, was clearly in many people's minds. In the event, a special Labour congress held in November 1918 reversed a previous decision to contest the elections, though, ironically, the gathering also adopted the movement's strongest socialist programme thus far, and stressed its political ambitions by changing the order in its name from ITUCLP to ILPTUC (Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress).[28]

'Deal with Socialism by being a Socialist'

Despite Labour's withdrawal from the elections, Sinn Féin had to take account of significant radical tendencies and a discernible sympathy among workers with the Bolshevik revolution. The socialist challenge could not simply be ignored as it was in the nineteenth century. Consequently, attempts to address the issue occur in nationalist literature of the time; the well-known republican propagandist Aodh de Blácam, for example, had this to say in 1921: 'If St. Patrick were here today, I know that he would deal with Socialism by being a Socialist; and would go with Socialism as far as Socialism did not part with the law of God.'[29] Following A.E. and Darrell Figgis, de Blácam argued for a system of social Gaelicism as a way of uniting the nation. He used the syndicalist concept of 'One Big Union' (OBU) to describe Sinn Féin's aim of uniting the different classes in the fight for independence. In a similar vein, he equated Connolly's concept of a workers' republic with a Gaelic state, Catholic social policy, the communist republic of Russia and the *Civitas Dei* of St Augustine. It was a muddle, but de Blácam – believing that Bolshevism was 'born in Ireland' – was unstintingly hyperbolic in his description of Connolly's impact:

> The bullet that killed James Connolly slew also the Capitalistic Order. It sanctified labour with a martyrdom, and damned labour's enemies with a mortal crime. Whether it is agreeable to our wishes or not, we have to recognise that the doctrine of James Connolly has completely conquered industrial Ireland since his death. His work has also affected developments in Russia and Revolutionary Germany, and may yet show its fruits in France, America and Australia. This is a big saying. Yet it is known to all that the Bolsheviks, the only protagonists in the great world-struggle who performed a great act of renunciation in the name of Conscience, Justice and Liberty, were led by men who studied Connolly's writings and watched his career.[30]

According to de Blácam, Connolly, intent on restoring the old Gaelic system, had used the term 'workers' republic' merely as 'international vocabulary' to make himself better understood. For de Blácam, the workers' republic was the republic declared in 1916, sealed 'not only by Connolly's own blood, but by the ratifying blood of the Columcille of our days [Pádraig Pearse]'. It incorporated the 'Irish spiritual tradition', which the future Irish state would revive by banning English language books and papers, cooperating with the Catholic Church – as in the 1918 anti-conscription campaign – and decentralising the state into regional politico-economic co-operative units of small peasants and artisans. To urban workers, who did not fit into this idyll, he suggested that their syndicalist unions establish co-operative industries, take over the market and outdo the capitalists. Overwhelmed by his own vision, he declaimed: 'Let us press eagerly along the road before us…the Gaelic road – for who knows but that,

at the next turn, it may reveal the beauty of the *Civitas Dei* set among the Irish hills?'[31] And he concluded in an abstruse medley of the most diverse ideologies:

> There is really but one cause in the world, the cause of the weak truth against the strong lie. Lenin and Trotsky in Russia battling against lies and force; Labour struggling against its self-appointed tyrants; the Gaelic tongue striving against the foreign jargon; Ireland striving against England – all are but phases of the single war that still rages undecided, though certain in its outcome – the warfare of the Christian State against the Gates of Hell.[32]

Remarkably, the *Voice of Labour* reviewed the volume from which this extract is taken – *Towards the Republic* (1918) – as 'a book that brings Connolly's *Re-Conquest* up to date'.[33] Such an appraisal may sound like an insult to Connolly, but in fact it illustrates perfectly the mind-confusing euphoria of early 1919. De Blácam, who worried about 'Red-Flaggery', went on to write a preface for a socialist pamphlet, Selma Sigerson's *Sinn Féin and Socialism* (1919).[34] A member of the Socialist Party of Ireland (SPI), she warned that Sinn Féin would become Labour's main enemy unless it aimed at radical social change and the abolition of the wage system. De Blácam, however, stressed the shared admiration of Sinn Féin and the socialists for the old Gaelic system and he dismissed Sigerson's 'obsession' with abolishing the wage system as an irrelevant matter of personal taste. Sigerson seemed content with de Blácam's preface and, instead of criticising Sinn Féin, she attacked Thomas Johnson as a reformist and an Englishman who had still not taken a stand publicly for the Easter Rising. Consequently, she alleged that he had no right to represent Irish workers (at the international socialist conference in Berne, in this instance).

By 1921, in his book *What Sinn Féin Stands For*, de Blácam was equating the politics of Connolly and Arthur Griffith and declaring the Irish-Ireland movement the ultimate synthesis of nationalism and internationalism. Four years later, he attacked the progressive views of A.E., W.B. Yeats, Lennox Robinson and Liam O'Flaherty on censorship, divorce and education. In 1939, he presented Wolfe Tone, implicitly, as a forerunner of the 1937 constitution and of the Catholic democracy it embodied, which, in his opinion, made Éire the most democratic state in the world.[35] At that stage, de Blácam was a prominent Fianna Fáil propagandist and an admirer of General Franco, the Spanish dictator.[36]

Views from the United States

If there was some sympathy for the Bolsheviks and socialism in Ireland, the same was not true of Irish-American nationalism. On 12 December 1918, the Irish-American Cardinal O'Connell declared before a hearing of the US House of Representatives' Committee on Foreign Affairs:

> Is it the Bolsheviki only who now are to be acknowledged as free? Is it because, being Catholic, the Irish people repudiate Bolshevism that they are now to be repudiated and their just claim forgotten and neglected?… Let the test of sincerity be Ireland. Then we will be convinced that the truth still lives.[37]

More openly anti-socialist, the Irish-American Sinn Féiners also sought to redefine the legacy of James Connolly and they promoted him as a Catholic nationalist. In October 1918, ex-socialist David Goldstein of the Catholic Truth Guild rejected an invitation to speak from the Boston-based James Connolly Literary Society in terms that clearly reflect the influence of these views:

> the name of your society is wilfully misleading. [It] leads one to believe that you seek to attract Irishmen to the cause for which the martyrs of the Dublin Easter Day Rebellion gave their lives, a cause that is becoming to Ireland as [the] land of Saints, which is certainly not the cause of Socialism…your announcement in the Socialist press openly states your purpose to be that of propagating Marxian Socialism, which in its very nature is anti-religious and anti-patriotic.[38]

Likewise, in June 1918, a New York Sinn Féiner complained to Dublin Sinn Féin that the Irish Progressive League, a radical alternative to Clan-na-Gael, was a socialist cover organisation and that Nora Connolly (a daughter of James Connolly) and Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington, who worked in it, were 'notorious socialists'. He suspected that Jim Larkin and Patrick L. Quinlan, both radical socialists, were behind the league and he urged the Dublin leadership not to let the two named women stand for Sinn Féin at the coming election.[39] In general, Irish-American middle-class nationalists disputed the socialists' right to Connolly's heritage and they presented Sinn Féin as the antithesis of socialism and Bolshevism.

Connolly remade

By the early 1920s, Connolly had been remade in many images. Socialists such as Selma Sigerson were sanguine about this, believing that his 'gifts were large enough for trivial misinterpretations' and that his politics would 'endure into ultimate clarity'.[40] However, the political climate of the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland did little to facilitate such clarity. With various nationalist and labour groupings remaking 'their' Connolly according to their respective visions, internal and external conflicts were furthered.

The Labour Party, in particular, saw itself as 'Connolly's party', though from the 1930s to the 1950s, the party was eager to distance itself from Connolly's communist legatees. In the conflict between the ITGWU and

Larkin in the 1920s, both sides referred to Connolly – the former (especially William O'Brien) hawking about personal references; the Larkinists and communists drawing justification from his politics. Indeed, by 1923, the ITGWU had firmly established itself as 'Connolly's union'. From 1918, it rhetorically adhered to Connolly's ideas about the moral value of syndicalist organisation without, however, actually embracing industrial unionism as a method of fighting for social change. Organisation became an end in itself. The ITGWU largely accepted church authority in workers' education and even in the interpretation of Connolly. Republicans also continued to claim the 'Connolly tradition' as their own and, in the 1930s, groups such as Saor Éire and the Republican Congress leaned heavily on his legacy. The Communist Party of Ireland (CPI), in its various manifestations, likewise laid claim to Connolly, helped initially by the active involvement of Roddy Connolly, the only son of the martyred socialist. On the other side of the political spectrum, establishment parties such as Fianna Fáil (founded in 1926) worked to incorporate Connolly into the ideology of the state – a sort of social conscience of the national independence struggle. In the hands of the state, Connolly's nationalism was always emphasised.

In 1977, Connolly's daughter, Nora, then an old woman, concluded that there was no political party in existence following her father's ideals.[41] In truth, there could not be. Attempts to claim the 'entire Connolly' for one particular political purpose aspired to something he had never managed to achieve himself. Of course, the personality-centred, traditionalist and 'heroising' context of Irish politics also saw Connolly's family play a role. Nora Connolly O'Brien (1893–1981) was supportive of the Sinn Féin tradition, giving it a left-wing image by linking it with her father, though, ironically, many Sinn Féiners distrusted her as a socialist. In 1918–21, she worked for the ITGWU and was an SPI member. Lillie Connolly (James's wife) and Ina Connolly (another daughter) were present at Gaelic League, Sinn Féin and SPI events. After 1919, Roddy Connolly (1901–80), who had participated in the 1916 rebellion as a 15-year-old, worked for the transformation of the SPI into the CPI, which he led from October 1921 to 1923, also editing its paper. Nora Connolly was also active in the CPI and a left-wing republican during the Civil War, suffering imprisonment for a time.

The Connolly family was by no means unified in their political views or in their understanding of James Connolly's politics. In 1923, during the ITGWU/Larkin dispute, Lillie Connolly supported William O'Brien, while Roddy defended Larkin. Both Nora and Roddy Connolly – via communist groupings – reached the Republican Congress in 1934 and the Labour Party in 1935. Roddy remained a Labour Party activist all his life, also defending the party's right-wing turns. Nora left the party in 1940 in protest at the withdrawal of its 1936 Workers' Republic programme. She became an independent senator nominated by Fianna Fáil, and gave legitimacy to the state commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the 1916

Rising. Later, she supported Sinn Féin and the Provisional IRA and expressed admiration for Séamus Costello of the Irish Republican Socialist Party, who was assassinated in Dublin in 1977. Ina Connolly and her husband, Archie Heron, remained committed to the Labour Party and the ITGWU from the 1920s. Fiona Connolly (1907–76) was close to the British Communist Party and the Connolly Association. Connolly's grandson Brian Heron was active in the US students' movement, while a great-grandson edited the somewhat haphazard *Words of James Connolly* (1986).[42] Ross Connolly, Roddy's son, was an organiser for the Federation of Rural Workers in 1947–58.[43] In short, the political family history illustrates a part of the spectrum of Connolly's legatees and the contested nature of the legacy.

Connolly's later reception cannot be detailed here.[44] His post-1923, and in particular his post-1966, impact still needs to be studied in depth. New impetus might be gained from recent flourishing research fields such as the 'culture of memory' and the 'politics of memory', which have produced outstanding works on the continent. Impetus may also be taken from the post-1989 national identity studies of dependent nations, for example of those that for 70 years were seen as integral parts of the states of 'actually existing socialism'. Of course, Connolly's legacy can only be profitably studied in the context of his politics and, for that reason, it is disappointing that there are no scholarly editions of Connolly's complete, selected or longer individual works.[45] Perhaps, the centenary of his death in 2016 will encourage such publications, though one hopes we do not have to wait quite that long.

Notes

1. Margaretta D'Arcy and John Arden, *The Non-Stop Connolly Show: A Dramatic Cycle of Continuous Struggle in Six Parts*, Vol. 4 (London, 1977–78), p. 88. This was staged at Liberty Hall, Dublin, at Easter 1975, and in London on 17–31 May 1976 (see *Irish Times*, 13 May 1976). Also see Margaretta D'Arcy and John Arden, 'A socialist hero on the stage: some of the problems involved in dramatising the life and work of James Connolly', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 3 (1977), pp. 159–83.
2. *Forward,* 3 May 1913.
3. *Forward*, 15 August 1914; *Irish Worker*, 8, 22 August, 5 September 1914.
4. Helga Woggon, *Integrativer Sozialismus und nationale Befreiung: Politik und Wirkungsgeschichte James Connollys in Irland* (Göttingen and Zürich, 1990), p. 289.
5. This is not to support the psycho-historic theory that childhood circumstances conditioned Connolly to aspire to heroic fame through a revolutionary martyr's death, as suggested in Michael Naumann, *Strukturwandel des Heroismus. Vom sakralen zum revolutionären Heldentum* (Königstein, 1984). His speculations on Connolly's early years are contrary to the facts established by C. Desmond Greaves, though nonetheless intriguing.
6. See Woggon, *Integrativer Sozialismus*, *passim*.

7. Connolly would not neglect an economic strike even weeks before the 1916 Rising; see, for example, Helga Woggon, 'Not merely a labour organisation: the ITGWU and the Dublin dock strike, 1915–16', *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, vol. 27 (2002), pp. 43–54.
8. W.K. Anderson, *James Connolly and the Irish Left* (Dublin, 1994), p. 13.
9. W.P. Ryan, *The Irish Labour Movement from the Twenties to Our Own Day* (Dublin, 1919), p. 265.
10. J. Anthony Gaughan, *Thomas Johnson, 1872–1963: Irish Labour Leader* (Dublin, 1980), p. 193.
11. *The American Trial of Big Jim Larkin* (Belfast, 1976), p. 73.
12. One of a series of leaflets circulated in 1923, contained in National Library of Ireland (NLI), William O'Brien Papers, LOP 113, no. 44. Misspelling in the original.
13. Gaughan, *Thomas Johnson*, p. 103. Interestingly, Gaughan points out that, although Johnson and O'Brien were involved in administrating donations for the 1918 anti-conscription campaign (collected mainly after Sunday masses and amounting to some £250,000), Labour received none of it, while Sinn Féin got at least £10,000.
14. Letter by Thomas Foran to James Larkin, 9 June 1919, quoted in Arthur Mitchell, *Labour in Irish Politics, 1890–1930* (Dublin, 1974), p. 106.
15. 1.2 million electors were newly enfranchised, two-thirds of whom women, the rest mainly working-class men.
16. *Irish Opinion – The Voice of Labour*, 8 December 1917, p. 17.
17. *Irish Opinion*, autumn 1916, quoted in *Forward*, 28 October 1916.
18. *Irish Opinion,* 3 March 1917.
19. *Dublin Saturday Post*, 29 July 1916. Original emphasis.
20. Gerald O'Connor, *James Connolly: A Study of his Work and Worth* (Dublin and Manchester, 1917). A pre-1909 IRB member, he taught at St Enda's, 1909–16; see Henry Boylan, *A Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Dublin, 1978), p. 201, and Peter Berresford Ellis (ed.), *James Connolly: Selected Writings* (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 310.
21. O'Connor, *James Connolly*, p. 14.
22. Ibid., p. 23.
23. Rose MacKenna, *A Plea for Social Emancipation in Ireland* (Manchester, 1917); Ronald [pseud.], *Freedom's Road for Irish Workers* (Manchester, 1917); Charles Russell, *Should the Workers of Ireland Support Sinn Féin?* (Dublin, 1918).
24. Spálpín, *Sinn Féin and the Labour Movement* (Dublin, n.d. [early 1918]).
25. Ibid., p. 18.
26. Ibid., p. 10.
27. *Irish Opinion*, 15 December 1917; Mitchell, *Labour in Irish Politics*, p. 91. Selma Sigerson (Open Letter to Thomas Johnson), *Socialist*, 3 April 1919, claimed that the Englishman Malcolm Lyon had given £1,000 for labour to purchase the paper.
28. Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824–1960* (Dublin, 1992), p. 104.
29. Aodh de Blácam, *What Sinn Féin Stands For* (Dublin, n.d. [1921]), p. 109.
30. Aodh de Blácam, *Towards the Republic* (Dublin, n.d. [end of 1918]), p. 31.
31. Ibid., p. 107, original emphasis.
32. Ibid., pp. 109–10.
33. *Voice of Labour*, 4 January 1919.
34. Selma Sigerson, *Sinn Féin and Socialism* (Dublin, 1919), with a preface by Aodh de Blácam. Reprinted, with other pieces, in *Sinn Féin and Socialism* (Cork, 1977), pp. 38–49. It is the Cork edition which is quoted from here.

35. Aodh de Blácam, *The Black North* (Dublin, 1938 [3rd edn 1942]), p. 297. For 1925, see Henry Summerfield, *That Myriad-Minded Man: A Biography of George William Russell, 'A.E.', 1867–1935* (Gerrards Cross, 1975), pp 229–30.
36. S.J. Connolly (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 137–8.
37. House of Representatives (ed.), *The Irish Question. Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Affairs on H.J. Res. 357, 12 December 1918, 65th Congress, 3rd Session* (Washington, 1919) (House Documents, vol. 107, no. 1832), pp. 15–17.
38. James Connolly Literary Society (Boston), *An Open Letter to the Irish Working Class Wherever Found, 1 October 1918* (Boston, 1918), p. 4, in NLI, O'Brien Papers, LOP 79.
39. Report on postal censorship, PRO, London, CO 904/165/2.
40. Sigerson, *Sinn Féin*, p. 40.
41. Interview with Nora Connolly O'Brien published in the *Irish Press*, 13 May 1977.
42. James Connolly Heron (ed.), *The Words of James Connolly* (Cork, 1986); also see Nora Connolly O'Brien and Eibhlín Ní Sheidhir (eds), *James Connolly Wrote for Today* (Dublin, 1978).
43. Ross Connolly, 'Memories of a union organiser in County Wicklow', *Labour History News*, no. 2 (1986), pp. 7–10. For Lillie Connolly who converted to Catholicism after the Rising, see obituaries in *Catholic Bulletin*, 28 (1938), pp. 102–3; *Labour News*, 29 January 1938; NLI, Ms.17.114(4). For Nora see Postal Censorship 1917/18, Report 69, pp. 14–15, and Report 71, p. 10, PRO, London, CO 904/165/2; also CO 904/165/1 and 23/7, no. 53/6094. Of Connolly's other daughters, Mona (1891–1904) died after an accident, while little is known about Moira and Aideen.
44. See Woggon, *Integrativer Sozialismus*, also on unionism and labour in the North.
45. See Aindrias Ó Cathasaigh, 'James Connolly and the writing of *Labour in Irish History* (1910)', *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, vol. 27 (2002), pp. 103–8.

10

Labour Militancy during the Irish War of Independence

Conor Kostick

Introduction

Between 1918 and the conclusion of the Irish War of Independence in 1921 the organised Irish working class made five distinct and powerful interventions. On 23 April 1918 a general strike took place against the threat of conscription; for a month at the beginning of 1919 Belfast was gripped by a strike for a shorter working week; in April that year Limerick workers took over their city and declared soviet rule; in April 1920 a massive general strike forced the release of hungerstrikers; and for most of 1920 transport workers sabotaged the movements of men and material by the British Army. Alongside these set-piece battles was a general spirit of resistance and confidence in the possibility of taking action amongst Irish workers, who were themselves part of a great upsurge of revolutionary enthusiasm that was sweeping through Europe. For the context of Ireland's struggle for independence was that of the dramatic and epoch-making prospect of working-class revolution spreading westwards from Russia. From October 1918 Germany was in the throes of revolutionary events, beginning with the mutiny of the sailors of the German High Seas Fleet. For the next five years the prospect of an extension of the Russian example through Germany terrified those in power and elated the European left. Even the victors in the First World War experienced internal social unrest, and Britain and France faced independence revolts in their colonies. But it was the mutinies of their own soldiers and the seemingly irrepressible waves of strikes that most alarmed those in power. In August 1919 Lloyd George, the British prime minister, was reported as saying that 'Ireland had hated England and always would. He could easily govern Ireland with the sword; he was far more concerned about the Bolsheviks at home.'[1] Sir Henry Wilson, a key figure in the British war cabinet, and the most consistent advocate of taking a hard line with regard to Ireland, wrote a summary of his perspective on the world situation in his diary:

If England goes on like this she will lose the Empire. There is absolutely no grip anywhere. I propose, after the New Year, and after I have a holiday, to take a rather active part in matters – even in some (like Ireland and Egypt) which are not solely military.

The coming year looks gloomy. We are certain to have serious trouble in Ireland, Egypt and India, possibly even with the Bolsheviks. At home, those who know best say we are going to have a strike of the triple alliance and the Post Office. This will be a direct attack on the life of the nation.'[2]

Social conflict in Ireland

It is easy when looking back at the period to underestimate the impact of this great international social ferment in Ireland. After all, the written records tend to focus on government decision-making, or the memoirs of the more highly educated political activists. The aspirations and thoughts of working-class activists are far less well documented. As a result the story of the leaders of the national movement, for example, is well-known and much scrutinised. But it is not always appreciated that Ireland had over a hundred 'soviets' in those five years, that is, workplace takeovers, usually in pursuit of economic grievances, but nonetheless raised to a higher level of significance by the workers' self-conscious emulation of their Russian counterparts.

One way of measuring the growth in independent working-class activity is through the statistics on strikes and the exponential rise of trade union membership. The government-noted number of strikes or lockouts rose from 62 in 1915 to 75 in 1916, 112 in 1917 and over 200 for 1918 through to 1920. The Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC) saw its affiliates grow from 100,000 in 1916 to 156,000 in 1919 and a peak of 225,000 by 1920. Even more dramatically the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU) grew from 12,000 in the autumn of 1917 to 68,000 by 1918.[3] Perhaps a more vivid illustration of the constant presence of social conflict during this time is to take the example of the bitter class war that took place on the land. Broadly speaking there were two trends of agricultural struggle during the War of Independence. In the west, led by the owners of smaller farms and their propertyless relatives, was a movement to redistribute the land and cattle of the larger estates, especially those owned by absentee or unionist landlords. In the east, the struggle was more typically waged by agricultural labourers seeking wage increases and union recognition from the owners of large farms. In both cases the forms of conflict took their inspiration and symbols from the traditions of socialist revolution. So, when the tenants of the absentee landlord James Dennison Going's 300-acre estate at Broadford, County Limerick, took it over in February 1922, they declared a 'soviet'. Landless men in Broadford were let land for tillage. A part was

kept for meadowing, the stock was watched and fences repaired. The lodge was taken over as a centre for the soviet organisation, and the landlord and his agent were helpless until republican civil guards arrived at the nearby vacated RIC barracks.[4] In the south-east, from the great number of strikes by agricultural labourers, there are several examples of class conflict reaching the point of open warfare. In November 1919 the 'battle of Fenor' took place in County Waterford. This was a running conflict between 121 police, who were escorting a threshing machine to an anti-union farm, and some 300 workers led by Nicholas Phelan, Waterford County Secretary of the ITGWU. A fierce riot 'in which revolver shots, batons and bayonets were freely used' eventually forced the workers to disperse, but not before they had destroyed 80 tons of hay, over 400 barrels of barely and a large barn.[5] If the workers often carried the red flag into battle, then the farmers had their own symbols of class organisation. In May 1920 a 'white army', the Farmers' Freedom Force (FFF), was created 'as a national bulwark against Labour, Socialism and Bolshevism, irrespective of whatever political developments may take place in the country'. This was no eccentric fringe organisation, as it was backed by farmers' unions everywhere and the paper the *Irish Farmer*.[6] Some groups of farm workers responded by seeking arms and appointing 'red commanders' for their own forces, leading to scenes such as that described by the *Watchword of Labour* on 8 May 1920: 'the country around Castletownroche, Co. Cork, where a strike has been in progress for the past fortnight, resembles a battlefield, trees have been hewn down, telegraph poles levelled, fairs and markets held up, etc.'. Following the retreat of the Carlow Farmers' Association in a dispute with the ITGWU three months later, the same paper declared:

> It is disappointing when, with one's courage screwed to the fighting point the enemy turns tail and flees. All arrangements had been made by us for a remorselessly-waged fight. The Red commandants had perfected their plan of campaign, and the rank and file were ready. This was to have been no mere stay-out holiday strike. The time is past when battles are won by men on holiday. The experience of last year's land strikes has proved that if the proletariat of the land are to win against the organised farmers, victory only comes through organised aggression not organised passivity. Terrorism is the most potent of Labour's weapons, and while every weapon in our armoury must be used, it is on the Red Terror that our greatest reliance is placed.[7]

The significance of these examples is not just that they illustrate the background of social conflict against which the War of Independence was taking place, but they give a glimpse of the kind of spirit that had taken hold of sections of the working population, and this spirit was intertwined with the struggle for national independence.

By the summer of 1921 the British administration of Ireland had been reduced to the urban centres. Elsewhere courts no longer functioned; tax collection was in abeyance; policing was no longer possible. In part this state of affairs had been created by the activities of the Irish Republican Army's (IRA) flying columns, which by April 1920 had obliged the police and army to retreat from their smaller posts and gather in larger barracks. But the guerrilla tactics of the IRA were sustained by an actively sympathetic population, who themselves were involved in boycotts, demonstrations and strikes. The level of popular support for the national movement is hard to measure but indisputable. A good example of the underlying popular enthusiasm for the struggle is the support that existed for the illegal structures of government created by Dáil Éireann;[8] the decisions of the newly created Sinn Féin courts that were established in nearly every town and village to cope with the vacuum created by the collapse of British administration were generally upheld. As an East Limerick Sinn Féin member remembered, 'strangely enough, the litigants and people concerned in these cases were generally satisfied to abide by the decision of the Sinn Féin court, rather than seek redress from the British courts, because they felt that in such a case the weight of public opinion would be set against them'.[9]

The British administration of Ireland can be likened to a tree, whose trunk was Dublin and whose branches reached out into every part of the country; by 1921 this tree was withered and stripped bare – being reduced to just the major branches. The question for nationalists was how to uproot it altogether, and here there was a problem. The limited availability of arms meant there was never a possibility of the approximately 3,000 fighting forces of the IRA defeating up to 100,000 British forces. For all the sympathy of the population, Dáil Éireann and the shadowy outline of an alternative governmental structure was struggling to hold its own in the face of repression, let alone threatening to replace the administration of Dublin Castle. The inability of Britain to rule large parts of Ireland but the equal impossibility of it being forcibly dislodged by the IRA was ultimately the reason for the compromise represented by the Treaty of 6 December 1921. In so far as the core administration of the colony was rocked, it was by the intervention of the working class.

Strike against conscription

The defining moment for the emergence of an independent working-class voice in the War of Independence was the conscription crisis of 1918. From the end of March the British Army was reeling under a German offensive along a front of 50 miles. Sir Henry Wilson, with typical directness, insisted that the British cabinet conscript Irishmen to provide the human material to block this drive. He 'was not afraid to take 100,000 to 150,000 recalcit-

rant conscripted Irishmen into an army of 2 1/2 million, fighting in five theatres of war'.[10] Lloyd George wanted to connect the proposed Manpower Bill to the prospect of home rule for Ireland, in the hope of retaining the support of the Irish Parliamentary Party, now led by John Dillon following the death of John Redmond on 6 March 1918. But struggling from recent by-election losses and discredited from its participation in the Irish Convention – a forum popularly seen as no more than a device to keep Irish aspirations on hold until after the war – the Irish Parliamentary Party could not comply with Lloyd George's goals. They withdrew from parliament as a protest on 16 April when the Military Service Bill was passed by 301 votes to 103.

In Ireland the first demonstration of opposition to conscription took place on the steps of Belfast's Custom House, when the previous Sunday, 14 April, the ITUC had called an anti-conscription meeting that was attended by between 8,000 and 10,000 people.[11] That Thursday the Lord Mayor of Dublin convened a conference at the Mansion House to discuss a national response to the crisis. Present were the Parliamentary Party, Sinn Féin and the All-For-Ireland League. The ITUC was also represented by William O'Brien and Thomas Johnson and although they were not supposed to formally participate – since the ITUC had its own conference due two days later – the labour delegates could not resist the heady pull of high politics. The conference agreed to the formulation drawn up by Eamonn de Valera that 'the passage of the Conscription Bill…must be regarded as a declaration of war on the Irish Nation…the attempt to enforce it will be an unwarrantable aggression, which we call upon all Irishmen [*sic*] to resist by the most effective means at their disposal'.[12] Since that very evening the Catholic bishops were holding their annual meeting at Maynooth the conference sent a deputation to appeal to them to sanction a pledge which the conference had drawn up with the aim of having it signed at churches the following Sunday. The bishops agreed, and issued their own manifesto. A 'National Cabinet' was created as a steering committee for the campaign, which included the two labour representatives, alongside Arthur Griffith and Eamonn de Valera for Sinn Féin, and John Dillon and Joseph Devlin from the Parliamentary Party.

