

The effect of the Irish Rebellion 1916 on the Southern Irish Minority by Leslie E. Blennerhassett

ORIGINS

Who were the Protestant Minority and what had they do with the Irish Ascendancy. The term Ascendancy originated from the Anglican Protestant Ascendancy of the 18th c. when Roman Catholics and Dissenters were initially debarred from all share in government and suffered many disabilities leaving an Anglican Protestant aristocracy with a monopoly of power and privilege.

To quote ^{Blennerhassett} Maconville they happened to include such people as the "The Earl of Bandon, Sir Robert Lynch-Bloss, and plain Mr. Blennerhassett of Riddlesstown; -they and others like them together with their relations. constituted what was known as the Ascendancy." It continued to be known as the Ascendancy long after it had been ceased to be in the ascendent. With the repeal of the anti Catholic Penal laws - a gradual process which started in 1778 and ended with full Catholic Emancipation in 1829- the Ascendancy was now combined with Roman Catholic Landowners who took their place alongside their Protestant neighbours in Parliament on the Bench of magistrates and on the Grand Jury which managed the affairs of the county. The nineteenth century Ascendancy now included Catholics, though very few, as well as Protestants. In county Kerry in 1879. the queens representative for Kerry, her majesty's lieutenant was the Roman Catholic Earl of Kenmare and among the 16 deputies were 4 Catholics including the grandson and nephew of Daniel O'Connell. These were to be labelled by the more fervent nationalist political detractors as Castle Catholics.

This Protestant majority of the Ascendancy was not as many would imagine, descended exclusively from English land grabbers who came over with Cromwell, and Presbyterian lowland Scots who settled under James 1. Though the families of English and Scots settler stocks together constituted the largest group in the Ascendancy, and did not amount to more than 60 percent. of the total but of this number only 10 percent were of Cromwellian origin. The rest of of the settler families which included Huguenots, and Palatines were established in Ireland at different periods from the 16th century onwards. The Earls of Rosse, the Bartons and the Blennerhassetts were all descended from settlers of the time of Elizabeth 1.

Less than 40 percent of the Ascendancy families were of old Celtic-Irish or Anglo Norman stock but this minority included "Lord Dunsany (Plunkett), Baron Roche of Fermoy, The FitzGerald, Dukes of Leinster and the Butlers, Marquesses of Ormonde, heads of historic Anglo Norman families. The Marquess of Waterford had inherited the estates in the female line. The Powers were Norman barons who became more Irish than the Irish. His kinsman John de la Poer was Catholic, and though only a major refused to use the title of his father who had inherited the title of Papal Count and lived at Gurteen ie Poer. He was more interested in inheriting an ancient title of the Barony of le Poer and Coroghmore. Among the Anglo Normans were the de Burgs, whose descendants included the Marquess of Clanricarde and the Earl of Mayo, as well as Mr. Burke of Danesfield. Lord Inchquin was descended from the O'Brien, High Kings, Arthur Macmurrough Cavanagh from the Macmurroughs, Kings of Leinster, and the Earl of Dunravin from the O'Quins.

Some nationalists have been more liable to brand the Ascendancy as West British while English writers have tended to use the term Anglo Irish. However one would not necessarily think of calling a Scottish laird as being Anglo Scottish despite his allegiance to the British monarch. Sean O'Faolin was one of the first to use the term.

The Ascendancy were an unusual colonial caste that for little more than two hundred years out of 5000 during which Ireland had been inhabited dominated the ordering of of the islands affairs. To quote Maconville- "the Anglo Irish exercised the authority delegated to them from London with a haphazard mixture of arrogance, high mindedness, insensitivity, selfishness elegance venality charity devotion to duty cruelty clear headedness kindness and political myopia. They governed Ireland usually not very well, sometimes abominably badly and in some respects better than the present generation of Irishman gives them credit for." Again to quote Maconville "The domestic legacy of the Ascendancy is often one of political and racial resentment, much of it formalised and unjustified- its origins ill understood. It bequeathed an infra structure of cities towns, roads and railways and a parliamentary democracy, also some superb georgian architecture, cultural and educational establishments like Trinity College, Dublin, the Royal Irish Academy and the Royal Dublin society the equal of any, anywhere"

How loyal were the loyalists?

Between 1912 and 1922 Irish politics were transformed by a host of new organisations- e.g the national and Irish volunteers (later the Irish Republican army), Sinn Fein, and Cumann na Ban. the Ulster constabulary, and the national army, the Irish Transport and General Workers Union and the Labour party. Vast unprecedented numbers

gave their names, money, time and votes, freedom or their lives for the causes these groups represented. Not so the Protestant men of Leinster, Connacht and Munster. This set them apart from their co religionists in Ulster and the three Ulster counties in the free state, thousands of whom joined the the Ulster Volunteer force in 1913 -1914 and in self defence associations and the Ulster Special Constabulary.

