

## REVIEWS

Diarmaid Ferriter, *A Nation and Not a Rabble: The Irish Revolution 1913–1923*  
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### A GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL DEFIANCE

Amid the deluge of literature on the Irish national revolution that has appeared in recent years, Diarmaid Ferriter's latest work was bound to attract particular attention, if only for the profile enjoyed by its author in Irish public life. A professor of modern Irish history at University College Dublin, Ferriter began his academic career with a batch of monographs on the temperance movement and local government in Ireland before making his name with an ambitious work of synthesis, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900–2000* (2004)—since followed by a revisionist biography of Éamon De Valera, a study of modern Irish sexuality, and a history of Ireland in the 1970s. In tandem with this stream of publications, Ferriter has established himself as a media personality, the first port of call for television programmes in need of a historian's perspective, and a regular contributor to the national press (most recently as a columnist for the weekend edition of the *Irish Times*). There can be no denying Ferriter's status as the leading public historian of his generation, in a country where historical debates are conducted with a rare sense of urgency by voices outside the academy.

*A Nation and Not a Rabble* falls into a burgeoning genre of books timed to coincide with a decade of centenaries that span the crucial events of Ireland's struggle for national independence. The sequence begins with the Home Rule crisis of 1912–14: the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) was able to trade the promise of self-government by a Dublin-based assembly against support for the Liberal reform programme at Westminster, but found its

efforts thwarted by an alliance of Ulster unionists and the British Tories. With rival unionist and nationalist militias forming to resist or uphold the Home Rule act and the island seemingly on the brink of civil war, the European conflict intervened in the summer of 1914, as the main leaders of the two camps gave their support to the war effort. Two years later, a group of radical nationalists sought to take advantage of the opportunity presented by the war through an uprising in Dublin that was suppressed within a week; the leaders were swiftly executed, but nationalist opinion was radicalized in the wake of the insurrection and the IPP found itself displaced by a new party, Sinn Féin, which swept the board at the 1918 general election on a platform demanding full independence. A campaign of guerrilla warfare spearheaded by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) ensued, eventually leading to negotiations and the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. Both Sinn Féin and the IRA split over the terms of the Treaty; the pro-Treaty camp came out on top in the Civil War of 1922–23. Meanwhile, six of Ulster's nine counties were chopped out of the new Free State's territory, to be ruled by the local unionists for the next half-century.

These events are being marked with great solemnity by the Irish political class and the country's media. Yet there is more to the efflorescence of historical writing than admittedly lucrative publishing opportunities. A rich seam of archival material has become available to Irish historians since the turn of the century, lending credence to Peter Hart's suggestion that Ireland's was 'quite possibly the best documented revolution in modern history'. The Bureau of Military History (BMH), a state-funded body, collected over 1,700 witness statements from participants in the 1940s and 50s, but with the project completed, those statements were impounded for almost half a century and only released in 2003. A decade later, an even larger haul of documentation fell into the hands of scholars, as the Military Service Pensions Collection (MSPC) opened its vault: nearly 300,000 files, carefully assembled by civil servants when assessing pension claims from those who had served (or claimed to have served) during the Easter Rising of 1916 and the subsequent War of Independence. There is ample reason for Irish historians to approach the revolutionary period with fresh eyes after beginning to process this windfall.

A shift in the political climate has also made it possible to adopt a new perspective on the formative years of the modern Irish state. The seemingly intractable conflict in Northern Ireland cast a long shadow over Irish historiography in the 1970s and 80s, leaving a heavy imprint on the 'revisionist' approach that exercised a powerful influence at the time. The term itself is controversial and difficult to pin down. Professional historians often reacted with annoyance to the suggestion that they belonged to any revisionist school or current, dismissing their critics as hidebound ideologues who

were unhappy to find cherished myths placed under the scholarly microscope; in the words of Roy Foster, often considered an exemplar of the trend, 'to say "revisionist" should just be another way of saying "historian".' For his own purposes, Foster defined revisionism as 'quite simply a desire to eliminate as much as possible of the retrospectively "Whig" view of history which sees every event and process in the light of what followed it rather than what went before'. This need not have implied any particular view of Anglo-Irish relations, but the Oxford historian was clear about his admiration for work that displayed 'the most robust scepticism about the pieties of Irish nationalism'.