The broad base of the campaign was an important precondition for its success, but the uncritical absorption of labour into what was very visibly a strongly Catholic and pan-nationalist initiative came at a price – namely the alienation of potential supporters among the Protestant workforce of the North. The fact that the ITUC had a basis for an independent voice, supportive but outside of the Catholic alliance, was shown at their own special conference, where 1,500 delegates from all parts of Ireland voted for a 24-hour general strike 'amid scenes of indescribable enthusiasm'. The Irish Women Workers' Union organised a demonstration for the day that marched through Dublin to the City Hall and pledged support for the strike.[13]

The strike took place on Tuesday 23 April and its impact was electrifying. Factories, shops and even pubs remained closed. All transport stopped, cab drivers refusing fares of £10 from visitors anxious to go to the Punchestown races. Almost every town saw marches, despite a ban from the authorities. Local studies show that trades councils took the lead in enforcing the strike and leading marches. In Navan, 6,000 people had already fought the police at an anti-conscription rally where they had resolved to burn the pro-British *Irish Times* and *Evening Mail*. In Thurles the members of the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) led a demonstration of 1,500, which included seven or eight companies of volunteers and one of Cumann na mBan. In Sligo 2,000 people followed the bands and banners to the Town Hall Square to hear the mayor, who was also a representative of the Railway Clerks, and John Lynch of the ITGWU.[14] The strike had limited success in the North, although at Ballycastle a conscious effort to be non-sectarian about the issue saw a march with bands alternatively playing '*The Boyne Water*' and '*A Nation Once Again*'. In Belfast, Thomas Johnson, later leader of the Irish Labour Party, lost his job as a commercial traveller for addressing a crowd of 3,000; he was immediately appointed secretary of the anti-conscription campaign.[15]

The overall success of the day's action stunned the *Irish Times*, which acknowledged that 'April 23rd will be chiefly remembered as the day on which Irish Labour realised its strength'.[16] The protest not only registered the massive opposition to conscription that existed in Ireland, but precipitated an upsurge of popular activity on both the national and social question. As David Fitzpatrick's detailed examination for Clare shows, it is from this moment onward that a strong upsurge of support took place for the volunteers and activities such as the boycotting of police barracks. No turf, butter, eggs or milk were supplied to the RIC and when they sought to forcibly obtain services, magistrates' decisions blocked their right to do so.[17] Similarly, Peadar McMahon, the Brigade Adjutant for Limerick, remembered that 'the threat of conscription brought a rush of volunteers into the various companies'.[18] Meanwhile, the number of new branches registering for the ITGWU leapt from two a month in 1917 to about twenty a month for the second half of 1918.[19] In several areas it was the ITGWU that was taking the lead in the struggle for independence. The Limerick May Day rally of 1918 was very significant; in a foreshadowing of the dramatic events soon to take place there, between ten and fifteen thousand workers took part in the procession whose themes were anti-conscription and fraternal greetings to their Russian comrades.[20]

The national movement was rapidly gathering pace, accelerated by the formation of Dáil Éireann in January 1919 in the wake of the Sinn Féin success in the general election of December 1918, and the beginning of military activity in Tipperary on 21 January 1919. It seemed as though the British authorities were to be challenged by a largely Catholic nationalism

in the South, but that at least they could depend on staunch support from the North. Yet suddenly it was the North that was the most unstable part of Ireland, and that to which troops had to be hastily sent. For in January 1919 control of Belfast was briefly in the hands of a group of Protestant and Catholic workers.

The Belfast strike

During the war working hours had been pushed up, until many engineers found themselves working twelve-hour days and a half-day on Saturday. With the ending of the war the pressure was eased, and at the same time unemployment swelled with the return of thousands of soldiers. The trade unions' response to this situation was to demand that the employers reduce the working week to 44 hours and maintain production by increasing employment. The popularity and militancy associated with this demand in Belfast was shown at midday on 14 January 1919 when, after a ballot had taken place on whether to strike for the shorter working week, a spontaneous 'down tools' took place in the shipyard so that 20,000 workers could march to City Hall for a rally.[21] When the overwhelming vote in favour of the strike became known, impatient power station and gas workers struck on Saturday afternoon 25 January. That night people had to walk home through darkness as Belfast's street lights were off, a situation that was to continue for nearly a month. The next day 8,000 workers came to the Customs House steps to hear their strike committee confirm that the strike was officially under way. On Monday all electricity was stopped, except a small amount that was allowed by special dispensation of the strike committee for hospitals to be kept in good supply. The first response of the shipyard owners was to try to continue work despite the strike, using foremen and apprentices to keep the yards open. But a spontaneous picket of 2,000 strikers broke through the gates and brought out the apprentices, before stoning the company offices for good measure. By nightfall the strike committee was in control of not just the power supply of the city but also the streets. No traffic could travel down Queen's Road, for example, without a pass issued by the committee.[22]

The correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian* sent the following report: '"Soviet" has an unpleasant sound in English ears, and one uses it with hesitation; but it nevertheless appears to be the fact that the Strike Committee have taken upon themselves, with the involuntary acquiescence of the civic authority, some of the attributes of an industrial soviet.'[23] The mayor of Belfast admitted that 'as far as the municipal undertakings were concerned [he was] entirely at the mercy of the strike committee'.[24] A telegram from the Belfast authorities confirmed the situation, that small businesses were having to contact the strike leaders: 'The workmen have formed a 'soviet' committee, and this committee had received 47 applications from

small traders for permission to use light.'[25] Some businesses, such as the *Belfast Telegraph* and a number of city centre shops, attempted to utilise power without such permission. In response, large crowds of workers gathered, and despite appeals for restraint from their leaders, put bricks through the windows of the offenders. The *Belfast Telegraph*, Belfast's most staunchly unionist paper, ceased production for a week.[26] For the next few weeks the most widely read paper in the city was the *Workers' Bulletin*, which was produced by the strike committee and ran for eighteen issues. It is noteworthy that the strike committee consisted of both Protestant and Catholic trade unionists, with a Catholic, Charles McKay, at the head of a strike in which Protestant workers were in the majority.

The same Monday that the strike began, the British government announced its intention to introduce the eight-hour day for railway workers. This was to head off possible solidarity from railworkers for the engineering strike that was also taking place in all the major British cities, and most militantly in Glasgow. In Belfast the news did not prevent railworkers unofficially joining the strike on Tuesday 28 January. Other groups of workers also joined the movement. Graveyard workers, also without the sanction of their union leaders, walked out to participate in the strike. In the rope factories, the mainly female workforce learned that pickets were due to arrive to bring them out, and they too struck on their own initiative. Meanwhile at the Sirocco engineering works some strike-breakers and apprentices managed to keep the factory open temporarily, until strikers cut off the power supply. Theatres were closed in the evenings, while few restaurants and hotels could manage a service. The dark streets of the city were thronged all the same, with excited crowds of workers defying the arrival of snowy weather. By Thursday momentum was still gathering. The strike committee had in fact persuaded the graveyard workers to return for the good of the community. But their forces had been more than replaced with the walkouts of crane men, carpenters, joiners and women workers from the spinning mills. A rent strike began in working-class districts. In Royal Avenue and North Street, more plate-glass windows were put in to prevent employers draining power allocated for emergency services.[27]

A major turning point in the fortunes of the strike came on 4 February when the transport workers sent a deputation to the strike committee and asked to be included in the action. Although the committee was seen as being too radical by the national leadership of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, who suspended them on 6 February, they were not revolutionaries and were nervous of taking a step that would lead to a major escalation of the dispute. As J. Milan of the Electrical Trade Union told the *Belfast Newsletter*, 'the strike committee adopted a policy of procrastination on the matter … the transport workers would come out at any time but they hadn't called on them as the strike committee wasn't sure it could run

the city'.[28] At angry meetings the rank-and-file strikers demanded that the transport workers be brought out, and that the 'up-town' shops (Mackie's, Combe's, Sirocco and the Linfield foundry) join the strike also. But bombarded by newspaper scare stories about how food supplies would give out if there were further escalation, the strike committee lacked the resolve to escalate matters further and put to the vote a proposal to accept a 47-hour working week. The result of the ballot went against the strike committee by 11,963 votes to 8,774.[29] However, sensing a weakening of the strike, the authorities now made their decisive move and the next day sent in troops that had been called up from Dublin. These soldiers guarded the power stations and trams. Attempts to move the trams were met with running battles from mass pickets.[30] The strike committee refused to implement the decision of a mass meeting held in Custom House Square on Sunday to call out the transport workers at last. But the rank-and-file workers had failed to develop any organisational structures independent from the strike committee, and although they expressed their anger and frustration at the committee outside the hotel where talks were taking place with the employers, the engineering factories were now reopening. A gradual drift back to work took place over the next two weeks until on 24 February the strike was officially ended. Belfast's greatest working-class struggle was over and, although they did not know it, the leaders of the national movement had seen a significant turning point pass in their own campaign.

The leaders of Sinn Féin took little interest in this strike. This was not surprising from those on the right of the party, such as Arthur Griffith, who were hostile to independent labour organisation, but even the socialist-inclined Minister for Labour, Countess Markievicz, who at the time was giving fiery speeches in favour of the workers' republic,[31] had no familiarity with northern working-class politics. In fact at no time did Sinn Féin have a strategy for incorporating the North into the struggle for independence. This can be seen from their promotion, in July 1920, of an economic boycott against northern business, which Arthur Griffith believed 'would bring the unionist gentlemen to their sense very quickly'.[32] In fact, the Belfast boycott reinforced the prospect of partition as, despite an estimated loss of £5 million in trade, it demonstrated to northern businesses that they could survive on their connection to the markets of the British Empire.[33]

Outside the Catholic minority of the North, the only constituency that might have been won over to the idea of Irish independence were the more militant Protestant workers, who saw the unionist shipyard owners and employers as their greatest enemies. For over two hundred years there had been a radical, non-sectarian, Protestant tradition in the North, and by 1918 it was most strongly represented in the form of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and other revolutionaries such as those behind the newly created Revolutionary Socialist Party of Ireland, which in 1919 was

holding meetings in Belfast of up to 500 people.[34] In the heightened atmosphere created by the strike for shorter hours, the Belfast left found itself with a large audience. It organised a May Day march of over 100,000 in 1919. The organising secretary was Sam Kyle, whose speech on the day emphasised the Red Flag, internationalism, and the need for Belfast to have independent labour representation.[35] In the municipal elections of January 1920 these activists won an impressive twelve of the city's 60 seats. Sam Kyle topped the poll in the staunchly loyalist Shankill, and only a tiny proportion of his transfers (under the newly introduced proportional representation system) went to unionist candidates.[36] The *Watchword of Labour* was euphoric over the results: 'as Labour stands solidly with Sinn Féin on the National question, the election really means that the Empire is in danger, and with it the whole capitalist system'. From the unionist side alarm was expressed at the growth of the left. No edition of the *Telegraph* from those times was complete without its warning that socialism meant the same as Sinn Féin. Sir Richard Dawson Bates, part-time secretary of the Ulster Unionist Council and Larne gunrunner, estimated a quarter of the strikers were 'out-and-out Socialists and "extremists"'.[37]

However, the hyperbole of the *Watchword* was misplaced. Although the northern radicals were opponents of the local unionist employers, this did not make them supporters of Sinn Féin; in so far as they expressed wider political goals, it was James Connolly's vision of a workers' republic or the Russian example that was championed.[38] In any case the influence of the left over the wider working class was on the wane. The partial defeat of the strike led to demoralisation, and a sudden slump in May 1920 combined with the continuing existence of a large number of unemployed ex-veterans to create the conditions under which a sectarian pogrom could take place. In July, the leading unionist politicians, such as Edward Carson and James Craig, used the Orange marches to make speeches advocating an attack on Labour and Sinn Féin.[39] Loyalists, with the complicity of the shipyard owners, then organised meetings where several thousand unemployed and ex-servicemen gathered to roam through the factories armed with sledgehammers and other weapons. Catholics and socialists had to flee for their lives. Over 7,000 workers lost their jobs, some 2,000 of whom were Protestant trade unionists.[40] Ex-Orange Lodge master, turned Larkin supporter, John Hanna, was among them. In his view, 'during the strike for 44-hours week the capitalist classes saw that the Belfast workers were one. That unity had to be broken, it was accomplished by appeals to the basest passion and intense bigotry.'[41] The mobs also went to Langley Street and burnt to the ground the hall of the ILP, 'and as a result the growth of the Labour movement was stemmed'.[42] With the crushing of radical organisation in Belfast, and the decision of the British cabinet on 8 September 1920 to raise a Special Constabulary, which absorbed the Ulster Volunteer Force into an official security force, the core structures of a future partitioned northern state were in place.

The Limerick soviet

The hold of the British authorities over the rest of Ireland had been steadily weakening throughout 1919, despite increasingly drastic repressive measures, such as the deployment of the notorious 'Black and Tans' in the autumn of that year, and the declaration of martial law in ever larger parts of Ireland. It was the impact of military rule in Limerick that led to the largest soviet of the period, that which took over the running of Limerick City on Sunday 13 April 1919.[43] Because of the heightened tension in the county created by the death of Robert Byrne, adjutant of the Second Battalion of the Limerick IRA, during an escape attempt, General C.J. Griffin had declared the city and part of the county a special military area. In particular he deployed troops onto the bridges over the Shannon and insisted that everyone needing to cross the bridges apply to him for a pass. To obtain a pass a letter had to be forwarded from an RIC sergeant. The costs of the extra policing were to be levied on the rates. These measures were designed to prevent known republicans from moving around the area, but they were too sweeping and crude to be effective, angering the local population. After a twelve-hour discussion as to their response, the local trades council took the unanimous decision to call a general strike and established committees to take charge of propaganda, finance, food and vigilance.[44] The response was immediate and overwhelmingly supportive. Soon the water, gas and electricity supply was in the tight control of the committee, which was referred to as the 'soviet'. Work was allowed to take place at bacon and condensed milk factories, but the bakers and Cleeves's creamery workers walked out anyway to join what was becoming a carnival atmosphere. In all 14,000 workers were on strike. Large crowds gathered and moved through the city, discussing events.[45] The local RIC telephoned Dublin for at least 300 more reinforcements, but Deputy Inspector-General W.M. Davies replied that this was impossible as 'there are so many strikes going on elsewhere'. Eventually fifty RIC men were sent and permission granted for military support.[46] Not that crime was the concern; during the two weeks of the soviet no looting took place and not a single case arose for the petty sessions.[47]

The first priority for the soviet was to secure food supplies for the city's 38,000 inhabitants. A panic over the possibility of scarcity was encouraged by Dublin Castle, which issued a communiqué denying responsibility for any shortage of the necessities of life that arose.[48] The strike leaders responded by asking the bakers to resume work, and fresh bread was thereafter made available in the mornings. A few delegated shops were given permission to open and sell foodstuffs, but only at prices set by the soviet. These prices were put on posters and placed around the town. More radically still, the soviet decided to expropriate 7,000 tons of Canadian grain that was at the docks. They also set up four depots to receive food from farms outside the town. Because the creamery was closed, there was in fact no shortage of fresh milk at the usual price. Workers also smuggled food

into the city past the military with relays of boats and even in a funeral hearse.[49] The committee also took charge of transport in the city and large crowds of strikers ordered off the streets any vehicle that was travelling without permission of the soviet. As money began to fall into short supply, the soviet organised the printing and issuing of its own currency.[50] Limerick newspapers were allowed to publish one issue a week providing they carried the bold imprint, 'Published by Permission of the Strike Committee'. The soviet also produced its own *Workers' Bulletin* with the legend, 'Issued by the Limerick Proletariat.'[51]

There was no doubting the strength of the strike or the authority of the soviet. For those unsympathetic to working-class organisation this was an alarming development. As a journalist for the *Daily Express* put it, 'the leadership mean to win, and it certainly seems as if the workers of Ireland were with them…I have witnessed many strikes in England but never one bearing any resemblance to this. It is the grand slam, and it suggests possibilities on which it is not pleasant to ponder.'[52] The stand of the Limerick soviet against military rule was putting General Griffin under a great deal of pressure, but the issue was no longer a local one; a loss of the ability to create special military areas would have been a catastrophic defeat for the British authorities. Despite the support flowing in for Limerick from across the country, and from towns in Britain with large Irish populations, the military authorities took a gamble and persisted in their measures. On Wednesday 16 April the dispute looked as though it was about to escalate drastically as the local railworkers took the decision to go on strike, despite a circular to the contrary from the National Union of Railwaymen's (NUR) headquarters in London. This raised the possibility of a national railway strike.[53] The strike was delayed by intervention from William O'Brien, general secretary of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Council (ILPTUC), who sent a telegram to the Limerick railworkers saying, 'railwaymen should defer stoppage pending national action. National Executive specially summoned for tomorrow.'[54] In Limerick this was taken to mean that a general strike of Irish workers was about to be called. As the leader of the soviet, John Cronin, said in an interview, 'the national executive council of the ILPTUC will change its headquarters from Dublin to Limerick. Then if military rule isn't abrogated, a general strike of the entire country will be called.'[55]

In fact, having sought advice during the course of three days of talks with leading nationalists, the leadership of the ILPTUC was anxious to defuse the crisis, not escalate it.[56] As various leading members of the ILPTUC slowly made their way to Limerick they prevaricated and spent days in talks with the leaders of the strike on the ground, offering a variety of reasons why they did not have the authority to call a general strike. Eventually they revealed the plan that had been agreed with the nationalist activists, which was to evacuate the population of Limerick. Understand-

ably the Limerick leaders were dismayed by this absurd proposition. As word of this scheme started to spread, the middle class, which had been cowed by the strength of the soviet, suddenly recovered its political will and on Thursday 24 April Bishop Dr Hallinan and the mayor entered into negotiations with General Griffin to obtain a compromise to the pass system, and the next day issued a letter insisting on an immediate end to the strike. Stalemated by their own union leadership, the strike leaders gave up and effectively called the strike off when they said that all those who did not need to show passes should return to work immediately. Rank-and-file workers, threatening to set up another soviet, tore up the posters announcing this retreat.[57] But their position was an extremely difficult one. In Russia the soviets were based on direct elections from the workplace, so if a body of workers felt it was being misrepresented, it could recall its delegate within 24 hours and give the mandate to another person. In Limerick the label 'soviet' was attached to the trades council because it was acting as a workers' government, but the leaders of the movement were delegates elected through the slow-moving workings of the individual trade union affiliates. To replace them in a matter of hours was impossible even if the majority of strikers desired to continue the fight. The Limerick soviet deflated with a whimper, with considerable damage to the position of the working class within the fight for Irish independence. As a local republican news-sheet put it, the people had been let down 'by the nincompoops who call themselves the "Leaders of Labour"'.[58]

Outside of Limerick the curve of working-class militancy was still on the rise. One mark of this was the strong response to the idea of holding a day's strike on May Day 1919, despite bans from the British and military authorities and local employers' federations. Thousands participated in the action and the ILPTUC claimed that it was as effective as the general strike against conscription. In some ways it was all the more impressive given the absence of a sanction from church or nationalist leaders. In most small towns it was the ITGWU that was at the heart of the action, and its conference report that year boasted that

> over more than three-fourths of Ireland the cessation was complete and meetings were held at convenient centres at which the Labour propaganda was zealously pushed and the red flag of the workers' cause displayed despite police interference. It was very generally admitted that nothing like the completeness of this stoppage could have been affected were it not for the far-flung battalions of the ITGWU.[59]

General strike for the release of hunger strikers

The high water mark of working-class struggle at this time was the general strike for the release of hunger strikers that began on Monday 13 April

1920. Due to the increase in repression and republican activity over a hundred prisoners were being held without charge in Mountjoy Jail, Dublin. On 5 April 36 nationalists, socialists and trade unionists took the decision to go on hunger strike. They were joined the next day by 30 more of their colleagues. Each day more prisoners joined until by 10 April there were 91 hunger strikers.[60] Inside the prison they broke the furniture and in one wing demolished the walls between the cells.[61] News of the jail protest spread quickly, and crowds gathering outside the jail grew from hundreds to thousands. By the end of the first week of the hunger strike some 40,000 people were at the entrance to the jail, facing troops and armoured cars. As the attention of the country focused on this issue, the executive of the ILPTUC responded by calling for a national stoppage. They sent telegrams to the organisers of the ITGWU and placed a manifesto for the strike in the *Evening Telegraph*.[62]

The strike began with the railworkers of the Great Southern and Midland Company on Monday 13 April. The next day most of the country was halted and governmental functions fell to local workers' organisations, typically the trades councils. A selection from the series of reports sent back to the ITGWU headquarters give a flavour of the radicalism of action. From Bagnalstown: 'We took full control of all food supplies and saw to the proper distribution of food and only allowed the shops to open for one hour each day…On the second day of the strike we held a public meeting on the Market square and publicly proclaimed the establishment of a Provisional Soviet Government to police this town to keep order and to ration out food supplies.' From Castletownroche:

> The whole branch acted like one man. Paraded 200 members through the streets yesterday with the general public, under the rebel flag – and proud were they. A monster meeting followed, all were prepared to hold out any length of time. Tralee: The trades council was turned into a workers' council who took full control of everything. We had our own police who kept order saw that business was suspended, issued permits for everything required. Pickets patrolled streets. In fact workers controlled all.[63]

The *Drogheda Independent* described 'shops closed and business suspended: as a moral protest it's an amazing spectacle carried out at a night's notice in a moment's deliberation'.[64] The *Manchester Guardian* reported that in Waterford, 'the City was taken over by a Soviet Commissar and three associates. The Sinn Féin mayor abdicated and the Soviet issued orders to the population which all had to obey. For two days, until a telegram arrived reporting the release of hunger strikers, the city was in the hands of these men.'[65] *Freedom* wrote that 'never in history, I think, has there been such a complete general strike as is now for twenty-four hours taking place

here in the Emerald Isle. Not a train or tram is running not a shop is open, not a public house nor a tobacconist; even the public lavatories are closed.'[66] The summary of the *Manchester Guardian* was that, 'in most places the police abdicated and the maintenance of order was taken over by the local Workers' Councils…In fact, it is no exaggeration to trace a flavour of proletarian dictatorship about some aspects of the strike.'[67] As with the Limerick soviet, workers undertaking such comprehensive action had to resolve the issues of control of food and transport. They did so by creating new structures to administer their areas. An example of how this occurred is given by an eyewitness who happened to be in Kilmallock, County Limerick, during the strike:

> a visit to the local Town Hall – commandeered for the purpose of issuing permits – and one was struck by the absolute recognition of the soviet system – in deed if not in name. At one table sat a school teacher dispensing bread permits, at another a trade union official controlling the flour supply – at a third a railwayman controlling coal, at a fourth a creamery clerk distributing butter tickets…all working smoothly.[68]

The authorities were stunned by the action. The police and military were helpless to intervene in the face of such a widespread and effective movement. They concentrated on guarding Mountjoy from being stormed – the crowds had suggested they might take such action by setting fire to a tank and testing entrances to the jail on Saturday 10 April, the night before the general strike was called.[69] That Sunday a serious confrontation loomed between the Dublin crowds, swelled by organised contingents of dockers and postal workers, and the British soldiers who were ordered to fix bayonets. Socialists distributed material appealing to the soldiers not to attack the demonstrators and it seemed as though a critical moment was approaching.[70] Would the crowds succeed in breaking in? Or would the soldiers maintain their discipline even at the cost of civilian lives and the potential political backlash that would accompany such an event? The flashpoint was defused, partly by the channelling of the protest into the general strike, but up at the jail Sinn Féin member of Dublin Corporation, John O'Mahony, organised with a number of priests to form a cordon between the soldiers and the crowd and drove the demonstrators back from the jail entrance, shouting 'in the name of the Irish Republic, go away'. He played the same pacifying role on the Tuesday, by which time the authorities had realised the danger and brought up two more tanks, several armoured cars, barbed wire and considerable reinforcements.[71] The government's resolve broke down and the hunger strikers were unconditionally released. The *Irish Times* wrote that the collapse of government resolve 'is slightly ridiculous and will weaken the Government's authority on both sides of the Irish Sea. It will be claimed as a great triumph by Sinn

Féin and the Irish Labour Party.'[72] The *London Morning Post* described the release of the hunger strikers as 'a situation of unparalleled ignominy and painful humiliation'.[73] The British Army's own official 'Record of the Rebellion in Ireland' saw this climbdown as the key turning point in their efforts to govern Ireland: 'the release of the hunger strikers and the cancellation of policy…nullified the effect of the efforts made by the Crown Forces during the three preceding months. The situation reverted to that obtaining in January, 1920, and was further aggravated by the raised morale of the rebels, brought about by their "victory", and a corresponding loss of morale on the part of the troops and police'.[74] It was an extraordinary victory for the national movement, one that had been won through the powerful impact of a radical general strike. The *Daily News* observed that

> Labour has become, quite definitely, the striking arm of the nation, and is bound to receive at once an immense accretion of strength, both numerical and moral. It can justly claim that it alone possessed and was able to set in motion a machine powerful enough to save the lives of Irishmen when threatened by the British Government and that without this machine Dáil Éireann and all of Sinn Féin would have beaten their wings against the prison bars in vain.[75]

The boycott of the British military

The other major intervention of the working class in the War of Independence was the boycott of the British military by transport workers, especially the railworkers. Again it was the Russian revolution that created the inspiration for this action. On 10 May 1920 Thames river workers had refused to load coal to fuel the munitions ship *Jolly George* that was destined for the interventionist forces in Russia.[76] The action was effective and very quickly became widely known throughout the international working-class movement. Ten days later Michael Donnelly, a revolutionary socialist and friend of James Connolly's, urged his fellow dockers to refuse to unload the 6,000-ton *Polberg* and the 1,000-ton vessel *Anna Dorette Boog* on the assumption they contained motor cars and other equipment for the military.[77] On learning that the *Anna Dorette Boog* was unable to discharge its cargo the *Polberg* sailed around the bay to Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire) where the military put its cargo on a train that arrived at Westland Row station. The 400 porters there refused to handle the cargo and were effectively on strike.[78]

The leaders of the ILPTUC had been willing to endorse the dockers' action, as they could find work unloading other ships, but they were alarmed at the escalation of the tactic to full-time railworkers. William O'Brien hurried to Arthur Griffith and John Dillon to ask that funds left over from the anti-conscription campaign be used to provide payments for

workers laid off as a result of the action. This was agreed and supplemented by a new appeal. Over the next six months £120,000 was subscribed.[79] The tactic spread. On 27 May, at the Harcourt Street station in Dublin, workers refused to load rifles for the RIC in Wexford and the cargo had to be taken back. Twice in June the unfortunately named *Czaritsa*, with her cargo of machine guns, failed to be unloaded in Queenstown (Cobh), Cork. This was followed by a general decision of railworkers not to transport any military cargoes, armed men or bodies of more than twenty unarmed men.[80]

The railway owners were less patriotic, telling the *Irish Times* that they would break the action 'if necessary by the complete replacement of the workforce'. All the railway companies adopted a policy of sacking those workers who refused to load or drive trains and went so far as to collaborate with the military in seeking out the offenders.[81] Nevertheless the workers sustained the boycott, at times in the face of more direct threats. As a delegate to the Special Conference of the ILPTUC described, 'it was common practice for the military authorities to get up on the footplate of an engine and say to the driver "you have got to drive this train." Put a revolver to his head and say, "you will get the contents of this if you don't drive." And to the everlasting credit of the railwaymen, they said "no".'[82] Throughout July 1920 the boycott was very effective, leading General Macready to describe it as 'a serious set-back for military activities during the best season of the year'.[83] Chief Secretary Sir Hamar Greenwood wrote that it put the Irish administration in a 'humiliating and discredited position'.[84] The railworkers very nearly won an extraordinary victory. At the end of July, the Dublin administration conceded that railways would no longer be used to transport arms, ammunition and motor fuel. However, the British cabinet overruled them.[85] From July to October passenger services virtually ceased over large parts of Ireland. From 11 October the policy of the authorities was to make the boycott unpopular by causing business to suffer too. Mark Sturgis, Assistant Under-Secretary at Dublin Castle, recorded in his diary that he had secretly been made 'Chairman of a Committee of three to control the throttling of the railway system'. Eventually the attrition caused by lay-offs took its toll on what had been one of Ireland's best-organised and most militant group of workers. Having failed to obtain sanction for an all-out strike from union leaders the action was ended on 21 December 1920.

Conclusion

The under-appreciated scale of working-class militancy in Ireland during the War of Independence, and its direct impact on the struggle, has been treated here only with regard to the big 'set-piece' interventions. This has been to neglect, for considerations of space, the many local strikes and soviets that also took place in this period, as well as less dramatic but

nevertheless notable national events such as the car drivers' strike or the ILTPUC embargo designed to prevent food speculation. Nor did working-class militancy immediately subside with the signing of the truce on 9 July 1921. In response to recession and the threat of factory closure during 1922, an extraordinary series of soviet takeovers took place, particularly in the Munster region. The victory of the pro-Treaty forces and the repressive measures of the Free State government were in part directed against this militancy, as well as those opposed to the Treaty.[86]

The great working-class organiser, James Larkin, had spent these critical years in the USA, where he was arrested for criminal anarchy during a crackdown on the left and sentenced on 5 May 1920.[87] He therefore missed the period in which his message of radical syndicalism could have met with its greatest response. Larkin returned to Ireland on 30 April 1923, just as the Civil War was petering out. By this time the working-class movement was in a sharp decline. His characteristically vivid writing style soon conveyed just how disillusioning the new country looked from the eyes of a socialist radical. For all the powerful displays of militancy during the War of Independence, by 1923 the working class had very little to show for it:

> We arrived in Westland Row, Dublin, on April 30th, and since then life has been one long sweet song. We found the country torn with fratricidal strife…To differ with or dissent against any Doctrine promulgated by the Tin Gods of any faction meant denunciation at least. A dozen would-be Mussolini's stood in the high places and issued their edicts. Lay theologians were as plentiful as mushrooms and just as dependable. The press of the country was the hired prostitute, as always, of the finance capitalists…Men who, in other days, had held the Flame of Liberty alight had become hucksters in the market place of selling their soul, their power of expression, their poetry of phrase…The class in Ireland who had in all ages, under all forms of native and foreign oppression kept the torch of liberty alight, faint at times, yet still alight, the Irish Working Class, they too, misled by compromising, selfish, self-seeking group of place and fortune hunters, masquerading as Labour Leaders had sunk into a plough of despond.[88]

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26. *Belfast Newsletter*, 28 January 1919.
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11

Radical Politics in Interwar Ireland, 1923–39

Fearghal McGarry

The history of the Irish left has been one of false dawns and failure. The most unexpected result of the 'pact' general election of June 1922 was the spectacular performance of the Labour Party which won seventeen of the eighteen seats it contested, outpolling the anti-treatyites and taking over 30 per cent of the poll in some constituencies. As conservative a source as the *Irish Times* believed that 'Labour has "arrived" as an important and highly organised factor in national affairs.'[1] Yet in the following year's general election, Labour's vote plummeted from 21 per cent to 12 per cent: 'Labour, not for the last time, snatched failure from potential success.'[2] Labour's 22 seats in June 1927 appeared to herald another breakthrough, but this figure dropped to thirteen seats only three months later following Fianna Fáil's decision to enter the Dáil. Such results inevitably led to a certain degree of frustration among Labour activists: 'How any working man or woman can feel justified in supporting Cumann na nGaedheal or Fianna Fáil is difficult to understand.'[3] Not much had changed some six decades later in the summer of 1981 when, despite economic recession, high unemployment, continuing emigration and a near meltdown of public finances, the Labour Party suffered its worst general election performance since the 1950s. Reflecting on her poor showing in West Dublin, a constituency blighted by unemployment and poverty, Mary Robinson attributed Labour's problems to a lack of political consciousness among Irish workers who 'did not respond with any degree of political awareness of their critical position and seemed to have no perception of the degree of social change necessary to alter their predicament'. Another candidate insisted that Dublin workers should examine their conscience after rejecting the Labour Party leader Frank Cluskey.[4] Little had changed by the 1990s, as was demonstrated by the ebbing of the 'Spring Tide' of 1992.

