

**'The god of our small world'**  
**Art O'Brien and Irish nationalism in**  
**London, 1900-1925**

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Submitted for award of PhD

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## DECLARATION

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of PhD is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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## Abbreviations

ACM	Ard-Choiste minutes
ACS	<i>An Claidheamh Soluis</i>
AÓBP	Art Ó Briain papers
<i>AtÉ</i>	<i>An tÉireannach</i>
BMH	Bureau of Military History
CAB	Cabinet minutes
CBS	Crime Branch Special Records
<i>CE</i>	<i>Cork Examiner</i>
CnaG	Conradh na Gaeilge
CO	Colonial Office
CRIM	Criminal records
CSO	Chief Secretary's Office
DDA	Dublin Diocesan Archives
DE	Dáil Éireann
DEA	Department of External Affairs
DFA	Department of Foreign Affairs
<i>DIB</i>	<i>Dictionary of Irish Biography</i>
DMP	Dublin Metropolitan Police
DT	Department of An Taoiseach
<i>FHJ</i>	<i>Faraday House Journal</i>
FIN	Department of Finance
<i>FJ</i>	<i>Freeman's Journal</i>
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
GLL	Gaelic League of London

GSL	Gaelic Society of London
HO	Home Office
<i>IE</i>	<i>Irish Exile</i>
IET	Institute of Engineering and Technology, London
<i>IF</i>	<i>Inis Fáil</i>
IFL	Irish Freedom League
IFS	Irish Free State
<i>II</i>	<i>Irish Independent</i>
ILS	Irish Literary Society
IMA	Irish Military Archives
INAA	Irish National Aid Association
INAAVDF	Irish National Aid and Volunteer Dependents' Fund
INC	Irish National Club, London
INRF	Irish National Relief Fund, London
<i>IP</i>	<i>Irish Press</i>
IPP	Irish Parliamentary Party
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IRB	Irish Republican Brotherhood
ISDL	Irish Self-Determination League of Great Britain
<i>IT</i>	<i>Irish Times</i>
MEPO	London Metropolitan Police
MP	Member of Parliament
MSP	Military Service Pensions Collection
NAI	National Archives of Ireland
NLI	National Library of Ireland
NPA	National Photographic Archive (Ireland)



<i>ODNB</i>	<i>Oxford National Dictionary of Biography</i>
PA	Parliamentary Archives, London
RROUK	Reports on revolutionary activity in the United Kingdom
SDA	Southwark Diocesan Archives
TCDA	Trinity College Dublin Archives
TNA	The National Archives, London
UCDA	University College Dublin Archives
VDF	Volunteer Dependents' Fund
WDA	Westminster Diocesan Archives
WO	War Office
WS	Witness Statement to Bureau of Military History

## ABSTRACT

**Author:** Mary MacDiarmada

**Thesis title:** 'The god of our small world': Art O'Brien and Irish nationalism in London, 1900-1925.

This thesis uses the life of Art O'Brien (1872-1949) as a central axis on which to construct an analysis of Irish nationalism in London from 1900 to 1925. Born and reared in London, O'Brien became a leading member of the Gaelic League, Sinn Féin, the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Irish Self-Determination League of Great Britain. His career as an electrical engineer placed him at the centre of the London business milieu and he was a key mobiliser of the Irish community. Appointed London envoy of Dáil Éireann in 1919, he was a close confidant of Michael Collins throughout the War of Independence. He was also a mediator in various peace initiatives during 1920 and 1921 and introduced de Valera to Lloyd George at their first meeting in July 1921. Following O'Brien's rejection of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, he became embroiled in various financial disputes and suffered a spectacular fall from grace. He has been a neglected figure in the historiography of the Irish revolution and the Irish in Britain. Based on rigorous research of British and Irish archives, Irish language material and privately held papers, this thesis argues that O'Brien made a vital contribution to the prosecution of the Irish revolution by co-ordinating prisoner relief and finance for gun-running, and by instigating a major propaganda campaign in favour of Irish independence. The dissertation demonstrates how a benign cultural nationalism gave way to militant activity for a small number of London enthusiasts who were galvanised by O'Brien. The importance of individual leadership rather than the influence of a movement is highlighted. This is the first comprehensive study of a London-based activist of the Irish revolution and also makes a significant contribution to the yet sparse historiography of leading second rank activists.

## NOTES ON IRISH LANGUAGE TERMINOLOGY

1. Art O'Brien/Art Ó Briain. O'Brien used both the English and Irish forms of his name interchangeably but was most commonly known in London as O'Brien. The English form is used in this thesis for ease of reading.

2. The spelling of the Irish language was standardised for the first time in 1945 prior to which the spelling of a particular word could vary. For example, the word 'conradh' for league was also written as 'conradh' and the Irish for 'London' was sometimes 'Lúnnduin' or 'Londain'. Where material is quoted directly from sources in this thesis the spellings have been left as they appeared in the original document.

3. Frequently-used Irish language terms:

Ard-Choiste                      Executive committee (Gaelic League of London)

Coiste Gnótha                      Executive committee (Gaelic League in Ireland)

Conradh na Gaeilge      Gaelic League

*An tÉireannach*              *The Irishman*

4. In the bibliography dates and place of publication are given in Irish for articles and books published in the Irish language.



**Art O'Brien in 1921**

(NLI, MS 49625/1)



**Staff of the London Office of Dáil Éireann, n.d. [c. early 1922]**

Front Row L to R: Liam Moore, Fintan Murphy, Art O'Brien, C. B. Dutton.

Back Row L to R: Seán Molloy, Maeve O'Brien, Paddy Codyre.

(NLI, National Photographic Archive, POLF 215)



**Art O'Brien, Irish Minister to France, presenting his credentials at the  
Élysée Palace, 29 July 1935**

On left, M. Pierre de Fouquières.  
(NLI, National Photographic Archive, POLF 214)

## Introduction

On 4 July 1923 Art O'Brien was convicted of seditious conspiracy against the Irish Free State at the Old Bailey in London and sentenced to two years imprisonment as a result of his support for the anti-Treaty IRA. The judge described O'Brien as 'the rallying point, the central figure, the presiding genius of the whole republican movement in Britain — the alter ego of de Valera, the chief in Ireland'.<sup>1</sup> This description barely scratched the surface of O'Brien's extensive curriculum vitae. O'Brien (1872-1949) was the doyen of Irish nationalism in London and the leading activist in the prosecution of the Irish revolution there. An electrical engineer by profession with a lucrative consultancy business, he chose to spend all his spare time in the pursuit of Irish-Ireland activities. He became leader of the Gaelic League and Sinn Féin in London, was central to gun-running and prisoner relief operations in London from 1915 to 1921, and established the Irish Self-Determination League of Great Britain in 1919 at de Valera's request. Appointed London envoy of Dáil Éireann in 1919, he gave up his engineering career and became a key enabler for Michael Collins during the War of Independence; they corresponded on a daily basis. He was also a mediator in several peace initiatives in late 1920 and early 1921, and was a confidant of de Valera in the lead-up to the Treaty negotiations. In addition, O'Brien found time to advise several other non-Irish nationalist movements in London. His rejection of the Treaty was absolute, however, and this led him down a path which culminated in his Old Bailey appearance.

Despite his significant contribution to the Irish revolution, to date there has been no biographical assessment of O'Brien. This is all the more surprising given the extensive use which historians have made of his papers in the National Library of Ireland — the Art Ó Briain collection. More significantly, there has been no detailed examination of Irish nationalism in London from 1900 to 1925.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Irish Independent* (hereafter *II*), 5 July 1923.

<sup>2</sup> Darragh Gannon has studied Irish nationalism in Britain in the later period, 1917 to 1921, but access to his doctorate is closed pending the publication of a monograph.

This thesis remedies these historiographical gaps. Using the life of Art O'Brien as a central axis, it constructs an in-depth analysis of Irish nationalism in London from 1900 to 1925. This is the first comprehensive examination of a key republican in London and offers the first analysis of the entire span of experience for O'Brien and his colleagues from the early days of the Gaelic League through to post-Treaty disaffection. Thus, instead of studying a particular movement such as the Gaelic League, the GAA, the IRB or the IRA in isolation, this dissertation analyses the multi-faceted and complex networks with which O'Brien was involved over a quarter century. The thesis assesses Irish nationalism in the context of life as it was actually lived in London from a political, social, religious and cultural perspective. It also assesses the impact of the First World War, the rise of the British Labour Party and the existence of many other nationalist movements in London. The key research questions focus on understanding O'Brien's remarkable journey from pillar of the British business community to London mastermind of the Irish revolution. What was the role of cultural nationalism in a diasporic context? What were the key influences which pushed O'Brien into militarism and once committed what contribution did he and his London colleagues make in terms of arms, propaganda and prisoner support? What was his role during the Truce and the Treaty and how can his rejection of the Treaty be explained? How did O'Brien respond to the Irish Free State (IFS) and what were the contours of anti-Treaty activity in London? None of these issues have been addressed in detail by historians to date and this thesis, therefore, adds significantly to the very limited historiography of the London contribution to the Irish revolution.

The life of O'Brien and the contribution of London to the revolution have evaded historical analysis for various reasons. First, as Niall Whelehan has observed, accounts of the Irish revolution have typically adopted local or national frameworks.<sup>3</sup> Understandably, the standard survey histories tend not to stray into analysis of the role of the British diaspora in the Irish revolution.<sup>4</sup> More specific histories of the revolution such as Michael Hopkinson's *The Irish War of Independence* and Charles

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<sup>3</sup> Niall Whelehan, 'The Irish revolution, 1912-23' in Alvin Jackson (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of modern Irish history* (Oxford, 2017), p. 635.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland since the famine* (London, 1971); R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972* (London, 1988); J. J. Lee, *Ireland, 1912-1985: politics and society* (Cambridge, 1989); Diarmaid Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000* (Dublin, 2004).



Townshend's *Easter 1916: the Irish rebellion* and *The Republic: the fight for Irish independence* refer to the role of the Irish in Britain but only in so far as it is essential to the narrative of the revolution in Ireland.<sup>5</sup> Peter Hart's article 'Operations abroad: the IRA in Britain, 1919-1923' was the first to analyse and attempt to quantify military support from Britain, while Gerard Noonan's *The IRA in Britain, 1919-1923* gives a much more comprehensive account and confirms the need to factor its role into an overall assessment of the Irish revolution.<sup>6</sup> The focus in both works, however, is on militarism and on the period *after* 1916. Biographies of Michael Collins have, of course, given accounts of the London milieu of Irish nationalism from 1906 to 1916.<sup>7</sup> This thesis builds on this work, particularly with the use of the Bureau of Military History witness statements, which were not available to Collins's biographers. In other studies, Irish nationalism in the period 1900-1916 is only briefly mentioned as part of wider accounts of the life of the Irish in Britain.<sup>8</sup> Some brief references to those who came to Dublin from London to take part in the 1916 rising occur in Roy Foster's *Vivid faces* and in *The Kimmage garrison* by Ann Matthews but there is no significant analysis of background or motivational factors.<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, the absence of O'Brien in the historiography may be the product of his falling out with both sides after the Treaty. Early accounts of the revolution were written by participants or by ideologues committed to one side or the other.<sup>10</sup> Despite being a daily correspondent of Collins throughout the War of Independence and a key confidant of de Valera in 1921, O'Brien does not feature in Piaras Béaslaí's biography of Collins, nor does he merit more than a few mentions in passing in Dorothy

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Hopkinson, *The Irish War of Independence* (Dublin, 2002); Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: the Irish rebellion* (London, 2006) and *The Republic: the fight for Irish independence* (London, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Peter Hart, 'Operations abroad: the IRA in Britain, 1919-23', *English Historical Review*, 115:460 (Feb. 2000), pp 71-102; Gerard Noonan, *The IRA in Britain, 1919-1923* (Liverpool, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Peter Hart, *Mick: the real Michael Collins* (London, 2005), pp 21-73; Tim Pat Coogan, *Michael Collins* (London, 1991), pp 15-39; Margery Forester, *Michael Collins: the lost leader* (London, 1971), pp 18-33; Piaras Béaslaí, *Michael Collins and the making of a new Ireland* (2 vols, Dublin, 1926), pp 9-17.

<sup>8</sup> See for instance David Fitzpatrick, 'A curious middle place: the Irish in Britain, 1871-1921', in Roger Swift and Sheridan Gilley (eds), *The Irish in Britain, 1815-1939* (London, 1989), pp 10-59.

<sup>9</sup> R. F. Foster, *Vivid faces: the revolutionary generation in Ireland, 1890-1923* (London, 2014), pp 236-7 and Ann Matthews, *The Kimmage garrison, 1916* (Dublin, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, 'The historiography of the Irish revolution', in John Borgonovo, John Crowley, Donal Ó Drisceoil and Mike Murphy (eds), *Atlas of the Irish revolution* (Cork, 2017), p. 865.

Macardle's *The Irish Republic*.<sup>11</sup> Subsequent historical analysis of the revolution, both biographical and general,<sup>12</sup> did not include O'Brien in the narrative until 1995 when he was resurrected by Arthur Mitchell who describes the work of the London office of Dáil Éireann in *Revolutionary government in Ireland, Dáil Éireann, 1919-22*.<sup>13</sup> Hart also affords O'Brien some attention in *Mick: the real Michael Collins*, but neither work gives a detailed account of O'Brien and his wide range of activities in the cause of Ireland.<sup>14</sup> As one might expect, O'Brien does feature in recent prisoner and IRA histories. Seán McConville and William Murphy have written comprehensively about those imprisoned during the Irish revolution and their work has informed this thesis.<sup>15</sup> However, while O'Brien is often referred to in both studies in his role as enabler and conduit, there is no analysis of his own background and his centrality to the London operation. Similarly, Noonan's work on the IRA in London includes several references to O'Brien but no detail.<sup>16</sup> In several recent general histories of the Irish revolution, O'Brien is mentioned for the first time when he was appointed Dáil Éireann envoy in 1919.<sup>17</sup> In this capacity he also features regularly in the first volume of the *Documents on Irish foreign policy* series.<sup>18</sup> However, most references to O'Brien are made in passing and apart from a small number of his letters to Collins and de Valera, there is little insight into the man himself. As Diarmaid Ferriter observes, 'a central role in the torrid years was no guarantee of prominence in the histories of the period'.<sup>19</sup>

The 'decade of centenaries' has promoted an upsurge in interest in the Irish revolution and with it a belated recognition of the contribution made by the diaspora

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<sup>11</sup> Piaras Béaslaí, *Michael Collins and the making of a new Ireland* (2 vols, Dublin, 1926); Dorothy Macardle, *The Irish Republic* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Dublin, 1938), pp 285, 464, 540.

<sup>12</sup> O'Brien does not feature in most biographies of de Valera except for brief mentions in passing in Tim Pat Coogan, *De Valera, long fellow, long shadow* (London, 1993), pp 218, 255 and David McCullagh, *De Valera: rise, 1882-1932* (Dublin, 2017), pp 207, 217, 248. O'Brien was also excluded from biographies of Collins until publication of Peter Hart's *Mick: the real Michael Collins* (London, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Mitchell, *Revolutionary government in Ireland: Dáil Éireann, 1919-22* (Dublin, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> Hart, *Mick*.

<sup>15</sup> Seán McConville, *Irish political prisoners, 1848-1922: theatres of war* (London, 2003); Seán McConville, *Irish political prisoners, 1920-1962: pilgrimage of desolation* (Oxford, 2014); William Murphy, *Political imprisonment and the Irish, 1912-1921* (Oxford, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Noonan, *IRA in Britain*.

<sup>17</sup> See for instance Townshend, *Republic*, p. 69; Diarmaid Ferriter, *A nation and not a rabble: the Irish revolution, 1913-1923* (London, 2015), p. 195.

<sup>18</sup> Ronan Fanning, Michael Kennedy, Dermot Keogh and Eunan O'Halpin (eds), *Documents on Irish foreign policy*, Vol. 1, 1919-1922 (Dublin, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> Ferriter, *A nation and not a rabble*, p. 28.

in Britain. Writing about political violence in the *Cambridge social history of modern Ireland*, Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid comments that study of the Irish diaspora in Britain is a key feature in understanding Irish political violence since 1740.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the *Atlas of the Irish revolution* includes a chapter on the activities of the Irish in Britain.<sup>21</sup> This thesis is timely, therefore, in appraising the career and multi-faceted involvement of the most significant London-based activist. It also places the spotlight on the essential role played by key second-rank activists in the Irish revolution.

The importance of the role of the individual and his life experience rather than the history of a movement is an underlying principle of this study. Biography as history has had its critics<sup>22</sup> but biographies where ‘the multi-faceted nature of the individual personality is stressed’ challenge that view.<sup>23</sup> The story of an individual life can help make sense of the historical process<sup>24</sup> and is also indispensable to our understanding of motives and intention.<sup>25</sup> Stressing the importance of the individual experience, Richard English, biographer of Ernie O’Malley, notes that it is questionable whether general accounts of Irish nationalism accurately reflect anybody’s specific experience except in blurred images.<sup>26</sup> He believes that studies of individuals are a necessary complement to studies focused on aggregates or collectivities and that the varied beliefs, ambitions, backgrounds, qualities and sympathies of individuals are essential to our understanding of historical change.<sup>27</sup> English also highlights the fact that significant individuals can make a marked difference to historical change.<sup>28</sup> O’Brien was 28 years of age when he joined the GLL — in the prime of his life — and he moved through various forms of Irish nationalism with energy and enthusiasm until his mid-fifties and did indeed make an impact. Thus this biography affords an opportunity to assess the world of the culturally and politically aware in London during the Irish

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<sup>20</sup> Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid, ‘Political violence and the Irish diaspora’ in Eugenio F. Biagini and Mary E. Daly (eds), *The Cambridge social history of modern Ireland* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 476.

<sup>21</sup> Darragh Gannon, ‘The Irish revolution in Great Britain’, in Borghonovo et al, *Atlas of the Irish revolution*, pp 520-5.

<sup>22</sup> Lois Banner, ‘Biography as history’, *The American Historical Review*, 114:3 (June 2009), p. 580.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, ‘Why biography?’, *The American Historical Review*, 114:3 (June 2009), p. 626.

<sup>25</sup> John Tosh *The pursuit of history: aims, methods and new directions in the study of modern history* (Harrow, 1986) p. 73.

<sup>26</sup> Richard English, *Ernie O’Malley: IRA intellectual* (Oxford, 1998), p. 208.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 208-9.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

revolution through the eyes of one of its most enthusiastic activists. In her biography of Rosamond Jacob, Leeann Lane describes how Jacob's diaries had previously been used by historians only 'as a source to plunder' for context and information on the political and cultural events of the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the Art Ó Briain papers have been used by historians analysing the Irish revolution, but his own story has remained elusive.

Some biographies of those involved in the Irish revolution have tended to concentrate on well-known figures and have included the largely hagiographical such as Tim Pat Coogan's biography of Collins and Pakenham and O'Neill's biography of de Valera.<sup>30</sup> Ruth Dudley Edwards's work on Patrick Pearse, however, shows how biography can also challenge long-held assumptions, while the recent '*Judging*' series from the Royal Irish Academy, which includes works on de Valera and W. T. Cosgrave, has shown the value of using a contextual and nuanced approach alongside the biographical details.<sup>31</sup> Biographical studies of women have also enhanced our understanding of the revolutionary period — giving new access to previously unheard voices and elaborating on issues of gender, class and ideology.<sup>32</sup>

In his introduction to *Vivid faces*, Foster refers to the examination of revolutionary process through the biographies *as well as* the theories of individuals.<sup>33</sup> He also describes how ordinary 'seemingly unlikely' people became radicalized and how 'we may now decode complex networks of influence operating through education, through mentoring, through reading, through family, through theatre, through journalistic co-operatives and through love'.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, in her review of Indian and Egyptian nationalism of the early 1900s, N. I. Khan writes of how she came to see how central the human need for dignity was for individuals and how this was,

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<sup>29</sup> Leeann Lane, *Rosamond Jacob: third person singular* (Dublin, 2010), p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Coogan, *Michael Collins*; Frank Pakenham and Thomas P. O'Neill, *Eamonn de Valera* (London, 1970).

<sup>31</sup> Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Patrick Pearse: the triumph of failure* (London, 1977); Diarmaid Ferriter, *Judging Dev: a reassessment of the life and legacy of Éamon de Valera* (Dublin, 2007); Michael Laffan, *Judging W. T. Cosgrave: the foundation of the Irish state* (Dublin, 2014).

<sup>32</sup> See for instance Nell Regan, *Helena Molony: a radical life, 1883-1967* (Dublin, 2017); Lane, *Rosamond Jacob*.

<sup>33</sup> Foster, *Vivid faces*, p. xviii.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp xx, xxii-iii.

perhaps, a proximate cause of anti-colonialism and nationalism.<sup>35</sup> O'Brien was the central figure in a complex network and this thesis demonstrates how *his* search for dignity and fulfilment in the cause of Ireland prompted a significant response in London. In her work on Irish nationalist women, Senia Pasėta has commented that many of them did not expect to be forgotten and that they had a sense that their experiences were worth remembering.<sup>36</sup> O'Brien, too, regarded *his* experience as important enough to warrant keeping a vast collection of papers and entrusting them to the National Library of Ireland with the expectation that future scholars would tell his story.<sup>37</sup>

This thesis is based on extensive primary research conducted in Dublin, London and Oxford. O'Brien operated in a systematic and organised manner and kept records of all his activities in relation to Irish independence. Remarkably, he retained this material through countless changes of address and eventually brought it with him to Dublin in 1939. The papers were donated to the National Library of Ireland in 1953 following the death of O'Brien's sister, Geraldine. The 'Art Ó Briain' collection amounted to sixty-three boxes and six volumes of unsorted material, for which reason researchers found the collection challenging. The catalogue compiled by Owen McGee in 2009 significantly improved accessibility and enabled this historian to conduct a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the collection.

The Art Ó Briain papers provided a solid foundation for the thesis, but the research is by no means limited to the world as mediated by O'Brien. The papers and correspondence of a wide range of participants in the Irish revolution held by the National Library, the National Archives of Ireland, UCD Archives and Trinity College Archives were examined. The Bureau of Military History witness statements and the Military Service Pensions collection were invaluable in tracing the history of the Volunteers and the IRA in London. This historian was also fortunate to acquire access to the privately held papers of Agnes Dodd and Proinnsias Ó Duinn, both of whom were close friends of O'Brien and fellow members of the Gaelic League of London.

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<sup>35</sup> N. I. Khan, *Egyptian-Indian nationalist collaboration and the British Empire* (New York, 2011), p. x.

<sup>36</sup> Senia Pasėta, *Irish nationalist women, 1900-1918* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> See will of Arthur O'Brien (NAI, CH/HC/PO/S/102/8470).

These papers enhanced the personal history of O'Brien and provided an alternative perspective on the man and his times. A small number of interviews with relatives of those who knew O'Brien also informed this thesis.

Material written in Irish can prove challenging to the historian and is an often underutilised source. This historian's fluency in Irish adds an extra dimension to this assessment of O'Brien and his milieu because many of the primary source documents were written in Irish. The minute books of the Gaelic League of London held by the National Library were used extensively, as were many other sources for the Gaelic League in Ireland.<sup>38</sup> National and local newspapers in Ireland and Britain were an essential source, but particular emphasis was placed on researching the newspapers of the Gaelic League, both in Ireland and London. These included *An Claidheamh Solais*, *Inis Fáil* and *An tÉireannach*. Irish language journals such as *Feasta*, *An Glór* and *Comhar*, which tend to be overlooked, were also mined for their contribution to the historiography of the period.

A significant section of the research was completed in London using the collections of the National Archives, the Imperial War Museum, the Parliamentary Archives and those of a number of Roman Catholic dioceses. Papers from the Home Office, the War Office, the Secret Service and the Metropolitan Police in the National Archives at Kew provided wide-ranging information on both O'Brien and his colleagues in London. The Lloyd George and Bonar Law papers in the Parliamentary Archives proved essential to understanding the Treaty negotiations, as did the Lionel Curtis papers in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. The diocesan archives at Southwark and Westminster include papers which helped illuminate the relationship between Irish nationalism and the Catholic Church in London. The papers of Archbishop Peter Amigo at Southwark, in particular, have been underutilised by historians to date, but they offer many new insights, particularly about the death and funeral of Terence MacSwiney.

The bibliography outlines the extensive secondary reading which was undertaken to ensure that primary and secondary sources were understood and

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<sup>38</sup> NLI, Conradh na Gaeilge [London] minutes, MS 9777-9. These minutes are in Irish only from 1915 onwards.

challenged, and that the political, social, cultural, religious and international context of Irish nationalism in London was clearly understood. O'Brien and his entourage did not exist in a vacuum and this thesis demonstrates the complexity of their life experience.

This dissertation is chronological and thematic. It is set out in six chapters, each charting a central period in O'Brien's life. In Chapter 1 the history of O'Brien's early life, education and career as an electrical engineer is outlined, but the main focus is on his activities in the Gaelic League of London (GLL) from 1900 to 1913. This was O'Brien's entrée to all things Irish. As Brian Ó Conchubhair has noted, 'we know remarkably little about the history of Irish in England'.<sup>39</sup> The major assessments of the Gaelic League such as John Hutchinson's *Dynamics of cultural nationalism* and Timothy McMahon's *Grand opportunity: the Gaelic revival and Irish society, 1893-1910* have naturally focused on the Gaelic League in Ireland.<sup>40</sup> The experience of a Gaelic League member was, however, very different in London and invites questions about the role of the League in the diasporic context. Donncha Ó Súilleabháin's *Conradh na Gaeilge i Londain, 1894-1917* is an admirable attempt to chronicle the affairs of the GLL, but is a narrative rather than an analytic history.<sup>41</sup> John Hutchinson and Alan O'Day's 'The Gaelic revival in London, 1900-22: limits of ethnic identity' and Darragh Gannon's 'The rainbow chasers: advanced Irish political nationalism in Britain, 1916-22', in so far as they touch on the GLL, are both over-arching reviews of a movement rather than a close analysis of the lives of members.<sup>42</sup> Giulia Ní Dhulchaointigh's PhD thesis 'The Irish population of London, 1900-14: connections and disconnections' takes a much closer look at the day-to-day activities of the GLL. She contrasts the different experiences of those who were native speakers of Irish with those who attempted to learn the

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<sup>39</sup> Brian Ó Conchubhair, 'The global diaspora and the 'new' Irish (language)', in Caoilfhionn Nic Pháidín and Seán Ó Cearnaigh (eds), *A new view of the Irish language* (Dublin, 2008), p. 244.

<sup>40</sup> John Hutchinson, *The dynamics of cultural nationalism: the Gaelic revival and the creation of the Irish nation state* (London, 1987); Timothy G. McMahon, *Grand opportunity: the Gaelic revival and Irish society, 1893-1910* (Syracuse, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> Donncha Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh na Gaeilge i Londain, 1894-1917* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1989).

