

FOUR HISTORIC YEARS

The Story of 1914–1918

How Ireland Made her Case Clear

The period from 1914 to 1918 is an important one in the struggle for Irish freedom. It was a transition period. It saw a wholesome and necessary departure from the ideas and methods which had been held and adopted for a generation, and it is a period which is misread by a great many of our people, even by some who helped that departure, and who helped to win the success we have achieved.

The real importance of the Rising of 1916 did not become apparent until 1918. It is not correct to say now that the assertion of the republican principle which was stated by the leaders of the Rising was upheld as the national policy without a break. The declaration of a Republic was really in advance of national thought, and it was only after a period of two years' propaganda that we were actually able to get solidarity on the idea.

The European War, which began in 1914, is now generally recognised to have been a war between two rival empires, an old one and a new, the new becoming such a successful rival of the old, commercially

and militarily, that the world-stage was, or was thought to be, not large enough for both.

Germany spoke frankly of her need for expansion, and for new fields of enterprise for her surplus population. England, who likes to fight under a high-sounding title, got her opportunity in the invasion of Belgium. She was entering the war "in defence of the freedom of small nationalities".

America at first looked on, but she accepted the motive in good faith, and she ultimately joined in as the champion of the weak against the strong. She concentrated attention upon the principle of "self-determination" and "the reign of law based upon the consent of the governed".

"Shall," asked President Wilson, "the military power of any nation, or group of nations, be suffered to determine the fortunes of peoples over whom they have no right to rule except the right of force?"

But the most flagrant instance of the violation of this principle did not seem to strike the imagination of President Wilson, and he led the American nation—peopled so largely by Irish men and women who had fled from British oppression—into the battle and to the side of that nation which for hundreds of years had "determined the fortunes" of the Irish people against their wish, and had ruled them, and was still ruling them, by no other right than the right of force.

There were created by the Allied Powers half-a-dozen new Republics as a demonstration of adherence to these principles. At the same time, England's military subjection of Ireland continued. And Ireland

was a nation with claims as strong as, or stronger than, those of the other small nations.

This subjugation constituted a mockery of those principles, yet the expression of them before the world as principles for which great nations were willing to pour out their blood and treasure gave us the opportunity to raise again our flag of freedom and to call the attention of the world to the denial of our claim.

We were not pro-German during the war any more than we were pro-Bulgarian, pro-Turk, or anti-French. We were anti-British, pursuing our age-long policy against the common enemy. Not only was this our policy, but it was the policy that any weak nation would have pursued in the same circumstances. We were a weak nation kept in subjection by a stronger one, and we formed and adopted our policy in light of this fact. We remembered that England's difficulty was Ireland's opportunity, and we took advantage of her engagement elsewhere to make a bid for freedom.

The odds between us were for the moment a little less unequal. Our hostility to England was the common factor between Germany and ourselves. We made common cause with France when France was fighting. We made common cause with Spain when Spain was fighting England. We made common cause with the Dutch when the Dutch were fighting England.

It so happened that on this occasion England had put a weapon into our hands against herself. The observation of the world was focused upon the mighty European War. We could call attention to the difference

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between England's principles as expounded to the world and her practice as against ourselves. We were put into the position of being able to force her to recognise our freedom or to oppress us for proclaiming that simple right.

Our position was our old position. Our aim was our old aim. Our intention was simply to secure liberation from the English occupation and that which it involved.

The Rising expressed our right to freedom. It expressed our determination to have the same liberty of choice in regard to our own destinies as was conceded to Poland or Czecho-Slovakia, or any other of the nations that were emerging as a result of the new doctrines being preached. The Republic which was declared at the Rising of Easter Week, 1916, was Ireland's expression of the freedom she aspired to. It was our way of saying that we wished to challenge Britain's right to dominate us.

Ireland wished to make it clear that she stood for a form of freedom equal to that of any other nation. Other nations claimed freedom, and their claims were conceded. Ireland's claim was no less strong than the claim of any nation. We had as good a right to recognition as Poland has. The position we adopted expressed our repudiation of the British government.