There is, of course, a neighbouring country with its own variety of nationalism—a country whose universities have educated and employed many Irish historians, and whose newspapers and magazines have been known to publish their articles and review their books, more or less admiringly as the case may be. Yet Foster could only manage a patronizing smirk for those who were keen to challenge the mythologies of British nationalism: 'A desire to expiate what are seen as past sins, and a genuine surprise at the appalling record of much of British government in Ireland, is understandable; it is probably good for the English soul; but it must be questioned whether it gets us any nearer understanding.' Three decades later, he can at least rest assured that excessive zeal to expiate past sins, whether committed in Ireland or elsewhere, is not a striking feature of British public culture. It was this double standard in the practice of 'revisionism', the sense that *Their Island Story* was not being handled with the same irreverence as *Our Island Story*, that aggravated many who would have been happy to see the sacred cows of Irish nationalism led to the slaughter. Few British nationalists could have been troubled by Foster's description of the Easter Rising, in his landmark work *Modern Ireland* (1988), as a 'blood sacrifice' rooted in 'Irish irrationalism'; or by David Fitzpatrick's reference to the 1916 rebels, in the *Oxford History of Ireland*, as 'Pearse's suicide squads'; or by the use of 'Anglophobia' as a synonym for opposition to British rule in Ireland by Foster and Fitzpatrick alike. Iconoclasm in this field was very much in the eye of the beholder.

Two historians cited approvingly by Foster, Leland Lyons and Ronan Fanning, had a much clearer sense of the danger that present-day political concerns would inflect the writing of Irish history. In 1971, Lyons suggested that in response to the IRA campaign in Northern Ireland, Irish historians had 'begun rather feverishly to examine their consciences (or those of their colleagues) to see whether they have by their writing given undue prominence to the concept of revolutionary militancy', and warned that such 'constitutional' historians were 'just as much in danger of falling into the Whig fallacy as are the proponents of "1916 and all that"'. Fifteen years later,

Fanning noted that British government records for the revolutionary period had only become available to scholars in the late 1960s: ‘The fact that release of these records about the “troubles” of the past was so soon followed by the “troubles” of the present has, I believe, more profoundly influenced the writing of twentieth-century Irish history than most historians care readily to recognize.’ Such pressures are by no means absent today, but have at least abated somewhat in the wake of the Northern Irish peace process, allowing for a more balanced approach.

Ferriter’s book is very much a product of this ‘post-revisionist’ moment, and gives a sense of where the debate is moving (terms like ‘Anglophobia’ are mercifully absent from its pages). The structure he has adopted will come as a surprise for those expecting a straightforward account of the Irish revolution, as promised in the book’s subtitle, and may prove challenging for a reader with no previous grounding in the events it describes. The first hundred pages are devoted to the ways in which the story has been told in print since the 1920s, from the memoirs of guerrilla chiefs to the latest academic scholarship. Ferriter then spends a little over two hundred pages on the independence struggle itself, before concluding with another ninety-odd pages on the aftermath (in particular, the approach of the Irish state and its political class to commemoration over the decades). The narrative of the revolution thus accounts for barely half of the book’s total length. By comparison, the British historian Charles Townsend has published two books covering the same period—*Easter 1916* (2005) and *The Republic* (2013)—that add up to almost a thousand pages between them. Ferriter’s account can’t help but seem a little thin when read alongside Townsend’s, which naturally supplies far more detail, both about the internal development of Sinn Féin and the IRA, and about the evolution of British government policy in response to the nationalist challenge. But there is enough fresh material here, from the BMH/MSPC archives and elsewhere, to justify the effort.