<sup>42</sup> John Hutchinson and Alan O'Day, 'The Gaelic revival in London, 1900-22: limits of ethnic identity', in Roger Swift and Sheridan Gilley (eds), *The Irish in Victorian Britain: the local dimension* (Dublin, 1999), pp 254-76;

Darragh Gannon, 'The rise of the rainbow chasers: advanced Irish political nationalism in Britain, 1916-22', in *Éire-Ireland*, 3:3&4 (2014), pp 82-101.

language through the auspices of the Gaelic League.<sup>43</sup> It is, however, a study of linguistic and community issues rather than an attempt to assess the role of the League prior to and during the Irish revolution. Using the Art Ó Briain papers, GLL minutes and several Irish language newspapers and magazines, this thesis provides the first detailed account of both the culture and politics of the GLL and maps its contours in relation to other Irish-Ireland organisations and London society in general. The thesis excavates the lived experience of the members of the GLL, and using a diasporic and international context analyses how the GLL fitted into wider London society from 1900 to 1913. In particular, it identifies the complex range of attitudes which existed in relation to Irish independence on the one hand, and life as it was lived at the heart of the Empire, on the other. This analysis also challenges previously published work which overstates the radicalism of the GLL.<sup>44</sup>

Chapter 2 charts the onset of the First World War, the suspension of home rule, the rise of the Irish Volunteers, the 1916 Rising and the care of Irish prisoners and internees in Britain. The Bureau of Military History witness statements have added significantly to the historiography of the revolutionary period as many historians have demonstrated.<sup>45</sup> In this thesis the witness statements made by the Volunteers in London are used to establish how the organisation was founded and to analyse its membership and activities. This particular aspect of London-Irish history is an important element in understanding how law-abiding citizens like O'Brien became gun-runners. Similarly, the impact of the introduction of conscription in Britain in early 1916 is a significant factor in assessing why some Londoners engaged in the Rising. Both Hart and Piaras Béaslaí, for instance, have acknowledged the role it played in encouraging Michael Collins to return to Ireland.<sup>46</sup> Teasing out the impact of the Rising and its aftermath on O'Brien and his associates also illuminates how attitudes changed over time in London and led to increased radicalism. This thesis also demonstrates that O'Brien was crucial to the success of the prisoner relief effort in Britain and shows how

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<sup>43</sup> Giulia Ní Dhulchaointigh, 'The Irish population of London, 1900-14: connections and disconnections' (PhD thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> See for instance Foster, *Vivid faces*, p. 236.

<sup>45</sup> See for instance Fearghal McGarry's history of the 1916 Rising based on witness statements, *Rebels: voices from the Easter Rising* (Dublin, 2011).

<sup>46</sup> See Hart, *Mick*, p. 79 and Béaslaí, *Michael Collins*, Vol. 1, p. 46.



his business expertise led to significant improvement in the management of the Irish National Aid and Volunteer Dependents' Fund operations in Dublin. O'Brien galvanised the London-Irish in support of prisoners and internees in Britain after the Rising and the impact of his activities on the coherence of the revolutionary movement in both Ireland and London has been underestimated.

Chapter 3 examines O'Brien's appointment as London envoy of Dáil Éireann in 1919. Mitchell's *Revolutionary government in Ireland, Dáil Éireann, 1919-22* was the first to chronicle O'Brien's activities as London envoy but makes no reference to O'Brien's long years of service to the Irish cause prior to 1919.<sup>47</sup> As this thesis demonstrates, O'Brien was by no means plucked from obscurity for the London job, but had proved to the leaders of the Irish revolution that he was competent and trustworthy over many years. This chapter also analyses O'Brien's role in the IRB and the IRA in London from 1919 onwards — accounts which have been enhanced by the recently available Military Service Pensions collection in the Irish Military Archive. In addition, O'Brien's daily correspondence with Collins between early 1919 and late 1921 is an exceptional collection within the Ó Briain papers and is used in this chapter to explain the extent of the work undertaken by O'Brien, as gun-runner, propagandist and conduit for funds during the War of Independence.<sup>48</sup>

The Irish Self-Determination League of Great Britain (ISDL) founded by O'Brien in 1919 at de Valera's request, has been summarily dismissed by David Fitzpatrick as 'a feeble flash in the pan'.<sup>49</sup> Keiko Inoue, while concluding that its contribution to furthering the Dáil's propaganda mission in Britain during the War of Independence should not be neglected, gives merely a brief summary of the organisation's history.<sup>50</sup> Hutchinson and O'Day note that the ISDL undoubtedly served as the chief vehicle of the ethnic Irish community between 1919 and 1921, but skim over its contribution in a few paragraphs.<sup>51</sup> This historian's MA thesis, which was the first comprehensive

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<sup>47</sup> Mitchell, *Revolutionary government*.

<sup>48</sup> See National Library of Ireland (hereafter NLI), Art Ó Briain papers (hereafter AÓBP), Section IV, ii, 1, correspondence with Michael Collins.

<sup>49</sup> Fitzpatrick, 'A curious middle place', p. 13.

<sup>50</sup> Keiko Inoue, 'Dáil propaganda and the Irish Self-Determination League of Great Britain during the Anglo-Irish War', *Irish Studies Review*, 6:1 (1998), p. 47.

<sup>51</sup> Hutchinson and O'Day, 'Gaelic revival', pp 271-274.

assessment of the ISDL, concluded that despite some inherent organisational faults, it made a significant contribution to the cause of Irish self-determination.<sup>52</sup> This doctoral thesis now builds on this earlier research by analysing the propaganda role of the ISDL within the complex network of O'Brien's other affiliations and activities, particularly his work with Scottish, Indian and Egyptian nationalists.

Chapter 4 analyses the events leading up to and including the Truce and the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. The historiography of the Anglo-Irish Treaty is limited in quantity, and, although the seminal works of Frank Pakenham and Nicholas Mansergh remain highly regarded, there has been very little recent work.<sup>53</sup> Efforts to broker a peace settlement during late 1920 and early 1921 have also been given very scant attention by historians. This chapter highlights the hitherto unrecorded role of O'Brien as mediator in several peace initiatives. He was no stranger to Downing Street in 1921 and was a confidant of the deputy secretary to the British cabinet, Thomas Jones. The chapter also presents a comprehensive picture of events leading up to the Truce and the Treaty negotiations and demonstrates O'Brien's centrality as an advisor to both de Valera and Collins during 1921.

O'Brien rejected the Treaty immediately. His subsequent correspondence with de Valera and Collins affords a unique opportunity to understand the mindset of one, who, while deeply loyal to Collins throughout the War of Independence, sided with de Valera at great personal cost. O'Brien was probably closer to Collins than most given their daily correspondence since 1919 and this makes his rejection of the Treaty all the more noteworthy. The thesis also assesses whether his rejection of the Treaty was related to his exclusion from the Treaty negotiations.

Chapter 5 describes the inevitable sacking of O'Brien by the IFS government because of his anti-Treaty stance and alleged impropriety with Dáil funds. Cut adrift, as the rest of London and indeed the whole of Britain moved on, O'Brien and his small band of supporters tried to implement de Valera's plans for overseas representation

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<sup>52</sup> Mary MacDiarmada, 'Exiles in the citadel of the enemy's authority: the Irish Self-Determination League of Great Britain, 1919-1922' (MA thesis, St Patrick's College, Dublin City University, 2013).

<sup>53</sup> Frank Pakenham, *Peace by ordeal: an account, from first hand sources, of the negotiation and signature of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, 1921* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., London, 1962); Nicholas Mansergh, *The unresolved question: the Anglo-Irish settlement and its undoing, 1912-72* (Yale, 1991).

for his republican government. They also attempted to fund-raise and run guns for the anti-Treaty IRA. The chapter outlines how the IFS turned a corner in its relationship with the British government as both administrations worked together to capture and deport O'Brien and approximately 100 others to Dublin. The implications of this decision for the IFS and the British government are analysed using key documents from the National Archives in Dublin and London and the Ó Briain papers. This episode had significant repercussions for the British government and caused uproar in the Dáil and the House of Commons. David Foxton and Seán McConville cover the case in some detail but they are concerned with the legal and prisoner aspects respectively rather than the wider political sphere.<sup>54</sup> Despite extensive newspaper coverage at the time and key legal decisions which defined the very nature of the IFS, there is no mention of the deportations in John Regan's *The Irish counter-revolution, 1921-1936* and the issue is only briefly referred to in Eunan O'Halpin's *Defending Ireland: the Irish state and its enemies since 1922* and Mo Moulton's *Ireland and the Irish in interwar England*.<sup>55</sup> This thesis, by contrast, analyses the security co-operation between the IFS and Britain in early 1923 and highlights the concern of the British government to shore up the Treaty, irrespective of legal obstacles. Subsequent republican squabbles, which led to the end of O'Brien's supremacy in Irish nationalist circles in London, conclude this chapter.

The key focus of the thesis is the period 1900 to 1925. Chapter 6, therefore, gives a summary rather than a detailed account of O'Brien's life from 1925 to 1949. It recounts his fortunes in the years after the Treaty and how, in particular, these changed unexpectedly on de Valera's accession to power. O'Brien, long forgotten and in abject poverty, availed of a reinstatement process to the civil service introduced by de Valera in 1932 for republicans who had been fired by the IFS. O'Brien was appointed Irish Minister to France in 1935 — then the equivalent of ambassador. It was his great good fortune that he was welcomed back into the fold by de Valera

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<sup>54</sup> David Foxton, *Revolutionary lawyers: Sinn Féin and Crown courts in Ireland and Britain, 1916-1923* (Dublin, 2008), pp 346-70; McConville, *Irish political prisoners, 1920-1962: pilgrimage of desolation*, pp 139-151.

<sup>55</sup> John M. Regan, *The Irish counter-revolution, 1921-1936: treatyite politics and settlement in independent Ireland* (Dublin, 1999); Eunan O'Halpin, *Defending Ireland: the Irish state and its enemies since 1922* (Oxford, 1999), p. 22; Mo Moulton, *Ireland and the Irish in interwar England* (Cambridge, 2014), pp 150-2.

because as Ferriter has commented, ‘for all those who were celebrated, honoured and fêted, or who forged rewarding political careers in the aftermath, many more were left wounded and impoverished despite their military, political or intellectual contribution to the decade’.<sup>56</sup> This chapter also outlines how his years in the wilderness had affected his personality leaving him bitter and unhappy and unable to enjoy his diplomatic sojourn to the full. His correspondence with the Department of External Affairs was often fraught.<sup>57</sup> O’Brien moved to Dublin for the first time in 1939. The privately held Proinsias Ó Duinn papers were utilised to assess O’Brien’s welfare activities during World War II, while O’Brien’s own papers signalled his dalliance with the right-wing politics of Ailtirí na hAiséirí.

This thesis shows how the life-story of an individual can lead the historian into new areas of interest and question previously held assumptions. By delving into the life experience of one person, it is possible to track attitudes and actions over time as they relate to historical events. It is also possible to tell new stories such as life in the GLL, the formation of the Irish Volunteers in London, the care of prisoners in Britain, the work of the London envoy and his role in peace initiatives and the impact of his anti-Treaty stance. While there is no doubt that O’Brien’s propensity to hoard an extensive document collection over a long period is a significant bonus to the researcher, it was his centrality in London during the Irish revolutionary period which made him an ideal candidate for this rigorous historical analysis. As Townshend has written: ‘In the place of a linear teleological story of national liberation, there needs to be an awareness of the complexity out of which an alternative story can emerge’.<sup>58</sup> This thesis analyses the complexity and the multiple dimensions of the life of Art O’Brien, the god of the small world of Irish nationalism in London,<sup>59</sup> and in doing so, develops a new understanding of the period from 1900 to 1925.

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<sup>56</sup> Ferriter, *A nation and not a rabble*, p. 12.

<sup>57</sup> See Caitríona Crowe, Ronan Fanning, Michael Kennedy, Dermot Keogh and Eunan O’Halpin (eds), *Documents on Irish foreign policy*, Vol. IV, 1932-1936 (Dublin, 2004) & Vol. V, 1937-1939 (Dublin, 2006).

<sup>58</sup> Townshend, *Easter 1916*, p. 353.

<sup>59</sup> Gladys Ní Eidhin to Barbara Carter, 22 Jan. 1923 (NLI, Barbara and Dorothy Carter correspondence, MS 20721/2).

## **‘Everybody can be a Gael if he tries’: Gaelic League of London activist, 1900-1913**

### **1.1 Introduction**

Hutchinson and O’Day have written about the Gaelic revival in London (1900-22).<sup>1</sup> They regard this movement as a failure because of its inability to create a stronger ethnic identity for the Irish in the British polity, but this analysis fails to grasp the fact that the main focus of this revival was Ireland itself rather than Irish assimilation in Britain. Revivalism did intersect with wider communal interests<sup>2</sup> but to see a connection between the integration of the Irish into the British political system and organisations such as the Gaelic League is to misunderstand their role. The Gaelic League of London (GLL) was about separateness not inclusion. Therefore, a diasporic perspective is more appropriate. The GLL was just one of several groups seeking to retain the heritage of its homeland in London; it was not exceptional. The GLL took pride in its efforts and stood up to church and state whenever Irish language and culture were not given due respect. It was also aware of the importance of good teaching methodologies and published high quality newspapers to spread information about Irish-Ireland. The GLL members were certainly aware of small groups of advanced nationalists in London with some overlap in membership. In addition, they came to know many of those who would take part in the Easter Rising. Yet, for most members of the GLL their day-to-day concerns were language acquisition and musical entertainments. They accepted the politics of the day and were supportive of home rule for Ireland. This thesis, therefore, challenges the view prevalent in the albeit limited historiography that the GLL was a major source of radicalisation for advanced Irish nationalists.<sup>3</sup>

The first part of this chapter gives an account of Art O’Brien’s background and then presents a detailed analysis of the activities of the GLL from 1900 to 1913 by

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<sup>1</sup> Hutchinson and O’Day, ‘Gaelic revival’, pp 254-76.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Foster, *Vivid faces*, p. 236.

tracing the motivations and interests of the members as mediated through the persona of O'Brien. The second part of the chapter analyses the relationship of the GLL with the Catholic Church and with overtly political Irish nationalist organisations in London. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the GLL in the wider London context.

## 1.2 O'Brien's early life

Arthur Patrick Donovan O'Brien was born in London on 25 September 1872 to John Francis O'Brien, a native of Cork, and Henrietta Myers of London. He had two sisters — Christine (born 1871) and Geraldine (born 1875).<sup>4</sup> The more Irish sounding name 'Art' seems to have been adopted by O'Brien at a young age. The choice of Patrick as a second name was a clear identification with the family's Irish background and the choice of Donovan may have been in homage to Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, the Fenian leader from West Cork who was imprisoned from 1865 to 1871. O'Brien's father served in the British army and attained the rank of major.<sup>5</sup> His military career might have made him an unlikely supporter of the Irish cause, but as Alvin Jackson has noted, 'taking the Queen's shilling certainly did not automatically induce loyalism' and there was an intriguing overlap between army service and revolutionary activism.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the harsh treatment of prisoners after the 1867 Rising generated significant public sympathy for Fenianism.<sup>7</sup> Thomas Clarke's father was also in the British army and the career of Erskine Childers was another example of movement from the British army to Irish republicanism. In his 2015 study of Staffordshire Irish in the British army, John Herson concludes that the strength of individual and family characteristics outweighed the general legacy of service in the forces.<sup>8</sup> It is quite possible, therefore, that O'Brien senior was a Fenian sympathiser. By the time of his marriage in 1870, at

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<sup>4</sup> The *Dictionary of Irish biography* (hereafter *DIB*) entry for Art O'Brien says he had just one sister (Geraldine). However, the 1891 and 1901 UK censuses list a second sister (Christine).

<sup>5</sup> O'Brien, CV, n.d. (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8461/31).

<sup>6</sup> Alvin Jackson, 'Ireland, the Union and the Empire, 1800-1960', in Kevin Kenny (ed.), *Ireland and the British Empire* (Oxford, 2004), p. 142.

<sup>7</sup> Lyons, *Ireland since the famine*, p. 127.

<sup>8</sup> John Herson, *Divergent paths: family histories of Irish emigrants in Britain, 1820-1920* (Manchester, 2015), p. 237.

the relatively late age of thirty-eight, he had left the army and described his occupation in the 1871 census as ‘guano merchant’.<sup>9</sup>

The O’Briens set up home in Kensington and the family boasted two servants, an indication of reasonable comfort, but certainly not any great wealth.<sup>10</sup> The norm in late Victorian London was for families to rent rather than to buy their homes. The O’Briens followed this trend and moved frequently within North Kensington. O’Brien senior died in 1878 when the young O’Brien was just five years old.<sup>11</sup> It seems that the family were left in straightened circumstances as the 1881 census shows that Mrs O’Brien had established a boarding house at 38 Powis Square, Kensington, which was home to eight boarders.<sup>12</sup> One was an Irish civil engineer named Rankin, so perhaps this is when O’Brien first thought of becoming an engineer. There was also an Irish servant named Mary Burke who ensured a daily connection to the homeland of O’Brien senior. On the paternal side of the family, O’Brien senior was an older half-brother of Ignatius O’Brien, Irish Solicitor General in 1911 and Lord Chancellor from 1913 until 1918.<sup>13</sup> In his memoirs Ignatius made no specific mention of the Kensington O’Briens but described being the youngest of nine children and being reared virtually as an only child.<sup>14</sup> Art O’Brien did, however, spend holidays as a child with J. J. O’Brien, brother of Ignatius, who was sub-manager of the Munster and Leinster Bank in Cork city.<sup>15</sup> These holidays helped cement his attachment to Ireland and introduced him to the Irish language.<sup>16</sup>

O’Brien’s maternal grandfather, Michael Myers, was a newspaper proprietor and printer, who, with his son, established the publishing firm G. D. Ernest and Co. based at 1 Racquet Court in Fleet Street. Their main publication was the *Music Trades*

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<sup>9</sup> Guano was a natural fertiliser from the excrement of seabirds and bats which was imported to Britain from Peru.

<sup>10</sup> Census returns for England and Wales 1871, household of John Francis O’Brien, Class RG10, Piece 43, Folio 98, p. 66 (ancestry.co.uk) (accessed Dec. 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Fiachra Éilgeach, ‘Bhí cean agus meas ag gach naon air’, *Feasta* (Meán Fómhair 1949), p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Census returns for England and Wales 1881, household of Henrietta O’Brien, Class 41b, Piece 37, folio 26, p. 47 (ancestry.co.uk) (accessed Dec. 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Fiachra Éilgeach ‘Bhí cean agus meas’, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Ignatius O’Brien, *The reminiscences of Lord Shandon, 1926* (Kings Inns Archive, Dublin, unpublished document), p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Fiachra Éilgeach ‘Bhí cean agus meas’, p. 13. See also *Cork Examiner* (hereafter CE) 20 Oct. 1911.

<sup>16</sup> *An tÉireannach* (hereafter AtÉ), Jan. 1911. GLL newspaper discussed later in this chapter.

*Review* which was launched in 1877 and boasted that every line of the paper was specially written by some of the most celebrated musicians and critics of the day.<sup>17</sup> The firm and this publication were still in business in 1925 when O'Brien became editor and manager.<sup>18</sup> Given the father's early demise, and the proximity of their English-born maternal grandparents, who lived in Cromwell Grove and later in Brentford, London, it might have been expected that the young O'Briens would become 'happy English children'.<sup>19</sup> Instead, although her background was English and Church of England,<sup>20</sup> Henrietta O'Brien seems to have embraced the Irishness and Catholicism of her husband and also visited Ireland periodically.<sup>21</sup> She survived until 1928 and lived with her son all her life. O'Brien's maternal uncle-in-law, Arthur Hesilrige, in addition to having a role in the family business, was an editor with *Debrett's Peerage*, the definitive guide to the British aristocracy.<sup>22</sup> This was a prestigious position in British society but Hesilrige seems to have made no attempt to steer the young O'Brien away from his Irish and Catholic background.

Foster suggests that prejudice against the Irish in Britain was by virtue of their class rather than their nationality and notes that many middle class Irish fitted into 'the known bourgeois world, and the world of the Union'.<sup>23</sup> Hutchinson and O'Day write of a substantial embourgeoisement of the Irish community born in Great Britain which made the lives of a section of the Irish in the late nineteenth century qualitatively different from those of the 1850s and 1860s.<sup>24</sup> This analysis reflects the reality of the O'Brien family. The O'Briens quite confidently embraced their Irishness and saw no inherent reasons to deny it. The family also benefitted from a weakening of the political obstacles for Irish Catholics in Britain in the last two decades of the

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<sup>17</sup> *Music Trades Review*, 15 Nov. 1877.

<sup>18</sup> O'Brien, CV, n.d. (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8461/31).

<sup>19</sup> Census Returns for England and Wales 1881, Household of Michael Myers, Class RG11, Piece 60, Folio 24, p. 42; Census returns for England and Wales 1891: Class RG12, Piece 1031, Folio 40, p. 22 (ancestry.co.uk) (accessed Nov. 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Parish records show that Henrietta Myers was baptised into the Church of England. She was a Roman Catholic when she died in 1928. It is presumed that she converted at the time of her marriage in 1870. See (ancestry.com/Henrietta Myers) (accessed 4 Nov. 2014) and O'Brien to William Cotter about her funeral Mass, 28 Mar. 1928 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8428/19).

<sup>21</sup> Fiachra Éilgeach 'Bhí cean agus meas', p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> Hesilrige was married to Henrietta O'Brien's younger sister Amy. See *Debretts Peerage* 1897 to 1935 which list Hesilrige as editor.

<sup>23</sup> R. F. Foster, *Paddy and Mr. Punch, connections in Irish and English history* (London, 1993), p. 288.

<sup>24</sup> Hutchinson and O'Day, 'Gaelic revival', p. 257.



nineteenth century. Gladstone's conversion to home rule in 1886 was the decisive turning point because it legitimised the political aspirations of the immigrant Irish and the Irish nationalist cause was no longer damned as heretical in British politics.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the appointment of Cardinal Henry Edward Manning as Primate of the Catholic Church in England did much to improve the perception of the Irish.<sup>26</sup> Manning had great affection for the Irish as well as a desire to keep Irish MPs in play as a pressure group for British Catholic interests.<sup>27</sup> As Mary Hickman observes, Manning and Gladstone 'sanctified moderate Irish aspirations'.<sup>28</sup>

### 1.3 O'Brien's education and career

Mrs O'Brien's attempts to make ends meet seem to have been quite successful as it enabled her to enrol her son at the prestigious St Charles's College in Kensington for his secondary education.<sup>29</sup> Founded by Cardinal Manning, the college was intended to provide the kind of scientific-commercial education which the new middle classes generated by the industrial revolution would require, as opposed to the classical education in Benedictine and Jesuit schools.<sup>30</sup> O'Brien later recalled that he first developed an interest in the Irish language when at St Charles's College, possibly with the assistance of some Irish-born teachers.<sup>31</sup> On completion of his secondary schooling O'Brien went to France to train as a civil engineer.<sup>32</sup> Particulars of his time in France are difficult to establish and an examination of student registers for the relevant dates in the main engineering colleges in Paris have yielded no information.<sup>33</sup> O'Brien acquired fluent French during this period, however. In 1893 he returned to London

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<sup>25</sup> M. A. G. Ó Tuathaigh, 'The Irish in nineteenth century Britain: problems of integration', in Roger Swift and Sheridan Gilley (eds), *The Irish in the Victorian city* (Beckenham, 1985), pp 13-36.

<sup>26</sup> See V. A. McClelland, *Cardinal Manning: his public life and influence, 1865-1892* (London, 1962).

<sup>27</sup> Owen Dudley Edwards and Patricia J. Storey, 'The Irish press in Victorian Britain', in Swift and Gilley, *Irish in the Victorian city*, p. 160.

<sup>28</sup> Mary J. Hickman, *Religion, class and identity: the state, the Catholic Church and the education of the Irish in Britain* (Aldershot, 1995), p. 114.

<sup>29</sup> O'Brien, CV, n.d. (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8461/31).

<sup>30</sup> McClelland, *Manning*, p. 54.

<sup>31</sup> Art Ó Briain, 'Gaedhil thar sáile: some notes on the history of the Gaelic League of London', *Capuchin Annual* (1944), p. 116.

<sup>32</sup> O'Brien, CV, n.d. (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8461/31).

<sup>33</sup> A review of the attendance roll at both major engineering colleges in Paris — l'École des Mines de Paris and l'École des Ponts de Paris did not yield any evidence of O'Brien's attendance.

and enrolled at Faraday House Engineering College in Charing Cross Road.<sup>34</sup> Founded in January 1890, it was intended that 'Faradian' students would form a 'corps of élite' for the new electricity industry.<sup>35</sup> Faraday House pioneered a novel idea for the time called the 'sandwich course' which meant that during training students supplemented their theoretical knowledge by working at an electricity works or a central supply station. The fees were 100 guineas per year payable in advance and an eight hour day of intensive study was the norm, as students grappled with mathematics, physics, electricity and magnetism, mechanical engineering and electrical engineering.<sup>36</sup> O'Brien was in a class of fourteen and results of his December 1893 exams show that he was a somewhat above average student coming 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> in most subjects.<sup>37</sup> In May 1894 he was granted student membership of the Institution of Electrical Engineers, a professional organisation which organised regular lectures for members and also organised study trips abroad.<sup>38</sup> The Institution was also concerned that electrical tradesmen were making inroads into the 'profession' of engineers and was anxious to prevent this by ensuring a strong collegiate membership which stressed the importance of a scientific education.

Between 1895 and 1899 O'Brien worked on various projects in the UK, France and Spain and became fluent in Spanish. His work took him to Westinghouse Française in Le Havre and to the iron mines of northern Spain.<sup>39</sup> In 1899 he was granted full associate membership of the Institution of Electrical Engineers, the highest grade available to a professional at that time.<sup>40</sup> By 1900 O'Brien had established himself as a consulting electrical engineer with numerous contacts in the industry and was based full-time in London again. His mother had given up the boarding house as O'Brien now provided the main household income. The 1901 census records described him as

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<sup>34</sup> Named after Michael Faraday, 1791-1867, renowned British physicist and chemist.

<sup>35</sup> F. W. Lipscomb, *The wise men of the wires: the history of Faraday House* (London, 1973), p. 24.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 6-7.

<sup>37</sup> Examination results, *Faraday House Journal* (hereafter *FHJ*), Dec. 1893.

<sup>38</sup> See *Engineer*, 12 July 1901; 15 Feb. 1901.

<sup>39</sup> O'Brien, notes in French, n.d. (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8461/22); O'Brien, CV, n.d. (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8461/31).

<sup>40</sup> Arthur P. O'Brien, application for Associate Membership of The Institution of Electrical Engineers, 5 July 1899 (Institute of Engineering and Technology Archive (hereafter IET), London). This allowed him to use the letters A.M.I.E.E. after his name.