During the troubles, John Henry Bernard , the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin stated that the Unionist Protestants in the South never resorted to arms to support their political opinions. It could be argued that the British Army was their protection, never the less, they chose not to defend themselves as a potent political or social entity. During World War 1, Southern Protestants were no more willing to sacrifice themselves for Britain than their Catholic neighbours. Ulster enlistment far outstripped the Southern part. It was equal among Catholics and Protestants. Occupation not religion determined the enlistment, it was not the World War that blighted Southern Protestants but what came after. Over 250, 000 Irish men enlisted and an estimated fifty thousand died both Catholic and Protestant during World War 1.

Protestant Decline

In 1920 one quarter of the population were Protestant in all Ireland amounting to 1.1 million. Of these only a few were substantially landed Protestant gentry that for generations had inter married with one another, with the better born Catholic Irish and with the English aristocracy. They supplied the Empire and Ireland with soldiers, politicians, statesmen. To quote Yeats in his speech to the Senate on divorce, the Southern Minority provided Ireland with most of its political and literary intelligence. Many of the landed ascendancy resided in Munster and Connacht where Protestants formed an extreme minority of 2.6 and 3.6 percent respectively. The rest of the Free State was made up of the inhabitants of the 3 counties of Ulster that had been included in the the State where they constituted 18.2 per cent of the population, namely Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal. Many of these Protestants were small and medium sized farmers.

In Leinster much of the Protestants were involved in business. In Rathmines and Rathgar in 1926 the population amounted to 33.2 percent and in Greystones to 57.4 percent. in Dublin there were about 92,328 Protestants and they composed 16 per cent of the white collar and manual workforce. Poverty incidentally was not confined to only Catholics. The role of charitable and church institutions in dealing with the Dublin poor was also marked at times by virulent denominational struggles between Roman Catholic and Protestant charities in the battle for the souls and bodies of the poorest slum dwellers. to quote Jacinta Prunty, a historical geographer

The largest number of Protestants were in Ulster. They were a separate case. The plantations of James 1 had left them in possession of large contiguous blocks of land with towns that were entirely Protestant. They were mainly lowland Scots. The massacres of 1641 by the native Irish Catholics had eaten deep into their collective memory. Most were Presbyterian or Dissenters. The majority of the large landowners were, however, almost to a man, members of the Anglican Church of Ireland and were indistinguishable from their Southern Irish contemporaries. The tenants as Protestants were given security of tenure denied to Catholics known as the 'Ulster Custom'. The arrangement was beneficial to the hard working tenants and their landlord, If the Southern Irish Ascendancy had the wit to adapt this more humane tenure to their Roman Catholic tenants in the south an enormous sum of human misery would have been avoided and perhaps the ultimate extinction of the Anglo Irish as an influence of any significance upon Irish affairs might have been at least been moderated.

The Troubles

Protestant experiences of the 1916 rebellion ranged from massacre and flight to occasional inconvenience and indifference and from outraged opposition to enthusiastic indifference. In the small troubled district of Kilbrittain in West Cork - a hot zone of republicanism and extreme violence, the conflict could mean radically different things to different people.

Dorothy Stopford had a good revolution. A recent graduate of TCD she spent 1921 and 1922 as a dispensary doctor in Kilbrittain. As a pipe smoking woman wearing riding breeches and an eye glass , she caused a minor sensation. But neither her politics (Republican) nor her religion (Church of Ireland) prevented here from getting along with her neighbours. To the local republican activists her Protestantism was merely a curiosity, she said "*I sternly refuse all efforts to be converted (to Roman Catholicism) and say I prefer to go to hell- Then they (the Republicans) all exclaim that they know its wrong but that they can not believe that I will go to hell-We have great sport !"*

For John Bolster Barrett, also living in Kilbrittain the same period was one of relenting fear. "*I have to sleep many nights in the open, sometimes unable to protect myself from rain and cold, I was unable to get provisions from my house except by long secretive journeys to loyal shops in Bandon. Many of my friends and neighbours of the same political adherence were murdered*

in West Cork some in their beds, a few more shot on the way to and from Bandon whither they had gone for food."