Explaining the absence of class politics

Why have parties which sought to represent the interests of the working classes never won significant political support in independent Ireland?

Why, indeed, have they never won significant working-class support? Why, almost uniquely in Western Europe, has the Irish political system not conformed to a left–right alignment? For many political scientists and historians, the reasons for the marginalisation of working-class politics in the Irish Free State are relatively straightforward. In comparison to the United Kingdom or Northern Ireland, the urban working-class population was tiny. Workers in industrial employment formed only 13 per cent of the labour force in 1926.[5] Moreover, in contrast to the decade preceding independence, organised labour declined throughout the first decade of the Irish Free State. Trade union membership and industrial militancy fell sharply, while the credibility of organised labour was damaged by internal divisions. Notwithstanding high levels of poverty and poor living conditions, urban Ireland provided fallow ground for those who sought to mobilise working-class discontent.

Despite its class tensions, land hunger and poverty, interwar rural Ireland also proved resistant to the appeal of radicalism. Again, the underlying social structure was not particularly favourable. Crucially, Britain's extensive programme of land redistribution in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had created an independent, conservative-minded, landowning population. As Bill Kissane noted: 'The fact that the Irish political "revolution" between 1916 and 1921 was preceded by this social revolution explains, more than any other factor, why the polity and society that emerged from the revolution were essentially conservative.'[6] The two parties which won most support in rural Ireland were Cumann na nGaedheal – which represented the interests of prosperous cattle farmers – and Fianna Fáil (whose radicalism did not extend beyond hinting at the prospect of redistributing the ranches of the richest graziers to benefit the interests of small farmers). The declining numbers of those lower down on the rural social scale, as J.J. Lee noted, remained marginalised: 'Attempts by agricultural labourers to acquire a stake in the country were brusquely rebuffed by both farmers and government. There were inevitably tensions between bigger and smaller farmers, but they shared an overriding interest in the security of property against the men of no property.'[7]

Political scientists, including most recently Kissane, have highlighted a range of underlying reasons for the conservatism and stability of interwar Ireland – the only postwar 'successor' state to remain fully democratic by 1939. The Irish Free State was a relatively modernised state with a well-educated population and modest levels of urbanisation and socio-economic development. Partition, while much resented, ensured that much of the potential for class, ethnic and religious conflict was exported to Northern Ireland. In contrast to interwar Spain, a country which shared some social and political similarities with Ireland, land reform and the safety valve of emigration marginalised the two classes for which democracy would have held least appeal – the landed and the landless. Around three-quarters of a

million people emigrated between 1922 and 1960, an exodus much regretted by those organisations which sought to mobilise support on the basis of class conflict. Hence, the ideological polarisation and class hatreds which characterised rural Spain were relatively absent in Ireland. A sturdy democratic tradition based on a well-developed civic society and, ironically, the legacy of the long struggle between the political forces of nationalism and the British state which had denied self-government to Ireland reinforced the acceptance of democratic norms.[8] The legacy of the Irish Civil War, and the continued relevance of the national question in the interwar period, also militated against a political alignment based on social issues. The powerful influence of the Catholic Church underpinned the conservative social and political structures of Irish society. Few Catholics questioned the hierarchy's view that socialism and Catholicism were incompatible. Given these conditions, Kissane concludes, the

> idea that there could have been some sort of 'Workers' Republic' in inter-war Ireland is hopelessly naïve. Indeed the most important political groupings that lost out after 1921 were not necessarily radical ones at all, but groups such as pro-Treaty republicans, Catholic Action groups, former Home Rulers, and the ex-Unionists who remained in the Free State.[9]

The small size of the industrial working class, the marginalisation of the rural discontented, and the social, economic and political infrastructure inherited by the Free State help to explain the lack of success if not the comprehensive failure of those organisations which attempted to mobilise support around working-class interests. The assumption behind much of the substantial historiography on interwar radicalism produced in the last decade is that politics, ideology and strategy also mattered. Indeed, radical activists – and some of their historians – regarded the unsettled conditions of interwar Ireland as a potentially revolutionary environment. In certain respects, it was. Until 1927, the second largest party in the state, Fianna Fáil, refused to accept the legitimacy of the state, and did so only reluctantly until it won power in 1932. Political violence remained a sufficiently serious threat to warrant the almost continual use of emergency legislation by governments throughout the interwar period. It was not until the consolidation of de Valera's Fianna Fáil regime in the mid-1930s, following significant challenges from republican and right-wing movements, that the triumph of conservatism became evident. This essay will assess the importance and effectiveness of appeals to the working classes in the ideology of those organisations which did attempt to mount a radical political challenge in post-revolutionary Ireland. It will also consider why Fianna Fáil proved so effective in disarming those organisations which sought to outflank it on class or national issues. It will be argued that the same factors

which aroused the revolutionary expectations of interwar radicals – a specific reading of the revolutionary experiences of 1916–23, the notion of the unfinished nature of the Irish revolution, and a belief in the intertwined nature of the republican and socialist struggles – reinforced their political marginalisation. It is not the intention of this essay to suggest that class differences did not constitute an important issue in Irish society or politics, but rather to consider why the politics of class failed to appeal to the electorate.

The Labour Party and Fianna Fáil

First, it should be explained why the Labour Party and Fianna Fáil – the party which the working classes actually voted for – do not form the primary focus of this essay. With the exception of its unconvincing championing of a workers' republic between 1936 and 1939, the Labour Party did not commit itself to a radical agenda during this period. Despite its tendency to eulogise the revolutionary legacy of James Connolly, Labour pursued a path of reformism rather than radicalism. In the words of party leader Thomas Johnson: 'one revolution in a generation is enough'.[10] Labour's decision not to contest the general election of 1918 signalled a willingness to postpone working-class objectives until the resolution of the national question, while its reluctance to follow Connolly's example by placing itself at the forefront of the independence struggle ensured its lack of appeal to the radical strand within republicanism. The decision to enter the Dáil in 1922, tacitly implying its acceptance of the Free State settlement, earned Labour the enmity of anti-Treaty republicans. Nonetheless, the tendency of socialist historians to castigate Labour for failing to tie its fortunes to the republican cause does not seem justified by the failure of those organisations (such as the Socialist Party of Ireland) which did opt for this strategy, and the fact that most Labour votes transferred to the pro-Treaty party in 1922.[11] Tied to the declining fortunes of organised labour and a marginalised rural proletariat, the Labour Party carved out a mild, ineffective, niche advocating policies broadly similar to those of Fianna Fáil. Labour's failure to understand the dynamics of Free State politics, and its unwillingness to formulate an independent position on the national question, compounded its problems: 'Although party systems structured around the question of relations with the former imperial power were typical of economically dependent post-colonial countries, Labour never understood this politics as anything other than irrational…Sooner or later, political stability and modernization would "clear the decks" for a class oriented party system.'[12]

That this did not happen can largely be attributed to Fianna Fáil's success in positing a link between the social and economic grievances of the working and lower middle classes and the national question. This achieve-

ment was not a foregone conclusion. In 1926, de Valera privately justified his break with Sinn Féin by pointing to the need to prevent the emergence of the sort of sectional politics which Labour had pinned its hopes on:

> You will perhaps wonder why I did not wait any longer. It is vital that the Free State be shaken at the next general election, for if an opportunity be given it to consolidate itself further as an institution – if the present Free State members are replaced by farmers and labourers and other class interests, the national interest as a whole will be submerged in the clashing of rival economic groups.[13]

With its calls for land redistribution, a minimum wage, public works, better housing, improved social welfare and attacks on Cumann na nGaedheal's conservatism, the party successfully depicted itself as a socially radical force. Nevertheless, the limitations of Fianna Fáil's radicalism have been clearly demonstrated by recent studies.[14] Crucially, the party succeeded in identifying the state's political and economic subordination to Britain as the primary source of social inequality. The working classes – along with other interest groups including agricultural labourers, small farmers, petty bourgeois, and even non-export-dependent industrial and financial interests – were successfully mobilised into a project directed towards attaining national sovereignty rather than radical social change.

Richard Dunphy convincingly locates these limitations within the petty bourgeois ideology of republicanism which Fianna Fáil shared with the Sinn Féin movement of 1918–21, that is a:

> concern with individual initiative went hand in hand with a contemptuous and fundamentally hostile attitude to the concept of class and of class politics and lies behind what has become a familiar theme throughout the history of Fianna Fáil – a concern with the 'rights' of the worker, the small farmer, the 'common man', combined with antagonism towards the forces of organized labour and the advocacy of class interests, invariably seen as 'sectional' and 'anti-national'.[15]

There were obvious explanations for the widespread acceptance of such a world view. Partly, it was facilitated by the lack of working-class consciousness which Irish labour activists repeatedly identified, itself a consequence of the absence of an industrial revolution and a strong tradition of organised labour. Modern Irish nationalism, from its origins in O'Connell's Catholic emancipation movement and Parnell's Home Rule Party through to Sinn Féin, mobilised cross-class alliances and successfully diverted popular radical impulses to national rather than social ends. The deep-seated hostility of the Catholic Church to sectional politics, not least 'the apostles of socialism and infidelity' condemned by the Synod of Thurles as

far back as 1850, reinforced the belief that class politics were a sinister foreign import.

The pervasive nature of Catholicism and nationalism in twentieth-century Ireland ensured the continued acceptance of such views. As Todd Andrews, one of the founders of Fianna Fáil, reflected: 'We assumed that except for the usual tendency for tuppence-halfpenny to look down on tuppence the Irish nation in the mass was a classless society.'[16] Class, as such comments illustrate, was often confused with snobbery or status rather than the existence of social inequalities deriving from a person's social origins and position in the workforce. It is important to emphasise that Andrews was expressing a widespread perception rather than a reality – numerous studies have demonstrated that a rigid class structure which reinforced deep-rooted social inequalities existed until the early 1960s – but it was a perception which informed attitudes to class politics in Ireland.[17]

The success of Fianna Fáil's cross-class alliance, both in opposition and in power, would pose insurmountable problems for radicals who attempted to outflank the party on national or social issues. There is a tendency in certain strands of socialist historiography, one which reflects the thinking of interwar radicals, to portray Fianna Fáil's success in constructing such an alliance as a kind of confidence trick. Underlying this assumption, as one historian noted, is 'the notion that the working class has an interest which *should* lead it to support a socialist party and that its failure to do so has been due to some process of mystification'.[18] But although de Valera was adept at masking conservative nationalism in the radical language of anti-imperialism – on one occasion informing the Dáil that Connolly had told him that 'As long as a foreign imperial power holds this country, the workers are the people who are principally exploited'[19] – the fortunes of interwar and subsequent generations of radicals expose the inadequacies of both assumptions.

Socialist republicanism

It was from within the ranks of the IRA that the most radical political challenge emerged in the Free State. The key figure in the evolution of interwar socialist republicanism was Peadar O'Donnell (1893–1986), who drew on contemporary communism and the republican tradition to construct a radical critique of mainstream republicanism.[20] An early point of departure was Fintan Lalor (1807–1849), the Young Ireland revolutionary who had asserted that class was more important than nationality. The two aspects of Lalor's writings which most appealed to O'Donnell were his prediction that the struggle for the land would become the engine which drove the movement for national independence, and his assertion that real independence would necessitate a dual process involving the economic as well as political liberation of Ireland. However, the central figure within the socialist republican canon was James Connolly (1868–1916), whose writings

exerted much the same influence on interwar radicals as those of Lenin in the Soviet Union. Connolly's principal ideological contribution to the revolutionary tradition was his insistence on the interdependence of social and political revolution. Following Lalor, Connolly believed that a political revolution which left British-imposed capitalism intact would prove meaningless. Moreover, as people's attitudes towards national issues were determined by their economic circumstances, Connolly predicted that only the working class would support a struggle sufficiently radical in nature to win complete independence.

For socialist republicans, Connolly's legacy – particularly the notion that socialism and republicanism were not merely compatible but interdependent – was nothing less than a blueprint for national liberation. Moreover, Connolly's visionary predictions had been confirmed by historical events. Sinn Féin's bourgeois-led nationalism had failed to deliver the Republic. The unfinished revolution could only be brought to its inevitable conclusion by a class struggle which united Catholic and Protestant workers against capitalism and the British-imposed settlement of 1920–1. The working-class forces which had been responsible for 'the four glorious years', and had been at the forefront of the republican opposition to the pro-treatyites during the Irish Civil War, had been betrayed by the pro-British compromises of bourgeois nationalism. The manner of Connolly's death reinforced the value of his teachings. As one of the martyrs of 1916, his historical reputation – despite his Marxism – was beyond reproach within the wider republican tradition. Finally, by placing the Irish Citizen Army at the forefront of the separatist movement, Connolly had pointed the way forward for subsequent socialists.

For many historians, Connolly represents no less important an influence on interwar radicalism but for reasons which are related to the weaknesses rather than strengths of his ideological legacy. Connolly's view that only a working-class-led revolution would prove sufficiently radical to win independence was mistaken. It was the farmers of Munster who formed the cutting edge of republicanism against British and treatyite forces between 1919 and 1923. Connolly had underestimated the determination of Ulster Protestant workers to oppose nationalism. His attribution of working-class unionism to a 'false consciousness' inspired by the 'devilish ingenuity of the master class' failed to explain why the interests of Ulster's industrial proletariat were best served by autarchic nationalism. He shared the tendency of republicans, left-wing or otherwise, to under-emphasise the religious and cultural dimensions of Unionist identity. More surprisingly for a Marxist, his writings revealed serious misunderstandings of the social forces in rural Ireland. He underestimated the social and economic power of the rural bourgeoisie which restrained the radical impulses behind much revolutionary violence, as well as the conservatism of small farmers who desired land redistribution rather than collectivisation. Many historians would see Connolly's central ideological legacy – 'that the two currents of

revolutionary thoughts in Ireland, the socialist and the national, were not antagonistic but complementary' – as one which hindered the emergence of class politics in independent Ireland.[21] As Joe Lee observed: 'The prospects for socialism were slender in any event, but Connolly's death ensured that whatever phoenix rose from the embers of Easter would unfurl no red flag.'[22]

It should be noted that the general consensus that what occurred between 1918 and 1921 amounted to 'a profoundly conservative national revolution against Britain' is disputed by much socialist historiography (whether Stalinist, Trotskyist or left republican).[23] Recalling 'the mass demonstrations carrying red flags and singing the "Red Flag", control of the people while British soldiers looked on helpless, the peoples' courts that handled cases while the crown courts stood empty, the guerrilla activities of the active service units, the land seizures and the so-called Soviets', C. Desmond Greaves lamented how 'the grand alliance of 1919' was 'allowed to drift into capitalist control thanks to the unwillingness of the Labour leaders to identify themselves with the Republic'.[24] A more recent example of this interpretation is provided by Conor Kostick's *Revolution in Ireland* which resolutely emphasises the process rather than outcome of popular militancy.[25] Despite the fact that class conflict played a minor role in the Irish Civil War, the notion that the grievances of the working classes were expressed in terms of support for the Republic also became an important article of faith among the socialist republican left.[26] Interwar communists and socialist republicans portrayed the Civil War as a counter-revolution by those who feared that the independence movement 'would develop into a social revolution, resulting in the overthrow of the Irish capitalist class and the establishment of a Workers' and Farmers' Socialist Republic'.[27] For O'Donnell, the lesson of the Civil War (attributed to Liam Mellows who joined the pantheon of left republicans stretching back to Wolfe Tone 'who saw the poor as the freedom force of the nation') was that republicanism would only prevail by placing class struggle at the forefront of the struggle for independence.[28]

The socialist republican interpretation of Connolly's ideology and the events of 1916–23 is central to an understanding of the rise and fall of radicalism between 1931 and 1934. The ideas and strategy underpinning the annuities campaign of the late 1920s, the IRA's establishment of Saor Éire in 1931 and the launching of Republican Congress stemmed from this reading of the revolutionary era.

The land annuities campaign

The IRA's decision to break away from the political authority of the Second Dáil (that is, anti-Treaty Sinn Féin) in 1925 was triggered by rumours of de Valera's willingness to enter the Free State Dáil, an initiative which would

have undermined its claim to constitute the army of the Republic. Although it reflected the IRA's militaristic and largely apolitical outlook, the split allowed socialist republicans to manoeuvre the army towards the left. By the late 1920s, several factors were working in their favour. As the interwar IRA, in contrast to the War of Independence-era army, was a working-class organisation whose rank and file were drawn from workers and the rural poor, it was more responsive to social discontent than the old IRA.[29] Fianna Fáil's increasing success in winning the allegiance of republicans increased the pressure on the IRA leadership to justify the army's role. Against this background, Peadar O'Donnell's involvement in a campaign against the payment of land annuities appeared to offer an opportunity for the army to mobilise support by responding to the grievances of the rural poor.[30]

The annuities, which amounted to £3 million per annum, were the payments which Irish farmers made to the British state to repay the loans they had received to purchase their farms from landlords during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. By the late 1920s, many poor farmers were struggling to pay the annuities which, in some cases, had been in arrears since the War of Independence. In response to an appeal from impoverished farmers threatened with eviction in his own rural Donegal, O'Donnell resolved to organise a national campaign against the payment of annuities. From an ideological perspective the campaign – which linked the issues of class, poverty and the state's continued dependence on Britain – was tailor-made for socialist republicans. The impoverishment of rural working farmers by the payment of 'a tax based on the conquest' neatly illustrated the socialist republican analysis. Moreover, the Free State government had confirmed this debt under the initially secret terms of the Ultimate Financial Settlement of March 1926. O'Donnell saw the annuities as an issue around which a revolutionary movement could be built: 'to talk of nationhood as something outside the people on which they are to rivet their eyes and struggle towards is wrong…organisation will only come from the struggles of the hard-pressed to drive hunger out of their lives. I am convinced that the hard-pressed peasantry and the famishing workless are the point of assembly.'[31] Resistance to the annuities could be channelled into a campaign of non-payment which would force to government to seize livestock, a measure which would provoke mass strikes, support for the IRA and a mutiny by the 'largely peasant' National Army, precipitating the long-awaited revolution.[32]

The annuities campaign did not create the revolutionary movement that O'Donnell had hoped for. But what did occur offers important insights into the strengths and limitations of interwar radicalism. By early 1928, just as O'Donnell's campaign was flagging, he was joined by a Fianna Fáil senator, Colonel Maurice Moore, who won broad opposition support for their efforts. Fianna Fáil's involvement brought much needed credibility to the 'No Tribute' campaign – by the end of the year four county councils had

passed resolutions of support – but fundamentally altered its nature. As the opposition rowed in behind the Anti-Tribute League, it succeeded in 'sucking the class dimension, so crucial to O'Donnell's conception, from the issue'.[33] Instead of demanding the abolition of annuities, Fianna Fáil demanded their retention, at a lower rate, to finance land redistribution to small holders and agricultural de-rating (a measure which appealed to prosperous farmers). De Valera's astute warning that the abolition of annuities would bring into question the legal ownership of land holdings undermined O'Donnell's radical demands. De Valera divested the campaign of its social radicalism, while also reinforcing his party's rural support.

What were the lessons of the annuities issue? The episode highlighted O'Donnell's abilities as 'the greatest agitator of his generation'. In two important respects, the campaign appeared to reinforce the socialist republican analysis. Despite the reluctance of Fianna Fáil's leadership to become involved in a potentially divisive campaign, O'Donnell's success in winning over radical elements of Fianna Fáil's rank and file literally had forced de Valera on to the anti-annuities platform. (The latter's single, uncomfortable, speech on that platform was 'marked by evasive irrelevance of the highest order'.)[34] By creating an agitation around a popular issue, O'Donnell had pushed Fianna Fáil to the left: 'My method of influencing any organization is to raise issues behind it and force it either to adjust itself so as to ride the tidal wave or get swamped.'[35] Second, the IRA army council – despite a similar reluctance to identify itself with O'Donnell's campaign – had offered formal support in 1928.[36] This decision marked the beginning of a drift to the left which would culminate in the establishment of a revolutionary socialist party in 1931.

However, the campaign also highlighted important weaknesses in the socialist republican analysis. Fianna Fáil may have been pushed to the left but it had experienced little difficulty in disarming the radical challenge on its flank. Crucially, it was Fianna Fáil, not the IRA, which benefited from the annuities campaign by mobilising landless and small farmer discontent 'within a national project which self-consciously eschewed class polarisation'.[37] The relatively limited extent of the agitation – which caused the government and police little concern compared to the Blueshirt revolt against annuities in 1934 – should also be noted. By 1930, IRA officers claimed that there was 'nothing approaching organized resistance' or public support for the campaign in Donegal where the agitation first originated. Indeed, one recent account suggests it is possible that 'O'Donnell's persuasive retelling of the agitation has given it a prominence that it does not deserve.'[38]

The campaign also raised more fundamental problems. The gulf between O'Donnell's revolutionary theory and the reality of social forces in rural Ireland was striking. His interest in the annuities issue was due to his belief that it could provide the basis for a revolutionary movement, but in order

to gain the support of small farmers O'Donnell had been forced to drastically modify the radical nature of his campaign. By 1929, he had conceded that there was no need for people to resort to 'other than constitutional means' and that the annuities should be retained rather than scrapped.[39] O'Donnell's assumptions about the revolutionary tendencies of small farmers conflicted with how small farmers actually perceived their interests. Why it had been necessary to dilute his revolutionary message in order to win the support of those whose interests he claimed to represent appears to have given O'Donnell little cause for concern. His belief that the rural and urban working classes could join forces against capitalist imperialism also conflicted with actual events. O'Donnell conceded that one reason why his campaign had flagged was the 'lamentable lack of co-operation between city and rural workers'.[40] In a revealing passage, he noted the 'quivering uneasiness in the collective mind of the working masses' who perceive the peasantry as a 'mean, clutching, self-seeking lot'.[41] Indeed, the episode reinforced his view that it was small farmers rather than urban workers who were most receptive to revolutionary politics.[42]

Despite his own background, O'Donnell's assumptions about small farmers were questionable. Like Michael Davitt and Connolly, he insisted that small farmers desired collectivisation rather than redistribution: 'This trash about small-property heavens and the dignity of a little property may get away in drawing rooms; it won't survive the working farmer's kitchen.'[43] The socialist republican tendency to attribute revolutionary aspirations to the Irish population which they did not hold may have been in part a product of the elitist nature of the republican tradition which embraced both a contemptuous view of the masses as corrupt and a belief that their own opinions 'voice the sacred and inner urge that burns in the heart of every son and daughter of Ireland – however imposed ignorance or assimilated corruption may have dimmed its flame'.[44] O'Donnell's grounds for speaking on behalf of urban workers were equally tenuous. Within the space of a single article he could claim that the IRA 'is simply the armed worker, the shock troops of the whole worker army' while complaining that the 'condition of labour organisation is the nightmare of those who think in terms of an interlaced Volunteer and Labour movement'.[45]

Even O'Donnell's achievement in influencing a shift to the left within the IRA, while significant, represented only a limited victory in terms of his own ambitions: 'O'Donnell's mission, as he saw it, was not to graft communism onto republicanism, or transform the IRA from above; rather it was to encourage the IRA in particular, and republicanism in general, to realize its true historical role by combining the struggles against capitalism and British imperialism.'[46] The IRA's interest in his campaign remained largely opportunistic. In 1927 an IRA convention rejected his proposal for a League of Republican Workers.[47] Despite backing his campaign, the IRA's attitude to social agitation remained 'lukewarm'.[48] In 1929, an IRA convention again

voted against launching a radical socialist party, instead backing a reactionary party dedicated to mobilising 'the clean, Gaelic, Christian mind of Ireland…against the beastliness of English Imperial paganism'.[49] Despite moving ever further left during the next two years, the IRA's social outlook remained essentially opportunistic. The limitations of O'Donnell's strategy were illustrated by the IRA's most radical initiative of this period, the establishment of Saor Éire.

Saor Éire and the red scare

The annuities campaign was one of several factors responsible for the IRA's flirtation with class struggle. The impact of the Great Depression, which undermined confidence in democracy and capitalism throughout Europe, also influenced the IRA's trajectory. In 1930 Moss Twomey, the IRA's chief of staff, proposed a constitution calling for the communal ownership of essential resources. At the same time, influential left republican figures were forming strategic alliances with the small but energetic communist movement emerging in this period.[50] In 1930, a year in which two communists were elected to Dublin City Council, O'Donnell affiliated the Anti-Tribute League to the Moscow-backed Krestintern, throwing his support behind the formation of a Workers' Revolutionary Party. Army Council members visited the Soviet Union, joined Comintern-affiliated organisations such as the League against Imperialism, and openly expressed communist sympathies. This shift to the left had the added advantage of preserving a distinctive political identity for the IRA as Fianna Fáil moved closer to power.[51]

The culmination of this trend was the decision by an IRA general army convention in February 1931 to establish Saor Éire. The party's first objective was to create 'an independent revolutionary leadership for the working class and working farmers towards the overthrow in Ireland of British Imperialism and its ally, Irish Capitalism'. Its second was the organisation of 'the Republic of Ireland on the basis of the possession and administration by the workers and working farmers, of the land, instruments of production, distribution and exchange'. The formation of Saor Éire proved a pivotal event in the history of interwar radicalism, although not in the way which socialist republicans had hoped. Alarmed by the increasing radicalism and violence of republicans, the Cumann na nGaedheal government saw the establishment of Saor Éire as an opportunity to move against the IRA with public and clerical support. Warning that 'a situation without parallel as a threat to the foundations of all authority has arisen', Cosgrave passed the hierarchy a dossier asserting the existence of an IRA conspiracy to overthrow the state. Despite having resisted an earlier attempt by Cosgrave to back the state against the IRA, the hierarchy issued its first collective pastoral since the Civil War. It condemned the IRA's methods but reserved its ire for Saor Éire whose policies were described as 'a blasphe-

mous denial of God' aimed at 'class warfare, the abolition of private property and the destruction of family life'.[52] On 20 October Cosgrave implemented the Constitution Amendment Act, modifying the constitution to allow the establishment a military tribunal with the power of the death sentence and a raft of other draconian measures. *An Phoblacht* was suppressed, leading republicans were arrested, and the IRA went to ground, not to resurface until Fianna Fáil's victory in the general election of February 1932.

As with the annuities campaign, what had initially appeared an important advance for socialist republicanism highlighted underlying weaknesses. One problem with Saor Éire was that it was imposed by the leadership on the grass roots. The organisation which emerged was, as O'Donnell had warned against, a paper organisation.[53] Republicans who were sympathetic to socialism, such as the Waterford schoolteacher Frank Edwards, regarded the army order instructing battalion officers to attend the convention as 'most undemocratic': 'They got a county council member from Clare as chairman…He startled everybody by commencing with a religious invocation. Then to cap it all Fionan Breathnach stood up later and said we should adjourn the meeting as some wished to attend the All Ireland in Croke Park that afternoon.'[54] In line with the IRA's self-perception as an army, Volunteers were instructed rather than consulted about their political beliefs – a fact which raises questions as to the suitability of the organisation as a vehicle for revolutionary socialism. However, what proved more problematic than the leadership's adoption of socialist rhetoric as a means of widening its support was the fact that many Volunteers and officers were opposed to the shift to the left.[55] Such scepticism or hostility was reinforced by the impact of the red scare which damaged the IRA's standing among its supporters. The *Mayo News*, which had enthusiastically supported the annuities campaign, declared: 'The proclamation on which Saor Éire takes its stand, was drafted not by Patrick Pearse, but by Mr Stalin in Moscow. The whole programme is foreign as well as anti-Christian.'[56] The IRA's response was to retreat from a radicalism to which relatively few of its members were genuinely committed.