One side-effect of the book’s structure is to bracket some of the most virulent controversies from the core of its narrative; by the time Ferriter addresses the 1916 Rising directly, readers will already have heard contending views on its legitimacy from the likes of Francis Shaw and Conor Cruise O’Brien several chapters earlier. His own analysis calmly disposes of the argument that remains popular with the most stridently revisionist historians—notably Ruth Dudley Edwards, a perennial darling of the British Tory press—who see the Rising as an undemocratic putsch that drove Irish nationalism off the constitutional path. It was the Ulster unionists and their British allies who had first made use of unconstitutional methods in order to thwart the Home Rule bill passed by the Liberals and their IPP allies: the Labour politician Thomas Johnson could publish a *Guide to Successful Defiance of the British Government* in 1918, quoting speeches from the unionist

chief Edward Carson and the Conservative leader Andrew Bonar Law, who had in Johnson's words 'with complete success by a display of armed force challenged the might of the Empire and were afterwards honoured and rewarded by the government they defied'. The Irish Volunteers, who supplied the bulk of the fighting force in 1916, had initially been organized to uphold legislation passed by the British parliament. Sir John Maxwell, the general charged with bringing Dublin to heel, privately held the British government responsible for what had happened: 'Ever since they winked at Ulster breaking the law they have been in difficulties.' The IPP leader John Redmond is often depicted as the great victim of the revolt, swept away in its wake by a tide of radical nationalism; but as Ferriter notes, support for the Home Rulers had already begun to drain away before a shot was fired in Dublin, largely because of the party's support for the war effort: 'Given Redmond's full-scale backing of a war that became increasingly unpopular in Ireland, the IPP was in grave trouble regardless of the Rising.'

Setting aside the tendentious view of the insurrection as a pointless and irrational 'blood sacrifice' allows for a more useful discussion of its ambitions and achievement. Whiggish hindsight has often been deployed to prove that the rebels were certain to fail, but they had expected to mobilize a much wider section of the Volunteer membership than proved to be the case, and had cherished unrealistic hopes of assistance from Berlin against their mutual enemy. Many of the 1916 leaders—the Marxist revolutionary James Connolly in particular—feared that if a blow was not struck against foreign rule before the war ended, all hope of securing Irish independence from a triumphant British Empire would be lost; as Ferriter puts it, 'it was a certain mood of despair mixed with vague optimism within Irish republicanism and socialism that prompted the manoeuvres of Easter Monday'. That proved to be utterly mistaken, of course: after the defeat of the rebels and the execution of their leaders, the surviving Volunteers would be reorganized as the IRA, working in partnership with the movement's political wing, Sinn Féin, to undermine the legitimacy and coercive power of the British state in Ireland. Ferriter quotes a remark by John MacBride, one of those executed, that is reported in a BMH witness statement: 'If it ever happens again, take my advice and don't get inside four walls.' That lesson was taken to heart by the new IRA leadership, whose campaign of guerrilla warfare—often directed by British Army veterans newly returned from the trenches—proved far more effective than the methods of Easter Week.

While the hostile view of 1916 still gets ample room in the Irish media, its impact on popular opinion has been limited. The same cannot be said of another perspective quietly dismantled by Ferriter: the cult of Michael Collins, and the exaltation of those who, like Collins, supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 as wise pragmatists with a sound grasp of democratic

principle that their opponents were signally lacking. In recent decades, Collins has been elevated to rock-star status by such devotees as the filmmaker Neil Jordan and the journalist Tim Pat Coogan, whose popular biographies of Collins and his anti-Treaty rival De Valera have probably reached a wider audience than all the revisionist historians put together. The fact that Collins died young, at the hands of anti-Treaty forces in a Civil War ambush, permitted his admirers to shift any responsibility for the disappointments of the post-revolutionary period away from the IRA's most celebrated wartime chief. Ferriter gives short shrift to this 'stained-glass' image of Collins: as he points out, Collins had a deeply conservative political outlook, and his pro-Treaty comrades would labour tirelessly to exclude the merest hint of social reform when they assumed control of the new Irish state after 1921. The foundations of what became known as 'De Valera's Ireland', a society that was savagely intolerant of those who could not accept its repressive cultural mores, had been laid well before De Valera's Fianna Fáil party took office in 1932.