The British form of government was monarchical. In order to express clearly our desire to depart from all British forms, we declared a Republic. We repudiated the British form of government, not because it was monarchical, but because it was British. We would have repudiated the claim of a British Republic

to rule over us as definitely as we repudiated the claim of the British monarchy.

Our claim was to govern ourselves, and the expression of the form of government was an answer to the British lie that Ireland was a domestic question. It was a gesture to the world that there could be no confusion about. It was an emphasis of our separate nationhood and a declaration that our ultimate goal was and would continue to be complete independence.

It expressed our departure from the policy of parliamentary strategy at Westminster. That policy had failed, as it was bound to fail. It had two evils involved in it. While claiming rightly to be a distinct nation, we had been acquiescing by our actions in the convenient British doctrine that we were a British province and an integral part of the United Kingdom—an acquiescence which gave Mr. Lloyd George the opportunity to question our right to freedom because for over a hundred years, he said, we had sent representatives to Westminster, and soldiers to fight in every British war.

And it had the evil effect of causing our people to look to England for any ameliorative government, and even for the "gift" of an instalment of freedom, and away from their own country, from themselves, who alone could give to themselves these things. So we sank more and more into subjection during this period, and it was only by a great educational effort that our national consciousness was re-awakened.

We were to learn that freedom was to be secured by travelling along a different road; that instead of it

being possible for the English to bestow freedom upon us as a gift (or by means of any Treaty signed or unsigned) that it was their presence alone which denied it to us, and we must make that presence uncomfortable for them, and that the only question between us and them was the terms on which they would clear out and cease their interference with us.

But we started along the new road, the only one that could lead to freedom, at first with faltering steps, half doubtingly looking back at the old paths which had become familiar, where we knew the milestones at which we had been able to shift the burden from one shoulder to another.

The Easter Week Rising pointed out the road. But after that declaration of a Republic and all that it meant of repudiation of Britain, we lapsed into the old way, or took but uncertain steps upon the new one.

When the first by-election after the Rising took place in North Roscommon in 1917, so much had the Republic of Easter Week been forgotten and so little had its teachings yet penetrated to the minds of the people, that, though the candidate was Count Plunkett, whose son had been martyred after the Rising, he was returned only on the ground of his opposition to the Irish Party candidate.

Abstention from attendance at the British Parliament was the indispensable factor in the republican ideal—the repudiation of foreign government. But it was only after his election that the Count declared his intention not to go to Westminster, and the announcement was not received very enthusiastically by some of the most energetic of his supporters.

They had returned a man, it was said, "who did not intend to represent them anywhere". Not only the people, but even some who had been engaged in the Rising hardly grasped the new teaching.

This election and others which followed were not won on the policy of upholding a Republic, but on the challenge it made to the old Irish Party.

There was at this stage no unity of opinion on the policy of abstention among the various elements which formed the opposition, which were joined together only on opposition to the Redmondites. At what was known as "the Plunkett Convention" an effort was made to get all the parts of the opposition united on such a policy but the divergence of opinion was so great that, to avoid a split, it was declared that there should be no greater union than a loose co-operation.

The North Roscommon and the South Longford elections were fought on the basis of this agreement, and there was no definite united policy until the merging of all the sectional organisations with *Sinn Féin* which occurred just prior to the great *Árd-Fheis* of 1917.

At the South Longford election Mr. Joe McGuinness, who was then still in penal servitude, was elected on the cry: "Put him in to get him out." Abstention was put forward, but was so little upheld that he was returned with a majority of only 27.

At the East Clare election, though Mr. de Valera put forward the abstentionist policy and was elected by a large majority, he issued no election address, and at the three elections which followed in South Armagh,

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Waterford, and East Tyrone, the abstentionists were defeated.

But the people were becoming educated, and the union of all the various sects and leagues in the big organisation of *Sinn Féin*, as we have seen, defined the national policy as definitely abstentionist.

The Republic of Easter Week had not lived on, as is supposed, supported afresh at each election, and endorsed finally in the General Election of 1918. But the people grew to put their trust in the new policy, and to believe that the men who stood for it would do their best for Ireland, and at the General Election of 1918, fought on the principle of self-determination, they put them in power.

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