Peter Hart in his research in Co.Cork revealed that the IRA deliberately shot over 200 citizens of whom 70 percent were Protestants. Between 1911 and 1926, the Protestant population fell by 34 percent. To put this in context over the same period the Catholic population in Ulster fell by 2 percent and the Protestant population rose by 2 percent. So this catastrophic loss was unique to the Southern Protestant minority. Between 1911 and 1926 the Protestant population fell from 327,000 to 221,000. This was of course not a decline but an exodus. Almost all of the people who left did so between 1921 and 1924 in a sudden mass upheaval and not all were Protestants- many were Roman Catholic families. There was a minor refugee crisis in Britain. The motives for the murder of many of the minority was based on their perceived threat or Unionists allegiances or their religion. Michael Collins and the provisional army had less than satisfactory military control.

From the winter of 1920 onwards thousands of men spent nights away from home, sleeping in barns or fields. Whilst IRA volunteers were going on the run from their enemies, these people were on the run from the IRA. The people who left did not do so lightly, as remarkable as the number who left were the numbers who stayed or returned.

17 former Unionists were given seats as Senators. The Nobel prize winner and nationalist poet, William Butler Yeats was also a Senator. There was scope for Protestants to become members of the government in the South and this tradition was carried out in Kerry relatively recently where my cousin, John Blennerhassett was appointed a Senator in the 1970's. The Protestants nevertheless were very insecure and previously there was the remarkable spectacle of a delegation of Protestants dispatched from the General Synod on the 12th May 1922 to wait on Michael Collins to enquire "if they were permitted to live in Ireland or if it was desired that they should leave the country." Collins gave them a firm assurance that they were welcome to stay. It brought back 18th century United Irishmen traditions where Dissenter, Protestant and Catholic alike were regarded as equal.

Between 1921 and 1922, 192 houses of the Ascendancy were burnt. It was part of a political military strategy that many were supporters of the Treaty party, (Michael Collins party). Elizabeth Bowen echoed the isolation in the *Last September*. She is tough minded and ironic about the plight of her ilk and how they largely contributed to their own downfall. Edith Somerville, a supporter of the Treaty party wrote the *Memoirs of an Irish Resident Magistrate* as well as other classics including the *Great Charlotte*. As a member of the Ascendancy she pleaded with the British Government in a letter to *The Times* to spare the lives of the rebels of 1916 as she foresaw the dreadful consequences that would follow also ending the possibility of a united Country with Home Rule.

Aftermath of the 1916 Rising

After the 1916 rising, It might have been expected that Catholic nationalist conservatism which dominated Irish society in the decade of the the Irish Free State's history would have met with significant political opposition from two sources e.g. from the forces of organised labour and from the ranks of the protestant minority in the Free State. Sean O Casey similar to Bertolt Brecht, James Connolly and Jim Larkin, kindred socialists, and political secularists like Michael Collins, were either dead, banned or had left the country. O Casey had been a thorn in the flesh as indeed were other writers but a lot of their work had been banned. There were no large predominantly urban proletariat in the South which was mainly in the North.

By 1922 the events of the preceding decade had rendered that once spirited an assured ruling caste nervously defeatist and impotent. Protestants were seen as an ethnic minority. Terence Brown stated "*Ideologically apart from a few individuals in the Celtic revival they made little effort to comprehend the nationalist cause, a dismissive contemptuousness had often reflected the offensive blend of insecurity and caste snobbery that characterised them and it was a fairly common place Protestant reactions to Irish nationalism*". The Irish Irelander movement by turn had not hesitated to reply in kind proposing a theory of Irish nationality that denied full spiritual communion with the Irish nation to the colonising landed Anglo Irishman with his apparently English accent, manner and loyalties and his Protestant faith. They were regarded as Anglo Irish and as strangers in their own land. This was not aided by the draconian loss in population following the rebellion of 1916. The urban Southern Protestants in Dublin were more easily assimilated and less of an affront to nationalists sympathies.

William Butler Yeats

Yeats was a fringe member of the Ascendancy and also a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and his mentor was John O'Leary. Yeats was an iconic Nationalist influence. He wrote *Cathleen ni Houlihan* in 1902, amongst other numerous poems and plays. *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was probably the most powerful piece of nationalist propaganda that has ever been made and partly initiated the ideology of self sacrifice followed by Patrick Pearse, Maude Gonne and others. This play was written mainly to shoo up Yeats's credentials as an Irish Protestant Nationalist and to combat Irish Irelanders about his lack of nationalist credibility as a Protestant.