‘Head of the Household’ with both sisters still living in the family home.<sup>41</sup> The O’Brien’s had six different addresses during the period 1897 to 1919.<sup>42</sup> The earlier addresses were in North Kensington but a move further north to Ealing occurred around 1906.<sup>43</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century London was the greatest manufacturing city in the world. The Victorians were ‘rapacious modernisers’ who swept away the past for new roads, railway lines and stations, warehouses, offices, museums, town halls, model dwellings, board schools, prisons and art galleries.<sup>44</sup> Close to O’Brien’s home the vast museum of South Kensington was taking shape and its environs included the Albert Memorial, the Royal Albert Hall and the Imperial Institute — all of which ‘celebrated empire’.<sup>45</sup> In addition, the electrification of the London underground brought with it great opportunities for electrical engineers.<sup>46</sup> O’Brien thrived in this environment, notwithstanding the dangers (explosions and fires) associated with the nascent electricity industry.<sup>47</sup> Scrupulous attention to detail and rigorous organisational ability were essential attributes in such a safety critical industry and O’Brien possessed these qualities in abundance. An Irish background, a distinctly Irish surname, and a Catholic upbringing did not impede O’Brien’s professional advancement. One would have to fast forward to the high-tech explosion of the 1980s and 1990s to understand the high demand for technical expertise in the electricity industry of the 1900s, where hundreds of companies vied for customers in a pre-regulation market. O’Brien was well known and respected by his peers in the electricity industry and yet chose not to pursue further advancement in the Institution of Electrical Engineers or as a lecturer at Faraday House. Instead, he devoted all his spare time to the Gaelic League of London.

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<sup>41</sup> Census returns for England and Wales 1901, Household of Arthur O’Brien, Class RG13, Page 26, Folio 112, p. 4 (findmypast.com) (accessed Dec. 2014).

<sup>42</sup> Information collated from the Institution of Electrical Engineers membership lists, 1897-1919 (IET Archive, London).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Jerry White, *London in the twentieth century: a city and its people* (London, 2001), p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Jonathan Schneer, *London 1900* (Yale, 1999), p. 94.

<sup>46</sup> White, *London*, p. 13.

<sup>47</sup> See R. H. Parsons, *The early days of the power station industry* (Cambridge, 1940).

#### 1.4 The Gaelic League of London (GLL)

The GLL had its origins in the Southwark Junior Irish Literary club established in 1881 by Francis Fahy, a native of Kinvara, who came to London to work in the Board of Trade in 1873. His aim was to teach the children of Irish emigrants the traditions, music and literature of their native land.<sup>48</sup> An adult Southwark Irish Literary Society was formed in 1883. Its members included W. B. Yeats, who was by then 'deliberately digging himself into the literary world of London'.<sup>49</sup> D. P. Moran and W. P. Ryan, both successful Irish-born journalists in London, were also members and they became leading exponents of the Irish-Ireland movement in the years ahead.<sup>50</sup>

In November 1891, the Southwark Literary Society evolved into the Irish Literary Society (ILS). Meanwhile in Ireland, the National Literary Society, an offshoot of the ILS in London, was formed, and it was there on 25 November 1892 that Douglas Hyde gave his ground-breaking address on the necessity for 'de-anglicising the Irish people'.<sup>51</sup> In this speech he proposed that Irish language and traditions should be reclaimed by the Irish people and used to differentiate themselves from English language and customs. The restoration of the Irish language was seen as the cornerstone of the national reconstruction of self-belief for the Irish nation.<sup>52</sup> The Gaelic League, founded in 1893 by Hyde and Eoin MacNeill, led to a new emphasis on the spoken word and the importance of preserving the dwindling Gaeltacht areas. The new organisation struck a chord with Irish people and branches were quickly formed throughout the country.<sup>53</sup> The success of the League in Ireland prompted the members of an ILS Irish language class in London to seek affiliation in December 1894 and the

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<sup>48</sup> Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, p. 6.

<sup>49</sup> A. Norman Jeffares, *W. B. Yeats* (London, 1988), p. 64.

<sup>50</sup> See D. P. Moran, *The philosophy of Irish Ireland*, ed. Patrick Maume (Dublin, 2006); Ian Sheehy 'Irish journalists and littérateurs in late Victorian London, 1870-1910' (D. Phil thesis, University of Oxford, 2003); Martin Waters, 'W.P. Ryan and the Irish-Ireland movement' (PhD thesis, Connecticut University, 1970); Philip O'Leary, *The prose literature of the Gaelic revival, 1881-1921: ideology and innovation* (Pennsylvania, 1994).

<sup>51</sup> See J. E. Dunleavy and G. W. Dunleavy, *Douglas Hyde: a maker of modern Ireland* (Berkeley, 1991), pp 182-5 for a full account of this speech.

<sup>52</sup> Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, 'Language, ideology and national identity' in Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly (eds), *The Cambridge companion to modern Irish culture* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 48.

<sup>53</sup> For a detailed history of the Gaelic League in Ireland see Proinsias Mac Aonghusa, *Ar son na Gaeilge: Conradh na Gaeilge, 1893-1993* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1993). See also John Hutchinson, *Dynamics*; P. J. Mathews, *Revival: the Abbey Theatre, Sinn Féin, the Gaelic League and the Co-Operative movement* (Cork, 2003).

formal opening of the GLL took place on 9 October 1896.<sup>54</sup> Pařeta has noted the need which arose for the Irish to emphasise ‘difference’ between Ireland and England as they moved towards home rule, hence the attraction of organisations which developed to meet this need.<sup>55</sup> While on the whole, London leaders and institutions were very much of the second rank, ‘initiatives in the metropolis made a substantial contribution to the political-cultural revival over the years between 1890 and 1922’.<sup>56</sup>

Although many GLL members came from a purely literary and cultural background, Dr Mark Ryan, a veteran Fenian, was also to the fore in its establishment.<sup>57</sup> A native of Galway, Ryan was a member of the IRB who had been on its supreme council in the 1870s.<sup>58</sup> His involvement in various political organisations in London is discussed below. Ryan gave an address in Irish at the opening meeting which, according to one observer, was followed ‘with much interest and pleasure by many who had not heard the old tongue since they left the green isle’.<sup>59</sup> The *Irish Times* reported a short time later that the GLL had made progress beyond the expectations of its founders and that the new members were warned that ‘great shame would rest upon the Irish people if they allowed their noble and ancient tongue to die out’.<sup>60</sup> Ryan joined heartily in the work of the new organisation which he regarded as ‘a powerful de-anglicising and educational agency’ and something that ‘brightened up life wonderfully for our people in London’.<sup>61</sup> It was not all glamour and glitz, however. A dedicated student described how the early days were spent in a smoky room off an underground passage where

in the London night, the dreary waste of brick and mortar, the crowded streets, the eternal bustle and rush and the grey, grey skies frowning over ... all had been forgotten for a brief spell the while two or three eager passionate souls reiterated again and yet again

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<sup>54</sup> Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, pp 6-7.

<sup>55</sup> Senia Pařeta, *Before the revolution: nationalism, social change and Ireland’s Catholic élite, 1879-1922* (Cork, 1999), p. 120.

<sup>56</sup> Hutchinson and O’Day, ‘Gaelic revival’, p. 262.

<sup>57</sup> Ó Briain, ‘Gaedhil thar sáile’, p. 117.

<sup>58</sup> Owen McGee, ‘Mark Francis Ryan, 1844-1940’, *DIB*.

<sup>59</sup> Fionán Mac Coluim to Eoin MacNeill, Oct. 1896 (NLI, Eoin MacNeill papers, MS 10897). This file contains several letters from the GLL inviting MacNeill to speak at their events in London.

<sup>60</sup> *Irish Times* (hereafter *IT*), 31 Oct. 1896.

<sup>61</sup> Mark Ryan, *Fenian memories* (Dublin, 1945), pp 145, 167.

with tireless energy: *Tá an lá bog, Tá iolar ar an aill, Tá cnaipe ar do chóta mhór, Tá mo mhéar bheag briste.*<sup>62</sup>

O'Brien joined the GLL at the suggestion of friends in December 1900 and thus began a lifelong association with the League.<sup>63</sup> He credited relatives who were speakers of Irish for his interest in the language and despite not having been born in Ireland, arrived at the GLL with a significant ability in the Irish language.<sup>64</sup> He had started his Irish studies when still at school and later studied the O'Growney language primers.<sup>65</sup> He also bought Irish storybooks with vocabularies and these helped him 'to read average Irish with little difficulty'.<sup>66</sup>

Within weeks of joining, O'Brien made an impact. His engineering consultancy took him to cities all over the UK and he used his free time to help start new branches and to keep in touch with established branches.<sup>67</sup> On 23 February 1901 the London notes in *An Claidheamh Soluis*, the newspaper of the Gaelic League in Ireland, described him as 'one of the most active members of the Gaelic League'.<sup>68</sup> As W. P. Ryan commented, 'the personal visits and enthusiasm of Art Ua Briain were the really effective factors in several quarters'.<sup>69</sup> O'Brien's sister, Geraldine, also joined the GLL, encouraged no doubt by his enormous enthusiasm.<sup>70</sup> By September 1901 O'Brien, with barely nine months membership, was appointed a member of the Ard-Choiste — the governing executive of the GLL.<sup>71</sup> As with all voluntary organisations, the committee must have been overjoyed to have found someone willing to work so hard. O'Brien was one of the few on the Ard-Choiste born outside Ireland and his elevation was therefore

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<sup>62</sup> *AtÉ*, Apr. 1913; Irish sentences from the class translate as: The day is fine. There is an eagle on the cliff. There is a button on your overcoat. My little finger is broken.

<sup>63</sup> Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, p. 35.

<sup>64</sup> *AtÉ*, Jan. 1911.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* Fr. Eoghan O'Growney (1863-1899) was a priest and Irish scholar based at Maynooth University, who wrote a series of *Simple lessons in Irish (Ceachtanna simplidhe)*, the first book of which was published in 1893.

<sup>66</sup> *AtÉ*, Jan. 1911.

<sup>67</sup> Art Ó Briain, 'Liam P. Ó Riain d'éag – dalta grádhmhar, fír-dílis', *An Glór* (27 Feabhra 1943), p. 3.

<sup>68</sup> *An Claidheamh Soluis* (hereafter ACS), 23 Feb. 1901.

<sup>69</sup> W. P. Ryan, notes on the first twenty years of the Gaelic League in London, n.d. (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8436/21).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 Jan. 1901.

<sup>71</sup> Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, p. 45.

unusual.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, many non-Irish born GLL members felt they were regarded as inferior prompting one to comment in exasperation:

One may be born in London, or Dublin, or Limerick and develop into as good a Gael as if one had been born in Cois Fharrage. It is a question of blood, brains, study, spirit and other things. The real Gaedhealtacht like the Kingdom of Heaven is within. Everybody ... can be a Gael if he tries.<sup>73</sup>

O'Brien's colleagues on the Ard-Choiste included the president, Francis Fahy, founder of the Southwark Literary Club, and Dr J. P. Henry, a medical graduate of Trinity College Dublin, who came to London in 1889 and was vice-president of the GLL from 1895. He was an expert on the teaching of Irish and author of *A handbook of modern Irish*.<sup>74</sup> Seán Ó Catháin, the honorary secretary, hailed from Co. Tipperary and was employed as a customs official in London. Fionán Mac Coluim from Kerry, an employee of the India Office in London and W. P. Ryan, the journalist were also members.<sup>75</sup> This Ard-Choiste was a microcosm of the system which Hutchinson outlines as essential to the development of cultural nationalism — a group to formulate the cultural ideas of the movement (secular intellectuals) such as Fahy and Henry who were experts on Irish history and language and another group to transform the ideals into concrete political, economic and social programmes such as W. P. Ryan and O'Brien.<sup>76</sup>

### 1.5 GLL Membership

While the GLL included professional people, the vast majority of members were minor clerks and civil servants and in the case of women, many were housemaids.<sup>77</sup> Joseph Good, who worked in a spinning factory, described the membership as 'mainly schoolteachers and civil servants' but noted that if you tried to learn Irish 'they would

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<sup>72</sup> Eileen Drury (1870-1962) was also born in London and I have not been able to determine a birthplace for Eamonn Morrissey.

<sup>73</sup> *AtÉ*, Aug. 1911.

<sup>74</sup> Seaghan P. Mac Énrí, *A handbook of modern Irish, Part 1* (Dublin, 1903).

<sup>75</sup> Éamonn Morrissey, Eileen Drury, Fr. Michael Moloney, Maurice Dodd, C. J. Kilgallin and Art O'Keeffe made up the rest of this rather large committee. See Annual Report of the GLL, 1902 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8435/1).

<sup>76</sup> Hutchinson, *Dynamics*, p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> P. S. Ó hÉigearthaigh, 'Cuimhní ar Éirinn na nGael i mblianta tosaigh an chéid', *Feasta* (Márta 1954), p. 7.

accept you like a brother'.<sup>78</sup> Workers like Good were the exception because of what P. S. O'Hegarty<sup>79</sup> termed 'the workingman's instinctive contempt for the clerk and avoidance of his class'.<sup>80</sup> This mirrors the conclusion of McMahon in relation to the Gaelic League in Dublin. He found that 90% of the members were 'black-coated workers' by which he meant civil servants, teachers, shop assistants and minor clerks. O'Brien, the consulting electrical engineer, was certainly different from the rest and exuded a sense of confidence and 'can-do' ability. In a list of 'influential members of the GLL' compiled in 1903, he had achieved enough recognition to be mentioned with native Irish speakers such as Seán Ó Catháin, Micheál Breathnach, and Pádraic Ó Conaire.<sup>81</sup> A contributor to *Inis Fáil* observed that most of the people who had excellent Irish in London were too poor to join and that the few who were comfortable were too lazy or thought they were too old for classes.<sup>82</sup> Regina Uí Chollatáin has written of the failure of the language revival in Ireland to entice 'the core Irish language community to the movement' and notes that the revival had no attraction for most of the poor in the Gaeltacht areas.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, many native Irish speakers in London remained outside the GLL. Another reason for the absence of Gaeltacht natives may have been what Ó Danachair describes as 'a linguistic tradition which sprang from personal talent or experience rather than recourse to the written word or to formal teaching'.<sup>84</sup> Ní Dhulchaointigh believes many Gaelic League enthusiasts regarded native Irish speakers as 'a historical repository rather than a living community' and had no intention of seeking them out.<sup>85</sup>

P. L. Garside cites a background of increasing social turmoil and fears of political upheaval and actual revolution in London at the close of the nineteenth

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<sup>78</sup> Joe Good, *Enchanted by dreams: the journal of a revolutionary* (Dingle, 1996), pp 7-8.

<sup>79</sup> P. S. O'Hegarty (1879-1955), born in Cork, post office official in London 1902-13, member of the IRB, the GAA and the GLL. See Tom Garvin, 'Patrick Sarsfield O'Hegarty, 1879-1955', *DIB*.

<sup>80</sup> *Inis Fáil* (hereafter *IF*), Mar. 1910. GLL newspaper discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>81</sup> L. P. Ó Riain, 'Connradh na Gaedhilge, Lúnnduin', *Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge*, 4:152 (Bealtaine 1903), p. 299.

<sup>82</sup> *IF*, Feb. 1905.

<sup>83</sup> Regina Uí Chollatáin, 'An Claidheamh Soluis agus Fáinne an Lae: 'the turning of the tide'', in Mark O'Brien and Felix M. Larkin (eds), *Periodicals and journalism in twentieth-century Ireland: writing against the grain* (Dublin, 2014), p. 34.

<sup>84</sup> Caoimhín Ó Danachair, 'The Gaeltacht' in Brian Ó Cuív (ed.), *A view of the Irish language* (Dublin, 1969), p. 117.

<sup>85</sup> Ní Dhulchaointigh, 'Irish population of London, 1900-14', pp 181, 193.



century as it grappled with huge poverty and an increasingly bitter divide between skilled and unskilled workers.<sup>86</sup> He notes that London harboured many communist and anarchist theorists. The police regarded the GLL as part of an anarchist rainbow and in his memoirs, John Sweeney, an Irish native who was a detective in Scotland Yard, recounted how he went to Irish language meetings ‘with a view to public safety’. He included anarchists, nihilists, Fenians and Clan-na-Gaelites [sic] in a general sideswipe at ‘revolutionaries who flock to London to work out their sinister purposes’.<sup>87</sup> The Fenian ‘dynamite’ campaign in Britain 1880-1885 led to the formation of permanent systems and structures within the police to carry out surveillance and enforce the law.<sup>88</sup> The London Metropolitan Police organised a Criminal Investigation Department in 1878 and it began to focus on Irish-related crime in 1881. Two inspectors, two sergeants and eight police constables formed an ‘Irish brigade’ within the CID.<sup>89</sup> All were chosen because of their Irish background. As numbers of police increased and responsibilities widened, the term ‘Special Branch’ came into use around 1887. This division eventually had responsibility for all movements and activities which constituted a threat to the security of the British Empire. An exhaustive search of Metropolitan Police files in London has not yielded any specific evidence of surveillance of the GLL, however.<sup>90</sup>

## 1.6 GLL Activities

Although the GLL was thriving in the early 1900s, it was small relative to the size of the Irish population in London which numbered 350,000 of Irish descent and 50,000 Irish-born.<sup>91</sup> At its height in 1903 the GLL had about 2,000 members and had ‘schools’ from Limebourne to Kensington and from Clapham to Hampstead.<sup>92</sup> Activities included

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<sup>86</sup> P. L. Garside, ‘London and the Home Counties’, in Thompson, F. M. L. (ed.), *The Cambridge social history of Britain, 1750 -1950* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 510.

<sup>87</sup> Francis Richards, *John Sweeney at Scotland Yard: being the experiences during twenty-seven years’ service of John Sweeney* (London, 1904), in Liam Harte (ed.), *The literature of the Irish in Britain: autobiography and memoir, 1725-2001* (London, 2011), pp 101-105.

<sup>88</sup> See K. R. M. Short, *The dynamite war: Irish-American bombers in Britain* (Dublin, 1979) for full details of this American-led campaign.

<sup>89</sup> Lindsay Clutterbuck, ‘Countering Irish republican terrorism in Britain: its origin as a police function’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 18 (2006), p. 102.

<sup>90</sup> See police files, 1900 -1915 (The National Archives, London (hereafter TNA), Metropolitan Police files (hereafter MEPO), 3).

<sup>91</sup> Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, pp 94, 99.

<sup>92</sup> Ó Riain, ‘Connradh na Gaedhilge, Lúnnduin’, p. 297.

classes for learning the Irish language, dance and song. It organised scoraíochtaí (dance and musical entertainment), seanchus (topical debates in Irish), céilithe (Irish dancing) and seilgí.<sup>93</sup> Though strictly translated as ‘hunts’, seilgí were in fact day-trips out of London organised at weekends to Epping Forest, Theydon Bois or Surrey Downs, and consisted of open-air music and dance with elaborate refreshments. One purpose of the seilg outings was to separate the Irish from their English neighbours as the following account reveals:

Tig linn abhráin agus damhsughadh agus greann a dhéanamh gan ár gcáirde na Sanaigh i n-ár dtimpeall. Ní minic a bhféadtar éalódh uabhtha — dalta na mbocht, bíd i gcomhnuidhe linn.<sup>94</sup>

This was partly a throwback to Fenian fears of infiltration but also an attempt to remain apart from the host nation. About 100 members of the GLL visited Ireland in 1900 to ‘improve their Irish and get in closer touch with the movement’.<sup>95</sup> The GLL also ran classes for children with prizes of holidays in the Gaeltacht for essays and poetry. Children from London visited Spiddal and Tourmakeady on several occasions from 1908 to 1913.<sup>96</sup> The establishment of the Aonach in 1903, a large scale annual industrial exhibition which showcased the best of Irish manufacture and agriculture in London, was a major innovation of the GLL. Apart from supporting Irish industry, *The Times* reported that the aim of the Aonach was to promote ‘a true national feeling among all classes of Irishmen, independent of political and religious differences’.<sup>97</sup> It also reflected a new trend of exhibitions and spectacles which were designed to combine education and tuition in the interest of Empire which had become a staple of London life.<sup>98</sup> The GLL also developed various drama groups which performed plays in Irish by Hyde, Pádraic Ó Conaire and P. T. MacGinley.<sup>99</sup> Fortunately, for the GLL its establishment coincided with an increased appetite for social activities due to a

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<sup>93</sup> Summary of the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Report of Gaelic League of London (hereafter GLL), *ACS*, 27 Oct. 1900.

<sup>94</sup> *ACS*, 19 Sept. 1908. Translation: We can sing and dance and have fun without our English friends around us. It is not often we can escape from them – like the poor they are always with us.

<sup>95</sup> *ACS*, 1 Sept. 1900.

<sup>96</sup> Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, p. 117.

<sup>97</sup> *The Times*, 19 Dec. 1904.

<sup>98</sup> See Schneer, *London 1900*, p. 94.

<sup>99</sup> See Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh* for an account of plays performed 1902-17. See also Lesa Ní Mhungaile, ‘Pádraic Ó Conaire, 1882-1928’, *DIB*; Vincent Morley, ‘P. T. MacFhionnlaoich [P. T. MacGinley], 1856-1942’, *DIB*.

shortened working week.<sup>100</sup> Norman McCord has highlighted increased leisure time and increased wages of the late 1800s as a significant factor in the growth of recreational activity for all but the poorest.<sup>101</sup> Increased educational opportunities for Catholics in Ireland during the late nineteenth century and the expansion of the civil service through open competitive examination also meant greater availability of jobs for Irish people in London, hence an influx of new GLL recruits.<sup>102</sup>

Highly educated, blessed with exceptional organisational skills and a gift for languages, O'Brien embarked on a tireless crusade to develop the GLL into a professional educational organisation. Rather surprisingly, however, he first made his mark in the field of Irish dancing. The GLL held the first ever Irish céilí in October 1897 and enthusiasm for the céilí format spread in both Britain and Ireland.<sup>103</sup> The London members, including O'Brien, became experts in the dances and were in high demand to give demonstrations and classes at the Oireachtas (annual gathering of the Gaelic League) and at feiseanna (festivals of Irish culture) in Ireland. Agnes Dodd, a native of Killorglin, described how 'some of us, including Art O'Brien and myself, toured around with the Keating Branch of the Gaelic League one summer [probably 1902] and we danced at Feis's [sic] in Youghal and Cork'.<sup>104</sup> O'Brien collected details of Irish dances on these travels and later collaborated with J. G. O'Keefe in the publication of *A handbook of Irish dance* in 1902.<sup>105</sup> Commenting on the book in 1990, Nicholas Carolan noted its importance as a historical document and as a source for later publications.<sup>106</sup> Catherine Foley refers to the appropriation of dance and the construction of a social dance event as 'a manifestation of the fact that dance was perceived to be an

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<sup>100</sup> Norman McCord, *British history, 1815-1906* (Oxford, 1991), p. 460.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 363.

<sup>102</sup> Hutchinson and O'Day, 'Gaelic revival', p. 264.

<sup>103</sup> Catherine E. Foley, *Step dancing in Ireland: culture and history* (Surrey, 2013), p. 135.

<sup>104</sup> Agnes Kilgallin, 'Memories of the early days of the London Gaelic League' (MS privately held). I am grateful to Nuala Acton and Aideen Hamilton, relatives of Agnes, for access to these papers. Born Agnes Dodd in Killorglin, Co Kerry, she came to London in the late 1890s. She was a sister of Maurice Dodd, a member of the Ard-Choiste of the GLL, and married Charles Kilgallin, also a member of the Ard-Choiste, in 1904.

<sup>105</sup> Helen Brennan, *The story of Irish dance* (Dingle, 1999), p. 30; J. G. O'Keefe and Art O'Brien, *A handbook of Irish dance* (Dublin, 1902). O'Keefe was a native of Kanturk, Co. Cork, who worked in the War Office in London.

<sup>106</sup> Nicholas Carolan, 'The beginnings of céilí dancing: London in the 1890s' ([www.itma.ie](http://www.itma.ie)) (accessed 22 May 2014), p. 6.

important and powerful ideological tool which facilitated the shaping, sensing and experiencing of Irish culture and identity'.<sup>107</sup>

The seemingly innocuous activity of dancing led to debates and disputes in the Gaelic League about what constituted 'Irish' dance. A letter to the *Freeman's Journal* criticised the *Handbook* because 'although the Londoners meant well' Irish dancing lived only in just a few remote corners of Connacht and nothing else was genuine.<sup>108</sup> The *Western People* caustically described the *Handbook* as in the style of the 'barrack-room' and 'music-hall'.<sup>109</sup> Moreover, it questioned the wisdom of learning Irish dancing from 'books inspired in London' and written by a man with 'an alarming cockney accent'. This presumably referred to O'Brien as O'Keeffe was reared in Ireland. What he thought of his Kensington accent being described as 'cockney' is not recorded! This debate emphasised again that in some minds there was a hierarchy of membership in the League and members in London were regarded as of lesser rank and suggests a strong ethnocentric tendency in Gaelic League circles in Ireland. A more sensible voice decried the squabble and declared that 'dancing, Irish or otherwise, will not make Ireland a nation — so there is no occasion to get hysterical about it'.<sup>110</sup>

O'Brien became assistant to W. P. Ryan, honorary secretary of the GLL, in 1903 and his new administrative duties left little time for dancing.<sup>111</sup> Ryan became a close friend of O'Brien's and helped hone his commitment to Irish cultural nationalism. O'Brien succeeded Ryan as honorary secretary in July 1905.<sup>112</sup> Thus within a few short years, O'Brien had assumed one of the most powerful positions in the GLL. While continuing to use the English form of his name he also began to use the Irish form interchangeably, using the more formal 'Ua Briain rather than 'Ó Briain'.<sup>113</sup> O'Brien became fluent in Irish very quickly and wrote extensively in Irish throughout his long career.

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<sup>107</sup> Foley, *Step dancing*, p. 136.

<sup>108</sup> Letter to *Freeman's Journal* (hereafter *FJ*), quoted in *IF*, Nov. 1904.

<sup>109</sup> *Western People*, 3 Sept. 1904.

<sup>110</sup> *IF*, Mar. 1906.

<sup>111</sup> Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, p. 72.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>113</sup> 'Ua' means 'of the house or family of' and suggests a dignified ancestry, rather than the more ordinary 'Ó' which means 'son of'.

From its early days the GLL attempted to professionalise the teaching of the Irish language and GLL teachers were very much to the fore in the development of modern teaching methods. The GLL arranged instruction for teachers in either the Gouin or the Berlitz methods. Gouin emphasised oral learning based on the demonstration of events and concepts, while Berlitz was based on total immersion in the language.<sup>114</sup> P. T. MacGinley, a GLL teacher, published a book on teaching Irish using the Gouin method which won a prize at the Oireachtas in 1902.<sup>115</sup> As previously noted, J. P. Henry of the Ard-Choiste had also written an Irish language handbook.<sup>116</sup> In addition to its own classes, the GLL also prevailed upon the London Board of Education to provide Irish classes as part of its evening programme of adult education.<sup>117</sup>

Finding competent teachers was difficult. One of the major contributions of the GLL was to persuade the Gaelic League in Ireland to establish ‘Irish colleges’ to help teachers improve their Irish.<sup>118</sup> Financial support and encouragement for the Irish colleges became a major aspect of the work of the GLL.<sup>119</sup> The *Irish Independent* reported that the London Gaelic League subscribed ‘liberally’ to the Munster College at Ballingearry.<sup>120</sup> Many London teachers, including Mac Coluim, Ó Conaire, MacGinley and Dr Henry, returned to Ireland to promote the colleges and to teach there.<sup>121</sup> This was one of the ironies of GLL activity — that in promoting the Irish language and Ireland itself, the natural outcome was for members to return to Ireland, thereby denying the GLL the support of some of its most enthusiastic activists.