The Collins cult feeds into the view of the Anglo-Irish Treaty as the most that could possibly have been achieved under the circumstances, and its republican opponents as inflexible, dead-end purists who were indifferent to the popular will. The clearest expression of this view can be found in *1922: The Birth of Irish Democracy*, a work published by the political scientist Tom Garvin in 1996, which celebrated the defeat of the anti-Treaty forces as the foundation-stone of constitutional government in Ireland. Ferriter finds this colourful morality tale unconvincing: 'Reducing the civil war divide to pro-Treaty political "democrats" and anti-Treaty military "dictators" did no justice to the complexity of the dilemmas and views of 1922; neither side during this conflict had a monopoly on virtue or democratic sentiment.' The anti-Treaty camp objected to the agreement on two main grounds: the British negotiators had denied recognition to an Irish Republic which had been overwhelmingly endorsed (outside Ulster) in two national elections, offering Dominion status under the Crown instead; and they had insisted on the exclusion from the new state's territory of six north-eastern counties where the Protestant minority was concentrated. Ferriter argues that British intransigence meant that a republic was never within reach, but goes on to show that partition was a different matter.

According to Lloyd George's secretary, the British premier had adopted an uncompromising position on imperial matters partly because he did not want the talks to break down over Ulster: 'Men will die for throne and Empire. I do not know who will die for Tyrone and Fermanagh.' The Northern Irish statelet being sought by the Ulster unionists and their Conservative backers would include large chunks of territory where there was a nationalist majority, including its second-largest city and two of its six counties; the

consensus at the time was that anything smaller would prove to be unviable. The notes of a meeting held in Churchill's house during the Treaty negotiations have Lloyd George emphasizing how weak the case for such a polity would be: 'He could carry a six-county parliament subordinate to a national [Irish] parliament. Alternatively he said he would try to carry a plan for a new boundary or a vote on the conclusion or exclusion of the whole of Ulster as a unit but he was not hopeful of doing so.' In fact he would deliver a good deal more than that for the unionists: the only question-mark left hanging over partition was a Boundary Commission, to be composed of one representative each from Dublin and Belfast and a chairman appointed by London. Its report, when eventually completed in 1925, unsurprisingly recommended preserving the status quo with a few minor changes.

The Irish negotiators displayed remarkable naivety in accepting this clause, and the same myopia was in evidence back in Dublin: the passionate debates over the Treaty focused on the status of the 26-county state, with both sides tacitly assuming that the Boundary Commission would take care of its northern neighbour in due course. Almost a century later, those features of the southern state that republicans found most objectionable—its imperial ties and the oath of allegiance to the British Crown that MPs would have to swear—have long since been undone, while partition remains as solid as ever. It is one thing to contend that partition in one form or another was inevitable at that juncture: as long as the British political elite was willing to back up unionist resistance with its own power, Irish nationalists would have faced a daunting uphill struggle to achieve their goal of an all-Ireland state. It is quite another to maintain that partition was inevitable *in the form that it did assume*; as Ferriter shows, that outcome was highly contingent. There is no telling at this stage whether a truncated Northern Ireland would have lasted or not. Experience has shown that there is no objective criterion of 'viability' for states—still less regions within states—and in any case there was never a time when the territory could sustain itself without help from the British exchequer, as imperial planners had originally anticipated it would. This much is clear: Northern Ireland as it came to be had the worst of both worlds, with a reliable unionist majority but a nationalist minority that was still large enough to be presented by its rulers as an existential threat, thus preventing any 'normal' alignment of politics along class lines. Lloyd George, who was for many years credited with solving the Irish question by ill-informed historians, merely planted a time-bomb at the heart of the peace settlement that would explode fifty years later—and the Sinn Féin negotiators allowed him to do so.

Was there more than plain incompetence behind this failure? Another important strand of Ferriter's narrative suggests an alternative hypothesis, although it is not a connection that the author draws himself. The men

who came to dominate the pro-Treaty faction—Collins, Arthur Griffith, Richard Mulcahy, William Cosgrave, Kevin O’Higgins, Ernest Blythe—were all staunch conservatives who found any challenge to the established hierarchies of class and gender profoundly disturbing. Ferriter quotes a letter of Cosgrave’s from 1921, addressed to a fellow minister in Sinn Féin’s clandestine government, which expressed this viewpoint with glacial clarity:

People reared in workhouses, as you are aware, are no great acquisition to the community and they have no ideas whatever of civic responsibility. As a rule their highest aim is to live at the expense of the ratepayers. Consequently it would be a decided gain if they all took it into their heads to emigrate. When they go abroad they are thrown on their own responsibilities and have to work whether they like it or not.