Ironically the play was to haunt him as he realised after the 1916 rising - *a terrible beauty was born!* Maud Gonne, not without some justification claimed *"without Yeats there would have been no Literary Revival and the glorification of beauty and heroic virtue, I doubt if there would have been an Easter Week."* On Easter week he wrote the definitive lines, perhaps the most remarkable Irish poem of that time,

Easter 1916

*I write it out in verse-
MacDonagh and MacBride
and Conolly and Pearse
now and in time to be,
wherever green is worn,
are changed. utterly:
a terrible beauty is born.*

Religious and social divide

Protestants continued to make further troubles for themselves by their own social divisions. The poet Geoffrey Phibbs who came from a land owning background, despised Yeats because his family were in trade. Phibbs was later to be a friend of the writer, Frank O'Connor (Michael O' Donovan was his real name) whom he readily accepted despite Phibbs natural contempt of the educated man for the self educated! The only job that O'Connor had having been released from internment was with a Protestant primary head teacher who told him *'All clergy men are the same, Mr, O' Donovan Catholic Church of Ireland or Presbyterian you can never trust any of them!*

The two Irish Protestants most prominent in the Rising were Roger Casement and Countess Markievicz who were both later to convert to Catholicism. In May 1918, Mrs Kathleen Clarke, Tom Clarke's widow was taken to England to Holloway prison where she was locked up with two converts Countess Markievicz and Maude Gonne both of whom dignified themselves with the title Madam. Whilst walking around the prison yard they argued about their status. Madam Markievicz claimed she was far above Madam MacBride (nee Maude Gonne) as she belonged to the inner circle of the Vice-Regal, Dublin Castle set while Madam MacBride was only on the fringe of it. The ladies Catholicism did not impress Mrs Clarke. Catholics, if they were Republicans, as Conor Cruise O'Brien has pointed out, *"would see such conversions simply as further establishing what very decent friendly Protestants these people were"*. Mrs Clarke was pressed to feel her inferiority when Madam Markievicz *"did talk to me in those early days. I sensed a certain patronage in her tone and manner - It appeared to worry her so much that the British were a blundering race of fools to arrest someone like me!"* When she was about to be released Mrs Clarke stated she was Irish and how could people of English descent feel the same hostility towards England as I do. Constance Markievicz died in 1928 in the public ward of St Vincents at the age of 52. The Free State government who imprisoned her as they did Maude Gonne refused to give her a state funeral.

Others Protestants who desired to to be associated with the new Ireland Edith Somerville of her ancestry said *"I don't mind if you say British, if you like, but the only trickle of English blood comes from one marriage, my family had eaten Irish food and shared Irish life for nearly 300 years and if that doesn't make me Irish I might as well say I was Scotch Norman or Pre diluvian. but she was not, however prepared, to becoming Catholic!"*

The nationalist Lady Gregory who did not flaunt her nationalist beliefs but remained staunchly Protestant. she symbolised the fading Ascendancy. O'Casey paid her a visit to Coole in 1923. He came from the opposite end of the Protestant spectrum. He was not made welcome by the maid who opened the front door. *"Great playwright, I'll give him great playwright. What right, at all, has a man like that to come into Coole without a tie on his collar— nor a collar on his shirt!"* He was offered tips on table manners by the well meaning host. who did it so that O'Casey stay would be more comfortable and and also apparently it made things easier for him to eat!

Regarding the class divisions prevalent at the time A E Russell, a big burly N I Presbyterian, and playwright, spent 25 years behind the counter of Pims where he became a manager before working for Sir Horace Plunkett in the Co Operative creamery movement. Like in England, his place in society was ambivalent because he had been in trade! In the twilight of of their power the minority were absorbed with snobbery, Writing about her status in the Lady's child, Enid Starkie recalled *"to be a lady's child did not depend on on the size of one father's income and I believe it was very difficult to qualify for this rank if one family was implicated in trade"*

That much of Dublin's businesses was in the hands of Protestants did not help them socially, Beatrice Eivery was ostracised by upper class Foxrock. Other families like the Becketts and the Orpens escaped the awful stigma. The

painter William Orpens felt very much at home in his adopted Gerrards Cross in England. The stifling bourgeois respectability of middle class Foxrock drove Beckett to imitate Synge and go into the Dublin mountains in search of down and outs and tramps.

There was the position of the Castle Catholics - Enid Starkie hated going to children's parties at Dublin Castle. Her family was Catholic as a result of a mixed marriage. Her father, an admirable and enlightened Minister of Education was an unusual man who ignored the Republican gunfire which could be heard in Blackrock while he sat in his garden reading Pliny's letters.

For many Catholics, Protestants carried a social disdain as Brian Inglis pointed out in his book *West Briton* "where Prods. were very definitely above you, snooty and potatoish in their speech. He said of the protestants in Malahide spoke U-English and only cultivated an Irish accent to tell Irish jokes."