In his analysis of the Gaelic League, McMahon has highlighted the process whereby ‘revivalists ... grasped “preserving the language” as a meta-concept, open to multiple understandings, only one of which required a personal commitment to

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<sup>114</sup> See Francois Gouin, *The art of teaching language* (1892); Maximilian D. Berlitz established the worldwide Berlitz language schools.

<sup>115</sup> P. T. MacGinley, *Handbook of Irish teaching founded on the discoveries of M. Gouin* (Dublin, 1903).

<sup>116</sup> Mac Énrí, *Handbook*.

<sup>117</sup> Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, p. 46.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42. See also Seán Ó Coigligh, ‘Na coláistí Gaeilge mar ghné d’athbheochan na Gaeilge, 1904-1912’ (PhD thesis, St Patrick’s College, Dublin City University, 2014).

<sup>119</sup> The financial records of the Coiste Gnótha in Dublin do not specify exactly where money for the colleges came from, so it is not possible to assess London contributions in relation to other areas. See Coiste an Airgid reports (NLI, Fionán Mac Collum papers, MS 24402).

<sup>120</sup> *II*, 8 Feb. 1905.

<sup>121</sup> See Donncha Ó Súilleabháin, *Na timirí i ré tosaigh an Chonartha, 1893-1927* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1990).

speaking the language'.<sup>122</sup> The success of the League in Ireland 'had a faddish attraction for hundreds of young men and women drawn to it more for its collateral social activities than for its language classes'.<sup>123</sup> Similarly, in London, the GLL teachers experienced problems with learners coming late to classes and who 'scarcely seemed to use their minds'.<sup>124</sup> O'Brien claimed many young men were 'eager to shoulder their pikes at the Rising of the Moon ... but they will not shoulder a grammar book'.<sup>125</sup> In the United States some members felt that those who did not learn the Irish language should not have the option of League classes in Irish dancing, singing and history.<sup>126</sup> By 1903, the New York Gaelic League stated its objective as the cultivation of the Irish language as a spoken language but noted that this would be achieved 'particularly in Ireland'.<sup>127</sup> This was probably a more realistic objective than forming Gaelic speaking areas in either London or the US. Úna Ní Bhroiméil's comment that in the US the language was 'a building block of ethnic pride and distinction' rather than a re-linguification attempt could equally be applied to London.<sup>128</sup> The idea of Irish as an everyday language in London rather than a hobby was never realistic. On the other hand the Irish language was an ideal means of demonstrating that even if one enjoyed London, one could remain apart from it.<sup>129</sup> Thus, the Irish language was more a signifier of nationality than a tool of communication.<sup>130</sup>

The GLL was incensed that many organisers of Irish events in London accepted negative Irish stereotypes and ran concerts which included songs like 'Delaney's chicken', 'Biddy Aroo' and 'Widow McCree'.<sup>131</sup> The stage Irishman was a popular nineteenth century character and 'Paddy was always fair game'.<sup>132</sup> In Britain cartoons frequently depicted the Irish as sly, simple, wild and reckless and newspapers

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<sup>122</sup> McMahon, *Grand opportunity*, p. 217.

<sup>123</sup> Dunleavy and Dunleavy, *Douglas Hyde*, p. 202.

<sup>124</sup> ACS, 11 Oct. 1902.

<sup>125</sup> *AtÉ*, Jan. 1911.

<sup>126</sup> Úna Ní Bhroiméil, 'The creation of an Irish culture in the United States: the Gaelic movement, 1870-1915', *New Hibernia Review/Iris Éireannach Nua*, 5:3 (Autumn 2001), pp 95-6.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>129</sup> Ní Dhulchaointigh, 'Irish population in London, 1900-14', p. 199.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>131</sup> ACS, 29 Nov. 1902.

<sup>132</sup> John Archer Jackson, *The Irish in Britain* (London, 1963), p. 156.

emphasised the brogue and the drollery of the Irish, particularly in court cases.<sup>133</sup> Stereotyping of ethnic groups was not confined to the Irish, however. A regular feature of London life in the 1900s were shows and entertainments featuring for instance ‘savage South Africans pursuing their ordinary vocations’ or ‘bush savages ... exhibiting the habits of their native country’.<sup>134</sup> Aidan Beatty, for instance, compares how Irish nationalists and Zionists sought to refute widespread stereotyping by crafting romantic and heroic images of their nation’s past.<sup>135</sup> Jonathan Schneer regards all of this stereotyping as a trend in popular entertainment which ‘extolled imperial themes, including the necessity of empire’ and drove home the message that ‘brave Britons had brought civilisation to savages, ruled them wisely, disciplined them when necessary [and] accepted as their due, the bounty which imperialism made possible’.<sup>136</sup>

On 22 April 1902 the GLL presented its alternative Irish concert to an attendance of 2800 at the Queen’s Hall in London. Fifteen songs were performed of which eleven were in Irish — among them *An Spailpín Fánach*, *Siúil a Ghrá* and *Máirín*, a new song composed by Douglas Hyde.<sup>137</sup> The concert also included harpists, violinists, pipers and a demonstration of Irish dancing. From then on, an annual St Patrick’s Day concert became the major showcase for the GLL and was a significant fund-raiser for the organisation. O’Brien became the main organiser of these concerts and found yet another sphere of work in which he excelled. These concerts also broadened his public profile within the Irish community outside the GLL and were the foundation for his subsequent pre-eminent position among Irish nationalists in London. His family background in the music industry was a huge asset, familiar as he was with the production requirements for concerts, the talent available and how fees should be structured. He also kept a very close eye on the accounts. One commentator referred to ‘the disciplinary days of Art O’Brien’.<sup>138</sup> While somewhat complimentary, there is also a slight edge to this description — presumably not everyone liked being

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Schneer, *London 1900*, pp 94-5.

<sup>135</sup> Aidan Beatty, *Masculinity and power in Irish nationalism, 1884-1938* (London, 2016).

<sup>136</sup> Schneer, *London 1900*, pp 97-106.

<sup>137</sup> Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, p. 39.

<sup>138</sup> *IF*, Apr. 1908.

whipped into line. O'Brien's criticism of the younger members of the GLL for their lack of responsibility when volunteering with the League must also have jarred with many.<sup>139</sup> Urging branch members of Forest Gate to bestir themselves he intoned: 'to my mind discipline and perfection are an ideal which differentiate man from the lower animals'.<sup>140</sup> He therefore wished the GLL and all Irish bodies to be the best organised in the world.<sup>141</sup> O'Brien, ever the perfectionist, set himself a difficult task, particularly when these organisations operated, for the most part, with voluntary effort.

In 1906 O'Brien's career took him to Liverpool and then to Sheffield where he worked for British Westinghouse Electrical Corporation.<sup>142</sup> Despite his disciplinary tendencies, a farewell tribute in *Inis Fáil* described him as 'the hungriest man for work ever known ... tactful to the point of genius'.<sup>143</sup> His absence from London caused major headaches in relation to the concerts and any help he could give from a distance was warmly received.<sup>144</sup> During this period C. B. (Charles Bertram) Dutton, a London-born stockbroker, emerged as a regular assistant to O'Brien both in relation to the concerts and the general finances of the GLL. Dutton had some Irish ancestry but no immediate Irish connections. He was, like O'Brien, highly organised and efficient and this led to a great working relationship between them for many years. He soldiered loyally with O'Brien right through the revolutionary period and beyond. They also shared the life experience of losing a father at a very young age — Dutton's father had died when he was just seven years old.

O'Brien returned to London in 1910 and resumed charge of the St Patrick's Day concerts.<sup>145</sup> Respected by many in the GLL, his full control irritated some concert-goers, however. P. S. O'Hegarty was highly critical of the 1912 concert, especially its lack of 'patriotic songs'.<sup>146</sup> Another concert-goer complained that members of the festival committee 'are afraid that even one Sasanach might be tempted to pay two shillings for an evening's entertainment and go away disgusted with those rebel

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<sup>139</sup> *IF*, Apr. 1906.

<sup>140</sup> O'Brien, address to Forest Gate branch of GLL, 30 Sept. 1910 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8417/1).

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, p. 96; O'Brien to James O'Keeffe, 23 Feb. 1907 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8436/7).

<sup>143</sup> *IF*, Feb. 1906

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, p. 139.

<sup>146</sup> *AtÉ*, April 1912.



Irish'.<sup>147</sup> She went on to vilify 'the pathetic figure of Art O'Brien' and in the ultimate insult said that 'filtration of that deadly disease called seoninism' (aping the actions and traits of the British) was the main feature of the concert.<sup>148</sup> The difficulties for O'Brien in striking a balance were encapsulated in another reader's response however:

We must hear a few free defiant songs now and then or else we shall become 'respectable' nationalists and West Britons ... but ... the whole programme should not be taken up with rousing patriotic songs. The Gaelic League is non-political and people of all shades of political thought belong to it.<sup>149</sup>

O'Brien, ever the pragmatist, realised that there were not enough Irish 'rebels' in London to support such elaborate concerts and that it was important to attract the wider Irish community. His actions in this regard are also a clear indication that he was not partial to advanced nationalism at that time. The role of O'Hegarty in this controversy is not surprising given his membership of the IRB and Cumann na nGaedheal, discussed later in this chapter.<sup>150</sup> O'Brien held very much to the cultural nationalism brief of the GLL and was sensitive to the wider Irish political landscape of home rule. Chastened and annoyed by the criticism, he relinquished control of the concerts in 1913.<sup>151</sup>

From the 1880s onwards, an increase in basic literacy and increased spending power in cities like London led to an upsurge in recreational reading — it had become the norm for people to buy newspapers and magazines.<sup>152</sup> *An Claidheamh Soluis*, the main propaganda organ of the Gaelic League, was sold throughout the London branches of the League.<sup>153</sup> In its first edition it carried reports of activities in the Forest Gate branch and thereafter most editions carried updates on classes, events and festivals in London. Nevertheless, GLL members felt they did not get enough coverage. In 1900 the honorary secretary wrote a series of letters to the editor, Eoin MacNeill, complaining that the tone of the newspaper implied that branches of the

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., May 1912, Nora Ní Dhéigidion to the editor.

<sup>148</sup> AtÉ, May 1912.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., Sidheóg Ní Annáin to the editor.

<sup>150</sup> Cumann na nGaedheal, the forerunner of Arthur Griffith's Sinn Féin, is discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>151</sup> Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, p. 153.

<sup>152</sup> McCord, *British history*, p. 461.

<sup>153</sup> See Uí Chollatáin, 'An Claidheamh Soluis agus Fáinne an Lae'.

League abroad were of little use to the movement.<sup>154</sup> The Londoners deeply resented the lack of recognition given in Ireland to their activities to promote the language.

By 1904 the GLL was sufficiently confident to produce its own newspaper, *Inis Fáil*.<sup>155</sup> Published monthly, it was sold at all GLL classes and social events throughout London for 2d. Its first editor was W. P. Ryan whose journalistic experience made him an ideal choice. A major function of the magazine was to inform the Irish in London about Ireland itself. While O'Brien contributed articles from time to time, his main involvement was as part of the management and production team in his capacity as honorary secretary of the GLL. By 1908 *Inis Fáil* was in financial difficulties, with losses of £31 8s.<sup>156</sup> Publication was finally suspended in May 1910 in the face of further losses.<sup>157</sup> Given the precarious state of its finances one might have expected the GLL to steer clear of the expense of further publishing endeavours, but publishing its own newspaper was a vital means of self-advertisement and promotion. A new newspaper named *An tÉireannach* was launched in July 1910. It was hoped that greater co-operation between all the London Irish societies would result in strong sales. It was also intended that this paper would have more latitude than *Inis Fáil* and would include the political opinions of contributors for which the GLL was not responsible.<sup>158</sup> O'Brien was not involved in the plans for the newspaper because he was still working in Sheffield but he immediately realised the folly of embarking on a new publication and was also critical of the proposal to include political opinion. On his insistence the Coiste Gnótha (executive committee of the Gaelic League in Ireland) was consulted about the political content plans.<sup>159</sup> The GLL was duly informed that this was not permissible.<sup>160</sup> The debate about political content and a political direction for the Gaelic League reflected what was occurring in Ireland at the time. Hyde had been warned about the capacity of Sinn Féiners to pull the Gaelic League 'further in their direction' and was aware that some young men were 'intense and impatient' at the

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<sup>154</sup> O'Kane to MacNeill, n.d. (NLI, MacNeill papers, MS 10882).

<sup>155</sup> *An Claidheamh Soluis* continued to cover London events until mid-1910 but *Inis Fáil* replaced it as the choice of GLL readers.

<sup>156</sup> GLL, Ard-Choiste minutes (hereafter ACM), 14 Aug. 1908 (NLI, Conradh na Gaeilge (hereafter CnaG), MS 9777).

<sup>157</sup> GLL, ACM, 27 July 1909 (NLI, CnaG, MS 9778).

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 May 1910

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 May 1910.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 June 1910.

slowness of non-political methods.<sup>161</sup> While O'Brien had genuine concerns about the finances and content of the newly proposed newspaper, his objections were certainly shaped by irritation that he had not been consulted about the plans in the first place.

The Ard-Choiste bowed to the inevitable in August 1911 when they appointed O'Brien as manager of *An tÉireannach* in a vain attempt to stem mounting losses.<sup>162</sup> He reported that prior to his management there had been 'no books or records', in fact 'no system at all'.<sup>163</sup> To his supremely organised mind this was the ultimate sin. Despite O'Brien's best efforts, and some brief editorial assistance from Michael Collins in the summer of 1913,<sup>164</sup> the paper's last edition was published in October 1913. The only objections to the cessation came from Collins and O'Hegarty.<sup>165</sup> From an IRB perspective they may have been reluctant to leave the Irish in London without a voice they could control if the need arose. There was no personal animosity between O'Brien and Collins, however, and their endeavours in the GLL at this time laid the foundation for a friendship which lasted until the aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921.

While some members of the GLL were also members of the GAA, there is little reference to the GAA in the Ard-Choiste minutes. The main contact with the GAA was to encourage it to use GLL newspapers to advertise its fixtures and outings. The GAA was critical of GLL members, however, suggesting that not more than five per cent of them who were fit for athletics took part in GAA activities.<sup>166</sup> *An Inis Fáil* contributor wrote that 'with a few honourable exceptions, the members of the Gaelic League in no way encourage ... the revival of those magnificent Irish games'.<sup>167</sup> O'Brien was a member of the GAA having joined the Geraldine's Club on its formation in 1904.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Dunleavy and Dunleavy, *Douglas Hyde*, pp 314-15.

<sup>162</sup> GLL, ACM, 2 Aug. 1911 (NLI, CnaG, MS 9778).

<sup>163</sup> Handwritten copy of report on *An tÉireannach* by O'Brien, 7 Feb. 1912, held in an envelope enclosed in NLI, CnaG, MS 9778.

<sup>164</sup> GLL, ACM, 10 June 1913 (NLI, CnaG, MS 9778). Collins joined the Gaelic League shortly after his arrival in London in 1906 but was initially a casual attendee. By 1911, however, he was Secretary of the Kensington Branch. Despite taking a keen interest from then on in GLL policy matters his attempts to get elected to the Ard-Choiste over the next few years failed. See Hart, *Mick*, pp 55-8; GLL ACM minutes, 1 July 1913 & 31 May 1915 (NLI, CnaG, MS 9778).

<sup>165</sup> GLL, ACM, 31 May 1913 (NLI, CnaG, MS 9778).

<sup>166</sup> *IF*, Mar. 1906.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> Copy of article by O'Brien in *An Camán*, n.d. (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8436/19).

There is no evidence that O'Brien ever played the games but he was on the list of 'honourable exceptions' referred to above, who were happy to promote native Irish games.<sup>169</sup> The club minutes 1904-1915 show that he never held office and that he did not contribute to discussions at half-yearly meetings held every January and July.<sup>170</sup> Like the GLL, the GAA had an avowed non-political stance, but as Stephen Moore and Paul Darby have commented 'it was not long before its membership came to reflect a growing militancy among sections of the Irish in London'.<sup>171</sup> The GAA in London was seen by the IRB as a natural recruiting ground for young athletic men who might be useful to the Irish cause. As early as 1893 an IRB organiser was dispatched from Ireland to recruit from the GAA in London.<sup>172</sup> And while it would be wrong to assume strong separatist or militant ideals for all members<sup>173</sup> the role of Liam McCarthy, a staunch IRB man, as treasurer and then chairman of the London County Board from 1898 to 1907 sent out a clear signal that this organisation was strongly nationalist and welcomed militants to the fold. When he briefly resigned as chairman in 1908 he was replaced by Sam Maguire, another iconic IRB man. P. S. O'Hegarty and Michael Collins joined the list of IRB stalwarts who graced the meeting rooms and playing fields of London GAA and while 'merely having revolutionaries in its ranks does not in itself make the GAA a revolutionary body',<sup>174</sup> the prominent positions of these IRB men in London GAA allowed it to retain and attract politically motivated nationalists into their ranks either as players, supporters or administrators.<sup>175</sup> As will be discussed in Chapter 3, it was the London GAA that was the key driver in the formation of the Volunteers there.<sup>176</sup>

London GAA was different to the GAA in Ireland, where although some individual members were members of the IRB and had strong separatist ideals, it was

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<sup>169</sup> Pat Griffin, *Gaelic hearts: a history of London GAA, 1896-1996* (London, 2011), p. 127; *IF*, Mar. 1906.

<sup>170</sup> Geraldine Athletic Club, minute book, 1904-9 (GAA National Archives, Dublin).

<sup>171</sup> Stephen Moore and Paul Darby, 'Gaelic games, Irish nationalist politics and the Irish diaspora in London, 1895-1915', *Sport in History*, 31:3 (Nov. 2011), p. 257. (<http://www.tandfonline.com>) (accessed Sept. 2015).

<sup>172</sup> F. de Búrca (IMA, BMH, WS 105, p. 1).

<sup>173</sup> See David Hassan and Andrew Maguire, 'The GAA and revolutionary Irish politics in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland', *Sport in Society*, 19:1 (23 June 2015), p. 57. (<http://www.tandfonline.com>) (accessed June 2018).

<sup>174</sup> Hassan and Maguire, 'GAA and revolutionary Irish politics', p. 60.

<sup>175</sup> Moore and Darby, 'Gaelic games', p. 277.

<sup>176</sup> Joseph Good (IMA, BMH, WS 388, p. 2).

not radically separatist. As Murphy has pointed out, in an era of political revolution the GAA in Ireland was more impacted upon than impactful.<sup>177</sup> Of seventy GAA clubs in Dublin, thirty-two had three or fewer members who took part in the 1916 Rising, while seventeen clubs had no members involved.<sup>178</sup> William Nolan concludes that it was Gaelic League membership rather than GAA membership that determined involvement in the Rising in Dublin.<sup>179</sup>

### 1.7 The GLL and the Catholic Church

The GLL did not operate in a cultural vacuum but was part of a wider London life both spiritually and politically. The GLL was certainly not beholden to the Catholic Church in any sense and in common with the League in Ireland, the GLL contained anti-clerical members side by side with those who genuinely respected priests.<sup>180</sup> While the GLL valued the role of dedicated priest members who were major enthusiasts for the language, a roll-call of about 500 members of the GLL published in *Inis Fáil* in April 1906 lists only thirteen priests, which shows that they were not a significant element in the GLL.<sup>181</sup> They were, however, over-represented on the Ard-Choiste, given that there were two clerical members most years.<sup>182</sup>

St Patrick's Day was a major focal point for the GLL. In 1905 Westminster Cathedral was offered as the venue for the St Patrick's Day Mass and this was recognised as a great honour for the Irish community. Once again, O'Brien leapt into action by joining the 'Religious Celebration Committee' which was instigated by the GLL but set up separately to conform to the non-sectarian ethos of the Gaelic League.<sup>183</sup> The Mass was a great success with an estimated attendance of 5,000. In his memoirs, John Pius Boland MP described the cathedral as filled to overflowing with

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<sup>177</sup> William Murphy, 'The GAA during the Irish revolution, 1913-1923', in Mike Cronin, William Murphy and Paul Rouse (eds), *The Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884-2009* (Dublin, 2009), p. 73.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>179</sup> William Nolan (ed.), *The Gaelic Athletic Association in Dublin, 1884-2000* (3 vols, Dublin, 2005), p. 126.

<sup>180</sup> See McMahan, *Grand opportunity*, p. 82.

<sup>181</sup> *IF*, Apr. 1906.

<sup>182</sup> GLL, ACM (NLI, CnaG, MS 9777-8); GLL leaflet 1902 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8435/1); GLL Annual Report 1902-3 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8433/40); *Guth na nGaedheal* 1904, 1905.

<sup>183</sup> Programme for St Patrick's Day Mass, 19 Mar. 1905 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8435/1).

people standing in the aisles and side-chapels.<sup>184</sup> The event recognised Irish as a living language and heralded its importance in the lives of the London-Irish.

The St Patrick's Day celebratory Mass took place in Westminster until 1908 when Archbishop Francis Bourne<sup>185</sup> banned the use of the Irish language in his cathedral.<sup>186</sup> 'It is not quite seemly', he wrote, 'that the prayer for the conversion of England and the Divine Praises which are prescribed to be said in English by the Celebrant at the altar, should be recited in another language in the pulpit by one who is not the celebrant'.<sup>187</sup> Handwritten notes in the Bourne papers expressed concern that the GLL 'would take over the cathedral' and that the archbishop and the cathedral authorities would lose control.<sup>188</sup> It seems that the procession to the cathedral with flags and music also angered Bourne.<sup>189</sup> Although he had an Irish mother, Bourne was educated for the priesthood in England, France and Belgium. There was 'nothing very Irish about him' and he appears to have become concerned that the Irish language had political undertones.<sup>190</sup> The GLL transferred the Mass to Dockhead Cathedral in the diocese of Southwark, where Archbishop Peter Amigo was much more sympathetic to the Irish.<sup>191</sup> The GLL members were furious and called on all the Irish organisations in London to attend a protest meeting on 22 April 1908 where this insult to the Irish language was roundly condemned.<sup>192</sup> The protest indicated that the GLL saw itself as independent of the Catholic Church and was certainly not concerned about approval from the hierarchy. A statement issued after the meeting noted that the right to hold services in their own language was enjoyed by practically every other body of foreign Catholics in the diocese.<sup>193</sup> The *Irish Independent* reported that the archbishop had

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<sup>184</sup> John P. Boland, *Irishman's day: a day in the life of an Irish MP* (London, 1944), p. 134. Boland's involvement in the GLL is discussed below.

<sup>185</sup> See Rene Kollar, 'Bourne, Francis Alphonsus, 1861-1935', *Oxford dictionary of national biography* (hereafter *ODNB*). Bourne became Cardinal of Westminster in 1910.

<sup>186</sup> Bourne to Fr. David Browne, 3 Jan. 1908 (Westminster Diocesan Archives (hereafter WDA), Bourne papers, BO 5/83g); see also Kollar, 'Francis Alphonsus Bourne'.

<sup>187</sup> Bourne to Browne, 3 Jan. 1908 (WDA, Bourne papers, BO 5/83g).

<sup>188</sup> Unsigned handwritten notes, n.d., *ibid*.

<sup>189</sup> Bourne to Browne, 3 Jan. 1908, *ibid*.

<sup>190</sup> Sheridan Gilley, 'English Catholic attitudes to Irish Catholics', *Immigrants and minorities: historical studies in ethnicity, migration and diaspora*, 27:2/3 (Jul/Nov. 2009), p. 228.

<sup>191</sup> Amigo was also in dispute with Bourne about financial matters. See Michael Clifton, 'Peter Emmanuel Amigo, 1864-1949', *ODNB*.

<sup>192</sup> Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, p. 115.

<sup>193</sup> Press statement issued by the GLL, Apr. 1908 (WDA, Bourne papers, BO5/83g).

been influenced by ‘a coterie of English Tory Catholics who had always been against Ireland’.<sup>194</sup> *An Claidheamh Soluis* proclaimed ‘we have our own language and none can express our religious convictions [and] our inmost thoughts more clearly or more effectively’.<sup>195</sup>

The fury of the London GLL at their treatment by Bourne may also have reflected tensions in Ireland between the Catholic Church and the Gaelic League in 1908. According to J. E. Dunleavy and G. W. Dunleavy, there were rumours that clerical dissidents on the Coiste Gnótha in Dublin were planning to oust Hyde and replace him with a ‘clerical Gaelic League with a bishop at its head’.<sup>196</sup> This was as a result of the ongoing debate on whether Irish should be a compulsory subject for matriculation in the National University — an essential requirement for the Gaelic League, but opposed by the Catholic Church who feared students might go to the Protestant Trinity College which had no such requirement. Writing to Archbishop William Walsh of Dublin, later in 1908, Cardinal Michael Logue, primate of All Ireland, referred to the actions of the Gaelic League as ‘very inconvenient ... promising headless correspondents with a platform from which to raise questionable views’.<sup>197</sup> Hyde just two years earlier had written that he was very concerned with ‘avoiding at all hasards [sic] any clash with the priest or the church’ seeing their support as crucial to the success of the League.<sup>198</sup> However, by the end of 1908, relations were strained with the hierarchy both in Ireland and London.<sup>199</sup>

Hutchinson and O’Day believe that lack of hierarchical support hindered the growth of the GLL but it could also be argued that an enthusiastic local priest with good organisational ability was far more valuable than hierarchical approval.<sup>200</sup> Indeed, many of the GLL’s classes were held in local Catholic schools.<sup>201</sup> It should also

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<sup>194</sup> *II*, 27 May 1908.

<sup>195</sup> *ACS*, 9 May 1908.

<sup>196</sup> Dunleavy and Dunleavy, *Douglas Hyde*, p. 307.

<sup>197</sup> Logue to Walsh, 18 Dec. 1908 (Dublin Diocesan Archives (hereafter DDA), Archbishop Walsh papers, Bishops’ correspondence, 1908).

<sup>198</sup> Dunleavy and Dunleavy, *Douglas Hyde*, p. 301.

<sup>199</sup> A review of Archbishop Walsh’s papers for this period yields no surviving correspondence between him and Bourne on the subject of the Gaelic League. (DDA, Archbishop Walsh papers, Bishops’ correspondence, 1908-1921).

<sup>200</sup> Hutchinson and O’Day, ‘Gaelic revival’, p. 270.

<sup>201</sup> GLL, List of Classes, 1902 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8435/1).

be noted that as very few of the English hierarchy were Irish or of Irish background it was surely unreasonable to expect that they would provide support.<sup>202</sup> O'Brien did not give any overt indication of religious zeal but was respectful of the church and its ministers and in particular understood their role as intermediaries with the wider Irish community. This mirrors what Joost Augusteijn describes as a very practical attitude to the church taken by Patrick Pearse in Ireland: 'He was always extremely deferential ... particularly in his various positions in the Gaelic League. Clerical support was vital to the causes he was involved in'.<sup>203</sup> A priest at Sunday Mass could canvass a far greater crowd to attend a concert, Irish class or public meeting. The main conflict between the League in Ireland and the Catholic Church which wanted 'to promote the Catholic religion rather than the Irish language as the central badge of Irish identity'<sup>204</sup> was largely irrelevant in London, giving the relatively small numbers involved. Thus, the local church played a supportive rather than an influential role with the GLL. This was in marked contrast to life for the Welsh community in London where their social life was very much centred on their chapels which provided Welsh language and cultural activities.<sup>205</sup>

### **1.8 Irish nationalist politics in London, 1900-1913**

Despite its apolitical constitution, it was impossible for the Gaelic League to divorce itself completely from politics and some commentators doubt that the Gaelic League could ever be described as non-political. For P. J. Mathews, the Gaelic League's promotion of a language not recognised in law by the British state 'at a key moment in Ireland's decolonization' meant that its *raison d'être* was by nature political.<sup>206</sup> In 1902 a Gaelic League pamphlet declared that 'the Irish language is the mind, the soul, the great bulwark, the most manifest expression of Irish nationality'.<sup>207</sup> In addition, as McMahon has observed, English speakers found it difficult to differentiate between *Conradh na Gaeilge* and other organisations with Irish names — so politics and

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<sup>202</sup> For an account of the small number of Irish in the hierarchy in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century see Gilley, 'English Catholic attitudes to Irish Catholics'.