The close attention paid to the social conflicts that coincided with the War of Independence is a notable feature of Ferriter’s work—and one respect in which his account is clearly superior to that of Charles Townsend, which does not give these questions as much space as they deserve. As Ferriter notes, trade union membership rose to 303,000 from a baseline of 110,000 in 1914. Sometimes the industrial struggle converged directly with the fight for independence, as in the cases of the general strike against conscription in 1918 or the short-lived Soviet declared by Limerick Trades Council the following year in protest against martial law. Often it simply took advantage of the opportunities presented by the breakdown of British rule in Ireland. With the Royal Irish Constabulary disintegrating under the pressure of IRA attacks and the official courts largely by-passed by Sinn Féin’s parallel system, employers could no longer rely on a functioning state machine to back up their position; the alternative republican state was little good as a substitute so long as it remained outside the law.

Knowing what we do now about the path that would be followed by the new Irish state, it may be difficult to credit the fear of social instability and working-class radicalism that haunted conservative minds at the time, but it shines through in the documentary record. In 1921, Sinn Féin’s minister for labour, Constance Markievicz, issued a brusque warning: ‘If a violent popular leader should emerge from among the disaffected workers it would be impossible to predict how far the trouble would develop.’ The same year, Sinn Féin’s propaganda sheet, the *Irish Bulletin*, bemoaned the spread of land agitation, especially in the impoverished western counties: ‘The mind of the people was being diverted from the struggle for freedom into a class war and there was even a possibility that the IRA, itself largely composed of farmers’ sons, might be affected.’ Although the Labour Party had given Sinn Féin a clear run in the 1918 general election, the republicans had been obliged to make a gesture towards the workers’ movement, in the form



of the Democratic Programme adopted by their rebel parliament in 1919. Ferriter quotes the well-known remark of Seán O'Faoláin that this social-democratic manifesto was 'listened to and discussed for precisely twenty minutes and fifty seconds, and then buried forever'. In the long run this would certainly prove to be the case, but there is good reason to doubt the claims later made by some of those who voted for the programme that it was never meant to be taken in earnest. Why, in that case, would they have found it necessary to water down a more radical first draft, prepared by Labour's Thomas Johnson, which included as one of its objectives 'the elimination of the class in society which lives upon the wealth produced by the workers of the nation but gives no useful service in return'? And why would Michael Collins have done his best to have the programme scrapped altogether? At a time of great social upheaval, Sinn Féin's leadership had to do something to keep organized labour on board, and to discourage it from making its own bid for leadership on the national stage. The subsequent fate of the Democratic Programme, which was just as O'Faoláin described it, shows the difference between a pragmatic gesture dictated by the balance of forces and a lasting ideological commitment.

To add to the sense of a social order under threat, a (weaker) challenge to the subordination of women had been posed by their involvement in both wings of the independence movement. There was an organization of republican women, Cumann na mBan, whose members took part in the Rising and the War of Independence as combatants—often diverted into secondary roles as nurses, couriers etc., but also bearing arms alongside the IRA's male Volunteers. Cumann na mBan's membership voted overwhelmingly against the Treaty, eliciting a torrent of outraged misogyny from the pro-Treaty camp; in correspondence with the Archbishop of Dublin, William Cosgrave referred to 'the prominent and destructive role played by women in the present deplorable revolt', while P. S. O'Hegarty devoted a whole chapter of his propaganda tract *The Victory of Sinn Féin* to the republican 'furies'. Female activists would subsequently be written out of the respectable history of the struggle. Ferriter quotes the official response to a veteran who had been shot during the Easter Rising while commanding a group of five men and was permanently disabled as a result: the body responsible for allocating pensions solemnly informed her that 'the definition of "wound" in Section 16 only contemplates the male gender.'