Between 1932 and 1934 left republicans urged a return to revolutionary politics. In one sense, their task was eased by Fianna Fáil's general election victory in 1932. The election of a party which regarded itself as the embodiment of the anti-Treaty republican tradition posed obvious difficulties for the IRA. As chief of staff Moss Twomey conceded: 'nobody visualized a Free State which Republicans were not supposed to attack'.[57] The government's success in scrapping humiliating aspects of the Treaty settlement such as the oath of allegiance raised questions about the need for the IRA, while the economic war enabled de Valera to identify Fianna Fáil as a party committed to the struggle for political and economic independence. De Valera's efforts to conciliate his republican base by recruiting supporters into the

police and army, offering pensions to former anti-Treaty combatants and suspending the coercion legislation further eroded support for militant republicanism. Some republicans who had been previously lukewarm or even hostile to Saor Éire, including Frank Ryan and Michael Price respectively, argued that the army must commit itself to social radicalism or become irrelevant.[58]

A majority of the IRA, however, remained opposed to a return to Saor Éire. The army instead confined its radicalism to attempts to outdo the government's anti-imperialism by attacking Armistice Day participants and the vanquished treatyite opposition.[59] The IRA wished to 'rouse up the people' but sought to do so by outflanking Fianna Fáil on national rather than class issues (for example, by launching a 'Boycott British' campaign during the economic war). The army convention of 1933 banned IRA volunteers from supporting communist organisations without permission, while a resolution expelling communists was only narrowly defeated. One important factor reinforcing this retreat from socialism was the rise of anti-communism which, following a relentless propaganda campaign in the popular Catholic press, had extended beyond its church- and state-inspired origins to become a widespread phenomenon.[60] By 1933 the communist fringe which republicans had previously cooperated with was regarded as a liability. Two incidents, in particular, illustrated the rise of popular anti-communism. In March 1933 a hymn-singing mob, incited by the belligerent Lenten mission sermons preached in the Pro-Cathedral, attacked the communist-owned Connolly House in Dublin's Great Strand Street. Rioting continued for three nights until the mob succeeded in burning the building to the ground. With the exception of several individuals who disobeyed their superiors, the IRA stood aside. The following Sunday, 1,000 supporters of the militant St Patrick's Anti-Communist League paraded through the streets of Dublin. Elsewhere in the capital, the notorious 'animal gang' – composed of proletarian elements from the slums – attacked communists. During the same period, a clerically inspired campaign to deport Jim Gralton, a Revolutionary Workers' Group member accused of preaching communism in his Leitrim dance hall, received the support of the government (and republicans in Leitrim).[61] It was against this background that the short-lived (third) Communist Party of Ireland was founded in June 1933. Its members were attacked by the IRA when they attended the republican commemoration in Bodenstown later that month. The rise of popular anti-communism, which had not been a feature of the 1920s, reinforced the marginalisation of the Irish left.

Republican Congress

In the spring of 1934, following the rejection of O'Donnell's call for a return to revolutionary socialism at the general army convention, much of

the IRA's left wing seceded to form a new organisation known as Republican Congress. The latter's Athlone manifesto called for the formation of a broad front of anti-capitalist republican opinion. Workers, small farmers, the Gaeltacht youth and, somewhat optimistically, Ulster Protestant workers were identified as the movement's revolutionary basis. However, Congress did initially attract support beyond the usual communist and left republican suspects including representatives of a number of trade unions and trades councils. In terms of ideology, Congress also represented an important development. One example was its attitude to working-class unionists who were identified as a constituency to be won over rather than as an enemy. Another was its attempt to formulate a critique of mainstream republicanism in class terms: 'We failed to state the Fianna Fáil position in terms of its Griffith teachings and confront Fianna Fáil with the vision of James Connolly. We failed to see that a Fianna Fáil government could only serve Irish capitalism.'[62] Freed from the IRA's preoccupation with militarism, Congress mounted rent strikes against slum landlords, picketed employers who banned trade unions, organised marches against the Unemployment Assistance Act and engaged in a broad range of agitation to draw attention to the social injustice of the era: 'the focus of Congress activity was open, mass, participatory politics – a unique development in republican history'.[63] The violence of the quasi-fascist Blueshirt movement, which was often directed against republicans during the summer of 1934, leant some credibility to Congress's calls for a united front against fascism until the former's implosion that autumn. But notwithstanding this burst of activity, Congress had collapsed within six months. Its criticism of the IRA, and decision to launch a military wing, cost it the support of previously sympathetic republicans. Fighting between IRA and Congress activists (including a Protestant delegation from the Shankill) at Bodenstown had increased these tensions. Ultimately, however, the movement collapsed because of its inability to agree a common objective (a workers' republic or the Republic) and structure (a political party or a united front) at its first conference at Rathmines Town Hall in September 1934.[64]

Despite its failure to win popular support, Congress has attracted much historical interest, often favourable, due to its ideological significance. As one socialist account approvingly noted: 'It pushed the republican tradition from which it grew to its very limit and, for a brief period, seemed to represent a serious threat to the status quo.'[65] The socialist historian C. Desmond Greaves went so far as to describe the summer of 1934 as 'a little 1919'.[66] The labour historian, Emmet O'Connor, described the Rathmines convention as 'a remarkable "who's who" of Irish militancy; arguably, Europe's first Popular Front'…A particular achievement was the attraction of Northern Protestant support.'[67] Historians less sympathetic to socialism (or at least its republican mutation), see Congress's significance in

its ideological shortcomings. Certainly, many of the claims made by its supporters – most notably that it won significant working-class and Protestant support – are dubious. (Left republicans invariably depicted the slightest element of cooperation by Protestant radicals with movements such as the Irish Labour Defence League or the Revolutionary Workers' Groups as evidence of the inevitable unity of Irish workers.) Attempts to attribute the failure of Congress – 'which had begun to attract broad working-class support on both sides of the border' – to the IRA's attack on Protestant workers at Bodenstown are unconvincing.[68] The notion that the tiny communist–Congress alliance was instrumental in defeating the Blueshirt movement seems equally implausible.[69] Describing the movement's support base, Henry Patterson caustically referred to 'The Republican Congress Minus Workers and Protestants'.[70] In contrast to earlier socialist republican initiatives, the collapse of Congress was due to public indifference and its own ideological incoherence rather than the opposition of Church, state or a conservative IRA leadership.

For historians like Patterson, Congress is of interest precisely because it 'demonstrated the strict limitations of even the most radical forms of social republicanism'.[71] The split at Rathmines provides the clearest example of this. Congress succeeded in attracting the interest of working-class representatives because its leaders emphasised the need for a socialist political analysis. For reasons which remain unclear, however, a small majority of delegates led by O'Donnell retreated from Congress's previously stated aim of achieving a workers' republic through class struggle: 'Wasn't it clear that what most people wanted to see in their day was the establishment of an Irish Republic? Here, then, in the permanent and universal sentiment of nationalism was a force that should be and could be turned to account.'[72] Rather than challenging Fianna Fáil on the basis of class, O'Donnell sought to confront the party on nationalism, its strongest front. It was difficult to see how such a strategy justified a split from the IRA, or indeed Congress's claims to the allegiance of socialists and Protestant workers. Moreover, by attempting to construct an alliance of workers, small farmers and republican elements in pursuit of a nationalist objective, Congress was attempting something which Fianna Fáil had already achieved.

The Spanish Civil War

The broader, arguably insurmountable, difficulties facing socialists in the 1930s were highlighted by the Irish response to the Spanish Civil War.[73] While the remnants of Congress and the Communist Party succeeded in sending some two hundred men to fight in the International Brigades, their attempts to win support for the Spanish Republic among the broader republican and labour movements met with indifference or hostility. Significantly, in their attempts to counter pro-Franco propaganda from the

pulpit and press, left-wing propagandists such as Frank Ryan felt it necessary to depict the Spanish Civil War as a struggle for democracy rather than a class struggle between left and right.[74] Despite their efforts, the most striking aspect of the Irish response to Spain was the massive public support for Franco's Nationalists. The Irish Christian Front, led by an opportunistic coterie of former Blueshirts, attracted huge crowds to its mass rallies throughout the country, while even many trade unions branches passed pro-Franco resolutions. The Labour Party and Irish Trade Union Congress remained neutral on Spain, while the far left's attempts to present an alternative analysis of the Spanish Civil War merely revived the anti-communist violence of the previous spring. The response to the Spanish Civil War provided ample evidence of the power of religious sentiment to mobilise mass opinion in the Irish Free State, and the inability of socialists to challenge the political parameters authorised by the Catholic Church. Even within Britain's more politically conscious working classes, the pro-Franco sympathies of Irish Catholics placed significant constraints on organised labour's support of the Republic.[75]

A further example of the conservative tendencies among Irish workers during the same period is provided by the Labour Party's feeble attempts to commit itself to a new constitution calling for a workers' republic.[76] The constitution, which was adopted in February 1936, called for a system of government based on public ownership of essential industries and sources of wealth. However, after a committee of the hierarchy ruled that it involved 'a clear denial of the Catholic principles on private and individual ownership', an embarrassed Labour leadership agreed to drop the constitution (which had been most vigorously championed by a recent influx of Congress dissidents). While this incident attests to the Catholic Church's willingness to exert its considerable political authority in the Free State, it should also be noted that the bishops were asked to rule on the constitution by dissatisfied trade union leaders within the labour movement. As one TD declared during a debate on the constitution: 'With respect to everybody's religious beliefs…they were Catholics first and politicians afterwards.'[77] Thus ended the Labour Party's last attempt to associate itself with socialism until the 1960s. Indeed, the Spanish Civil War can be seen as the last gasp of interwar radicalism in Ireland. The departure of leading radicals to Spain, where many died, was partly a response to the lack of a meaningful political role in Ireland. Those who returned found that their 'old friends were retired to the sidelines. No political organization existed in which they could play a part'.[78]

Conclusions

For all its shortcomings, Congress represented the high point of attempts by interwar radicals to advance working-class politics. Although much of

the historiographical analysis of socialist republicanism seeks to attribute the movement's failure to its tactical and ideological errors, there is little reason to believe that the potential alternatives, such as a socialist party committed to a workers' republic, would have achieved significant success. This is not to say that an organised socialist movement could not have exerted an influence greater than its limited electoral support. The failure of the Irish left contributed to the political, social and cultural conservatism of independent Ireland. The significance of interwar socialist republicanism rests in its ideas rather than in its potential or achievements. The notion that republicans should address the existence of working-class unionism, that there were limits to what could be achieved by physical force, and that republicanism without a commitment to social change could serve reactionary interests were important arguments which helped to legitimise ideological alternatives among later generations of militant republicans.[79]

What conclusions can be drawn from this survey of interwar political radicalism? The failure of working-class politics was clearly rooted in many factors. The conservative social structure and political climate of interwar Ireland, characterised by militant Catholicism and nationalism, were not conducive to class politics. Socialist republicans failed to develop a credible political strategy to challenge Fianna Fáil's hegemony or even influence its political outlook. Like most forms of ideology, socialist republicanism was based on political assumptions and a selective reading of history rather than an accurate analysis of social and economic forces. Despite considerable evidence to the contrary, socialists such as O'Donnell persisted in regarding workers and working farmers as inherently radical constituencies. In contrast, the striking ineffectiveness of those who appealed exclusively to these sections of society – whether militant socialist republicans, communists or the Labour Party – suggests that Fianna Fáil's hostility to class politics reflected that of much of the population.

Considering these factors, it could be argued that the influence of unrepresentative socialist radicals within the leadership of organisations such as the IRA in 1931 or the Labour Party in 1936 is more curious than their failure to win support among the rank and file and general public. Accounts which blame the failure of socialism on the Labour Party for 'turning its back on class struggle' assume rather than demonstrate the inherent radicalism of the Irish working classes.[80] Such historians rightly reject the claim that class distinctions were an unimportant factor in twentieth-century Ireland: Fianna Fáil's dominance was clearly based in part on its ability to exploit working-class grievances, as was the long-term survival of the IRA. However, they fail to explain why the great majority of Irish workers have persistently rejected the politics of class or why those organisations which most effectively mobilised support in rural Ireland – whether Sinn Féin during the revolutionary period or even the Blueshirt

movement in the mid-1930s – have appealed to conservative rather than radical instincts.

Has the historic failure of the Irish left any relevance to present-day politics? In retrospect, perhaps the most striking aspect of interwar politics is the element of continuity. Nationalism and Catholicism are no longer dominant forces in the southern state but political inertia has ensured that the contours of interwar political alignments remain familiar. Despite the greater influence of smaller parties, and the end of single-party government by Fianna Fáil, the politics of the state remain dominated by the same two right-of-centre parties, with Labour remaining an ineffective third party. Urban and rural workers continue to vote for Fianna Fáil, ensuring its dominant position as the semi-permanent party of government, rather than Labour. In contrast to much of Western Europe, no social democratic party has emerged as a serious political force. Although socialists continue to predict the rise of a working-class movement from amidst the inequalities of the Celtic Tiger economy, recent election results demonstrate the survival of another old pattern: rather than the left it is Sinn Féin – the latest example of a republican phenomenon stretching back to the Workers' Party and Clann na Poblachta and a party with more than a few ideological similarities to early Fianna Fáil's radical populism – which has proved most capable of mobilising radical working-class discontent.[81]

Notes

1. *Irish Times*, 19, 20 June 1922.
2. J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 95.
3. *Watchword*, 30 May 1931, cited in Enda McKay, 'Changing with the tide: the Irish Labour Party, 1927–1933', *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, vol. 11 (1986), p. 29.
4. Michael Gallagher, *The Irish Labour Party in Transition 1957–1982* (Manchester, 1982), p. 242.
5. Richard Dunphy, *The Making of Fianna Fáil Power in Ireland, 1923–1948* (Oxford, 1995), p. 40.
6. Bill Kissane, *Explaining Irish Democracy* (Dublin, 2002), p. 220.
7. Lee, *Ireland*, p. 72. On the Free State inheritance generally, see pp. 69–94.
8. Kissane, *Irish Democracy*, pp. 54–5, 219–21.
9. Ibid, p. 221. See also W.K. Anderson, *James Connolly and the Irish Left* (Dublin, 1994), p.156, on the 'not very surprising' failure of the republican left.
10. Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824–1960* (Dublin, 1992), p. 121.
11. C. Desmond Greaves, 'Class and nation in Ireland', in J. Fyrth (ed.), *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front* (London, 1985), pp. 224–5; Kieran Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour: 1926 to the Present* (London, 1997), p. 7.
12. O'Connor, *Labour History*, p. 121.
13. Cited in Paul Bew, Ellen Hazelkorn and Henry Patterson, *The Dynamics of Irish Politics* (London, 1989), p. 28.
14. Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil Power*; Allen, *Fianna Fáil*.
15. Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil Power*, p. 41.

16. C.S. Andrews, *Man of No Property* (1982), p. 13, cited in Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil Power*, p. 42.
17. Richard Breen *et al.*, *Understanding Contemporary Ireland: State, Class and Development in the Republic of Ireland* (London, 1990), p. 54; Christopher T. Whelan *et al.*, 'Industrialisation, class formation and social mobility in Ireland', in J.H. Goldthorpe and C.T. Whelan (eds.), *The Development of Industrial Society in Ireland* (Oxford, 1992), p. 107.
18. Henry Patterson, 'Fianna Fáil and the working class: the origins of the enigmatic relationship', *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, vol. 13 (1988), p. 81.
19. *Dáil Debates*, vol. 41, col. 907, 29 April 1932, cited in Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 25.
20. Richard English, *Radicals and the Republic* (Oxford, 1994). For a more sympathetic analysis of O'Donnell's life and politics, see Donal Ó Drisceoil, *Peadar O'Donnell* (Cork, 2001).
21. James Connolly, cited in Greaves, 'Class and nation', p. 221. For a critique of Connolly's legacy see English, *Radicals*, pp. 12–29.
22. J.J. Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society 1848–1918* (Dublin, 1973), p. 152. But see also W.K. Anderson's thoughtful *James Connolly and the Irish Left* (1994) which largely exonerates Connolly of responsibility for the ineffectiveness of his political legacy.
23. Bew *et al.*, *Dynamics*, pp. 21–6; Roy Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600–1972* (London, 1989), pp. 513–15. See also David Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish Life 1913–1921* (Dublin, 1977) for the most influential statement of the conservative revolution thesis.
24. Greaves, 'Class and nation', pp. 226, 231.
25. Conor Kostick, *Revolution in Ireland: Popular Militancy 1917 to 1923* (London, 1996).
26. For criticism of the claim that class conflict played a substantial role in the Civil War see Kissane, *Irish Democracy*, pp. 66–9; Tom Garvin, *Nationalist Revolutionaries in Ireland, 1858–1928* (Oxford, 1987), p. 174; Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil Power*, pp. 32–7; English, *Radicals*, pp. 52–62.
27. Manifesto of the Communist Party of Ireland, 1933, cited in English, *Radicals*, p. 52.
28. Peadar O'Donnell, *There Will Be Another Day* (Dublin, 1963), p. 11, cited in English, *Radicals*, p. 54.
29. Brian Hanley, *The IRA 1926–1936* (Dublin, 2002), pp. 20–3.
30. For O'Donnell's involvement in the annuities campaign, see Ó Drisceoil, *O'Donnell*, pp. 44–50.
31. *An Phoblacht*, 25 March 1927, cited in Henry Patterson, *The Politics of Illusion* (London, 1997), p. 41.
32. Hanley, *The IRA*, pp. 120–1.
33. Ó Drisceoil, *O'Donnell*, p. 50; Patterson, *Politics of Illusion*, p. 46.
34. Bew *et al.*, *Dynamics*, p. 37.
35. *An Phoblacht*, 12 November 1927, cited in Ó Drisceoil, *O'Donnell*, p. 48.
36. Hanley, *The IRA*, p. 121.
37. Bew *et al.*, *Dynamics*, p. 78.
38. Hanley, *The IRA*, p. 122.
39. Hanley, *The IRA*, p. 121.
40. *An Phoblacht*, 1 November 1931.
41. Bew *et al.*, *Dynamics*, p. 44.
42. Patterson, *Politics of Illusion*, p. 68. See also Hanley, *The IRA*, p. 56 for O'Donnell's 'resentment of urban workers'.

43. *An Phoblacht*, 28 April 1931.
44. *An Phoblacht*, 26 October 1929; Garvin, *Nationalist Revolutionaries*, pp. 120–1; Brian Hanley, *The IRA*, p. 178.
45. *An Phoblacht*, 1 February 1930.
46. Ó Drisceoil, *O'Donnell*, p. 1.
47. Ó Drisceoil, *O'Donnell*, p. 48.
48. Hanley, *The IRA*, p. 57.
49. Fearghal McGarry, *Frank Ryan* (Dundalk, 2002), p. 13.
50. Donal Ó Drisceoil, 'The "irregular and bolshie situation": republicanism and communism, 1921–1936', in Fearghal McGarry (ed.), *Republicanism in Modern Ireland* (Dublin, 2003), pp. 42–60.
51. Hanley, *The IRA*, pp. 178–9; Patterson, *Politics of Illusion*, p. 53.
52. Patrick Murray, *Oracles of God: The Roman Catholic Church and Irish Politics, 1922–37* (Dublin, 2000), pp. 317–25.
53. Ó Drisceoil, *O'Donnell*, pp. 64–8.
54. Uinseann MacEoin (ed.), *Survivors* (Dublin, 1980), p. 6.
55. Hanley, *The IRA*, pp. 179–80.
56. *Mayo News*, 10 October 1931, cited in Patterson, *Politics of Illusion*, p. 59.
57. Hanley, *The IRA*, p. 129.
58. McGarry, *Ryan*, pp. 31 and 34.
59. Fearghal McGarry, '"Too damned tolerant': republicans and imperialism in the Irish Free State', in McGarry (ed.), *Republicanism*, pp. 61–85.
60. Mary Banta, 'The red scare in the Irish Free State' (MA thesis University College Dublin, 1982).
61. Ó Drisceoil, *O'Donnell*, p. 80.
62. *Republican Congress*, 5 May 1934, cited in Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 50.
63. Ó Drisceoil, *O'Donnell*, p. 85.
64. McGarry, *Ryan*, pp. 35–41.
65. Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 49.
66. Greaves, 'Class and nation', p. 231.
67. O'Connor, *Labour History*, p. 127.
68. Joseph O'Connor, *Even the Olives Are Bleeding* (Dublin, 1992), p. 50.
69. See, for example, Michael O'Riordan, *Connolly Column* (Dublin, 1979), pp. 25–6 and Manus O'Riordan, 'Communism in Dublin in the 1930s', in H.G. Klaus (ed.), *Strong Words Brave Deeds* (Dublin, 1994), pp. 225–6.
70. Patterson, *Politics of Illusion*, p. 58. J. Bowyer Bell noted that there were 'as many Congress leaders as followers' (*The Secret Army*, Dublin, 1997 edn, p. 114).
71. Patterson, *Politics of Illusion*, p. 65.
72. O'Donnell, cited in Department of Justice, 'Notes on Republican Congress', c.1936, p. 13, MacEntee Papers, P67/527, University College Dublin Archives Department. Two factors which contributed to this apparent subordination of class to nationalism were the united front strategy of the influential CPI and Comintern element within Congress and the fact that socialist republicans could (like their opponents) cite Connolly's life and work to support their strategy. See Fearghal McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War* (Cork, 1999), pp. 87–99, and Anderson, *James Connolly*, pp. 135–6.
73. Robert A. Stradling, *The Irish and the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939* (Manchester, 1999) and McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*.
74. McGarry, *Ryan*, pp. 44–6.
75. Tom Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 183–5.

76. Fearghal McGarry, '"Catholics first and politicians afterwards": the Labour Party and the Workers' Republic, 1936–39', *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, vol. 25 (2000), pp. 57–65.
77. Gerard McGowan, cited in McGarry, 'Catholics first', p. 64.
78. Edwards, cited in McGarry, *Irish Politics*, p. 81.
79. Richard English, 'Socialism: socialist intellectuals and the Irish revolution', in Joost Augusteijn (ed.), *The Irish Revolution, 1913–1923* (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 211–14.
80. See, for example, Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, pp. 8–9, 179. For criticism of Allen, see English, *Radicals*, p. 26.
81. I would like to thank Dr Enda Delaney for his comments on this essay.

12

The Northern Ireland Labour Party, 1924–45

Graham Walker

Background

The nature of the circumstances in which Northern Ireland was brought into being as a political unit virtually ensured that its political character would subsequently be shaped by national and ethnic rather than class forces. Partition, under the terms of the Government of Ireland Act of 1920, was designed to be a temporary means of resolving the national question, but it instead had the effect of hardening respective nationalist and unionist positions.[1] The divisions over Irish home rule dating from the late nineteenth century were given a new twist. In the unionist-controlled North, the determination to use the new devolved structure as a bulwark against Irish nationalism would result in the main political focus being on the maintenance of the state (or statelet's) constitutional position, albeit anomalous, within the United Kingdom. For Irish nationalists and republicans the new partition arrangement could not be granted recognition as legitimate. Markers to this effect were laid down in the first elections to the new Northern Ireland parliament in May 1921 as both unionists and nationalists made the communal and sectarian appeals to their respective electorates, which would quickly come to define the political temper of this society.

Nevertheless, class issues remained significant. The industrial economy of the Lagan Valley region in particular had led to a growth of trade unionism, mainly of the craft variety. Labour politics had established a presence in the North since the 1890s, sometimes in conditions of the utmost hostility. Shortly before the partition settlement, in January 1919, Belfast witnessed a huge display of industrial action by the overwhelmingly Protestant engineering workers in support of a 44-hour week.[2] Coincidental with the birth of Northern Ireland in 1921 was a serious slump in the province's staple export-based industries of shipbuilding, engineering and textiles. There would be no shortage of issues around which Labour could attempt to organise and prioritise the interests of the working class.

Organisation

The subject of this chapter, the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP), came into existence in March 1924 out of a conference involving delegates from the Belfast Labour Party (BLP) and the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions.[3] It was felt that the time had come to broaden the BLP and organise on a state-wide, six-county basis, an indication perhaps that perceptions of the new Northern Ireland unit as merely an ephemeral political phenomenon were fading, although it was not until the conclusion of the Boundary Commission's deliberations in December 1925 that the Irish border could be said to have acquired the semblance of being permanent.[4] The 1924 conference was more likely the outcome of the deepening seriousness of the unemployment problem and the need for more purposeful and coherent Labour political agitation; and of the heartening performance of the BLP candidate, the party secretary Harry Midgley, at the Westminster seat of West Belfast in the election of December 1923. This contest, in which Midgley polled 22,255 votes and lost to the Unionist by only 2,720, appeared to demonstrate the potential for Labour to appeal across the sectarian divide, especially in straitened economic circumstances.[5]

The BLP had emerged back in 1917 out of a similar conference of trade unions and delegates from the branches of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in the city. The ILP had been the focus of left-wing politics in the North since 1893, and had produced a major leadership figure in William Walker, a craft union official whose outlook was shaped by the conviction that the interests of the working class in Ireland were bound up with the steady progress of the British labour movement within the UK polity then in existence. As a consequence he was anti-home rule, a stance which brought him famously into conflict with those, championed by James Connolly, who took the view that socialist advance in Ireland depended on independence and the breaking of the union with Britain.[6] Connolly set up the Independent Labour Party of Ireland in 1912 and recruited a sizeable number from the North. Divisions over the national question within the northern labour ranks were thus apparent before and indeed after the First World War, although they were sufficiently held in check to enable the BLP to exploit the mood of industrial unrest and discontent over housing and living standards at the local elections in 1920.[7] These successes were short-lived: in July 1920 rising tensions over the political situation in Ireland as a whole led to expulsions of Catholic workers and Protestant 'red-flaggers' (also known as 'rotten prods') from the shipyards. This was the prelude to a period of communal violence surrounding the formation of Northern Ireland that only abated in 1923 and which claimed the labour movement as a notable casualty.[8]

The organisation of the NILP (known during the 1920s as the Labour Party (Northern Ireland)),[9] in 1924 was not in the circumstances done lightly.

There were some who had come to be fatalistic about the prospect of Labour politics in the new political context. There was also the question of funding and resources. This brought into focus the new party's external relationships.

The first of these to consider is that of the British Labour Party. In 1925 a request by the NILP for financial assistance was considered by the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the British party. The request was for a loan to enable the party to contest seats for the Northern Ireland Parliament, and it was decided to refer the matter to the organisation sub-committee. British Labour records indicate that the matter was not then considered by this sub-committee or any other of the NEC at the time.[10] In 1927, Arthur Henderson, general secretary of the British party, received two communications from the NILP requesting the British party to remit to the NILP the proportion of affiliation fees which were paid to the British party by British-based trade unions having a membership in Northern Ireland. Henderson noted that this was the revival of a claim made when the NILP was in the process of formation in 1924. In 1927 the NEC recommended that further enquiry be made as to whether political fees were being paid by trade union members in Ireland, if so to what extent, and that further consideration of the NILP request be deferred until this information had been secured. However, once again the matter appears to have dropped out of sight.[11] Financial help from London was thus negligible, even at election times when the NILP candidates, in the interwar period, had to secure trade union backing to fight a credible campaign. The practical help provided by the British Labour Party came in the form of visits by mostly second-division personalities to speak and canvass for NILP candidates at elections. In addition, the British Labour Party was officially represented at an NILP conference for the first time in 1932, a reflection of the closer links between the parties which the then NILP leader, Midgley, was striving to build.[12] It would be after the Second World War before the British party would appoint a full-time organiser for Northern Ireland, and even then the NILP was kept at a distance from the British party's deliberations.

The NILP also looked south to the new Irish Free State. Here too there was little in the way of a positive response. The party affiliated to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ITUC) in 1927 and set up a joint council with the Irish Labour Party (IrLP) in 1930.[13] However, the links were even less effective than those with British Labour, and from both directions there was scant appreciation of the peculiar political difficulties the NILP found itself in amidst continuing divisions over the national question, and the uncertainties and anomalies surrounding Northern Ireland's devolved status within the UK. The party was caught between sectarian blocs in Northern Ireland itself, and between Irish Labour Party weakness and British Labour indifference outside.[14]

The NILP duly organised in different parts of the six counties, most notably the city of Derry – sixteen Labour councillors were returned to the

local corporation in 1926. There were also branches in North Antrim and South Armagh, but overall the party remained a Belfast phenomenon. Here branches sprung up across the city in Protestant and Catholic areas alike, such as Shankill and Smithfield respectively, but the strength and level of activity varied greatly. Perhaps the most lively was that of Dock, 'Red Ward', which achieved significant municipal election success and benefited from the organisational energies of Midgley.[15] O'Connor notes that twenty trade unions affiliated to the NILP initially, but that this figure declined in later years.[16]

The ILP continued to be a presence in Belfast until the party's disaffiliation from the British Labour Party in 1932. Following this, its branches, North and Central, dissolved and in its place came the Socialist Party of Northern Ireland (SPNI), a focus of left-wing and anti-partitionist agitation which irked the NILP leadership for the rest of the decade.[17] The SPNI also became the political home of several left-wing intellectual figures such as the writers John Hewitt, Sam Hanna Bell and John Boyd who saw it as their mission to transcend the stifling confines of the Northern Ireland political world.[18]

Policy and ideology

During the interwar era the NILP made its appeal on social and economic questions and adopted, in effect, a 'neutral' stance on the national question. It officially declined to take up an unequivocal pro-Union or anti-partition position. At election times, as will be shown, the party was not above tailoring its message in accordance with the character of the constituency it was fighting and the particular side of the sectarian divide from which it was attempting to gain votes. Moreover, the NILP's apparent fence-sitting concealed significant varieties of opinion within the party on the constitutional question.