<sup>203</sup> Joost Augusteijn, *Patrick Pearse: the making of a revolutionary* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp 122-3.

<sup>204</sup> Mathews, *Revival*, p. 26.

<sup>205</sup> Emrys Jones, *The Welsh in London, 1500-2000* (Cardiff, 2001), p. 116.

<sup>206</sup> Mathews, *Revival*, p. 25.

<sup>207</sup> M. P. Hickey, *The Irish language movement: its genesis, growth and progress*, Gaelic League Pamphlet no. 29 (Dublin, 1902).



language tended to be lumped together.<sup>208</sup> Similar issues arose for the GLL which shared offices in Chancery Street with various societies that were avowedly more political having emerged from an inherently Fenian background.<sup>209</sup> The concept of Fenianism resonated with many Irish through the latter half of the nineteenth century as key figures such as John Devoy and O'Donovan Rossa maintained an iconic status among the Irish at home and abroad.<sup>210</sup> London-Irish nationalist political organisations could be summarised as having an undercurrent of Fenianism which took on new identities in response to developments in Ireland. There was never any sense that direction was coming *from* London. Foster describes this activity as 'violent metaphors employed without any necessary thought of revolution'.<sup>211</sup> While there was some risk to their liberty and job security in London, they were at one remove from an active role in Irish opposition to the British Empire.

By the time O'Brien arrived on the London-Irish scene in 1900 advanced Irish nationalist politics was mediated through the Irish National Club and the IRB and largely controlled by Mark Ryan and P. S. O'Hegarty. London Amnesty, Young Ireland and various 1798 committees<sup>212</sup> had been subsumed into the Irish National Club (INC) which was formed to show support for the Boers in South Africa in their fight against British Imperialism.<sup>213</sup> The club ran Irish language and Irish history classes and fostered Irish games and pastimes and was supportive of Irish industry. Mark Ryan recalled that 'we made no disguise of the fact our principles were the principles of Fenianism and we got many recruits for our underground movement [the IRB]'.<sup>214</sup> Fenianism in Britain, as in Ireland, had generally given way to the politics of the Land War and Home Rule. The 'New Departure' of 1879 allowed IRB members to 'agitate on behalf of an independent home rule party and for land reform while retaining the commitment to the achievement of independence through insurrection'.<sup>215</sup> Ryan however, continued

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<sup>208</sup> McMahon, *Grand opportunity*, p. 67.

<sup>209</sup> Ryan, *Fenian memories*, p. 172.

<sup>210</sup> See Shane Kenna, *Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa: unrepentant Fenian* (Sallins, 2015) and Terry Golway, *Irish rebel: John Devoy and America's fight for Irish freedom* (revised ed., Dublin, 2015).

<sup>211</sup> Foster, *Paddy and Mr. Punch*, p. 275.

<sup>212</sup> For an account of Young Ireland and Amnesty in London see Ryan, *Fenian memories*: see also Senia Pašeta '1798 in 1898: the politics of commemoration', *The Irish Review*, 22 (Summer 1998), pp 46-53.

<sup>213</sup> Ryan, *Fenian memories*, pp 179, 191.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>215</sup> M. J. Kelly, *The Fenian ideal and Irish nationalism, 1882-1916* (Woodbridge, 2006), p. 3.

to be of interest to the British security forces and his travel to and from Ireland was monitored.<sup>216</sup> Richard Connolly recalled that he was initiated into the IRB at the INC in 1900 by Michael MacWhite.<sup>217</sup> Connolly also remembered a visit by Fred Allan, then a leading member of the IRB in Dublin.<sup>218</sup> Bryan Cusack was in no doubt that the INC which he joined 'was really a cover for an IRB circle' but as other social groups also held meetings in the same place he felt that the IRB organisation was 'not obvious'.<sup>219</sup> Ryan remembered Scotland Yard spies attending their meetings but wrote that 'on the surface everything was quite constitutional' and all of their members escaped the clutches of the law.<sup>220</sup>

Parallel to this 'over-ground' and outwardly legal organisation, there were about eight to ten sections of the IRB in London in the early 1900s with new members regularly transferring from Ireland.<sup>221</sup> O'Hegarty described the composition of his section as around fourteen members in the twenty to thirty age-group who were mainly civil servants, post office sorting clerks and the older generation represented by Ryan, Dr Anthony McBride and Dr David Barry.<sup>222</sup> O'Hegarty became section master in 1905 and was elected to the Supreme Council of the IRB in 1906/7 representing the South of England.<sup>223</sup> By 1909 the London IRB had 100 members.<sup>224</sup> A key change in the IRB by the early twentieth century was that it no longer planned an armed insurrection of its own but instead it operated in secret trying to manipulate 'front organisations' by placing IRB members in key positions.<sup>225</sup> Kieron Curtis describes O'Hegarty's attitude to physical force nationalism as one which emphasised the importance of adequate preparation and this ties in with the overall ethos of the IRB in the early 1900s.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> See Inspector-General reports to Chief Secretary Dublin Castle, June 1904 (National Archives of Ireland (hereafter NAI), Crime Branch Special records (hereafter CBS), Précis, box 3, 29621/S).

<sup>217</sup> See Michael Kennedy 'Michael MacWhite, 1883-1958', *DIB*.

<sup>218</sup> Richard Connolly (IMA, BMH, WS 523, p. 1).

<sup>219</sup> Bryan Cusack (IMA, BMH, WS 736, p. 1).

<sup>220</sup> Ryan, *Fenian memories*, p. 192.

<sup>221</sup> P. S. O'Hegarty (IMA, BMH, WS 26, p. 1).

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>225</sup> John Newsinger, *Fenianism in mid-Victorian Britain* (London, 1994), p. 79.

<sup>226</sup> Kieron Curtis, *P. S. O'Hegarty, 1879-1955: Sinn Féin Fenian* (London, 2012), p. 26.

Cumann na nGaedheal, formed by Arthur Griffith in Ireland in 1900 to serve as a loose federation of several groups promoting Irish self-reliance and independence, and the more separatist Dungannon clubs founded by Bulmer Hobson and Denis McCullough in 1905, found their way to London with the ubiquitous O’Hegarty filling various roles in both.<sup>227</sup> In 1903 Mark Ryan joined O’Hegarty on the executive of Cumann na nGaedheal.<sup>228</sup> Without their input it is hard to see how these organisations could have continued. Their involvement affirms Michael Laffan’s observation that Cumann na nGaedheal was yet another front for the IRB.<sup>229</sup> The already very crowded London-Irish scene also contained the remnants of the National Council, an umbrella group of Irish nationalist organisations first formed by Griffith in 1903 to organise protests against the visit of King Edward VII to Ireland.<sup>230</sup> Ryan was a member and the ever active O’Hegarty was listed as secretary of the Central Branch in 1907.<sup>231</sup> The membership of these organisations was tiny with much overlap.

In 1907 when Cumann na nGaedheal, the Dungannon Clubs and the National Council in Ireland eventually merged to form ‘The Sinn Féin Organisation’ subsequently called ‘Sinn Féin’, the clubs in London followed suit. Marnie Hay has pointed out that pressure to amalgamate came from both London and the United States which urged unity of purpose and a rationalisation of resources in Ireland. In particular, Irish-American nationalists were not keen to provide financial assistance unless there was a more coherent strategy.<sup>232</sup> Sinn Féin’s grand objective was the establishment of the independence of Ireland but as F. S. L. Lyons has commented ‘quite what this meant was ambiguous’.<sup>233</sup> Mark Ryan pointed out that at its inception Sinn Féin ‘did not seek absolute separation from England and it had no connection with the physical force movement’.<sup>234</sup> He also commented that as Fenians ‘some of them felt that a movement which was founded on the repudiation of England’s claim

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<sup>227</sup> Ó hÉigearthaigh, ‘Cuimhní ar Éirinn na nGaedheal i Londain I mblianta tosaigh an chéid’, *Feasta* (Meitheamh 1954), p. 2.

<sup>228</sup> Ryan, *Fenian memories*, p. 201.

<sup>229</sup> Michael Laffan, *The resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Féin party, 1916-1923* (Dublin, 1999), p. 21.

<sup>230</sup> Lyons, *Ireland since the famine*, p. 252.

<sup>231</sup> Comhairle Náisiúnta [National Council], Central branch programme of lectures, 1907 (NLI, EPH B578).

<sup>232</sup> Marnie Hay, *Bulmer Hobson and the nationalist movement in twentieth-century Ireland* (Manchester, 2009), p. 71.

<sup>233</sup> Lyons, *Ireland since the famine*, p. 253.

<sup>234</sup> Ryan, *Fenian memories*, p. 205.

to legislate for Ireland' was likely to help them in their objective and therefore they were happy to support Sinn Féin.<sup>235</sup> In London, Sinn Féin was much less vibrant than either the GAA or the GLL. This mirrors the fortunes of the organisation in Ireland where slow early growth was followed by a rapid decline.<sup>236</sup> Laffan refers to Sinn Féin 'in terminal decline' by 1914 and Tom Garvin has pointed out that before 1916 it 'was actually little more than a coterie of Dublin journalists, minor politicians, politicised students and office-workers'.<sup>237</sup> It was hardly surprising therefore that it was fairly invisible in London. In July 1912, Eamonn Ó Tuathaigh from London Sinn Féin requested a supply of the 'Home Rule and Finance pamphlets' which had been prepared in Dublin.<sup>238</sup> In line with all the other Irish-Ireland organisations in London Sinn Féin accepted the inevitability of home rule.

A majority of the GLL, including O'Brien, was focused on Ireland's language and culture in the context of impending home rule and had no thoughts of politics or revolution. Despite working very closely with Ryan and O'Hegarty in the GLL, O'Brien eschewed politics. He does not appear to have joined the INC but he did occasionally lecture there.<sup>239</sup> Although he joined Sinn Féin in 1912, he gave no indication of active membership until 1917.<sup>240</sup> While he eventually joined the IRB in June 1916,<sup>241</sup> the question arises as to whether Ryan attempted to induct him into the IRB in the early 1900s. O'Brien's enthusiasm and exceptional ability in GLL administration must have been obvious to Ryan. However, given O'Brien's English birth and accent and a lack of previous bona fides in Fenian organisations, he may have needed to prove himself reliable and loyal over a long period before induction. Concern that he was a British spy was another possibility. One should not discount either, a strong bias against an Englishman with a big job telling the Irish what to do! O'Brien was not diffident or humble — he was forthright in his views, did not suffer fools gladly and had the potential to threaten O'Hegarty's leadership of the IRB. The more mature Ryan may

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Laffan, *Resurrection*, p. 30.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., p. 33; Tom Garvin, *The evolution of Irish nationalist politics* (Dublin, 1981), p. 105.

<sup>238</sup> Sinn Féin residential council minutes, 25 July 1912 (National Museum of Ireland, Easter Rising collection, HE.EW.1290).

<sup>239</sup> *IF*, Dec. 1905. O'Brien's lecture was on the future of the Gaelic revival.

<sup>240</sup> Art Ua Briain, Sinn Féin membership form, n.d. but annotated 1912 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8431/1).

<sup>241</sup> O'Brien, handwritten notes, 1935 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8427/22).

well have sensed that they would clash with one another. It is also possible that O'Brien was asked to join but declined, regarding such membership as a greater commitment than he was willing to give in the early years of his Irish-Ireland activity. He may also have been wary of jeopardising his engineering career. Ryan, a successful medical doctor who used his spare time in the cause of Ireland, was certainly a role model for the young O'Brien and probably a father figure. He was always respectful of Ryan and later declined to accept the presidency of the GLL if Ryan was interested. Ryan also became his personal physician and after the 1916 Rising O'Brien took on Ryan's mantle as a champion of prisoners' rights.<sup>242</sup>

Although not active in London-Irish politics, through his GLL activities O'Brien came to know many of those who became major players in the Irish revolution. This had a significant bearing on his post-1916 Rising radicalization. O'Brien joined the Keating Branch of the Gaelic League in Dublin in the early 1900s and apparently visited whenever he was in town.<sup>243</sup> This branch was a stronghold of Munster Irish and according to Proinsias Mac Aonghusa was a movement within a movement: 'nach raibh aon chraobh eile den Chonradh chomh sáite sa pholaitíocht réabhlóideach'.<sup>244</sup> At the GLL annual meeting in September 1903 O'Brien encountered Patrick Pearse for the first time. Speaking in both Irish and English, Pearse encouraged all to be 'a helpful and vital part of Irish Ireland in the broad sense'.<sup>245</sup> O'Brien met Pearse several times over the following years and they became good friends. Although Pearse declined, O'Brien had invited him to stay in his own home when he came to speak at a GLL meeting in October 1915.<sup>246</sup> Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh and Eoin MacNeill also spoke at GLL meetings.<sup>247</sup> Éamonn Ceannt, who was a piper, performed in several St Patrick's Day concerts in London. This meant that GLL members, and O'Brien in particular, were quite familiar with many of those who held strong separatist views. In spite of these connections, however, the Ard-Choiste minutes of the period 1912-1913 indicate that the GLL

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<sup>242</sup> O'Brien to Mark Ryan, 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/35).

<sup>243</sup> Fiachra Éilgeach, 'Art Ó Briain', *Comhar* (Deire Fómhair 1949), p. 27.

<sup>244</sup> Mac Aonghusa, *Ar son na Gaeilge*, p. 132. Translation: There was no other branch of the League so immersed in revolutionary politics.

<sup>245</sup> Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, p. 72. The biographies of Pearse by Dudley Edwards and Augusteijn do not mention these short visits to London; GLL, Annual Report 1903-4 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8433/40).

<sup>246</sup> Pearse to J. F. Murphy, 29 Sept. 1915 in Séamas Ó Buachalla (ed.), *The letters of P. H. Pearse* (Buckinghamshire, 1980), p. 348.

<sup>247</sup> See Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, pp 112, 134.

concerned itself with matters directly related to the promotion of the Irish language rather than the febrile political situation and there is no evidence that O'Brien attempted to steer the GLL in any particular political direction during this period.

Following its reunification in 1900 the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) had a generally harmonious relationship with the Gaelic League in Ireland. John Redmond had been personally supportive of the Gaelic League since its inception and as James McConnel has observed, most MPs were happy to associate themselves with the League in their own constituencies and to act as patrons at concerts and feiseanna.<sup>248</sup> They also supported campaigns to promote Irish industries.<sup>249</sup> Michael Wheatley writes that encouragement of the local manifestations of Gaelic cultural nationalism was 'wholly consistent' with the prevailing outlook of leading nationalist MPs in the period 1910-16, while Jackson notes the 'reasonably extensive involvement' of home rule politicians in the GAA and the language movement up to 1914.<sup>250</sup> The great majority of Irish MPs, however, had little time for the idea that to speak Irish was to be somehow *more* Irish than those nationalists who were monoglot English speakers.<sup>251</sup>

The Ard-Choiste members of the GLL, including O'Brien, were not relying on Irish MPs for support nor were they regularly in their company. Benjamin Harrington highlighted the paradox of IPP members in London. While they might be important and influential figures in their constituencies in Ireland, they had no currency among the Irish in London and were 'virtual non-entities'.<sup>252</sup> MPs might attend St Patrick's Day concerts to remind them of home but there were no votes to be won from the London-Irish and therefore not much point in joining the GLL. The exceptions were Thomas O'Donnell (West Kerry) and John P. Boland (South Kerry) both of whom were keen Irish language enthusiasts. Born near Dingle and trained as a teacher, O'Donnell was a founding member of the Gaelic League. He ran an Irish language class in the

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<sup>248</sup> Dermot Meleady, *John Redmond, the national leader* (Kildare, 2014), p. 76; James McConnel, *The Irish Parliamentary Party and the third Home Rule crisis* (Dublin, 2013), p. 158.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>250</sup> Michael Wheatley, *Nationalism and the Irish party: provincial Ireland, 1910-1916* (Oxford, 2005), p. 255; Alvin Jackson, *Home Rule: an Irish history, 1800-2000* (London, 2003), p. 101.

<sup>251</sup> McConnel, *Irish Parliamentary Party*, p. 24.

<sup>252</sup> Benjamin Harrington, 'The London Irish: a study in political activism, 1870-1910' (PhD thesis, Princeton University, 1976), p. 291.

House of Commons in the early 1900s attended by twelve party colleagues.<sup>253</sup> John P. Boland was born in Dublin and was a key mover in the establishment of an Irish college at Glenbeigh in 1902 — a cause which was dear to the members of the GLL.<sup>254</sup> Boland was also a great supporter of the Aonach and was closely involved in the establishment of a trade mark for Irish produce — a celtic design with the inscription ‘Déanta in Éireann’.<sup>255</sup> In 1908 Boland became joint vice-president of the GLL with O’Brien.

A number of IPP members, however, were ‘unconvinced that the League’s vision was compatible with Home Rule’.<sup>256</sup> George A. Birmingham put it quite succinctly: ‘people who began by regarding its love of Irish as a harmless silliness discovered that the language imperfectly and very partially learned by Gaelic Leaguers, was in some inexplicable way changing the whole spirit of the people’.<sup>257</sup> In 1907 Matthew Keating, MP for South Kilkenny, and a fluent Irish speaker, sent a furious letter to *Inis Fáil* suggesting that the GLL Ard-Choiste had been ‘captured’ by Sinn Féin ‘to promote their absurd doctrine of anti-Parliamentarianism’.<sup>258</sup> He also complained that the whole atmosphere of the organisation was against parliamentary activity.<sup>259</sup> Comments such as those by ‘Brian Donn’ in *Inis Fáil* that ‘most young men of spirit will find it more exciting to meet together for an evening’s rifle drill than to spend an hour trying to master irregular verbs’ must surely have contributed to Keating’s uneasiness.<sup>260</sup> The MP’s attack was robustly denounced by an editorial in *Inis Fáil* which insisted that the GLL had room ‘for the Unionist, the United Irish Leaguer, and the Sinn Féiner, the Catholic and the Protestant, for every true lover of Ireland indeed, to stand side by side’.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> J. Anthony Gaughan, *A political odyssey: Thomas O’Donnell, MP for West Kerry, 1900-1918* (Dublin, 1983), p. 32.

<sup>254</sup> Boland, *Irishman’s day*, p. 156.

<sup>255</sup> See *IF*, Dec. 1906. Translation: Made in Ireland. This trademark was a forerunner of today’s ‘Guaranteed Irish’ symbol.

<sup>256</sup> McConnel, *Irish Parliamentary Party*, p. 154.

<sup>257</sup> George A. Birmingham, *An Irishman looks at his world* (London, n.d.), pp 161-2. See Dunleavy and Dunleavy, *Hyde*, pp 62, 301, 308, 314.

<sup>258</sup> *IF*, Nov. 1907.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>260</sup> *IF*, June 1906.

<sup>261</sup> *IF*, Nov. 1907.

From 1912 onwards the expectation of Irish home rule gave rise to animated discussion among GLL members. Some were highly critical of the Coiste Gnótha in Dublin and insisted that the League should develop an educational and language policy to put before the new parliament as 'it will be composed mainly of people who will not care a button for the language'.<sup>262</sup> The 1911 census returns which recorded that spoken Irish was in decline also caused deep concern in London and there was little confidence that the likes of John Dillon, T. P. O'Connor or indeed Edward Carson would do much for the language.<sup>263</sup> The Irish language was indeed very far down the list of concerns for the IPP. The financial arrangements for Ireland, the concerns of the Catholic church about control and funding of education and not least the attempts to persuade the northern Unionist community that home rule would meet their interests, were the significant issues of the day.<sup>264</sup> Reservations about the motives of the League started to surface more and more in the IPP when the First World War started.<sup>265</sup> Thomas O'Donnell, once such a fervent ally and supporter, referred to the 'poison of the Gaelic League' in a letter to John Dillon in 1914.<sup>266</sup> In 1915 the resignation of Boland as vice-president severed the last link between the IPP and GLL.<sup>267</sup>

### 1.9 The GLL in the wider London context

Unlike Gaelic League members in the United States who saw no conflict between 'Irish-Americanism and being a loyal American' and who regularly concluded meetings with a rendition of the 'The Star Spangled Banner'<sup>268</sup> there was always an edge to proceedings in London, the heart of the British Empire. Gannon notes that the GLL portrayed itself as a frontier organisation between Gaelic respectability and English degenerative culture and that terminology such as 'cold, selfish, harmful and, more forcibly, poison, murder and lust' were frequent associations made with life outside

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<sup>262</sup> *AtÉ*, July 1912.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>264</sup> See Daithí Ó Corráin, 'Resigned to take the bill with its defects': the Catholic Church and the third home rule bill', in Gabriel Doherty (ed.), *The Home Rule crisis, 1912-14* (Cork, 2014), pp 185-209.

<sup>265</sup> McConnel, *Irish Parliamentary Party*, p. 162.

<sup>266</sup> Gaughan, *Political odyssey*, p. 97.

<sup>267</sup> GLL, ACM, 7 Apr. 1915 (NLI, CnaG, MS 9778).

<sup>268</sup> Ní Bhróiméil, 'The creation of an Irish culture in the United States', p. 98.



the Gaelic League in London.<sup>269</sup> Referring to life in London, Francis Fahy decried the 'fatal influence on an impressionable people [the Irish] of a debased literature, a low moral tone and a standard of life in which success wealth, power and empire are widely held as the highest ideals'.<sup>270</sup> Rev. P. S. Dineen described London as being 'in a corrupt and degenerate stage'.<sup>271</sup>

It is very difficult to reconcile this negativity about London with the relatively comfortable and happy lives of those who attended Irish classes and entertainments there and who also earned their living in many reputable organisations. The GLL was attempting to develop a sense of cultural nationalism within the nation which was the object of its disdain but which was also providing its members with their livelihoods. In addition, 'de-anglicisation' when one lived in Ireland had some rationale, but the concept had little applicability for those living in London. Milton Esman has observed that the ability of the diaspora to influence events at home is conditioned by the access to resources and the opportunities offered by the host society.<sup>272</sup> In the case of the GLL, the irony was that the secure well-paid employment which the host nation provided to Irish immigrants, coupled with the education it had given to the likes of O'Brien, ensured that they had the skills and the time to devote to what was essentially anti-British propaganda. Miroslav Hroch has highlighted the need for the educated members of a non-dominant ethnic group to try to establish their authority while maintaining the way of life and value system of the established ruling classes.<sup>273</sup> This encapsulated the life of the London Gaelic Leaguer — many working in professional occupations such as doctor, teacher and engineer while upholding the highest standards of professional integrity within the British system. In this O'Brien seems to have represented a classic dichotomy — totally committed to his engineering career in the UK with all its imperial trappings, but always focused on his 'spiritual home' in Ireland. It should also be noted that the activities of the GLL in the early years were less about cultural nationalism than an expression of the way immigrants

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<sup>269</sup> Darragh Gannon, 'Celticism in exile: the London Gaelic League, 1917-1921', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 30 (2010), pp 92-3.

<sup>270</sup> Francis A. Fahy, *A Gaelic League catechism* (Dublin, n.d.).

<sup>271</sup> P. S. Dineen, *Lectures on the Irish language movement* (Dublin, 1904), p. 48.

<sup>272</sup> Milton J. Esman 'Diasporas and international relations' in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (eds), *Ethnicity* (Oxford, 1996), pp 316-20.

<sup>273</sup> Miroslav Hroch, *Social preconditions of national revival in Europe* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 197.

typically behave. Denigration of the host nation was a common feature of immigrant life. The demonising of London and by extension mythologising of the homeland was by no means confined to the Irish. For the Welsh in London, Wales became a mythical haven<sup>274</sup> and London was depicted as a 'great sinful Babylon' by nineteenth-century Welsh writers such as Pugh.<sup>275</sup>

Esman also writes that *all* immigrant groups tend to maintain their links with their country of origin in terms of language, culture and political contact and that these links become a dimension of international politics.<sup>276</sup> In London GLL members witnessed at first hand the efforts of Russian Jews and Germans who wished to maintain their language and culture in an alien environment. *An Claidheamh Soluis* declared that 'East London has several lessons for Gaelic Leaguers. It is a home of hosts of immigrants ... who cling tenaciously to their own language and traditions which fact, as social scientists have pointed out, accounts for much of the grit and energy that enable them to go ahead in their new sphere'.<sup>277</sup> Their fellow Celts in London also provided inspiration and encouragement. Welsh language enthusiasts formed The Cymmrodorion Society in London in 1873 which campaigned for improvements in education in Wales, including the provision of a university.<sup>278</sup> According to Emrys Jones, the Welsh in London used their cultural activities as 'a temporary place of refuge where once a week or so they could have a cultural topping up and where they could speak their own language'.<sup>279</sup> In the early 1900s Scots Gaelic activity in London centred on the Gaelic Society of London (GSL) where language and literature were the main concerns.<sup>280</sup> They published a quarterly newspaper, *Guth na Bliadhna*, from 1904 to 1925, and organised a London Gaelic choir and church services in Irish.<sup>281</sup> The GLL newspaper *Inis Fáil* published details of GSL events and the two organisations exchanged history and language lecturers from time to time. The GSL was not a vibrant organisation, however, and it was not until after the 1916 Rising that

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<sup>274</sup> Jones, *Welsh in London*, p. 130

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13

<sup>276</sup> Esman 'Diasporas and international relations', p. 317.

<sup>277</sup> *ACS*, 8 Nov. 1902.

<sup>278</sup> Jones, *Welsh in London*, pp 115-7.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>280</sup> The Gaelic Society of London was founded in 1892 to preserve Scots Gaelic.