This acute fear of social turbulence—the belief that, as Kevin O'Higgins famously remarked, 'the ceasing of the bailiff to function is the first sign of a crumbling civilization'—helps explain why long-standing republican militants were willing to accept a settlement that fell a long way short of their original goals. It also sheds light on the ruthless efficiency with which they set about repressing the anti-Treaty forces after Michael Collins was goaded

into starting the conflict by pressure from Churchill and Lloyd George. As Ferriter notes, the seventy-seven executions of republican prisoners during the Civil War was fifty-three more than the British authorities had carried out during the War of Independence; there were also many random killings outside the Free State's gaols, including the notorious Ballyseedy massacre, when a group of prisoners were strapped to a land mine that was detonated by Free State troops. Some of this brutality stemmed from the fact that recently estranged comrades were now fighting each other; such conflicts tend to be especially bitter, regardless of ideology. But it also makes sense to view the implacable approach of the pro-Treaty camp to their opponents as a manifestation of their insecurity: threatened by working-class militancy as well as republican insurgents, the new state was determined to assert its authority in the most emphatic way possible.

This is not to claim that the Civil War was simply a class struggle by proxy. Many if not most of the anti-Treaty leadership were at best indifferent to the cause of labour; indeed, some IRA commanders saw little need for 'politics' at all, which helps explain their defeat. Much work remains to be done on the precise social composition of the two blocs. Ferriter cites regional studies by Peter Hart, Michael Farry and Marie Coleman which undermine the argument that support for the Treaty broke down along class lines, but that work has been questioned in turn by historians such as Gavin Foster. There is a large empirical gap here that will need to be filled by researchers. For all the nuance that can and should be added to the picture, it is worth recalling another comment made by Kevin O'Higgins, just after the Civil War ended, which Ferriter quotes: 'Here they had the decent, silent masses of the people, anxious to restore the nation's credit and, on the other side, they had the noisy, ignorant rabble, that could only shout and destroy instead of building up.' If we peel away the thick layers of social prejudice, it gives a clear sense of what men like O'Higgins thought was at stake in the conflict.

Ferriter's penultimate chapter has a rather unwieldy title—'Invoking Revolutionary Ghosts as the Celtic Tiger Dies and Fianna Fáil Collapses'—which shows that there is more than one way of reading the past in the light of the present. The economic crisis which has dominated Irish politics for the past eight years has provoked a slew of articles contrasting the hopes of the revolutionary generation with the performance of the Irish state since independence. Ferriter's brief commentary on this 'hankering after the ghosts of the past' does not say anything especially pointed about the current power-holders in Dublin; a quote from Michael Collins that he considers apposite—'we must not have state departments headed by a politician whose only qualification is that he has climbed to a certain rung on the political ladder'—merely regurgitates the saloon-bar wisdom of pundits who reckon that a few competent technocrats are what the country

needs. For the historian's take on the crisis and its aftermath, we must turn to his journalism.

Like many Irish public intellectuals, Ferriter appears to be keen on protest movements in the abstract, but not on the ones that actually materialize. In 2013, he suggested that future historians would 'contrast the wave of protests and mobilizations in other countries where incompetence and greed were exposed, with the absence of such activity in Ireland, even when the extent of the bankers' betrayal and contempt for their fellow citizens became public—'was there nothing that would bring the Irish to the barricades during the financial meltdown?' Over the past two years, the biggest social movement in a generation has developed in opposition to water charges. The working-class communities that supplied the great majority of the protesters had every reason to oppose the charges—transparently a scheme to prepare the water service for privatization and the lucrative opportunities it would present for cronies of the political elite—but the mobilization was also part of a much wider backlash against years of grinding austerity, taking advantage of the first opportunity to land a real blow. The charges have now been suspended, thanks not least to a mass campaign of non-payment. In line with the great majority of Irish newspaper columnists, Ferriter responded to this development with indignation, railing against the 'shameless populists' whose 'posturing and blather' had forced the government to retreat: 'What a tortuous business it is to develop a civic-minded Irish Republic.' His tirade will have delighted those who see the protesters as a selfish, undisciplined rabble, and for whom the task of constructing a 'civic-minded Irish Republic' is one that pits a courageous elite against the mass of Irish citizens. If we must choose between the 'shameless populism' of the water charges movement and the shameless elitism of the Irish commentariat, there is no doubt which holds greater promise for Ireland's future.