The NILP's ideological inheritance regarding socialism's relationship to the Irish question, for example, involved the positions taken up by both Connolly and Walker. The first chairman of the party, William McMullen, had been an associate of Connolly during the latter's short period of residence in Belfast in 1910–11 when he was engaged in organising mill workers.[19] McMullen, although a Protestant, became something of an apostle for Connolly's socialist republican gospel during the 1920s, and his Irish unity aspirations were evident in his work as a member of the Poor Law board and as an MP in the Northern Ireland Parliament between 1925 and 1929. The West Belfast branch of the NILP in the 1920s included other prominent 'Connollyites' such as Murtagh Morgan, John McWade and James Grimley. Nor should it be forgotten that the BLP had opposed partition in 1921 on the grounds that it was a device employed by the ruling bourgeoisie to divide and weaken the political strength of the working

class. A strong strain of anti-partitionism, justifying itself on a socialist basis, was to be apparent in the NILP throughout the period under scrutiny.

If Connolly and his ideas inspired the more doctrinally minded in the party, the influence of Walker was nonetheless felt also, if in more ambiguous terms. Walker's outright opposition to Irish home rule had eventually put him at odds with most of the labour movement when he retired from the political arena around 1912. Indeed, the British Labour Party and the ILP, to which he wished Ireland firmly wedded, were pro-home rule as a result of the radical Liberal strand in their make-up. In the NILP in the 1920s and at least the early 1930s there was no equivalent championing of Walker's Labour Unionist position to compare with those like McMullen who promoted Connolly's vision. Nevertheless, it can be argued that there were some for whom Walker was a trusted guide to the perils of mixing socialism and nationalism. Such people would have included ILP veterans Bob McLung and Alex Stewart who had fought alongside Walker to establish a Labour presence in Belfast.[20]

Walker's ideological significance for the NILP, however, transcended the Irish question. It was manifested in the party's adoption, from the beginning, of an essentially British labourist approach to its task in Northern Ireland. Indeed, it may be observed that the party's equivocation on the national question was the only meaningful concession to the Connollyite or anti-partitionist Labour tendency. In practice the NILP accepted the reality of the new state and set out to become the main opposition party within it; in the process it attempted to take advantage of the Nationalist Party's abstentionism.[21] In March 1925 the first issue of the newspaper the *Labour Opposition of Northern Ireland* appeared, published by the northern branch of the ILP and edited by Hugh Gemmell. The paper's name alone spoke clearly of Labour's intentions, and the paper's espousal of causes such as old age pensions, widows' pensions, the establishment of a Ministry of Health, and the nationalisation of the railways revealed how closely in practice the NILP was identifying itself with British Labour policy and goals.[22] Another NILP leadership figure of the time, Sam Kyle, made the significant comment in his election address in 1925 that 'until the Free State is prepared to give the same conditions to teachers, OAPs, and Unemployment Insurance as we have in Northern Ireland, we in the North should not permit any worsening of our position'.[23]

This indicated a pragmatic approach on the part of what might be called the NILP's mainstream – Kyle, Gemmell, Midgley and others – towards the national question. These leaders quickly put the issue to one side when the NILP was formed and concentrated on supplying a non-sectarian opposition to the governing unionists with British Labour as their model and ideological base. In addition, such Labour leaders venerated the Walkerite cause of municipalisation; they regarded with pride the progress made in

this area and reacted defensively to those of a more high-minded theoretical disposition who disparaged such preoccupations. In the *Labour Opposition* in May 1926 Margaret McCoubrey, one of the few female activists in the northern labour movement, assailed those who considered 'Marxian theory' more important than 'Pure Milk'.[24] Municipalisation, the Co-operative Society, and the vibrant culture of the ILP were all British socialist characteristics that were coolly viewed at best by those of a strong Connollyite and/or revolutionary bent. Andy Barr, a prominent Northern Ireland communist from the time of the Second World War, recalled being appalled by the sing-songs at strike meetings when serious talking about tactics was required.[25] What he failed to grasp was how such activities reflected the appeal over generations of the ILP and the crusading, evangelising style in which it promoted its ethical socialist message and ideas of citizenship and individual responsibility as well as distribution of wealth and social justice.[26] The *Labour Opposition* newspaper was inspired by the Glasgow ILP paper *Forward* and reflected the ILP faith in the efficacy of good propaganda. The goal was to educate the workers, not instruct or dragoon them.

There were thus tensions within the NILP from the start of a reformist–revolutionary kind, but they by no means in all cases mapped conveniently onto the lines of division over the national question. The extreme left faction of the party was led by Tommy Geehan who was for a time secretary of the Court Ward branch. Geehan became associated in 1927 with the Workers' Party of Ireland (WPI), a Communist Dublin-based group led by Connolly's son Roddy. The WPI later mutated into the Revolutionary Workers' Groups (RWGs) which made a striking, if fleeting, impact in the North around the Outdoor Relief protests of the unemployed in 1932, which briefly united Protestants and Catholics, and then finally into the Communist Party of Ireland (CPI). Geehan and his followers took their ideological cue from the Soviet Union and attempted to wrest control of the NILP from the moderate leadership around Kyle, Gemmell, Midgley and others. Geehan and Gemmell indeed clashed polemically in the pages of the *Labour Opposition*, the former pledging to purge the party of 'adulterated socialists', the latter espousing a 'higher pragmatism' which would preserve the integrity of the movement.[27] Geehan and some supporters duly left the NILP in 1929 to Gemmell's delight.[28]

Geehan's revolutionary perspective was informed by Connolly as well as the Soviet Union, but others claiming the mantle of Connolly, such as McMullen, rejected the communist–revolutionary approach. They were undoubtedly wary of the antagonism towards socialism and communism on the part of the Catholic Church and the extent to which this influenced the Catholic voters to whom they were appealing in the labour interest. McMullen and others were to find that Catholic anti-socialist propaganda

from the pulpit and in the pages of the *Irish News*, the mouthpiece of the Nationalist Party led by Joseph Devlin, was an obstacle just as daunting as the unionist–Orange machine on the other side of the sectarian divide.[29]

However, the most serious problem for the development of the NILP and its brand of British labourism was the way the unionists chose to use the devolved government powers at their disposal. Rather than taking the opportunity to chart a divergent course from that of the central government, the successive Unionist Party administrations adopted a conservative approach and generally followed what to them was the line of least political risk. This translated into reproducing most Westminster legislation of any importance; socially, this involved the maintenance of welfare payments, including the politically crucial one of unemployment benefit, at the same level as in the rest of the UK.[30] This was not achieved without a struggle with the British Treasury, but agreements negotiated in the 1920s and 1930s ensured that 'step by step', as it was colloquially known, in the general realm of social welfare could be touted by the unionists as proof that they in Northern Ireland were no less British when it came to material benefits.[31]

The political advantage of this to the unionists, and the consequent difficulty for Labour, was that the governing party could persuade their Protestant working-class electorate that there was no need to vote for the NILP to bring socially progressive legislation to Ulster. The Unionist Party machine had incorporated a labour wing, the Ulster Unionist Labour Association (UULA), in 1918 as part of its quest for cross-class ethnic unity against Irish nationalism. The UULA's chief patron, John Miller Andrews, became Minister of Labour in the first Northern Ireland administration and, together with Prime Minister James Craig, worked to ensure that the Labour interest was kept 'loyal' and that class grievances would not rupture the unionist alliance. In 1929, following an agreement over unemployment insurance reached with London, William Grant (a UULA MP in the northern parliament) congratulated the government on 'one of the greatest achievements…in the interests of the industrial workers in Northern Ireland'.[32] The importance placed by the unionist government on this endorsement from Grant might be judged by the fact that he had opposed the government 26 times during the 1925–9 parliament,[33] usually in the company of the NILP.

It was thus largely in vain that the NILP tried to point out that the unionists were tolerating such legislation for their own political ends without believing in its social value; and that unionist MPs at Westminster invariably opposed anything of benefit to the working class. Devolved government, in the minimalist form in which it was operated by the unionists, became part of the problem for labour. Shortly after being elected to the Northern Ireland parliament in 1933, Midgley's frustrations boiled over:

'This is a deadly institution…Every time you come forward with a new idea or try to develop a new problem and inculcate it into the minds of members you are met with the argument, "it is outside our powers; it is a reserved service; do you expect us to do that on our own when other areas are not prepared to join us?" After you have been here for a while you become obsessed with the feeling that you can perform no useful function.'[34]

Fatally for the NILP, the unionists reduced the space for the development of class politics. They saw the political benefits in marginalising class issues and filling the political vacuum with the one question guaranteed to close the ranks of their supporters: the territorial integrity of Northern Ireland as part of the UK. Where the NILP criticisms of the government fastened onto practical details of social and economic matters, it was usually British government policies that were the object of discussion, and British Labour critiques that were being echoed.[35]

When he became undisputed leader of the NILP in the early 1930s Harry Midgley attempted to nudge it purposefully in the direction of accepting Northern Ireland's constitutional position. As well as strengthening links with British Labour he regularly excoriated nationalists for playing the game of sectarianism which was a 'gift' to the unionists.[36] He tried to supply an opposition programme around demands such as the return of the proportional representation electoral system scrapped by Craig in 1928, a reduction in the costs of government, pensions and unemployment insurance reform, minimum wages and working hours legislation, the abolition of the Poor Law, and housing and education reforms.[37] In addition, he sought to fix the NILP sights more intently on international developments: he himself was to campaign vigorously for the republican government against Franco's fascists in the Spanish Civil War of 1936–9 and link Northern Ireland to this most celebrated cause of the interwar left in Europe.[38] However, in alienating as a consequence the Catholic votes on which he depended, he lost his seat in the Northern Ireland election of 1938. By then he had endured a series of fractious confrontations with the anti-partitionist wing of the NILP, the small SPNI, and his main rival for the leadership Jack Beattie, who reinvented himself in the 1930s as a Connollyite. Against the background of the rise of right-wing nationalism and fascism in Europe, Midgley considered Irish nationalist and republican ideals in a new and darker light and became impatient with those whose, in his view outdated, espousal of them only prevented the NILP from making a truly broad and popular appeal.[39] 'The Ulster Protestant', he wrote in an anti-partitionist journal in 1936, 'will not, under present conditions, be interested in the question of Irish Nationalism. He is a Britisher in sentiment and outlook. During the whole of his lifetime he has lived in such an atmosphere.'[40] By the end of the 1930s the Midgley–Beattie rivalry was looking increasingly like a rerun of Walker–Connolly, and the NILP suffered as a result.

Elections

The electoral performance of the NILP from its inception to the beginning of the Second World War was generally disappointing, notwithstanding some heartening results periodically in both parliamentary and municipal contests. As noted, Midgley's narrow defeat in West Belfast in 1923 encouraged the formation of the party, and he stood for the same seat in the Westminster election of October 1924. Again he polled impressively (21,122) but lost by a greater margin than previously (7,313) and was somewhat less successful in attracting Protestant support.[41]

Yet the economic downturn and the consequent unemployment, affecting the working class as a whole, kept the unionists in a state of anxiety about the threat posed by Labour. Hence the efforts to restructure the basis on which devolved government was financed, and to persuade the British Treasury to guarantee the maintenance of unemployment insurance payments and other welfare benefits at British levels. Nevertheless, for those unemployed forced to seek relief work, the rate of payment was considerably lower than the British average, a situation which persisted until the riots of 1932 and owed much to the parsimony and prejudices of the Poor Law Guardians. There was still much of substance around which Labour might agitate.[42]

It was not altogether surprising therefore that the NILP should make a good showing in the Northern Ireland election of April 1925. This, like the first election in 1921, was fought under a proportional representation (PR) system.[43] The three NILP candidates who stood were returned: Beattie, top of the poll in East Belfast; Kyle, elected on the second count in North Belfast; and McMullen who squeezed in on the fourth count in West Belfast. The party became the official opposition in the absence of the nationalists and Kyle assumed the role of leader in parliament. There was a surge of optimism and Kyle declared that Belfast would become 'redder than the Clyde'.[44] The unionists were discomfited, not only by the loss of seats to the NILP, but also to a variety of Independent Unionists. Indeed it was evident that much Protestant working-class disaffection with the government was more likely to be expressed in votes for these Independent candidates, a tendency which persisted during the 1930s and sporadically vexed the Unionist Party. The results in 1925 in fact confirmed Craig in his determination to be rid of the PR system at the earliest opportunity. This he did in 1928 as a deliberate strike at both Labour and the Independents. Craig simply wished for a straight fight between unionists and nationalists over the constitutional question, a state of affairs which held out the best prospects of comfortable unionist majorities in perpetuity. But the success of the Independent Unionists was also ominous for Labour. Midgley was ruefully to remark later that 'it is astounding the number of votes these independents can obtain without a programme and without electoral

organisation', but, as he also observed, their success often lay in outbidding the official unionists in sectarianism.[45]

The replacement of PR with the first-past-the-post 'winner takes all' system in use in Britain had the effect of reducing the NILP representation in the Northern Parliament from three to one as a result of the 1929 election. Only Beattie survived, having acquired a relatively solid block of support in the Pottinger area. In 1933 Midgley joined him with the capture of the seat of Dock which he had represented for some years in the Belfast City Council. When the unionist incumbent in Dock, Major Blakiston-Houston, attempted to use the Catholic faith of his wife to poach some votes, Midgley retaliated by accusing his opponent of supporting the provision of divorce, thus pitching as dubiously for Catholic backing.[46] In 1941 Midgley was to tailor his appeal to the Protestant voters of Willowfield very differently. Notwithstanding Midgley's victory, the unionists could reflect that changes to the electoral system had done the intended job, at least where Labour was concerned. Certainly, the NILP showing in the trough of an economic depression was unsatisfactory. Craig continued to be more preoccupied with extremist Independent threats; he wrote, relatively unperturbed, to the defeated Blakiston-Houston that 'we will just have to put up with your successor [Midgley] and try to keep him in order. I do not mind quite so much what these sort of people say as the length of time it takes them in the saying, but it cannot be helped.'[47]

Midgley and Beattie coexisted uneasily at Stormont until Beattie was expelled from the NILP in 1934 for defying the party line over the moving of a writ in parliament to allow a by-election to take place for the seat of Belfast Central. The seat had been Joseph Devlin's and was vacated on Devlin's death in January. It was the privilege of the nationalists to move the writ but the NILP took the view by May that the nationalists were stalling to gain advantage. Beattie's actions reflected the degree to which he was unwilling to cause offence to the nationalists and by extension Catholic voters in his own constituency. The by-election duly took place in June and the NILP recalled McMullen who was now based in Dublin on trade union business. However, his Connollyite credentials could not prevail over the Devlinite, T.J. Campbell. The nationalist campaign was typical in its anti-socialism and thinly veiled aspersions of a religious nature towards the Protestant McMullen. Beattie meantime acquired a post with the strongly nationalist trade union, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation.

The next election, in 1938, was called by Craig (now Lord Craigavon) to send a defiant message to de Valera over the latter's attempts to persuade the British government to move Northern Ireland into unity with the South, and the Constitution introduced the previous year which renamed the Free State 'Éire', recognised the special position of the Roman Catholic Church and claimed the territory of Northern Ireland. The election pre-

dictably assumed an even more emphatic 'Orange versus Green' character, and the NILP was again left struggling to appear relevant. The NILP was in many ways at the mercy of such developments around the national question on which it had no influence and could exert no control. In addition, Midgley's combativeness on the Spanish Civil War resulted in the intervention of a nationalist, James Collins, in Dock. The Catholic vote thus split, allowing the unionist to win with Midgley a humiliating third. It was suggested by those of an anti-partitionist disposition in the NILP that Midgley lost Catholic support on account of not standing up strongly enough for them during the sectarian riots of 1935 which centred on the constituency.[48] However, there had been earlier local electoral opportunities for the voters to show their displeasure towards Midgley, if such it was, and they were not taken.[49] It was the Spanish issue which unleashed the antagonism, and brought about an orchestrated response on the part of the Catholic Church and the Nationalist Party against Midgley. Beattie and other anti-partitionist Labour figures maintained a studied silence over Spain.[50] Beattie was again returned in 1938, this time as 'Independent Labour', while Patrick Agnew, a Catholic and anti-partitionist, was allowed a walkover in South Armagh to become the NILP's sole MP at Stormont for the next three years.[51]

In the realm of local government the NILP enjoyed intermittent successes, largely in Belfast.[52] However, the scrapping by Craig's government of PR for local elections as early as a year into Northern Ireland's existence severely hampered the party's prospects, as was the case at parliamentary level after 1928. In the Poor Law elections of the period the NILP at least had the satisfaction of decisively defeating its communist antagonists, what ever might be said about the apparent effectiveness of the RWGs' direct action tactics over outdoor relief payments in 1932.[53] For the NILP there could be no forsaking the gradualist, reformist faith in the ballot box, and the need to convince workers to use this instrument in their own interests.

The war years

The initial impact of the Second World War on the NILP was merely to exacerbate strains over the national question. Midgley and those around him wished to position the party behind the war effort, but this would have occasioned a split. As it was, even Midgley had to bow to the prevailing opinion in the party against the extension of conscription to Northern Ireland. This reflected both the sensitivities of the Catholic minority community and the reluctance of even those generally supportive of Midgley's leadership to take such a huge political risk. However, Midgley was prepared to incur the wrath of his anti-partitionist party opponents and the anxiety of those in the moderate centre, by identifying himself personally with government-sponsored projects in support of the war effort.[54] As a

result criticism over his leadership grew more strident, notwithstanding the advances of Nazi Germany on the continent. 'Up here, Midgley & Co are trying to blow the trumpet louder than Craigavon', complained Malachy Gray, a communist-inclined NILP activist in a letter to the Dublin author and journalist Desmond Ryan in December 1940.[55]

The problem for Midgley lay in the contrast between the highly motivated and energetic anti-partitionist wing of the NILP and the cautious disposition of the moderates, including the craft trade union representatives, on whom his leadership depended. The latter were undoubtedly content to accept the constitutional position of Northern Ireland, but they were not prepared to evangelise for it in the manner of Midgley from the late 1930s.[56] They lacked the idealism of the anti-partitionists, and the enthusiasm for a progressive British Commonwealth which Midgley and his closest allies were increasingly displaying. A staple of Midgley's conference orations in this period was a tribute to the recent social reforming governments of New Zealand.[57]

The gulf between Midgley and his opponents grew even wider after his sensational by-election triumph in the seat of Willowfield in December 1941.[58] This previously rock-solid unionist seat of a largely Protestant working-class character was captured emphatically by Midgley after a powerful campaign in which his pro-British and pro-war effort rhetoric quelled the usual unionist scares about the national question. Midgley also exploited the deep sense of dissatisfaction with the unionist government now led by J.M Andrews, and the leftwards shift in public opinion which to a degree shadowed that in Britain in the same early wartime period. However, his stunning victory only brought the NILP dilemma into sharper focus: should the party endorse more such 'Labour Unionist' appeals to mount a serious opposition to the government based essentially on dissidents from within the Protestant community; or should it focus again on preserving a balance between rival tendencies on the constitutional issue and insisting that it stood only for the interests of the working class as a whole? For Midgley the extraordinary gravity of the international situation demanded a commitment to Britain and the Allies in defence of democracy, but he was soon made aware that such a commitment was not likely to be forthcoming in the context of lingering ethnic and national divisions in Northern Ireland and Catholic community grievances over discrimination. This was in spite also of the political somersaults turned by the communists in 1941 and their subsequent support of the war and in particular the Russian part in it.

By the end of 1942 Midgley and the NILP came to a parting of the ways. Midgley attempted to obtain the party's backing for a declaration in support of Northern Ireland's position within the UK and the Commonwealth, to stop what he called a 'drift towards Nationalism and Republicanism' in the NILP. This latter perception was based on the readmission into the

party of Beattie, and the admission of others of similar views including Midgley's recent nationalist opponent, James Collins, during the course of the year 1942. However, his efforts only met with the calculated rebuff of being relegated to the status of Beattie's deputy in Parliament. This, coupled with the fact that two out of the three NILP MPs at Stormont were now anti-partitionist, convinced Midgley that he had to sever the ties with the party he had been so instrumental in founding.[59] Moreover, there had been rumours about Midgley being invited into the government in an attempt to broaden its base. There was undoubtedly pressure from London to this end.[60] That eventuality, however, hinged on Midgley and the party he led being 'safe' from a unionist point of view on the national question.

It was perhaps unsurprising in the circumstances that Midgley should immediately form the explicitly pro-Union Commonwealth Labour Party (CLP).[61] Government office arrived soon after when Basil Brooke replaced the floundering figure of Andrews as prime minister in April 1943 and made Midgley Minister of Public Security in a revamped administration. The reaction of the NILP to these events was scornful. It was claimed that Midgley had taken 'a tiny handful' of party members with him,[62] although the Christian socialist Malcolm McColl was to observe to Desmond Ryan that 'he [Midgley] has as his supporters some of the soundest socialists surviving from old times of the pre-war ILP in Belfast that is, pre-1914'.[63] Such supporters included Hugh Gemmell. Beattie, meanwhile, scored a notable by-election success in the Westminster seat of West Belfast before his maverick conduct tried the patience of the same controlling forces in the NILP which had sought to check Midgey's tendency to use the party as a personal vehicle. Such men included William Leeburn, Bob Thompson and Robert Getgood, moderates in temperament and outlook, and unprepared to tolerate cavalier leadership, especially if it tilted the party too far in one direction or the other over the constitutional issue. Beattie was expelled (for the second time) from the party in 1944.

As Cradden has shown,[64] much of the NILP's energy continued to be consumed by constructing ingenious formulas to reconcile the rival positions on the constitution. Moreover, the tendency for the party, even without Midgley, to take inspiration from the British Labour Party, now pulling its weight in Churchill's coalition government in London, was somewhat balanced by the NILP dominance of the Northern Ireland Committee (NIC) of the ITUC which was set up during the war. The war years, indeed, witnessed a dramatic increase in trade union membership in the North, significant episodes of industrial militancy, and closer links through the ITUC of labour north and south.[65] The party welcomed such progressive landmarks as the Beveridge Report (1942) on the future of social welfare in Britain, while opposing the exclusivist tendencies both of unionists in Northern Ireland and 'Eire-Nationalists' in the South.[66] Sam Kyle's prominence in the ITUC during the war helped to rekindle some of

the old home rule anti-partitionism in the North, although by this time such perspectives, honourable as they were, took on the appearance of an ideological luxury or a refusal to face the reality of the chasm between the North and the neutral South which contrasting experiences of the war only deepened.[67]

The end of the war and the elections of 1945 found the NILP stronger in terms of votes if not of seats in parliament. The Stormont election was remarkable for the scale of the vote achieved by parties which campaigned on a left-wing social and economic platform whatever their differences on the national question. The combined vote for parties and candidates of the left came to almost 126,000 compared to the unionist total of over 178,000.[68] It was a clear signal that public opinion in the North had been radicalised; the NILP's 66,000 votes, and the strong showing of the Communist Party and Midgley's CLP, owed much to a Protestant working-class desire to share in the promised 'New Jerusalem' of postwar Britain. Brooke, indeed, heeded the warning and guided his postwar unionist government towards the reproduction of the British Labour government's welfare programme, notwithstanding the unrest from within his party.[69] The gap which consequently widened between Northern Ireland and the South over welfare and living standards, combined with an often sectarian and bellicose anti-partition campaign which drew in elements in the party,[70] were to push the NILP into a declaration of support for the Northern Ireland constitutional position in 1949, thus ending a quarter-century balancing act.

Conclusion

The NILP emerged in circumstances marked by communal divisions and political uncertainty over the future of Northern Ireland. It was an unpropitious context for the promotion of secular class-based politics, and the party could not avoid encountering the difficulties which had confronted its forerunners such as the BLP and ILP. Nevertheless, it was taken seriously enough as a potential threat to unionist hegemony to persuade the governing party to badger London into providing the means to maintain social welfare payments at the British level. Additionally, the stock disclaimer that all significant social and economic measures were taken in London preempted much of the NILP's critique and constricted its room for electoral manoeuvre. The unionist fear of Protestant working-class votes going either to the NILP or Independents was the reason for the abolition of PR at parliamentary elections. The fact of devolved government and the way it was operated stymied the development of labour politics in Northern Ireland along the lines of the rest of the UK.

Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that the same issues – unemployment, poor relief, housing and health – which galvanised interwar Labour

politics in Britain also bore down upon Northern Ireland, and that working-class consciousness and Labour identity were arguably as pronounced in the Province. Even an outfit like the UULA can be viewed in terms of a defensive and narrow form of Labour advocacy to be found in Britain in the same era. If David Marquand's conceptualisation of Labour politics and working-class values is taken as a guide, then 'Unionist Labour' in Northern Ireland might qualify as a species of British Labour culture in which the values held were essentially conservative.[71] Neither, it might be added, did the greater success achieved by Labour Party politics in Scotland remove sectarian tensions and divisions there.[72] The peculiarly entrenched nature of ethno-national divisions in Northern Ireland should not prevent notice being taken of similarities and resemblances with other parts of the UK, a Labour 'culture' being a case in point.

The NILP weathered the turbulence of the war years, including the Midgley split, to derive some benefit from the collectivist drift of public opinion. It also became more meaningfully involved in trade union matters on an all-Ireland basis. However, it also remained vulnerable to buffeting from either Orange or Green agitation, or simultaneously of both, such as occurred after the war. Apparent electoral breakthroughs like that of Willowfield or West Belfast during the war proved instead to be the pretext for the intensification of dilemmas over the national question and the relationship of Labour politics to it. The story of the NILP's first twenty or so years was one of struggle, protest and survival; yet the party's dissenting voice was a valuable contribution to a troubled society and polity.

Notes

1. For the Government of Ireland Act see Nicholas Mansergh, *Nationalism and Independence* (Cork, 1997), ch. 2. For the subsequent history of Northern Ireland see David Harkness, *Northern Ireland since 1920* (Dublin, 1983), and Thomas Hennessey, A *History of Northern Ireland* (Dublin, 1997).
2. See Austen Morgan, *Labour and Partition: The Belfast Working Class, 1905–23* (London, 1991), ch. 11.
3. Graham Walker, 'The Northern Ireland Labour Party in the 1920s', *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, vol. 10 (1984), pp. 19–29; C. Norton, 'The Left in Northern Ireland 1921–1932', *Labour History Review*, vol. 60, no. 1 (spring 1995), pp. 3–20.
4. A treaty was signed ratifying the border by the British, Free State and Northern Ireland governments in 1925 and was then lodged with the League of Nations.
5. See Graham Walker, *The Politics of Frustration: Harry Midgley and the Failure of Labour in Northern Ireland* (Manchester, 1985), pp. 28–34.
6. For fuller discussion of the Connolly–Walker debate, see Morgan, *Labour and Partition*, chs 4 and 7; Henry Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism* (Belfast, 1980), ch. 4.
7. The party won ten seats and 22 per cent of first preference votes.
8. See Morgan, *Labour* and *Partition*, chs 12–14.

9. The party was generally referred to as the Labour Party (NI) until around 1930 when the more common usage became the NILP. For convenience NILP will be used in this essay throughout.
10. Labour History Archives, Manchester: Northern Ireland Policy Box, 1980–90, Research Department, Northern Ireland Liaison Committee: 'The Labour Party and Northern Ireland. An Historical Account of the Relations between the Labour Party and the Northern Ireland Labour Party'.
11. Ibid.
12. Walker, *Politics of Frustration*, p. 60.
13. Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland 1824–1960* (Dublin, 1992), p. 182.
14. See Terry Cradden, 'Labour in Britain and the Northern Ireland Labour Party, 1900–70', in P. Catterall and S. McDougall (eds), *The Northern Ireland Question in British Politics* (Basingstoke, 1996).
15. See Walker, 'The Northern Ireland Labour Party in the 1920s'.
16. O'Connor, *A Labour History*, p. 182.
17. See 'Letting Labour lead: Jack MacGougan and the pursuit of unity, 1913–1958', *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, vol. 14 (1989), pp. 113–23.
18. See Edna Longley, 'Progressive bookmen: politics and northern Protestant writers since the 1930s', *The Irish Review*, no. 1 (1980), pp. 50–9.
19. See his introduction to the 1951 reissue of James Connolly's *The Workers Republic*, edited by Desmond Ryan.
20. See Walker, 'The Northern Ireland Labour Party in the 1920s'.
21. For the Nationalist Party see Eamonn Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994).
22. The entire run of *The Labour Opposition of Northern Ireland* was republished by Athol Books in Belfast in 1992 with an introduction by Joe Keenan.
23. *Labour Opposition of Northern Ireland*, April 1925.
24. Ibid., May 1926.
25. See 'An undiminished dream: Andy Barr, communist trade unionist', *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, vol. 16 (1991), pp. 95–111.
26. The best study of the ILP remains David Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party* (Manchester, 1983).
27. See Walker, 'The Northern Ireland Labour Party in the 1920s'. Geehan wrote under the pseudonym 'Plebeian'.
28. *The Irishman*, 27 September 1930; see also Norton, 'The Left in Northern Ireland'.
29. For a fuller discussion see Mary Harris, 'Catholicism, Nationalism, and the Labour Question in Belfast, 1925–1938', *Bullán*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1997), pp. 15–32.
30. However, some were accompanied by stricter rules on qualification. See the detailed discussion in C. Norton, 'Creating jobs, manufacturing unity: Ulster Unionism and mass unemployment, 1922–34', *Contemporary British History*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2001), pp. 1–14.
31. See discussion in Graham Walker, *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party*: *Protest*, *Pragmatism*, *and Pessimism* (Manchester, 2004), pp. 63–6; also Patrick Buckland, *The Factory of Grievances* (Dublin, 1979).
32. *Northern Whig*, 4 March 1929.
33. Buckland, *Factory of Grievances*, p. 34.
34. Northern Ireland House of Commons Debates, XV1, c.1486 (9 May 1934).
35. See discussion in Walker, A *History of the Ulster Unionist Party*, pp. 75–7.
36. *Irish People*, 29 February 1936.
37. Ibid.
38. See Walker, *Politics of Frustration*, ch. 6; also Fearghal McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War* (Cork, 1999).