<sup>281</sup> Derick S. Thomson, 'Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar, 1869-1960', *ODNB*.

leading members Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar and William Gillies began to escalate their campaign for Scottish independence.<sup>282</sup>

The role of the GLL, therefore, in simply meeting the needs of a diaspora society should not be discounted. While its main focus was language, the GLL gave the Irish in London a rallying point which infused them with a sense of Irishness and allowed them to gather regularly at Irish-themed events. It was a support for those who were homesick and displaced and this function was very different to the role of the Gaelic League in Ireland. Revivalists abroad were concerned with the formation of a self-reliant Irish community by permeating all aspects of diaspora life with a sense of nationality.<sup>283</sup> Foster argues that 'creating a sense of national solidarity' was probably more important than extending the use of the Irish language among the Irish abroad.<sup>284</sup> That many Irish mythologised home did not mean that they were all budding nationalists. One contemporary perceptively suggested that when the Irish first landed in England 'they curse her and her people, in spite of the fact that they find snug berths within her domains'.<sup>285</sup> This writer also suggested that the concern of the Irish about home was 'all talk'.<sup>286</sup> Most GLL members were happy to assimilate and to use the GLL as a cultural outlet, others saw it as proof of their non-British future, while a small section were enthused by thoughts of fighting for an independent Ireland. Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh refers to 'the important and complex psychological function' which expatriate nationalism may have served by giving 'an exalted sense of purpose' to the lives of Irish immigrants.<sup>287</sup> The achievement of Irish independence, even if only culturally, had the potential to enhance their self-esteem. Significantly, they could also embrace the concept of an Irish-speaking Ireland safe in the knowledge that the actual practicalities of such a dramatic change were not going to trouble them in London.

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<sup>282</sup> See Thomson, 'Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar' and Richard D. Finlay 'William Gillies, 1865-1932', *ODNB*. Their links with O'Brien post 1916 are discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>283</sup> Hutchinson and O'Day, 'Gaelic revival', p. 262.

<sup>284</sup> Foster, *Vivid faces*, p. 54.

<sup>285</sup> *Penny Illustrated Paper*, 16 Mar. 1912.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>287</sup> Ó Tuathaigh, 'The Irish in nineteenth century Britain', p. 30.

## 1.10 The decline of the GLL

O'Brien was elected vice-president of the GLL in 1911.<sup>288</sup> Liam Mac Giolla Bhríde (also known as William Gibson and who became Lord Ashbourne in 1913) was president of the GLL at that time. Neither he nor J. P. Boland, the other vice-president, attended Ard-Choiste meetings regularly, so O'Brien was now in charge. An exemplary attendance record enabled him to take a firm grip of proceedings.<sup>289</sup> His trojan work was in vain, however. The GLL continued to decline due to financial constraints and lack of interest.<sup>290</sup> By November 1913 the cash assets of the GLL amounted to £36.6.5 but its liabilities were £166.0.08.<sup>291</sup> This reflected the decline in Gaelic League activity in Ireland despite Hyde's efforts to revive its flagging fortunes.<sup>292</sup> In the final edition of *An tÉireannach*, O'Brien addressed the members in English and bemoaned the fact that 'we have not and have not had for some time, sufficient workers with enthusiasm and initiative to keep this or any of our other activities going with success'.<sup>293</sup>

On a personal level, O'Brien made some life-long friends in the GLL. He and W. P. Ryan remained close all their lives and a warmth and personal concern was evident in their correspondence in later life.<sup>294</sup> This was despite the fact that Ryan was a lifelong pacifist.<sup>295</sup> O'Brien's close Dublin friends included J. G. O'Keeffe with whom he had collaborated on the Irish dance book and Fiachra Éilgeach (Risteard Ó Foghludha) who was chairman and founding member of the Keating Gaelic League branch and who described O'Brien as 'aerach, gáireathach'.<sup>296</sup> C. B. Dutton and O'Brien also remained close. Most of his enduring friendships arose, however, when he became immersed in the Irish nationalist cause after 1916.

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<sup>288</sup> GLL, ACM, 10 Jul. 1911 (NLI, CnaG, MS 9778). J. P. Boland MP was the second vice-president.

<sup>289</sup> Figures in *An tÉireannach* June 1912 show that O'Brien attended 14 of 17 Ard-Choiste meetings in 1911-12.

<sup>290</sup> Ó Briain, 'Gaedhil thar sáile', p. 123.

<sup>291</sup> GLL, ACM, 4 Nov. 1913 (NLI, CnaG, MS 9778).

<sup>292</sup> Dunleavy and Dunleavy, *Douglas Hyde*, pp 323-4; see also Pádraig Ó Fearáil, *The story of Conradh na Gaeilge* (Baile Átha Ciath, 1985), p. 42.

<sup>293</sup> *AtÉ*, Oct. 1913.

<sup>294</sup> O'Brien to W. P. Ryan, 30 May 1922, 1 Mar. 1935, 9 July 1935 (University College Dublin Archives (hereafter UCDA), W. P. Ryan papers, LA 11/81).

<sup>295</sup> Desmond Ryan, 'Liam P. Ó Riain and the making of a new Ireland', Lecture to Dublin District Council of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union, 7 Dec. 1943 (UCDA, Desmond Ryan papers, LA10/389).

<sup>296</sup> Fiachra Éilgeach, 'Art Ó Briain', p. 28. Translation: He was pleasant and cheerful.

As discussed above, O'Brien danced around Ireland with Agnes Dodd and other members of the Keating branch in the early 1900s. He wrote a poem about Carrantouhill for Agnes and in the dedication he refers to her as 'a stór' and 'a leanbh mo chroí'.<sup>297</sup> While extolling the virtues of Kerry in this poem, O'Brien refers to his own position as one 'of misery deep' while 'in exile I must weep'. Foster identifies common usage of the themes of exile and alienation as literary tropes for the Irish abroad but argues that these 'became increasingly a reflex action, not only bearing less and less similarity to emigrant experience as actually lived in the second and third generations, but also diverging more and more markedly from the reality of life in the old country'.<sup>298</sup> The concept of 'misery in exile' for O'Brien, the successful London-born electrical engineer in early 1900s London, was one of great exaggeration. It is possible that his professed love for Carrantouhill was a metaphor for his love for Agnes Dodd who did not return his affections — she married Charles Kilgallin of the GLL Ard-Choiste in 1904. She remained a life-long friend of O'Brien and his sister Geraldine, however.<sup>299</sup> O'Brien lived at home with his mother and his sister and was single all his life; he referred to 'the darkness of disappointed bachelorhood' in another poem.<sup>300</sup> This single life, and a certain loneliness, may well have been a significant spur to his total immersion in all matters Irish. Interestingly, he seems to have never contemplated a move to Ireland until his retirement. Given that a graduate of Faraday House, L. J. Kettle, was deputy city engineer in Dublin Corporation by 1912, he presumably could have got work in Ireland had he wished.<sup>301</sup> Attachment to his mother and the fact that his was the main income in the household were key factors in keeping him in London.

### 1.11 Conclusion

Between 1900 and 1913 the mission of the GLL was firmly education and entertainment. While members were very familiar with the ideology of advanced Irish nationalism and under pressure from some of its more vociferous proponents there

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<sup>297</sup> Private papers of Agnes Kilgallin (née Dodd). Translation: 'my darling' and 'child of my heart'.

<sup>298</sup> Foster, *Paddy and Mr. Punch*, p. 288.

<sup>299</sup> Interview with Nuala Acton of Kilcock, Co. Kildare (20 Sept. 2015). She is a grand-daughter of Agnes Dodd Kilgallin and recalled visiting Geraldine O'Brien with her in the 1950s.

<sup>300</sup> Poem by O'Brien, n.d. (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/29).

<sup>301</sup> *FHJ*, Jan. 1905; Patrick Long, 'Laurence Kettle, 1878-1960', *DIB*.

was no indication that the GLL was a hotbed of revolution nor was there evidence of the radicalizing force described by Foster. Neither was it an attempt at copper-fastening Irish identity with a view to making its voice heard in the British political sphere as suggested by Hutchinson and O'Day. This analysis supports Gannon's argument that leaders of the Gaelic League in Britain 'sank into roles on the periphery of Edwardian Irish immigration culture as the home rule movement re-emerged'.<sup>302</sup>

While O'Brien was the leading member of the Ard-Choiste of the GLL and contributed greatly to its activities, the organisation was neither large nor particularly successful. At its height in early 1904 there were some 2000 members and seventeen schools of Irish.<sup>303</sup> By 1906 there were only nine schools and the number continued to dwindle.<sup>304</sup> This mirrored the fortunes of the Gaelic League in Ireland.<sup>305</sup> The GLL was however, *the* vehicle which allowed O'Brien to demonstrate his great organisational talents, which confirmed his strong commitment to Ireland and which introduced him to many of those who would take part in the revolutionary activities of 1916-1921. It also immersed him in an organisation which had an underlying sense that it knew what was 'good for Ireland' — with its Buy Irish campaign, recommendations for teacher training colleges, publication of Irish language teaching manuals and contribution to positive images of Irish culture and people. This theme developed over time giving the impression that O'Brien and some other GLL members believed they were superior thinkers in relation to the future of Ireland — in effect a colonialist attitude to the 'poor Irish at home' — yet another dynamic of the migration story between sender and host nation.<sup>306</sup>

Given his significant ability and employability in the electrical engineering industry, it is reasonable to assume that O'Brien initially joined the GLL as a hobby and that it was hardly his intention in the early years to jeopardise his career. There was nothing dangerous or risky about the GLL — he could enjoy it without fear of sanction. An Irish father and an English mother sympathetic to Ireland moulded his early affinity

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<sup>302</sup> Gannon, 'Rise of the rainbow chasers', p. 116.

<sup>303</sup> Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, p. 78.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>305</sup> Hutchinson, *Dynamics*, p. 184.

<sup>306</sup> For an interesting summary of the various aspects of Irish migration dynamics see Enda Delaney, *Demography, state and society: Irish migration to Britain, 1921-1971* (Liverpool, 2000), pp 7-35.

with Ireland. His linguistic ability was yet another spur to him to progress his Irish language studies. O'Brien was different to other GLL members, however, needing neither 'a safe bridgehead to conduct an assault on the capital' nor the excitement of 'expatriate nationalism'.<sup>307</sup> Instead, the GLL afforded him the opportunity to use his excess energy and workaholic tendencies to take control of an organisation and mould it to his liking. His work and attention to detail were admired by many. His various roles in the GLL pandered to his love of authority and there were few with the energy or interest to challenge him. The only possible exception was O'Hegarty, but he was too busy with every other Irish organisation in London.

By 1913, however, O'Brien and his fellow GLL members were struggling to maintain their enthusiasm for Irish cultural nationalism and awaiting home rule in Ireland. The Irish language had not taken off in London or in Ireland. O'Brien was a rather disappointed man in 1913 and might well have wandered off to a new avocational interest. Instead, the formation of the Irish Volunteers and the onset of the First World War changed everything. O'Brien moved from law-abiding citizen to gun-runner in the context of the Volunteers first and was subsequently radicalized by the execution of the 1916 leaders. While typical of the conversion route for many in Ireland, there were few in London who embraced the cause with as much vigour and determination as O'Brien. In Chapter 2 his total commitment and centrality to the London operation is analysed.

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<sup>307</sup> White, *London in the twentieth century*, p. 98.

**‘Our martyred dead and our persecuted living’:  
Militant republican, 1914-1919**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The historiography of militant Irish nationalism in London during the revolutionary period has focused in the main on post-1916 activities.<sup>1</sup> This chapter teases out for the first time how some of the Irish in London came to support militant nationalism *before* 1916. Foster has stated that ‘radical nationalism’ was part of the package of the Gaelic League of London.<sup>2</sup> In fact, radicalism was not a key element of Gaelic League activity and few members embraced militant nationalism. The establishment of the Irish Volunteers, concern about conscription in England during the First World War and an underlying IRB mantra that England’s difficulty was Ireland’s opportunity brought a small number of Londoners into the militant fold. Thus O’Brien, with no prior military or IRB experience, found himself on the organising committee of the Volunteers in London as a representative of the GLL. The first part of this chapter analyses O’Brien’s gradual transition from pacifist to militarist. Having run guns to support home rule, it was a seamless move to gun-running for the 1916 Rising. The execution of the leaders of the Rising had a profound impact on O’Brien and from then on he was totally committed to the militant separatist cause. From 1916 onwards, he also managed to hone the activities of the GLL so that it became more aligned with militant separatism.

The second part of this chapter analyses how O’Brien galvanised a small enthusiastic group in the Irish National Relief Fund to provide support for all those interned or imprisoned in Britain after the Rising. He is frequently mentioned in studies of Irish political prisoners such as those by McConville and Murphy, but the scale of the operation and O’Brien’s immense contribution to prisoner welfare have not been described or analysed in detail to date.<sup>3</sup> This account therefore, is the first

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<sup>1</sup> Hart, ‘Operations Abroad’; Noonan, *IRA in Britain*.

<sup>2</sup> Foster, *Vivid faces*, p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> McConville, *Irish political prisoners, 1848-1922: theatres of war*; Murphy, *Political imprisonment*.



in-depth assessment of how O'Brien and his colleagues developed and sustained a comprehensive prisoner support system which lasted until well after the Treaty.

## 2.2 The Irish Volunteers

While the Gaelic League in Ireland was known to have branches with strong separatist and even militarist ideologies (particularly the Keating branch in Dublin), there was no equivalent radical branch in London. This did not mean that separatists and militants eschewed the GLL. In his Bureau of Military History (BMH) statement Richard Connolly recalled Gaelic League branches being used as 'cover' for IRB activities.<sup>4</sup> In addition, some leading Gaelic Leaguers such as O'Hegarty and Michael Collins were prominent IRB members. While the IRB may have wished to take over the Gaelic League in Ireland, there is little evidence of a similar desire in London. Until 1914 cultural nationalism among the GLL members ran in parallel with the constitutional home rule movement; it was not 'the avatar of a bloody revolution' but rather 'preparation for the Home Rule state'.<sup>5</sup> Joseph Good recalled that the GLL was 'a purely cultural organisation with no pretence whatsoever to the application of physical force as a means of obtaining independence for Ireland'.<sup>6</sup>

The rise of the Irish Volunteers north and south changed the cultural and political scene irrevocably. As Thomas Bartlett has commented, by 1912 'political moderation, reasoned debate and polite disagreement were being denounced on all sides as shameful, spineless and worthless; public space in Ireland was being rapidly militarised'.<sup>7</sup> The Irish Volunteers were founded in late 1913 in Dublin following the publication of Eoin MacNeill's article 'The North began' in *An Claidheamh Soluis*.<sup>8</sup> A meeting was held on 6 December 1913 to inaugurate the Irish Volunteers in London 'for the purpose of supporting the Home Rule Bill championed by John Redmond'.<sup>9</sup> The meeting was chaired by William (Liam) McCarthy<sup>10</sup> of the GAA and the main speaker was Colonel Arthur Lynch of Boer War fame. Over 100 men joined on that first

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Connolly (IMA, BMH, WS 523, p. 2).

<sup>5</sup> Alvin Jackson, *Home Rule*, pp 101-2.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Good (IMA, BMH, WS 388, p. 2).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: a history* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 371.

<sup>8</sup> ACS, 1 Nov. 1913.

<sup>9</sup> William D. Daly (IMA, BMH, WS 291, p. 1).

<sup>10</sup> Liam McCarthy — after whom the All-Ireland hurling trophy is named.

night but O'Brien was not involved at that point.<sup>11</sup> The first overtly political item on the GLL Ard-Choiste agenda did not arise until April 1914 when the London GAA asked if the GLL intended to form a branch of the Volunteers.<sup>12</sup> Although some members of the Ard-Choiste were reluctant, the minutes noted 'the Volunteer movement is not in any sense political ... its object is primarily to unite Irishmen of every creed and class in a movement to secure and maintain the liberties common to all the people of Ireland'. This direct quote from the manifesto of the Irish Volunteers served to assuage GLL anxiety and it was decided to send representatives, including O'Brien, to a meeting of the Irish societies in London in relation to the Volunteers.<sup>13</sup> O'Brien was then asked to join a committee tasked with drafting a constitution for the London Volunteers.<sup>14</sup> There is no subsequent reference to the Volunteers in the GLL minutes but the fact that Douglas Hyde reviewed the Volunteers at various venues in Ireland in July 1914 would have encouraged many GLL members including O'Brien to join.<sup>15</sup> O'Brien was an unlikely candidate for the Volunteer activities of drilling or bayonet attacks. By his own admission, he never participated in GAA sports, and by 1914 he was 42-years-old and rather portly. Instead, his forte lay in managing the finances for undercover gun-running. He later confirmed that from the start of the 'Great War' the supply of guns to Ireland was in the hands of a very small group led by himself and Sam Maguire.<sup>16</sup> Their involvement at this point, however, was in the context of arming the Volunteers, a task which was seen as necessary by many who did not envisage actual armed rebellion. Thus O'Brien, like many others, segued from cultural nationalism to militant activity. His position in British society made him an unlikely suspect and his engineering expertise was apposite. Many years later, police questioning a suspect in relation to his association with O'Brien summarised the attraction of his position: 'If you were working on that kind of thing you would find a man like Art O'Brien in a good social position and who was able to mix with good people in this country and you

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<sup>11</sup> William D. Daly (IMA, BMH, WS 291, p. 1).

<sup>12</sup> GLL, ACM, 7 Apr. 1914 (NLI, CnaG, MS 9778).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> *Irish Volunteer*, 11 July 1914.

<sup>15</sup> Dunleavy and Dunleavy, *Douglas Hyde*, p. 323.

<sup>16</sup> O'Brien, handwritten notes, 1935 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8427/22). See Margaret Walsh, *Sam Maguire: the enigmatic man behind Ireland's most prestigious trophy* (Cork, 2003); Kieran Connolly, *Sam Maguire: the man and the cup* (Cork, 2017) and Marie Coleman, 'Sam Maguire, 1877-1927', *DIB*.

would use him as a nominal open side'.<sup>17</sup> De Valera later recalled that O'Brien threw his whole heart and soul into the Volunteers and that he was a guide and friend to the younger men who joined.<sup>18</sup> The key conversion factor for the likes of O'Brien to the Volunteers was the support of Gaelic Leaguers such as Hyde, MacNeill and indeed constitutional nationalists like Redmond. When good upstanding, apparently law-abiding people, supported a Volunteer force, the jump from cultural nationalism to war was far less daunting and seemed respectable even. Rather than seeing people as being radicalized by the Gaelic League, therefore, much greater emphasis needs to be placed on the genesis of the Volunteers in London and how this legitimised gun-running. In later years, O'Brien explained this as 'the lucky accident of confused political circumstance which made the formation of the Volunteers a possibility' and which caused the ranks of the Volunteers to be swollen 'by a rush of the young adherents of the Gaelic movement'.<sup>19</sup> Without the Irish Volunteers these young men, including those with IRB sympathies, were rushing nowhere.

Membership of the Volunteers in London included people from all of the London-Irish sporting, cultural and political associations but Joseph Good regarded the GAA rather than the GLL as the driving force behind any revolutionary activity in London.<sup>20</sup> A distinct lack of arms defined their experience. Manus O'Boyle recalled drilling with dummy guns in Hammersmith Hall.<sup>21</sup> The Bermondsey company drilled in the crypt of the local church while the Shepherds Bush company drilled under railway arches with 'wooden guns'.<sup>22</sup> When the split in the Volunteers occurred in September 1914 following Redmond's call that they enlist, only a very small number of Londoners remained in the anti-Redmond 'Irish Volunteers'. A membership card of O'Brien's dated October 1914 confirms that he joined the breakaway 'Irish Volunteers'.<sup>23</sup> Seán Nunan recalled a 'strong body of IRB men' in this group, including Sam Maguire and Michael Collins.<sup>24</sup> While the Supreme Council of the IRB had advised members not to

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<sup>17</sup> Transcript of police interview with H. E. M. Bradley, 22 Mar. 1923 (UCDA, De Valera papers, P80/748).

<sup>18</sup> *IP*, 13 Aug. 1949.

<sup>19</sup> Art Ó Briain, 'London Gaels and the Easter Rising', *An Gaedheal*, 2:16 (20-27 Apr. 1935), p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Good (IMA, BMH, WS 388, p. 2).

<sup>21</sup> Manus O'Boyle (IMA, BMH, WS 289, p. 1).

<sup>22</sup> Fintan Murphy (IMA, BMH, WS 370, p. 1); Joseph Furlong (IMA, BMH, WS 335, p. 4).

<sup>23</sup> Art Ua Briain, membership card of the Irish Volunteers, 1 Oct. 1914 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8461/8).

<sup>24</sup> Seán Nunan (IMA, BMH, WS 1744, p. 1).

take a role in starting the Volunteers or as its officers, unless there were not enough other men in the district 'to start and guide the local company', the Volunteers was of course a natural home for those inclined to militant separatism.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, Good, a rank and file volunteer, was probably typical of most when he said he had no association with the IRB and was unaware of its existence.<sup>26</sup>

The war meant that the presence of armed men in uniform in London was commonplace and this enabled the Irish Volunteers to move about with few restrictions. Towards the end of 1915, about 60 members did a five mile 'route march' from Clapham to Merton with a small pipe band leading the way. At the GAA football field in Merton they had a military drill and then practised bayonet attacks and counter attacks. The London public thought that they were about to enlist in the British army and were very supportive.<sup>27</sup> Patrick J. Kelly described how a number of rifle ranges in Britain were opened to those about to enlist. He paid 1/6 to shoot guns of various kinds for a day and then returned home to Ireland in 1915 with 'shooting experience'.<sup>28</sup> Townshend argues that what the Irish Volunteers lacked in numbers they made up for with a higher level of political commitment and determination and this was clearly the case in London.<sup>29</sup> An additional factor with regard to the Irish Volunteers in London is that some, including O'Brien, must have been under pressure from relatives, business associates and neighbours to join the war effort. Marching around in Volunteer uniforms enabled them to blend seamlessly into the British war scene and sheltered them to some extent from any vitriol directed at those who shirked their 'national duty'.

In seeking to understand O'Brien's journey from cultural nationalism to militarism it is important to identify the underlying factors which influenced him. Historians such as McGarry, Hart, Foster and Tom Garvin have sought to identify shared characteristics of the Irish revolutionary generation and to assess the influence

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<sup>25</sup> P. S. O'Hegarty (IMA, BMH, WS 26, p. 27).

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Good (IMA, BMH, WS 388, p. 1).

<sup>27</sup> William D. Daly (IMA, BMH, WS 291, p. 2).

<sup>28</sup> Patrick J. Kelly (IMA, BMH, WS 781, p. 4).

<sup>29</sup> Charles Townshend, *Political violence in Ireland: government and resistance since 1848* (Oxford, 1983), p. 279.

of family, education, culture, politics and social class.<sup>30</sup> As McGarry notes, ‘no one is born a revolutionary’.<sup>31</sup> For many separatists their secondary education was a radicalizing experience<sup>32</sup> but this was certainly not the case with O’Brien, who was educated in a private London school. Parents ‘who preached Fenianism’ were also a significant factor and McGarry notes that the importance of childhood influences is striking in BMH witness statements.<sup>33</sup> Given that O’Brien’s father was dead by the time he was five, it is unlikely that he could have instilled a strong sense of Irishness, let alone Fenianism, in him, but the loss of his father at such a young age may well have been the catalyst which sparked O’Brien’s attraction to Irish nationalism. Many years later he wrote a poem for his sister Geraldine which invoked their father as the source of their love for Ireland:

‘If you love your country you’ll love your brother, And without one love comes not the other, And if you think of our father who is above, His native land you will surely love’.<sup>34</sup>

O’Brien wrote that he taught himself Irish as a youth by learning Moore’s melodies — using Archbishop McHale’s Irish language version.<sup>35</sup> Many of these songs reinforced a sense of the glory days of Ireland and her long oppression at the hands of the ‘invader’. Such ballads influenced the revolutionary generation and encouraged ‘deeper national feelings’.<sup>36</sup> One of O’Brien’s great themes at GLL events was ‘restoring Ireland to her place among the nations of the earth’.<sup>37</sup> He also spoke of lifting Ireland ‘to that nobler state which is her right’.<sup>38</sup> As Foster notes, ‘the power of historical memory and historical reiteration in nationalist rhetoric has a special significance to the revolutionary generation’ — a pre-occupation with history rather than present economic conditions or lack of freedom was what united many of those

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<sup>30</sup> See Fearghal McGarry, *The Rising: Ireland: Easter 1916* (Oxford, 2010), pp 8-43; Peter Hart, *The IRA at war, 1916-1923* (Oxford, 2003), pp 110-38; Foster, *Vivid faces*; Tom Garvin, *Nationalist revolutionaries in Ireland, 1858-1928* (Oxford, 1987), pp 48-56.

<sup>31</sup> McGarry, *Rising*, p. 33.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 33, 41.

<sup>34</sup> Art O’Brien to Geraldine O’Brien, n.d. but written while he was in Paris in the 1930s (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/32).

<sup>35</sup> Ó Briain, ‘Gaedhil thar sáile’, p. 116.

<sup>36</sup> See McGarry, *Rising*, p. 36 & Diarmuid Lynch, notes for an autobiography, n.d. (NLI, Diarmuid Lynch papers, MS 11127).

<sup>37</sup> *IF*, June 1907.

<sup>38</sup> *IF*, Nov. 1904.

who comprised this generation.<sup>39</sup> O'Brien embraced the history of Ireland and was attracted to the Irish language as 'a spiritual weapon of national defence'.<sup>40</sup>

Hart believes that British-born guerrillas [IRA men] may have felt somewhat inferior and that this made them more vehemently Irish.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Garvin poses the question as to whether the 'foreignness' of people like de Valera, Childers and Maud Gonne encouraged over-compensation in relation to the Irish cause.<sup>42</sup> O'Brien, by contrast, had a very strong sense of his own superiority and felt that he knew what was best for the Irish people, which may well have also come from 'foreignness' and his vision of an independent Ireland from afar.

O'Brien matched most of the criteria identified by Garvin in his analysis of the revolutionary élite – middle class, highly educated and socially mobile.<sup>43</sup> He also belonged to that group identified by Foster for whom 'revolution was not in their objective interest' and whose radicalization came by degrees.<sup>44</sup> But really he must be seen as a man apart. He defies easy categorisation because of his British upbringing and the fact that he never lived in Ireland before or during the revolution.

### 2.3 First World War

The First World War with its grim stalemate and terrible casualties was a profoundly shocking event.<sup>45</sup> Initially, Britain was hoping for 'business as normal' and was unprepared for the socio-economic demands that modern warfare would impose.<sup>46</sup> Although the main theatre of war was on the European mainland, London was the target of Zeppelin bombing raids. These started in January 1915 and continued regularly throughout the war. People sheltered in underground train stations but many were killed. Food shortages were commonplace and there was a general sense of siege. There was voluntary food rationing in 1917 but it became mandatory in 1918

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<sup>39</sup> Foster, *Vivid faces*, p. 328.

<sup>40</sup> *IP*, 4 Aug. 1942.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Hart, *IRA at war*, p. 128.

<sup>42</sup> Garvin, *Nationalist revolutionaries*, p. 54.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p. 53.

<sup>44</sup> Foster, *Vivid faces*, p. xix

<sup>45</sup> Trevor Wilson, *The myriad faces of war: Britain and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 196.

<sup>46</sup> Ian F. W. Beckett, *The Great War, 1914-1918* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Harlow, 2007), p. 59.