Inclusion and Exclusion

On July 1924 the deputy grand master of the Orange lodge in Monaghan "now that we are living under a the new government we are all determined to do the best we can to support it." They became dutiful citizens of the new State unlike many of the harassed Catholic minority in the North. Protestant small farmers and shopkeepers strove to find a place in the new order. The future Anglican Dean Griffin of St Patricks belonged to this sizable and often forgotten group, His father was a grocer in Carnew, Co Carlow. His family were on good terms with his Catholic neighbours. Others sensitive matters were avoided particularly Religion and politics which was part of the the Southern Protestant hidden *manifesto*, He had no doubts about his Irish identify despite the crisis of the political identity of the Ascendancy. The Protestant minority may have secretly regretted the the political separation from the United Kingdom. There was a need for caution and stay low and do not draw too much attention. He remembers his mother warning him say clear of religion and politics. It was a question of acceptance -either clear out or shut up! They always felt they were Irish but not Catholic Irish as Protestantism was as fundamental to their psyche as was Roman Catholicism was to the majority.

The Ne temere Papal decree on mixed marriages stated that children should be brought up as Catholics in a mixed marriage. This had a marked effect on the Protestant population. It was stated at the Assembly hall in Belfast, prior to Irish Independence, this would cause bitterness and sectarian hatred which it did. Outside the Catholic church there was no salvation, hence the term *Rome Rule is Home Rule* for many Protestants. There were prejudices on both sides *You'r a proper little Protestant* would be said when a baby was crying in mass. Patrick Campbell, Lord Glenavy came from a Protestant home where Catholicism and all its work were condemned,- "*the bottomless squalor of Roman Catholic superstition*" -his father would half say in jest.

James Joyce was made aware of the sectarian divide when he was warned by his teacher, Hearn Conway that he would go to hell for playing with his playmate, Eileen Vance who was a Protestant. She was known as Dante and was later to be portrayed in the *Portrait* as a 'spoiled nun'.

When a boy, Sean O Casey questioned his mother "*but we are not really Irish ma not really not Irish*". His mother "of course we are Irish, what on earth put it into your head that we weren't Irish. Young Casey replied "One day an us playing Kelly told me that us Catholics were really Irish an as we're Protestants we couldn't anyway near be Irish. His mother "the ignorant cheeky little Roman Catholic scut- if your poor father was alive he 'd show you in books solid arguments that St Patrick was really Protestant as Protestant can be!

A story related to Somerville Large by a Catholic man who happened to be from West Cork, who said, that though Protestants remained apart they were often trusted more than their fellow Catholics. Nevertheless, they were seen as outsiders not truly Irish -in the nation but not of it. To be Irish was meant being Roman Catholic, Nationalist, Gaelic and anti -English. In the North their co- religionists observed the decline of their Southern Protestants The Protestant community as a whole opted out of the political scene with this passive almost subservient attitude. This had an unfortunate effect on the Roman Catholic community and the Northern Protestants. There was a rare case of boycotting of Protestant shop in Fethard in 1957 when a Protestant wife of a Catholic husband insisted on bringing up her children in the local Protestant school. On a lighter note David Norris later to be a senator and a leading gay right activist stated "*growing up as Protestant, I was never greatly troubled but it was far more problematic being a poof.*"

Conclusion

On a more tragic note of Irish history of which there were many, in his book, *The IRA at War*, Professor Peter Hart . "All of the nightmares images of ethnic conflict in the 20th century are here, the massacres and anonymous death squads, the burning homes and churches , the mass expulsions and trains filled with refugees, the transformation of lifelong neighbours into enemies, the conspiracies theories and the terminology of hatred. Munster, Leinster Connacht can take their place with fellow imperial provinces, Silesia, Galicia and Bosnia as part of the post war un mixing of peoples in Europe. We must not exaggerate. The Free state government had no part in in this persecution. Cork was not Smyrna, nor Belfast. Nevertheless sectarianism was embedded in the vocabulary and the syntax of of the Irish revolution, North and South. Any accounting of its violence and consequences must encompass the dreary steeples of Bandon and Ballinasloe as well as those of Fermanagh and Tyrone".

Future

The Protestant community in Southern Ireland ended the century more confidently even though their population was only 3.4 per cent of the recorded total in 1981 down from 10 per cent in 1911. Ten years later there were only 90,000 Church of Ireland members in the Republic from the early 1970's. 30 percent of marriages were to Roman Catholics which is less relevant today as Southern Ireland was becoming a more pluralist and less sectarian society.

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