39. Walker, *Politics of Frustration*, pp. 99–104.
40. *Irish People*, 29 February 1936.
41. Walker, *Politics of Frustration*, pp. 34–7.
42. See Norton, 'The Left in Northern Ireland'; also Paddy Devlin, *Yes We Have No Bananas*: *Outdoor Relief in Belfast* (Belfast, 1981).
43. The single transferable vote (STV) form of PR was used. See Sydney Elliott, 'Voting systems and political parties in Northern Ireland', in B. Hadfield (ed.), *Northern Ireland*: *Politics and the Constitution* (Buckingham, 1992).
44. Quoted in Norton, 'The Left in Northern Ireland'.
45. *Irish People*, 29 February 1936.
46. Walker, *Politics of Frustration*, p. 69.
47. Public Record Office, Northern Ireland (PRONI), PM4/20/1.
48. See 'Letting Labour Lead: Jack MacGougan'; Devlin, *Yes, We Have No Bananas*, p. 143.
49. Walker, *Politics of Frustration*, p. 80.
50. Ibid., ch. 6.
51. For a comprehensive guide to the election results see Sydney Elliott, *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Election Results*, *1921–72* (Chichester, 1973).
52. For fuller details and discussion see Ian Budge and Cornelius O'Leary, *Belfast*: *Approach to Crisis* (London, 1973), pp. 143–56.
53. Norton, 'The Left in Northern Ireland'; also P. Bew and C. Norton, 'The unionist state and the outdoor relief riots of 1932', *Economic and Social Review*, vol. 10 (1979), pp. 255–65.
54. Walker, *Politics of Frustration*, pp. 114–23.
55. Desmond Ryan Papers, LA10/P/58, University College Dublin Archives Department (UCDAD).
56. See Terry Cradden, *Trade Unionism*, *Socialism and Partition* (Belfast, 1993), ch. 2.
57. Walker, *Politics of Frustration*, pp. 124–5.
58. The voting figures were: Midgley (NILP) 7,209; Lavery (Unionist) 2,435.
59. Walker, *Politics of Frustration*, pp. 129–37.
60. Informative discussions of Northern Ireland politics during the war can be found in Brian Barton, *Northern Ireland in the Second World War* (Belfast, 1995), and Robert Fisk, *In Time of War* (London, 1983).
61. See Graham Walker, 'The Commonwealth Labour Party in Northern Ireland, 1942–47', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 24 (May 1984), pp. 69–90. Midgley would join the Unionist Party in 1947.
62. *Labour Progress*, January 1943.
63. Desmond Ryan Papers, LA10/Q16/8, UCDAD.
64. See Cradden, *Trade Unionism*, ch. 2.
65. Ibid., ch. 3.
66. See Cradden, *Trade Unionism*, ch. 4 for discussion of the O'Brienites and the Congress of Irish Unions (CIU).
67. See commentary in Graham Walker, *Intimate Strangers*: *Political and Cultural Interaction Between Scotland and Ulster in Modern Times* (Edinburgh, 1995), pp. 137–43.
68. Walker, *Politics of Frustration*, pp. 167–9; Cradden, *Trade Unionism*, pp. 41–7.
69. See Walker, *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party*, pp. 104–7.
70. Cradden, *Trade Unionism*, pp. 148–52; Walker, *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party*, pp. 100–4.
71. David Marquand, *The Progressive Dilemma* (London, 1991), ch. 5.
72. See Walker, *Intimate Strangers*, ch. 5.

13

Fianna Fáil and the Working Class, 1926–38

Richard Dunphy

Introduction

The relationship between a political party and the social classes from which it draws support is multifaceted and fraught with conceptual difficulties. In proposing to examine Fianna Fáil's relationship with the working class in Ireland during the party's formative years I am certainly not supposing that there is any easy or straightforward relationship between social class membership (itself a problematic category) and electoral or political behaviour. Rather, I have explicitly argued elsewhere[1] that both the 'vulgar Marxist' tendency towards economic reductionism and romantic leftism's instinctive explanation for the weakness of working-class politics and the failure of socialist revolution to materialise – 'betrayal' of the working class by its 'leaders' – must be eschewed if we are to get to grips with the complexities of politics.[2] In my previous work on Fianna Fáil[3] I have attempted to analyse its rise to hegemony in the Ireland of the 1930s in the context of a successful political strategy that incorporated large swathes of working-class, small farmer, petty bourgeois and déclassé support behind a project that aimed at the transformation of Irish society through the consolidation of a new national bourgeoisie. In the process, the party succeeded in outflanking various romantic republican leftist movements that sporadically questioned its leadership, outpolled the Labour Party amongst urban workers, and divided and contained the organised trade union movement.

The question of how the party succeeded in achieving this obviously raises a number of issues, amongst which are: the nature of Fianna Fáil itself, the reasons for its appeal to many urban and rural workers in the Ireland of the 1920s and 1930s, the impact of its strategy upon what might be seen as classic working-class organisations (such as trade unions), and the response of the Labour Party and other political forces which might be considered rivals for the working-class vote. This essay will consider some of these issues.

The nature of Fianna Fáil: lessons from the debate about populism

The nature of the early Fianna Fáil party – the issue of how best to locate it within a comparative framework – has long been a subject of debate. Sometimes, the concept of populism – with its characteristic stress on 'the people' as opposed to class divisions, its attempt to construct a broad coalition of support behind a charismatic leadership, and its (often) demagogic attack on existing political elites – has seemed to be applicable to the party, at least in its early years.[4] Populism is a vague and much disputed concept. I have argued that there is a danger in uncritically applying some definitions of populism to the early Fianna Fáil that we fall into the trap of colluding with the view that the party can only really be understood comparatively in a Latin American or 'third world' context; or, if we assume that populism is always a conservative and reactionary phenomenon, that we overlook the importance of the early Fianna Fáil's projection of itself as a dynamic, modernising and developmental force in Irish politics.[5] The latter was certainly crucial to Fianna Fáil's success in enlisting working-class support in the late 1920s and the 1930s. Nevertheless, populism understood as a 'style of leadership rather than an ideology'[6] does allow us valuable insights into how Fianna Fáil consolidated its support among the working class (and other subaltern social classes and strata). To quote Brian Smith, populism

> seeks to mobilise people regardless of class by denying the existence of class and of any class-based ideology. Populism tries to mobilise all interests under a single conception of the national interest. It rejects the idea that groups have irreconcilable interests…Leaders specifically aim to prevent the development of a consciousness of conflicting interests. The methods used include building support on the basis of rewards rather than ideological conviction, and expressing contradictory policy positions incoherently.[7]

This certainly applies to the early Fianna Fáil and forces us to consider how such a style of leadership succeeded in appealing to many working-class voters in the 1920s and 1930s.

Recently, the academic debate on populism has borne new fruit. In particular, Margaret Canovan's 1999 article in *Political Studies*[8] has facilitated new insights into how a populist style of politics may characterise various parties on both the right and left. Canovan rejects the tendency to see populism – 'a notoriously vague term' – as a 'pathological [symptom] requiring sociological explanation'. In the context of the revival of populism of both left and right (but especially the latter) in the so-called advanced democracies of

Europe at the end of the twentieth century, she urges us to take seriously the claims of populists to 'see themselves as true democrats, voicing popular grievances and opinions systematically ignored by governments, mainstream parties and the media'. Populism may flourish in that gap between the promise of democracy to deliver 'power to the people' and the reality of alienation from politics, mass disaffection with the behaviour and conduct of established parties and politicians, and a growing crisis of political legitimacy on the part of the political system – what Canovan calls the gap between the 'redemptive' and 'pragmatic' faces of democracy. In other words, far from being a quintessentially 'third world' phenomenon, or 'a symptom of "backwardness" that might be outgrown, populism is a shadow cast by democracy itself'.

Populism, for Canovan, is best analysed in terms of its *structural* considerations. 'Populism in modern democratic societies is best seen as an appeal to "the people" against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society. This structural feature in turn dictates populism's characteristic legitimating framework, political style and mood.' Canovan argues that populism tends to target not only existing governing parties but also existing elite values. It involves an attempt to direct popular anger and protest 'not just at the political and economic establishments but also at opinion-formers in the academy and the media'. Given this structural orientation, populism can have quite different content depending on the context. As Canovan argues, when populist parties display a wide range of economic and social policies, ranging from left to right, they are not so much demonstrating either a lack of principle or confusion; rather, 'what makes them populist is their reaction to the structure of power. The values that are populist also vary according to context, depending upon the nature of the elite and the dominant political discourse.'

For populist parties, the alternative source of authority to existing power structures, which confers legitimacy upon their actions, is of course *the people*. Such parties may well mobilise on the basis of economic grievances and place great emphasis on the need to articulate an alternative programme of economic development for society. And, from a Marxist point of view, they can always be analysed in terms of which classes benefited (or stand to benefit) most from their policies and which classes appear to be condemned to a subaltern or subordinate political and economic role. But populist parties present themselves as representing 'the democratic sovereign, not a sectional interest such as an economic class'. Economic policies are 'translated into political questions of democratic power'. Canovan goes on to identify three distinct senses of the term 'the people' that tend to be blended together in populist discourse. The first is an appeal to 'a united people' 'against the parties and factions that divide it'; this often translates not only into a rejection of existing parties and groups that articulate sub-

ordinate class interests (such as trade unions) in the name of unity,[9] but also into an identification of a strong, charismatic leader with the interests of the people or nation. The second is an appeal to 'our people', often in an ethnic or communal sense. The third is an egalitarian appeal to 'the common people' against 'the privileged, highly educated, cosmopolitan elite'.

Finally, Canovan draws our attention to a populist *style* of politics that directs charges of dishonesty and corruption against existing power-holders and claims, by contrast, to speak in terms of simplicity and transparency.

Fianna Fáil's decade of populism

There is much in the foregoing analysis that can help us make sense of Fianna Fáil's rise to dominance in the Ireland of the late 1920s and 1930s, and above all of its appeal to the working class. The Ireland of the late 1920s was a society that appeared economically, politically and culturally moribund, exhausted. The governing Cumann na nGaedheal and its conservative allies could rely on war weariness on the part of most citizens and a deep desire not to repeat the agonies of the Civil War of 1921–3; but the power-holders had precious little else by way of popular appeal. Poverty, emigration and mass unemployment were widespread and affected, above all, those who had taken the losing republican side in the Civil War. In 1926, the working class was numerically small and vulnerable: only about 13 per cent of the labour force worked in industry, about the same as the number of domestic servants and far less than the 53 per cent who worked in agriculture.[10] The ruling party and its allies relied on repression and ever more authoritarian appeals to 'law and order' to justify a reign that seemed increasingly detached from the aspirations of the national independence struggle. The power-holders lacked any economic policy other than reliance on the export of agricultural produce to the UK market, a policy that underpinned their reliance on the support of large farmers and their neglect of the plight of the urban and rural poor. This failure of imagination was symptomatic of a general failure to engage with political realities in the newly independent democratic state. (Cumann na nGaedheal, which neglected to build a mass base in the country, relying heavily on local elites, would in just a few years time flirt heavily with fascism, in the form of the paramilitary Blueshirt movement, merging with the Blueshirts of course to form Fine Gael in 1933.)

It was in this atmosphere that Fianna Fáil was born in 1926, fought its first elections in 1927 and entered the Dáil in that same year. From the outset, the party represented something new in Irish politics – eschewing the fanaticism of the third Sinn Féin party, embracing a hard-headed pragmatism, concentrating on building an impressive electoral machine, and deploying a rhetoric that sought to isolate its opponents and construct a

broad alliance of political and social forces under its leadership. Its project was the rise to economic dominance of a new national bourgeoisie, under its own political guidance. Its success was due in no small measure to its willingness to force compromises on that class, when it felt such compromises were needed in order not to jeopardise the project. Its appeal in the early years can certainly be characterised as populist.

Far from being a symptom of rural or Gaelic backwardness on the Irish periphery, 'invading' a more modern and Anglocentric core,[11] the party was able to tap into a vibrant tradition of modern, mass political mobilisation. It portrayed the governing Cumann na nGaedheal and its allies as having betrayed the democratic promises of the national independence struggle, above all the promise of economic regeneration and prosperity, and of being the political puppets of the remnants of the Ascendancy. The famous Fianna Fáil slogan, 'The Masses not the Classes' – ascribing the very concept of class to the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy and associating Fianna Fáil with the 'common masses' – is of course classic populist fare. So, too, is the claim that Fianna Fáil was a 'national movement', not a mere party; the identification of the charismatic leadership of de Valera with the spirit of the Irish people;[12] and the projection of the Irish people as essentially egalitarian, frugal, self-sacrificing and contemptuous of the privileges of an establishment that was not a 'natural' organic product of the society over which it presided.

The party did indeed engage in an assault upon existing structures of power, at least in terms of rhetoric. (The fact that Fianna Fáil in power in the 1930s did very little to break with preexisting power structures, and actually made its peace rather rapidly with civil service, legal, financial and educational elites, is another matter. It demonstrates both the fundamental appeal of social conservatism within the party's leadership circles and the failure of its political rivals to articulate a political strategy that might have exploited its contradictions.) An anti-bourgeois and anti-intellectual rhetoric revealed a blend of Catholic puritanism and petty bourgeois covetousness. As Todd Andrews has written:

> We disapproved of any kind of ostentation. We disapproved of the wearing of formal clothes – tuxedos, evening or morning dress, and above all silk hats. We disapproved of horse racing and everything and everyone associated with it. We disapproved of any form of gambling. We disapproved of golf and tennis and the plus-fours and white flannels that went with them. We disapproved of anyone who took an interest in food.[13]

By the time Andrews wrote those lines, his beloved Fianna Fáil was deeply embedded in the social world of the rich and privileged. But, of course, that too could be deemed compatible with the party's ideology, right from the

start. What was under attack was not the existence of inequality per se, but the existence of *unearned privilege*. The flattering picture that Fianna Fáil held out to the national bourgeoisie that would emerge under its leadership was one of *justly earned reward* for patriotic duty. The populist rhetoric, however, served to obscure the limits of the party's supposed early radicalism and the reality of its petty bourgeois conservatism; this was especially so because many on the small Irish left who deluded themselves into thinking that early Fianna Fáil was an egalitarian or even socialistic party shared in large measure the party's puritanism and its delight in mocking the 'non-national' nature of existing elites without subjecting Fianna Fáil's own political and economic plans to anything like an exacting class analysis.

The populist disposition of the early Fianna Fáil is reflected in many of the policies associated with the party during the years 1926–38. Its attacks upon the large farmers, the 'ranchers', its advocacy of an 'Ireland for the Irish' economic policy with the promise of tariffs to protect Irish manufacturers, which of course culminated in the (ultimately unsuccessful) 'Economic War' against Great Britain from 1932 to 1938, and its constitutional reforms, such as the removal of the oath of allegiance to the English crown, are all stances that can be read in a number of ways. Of course, there is a straightforward appeal to the emergent national bourgeoisie, with enough by the way of welfare reform promises and pledges on land redistribution and jobs creation to enlist substantial small farmer and working-class support. And, of course also, there is a straightforward nationalist or republican content to its central policy message. But these policies can also be seen as populist at their core, reinforcing the division of the world into 'us' (Fianna Fáil, the 'Irish people', 'the masses') and 'them' (existing power-holders, alien and foreign interests, 'the classes'). Likewise, moves initiated by the party after 1932 – such as installing a small garage owner, Donal Buckley, as Governor-General (representative of King George V in the Irish Free State) in a general mockery of that office – reveal a populist delight in snubbing the 'old' establishment. Nothing that Fianna Fáil did in office from 1932 onwards could be said to violate the principles of liberal democracy. (Instead, the frustration of its Cumann na nGaedheal opponents with its growing popularity and with their own inability to make progress at the ballot box may well explain their flirtation with fascism, which in turn reinforced Fianna Fáil's democratic credentials.) The words of Mexican political scientist Benjamín Arditi seem apposite to this period:

> Whether as a reaction against 'politics as usual' or as a response to the failures of elitist democracy, populism would designate a form of intervention that has the potential to both disturb and renew the political process without necessarily stepping outside the institutional settings of democracy. Its politics unfolds in the rougher edges of the liberal-democratic establishment.[14]

Canovan's analysis of the (sometimes contradictory) ways in which populist parties seek to deploy the concept of *the people* as an ideological and rhetorical weapon certainly applies to Fianna Fáil. The notion of a united and resurgent people, led by the 'national movement' that was Fianna Fáil, could be invoked to portray the party's rivals on the pro-Treaty wing of Irish politics as defeatist or even anti-national; and to attack the Labour Party, tiny socialist groups and the trade unions as 'sectional', divisive and 'working against the national interest'. Behind this lurked a paternalism in Fianna Fáil's dealings with organised labour. This can be seen most clearly in the destructive and highly damaging interventions of the Fianna Fáil government in the internal affairs of the trade unions in the 1930s and 1940s, to which we will return. Populism again is evident in de Valera's use of his alleged friendship with James Connolly to outmanoeuvre the Labour Party in the early 1930s. In April 1932, he told the Dáil that 'I thought that party [Labour] was making a mistake and that they did not see what James Connolly saw, and what he told me he saw, that to secure national freedom was the first step in order to get the workers of Ireland the living they were entitled to in their own country.'[15] Here, the appeal to personal history is deployed to posthumously enrol the father of Irish socialism behind a project that relegates organised labour to a subaltern role. It was a trick that would be played time and time again. For instance, the ultra-conservative Seán MacEntee, justifying his 1941 anti-trade union legislation in a speech made two years later, declared himself as proud of the legislation as he was of 'the moment when James Connolly gave him a special message in 1916'.[16] The message was clear: Connolly was revered by 'the people' because of his republicanism, not his socialism; his legacy belonged at least as much to Fianna Fáil as to Labour or the trade unions; and his name could be invoked to deny the labour movement's patriotism or even to deny it an indigenous ideological patrimony.

The party was also clearly invoking an exclusivist, sectarian definition of *the people* on occasions: for example, when de Valera declared the Irish people to be a Catholic nation;[17] or when he proclaimed the Constitution of 1937 to have been approved by the 'people of Ireland', when, in fact, it had been approved by a narrow majority in the South and by no one in the North.[18] Finally, the party of course made constant reference to egalitarian constructions of *the people*, focusing on the struggle against the symbolic remnants of post-colonialism with its constitutional reforms of the period 1932–7 – even as the failure of its economic policies exacerbated social inequalities, drawing large sections of the population into a relationship of economic dependency on the Fianna Fáil-dominated state machine, spawning new relations of clientelism, and forcing many thousands of unemployed workers to emigrate.

Canovan's point about the populist *mood* is also well taken. One of de Valera's first moves on taking office in 1932 was to cut the salaries of minis-

ters, suggesting that a new era of probity was about to replace the 'recklessness' of the preceding elite. (At the same time, he assured senior civil servants that there would be no dismissals or changes in personnel, and his minister for finance received advice from these same civil servants on the need to enable employers to reduce wages and salaries of workers in the private sector.) De Valera's moral puritanism and hostility to conspicuous consumption was to remain part of his populist appeal, long after his party had adopted the ethical flexibility and considerable moral laxity that would characterise the national bourgeoisie whose rise it had facilitated, and small 'left republican' groups (such as Clann na Poblachta) had arisen to challenge Fianna Fáil on the basis of the very populism that Fianna Fáil seemed to have abandoned.

For the fact is that by the 1940s, with the country sinking back into depression and stagnation (a fact temporarily obscured by the 'Emergency' of 1939–45 which boosted the party's popularity), the limitations of Fianna Fáil's populism, or 'radicalism', were already visible. Indeed, as early as around 1938, the party's radicalism had in effect 'been implemented'.[19] Thereafter, although some aspects of populism would always remain part of the party's 'genetic inheritance',[20] Fianna Fáil appeared an increasingly conservative force. The social conservatives on the so-called right of the party would more often than not (until the economic near-collapse of the late 1950s forced a popular but scarcely populist fundamental U-turn in party policy) inflict defeats on the urban populists associated with Seán Lemass on the so-called left.

The key question we now have to turn to is how the populism of the early Fianna Fáil – during what might be called the party's populist decade of 1926–38 – proved so appealing to the working class, and how Fianna Fáil retained substantial working-class support even after its conservative and bourgeois nature became more apparent. In addressing this question a number of factors are important: the strength, level of political consciousness and degree of political mobilisation of a class-based left in Ireland; the political and economic strategy articulated by Fianna Fáil in its drive for hegemony; and the reaction of its political rivals, above all in the Labour Party and the trade union movement.

The appeal to working-class voters

As is well-known, the urban working class in the Irish Free State of the 1920s was not only numerically small and weakened by the effects of partition, but lacked the degree of political mobilisation on class grounds found in many other European countries. Stefano Bartolini, in his important survey of the rise of a class-based left in Europe from the second half of the nineteenth century,[21] reminds us that in Ireland during the late nineteenth century political mobilisation had revolved around three main issues. First,

the land and peasants issue which, after a series of Land Acts from 1869 to 1903, was resolved through the creation of a large class of smallholders. 'There were 3 per cent of these as opposed to 97 per cent of tenants in the 1870s, and they swelled to 97.4 per cent in 1929 as opposed to 2.6 per cent of tenants. This clearly converted the position of the great bulk of the peasantry from radical social protest to social conservatism, thereby neutralizing any potential rural radicalism.'[22] Second, there had been the Catholic emancipation issue, the resolution of which through a sequence of reforms resulted in a large degree of clerical community leadership. Third, there was of course the national emancipation issue – 'the last of the three to be activated and politicized'. The dominance of mobilisation around the national issue during the first two decades of the twentieth century not only worked against a mobilisation on class grounds. The weakness of the urban middle classes, the conversion of the bulk of the small farmers to social conservatism and the power of the Church left organised labour politically isolated or condemned to a subaltern political position. 'Under these conditions, the possibility of a delegated representation of the early working-class organizations within a liberal movement was nonexistent, and the labor movement developed with only a weak link to liberal political allies.'[23]

With liberalism subordinated to nationalism, the possibility of an alliance between liberalism and organised labour – which facilitated the emergence of a class-based socialist left in many European countries – was negated. Instead, many socialists followed Connolly's lead in accepting the primacy of republicanism over socialism and national mobilisation over class mobilisation. Connolly's legacy to the Irish left was, in many ways, a disastrous one. Connolly's slogan, 'The Cause of Labour is the Cause of Ireland' would quickly become de Valera's 'Labour Must Wait'. Those who accepted that a numerically weakened, ideologically compromised and politically isolated working class had no option but to accept republican leadership – and the Labour Party's momentous decision to absent itself from the crucial 1918 election must be seen in this light – would be ill-equipped to contest the populism of the early Fianna Fáil. On the contrary, all too often they would delude themselves as to the real nature of that populism. Leftist republicans and socialists – from Peadar O'Donnell in the 1920s to the Republican Congress in the 1930s and Clann na Poblachta in the 1940s – would for long maintain a fundamentally ambiguous relationship with Fianna Fáil, dreaming of somehow 'recalling' that party to its 'radicalism', as if its populism masked a socialist soul. Timid leaders of the Labour Party would likewise find themselves either allied with Fianna Fáil in the late 1920s and early 1930s, or criticising that party for not pursuing its own policies with sufficient vigour. Even after they had shed some of their illusions about Fianna Fáil, they would still cling to the hope that it might 'protect' trade unionists against an even bigger threat – that posed

by the likes of the Blueshirts. Fianna Fáil – above all in the form of leaders such as Seán Lemass – would prove adept at exploiting these hopes, fears and illusions; and it would enjoy greater success in mobilising working-class voters on populist grounds than the left would on grounds of social class.

There is yet another factor that needs to be borne in mind. And this concerns not merely the numerical and ideological weakness of the working class at the time but the implications for a class-based politics of *the nature* of the working class in Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s. Michael Mann, in his pan-European survey of different types of working-class political movements in the twentieth century,[24] reminds us that a socialist class consciousness never really touched more than half of the working class across Europe, at the very most. A counter-mobilisation, by forces of the right, made substantial inroads into the other half of the working class. This counter-mobilisation deployed three themes successfully: religion, nationalism, and a technical discourse that emphasised the superior economic and technical competence of the right (all three themes, of course, featured in Fianna Fáil discourse constantly). In many countries and regions of Europe, more workers voted for parties of the centre and right, or joined affiliated organisations (such as Catholic trade unions), than supported a class-based left. What is important here is that Mann demonstrates, using an ecological regression analysis which plots the variation in party support against known differences in occupational and religious affiliation, that industrial employment in large-scale manufacturing was the critical factor that influenced workers to support parties of the left. By the start of the twentieth century the core of socialist support was in three industries: mining (where workers exhibited the highest levels of proletarian class consciousness), iron and steel, and transport (including dockers and railway workers). With the possible exception of Dublin dockers, Ireland was of course extremely weak in all three sectors. By contrast, the largely successful counter-attacks by conservatives among workers – invoking nationalism and religion, especially – made their greatest inroads amongst workers who lay outside these 'proletarian macro-communities'. The problem for a class-based Irish left is obvious: not only was the Irish working class numerically small, but most Irish workers did not belong to 'proletarian macro-communities', working instead in relatively small-scale manufacturing firms (often tied to the food industry), or in the public sector. This would continue to be the case during the 1930s when Fianna Fáil development of a national bourgeoisie behind tariff barriers cautiously boosted working-class numbers.

Even so, there was nothing inevitable about Fianna Fáil's success in establishing itself as the first party of working-class voters. On the contrary, my contention is that while the conditions described above certainly left many Irish workers with a favourable predisposition towards Fianna Fáil populism, choices of political strategy on the part of both Fianna Fáil and

the Labour Party (and smaller left organisations) were to prove crucial. At this point, it is worth reflecting on the type of organisation that the Irish Labour Party became in the years after Connolly's death.

Bartolini points out that the Irish Labour Party, to a much greater extent than its British sister party, was wholly dependent on the trade unions until well into the 1930s. 'Moves to broaden the membership of the Irish Labor Party beyond the collectively affiliated unions were regularly defeated throughout the 1920s. Until at least the 1930s, the party remained trade unionist in personnel and mentality; after 1930, it remained so in spirit.'[25] Indeed, until the second World War party leaders and candidates were almost exclusively trade unionists. The party saw itself as existing for the primary purpose of defending trade unionists' interests in the Dáil. This had a number of important effects. It resulted in a narrowing of political vision, a concentration on the defence of what in Gramscian terms might be called 'economic–corporate interests'. It produced a defensive and overly pragmatic approach to politics. And it meant that internal quarrels and splits within the unions were reproduced within the Labour Party itself. Fianna Fáil was well aware of the potential that splits in the union movement had to deal a deadly blow to the Labour Party and throughout the 1940s it actively intervened in union affairs, splitting Irish-based unions from the Irish affiliates of British-based unions, regulating trade unions to the disadvantage of smaller unions, and ultimately splitting the Labour Party as well as the union movement.

Indeed, the 'incapacity of the Irish Labour Party to advance a class appeal and a policy line consistently' and the fact that it represented, in concentrated form, some of the weaknesses of its British sister party (notably the overly dependent relationship on the unions), meant that it tended to be insulated from the influences of European socialism.[26] 'Irish socialism lost a war that it never fought. Its failure to compete is macroscopic…Its involvement in the national revolution in a subordinate and muted position contributed to the containment of working-class militancy, and thus it can be concluded that class conflict was deliberately contained.'[27]

Of course, class conflict was certainly not absent in the Ireland of the 1920s. As I have argued elsewhere,[28] there was some evidence of a readiness on the part of some urban workers to support a class-based left-wing agenda. The mid-1920s saw wave after wave of industrial strikes; but these were largely defensive actions against attempts by the employers, backed by the Cumann na nGaedheal government to force through wage reductions. The Irish Worker League (IWL), founded by James Larkin as the Irish section of the Communist International, won a Dáil seat (with Larkin himself) in North Dublin in 1927 and polled respectably well in two other Dublin constituencies. The Workers' Union of Ireland, founded by Larkin in 1924 after a split from the ITGWU and affiliated to the communist Red International of Trade Unions, gained some 16,000 members in Dublin. And a

communist-led National Unemployed Movement organised some impressive rallies in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

However, the radical left remained a tiny minority and suffered from some clear political weaknesses. Its actions were largely defensive and strongly trade unionist in orientation, and it remained largely confined to the capital, where bitter memories of the 1913 Dublin lockout lingered for more than a generation. It was heavily dependent for its electoral appeal and capacity for political mobilisation on the personal charisma of 'Big Jim' Larkin, the legendary trade union organiser and leader of the workers during the 1913 lockout; it is highly doubtful that the IWL would have achieved anything like the modest success it did achieve during the 1920s without Larkin's personal appeal. (He would eventually return to the Labour Party, although only after an intensely bitter and personalised feud with the Labour leadership.) And despite Larkin's willingness to defy the republican orthodoxy of the day and organise workers on a class basis, the sway that romantic republicanism continued to hold over the Dublin working class is well-known. Ultimately, the romanticism of the dead Connolly (open to manipulation, as we have already seen, by Fianna Fáil) would prove a greater attraction to many Dublin workers of the 1930s than the tireless campaigning of the all-too-living Larkin. Nor can it be denied that the defeat of the radical left's attempts to give expression to a class politics was greatly facilitated by the extraordinary bitterness of a frightened Labour Party leadership that unleashed an unprecedented campaign of anti-communist denunciation in the late 1920s. No doubt stung by Larkin's success in splitting off a sizeable section of Dublin trade unionists from the ITGWU, the Labour Party denounced the 'red threat' in terms that seemed to legitimise Cumann na nGaedheal's dire warnings of an imminent Bolshevik takeover of Holy Catholic Ireland.