— sugar, bread and meat being the restricted items. The Irish in London lived and worked among those who had enlisted or had been conscripted and must have been moved by the sacrifices made and the slaughter of so many young men. In addition, friends and acquaintances were dying in large numbers on the battlefield. Tadhg Ó Ríordáin, a member of the GLL Ard-Choiste, went missing and was presumed dead. Three brothers of Agnes Dodd, O’Brien’s dancing friend at the Munster feiseanna in 1902/3, were killed in action.<sup>47</sup> O’Brien himself was deeply troubled by the war. In undated notes for a lecture given in Irish entitled ‘An Cogadh’ [The War] he castigated the press for their propaganda which he felt minimised the scale of the death toll and which was ‘ag tarraingt brat ós cion [sic]na fírinne’.<sup>48</sup> He referred to those dying in the war as ‘God’s children’ as were their heartbroken mothers, fathers and spouses and he railed against the wholesale slaughter which was taking place.<sup>49</sup> This attitude was in line with the thinking of some Irish advanced nationalists at the time. Ben Novick has highlighted how many of them expressed the view that if they were in power such wanton bloodshed would be avoided, thereby linking anti-war propaganda with the campaign for an independent Ireland.<sup>50</sup> While Novick’s conclusions may overstate that case, like most Irish revolutionaries, O’Brien distinguished between the killing done by small nations in the cause of nationhood and the largescale wars conducted by ‘empires’.

## 2.4 Conscription

Although conscription was not applied to Ireland, the threat of compulsory military service was a powerful cohesive force binding the Irish Volunteers together.<sup>51</sup> Townshend notes that by the autumn of 1915 there was an obsession about conscription in rural Ireland and this proved a key factor in the decline of the IPP.<sup>52</sup> A significant anti-conscription meeting was held at the Mansion House in December

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<sup>47</sup> See Dodd memorial (Irishwarmemorials.ie) (accessed May 2013).

<sup>48</sup> Translation: Drawing a curtain over the truth.

<sup>49</sup> O’Brien notes for a lecture entitled ‘An Cogadh’, n.d. (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8417/1).

<sup>50</sup> Ben Novick, *Conceiving revolution: Irish nationalist propaganda during the First World War* (Dublin, 2001), p. 63.

<sup>51</sup> Lyons, *Ireland since the famine*, p. 360.

<sup>52</sup> Townshend, *Easter 1916*, pp 77-8.

1915.<sup>53</sup> The concerns of the Catholic Church in relation to the prolonged war and an attack on Redmond by Bishop Edward O'Dwyer of Limerick led to a new surge in separatist nationalism.<sup>54</sup> This context enabled the likes of O'Brien to justify gun-running activities and a gradual move from a home rule agenda to a separatist one. O'Brien relished his role as the financial conduit for gun-running which included trips to Dublin to carry out negotiations with the O'Rahilly.<sup>55</sup> Seán McGrath, a native of Co. Leitrim, was also a significant player in the gun-running operation and he and O'Brien developed a strong working partnership which continued until 1925. Jeremiah O'Leary described how they utilised McGrath's position as a sorter on 'the travelling post office [train]' to send revolvers and ammunition to Dublin.<sup>56</sup> O'Rahilly booked the entire output of Martini Enfield rifles from the Birmingham firm of Greener and Co. in early 1916, amounting to about 800 rifles per week.<sup>57</sup> McGrath made the arrangements for transferring these consignments to Dublin in the offices of the GLL, compromising its apolitical stance.<sup>58</sup>

The conscription bill introduced in Britain in January 1916 for single men aged 18-41 years, and extended in May 1916 to include married men prompted many young Irish men to return home from England. In January 1916 a meeting of all the Irish Volunteers in London was called and a decision taken that all single men were to go to Dublin and await 'the Day'.<sup>59</sup> Michael Collins assisted the men with the fares.<sup>60</sup> The timing of the meeting gives a very clear indication that anticipation of a rebellion or uprising in Ireland was common among the Volunteers in London as early as January 1916. However, this was in the context of the oft-repeated mantra that England's difficulty was Ireland's opportunity rather than specific details. Given the level of secrecy the IRB military council engaged in, it was very unlikely that anyone in London had concrete details of the Rising. This may well have been a case of Collins spotting an opportunity — men who were anxious about conscription were suddenly given

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<sup>53</sup> *Irish Volunteer*, 25 Dec. 1915.

<sup>54</sup> Townshend, *Easter 1916*, pp 78-9. See Thomas J. Morrissey, 'Edward Thomas O'Dwyer, 1842-1917', *DIB*.

<sup>55</sup> Ó Briain, 'London Gaels', p. 4.

<sup>56</sup> Jeremiah O'Leary (IMA, BMH, WS 1108, p. 10).

<sup>57</sup> Aodogán O'Rahilly, *Winding the clock: O'Rahilly and the 1916 Rising* (Dublin, 1991), p. 153.

<sup>58</sup> Ó Briain, 'London Gaels', p. 4; Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, p. 182.

<sup>59</sup> William D. Daly (IMA, BMH, WS 291, p. 3).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*



encouragement to fight for Ireland instead. It was very convenient for the London Volunteers to escape to Dublin to avoid conscription and few can have imagined the drama ahead. William Daly recalled that they had many discussions about strategies to circumvent conscription.<sup>61</sup> Both Good and Murphy of the London Volunteers identified the threat of conscription as the key factor in their decision to come to Dublin in early 1916.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Townshend has posed the question whether Collins would have returned to Ireland in 1916 had it not been for conscription in England.<sup>63</sup> Fear of conscription, therefore, rather than radicalism was the key motivator for those moving from London to Ireland.

Many of those who came from England stayed in the grounds of the Plunkett home at Larkfield in Kimmage and formed 'Pearse's Own' company.<sup>64</sup> Good remembered that they behaved as 'disciplined troops' and when not drilling they made ammunition, including hand grenades.<sup>65</sup> They were not welcomed in Dublin without reservation, however. 'Their British backgrounds and accents provoked surprise and mistrust from both separatists and the authorities'.<sup>66</sup> The former were concerned about infiltration by spies and the latter appalled at the disloyalty to the Empire. The most recent assessment concludes that the total numbers who came from Britain was about sixty.<sup>67</sup> The majority were from Liverpool and the number from London was small.<sup>68</sup> In *Vivid faces* Foster refers to the group of men 'radicalized' by the Gaelic League in London who returned to Ireland to fight in 1916.<sup>69</sup> Eight members of the GLL died and six others were interned in Frongoch.<sup>70</sup> This supports the argument that the number of GLL members involved in 1916 was low – probably less than twenty. There is no doubt that the GLL instilled a strong commitment to Ireland but its members were not going to start a revolution. In reality there was no

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 2

<sup>62</sup> Joseph Good (IMA, BMH, WS 388, p. 2); Fintan Murphy (IMA, BMH, WS 370, p. 1).

<sup>63</sup> Townshend, *Easter 1916*, p. 353.

<sup>64</sup> See Matthews, *Kimmage Garrison*, for a detailed account of the activities of this group.

<sup>65</sup> Joseph Good (IMA, BMH, WS 388, p. 4).

<sup>66</sup> Fearghal McGarry, *Rising*, p. 108.

<sup>67</sup> Noonan, *IRA in Britain*, p. 17.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Foster, *Vivid faces*, p. 236.

<sup>70</sup> Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, p. 182.

revolutionary 'movement' in London before the 1916 Rising and but for conscription in Britain few would have participated in the Rising.

Some weeks before Easter 1916 O'Brien received an urgent message to expedite supplies of munitions to Dublin.<sup>71</sup> Over a period of ten days anyone sympathetic to 'the cause' who was travelling to Ireland was entrusted with guns, ammunition, bayonets, coils of wire and other electrical supplies. O'Brien claimed retrospectively that 'although not one of those participating in these activities had any knowledge of the Rising ... all concluded that some event of an outstanding nature was imminent'.<sup>72</sup> The 'outstanding' accolade may have been a result of hindsight but clearly there was a sense that something was afoot at that stage. Police monitored the activity of the GLL, the GAA and various other organisations in London but a surveillance report on O'Brien personally is not recorded until 1920.<sup>73</sup> Despite intense surveillance in Dublin during 1915/16 of many of those who took part in the Easter Rising, it seems that O'Brien had no connection with the leaders of the Rising or else was not recognised by Dublin police. Neither was he mentioned in Colonial Office censorship of letters' files during this period.<sup>74</sup> By contrast, the presence of Mark Ryan, James Barrett of Manchester and Peter Murphy of Liverpool was noted by the police reports on extremists in Dublin 1915/16.<sup>75</sup> O'Brien was certainly in Dublin in July/August 1915 en route to the Ard-Fheis of the Gaelic League in Dundalk but seems to have escaped attention.<sup>76</sup> He also seems to have been under the radar during this period in London in relation to his gun-running activities.

## **2.5 Impact of the War and the 1916 Rising on the GLL**

As with the Gaelic League in Ireland, where a fundamental rift in the philosophy of the organisation reared its head, the GLL found it increasingly difficult to remain clear of politics as the First World War progressed.<sup>77</sup> O'Brien's actions in relation to the Kuno

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<sup>71</sup> Ó Briain, 'London Gaels', p. 4.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Art O'Brien (TNA, War Office (hereafter WO) 35/206/17).

<sup>74</sup> See censorship of letters' files (TNA, Colonial Office (hereafter CO) 904/164).

<sup>75</sup> See Chief Secretary's Office, Crime Branch, Dublin Metropolitan Police (hereafter DMP), Movement of Extremists in Dublin (NAI/CSO/JD/2/ 52, 53, 61, 152).

<sup>76</sup> Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, p. 178.

<sup>77</sup> Mac Aonghusa, *Ar son na Gaeilge*, p. 139.

Meyer controversy in January 1915 led to the resignation of a number of high profile members of the GLL.<sup>78</sup> Meyer, a native of Germany, was a Celtic and Irish language scholar employed at Liverpool University. A regular visitor to Ireland and to London, he often lectured at Gaelic League events. He became increasingly pro-German in his pronouncements, however, and in early 1915 this led the City of Dublin to revoke the 'Freedom of the City' previously granted to him. Criticism of this decision by the Gaelic League in Ireland upset a number of GLL members, including Sophie Bryant, Eleanor Hull, Alfred Percival Graves and Sam Boyle. They asked O'Brien to complain about this intervention in politics on behalf of the GLL and when he declined they resigned. In her resignation letter, Eleanor Hull recorded her disappointment with her once close colleague and friend O'Brien. 'I never took you to be an extremist' she wrote — a clear indication of how she thought he had changed over time.<sup>79</sup> Sam Boyle wrote that only he and his fellow protestors could 'save the London Gaelic League from becoming the slavish followers of a wretched anti-national political clique'.<sup>80</sup> The war and the rise of the Volunteers had shaken up the cosy consensus of the GLL and unsettled the previous equilibrium. In December 1914 Lord Ashbourne resigned as GLL president because the Gaelic League had become too politicised and was no longer promoting the Irish language.<sup>81</sup> More pertinently, his support of British army recruitment left him at odds with many League members.<sup>82</sup> O'Brien was unanimously elected president of the GLL on 26 January 1915 and this was ratified at the annual meeting on 31 May.<sup>83</sup> He remained president until 1935. Although attempting to steer clear of politics, the GLL was now controlled by a committed political activist and gun-runner. The involvement of O'Brien in the Volunteers severely compromised his position as president of the supposedly apolitical GLL but as with many others at the time, he was oblivious to the conflict of interest. From then on, a blurring of the lines between culture and politics became inevitable.

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<sup>78</sup> Kuno Meyer (1858-1919), Celtic scholar and professor at Liverpool University. See Seán Ó Lúing, *Kuno Meyer, 1858-1919: a biography* (Dublin, 1991).

<sup>79</sup> Eleanor Hull — Celtic scholar and writer. See Eoghan Ó Raghallaigh and Lesa Ní Mhunchaile, 'Eleanor Henrietta Hull, 1860-1935', *DIB*; Hull to O'Brien, 28 May 1915 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8435/23).

<sup>80</sup> Sam Boyle, a native Irish speaker from Donegal who lived in London. Boyle to O'Brien, 26 May 1915 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8435/23).

<sup>81</sup> GLL, ACM, 1 Dec. 1914 (NLI, CnaG, MS 9778).

<sup>82</sup> Mac Aonghusa, *Ar son na Gaeilge*, p. 144.

<sup>83</sup> GLL, ACM, 26 Jan. 1915 (NLI, CnaG, MS 9778).

As noted above, a number of GLL members died in the Rising. Michael Mulvihill, Pádraig Shortis, Pádraig Ó Conchúir and Seán Howard were killed in the GPO; Seán Turles, secretary of the Kensington Branch, and Seán Hurley of Fulham branch were killed in Church Street. Dónal Sheehan and Con Keating drowned at Ballykissane Pier in Kerry on the ill-fated mission to meet the *Aud*.<sup>84</sup> Sorcha McDermott described how W. P. Ryan cried in the GLL offices on hearing news of the execution of the leaders. When she consoled him that they were in heaven, Ryan replied that he lamented the quality of the men shot.<sup>85</sup> The first meeting of the GLL Ard-Choiste after the Easter Rising was held on 2 May 1916. O'Brien was present as always, with George Gavan Duffy and three or four others. The minutes were starkly brief — there was no conversation about the normal activities of the League. Neither was reference made to the execution of Pearse or to the fallen GLL members, although it was surely the main topic of discussion. This may have been a vain attempt to keep politics out of the League. Uí Chollatáin notes that the first few issues of *An Claidheamh Soluis* after the Rising were non-political.<sup>86</sup> The Ard-Choiste minutes of 9 May 1916 were even shorter, suggesting great sorrow and perhaps, fear of the police. By early June 1916, O'Brien had gathered his thoughts and gave a speech to the Annual Meeting of the GLL in which he referred to the great tragedy that had befallen them on the loss of 'An Píarsach agus na laochra eile'.<sup>87</sup> He referred to Ireland lying 'silent and bleeding' and while acknowledging that it was outside the province of the GLL to discuss or criticise the action of the leaders in 'the recent outrage', he went on to say that it was impossible for them to ignore the events 'which have drawn from us tears of blood and which sicken our hearts with anxiety for the future'. He described some of the victims as 'very near and dear to us' and referred to 'our martyred dead and our persecuted living'.<sup>88</sup> O'Brien dragged the GLL further into the politics of the day in support of Roger Casement. On 20 July 1916 he called a special meeting of the GLL Ard-Choiste to discuss the following motion:

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<sup>84</sup> Ó Briain, 'London Gaels', p. 4; Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, p. 182. See also Jimmy Wren, *The GPO garrison, Easter week 1916: a biographical dictionary* (Dublin 2015).

<sup>85</sup> Sorcha McDermott (IMA, BMH, WS 945), p. 1.

<sup>86</sup> Regina Uí Chollatáin, Lecture at Newspapers and Periodicals seminar, NLI, 28 Feb. 2015.

<sup>87</sup> GLL, ACM, 5 June 1916 (NLI, CnaG, MS 9779); Translation: Pearse and the other heroes.

<sup>88</sup> ACS, 24 June 1916.

In view of the statements that have been circulated that there is a feeling in Ireland that failure to inflict the capital penalty on Roger Casement would be unjust to those Irishmen who have been executed in connection with the Irish Rising, we the governing body of the Gaelic League in London ... desire to record our conviction that these statements are utterly unfounded.

This motion was sent to Asquith, Redmond and various newspapers including the *Irish Independent*, *Cork Examiner*, and the *Freeman's Journal*.<sup>89</sup> The GLL then embarked on the collection of signatures pleading for clemency for Casement. Copies of the petition lists are held in the Ó Briain papers and in the National Archives in London.<sup>90</sup> George Gavan Duffy recalled spending 'an arduous weekend' going through Casement's documents with O'Brien 'to see what might be utterly seditious in them' presumably to get rid of them before the police arrived.<sup>91</sup> It is quite possible, therefore, that O'Brien knew Casement personally.<sup>92</sup> The actions of O'Brien and the GLL were, of course, in vain.

O'Brien described how 'a remarkable change' in the attitude of 'our people' in London occurred after the Rising with an influx of new GLL members. The winter 1916 session was described 'as the best in years'.<sup>93</sup> Those who had initially stayed away for fear of police raids and searches drifted back to the GLL and new members 'flocked' to the GLL. This vastly improved the finances. The minutes of 13 June 1916 reported £135 cash in hand and debts of £5 — a remarkable turnaround from the financial struggles of the previous years.<sup>94</sup> By 1921 the GLL had fourteen schools in operation again — nearly equalling its heyday of seventeen schools in 1904.<sup>95</sup> A small number of GLL members resigned in protest at the Rising but this was a trickle rather than a major exodus.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> GLL, ACM, 20 July 1916 (NLI, CnaG, MS 9779).

<sup>90</sup> Petitions held in NLI Dublin and TNA London (NLI, AÓBP 8447/1-5; TNA, Home Office (hereafter HO) 144/1636/7).

<sup>91</sup> George Gavan Duffy (IMA, BMH, WS 381, p. 4).

<sup>92</sup> An exhaustive search of Casement papers in NLI and TNA yielded no references to O'Brien, however.

<sup>93</sup> ACS, 11 Nov. 1916.

<sup>94</sup> GLL, ACM, 13 June 1916 (NLI, CnaG, MS 9779).

<sup>95</sup> Ó Briain, 'Gaedhil thar sáile', p. 123; Ó Súilleabháin, *Conradh*, p. 78.

<sup>96</sup> See GLL ACM, May – December 1916 (NLI, CnaG, MS 9779).

## 2.6 O'Brien joins the IRB

In June 1916, O'Brien joined the IRB.<sup>97</sup> This is confirmed for the first time in this dissertation, following the uncovering of handwritten notes by O'Brien in his 1935 papers.<sup>98</sup> A file in the Military Service Pensions collection of the Irish Military archive released in 2014 also refers to his IRB status.<sup>99</sup> His horror at the execution of the leaders of the 1916 Rising completed his transformation from pacifist cultural nationalist to radical militant republican. He was initiated into the IRB by Sam Maguire, a mainstay of the organisation in London.<sup>100</sup> Maguire, who was employed at the Mount Pleasant Post Office in Kensington became the leading intelligence officer for the Irish revolutionary movement and built up a network of contacts and couriers throughout Britain. However, Mike Cronin writes that although Maguire was an important figure in the IRB because of his gun-running activities 'he does not appear in the relevant archive as a major player who directed policy for the organisation'.<sup>101</sup> O'Brien's entry to the IRB followed a period of approximately two years during which he proved himself by working with Maguire to provide arms for the Volunteers in Ireland. O'Brien described this as a new incarnation of the IRB in London and he named Sam Maguire, Fintan Murphy, Joe Cassidy, Seán McGrath, Reggie Dunne, Denis and Joe Carr, Seán Goulding and Jack Phelan as fellow members of the circle. McGrath, who like O'Brien, was a new recruit to the IRB was the centre (head of the group) and O'Brien was treasurer.<sup>102</sup> The timing of this revival makes it abundantly clear that the Easter Rising and the executions were the catalyst for the resurgence of the IRB in London. In his notes, O'Brien describes IRB activity prior to that date as 'ineffective, inactive and moribund'.<sup>103</sup> From then on, it was the active military organisation in London for the purchase of arms and O'Brien was the chief financial officer at the centre of militant Irish republican activity in London.

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<sup>97</sup> O'Brien handwritten notes, 1935 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8427/22).

<sup>98</sup> Due to the uncatalogued nature of the material prior to 2009 previous historians of the Irish revolution probably regarded files from this date as outside their area of interest.

<sup>99</sup> See Denis Carr, application for military service pension, Dec. 1936 (IMA, Military Service Pensions (hereafter MSP) 34 REF 27243).

<sup>100</sup> O'Brien handwritten notes, 1935 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8427/22).

<sup>101</sup> Mike Cronin, 'Sam Maguire: forgotten hero and national icon', *Sport in History*, 25:2 (Aug. 2005), p. 192. (<http://www.tandfonline.com>) (accessed Sept. 2015).

<sup>102</sup> O'Brien, handwritten notes, 1935 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8427/22).

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

## 2.7 Prisoner relief

Two committees were established in Ireland to cater for Irish political prisoners and their families. The Irish National Aid Association (INAA) was founded towards the end of May 1916 with a committee combining ‘well-known figures somewhat associated with the Irish Parliamentary party’ and ‘advanced nationalists of varying shades’.<sup>104</sup> The second relief organisation — The Volunteer Dependents’ Fund (VDF) — was established by Kathleen Clarke, widow of Thomas, and was composed primarily of female relatives of those executed after the Rising.<sup>105</sup> Lyons describes how these organisations provided a variety of options for members — allowing them to do something for the families of the dead, the wounded and the prisoners, while also providing a focus for the hatred and bitterness engendered by the executions.<sup>106</sup> The British authorities viewed these developments with concern and were worried about links between the aid associations and the IRB.<sup>107</sup>

Within days of the Rising, O’Brien, Joe Cassidy, Fintan Murphy and Seán McGrath, all members of the IRB, organised the Irish National Relief Fund in London (INRF). C. B. Dutton was the only non-IRB man on the management committee. O’Brien’s friendship with Dutton, the London stockbroker mentioned in Chapter 1, stretched back to their days as stewards at the GLL seilgí in 1905 and right through a series of GLL events and committees and O’Brien clearly valued his expertise.<sup>108</sup> The relief fund work ensured that this group operated as a very coherent and committed team which would be of huge benefit during the following years as the fight for independence intensified. O’Brien and Murphy were appointed joint honorary secretaries and as usual O’Brien took the lead in all activities. Thus, while the INRF was fronted by an extensive appeal committee of more than fifty notables of the Irish community in London, including many priests, doctors and literary figures,<sup>109</sup> O’Brien ensured that the INRF was managed by a small IRB coterie on a day to day basis.

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<sup>104</sup> Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid, ‘The Irish National Aid Association and the radicalization of public opinion in Ireland, 1916-18’, *Historical Journal*, 55:3 (Sept. 2012), p. 707.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 710.

<sup>106</sup> Lyons, *Ireland since the famine*, p. 382.

<sup>107</sup> General Maxwell to Asquith, 30 May 1916 (Parliamentary Archives (hereafter PA), Herbert Samuel papers, A/41/13).

<sup>108</sup> *IF*, May 1905.

<sup>109</sup> See Irish National Relief Fund (hereafter INRF) headed notepaper (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8435/30).

O'Brien emphasized the financial propriety of all their activities, however, noting that there was provision in place for any member of the appeal committee or any collector, to inspect the books or accounts at any stage'.<sup>110</sup> O'Brien combined a remarkable fixation with practice and procedure with parallel underground illegal activity. As with his previous pattern of full attendances at GLL meetings, O'Brien rarely missed an INRF meeting.<sup>111</sup> As honorary secretary he assumed a commanding role and was the face of the INRF in all its dealings with the Dublin relief committees and the British prison service. Other members of the INRF were quite happy to defer to him and there is a marked sense of unanimity in decision-making in the minutes.<sup>112</sup> O'Brien's style was to micro-manage and to keep track of every item on the agenda, but in a voluntary organisation, as with the GLL, it was a bonus to the other committee members that he was so pro-active. The strength of O'Brien's position on the INRF committee was very similar to his position in the GLL. The minutes contain regular references to matters which can only be dealt with by O'Brien and at one meeting seven out of ten items are identified as his responsibility.<sup>113</sup> While it is tempting to describe this as controlling behaviour by O'Brien, the reality is that he actually got the work done and there was very little kudos or public recognition for anyone interested in prisoners' rights.

In early June O'Brien visited Dublin to assess both relief committees.<sup>114</sup> The result of this assessment was that the INRF decided to remit funds in equal proportion to both the INAA and the VDF. Over 2500 people were interned and about 120 were sentenced to penal servitude in prisons and military camps throughout England and Wales.<sup>115</sup> Nic Dháibhéid writes that the concept of sympathy for prisoners was 'sufficiently flexible enough to encompass a broad church of nationalist opinion'.<sup>116</sup> Financial support for prisoners' families was a relatively safe banner for the Irish in London to congregate around. However, in the context of the deprivation caused by

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<sup>110</sup> O'Brien to Robert Lynd, 9 Aug. 1916 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8434/19).

<sup>111</sup> See INRF minutes (NLI, MS 1563).

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 18 July 1917 & 17 Oct. 1917.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 15 June 1916.

<sup>115</sup> For a detailed account of prisoner numbers, the prison locations and the various prison régimes see Murphy, *Political Imprisonment*. See also McConville, *Irish political prisoners, 1848-1922: theatres of war*, Seán O'Mahony, *Frongoch, university of revolution* (Dublin, 1987) and Lyn Ebenezer, *Fron-goch and the birth of the IRA* (Pwllheli, 2006).

<sup>116</sup> Nic Dháibhéid, 'Irish National Aid Association', p. 726.



the War it is all the more impressive that the Irish in London concerned themselves with the 1916 prisoners and collected funds for them.

While some funds from the INRF supported the dependents of these prisoners, it quickly became clear to O'Brien and his committee that support for the prisoners themselves was of the utmost importance. The INRF established 'a ladies' committee' to ensure visiting rights, receipt of correspondence and supply of food and clothes to the prisoners and 'to ensure that every prisoner receives equal attention'.<sup>117</sup> Members of Cumann na mBan (formed in London shortly after the Volunteers) were involved in these activities. Mary Cremin recalled visiting prisoners and how the organisation provided accommodation for released internees prior to their return to Ireland.<sup>118</sup> According to Sorcha McDermott, 'money was rolling in at that time. You could get money for anything [because] people had not yet got over the feelings inspired by the Rising'.<sup>119</sup> By 27 June 1916 over £300 had been collected in London by the INRF and a pattern of spending some funds in England and remitting some to Dublin developed.<sup>120</sup> The level of support provided for the 1916 prisoners in Britain surpassed earlier campaigns on behalf of the Fenians in 1867 and the 'dynamitards' of the 1880s. McConville attributes this to the greater sense of self-confidence and prosperity that the Irish in Britain had achieved by 1916 and because the culpability of many untried prisoners 'remained helpfully vague'.<sup>121</sup> The number of prisoners was considerable as was the publicity they attracted. This publicity was in no small way due to the co-ordinated response of O'Brien and his colleagues. 'The visitors were tangible proof to the men that their cause was widely supported, while each person who visited a camp or prison or was involved with those who did, became a potential propagandist for Irish republicanism'.<sup>122</sup> While the actions of the INRF were ostensibly humanitarian, the organisation had in fact taken the first steps in a widespread operation that would contribute to the cohesion and sense of purpose of the prisoner group. This was

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<sup>117</sup> INRF minutes, 15 June 1916 (NLI, MS 1563). The ladies are not named.

<sup>118</sup> Mary Cremin (IMA, BMH, WS 924, p. 4).

<sup>119</sup> Sorcha McDermott (IMA, BMH, WS 945, p. 4).

<sup>120</sup> For instance in July 1916 £43 was spent in London and £174 remitted to Dublin. See INRF minutes, 18 July 1916 (NLI, MS 1563).