Once again, the spotlight falls on the political choices – tactical and strategic – of the key actors of the day. Fianna Fáil's success in appealing to and mobilising (on non-class grounds) many working-class voters cannot be properly understood without an examination of the tactics and strategies of both that party and its only really serious rival for working-class support in the Ireland of the late 1920s and 1930s – the Labour Party. There are many striking contrasts between the 'styles' of the two parties during this period. Pressure of space forces me to comment briefly on just two points: differences in coherence and unity and consequently in the two parties' respective ability to exploit each other's contradictions and weaknesses; and differences between Fianna Fáil's hegemonic thinking and the Labour Party's defensiveness.

The Labour Party during the 1920s and 1930s was notoriously weak and divided internally, and incapable of formulating a coherent position to which all Labour TDs would adhere. The 1929 congress of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress received a report from the National

Executive bemoaning the fact that Labour TDs sometimes voted with Fianna Fáil, sometimes with Cumann na nGaedheal, and often on different sides at once. Discipline and political unity were becoming impossible to maintain.[29] These divisions reflected deep unease within the trade unions. TU membership declined after 1923 and the ITGWU (led by William O'Brien) in particular was badly hit, falling from 89,000 members in 1924 to 40,000 in January 1936.[30] Its main rival, the Amalgamated TGWU, recruited heavily in Northern Ireland. O'Brien, whose union sued the ATGWU in 1935, campaigned relentlessly for trade union organisational reform that would strengthen the hand of his union against rival 'British-based' unions. At the 1940 ITGWU conference he issued a virtual invitation to Fianna Fáil to intervene and regulate trade union affairs. It duly did so, with the 1941 Trade Union Act, and the ensuing splits in both the unions and the Labour Party strengthened Fianna Fáil's hand.[31]

The lack of unity was matched by a lack of coherence. Labour fought the 1927 elections boasting of its moderation as an opposition party to Cumann na nGaedheal. It effectively fought in 1932 on a platform that accepted Fianna Fáil leadership of the country. As Hazelkorn has argued, with Labour's capitulation to Fianna Fáil after 1929, 'concepts of "class" were ultimately buried beneath a barrage of neo-populist rhetoric. Criticisms [from within] of trade union/labour support for Fianna Fáil after 1927 must be compared with conference speeches urging the dissolution of the Labour Party once Fianna Fáil won in 1932.'[32] Labour in fact totally accepted the logic of Fianna Fáil's economic strategy and found itself after 1932 urging the new government to speed up the pursuit of its own policies. For example, Labour leader William Norton told the 1933 party congress that support for de Valera's 'Economic War' was essential because otherwise 'the country would become a Lancashire or Yorkshire and we of the Irish working class will never be satisfied with any status less than Nationhood'.[33] On the social front, Labour and the unions found themselves thanking Fianna Fáil for the modest social welfare provisions introduced after 1932 and then wondering why these measures led to increased working-class and trade union support for the governing party.

In terms of rhetoric, Labour leaders were cautious in the extreme. I have already commented on their visceral anti-communism. They also continually invoked the authority of papal encyclicals and 'Christian teachings' to justify calls for modest increases in Fianna Fáil welfare commitments. Moreover, the Labour Party on occasion sought to portray Fianna Fáil as not sufficiently nationalist! In other words, it attacked Fianna Fáil on territory all too often of the latter party's choosing.

Fianna Fáil, by contrast, projected an image of unity, despite some internal divisions. Not only were there differences of temperament and tactics within the cabinet after 1932; there were also real ideological differences within early Fianna Fáil. For example, in the late 1920s the Dublin-based

Erskine Childers' *cumann* [branch] of the party issued a trenchant class analysis and denunciation of the party's protectionist policies and commitment to the national bourgeoisie. Such policies, it warned, would 'benefit the manufacturing class' and 'force workers to toil for low wages'.[34] But such dissent was easily marginalised and contained and in this respect the party's populism – especially the iron discipline inculcated by the 'democratic centralist' model of party-building allied to a stress on charismatic leadership – was crucial. An image of unity, a coherent and confident message and a ruthless willingness to attack Labour precisely where Labour's very legitimacy was at state – Connolly's legacy – make for a sharp contrast between the parties.

Fianna Fáil's drive for political hegemony, rooted in its claim to represent new and dynamic economic thinking in the late 1920s and early 1930s, again contrasts with Labour's defensiveness. This was increased by the appearance of the Blueshirts. There is no doubt that the Blueshirt phenomenon genuinely frightened many within the labour and trade union movement, encouraging them towards an even more defensive posture. The 1934 party congress heard a speech from its president Seán Campbell warning that 'if any should doubt that the trade union and labour movements were not in peril, than let me tell that person to go and study the public pronouncements of the Fine Gael professors and politicians, and he will find both movements were in imminent danger…the employers were to get an abundant supply of cheap labour, which, dragooned beneath the Blueshirt Fascists, would be voiceless, impotent and incapable of resistance'.[35] These fears encouraged Labour and the unions to cling to Fianna Fáil, not only as the lesser of two evils, but even as the protector of freedoms and liberties. Paradoxically, the Blueshirts enabled Fianna Fáil to further woo working-class support by manipulating the fears and pandering to the illusions of those on the left who *needed* and *wanted* to see Fianna Fáil as a popular and anti-fascist party at heart.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have examined some of the reasons that explain why the populism of the early Fianna Fáil held such appeal for Irish workers. It is important to analyse the nature of that populism – the class interests it both masked and appealed to, and its limitations. It is also important to bear in mind the so-called objective constraints imposed by the numerical size, structural composition and ideological state of the working class at that time. Although it may have been virtually impossible for a class-based left to build a mass support base in Ireland, given those constraints, there was nothing inevitable about Fianna Fáil's success in winning such working-class support. The tactics and strategies of Fianna Fáil and of its Labour rivals played a crucial role in delivering substantial working-class support and allegiance to Fianna Fáil in those important formative years.

Notes

1. Richard Dunphy, 'The enigma of Fianna Fáil: party strategy, social classes and the politics of hegemony', in M. Cronin and J.M. Regan (eds.), *Ireland: The Politics of Independence, 1922–1949* (Basingstoke, 2000).
2. It could be argued that an example of such romantic leftism is Kieran Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour, 1926 to the Present* (London, 1997).
3. Richard Dunphy, *The Making of Fianna Fáil Power in Ireland, 1923–1948* (Oxford, 1995).
4. See Dunphy, 'The enigma of Fianna Fáil', pp. 75–9, for a discussion of this topic.
5. Ibid.
6. B.C. Smith, *Understanding Third World Politics: Theories of Political Change and Development* (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 202.
7. Ibid., pp. 202–3.
8. Margaret Canovan, 'Trust the people? Populism and the two faces of democracy', *Political Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1 (March 1999), pp. 2–16 – from which subsequent quotations are taken.
9. Unless, of course, trade unions and the like agree to accept the leadership of the populist party. In that case, they demonstrate their loyalty to 'the people' (as represented by the populist party) over and above 'sectional' and 'selfish' class interests. In short, through subordination they demonstrate their 'patriotism'.
10. John A. Murphy, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century* (Dublin, 1975), pp. 111–12.
11. This view is of course associated with Tom Garvin. See his highly influential 'Political Cleavages, party politics, and urbanisation in Ireland – the case of the periphery-dominated centre', *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 11, no. 4 (1974), pp. 307–27.
12. 'The Irish people' was arguably as significant a concept in Fianna Fáil rhetoric and propaganda as 'the Irish nation'. Indeed, 'the Irish people' – understood as 'our kind of people', the noble, impoverished Catholic masses, united under the leadership of the Fianna Fáil-sponsored emergent national bourgeoisie – could sometimes lend itself more readily to party propaganda than 'the Irish nation'. The latter concept, of course, always carried within it the implicit question of how to categorise those awkward Ulster Protestants.
13. C.S. Andrews, *Man of No Property* (Dublin, 1982), p. 29.
14. Benjamín Arditi, 'Populism as a spectre of democracy: a reply to Canovan', *Political Studies*, vol. 52, no. 1 (March 2004), p. 142.
15. *Dáil Debates*, 29 April 1932.
16. Quoted in Dunphy, *The Making of Fianna Fáil Power in Ireland*, p. 267.
17. Quoted in Dunphy, *The Making of Fianna Fáil Power in Ireland*, p. 209.
18. J.J. Lee and Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, *The Age of de Valera* (Dublin, 1983), p. 104.
19. The expression was used by one of the party's most senior leaders, Frank Aiken.
20. The concept of a political party's 'genetic inheritance' is taken from Angelo Panebianco, *Political Parties: Organization and Power* (Cambridge, 1988).
21. Stefano Bartolini, *The Political Mobilization of the European Left, 1860–1980: The Class Cleavage* (Cambridge, MA, 2000).
22. Ibid., p. 445.
23. Bartolini, *The Political Mobilization of the European Left*, p. 447.
24. M. Mann, 'Sources of variation in working-class movements in twentieth century Europe', *New Left Review*, vol. 212 (July/August 1995), pp. 14–54.
25. Bartolini, *The Political Mobilization of the European Left*, pp. 257–8.

26. In Ireland, given the almost total absence at the time of a secular or anti-clerical political voice, there was, of course, no need for the Catholic Church or conservative forces to launch specifically Catholic trade unions or Catholic workers' social movements as a counter to a class-based labour movement. Most Irish trade unionists and Labour Party leaders were only too ready and willing to loudly proclaim their social Catholicism and their loyalty to church and community in the face of the slightest suggestion that they were contaminated by the virus of secular socialism. Even so, following the Fianna Fáil-engineered split in the labour movement that saw the emergence of the Congress of Irish Unions (CIU) and the National Labour Party (NLP) in opposition to the ITUC and the Labour Party, these new organisations functioned pretty much as conservative Catholic nationalist adjuncts of the Fianna Fáil government.
27. Bartolini, *The Political Mobilization of the European Left*, pp. 451–2.
28. Dunphy, *The Making of Fianna Fáil Power in Ireland*, pp. 53–5 and 134–5.
29. *Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress Report of the National Executive for the Year 1928–1929* (Irish Labour History Museum Archives, Dublin), p. 20.
30. D.R. O'Connor Lysaght, 'The rake's progress of a syndicalist. The political career of William O'Brien, Irish labour leader', *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, vol. 9 (1985), pp. 48–62.
31. The so-called amalgamated unions – Irish branches of British-based unions – continued to be very popular with Irish workers, being in general bigger, with better financial resources, and therefore perceived as better placed to defend workers' interests. Of all trade unionists affiliated to the ITUC in 1934, 58,000 belonged to unions with their headquarters in the southern Irish state and 56,500 belonged to amalgamated unions. By 1944 this had risen to 80,000 in the former category and 108,000 in the latter. The ITUC was reduced to pleading with the government to respect 'freedom of choice' and stay out of union affairs (from 'Additional Notes for Interview with Mr Lemass', Irish Labour History Museum Archive, undated but probably 1945). The government, fully backed by O'Brien and his supporters, invoked nationalism to justify measures against so-called 'foreign' unions, even though this of course tended to strengthen divisions between workers in Northern Ireland and those in Éire.
32. Ellen Hazelkorn, 'Rejoinder to Enda McKay, "The Irish Labour Party, 1927–1933"', *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, vol. 12 (1987), pp. 7–8.
33. *Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress Report of the National Executive for the Year 1932–1933* (Irish Labour History Museum Archives, Dublin), p. 37.
34. Quoted in Dunphy, *The Making of Fianna Fáil Power in Ireland*, p. 107.
35. *Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress Report of the National Executive for the Year 1933–1934* (Irish Labour History Museum Archives, Dublin), p. 27.

14

'Whose Emergency Is It?' Wartime Politics and the Irish Working Class, 1939–45

Donal Ó Drisceoil

> *Whose Emergency is it? Is it the Ministers', who are now planning stand-still wages for the workers – and Fascist legislation for the Trade Unions?…or is it the WORKERS'…?*
>
> (Extract from 'Council of Action' handbill, June 1941)

The economic impact of the Second World War provided the impetus for class-based politics to make a rare, fleeting appearance on the southern Irish political stage. At centre-stage, however, stood Fianna Fáil, armed with powerful populist rhetoric, peerless political craftiness and extraordinary state power, ready and able to repel the 'sectional' interloper and maintain business as usual. Fianna Fáil's classic populist appeals to 'the people' for 'unity' in the 'national interest' and rejection of the divisiveness of class politics, plus the promotion of Eamon de Valera as national leader, had heightened relevance and resonance in the context of the 'Emergency', as the war years in Ireland were known.[1] The party made skilful use of the all-party-supported policy of neutrality for its political advantage, while arbitrary emergency powers were used to pin down wages and restrict workers' rights, as well as to marginalise and suppress the attempts of the temporarily resurgent left to force class issues onto the national political agenda. The politico-cultural bludgeon of Catholic nationalism was an added weapon, wielded to good effect. The war years provide a case study of the fate of class-based, socialist politics in the Irish state. Most of the familiar elements of that story of failure are present: the timidity, conservatism and consensus reflex of the Labour leadership; the separation of the political and economic wings of the labour movement; the surrender of the Irish communist movement to Soviet priorities; the limitations of entryism as a far-left strategy; the failure of the left to compete for the anti-imperialist card; the 'safety valve' of emigration; the power of Catholic Church-inspired anti-socialism and the reliability of the 'red scare' strategy; and, crucially, the political skill of the dominant Fianna Fáil party in countering challenge from the left and maintaining its core working-class support.

The politics of neutrality

The policy of neutrality adopted by the Fianna Fáil government on the outbreak of war in September 1939 was sensible and popular. The Irish state was small and virtually defenceless. Joining the war on the British side, the only viable alternative, would have left it extremely vulnerable to attack and serious internal division. The bitterly divisive Civil War had ended only sixteen years previously, and memories of British military activities in Ireland were still fresh. The IRA remained a threat, both literally and because of its continuing ability to mobilise emotions and popular responses on relations with Britain and partition. Neutrality was the least divisive policy and had the added symbolic value of being a clear assertion of newly won sovereignty and independence of action from Britain. The fact that Irish neutrality was, of necessity, highly compromised was hidden from public view by a rigorous censorship system, which also had many other political functions, as we shall see.[2] Censorship was part of an arsenal of extraordinary powers granted to the government under the Emergency Powers Act (EPA) 1939, powers deemed necessary for securing public safety, the preservation of the state, the maintenance of public order, and the provision and control of essential supplies and services.[3] In the dominant discourse, moulded and controlled by the state through its censorship/propaganda system, the survival of the state was synonymous with the survival of neutrality. The government, in the words of the minister responsible for censorship and other 'defensive measures', Frank Aiken, felt that a priority was to 'keep the temperature down', both between Ireland and the belligerents and internally.[4] In the absence of a military deterrent, survival was disproportionately dependent on the maintenance of political and socio-economic stability – to prevent hostile forces from being tempted to fish in troubled waters – together with diplomatic manoeuvring and secret cooperation with the Allied war effort.

Fianna Fáil refused to countenance a wartime coalition government, and party politics were maintained throughout the Emergency, albeit within a highly restricted and compromised democratic context. The EPA empowered the government to effectively rule by decree and the normal legislative functions of parliament were suspended. Local democracy was virtually eliminated through the extension of the managerial model, while censorship was utilised to 'neutralise' the political culture. This involved the suppression not only of war-related news and opinion, but of anything deemed a danger to internal stability or the unity of the people. Clearly, this had serious implications for the conduct of politics in general, and class politics in particular. Stressing class inequalities was divisive; publicising and campaigning on issues of unemployment, ill health and bad housing was defeatist; drawing attention to emigration sapped morale; discussion of hunger caused 'despondency and alarm';[5] highlighting the plight of the poor

when the 'unity of the people' was a priority had the effect of 'promoting class hatred and civil war'.[6] Every serious industrial dispute, according to the Minister for Industry and Commerce, was an inherent 'danger to civil order and indeed the stability of the state'.[7] Neutrality became less a policy than a dogma as the war progressed – it could not be publicly questioned or challenged, it was synonymous with the security of the state, and synonymous with Fianna Fáil, despite all-party support for it. In this form it was used as a stick to herd the opposition and public into line with the Fianna Fáil position across a range of domestic issues. For example, British-based trade unions in Ireland were branded as threats to neutrality, and thus to the state, which helped to weaken the opposition to class legislation and facilitate the alignment of key sections of the union movement behind Fianna Fáil. The brief threat of Labour supplanting the conservative Fine Gael party as the main opposition to Fianna Fáil, and the potential realignment of Irish politics inherent in that shift, was averted by the war's end.

The socio-economic impact of war

Class conflict in the early years of the Emergency provided the background to a brief growth of grass-roots socialist politics, centred on Dublin, which in turn benefited the Labour Party. Introducing the special Emergency budget in November 1939, Minister for Finance Seán T. O'Kelly declared the government's determination to 'set its face against the efforts of any class to obtain compensation for the rise in prices at the expense of the community'.[8] As it transpired, 'any class' meant the working class, in particular the efforts of workers, through their unions, to secure wage increases in a context of rapidly rising prices. The cost of living index already showed an increase of 11 per cent by the time of O'Kelly's speech, and continued to rise throughout the war years. It peaked in March 1944, at 71 per cent above the prewar level, with the cost of clothing up 97 per cent, fuel and light up 87 per cent, and food up 67 per cent.[9] The food price increases were particularly severe on the staples of the average working-class diet. Wage increases were resisted and restricted, and the most generous estimate of overall wage increases in the war period is one-third.[10] In broad economic terms, real wages dropped by 30 per cent, the share of wages and salaries in net manufacturing output fell by almost 4 per cent, and labour's share of domestically generated national income dropped from 51 per cent in 1938 to 44.3 per cent in 1944.[11] Infant mortality and deaths from tuberculosis, two key indicators of poverty, rose significantly. A doctor in a Dublin hospital estimated in 1940 that 'between $\frac{1}{5}$ and $\frac{1}{6}$ of the population of Dublin are at present subsisting on a deficiency diet and that many thousands are actually in a condition of semi-starvation'. The Chief Medical Officer in Waterford described the city's hospitals in 1941 as packed with the hungry, there 'for no other object but to get fed'. In an

interdepartmental letter in July 1941, a senior civil servant commented in passing that 'poverty and hunger [were] already fairly widespread'.[12] While workers' wages and social welfare payments were pinned down by the state, 'virtual autarky' ensured increased profits for manufacturers and traders. Many large companies continued to announce healthy profits and dividends continued to be paid to shareholders, particularly in the early years of the war. Socialists argued that a primary cause of high prices was not wage increases, as argued by the government, but the fact that a substantial part of the selling cost of most goods was made up of rent, interest and profit.[13] Taxes were increased, but minimally, a situation made possible by the government's spectacular wartime achievement of reducing public expenditure as a proportion of gross domestic product. (The Irish state spent proportionately less than half on defence than other neutrals like Sweden and Switzerland.)[14] The sum yielded from taxes on the wealthy (surtax, supertax, excess profit duty, corporation profits tax and motor vehicle duty) in 1939–40 was less than the interest payments on money advanced by the wealthy to the state under the National Security Loan scheme. 'If the government wants the working class to believe that the employers are sharing the burdens,' wrote a columnist in one Labour paper, 'it will have to start a new censorship: it will have to cut the financial pages from the daily papers.'[15]

The cost of living index figures cited above did not factor in prices on the black market, on which many had to rely for basics such as tea and candles, which were in very short supply. The wartime black market was extensive; combined with profiteering and overcharging by companies and traders, this made the situation even worse than that reflected in the official statistics. The thousands prosecuted for flouting price controls were generally acknowledged to have represented the tip of a very deep iceberg. The government resisted general rationing until May 1942, though items such as tea, cocoa, and fuels had been rationed before that. The earlier introduction of general rationing, as demanded by the labour movement, would have improved equity. Instead, the government encouraged consumers to stock up on food and fuel, which the better off could and did. (A poster for the Labour paper *Torch*, which ran: 'Fill the Larder – How?', was stopped by the censor.)[16] Traders found it increasingly difficult to replenish supplies, and the poor obviously suffered most from shortages. Those with disposable income were also better placed to avail themselves of the black market. (The rise in bank deposits of almost £80 million during the war years indicated that there was no shortage of disposal income in some sectors of the population.)[17] Critics of the government pointed out that when maximum prices were announced on certain goods, such as tea, white flour, sugar and bicycle tyres, these would immediately disappear from the open market and then reappear on the black market at twice or thrice the maximum price. The Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC) annual report for 1942 stated

that 'open profiteering and the black market in rationed and unrationed commodities has reached the dimensions of a national scandal'. Fines for overcharging were so small when compared to the profits to be made as to present little deterrent, while in some cases profiteering was officially encouraged. Prices were fixed at a 'profiteering standard of profit' in the case of products such as oatmeal and suit material. In the latter case, profit margins, fixed by the Department of Supplies, were up to double the prewar rates, and only 75 per cent of excess profit was taken by the state, compared to 100 per cent in the United Kingdom. White flour was smuggled across the border in large quantities from the beginning of the Emergency with the knowledge of the authorities and sold openly at 'extremely high prices'. The Department of Supplies believed that it was in the national interest for as much of the commodity as possible to enter the market by whatever means, and urged that nothing be done to stop it. Criticism of the 'white flour racket' and suggestions that the state intervene and pool all supplies for equitable distribution were censored.[18]

Unemployment rose due to the impact on industry of curtailed supplies, particularly imported raw materials, machinery, spare parts and fuel. Building came to a virtual standstill and industrial output declined by 27 per cent between 1938 and 1943.[19] The situation worsened as the war progressed, particularly following the application of an economic 'squeeze' by Britain to pressurise Irish neutrality in late 1941. Railwaymen, builders, dockers and factory workers were laid off in increasing numbers. The government organised various schemes for the unemployed such as rotational employment, and work on the bogs (as part of a fuel drive to replace imported coal), and established a Construction Corps in the army for the young urban unemployed. The general expansion of the defence forces absorbed some more surplus labour, but the government's primary response to the unemployment problem was to facilitate mass migration to the British war economy, where the demand for labour was high and real wages rose by 20 per cent during the war years. Wartime emigration required a high degree of cooperation between the Irish and British authorities. All emigrants had to obtain a travel permit in Ireland, and in August 1941 the government agreed to have a British liaison officer for labour based in Ireland to coordinate all recruitment for employment in the UK. At least 100,000 and perhaps as many as 150,000 emigrated to the UK during the war years. (Added to this was the estimated 50–70,000 who volunteered for the British armed forces.) The vast majority of emigrants were young (under 30) unskilled workers. Dublin had the second highest outflow after Mayo in the peak years of 1942–3.[20] The absence of so many young unemployed workers helped to weaken the potential for radical working-class politics, as was recognised by the state. The scale of the exodus not only highlighted Irish economic failure, but, because the host country was a belligerent, had broader political implications, which the

state wished to play down. Publicity about Irish involvement in the war, whether in uniform or not, was ruthlessly suppressed. '[P]icturing thousands of starving Irish workers flocking across to the bombed areas of England or to join the British forces…', wrote a leading censorship official in 1941, 'have simply got to be stopped if public morale is not to be hopelessly compromised.'[21] Whether Irish neutrality itself was 'hopelessly compromised' by this situation is an ongoing debate. The contradiction between neutrality and the government's policy regarding migration to a belligerent economy and army was a feature of left-wing critique, but censorship and repression minimised its impact. Within the civil service, opinion was divided on the issue. During deliberations on the question of restricting the emigration of agricultural and turf workers in 1942, Frederick Boland of External Affairs and J.J. McElligot of Finance took opposing views on the general question of allowing 'the traffic' to continue unabated. For McElligot, emigration provided 'a safety valve against revolution', while the flow of remittances (estimated at £100,000 per week) and savings on unemployment assistance were a boost to the strapped economy. Boland anticipated the sudden return of tens of thousands of workers at the end of the war who, having 'imbibed a good deal of "leftism" in Britain', would pose a serious political as well as socio-economic problem.[22] The influx never occurred, so Boland's fears were never realised.

Early responses

Unemployed workers' groups campaigned for increased welfare payments and organised resistance to labour camps and forced labour schemes, and worked to unionise unemployed workers, not least to forestall attempts to use them as strike-breakers. In April 1940 200 unemployed men were chosen to work for wages barely above welfare rates on the Clonast bog near Portarlington, County Laois. A Dublin Unemployed Workers' Movement (UWM) demonstration against the plan was banned; the UWM defied the ban and two of its leading activists – Steve Daly and Tommy Reilly, UWM secretary, Trotskyist members of the Labour Party – were interned in the Curragh following clashes with the police. The outcry in the labour movement forced their release after a week. (In June 1940 the UWM was banned for three months under emergency powers.) The Clonast experiment was doomed as, partly due to the UWM campaign, only 57 reported for duty at the bog, and 30 of them left after one week.[23] The Construction Corps scheme, introduced in late 1940, received qualified support from the ITUC, which accepted government assurances that enlistment would be voluntary. It transpired that those who refused faced serious penalties in terms of benefits cuts. There was widespread resistance to the Corps, organised primarily by Labour Party branches. Only 680 of the 3,084 who were offered places accepted, despite the threat of disqualification from

unemployment assistance.[24] Those who did take part in the various schemes did not remain quiescent; the government recorded that between 1940 and 1942 just under 33,000 working days were lost on employment schemes due to strike action by almost 3,000 men. Work on the bogs began in earnest in 1941 and in May 1942 an embargo was placed on the emigration of those with experience of turf and farm work. Pay was low and conditions often appalling, making the bogs a battlefield: between 1941 and 1944 over 16,000 turf workers were involved in strikes, with the loss of 163,506 workdays. In 1941 more workers (7,493) were involved in turf production strikes than in disputes in all other industries combined.[25]

The first year of the Emergency was marked by strikes in a range of industries. Miners, shopworkers, bakers, railwaymen, cinema workers and dockers were among the groups of workers who struck for higher wages in a wave of militancy against the backdrop of spiralling inflation. The spring of 1940 saw a prolonged dispute in the rosary bead assembly industry, which was ended only following the establishment of a special tribunal into the industry by the Minister for Industry and Commerce. The most significant dispute, however, was a twenty-day strike in Dublin Corporation in February–March 1940. The withdrawal of labour by 2,000 members of the Irish Municipal Employees' Trade Union (IMETU) led to a virtual shutdown of public services in the capital. They won the support of the Dublin Trades Council and eleven other unions took solidarity action. The dispute was defused following the intervention of the Department of Industry and Commerce and the Catholic auxiliary bishop of Dublin, but it became the catalyst for government moves against union militancy and wage increases. Civil service wages were frozen in May 1940 and by August the government had agreed in principle to a general pay freeze in protected industries and essential services. Seán MacEntee, the right-wing Minister for Industry and Commerce, drafted draconian anti-union legislation, which included severe limitations on the right to strike. One civil servant warned that opposition could develop to a level that might provide 'the first step to revolution', while Seán T. O'Kelly, Minister for Finance, voiced fears about 'the dangers of large scale resistance'.[26] The cabinet rejected the proposed confrontational approach (persuaded, in part, by warnings from the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU), the largest union in the country, whose leadership was sympathetic to the government, that it would take 'every effective step' to safeguard union rights) and decided on a subtler course of action. Deliberations on trade union legislation in the autumn of 1940 involved ITGWU general secretary William O'Brien, who strongly influenced the legislation and the course of subsequent events. O'Brien's plan to replace multiple trade unions with ten industrial unions had been defeated by the votes of the amalgamated (British-based) unions in Congress in 1939. He now turned to the state to help him pursue his vision.

The Trade Union Act and wage freeze

O'Brien persuaded MacEntee and his civil servants that it was the multiplicity of small unions (including that of his arch-enemy, Jim Larkin, the Workers' Union of Ireland), and the resultant inter-union rivalry, that lay at the root of so many strikes. The Trade Union Bill, published on 30 April 1941, aimed to remove the perceived problem of trade union multiplicity by eliminating smaller, troublesome unions through a system of state licensing, leaving a smaller number of larger bodies to pursue 'orderly' trade unionism. The ITUC executive and the Council of Irish Unions (CIU) (representing Irish unions within the ITUC and formed on O'Brien's initiative in 1939 following the defeat of his proposals) had both indicated that they were favourable towards the bill in principle when briefed in October 1940. When it was published, Congress deferred a response until a special conference on 16 May. This situation of apparent consensus was soon blown apart. On 6 May the Dublin Trades Council (DTC), on which the left was well-represented and strengthened by the earlier disaffiliation of the ITGWU, met and rejected the bill as 'highly detrimental to the interests of workers and inimical to trade unionists'. The following day the government, in a blunder of timing, introduced Emergency Powers Order No. 83, the wages standstill order, which froze wages and outlawed strikes in pursuit of wage claims in protected industries and essential services. Many in the labour movement regarded the two measures as class legislation, twin attacks on the working class and their unions. A wave of rank-and-file dissent and opposition gathered momentum, spearheaded by the DTC and the Dublin constituencies council of the Labour Party, which represented the burgeoning and increasingly militant branch movement in the city. Together they formed a Council of Action to lead and coordinate the opposition campaign.

The Council was unambiguously left-wing and helped radicalise opposition to the measures. 'Big Jim' Larkin and his son, James Larkin Jnr of the DTC, were central personalities. They were joined by other prominent socialists from Dublin Labour Party and trade union ranks such as Owen Sheehy Skeffington, the bakers' union leader John Swift, Robert Tynan of the IMETU, Archibald Jackson, Michael Price and a small but active Trotskyist tendency. A series of public meetings and demonstrations were organised in Dublin and across the country. A full range of general and craft unions, Irish-based and amalgamated, joined the opposition and 70,000 signatures were collected on a petition in Dublin alone.[27] The Council established a propaganda section which produced *Workers' Action*, a short-lived supplement to the Labour paper *Torch*, and a multiplicity of handbills which were distributed at union and public meetings and demonstrations. This literature was steeped in the discourse of class struggle. The notions of national unity and national interests that underpinned

government policy and propaganda and were accepted by key trade union leaders were directly challenged. One leaflet promised that 'The Irish trade union movement will not sacrifice its independence and the rights of its members at the behest of any group, party or government, outside the working class, not even to preserve national unity, because the Irish working class is the basis of the Irish nation.' The contrast between 'high-salaried ministers' and ordinary workers was highlighted, as was the absence of a freeze on profits and prices to match that on wages. *Workers' Action* ran a detailed analysis of 'How the National Income is Divided', which showed that over a third of national income went to one-tenth of the population, and that Ireland boasted 22 millionaires. A central theme was the characterisation of the trade union and wage legislation as the thin edge of a corporatist, crypto-fascist wedge: 'To-day the Government says to the Workers' Organisations: There are too many unions. And forthwith it plans to dragoon free Organisations into a State Regimented Body. To-morrow it will go further and say to the Dail: there are too many political parties! One Tribunal! One Party! One Dictator!'[28] The background to such rhetoric, besides the broader context of European fascism, was the vogue for corporatist thinking in influential Catholic circles, the ongoing government-appointed Commission on Vocational Organisation, and suspicions about O'Brien and the ITGWU's closeness to the government. The core of the opposition was the rejection of state interference in trade union affairs, a position in direct contrast to the approach favoured by O'Brien and his allies.

On 22 June 1941, coincidentally the day that Germany launched Operation Barbarossa against the Soviet Union, up to 20,000 workers marched in Dublin in the largest public event organised by the Council of Action and the 'biggest demonstration of working class resolve since 1923'.[29] Fifty-three unions were represented. The scale and depth of feeling among trade unionists surprised union and Labour Party leaders and the government, and forced shifts in position and strategy. The Labour Party, which had initially intended to selectively criticise and seek amendments to the Trade Union Bill, now adopted a position of outright opposition. On 24 June Labour leader William Norton and fellow TD Richard Corish told the Dáil that they would advocate non-observance of the law if it came into effect (statements that were denied press publicity by the censorship). The party used obstructionist tactics to delay the passage of the bill. The CIU had, in the meantime, been lobbying the government to make amendments that would ease the burden on smaller Irish-based unions. The ITUC adopted an official position of opposition, but did little to make it effective and refused to take a lead in the campaign, which was unsurprising given that its president William O'Brien and his allies were dominant figures in the executive. O'Brien condemned the wage freeze at the July 1941 congress, but blocked attempts to pass a resolution committing Congress to lead a refusal

to register under the Trade Union Act. Despite strong criticisms of the wages order, the trade union leadership refused to take the one course of action that could have defeated it, and which the government most feared – industrial action. Internal civil service correspondence shows that the prospect of a general strike was genuinely feared; such a response by the trade union movement, admitted a senior civil servant, would render 'impossible the enforcement of the order'.[30] The Council of Action was limited to Dublin and incapable of leading the type of national action necessary. Only the ITUC could do this, but it substituted radical rhetoric for radical action and prevaricated until the steam went out of the opposition.

The government had changed strategy in the face of the initial backlash and MacEntee adopted a clever divide-and-conquer approach. By early July he was deliberately presenting the bill in Irish- versus British-based union terms, taking advantage of that festering fault-line in Irish trade unionism and playing the nationalist/neutrality card. The old chestnut about British trade unions being somehow in league with British capitalism in a conspiracy to destroy Irish industry reappeared in Fianna Fáil speeches. MacEntee had made amendments that discriminated in favour of smaller Irish unions in regard to the amount to be paid in deposits, following meetings with the CIU, and followed this with the exclusion of amalgamateds from holding sole negotiating licences in any industry. The issue was thus 'nationalised', the discourse of class sidelined and the opposition divided and weakened. In August, the more conciliatory Seán Lemass replaced MacEntee as Minister for Industry and Commerce, and he set about healing the rift that threatened to weaken a key pillar of Fianna Fáil's support structure. He softened the wage freeze in April 1942 to allow tribunals to award cost of living bonuses. Further modifications were introduced in March 1943. This not only took the sting out of the opposition to the standstill order, and to Fianna Fáil, but encouraged unions to cooperate with the Trade Union Act (which became law on 21 September 1941), as only licensed unions could negotiate for pay rises under the new system. Following the enactment of the bill, a joint meeting of the ITUC executive and the administrative council of the Labour Party initiated a joint campaign against it. The campaign, which ran from November 1941 to March 1942, lacked energy and direction and was a pale shadow of the initial, Council of Action-led effort. Lemass made some minor amendments to the Act in December 1942, and the majority of trade unions gradually took out licences. These moves were presented as arising from government–trade union negotiations, and were welcomed by the ITUC. Lemass had succeeded in bringing the unions into the fold, a key aim of his long-term economic strategy and a crucial political success for Fianna Fáil. The tribunal structure encouraged workers to join trade unions, was weighted towards the lower-paid, and meant that many workers did not need to establish bargaining power through militancy, with obvious implications for the radical left.

A 'brief but memorable flowering': the left and the Labour Party

The wave of working-class militancy that marked the early years of the Emergency, and the apparent leftward shift in working-class opinion arising from the blatant inequities of wartime policies, directly benefited the Labour Party. The small Labour left grew in strength in the early war years. Socialists like Michael Price, who had joined the party in the mid-1930s along with others such as Peadar Cowan and Roddy Connolly following the split in the Republican Congress, were joined by new arrivals like Paddy Trench, a Dubliner who had been active in Trotskyist politics in London. He joined the Labour Party on his return to Ireland in September 1939 and set about recruiting and building a revolutionary socialist tendency in the party. He and his two Irish recruits, Steven Daly and Joe Noonan, were temporarily joined by five members of the (Trotskyist) Workers' International League (WIL) who arrived from Britain in a bid to escape possible incarceration. They sold papers, intervened at meetings, were active in the unemployed movement, and wrote for the Labour paper *Torch*.[31] Trench became secretary of the Pearse Street branch, a key locus of the wartime Labour left, which also had another returned exile, Trinity academic Owen Sheehy Skeffington, and his wife Andrée, as members. Tommy Reilly, one of the WIL contingent, chaired the UWM and was secretary of the Crumlin Labour branch. As well as ground-level activism, the left tried to influence policy, opposing the party's support for monetary reform, a hobby-horse of party secretary Luke Duffy, and pushing for socialist flesh to be put on the bones of Labour policy, a prelude to its ambition of reddening the marrow. Sheehy Skeffington was elected to the party's executive, the administrative council, in 1941 and 1942, and the proliferation of branches brought a stronger left-wing voice to the annual conference, though branch delegates were heavily outnumbered by those from the trade unions, who often acted as voting fodder in support of the – often reactionary – position of their union leaders. The left occasionally succeeded in having resolutions carried at annual conference, such as the demand in 1941 'that the Press Censorship on activities of the working-class in their struggle for better conditions be withdrawn, and that the emergency powers be not utilised against organisations working for the betterment of the working class'.[32] More commonly, the left was successfully opposed by the party leadership, with the aid of block voting by trade union delegates. Labour's largely uncritical support for the government's neutrality policy was reaffirmed at the 1942 conference. Trench unsuccessfully attempted to have the motion amended to reflect a more progressive approach, identifying Irish neutrality as specifically anti-imperialist and expressing solidarity with the struggles of 'the peoples of India, USSR, China, occupied Europe and Africa'. He argued that 'a simple reaffirmation

of support for Government policy was not the foundation on which a mass movement could be based'.[33]

During his tenure on the administrative council, Sheehy Skeffington's attempts to 'bring the executive closer to the rank and file and the Labour Party closer to the people' met with little success. A quote from party leader William Norton at one meeting – 'We should be slowest in doing anything that might make difficulties for us later on and prevent us from being in a position to manoeuvre' – summed up the dominant attitude. He served with equal frustration on the board of *Torch*, where the ITGWU maintained a controlling presence due to their subvention of the publication. The paper virtually ignored the Council of Action, and Sheehy Skeffington resigned in late 1941.[34] He was one of the editors of the Council's occasional *Workers' Action*, the May Day 1942 issue of which carried a piece by him entitled 'What is wrong with the Labour Party?'. In a hard-hitting critique, he attacked the party leadership for being over-cautious and conservative, and correctly characterised Labour TDs as owing their positions to personal, clientelist followings in their constituencies rather than their identification with party policy. He slammed the removal of the aim of a workers' republic, which occurred in 1940 under clerical pressure, and its replacement with the watered-down aim of 'a Republican form of Government based upon Social Justice', and also the failure to provide meaningful parliamentary opposition on issues such as rationing, supplies, unemployment and censorship. 'It is an open secret', he wrote, 'that we have a special sub-committee for letting sleeping dogs lie.' He targeted the excessive power of the trade unions within the party as a key source of its problems. The unions monopolised the selection of candidates, had too much influence over party policy, and yet failed to bring labour policy into the unions. He ended with a call for a fight for 'Connolly's Workers' Republic' based on clear socialist demands: 'And let us make it plain that we are not merely an out-of-office Fianna Fáil, but an active, positive, clear-sighted, courageous, workers' party.'

The Council of Action had a broader remit than opposition to the wages and trade union measures. In October 1941 it organised a Conference on Emergency Conditions in Dublin's Mansion House attended by 280 delegates from 83 organisations, including trade unions, political parties, charities, parish councils and representatives of Dublin Corporation. The conference formed sections to address the issues of food, fuel, housing and unemployment, and campaigning began on demands such as hot meals for poor schoolchildren, the establishment of food and fuel depots, the institution of a general rationing system, action against food profiteering, and rent allowances for the unemployed. Local councils were established across the city, mainly by Labour Party branches, and some carried on until the war's end. The Pearse Street council was particularly active, running what was effectively a free legal aid and citizen's advice service for working-class

tenants in their numerous disputes with landlords, particularly in the notorious tenements in which many inner-city working class families still lived in appalling conditions. The Labour Party leadership remained largely aloof from this rank-and-file initiative.[35] The Communist Party of Ireland (CPI) underwent a minor recovery in Dublin in 1939–40, running talks and public meetings and publishing the *Irish Workers' Weekly*. However, it was not in a position to take political advantage of the rise in working-class militancy, not least because of the weakness of its trade union base and its recent history of Popular Front politics. Its frequently shifting position on international and national affairs was primarily a response to Soviet demands, and the early war years saw it become 'truly reduced to an abject mouthpiece of Moscow, and indeed of London [Communist Party of Great Britain]' at a time of repeated policy modification of the Comintern line.[36] The Nazi–Soviet pact meant that Britian's previously 'anti-fascist' war was now 'imperialist', and, with the abandonment of the Popular Front strategy, communist parties were to reengage with the class struggle. Irish neutrality was endorsed, the CPI campaigned for the withdrawal of Northern Ireland from the war and rediscovered its positive attitude to the IRA. Involvement in unemployed and tenant agitation, and sympathy with IRA subversion, led to the internment of up to a dozen communists in the Curragh, where they formed study groups with left-leaning IRA men. (Over 1,000 republicans and sympathisers were interned or imprisoned in the war period.) Following the German invasion of the Soviet Union the CPI could no longer support neutrality. As Moscow demanded unqualified support for the Allied war effort, something that was not politic in the Irish context, the Irish solution to this Irish problem was dissolution of the party in the southern state in July 1941. The strategy now was for communists to join the Labour Party and work for a Fianna Fáil–Labour coalition that would lead Ireland into the war. This entryism was made easier by the rapid growth of Labour, which gained 750 additional branches in 1942–3, many in areas where it had previously no presence, in an extraordinary organisational drive led by Peadar Cowan.[37]

Many of the new Labour recruits were rank-and-file trade unionists radicalised by the struggle against the trade union bill and wage freeze. They were attracted by the novelty of the party's profile in that campaign, during which Labour recruited successfully, telling trade unionists that while their union was 'one weapon of defence: you need another equally powerful… Your most effective protest against anti-Trade Union legislation is to join the political arm of the Labour Movement.'[38] The Larkins brought supporters and followers with them into the party in December 1941. They joined the Central Branch, established in January 1942 at the suggestion of the trades council as a home for shop stewards and other activists. Within a month, the branch boasted 150 members, including John Swift, John de

Courcy Ireland (a Marxist formerly active in the Northern Ireland Labour Party), veteran Larkinite Barney Conway, and many of the former CPI activists in the city. It played its part in what de Courcy Ireland has called 'a brief but memorable flowering' of grass-roots socialist politics in the capital, which included street clashes with the fascistic Ailtirí na hAiseirghe movement.[39] The upcoming 1942 local elections became a focus, and a popular test of the Labour resurgence.

Elections and splits

The elections were held on 19 August 1942, a week before the new local authority management system became operative. The restoration of the powers of elected representatives was a major plank of Labour's programme (making the managers 'servants' and not 'masters'), which was a radical reformist one of rent and rate reduction and improved services and housing. Fianna Fáil accused Labour of using the elections to 'sabotage the government'. The list of Dublin candidates included many who had been active in the Council of Action, such as Archie Jackson, Walter Carpenter, John Swift and Larkin Senior. In a low turnout of less than 50 per cent, Labour was the major winner. It trebled its representation on county councils and more than doubled it on urban councils and corporations across the country, jumping from two to twelve seats on Dublin corporation, where it became the largest party and secured the mayorship.[40] Among the successful candidates were Larkin and Barney Conway, who both became aldermen. While the result was partly a victory for political commitment on the part of the Labour branch movement in the face of the larger parties' apathy with regard to local democracy, it also reflected a more general disenchantment with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, especially in Dublin, and provided a promising springboard for Labour in the general election that would be held the following year.

The Labour Party was a 'broad church', however, and trouble was brewing, centred on the old O'Brien–Larkin feud, but also reflecting tensions between the party's dominant trade union bloc and the vigorous new branch movement, as well a broader, partially corresponding right/conservative/nationalist – left/radical/internationalist divide. The old syndicalist O'Brien was less concerned with the left ideologically than with the potential of explicit class politics to upset the ever-deepening relationship with the state/Fianna Fáil and the concomitant benefits for his union and his vision of Irish trade unionism, as reflected in the Trade Union Act and the Lemass initiatives. He was also driven by his hatred for Larkin and wished to banish him from the party, as he had previously attempted, with partial success, in the trade union movement. O'Brien was willing to dress up his agenda in ideological clothes and to split the party to achieve his aims, if

necessary. The ITGWU managed to control the selection conferences for the upcoming general election sufficiently to exclude most of the recently elected councillors and representatives of the branch movement. Michael Price was selected but had to withdraw due to ill health, and suggested to the administrative council that Larkin Snr, who received the next highest vote at the Dublin conference, be put forward instead.[41] This was supported by the Dublin Executive, but an ITGWU majority on the council (due to the absence of two members who would have supported it) voted it down. The Dublin Executive put him forward as official candidate nonetheless, with the tacit approval of Norton and no public protest from the ITGWU. Amidst the wrangling and confusion, Sheehy Skeffington was expelled from the party for 'gross disloyalty and breach of confidence' for clarifying publicly some of the issues surrounding the selection process. In what appeared to be a further move against the left, the Labour leadership also announced plans to restructure the Dublin party in a way that would break up the constituencies council and the Pearse Street branch, which, in the run-up to the election, had been attempting to mobilise a 'left opposition' to the party's 'reactionary leadership' by focusing attention on the socialist elements of Labour's Constructive Programme.[42] The development of a 'conscious left wing'[43] based in the branch movement, in alliance with the Larkinites and Stalinists, was further hampered by the ill health suffered by two key figures, Trench and Price (who died in March 1944).

Despite the popular consensus on neutrality, the government feared that it would suffer a backlash due to wartime inequality, Labour growth and the diminution in Fianna Fáil's image as the friend of the working class. Having failed to secure the necessary all-party agreement for a postponement of a general election, the government allowed the Dáil to run its full course for the first time ever. The Fianna Fáil election strategy was straightforward: it was the only party that could give stable government at this time of crisis, and voters should avoid the dangers inherent in 'changing horses when crossing the stream'. It naturally sought to have its cake and eat it: claim party credit for the all-party supported policy of neutrality, but shirk and share responsibility for the social inequalities of the Emergency. The left failed to radicalise Labour's election programme, which did not even mention the Beveridge Report, published in December 1942, outlining British commitment to a comprehensive welfare state and full employment. The political potential of Beveridge was recognised within government; Hugo Flinn, parliamentary secretary to the Minister for Finance, wrote to de Valera:

> The publication of this report, its adoption by public opinion in England and the promise of the Six County Government to implement it if adopted at Westminster is a 'god send' for the Labour Party and, properly worked, worth quite a few seats.

> Every wildest claim made by them may be made to seem possible of accomplishment: 'if this can be done by England after a horribly costly war, what could not be done by a country that has remained at peace?'[44]

But Labour failed to grasp this opportunity, and the following year endorsed Bishop Dignan's vocationalist proposals for a welfare system based on Catholic social teaching.[45] Despite the mildness of the commitments that made up the Labour programme, it was condemned by Fianna Fáil as 'outlandish', inflationary and unworkable. MacEntee spearheaded a lurid red-scare campaign against Labour, claiming that the party was controlled by communists, despite the fact that none of the communists who had joined the party were election candidates. Lemass and others in Fianna Fáil, anxious about the working-class backlash, were critical of MacEntee's anti-Labour belligerence and laid some of the blame for the party's poor election performance at his feet.[46]

The election, held on 22 June 1943, saw the vote for the two biggest parties drop by over 10 per cent each, which translated as a loss of ten seats for Fianna Fáil (from 77 to 67) and thirteen for Fine Gael (from 45 to 32). Labour's vote increased by 5.7 per cent to 15.5, which meant an increase of eight seats (9 to 17), its best ever performance. Half the new seats were in Dublin, and both Larkins were elected. Fianna Fáil was in a minority of five, but new farmers' party Clann na Talmhan (whose rural success at the expense of Fianna Fáil mirrored Labour's achievement in urban areas) and Labour abstained in the vote for Taoiseach rather than precipitate another election, resulting in a minority Fianna Fáil government. With Fine Gael in serious decline and Labour apparently poised to challenge its position as the main opposition party, the party underwent a disastrous split. In December 1943 William O'Brien and the ITGWU put forward a motion at the administrative council for the expulsion of Larkin Jnr and de Courcy Ireland, chair and secretary respectively of the Dublin Executive, for their role in the irregular nomination of Larkin Snr. The ITGWU was outvoted, and promptly disaffiliated from the party, citing its takeover by 'sinister and disruptive elements', namely Larkinites in alliance with communists.[47] In January 1944 five of the union's eight TDs withdrew from the party and formed the National Labour Party (NLP), committed to Catholic nationalist (Fianna Fáil-friendly) politics and free from communist, or even socialist, infestation. It received clerical endorsement and encouragement from Fianna Fáil, with whose approach it so closely harmonised that one historian has dubbed it 'Fianna Fáil's Labour Party'.[48] Norton and the the Labour leadership attempted to limit the damage by launching an inquiry into communist infiltration, against the background of McCarthyesque witch-hunting articles in the Catholic *Standard*, penned by an influential champion of the NLP, Alfred O'Rahilly. This resulted in the expulsion in April 1944 of six members for attending a CPI conference in Belfast the previous

October and the effective silencing of the left in the party. (Vanguard, Peadar Cowan's attempt to rally the remnants of the Labour left around a radical, socialist republican programme in late 1944, ended in failure). With Fine Gael dispirited and Labour split and in disarray, and basking in its success over the American Note episode, Fianna Fáil seized an early opportunity in May 1944 to call a snap election in order to regain its majority.[49] In a short campaign of only eighteen days, Fianna Fáil made hay with the Labour split. MacEntee praised the NLP, calling it a Labour party in the true 'Pearse and Connolly' tradition, in contrast to the 'Internationale Labour Party'.[50] The NLP increased its anti-communist rhetoric, focusing its attention on the Labour Party rather than offering opposition to the government. The Labour Party fell into the trap, asserting its own anti-communism and fealty to Catholic principles and church authority in public affairs, to little avail.[51] In the lowest turnout since 1927, partially attributable to working-class abstention, the two Labour parties won fewer votes and seats than the united party in 1943. The NLP candidates retained four out of five seats, while the Labour Party lost a further five, reducing its representation from seventeen to eight. Fianna Fáil won back its majority. The labour movement received a further setback in April 1945 when O'Brien led a split in Congress. The pretext was the decision of the ITUC executive, on which amalgamated unions were in a rare majority due to their successful growth in Northern Ireland during the war, to send delegates to the British TUC-organised, pro-Allied international trade union conference in London. Ten Irish unions then established a rival Congress of Irish Unions, in a rejection of anglicised labour thinking and an assertion of 'pointedly indigenous labourism, distinguished by emphases on corporatism, nationalism, Catholicism and anti-Communism'.[52]

The Labour Party was reunited in 1950, in the context of joint participation in the first inter-party government, but serious damage had been done. The prospect of a leftward shift in the Irish political landscape, paralleling that in Britain and much of the postwar Western world, lay dead on the Emergency landscape. The genie of secular, socialist class politics had been put back in the bottle and Fianna Fáil retained its dominance of Irish politics and the allegiance of a majority of the working class.

Notes

1. On Fianna Fáil's populism, see Richard Dunphy, 'Fianna Fáil and the working class, 1926–38', in this volume.
2. On the pro-Allied nature of Irish policy, see, most recently, Eunan O'Halpin, *Defending Ireland: The Irish State and Its Enemies since 1922* (Oxford, 1999) and his edited *MI5 and Ireland, 1939–1945: The Official History* (Dublin, 2003). On censorship, see, Donal Ó Drisceoil, *Censorship in Ireland 1939–1945: Neutrality, Politics and Society* (Cork, 1996), and 'Censorship as propaganda: the neutralisation of Irish public opinion during the Second World War', in Brian Girvin and Geoffrey Roberts (eds), *Ireland and the Second World War: Politics, Society and*

Remembrance (Dublin, 2000), pp. 151–64. Two recent overviews of wartime politics are Brian Girvin, 'Politics in wartime: governing, neutrality and elections', in Girvin and Roberts, *Ireland and the Second World War*, pp. 24–46, and Donal Ó Drisceoil, 'Keeping the temperature down: domestic politics in Emergency Ireland', in Dermot Keogh and Mervyn O'Driscoll (eds), *Ireland in World War Two: Neutrality and Survival* (Cork, 2004), pp. 173–86.

3. See Seosamh Ó Longaigh, 'Emergency law in action, 1939–1945', in Keogh and O'Driscoll (eds), *Ireland in World War Two*, pp. 63–80.
4. *Seanad Debates*, vol. 24, col. 2614–5, 4 December 1940.
5. Thomas J. Coyne (Assistant Controller of Censorship) to Stephen Roche (Secretary, Department of Justice), 25 March 1941, Department of Justice (D/J) wartime censorship files, No. 20, National Archives of Ireland (NAI).
6. Coyne to Maurice Moynihan (Secretary to An Taoiseach), 5 July 1941, Office of Controller of Censorship files (OCC), 7/58, Irish Military Archives (IMA).
7. Seán MacEntee to R.F. Ferguson, Secretary, Department of Industry and Commerce, 17 March 1940, MacEntee Papers, P 67/229, University College Dublin Archives Department (UCDAD).
8. *Dáil Debates*, vol. 77, col. 969, 8 November 1939.
9. *Irish Trade and Statistical Bulletin* (*ITSB*) (Dublin, 1939–45).
10. Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824–1960* (Dublin, 1992), p. 140.
11. Cormac Ó Gráda, *A Rocky Road: the Irish Economy since the 1920s* (Manchester, 1997), p. 17.
12. *Annual Report of the Registrar General* (Dublin, 1939–45); *Labour Party Ninth Annual Report* (Dublin, 1940); Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Waterford* (Waterford, 1989), p. 257; Thomas J. Coyne to Maurice Moynihan, 5 July 1941, OCC 7/58, IMA.
13. Owen Sheehy Skeffington to Luke Duffy, 22 September 1942, Sheehy Skeffington Papers, National Library of Ireland (NLI), unnumbered file.
14. J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 236–7.
15. *Labour Party Ninth Annual Report* (Dublin, 1940); *Torch*, 11 January 1941.
16. *Labour Party Tenth Annual Report* (Dublin, 1941).
17. Ó Gráda, *A Rocky Road*, p. 13.
18. Labour Party annual reports for the war years carry details and analysis of profiteering. On flour, see Ó Drisceoil, *Censorship*, p. 256.
19. O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland*, p. 140.
20. Enda Delaney, *Demography, State and Society: Irish Migration to Britain, 1921–1971* (Liverpool, 2000), pp. 112–59.
21. Coyne to Moynihan, 5 July 1941, OCC 7/58, IMA.
22. F.H. Boland memorandum, 14 May 1942, Department of An Taoiseach (D/T), S 11582A, NAI.
23. Kieran Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour, 1926 to the Present* (London, 1997), pp. 67–8; *Torch*, 4 May 1940; Press Censorship Monthly Reports, September 1940, D/J, NAI.
24. Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 68.
25. *ITSB* (1942–3).
26. Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 70; *ITSB* (1940–2). In general, see Finbarr O'Shea, 'Government and trade unions in Ireland 1939–46: the formulation of labour legislation' (MA thesis, UCC, 1988) and 'A tale of two Acts: government and trade unions during the Emergency', in Keogh and O'Driscoll (eds), *Ireland in World War Two*, pp. 211–29; O'Connor, *Labour History of Ireland*, pp. 137–54.
27. O'Shea, 'Formulation', p. 92.

28. Council of Action handbills, Sheehy Skeffington Papers, NLI; *Workers' Action*, 1 May 1942.
29. O'Connor, *Labour History of Ireland*, p. 144.
30. Allen, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 74.
31. Ciaran Crossey and James Monaghan, 'The origins of Trotskyism in Ireland', *Revolutionary History*, vol. 6, no. 2/3 (n.d.), pp. 6–23.
32. *Labour Party Tenth Annual Report* (Dublin, 1941).
33. *Labour Party Eleventh Annual Report* (Dublin, 1942).
34. Andrée Sheehy Skeffington, *Skeff: A Life of Owen Sheehy Skeffington, 1909–1970* (Dublin, 1991), pp. 102–9.
35. *Workers' Action*, June 1942; Sheehy Skeffington, *Skeff*, pp. 113–14.
36. Emmet O'Connor, *Reds and the Green: Ireland, Russia and the Communist Internationals, 1919–43* (Dublin, 2004), p. 226. On the CPI in the war years, see also Mike Milotte, *Communism in Modern Ireland: The Pursuit of the Workers' Republic since 1916* (Dublin, 1984), pp. 182–215.
37. *Labour Party: Reports of the Administrative Council, 1942 and 1943* (Dublin, 1943–4).
38. Labour Party leaflet, Sheehy Skeffington Papers, NLI.
39. John de Courcy Ireland, 'Reviewing socialism in Derry and Dublin in the 1940s', *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, vol. 17 (1992), pp. 11–13.
40. See *Irish Press*, 14–31 August 1942; *Torch*, 25 July–29 August 1942.
41. 'Pearse Street Labour Party Minute Book', 16 December 1942, William O'Brien Papers, MS 15,661, NLI.
42. 'Pearse Street Labour Party Minute Book', 9 December 1942–3 November 1943; Trench memorandum, 24 December 1942, unnumbered file, Sheehy Skeffington Papers, NLI.
43. Patrick Trench, 'International Notes: Ireland', *Fourth International*, December 1942.
44. 13 December 1942, D/T, S 13053A, NAI.
45. *Labour Party: Report of the Administrative Council, 1944* (Dublin, 1945); on Dignan's proposals, see J.H. Whyte, *Church and State in Modern Ireland, 1923–1979* (Dublin, 1980), pp. 96–119.
46. Richard Dunphy, *The Making of Fianna Fáil Power in Ireland, 1923–1948* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 287–92; Brian Girvin, 'Politics in wartime', pp. 42–3.
47. *Labour Party: Report of the Administrative Council, 1943* (Dublin, 1944); William O'Brien to all Labour Party branches, 15 January 1944, MacEntee Papers, P 67/535, UCDAD.
48. Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, pp. 289–90.
49. The 'American Note' incident was de Valera's *popular rebuff* to an American diplomatic demand in February 1944 that he expel Axis diplomats.
50. *Irish Times*, 23 May 1944.
51. According to Peadar Cowan, the expulsions from the party had been carried out at behest of 'a secret religious organisation' that was central in the state and political parties (*Irish Press*, 23 September 1944) – a reference to the Knights of Columbanus, of which Norton, at least, was a member.
52. O'Connor, *Labour History of Ireland*, p. 151.

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