<sup>121</sup> McConville, *Irish political prisoners, 1848-1920: theatres of war*, p. 481.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

significant because as Townshend noted the incarceration of the deported prisoners became a key aspect of the rebellion's impact.<sup>123</sup>

On 10 July 1916 O'Brien wrote to Fred Allan<sup>124</sup> secretary of the INAA about his plan to spend his holidays in August visiting various prisons including Frongoch, after which he intended to go to Dublin to report on the state of the prisoners.<sup>125</sup> In Dublin O'Brien met the committees of the INAA and the VDF on several occasions where issues in relation to amalgamation were teased out. He and the INRF were strongly supportive of such a move as was an American delegation which also attended the meetings.<sup>126</sup> Subsequently, both organisations merged to become the Irish National Aid and Volunteer Dependents' Fund (INAAVDF). Kevin Cullen argues that the business acumen and skill set of the London group was far superior to that of the Dublin organisation and notes that the INRF brought several key initiatives to the INAAVDF, in particular the vigorous use of the press as a propaganda tool.<sup>127</sup> For instance, O'Brien urged the newly merged association to establish a publicity campaign to improve conditions for prisoners. He referred to the leniency shown to political prisoners by the new Provisional Russian Government and suggested that the Russian example be used to the utmost 'to secure the proper treatment of our countrymen and countrywoman (Countess Markievicz) as prisoners of war'.<sup>128</sup>

A regular correspondence developed between O'Brien and Lieutenant William Bevan, camp censor in Frongoch. Polite letters went back and forth about prisoner comforts such as socks, mufflers, tobacco, magazines, newspapers and even sheet

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<sup>123</sup> Townshend, *Easter 1916*, p. 316.

<sup>124</sup> Fred Allan, a long standing member of the IRB who had drifted from the centre of advanced nationalist power by 1916. Allan and O'Brien had electrical matters in common as Allan was the secretary and commercial manager of Dublin Corporation's Electricity Supply committee. See Owen McGee, 'Fred Allan (1861-1937): Republican, Methodist and Dubliner', *Dublin Historical Record*, lvi (2003), pp 205-16.

<sup>125</sup> O'Brien to Allan, 10 July 1916 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8435/31). The distribution of prisoners throughout England was extensive and made for a huge workload for O'Brien and the INRF. For an account of life in Frongoch, see W. J. Brennan-Whitmore, *With the Irish in Frongoch* (Dublin, 1917).

<sup>126</sup> INRF minutes, 16 Aug. 1916 (NLI, MS 1563).

<sup>127</sup> Kevin Cullen, 'The humanitarian wing of Irish republicanism: The Irish National Aid and Volunteer Dependents' Fund' (MA thesis, St Patrick's College, Dublin City University, 2012), p. 49.

<sup>128</sup> O'Brien to Irish National Aid and Volunteer Dependents' Fund (hereafter INAAVDF), n.d. (NLI, AÓBP, 8435/32).

music for the choir established by Douglas ffrench-Mullen.<sup>129</sup> Irish language books were initially banned but then permitted. Bevan wrote to O'Brien listing the books received at Frongoch using old Irish orthography and earned O'Brien's admiration.<sup>130</sup> When Bevan informed O'Brien that Collins assisted him with the dispersal of the items received, O'Brien, in keeping with the secret ways of his IRB membership, claimed not to have 'had the pleasure of knowing Mr. Collins personally'.<sup>131</sup>

Nic Dháibhéid notes the additional role of the INRF in monitoring poor prison conditions and providing information for an amelioration campaign.<sup>132</sup> There was real suffering for prisoners, many of whom were confined for 23 hours a day. Collins compiled a report which, according to Townshend, 'painted a grim picture of the rat-infested old distillery stores in which the South Camp inmates were housed, the miserable rations on which they had to survive and the brutal nature of the prison regime'.<sup>133</sup> On foot of complaints and the high profile campaign by Irish MPs, particularly Alfie Byrne, IPP MP for Dublin Harbour and Laurence Ginnell, Independent MP for Westmeath North, the British government set up the Sankey Commission (The Enemy Aliens Advisory Committee) to review the case against each prisoner. Apart from any concerns about the Irish prisoners, a real concern of the British government was that the large influx of detainees was threatening to swamp the English military system.<sup>134</sup> Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh recalled that O'Brien sent a telegram to the prisoners in Reading Jail on Christmas Eve 1916 with the news of their release.<sup>135</sup> The meticulous INRF plans for Christmas in the prisons had included hampers for Reading Jail with 4 turkeys, 6 chickens, 2 hams, 500 cigarettes, plum puddings, crackers and money for the Governor to buy wine for the prisoners.<sup>136</sup> In the event, on 21 December 1916 the Home Office announced the release of a large number of prisoners. This was partly at the behest of Redmond who was increasingly concerned that support for the IPP was

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<sup>129</sup> See various correspondence between O'Brien and Bevan, May to Dec. 1916 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8434/21).

<sup>130</sup> Bevan to O'Brien, 15 Sept. 1916, *ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> O'Brien to Bevan, 8 Nov. 1916, *ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Nic Dháibhéid, 'Irish National Aid Association', p. 719.

<sup>133</sup> Townshend, *Easter 1916*, p. 322.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 317.

<sup>135</sup> Proinsias Ó Conluain (ed.), *Seán T.* (Gaillimh, 1963), p. 239.

<sup>136</sup> INRF minutes, 13 Dec. 1916 (NLI, MS 1563).

slipping away in the light of sympathetic attitudes to the Sinn Féin prisoners.<sup>137</sup> Lloyd George's succession of Asquith as prime minister was also a factor in this amnesty. Protests in the Dominions and the USA about the Irish situation meant that Lloyd George was acutely conscious of the need to demonstrate that real political progress was being made.<sup>138</sup> O'Brien went to the Home Office on 21, 22 and 23 December to meet officials in order to ascertain the arrangements for the released prisoners and to plan their short-term care and repatriation.<sup>139</sup>

Given that he was still working full-time as an electrical engineer, O'Brien made an extraordinary commitment to the cause of the prisoners. Keith Jeffery has commented that in the immediate aftermath of the Rising it was by no means clear whether Ireland's political situation had changed irreversibly and that 1916 as a major tipping point only became apparent much later on.<sup>140</sup> This made O'Brien's commitment all the more impressive as there certainly was little to be gained personally. Until mid-1917 all INRF committee members paid their own travel, accommodation and food expenses for visits to prisoners.<sup>141</sup> This was a major expense for O'Brien who travelled extensively for the committee in Britain and to Dublin. When a decision was eventually taken that expenses could be claimed, very strict criteria were introduced requiring unanimous approval of the management committee – so there was, therefore, no opportunity for self-enrichment.<sup>142</sup> The selfless nature of O'Brien's commitment to the Irish prisoners is evident in the vast correspondence held in his papers on the subject. Letters of gratitude to him abounded. In September 1916 Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh who was in Reading Jail, expressed concern about O'Brien's heavy workload in relation to the prisoners: 'It is really awful to be forced to put so much work upon your already heavily burthened [sic]shoulders but there's no help for it — God will reward you one day'.<sup>143</sup> Collins informed O'Brien that the prisoners had a high opinion of him and were very thankful for the way they were treated by him.<sup>144</sup> Fred

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<sup>137</sup> Townshend, *Easter 1916*, p. 327.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

<sup>139</sup> INRF minutes, 27 Dec. 1916 (NLI, MS 1563).

<sup>140</sup> Keith Jeffery, *1916: a global history* (London, 2015), p. 121.

<sup>141</sup> See INRF minutes, 28 Mar. 1917 and report of general meeting, 29 Mar. 1917 (NLI, MS 1563).

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 Apr. 1917.

<sup>143</sup> Ó Ceallaigh to O'Brien, 22 Sept. 1916 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/18).

<sup>144</sup> Collins to O'Brien, 19 Mar. 1917 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8435/30).

Allan was effusive in his praise and wrote that the members of the INAAVDF executive 'can never adequately express their appreciation of the splendid work of your committee and especially of yourself in connection with release from Frongoch'.<sup>145</sup> In December 1916, O'Brien gave a complete account of the work of the INRF to the INAAVDF in Dublin and 'was heartily thanked by the Chairman on behalf of the meeting'.<sup>146</sup> In early 1917 Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh wrote effusively to O'Brien thanking himself and his committee for their 'most arduous labours so efficiently and so enthusiastically undertaken' on behalf of the internees.<sup>147</sup>

## 2.8 Legal support for prisoners

The INRF personnel in London were also authorised by the INAAVDF to provide legal advice and support for prisoners. George Gavan Duffy was their solicitor and this work cemented his relationship with O'Brien. While treasurer of the Gaelic League in 1913 Gavan Duffy first encountered O'Brien. In July 1919, he described O'Brien as 'an intimate friend of mine, in whom I have the utmost confidence'.<sup>148</sup> So great was the work imposed on Gavan Duffy that J. H. MacDonnell was also engaged to shoulder some of the load. In a letter to Sinn Féin's solicitors in Dublin, Gavan Duffy described MacDonnell as 'literally the only solicitor in London to whom I should have cared to confide this business'.<sup>149</sup> MacDonnell was a nephew of Anthony MacDonnell, Irish under-secretary from 1902 until 1908. He qualified as a solicitor in 1911 and had offices in Battersea and Southampton Street in London. From 1916 to 1923 he worked virtually exclusively on Irish political cases.<sup>150</sup>

Sankey's approach was to encourage prisoners to dissociate themselves from the Rising and MacDonnell urged them to go along with this. Frank Robbins described a general reluctance to accept this advice and felt that the solicitor's fees were a waste

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<sup>145</sup> Allan to O'Brien, 14 Jan. 1917 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8435/31).

<sup>146</sup> INAAVDF minutes, 5 Dec. 1916 (NLI, MS 23469).

<sup>147</sup> Ó Ceallaigh to O'Brien, 12 Jan. 1917 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8443/3).

<sup>148</sup> George Gavan Duffy to Dr. O'Hagan, 19 July 1919 (NLI, George Gavan Duffy correspondence, MS 5582).

<sup>149</sup> George Gavan Duffy to Corrigan & Corrigan solicitors, 31 Jul. 1916 (NLI, INAAVDF minutes, MS 24357/1).

<sup>150</sup> Foxtan, *Revolutionary lawyers*, p. 50.

of money.<sup>151</sup> Similarly Seán Prendergast was unimpressed with this offer of assistance — ‘which few if any of us wanted’.<sup>152</sup> They and many others wanted to affirm their participation in the Rising. In the event, by the end of August 1916 only 573 of 1846 internees reviewed were still in prison; almost seventy per cent had been liberated.<sup>153</sup> The concern with wasting money on legal fees recurred in the years ahead. Foxtan has described how a pattern of instructing a pool of sympathetic solicitors for all cases involving republican prisoners [in Britain] continued until 1921 on an immense scale. He quotes a letter sent on Austin Stack’s behalf to the INAAVDF in 1917 saying that he objected to any money spent in English courts on his behalf.<sup>154</sup> A sense among the prisoners and in Sinn Féin’s Dublin office that O’Brien and his London coterie were engaged in an expensive round of legal proceedings was never quite shaken off and, as discussed in Chapter 3, erupted again when ISDL prisoners were defended.

O’Brien also arranged legal support for some members of the London-Irish community who were imprisoned after the Rising and then court martialled because of their refusal to accept conscription. Collins wrote to O’Brien from Frongoch in October 1916 expressing great concern about attempts to conscript Seán and Ernie Nunan, Thomas O’Donoghue and Hugh Thornton.<sup>155</sup> He also remarked that ‘we may however draw a good deal of consolation from the spectacle of the mighty Empire being reduced to the indignity of forcing her recent antagonists to fight her battles’.<sup>156</sup> Prison staff and ordinary prisoners were known to have very bitter attitudes to ‘conscientious objectors’ and others who refused to fight. Such prisoners were regularly jeered, assaulted and spat at and received no support or sympathy from prison staff.<sup>157</sup> NCOs were described as ‘revelling in the sadistic joy of making life hell for these objectors’.<sup>158</sup> They were kicked around the prison yards, thrown down

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<sup>151</sup> Frank Robbins (IMA, BMH, WS 585, pp 108-9).

<sup>152</sup> Seán Prendergast (IMA, BMH, WS 755, p. 211).

<sup>153</sup> Townshend, *Easter 1916*, pp 318-9.

<sup>154</sup> Foxtan, *Revolutionary lawyers*, p. 128.

<sup>155</sup> Collins to O’Brien, 13 Oct. 1916 (NLI, AÓBP, 8429/17).

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> See Ann Kramer, *Conscientious objectors of the First World War: a determined resistance* (Barnsley, 2013).

<sup>158</sup> Joseph V. Lawless (IMA, BMH, WS 1043, p. 186).

cement stairs and brutally beaten.<sup>159</sup> Hugh Thornton was left naked in his cell in the cold winter of 1916 when he refused to wear a British army uniform.<sup>160</sup> The concept of 'human rights', particularly in relation to prisoners, did not emerge in public discourse until after the Second World War.<sup>161</sup>

Despite legal support, Nunan was sentenced to twelve months hard labour in a military camp near Salisbury where he was regularly requested to take part in military activities. Each time he refused he was placed in solitary confinement on a diet of bread and water.<sup>162</sup> Nunan and some others were released in March 1917 because the British army eventually deemed them ineligible for service given that they had taken up arms against 'His Majesty's forces'.<sup>163</sup> In Frongoch attempts to enlist nearly 150 men met with sustained resistance, including a short hunger strike, and were eventually abandoned.<sup>164</sup>

By early 1917 almost all internees had been released and the INRF now focused on the 140 convicted prisoners who remained in prison and also two internees (Halpin and Tierney) who were mentally unwell and held in Denbeigh Asylum.<sup>165</sup> Most of the convicts, including de Valera, were removed to Lewes Jail in East Sussex by late 1916. The INRF set up a visiting system for Lewes, pressed the Home Office for reduced rail fares for visitors and sent copious supplies into the prison including rosaries, sheet music, prayer books and books in Irish.<sup>166</sup> A lengthy correspondence ensued with the Home Office about the Denbeigh patients, resulting in the transfer of Tierney to Epsom, close to his wife in London, in April 1917, and Halpin's release.<sup>167</sup> The INRF arranged that they were visited regularly throughout their stay in Denbeigh and provided funds for 'little luxuries' for them.<sup>168</sup> A steady trickle of released prisoners

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<sup>159</sup> See *ibid.*, John J. O'Reilly (IMA, BMH, WS 1031, p. 20) and Eamon O'Dwyer (IMA, BMH, WS, 1403, p. 58) for harrowing accounts of the treatment meted out to conscientious objectors.

<sup>160</sup> James Kavanagh (IMA, BMH, WS 889, p. 84).

<sup>161</sup> See Aryeh Neier, 'Confining dissent' in Norval Morris and David J. Rothman (eds), *The Oxford history of the prison* (Oxford, 1995), p. 408.

<sup>162</sup> Seán Nunan (IMA, BMH, WS 1744, p. 7).

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> Brennan-Whitmore, *With the Irish in Frongoch*, pp 123-131.

<sup>165</sup> See INRF minutes, Jan. to June 1917 (NLI, MS 1563).

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 31 Jan. 1917 & 14 Feb. 1917. See also Murphy, *Political Imprisonment*, p. 74.

<sup>167</sup> See INRF minutes, 28 Feb, 2 & 21 Mar. 1917, 18 Apr. 1917 (NLI, MS 1563).

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 Mar. 1917.

began to put pressure on the INRF funds so £100 was advanced by the INAAVDF for clothes, accommodation and fares home.<sup>169</sup> When the Lewes convicts began to challenge the prison authorities in March 1917, O'Brien and the INRF issued press statements to maximise publicity for their situation.<sup>170</sup> The INRF also engaged with the Home Office seeking to have themselves recognised as a prison charity which would be automatically notified in advance of all prison discharges.<sup>171</sup> There were several such charities registered in Britain but the Home Office refused to grant this request. When news of the possible release of all convicts emerged in June 1917 the INRF requested notice of their release so that a reception could be held for them, but this was thwarted by the Home Office who secretly removed the prisoners to Pentonville and then transferred them to Dublin.<sup>172</sup> The INRF was incensed at this. Apart from any motives of republican defiance against the British, the INRF was also very keen that their supporters in London, who had never met the convicts they had so ardently worked for, should be allowed to greet them and be thanked. A letter from O'Brien to Lloyd George, complaining of 'the petty meanness exhibited by the authorities in all this procedure' reflected not just his own fury at this decision, but that of the entire INRF management committee.<sup>173</sup>

In February 1917 Collins was appointed secretary of the INAAVDF and O'Brien was co-opted on to its executive. This introduced O'Brien to a Dublin audience who heretofore had not been aware of his significance in London.<sup>174</sup> It also re-established his working relationship with Collins. 'I suppose of all places in the world you wouldn't expect to find me in this job', Collins wrote to O'Brien, 'but the N[ational]A[id] executive wanted a man to act as secretary on all matters and also to organise the office on some sort of a business-like basis'.<sup>175</sup> O'Hegarty later wrote of Collins: 'He kept an eye upon every little detail in connection with his work and he knew everybody who was entrusted with even the most perfunctory of tasks'.<sup>176</sup> The

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 28 Feb. 1917.

<sup>170</sup> See Murphy, *Political imprisonment*, p. 75.

<sup>171</sup> INRF to Home Office, 31 Jan. 1917 (NLI, MS 1563).

<sup>172</sup> See O'Brien to Lloyd George, 21 June 1917 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8444/2).

<sup>173</sup> Ibid. and INRF minutes, 20 June 1917 (NLI, MS 1563).

<sup>174</sup> INRF minutes, 27 Feb. 1917 (NLI, MS 1563).

<sup>175</sup> Collins to O'Brien, 23 Feb. 1917 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8435/30).

<sup>176</sup> P. S. O'Hegarty, *The victory of Sinn Féin* (Dublin, 1924), p. 25.



similarities between Collins and O'Brien are obvious. It also meant that at this crucial time of re-grouping in the Irish nationalist movement there were two highly competent members of the IRB monitoring the whereabouts and activities of those committed to the cause. O'Brien was clearly identified by Collins at that stage as someone who was competent, loyal and efficient.

In late February 1917 about thirty men were simply rounded up in Ireland and forced to move to small towns in England until the British authorities regarded the threat of further insurrection unlikely.<sup>177</sup> The group included Terence McSwiney, J. J. O'Kelly (Sceilg) and Darrell Figgis. The British had first used this strategy in 1915 when they served expatriation orders on a handful of nationalists which included Ernest Blythe and Liam Mellows.<sup>178</sup> Count Plunkett was deported to Oxford under a similar order in June 1916 and remained there until January 1917.<sup>179</sup> The February 1917 group were physically removed to the British mainland rather than served with expatriation orders and were directed to live in specific towns in Herefordshire, Gloucestershire and Yorkshire. A small group were initially sent to Oxford before transfer elsewhere and with great efficiency the INRF sent O'Brien to interview these men within a few days of their landing in England.<sup>180</sup> Its ability to respond immediately to changing circumstances was the hallmark of the INRF. A sum of £30 was immediately sanctioned for the care of deportees and from then on the INRF monitored their well-being on a weekly basis.<sup>181</sup> Arrangements were also made with local banks so that deportees could cash cheques.<sup>182</sup> Those sent to small villages rather than towns were regarded as particularly hard done by — there being nothing to do and a complete lack of support.<sup>183</sup> McSwiney resided in Bromyard in Gloucestershire and got married there on 9 June 1917.<sup>184</sup> William Mullins was part of a group moved to Wetherby in Yorkshire and instructed to stay in 'digs' and not to stray outside the area. M. J. O'Connor, also in Wetherby, recounted how they made contact with the INRF in

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<sup>177</sup> *II*, 23 Feb. 1917.

<sup>178</sup> *The Irish Volunteer*, 24 July 1915, reported that Ernest Blythe and Denis McCullough were told to leave. Liam Mellows and H. M. Pim were also instructed to leave. See *Irish Examiner*, 15 July 1915.

<sup>179</sup> J. J. O'Kelly (IMA, BMH, WS 384, p. 34); INRF minutes, 10 Jan. 1917 (NLI, MS 1563).

<sup>180</sup> INRF minutes, 28 Feb. 1917 (NLI, MS 1563).

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, Feb. to June 1917.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 Apr. 1917.

<sup>183</sup> George Gavan Duffy to Henry Dixon, 12 Mar. 1917 (NLI, George Gavan Duffy papers, MS 5581).

<sup>184</sup> Moirin Chavasse, *Terence McSwiney*, p. 100.

London and received bank notes by registered post each week to pay for their 'digs'.<sup>185</sup> In April 1917 Dublin Castle rather surprisingly decreed that these 'deportees' should be paid by the local constable for their maintenance. Mullins and others therefore claimed compensation retrospectively from the British government for accommodation costs. They were awarded same and repaid all monies received to O'Brien for the INRF.<sup>186</sup>

These 'deportees' concerned Collins who suggested that O'Brien should find someone to travel around to visit them and encourage them to return to Ireland.<sup>187</sup> Notably, Collins urged O'Brien to keep the matter secret.<sup>188</sup> This was undoubtedly part of Collins's strategy to re-invigorate the IRB and the Volunteers post-1916. In his witness statement J. J. O'Kelly (Sceilg) refers to 'a new IRB' formed by Collins in Frongoch and says that Collins and his associates made contact 'with as many of the leading men as they could reach as they came home from gaol'.<sup>189</sup> The supervision by the police of the deportees was fairly haphazard in some circumstances, however. Liam Manahan recalled that six deportees simply 'walked out' of Wetherby and went straight back to Ireland.<sup>190</sup> The deportation orders were eventually cancelled in June 1917.<sup>191</sup> Relief fund business took O'Brien to Dublin in August 1917 and Collins to London that November, so they had ample opportunity to confer about IRB matters.<sup>192</sup>

Following the release of the convicted prisoners and the cancellation of the deportation orders in June 1917, in common with the fund in Ireland, the INRF activities gradually ground to a halt and meetings were suspended in early 1918.<sup>193</sup> It had remitted £1000 to Dublin and raised about £1,550 in total.<sup>194</sup> The first of many issues with accounts held by O'Brien also began to surface. Despite the first INRF relief

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<sup>185</sup> See M. J. O'Connor, *Stone walls: an Irish Volunteer's experiences in prison and internment in England and Wales after the 1916 rising* (Dublin, 1966); Seán Ó Muirthuille to O'Brien, 26 Apr. 1917 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8434/15).

<sup>186</sup> William Mullins (IMA, BMH, WS 801, pp 3-5).

<sup>187</sup> Collins to O'Brien, 4 Aug. 1917 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8443/5).

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> J. J. O'Kelly (IMA, BMH, WS 384, pp 50-1).

<sup>190</sup> Liam P. Manahan (IMA, BMH, WS 797, p. 22).

<sup>191</sup> *II*, 23 June 1917.

<sup>192</sup> See INRF minutes, 18 July & 30 Oct. 1917 (NLI, MS 1563).

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.* 19 Apr. 1918.

<sup>194</sup> INRF, notice of closure (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8442/22) and Noonan, *IRA in Britain*, p. 26.

fund having been wound up in London on 2 January 1918, O'Brien's completed accounts were not sent to Dublin until May 1919. He cited pressure of work as an excuse for the delay but confirmed that the funds were held in an account in his own name and that he intended to refund the money.<sup>195</sup> Although he did so, the delay gave an impression of less than strict accountability in financial affairs.

In April 1918 O'Brien and his fellow INRF committee members tried to start up the organisation again 'in case an emergency would arise'.<sup>196</sup> While McConville believes that as time went on both the Dublin and London relief organisations became more directly involved with republican politics and that the prison work became less important, the reality was that in London the prison work was the *only* focus for republican politics and is key to understanding how the small number of London activists stayed involved in the relatively quiet period between Easter 1916 and January 1919.<sup>197</sup> The INRF was concerned that a significant number of Irish men were still in English jails. When the British government arrested 73 prominent Sinn Féin members on 17-18 May 1918, in the context of the German plot,<sup>198</sup> the INRF moved up a gear and attempted to establish a system similar to that established post Easter 1916. These prisoners were dispersed to prisons throughout the length and breadth of Britain. They included de Valera, Griffith, Countess Markievicz and Kathleen Clarke and visits were banned until September 1918.<sup>199</sup> At a meeting on 22 May 1918 it was decided that the INRF should do everything possible to help these new prisoners and to instruct MacDonnell, the solicitor, to seek permission to see all of them.<sup>200</sup> The ill-health of Kathleen Clarke was a specific concern while poor food at Holloway prison was also noted.<sup>201</sup> Many relatives of those incarcerated remained ignorant of their whereabouts so O'Brien immediately began corresponding with the Home Office in pursuit of this information.<sup>202</sup> Chessmen, newspapers and tennis balls were bought for

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<sup>195</sup> O'Brien to Sceilg, 29 May 1919; O'Brien to John O'Mahony, 30 May 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8427/19).

<sup>196</sup> INRF minutes, 19 Apr. 1918 (NLI, MS 1563).

<sup>197</sup> McConville, *Irish political prisoners, 1848-1920: theatres of war*, p. 487.

<sup>198</sup> The 'German plot' was an alleged conspiracy between Sinn Féin and the German government which involved what the British described as 'treasonable contacts with the enemy'. See Laffan, *Resurrection*, pp 142-46.

<sup>199</sup> See Murphy, *Political imprisonment*, p. 111.

<sup>200</sup> INRF minutes, 22 May 1918 (NLI, MS 1563).

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 June 1918.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 29 May 1918.

the prisoners and it was decided to send de Valera, who was in Lincoln Jail, some special treats of fruits and salads.<sup>203</sup> In July 1918 O'Brien wrote to his old adversary, Cardinal Bourne, asking him to ensure that the prisoners had the facilities to observe their religious duties.<sup>204</sup> De Valera requested records from which he could learn Spanish and O'Brien was duly despatched to buy the records and a phonograph on which to play them, at the then rather exorbitant cost of £10.14.6.<sup>205</sup> No one on the INRF committee, however, expressed any reservations!

O'Brien composed a draft letter to all those on the appeal committee of the INRF explaining the new work which the fund was now undertaking. At this point a number of those involved in the 1916 appeal declined to be involved. Liam McCarthy objected strenuously on the grounds that this activity contravened the original constitution to render assistance in relation to the 1916 Rising only.<sup>206</sup> It is clear also that a very different atmosphere prevailed in London in 1918 compared to post Easter 1916. The INRF minutes of 24 July 1918 indicated that a much bigger effort was required to raise funds than in 1916.<sup>207</sup> The on-going hardship imposed by the war meant that incomes were depressed, food was scarce and patience with war and revolution was wearing thin. In addition to the continuing wartime fatalities, life was bleak for the civilians at home.<sup>208</sup> By September 1918 only a trickle of funds came in.<sup>209</sup> A Miss Watt wrote complaining of the political character of the fund's work in November 1918, while Miss O'Shaughnessy returned her collector's card owing to the unsympathetic attitude of the Irish in her neighbourhood.<sup>210</sup> The end of the war exacerbated the situation as the absorption of returning troops into the domestic economy led to a sharp rise in unemployment and associated poverty.<sup>211</sup> Matters were not helped by the arrest in October 1918 of C. B. Dutton of the INRF management committee. Although he was released without charge after a few weeks,

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 26 June & 21 Aug. 1918.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 10 July 1918.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 4 Sept. 1918. This equates to a cost of £463 in today's terms.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 26 June 1918.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 24 July 1918.

<sup>208</sup> See Wilson, *Myriad faces of war*, pp 507-18.

<sup>209</sup> INRF minutes, 14 Aug. & 11 Sept. 1918 (NLI, MS 1563).

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 27 Nov. & 11 Dec. 1918.

<sup>211</sup> Joshua Cole 'The transition to peace', 1918-1919' in Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (eds), *Capital cities at war: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914-1919* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 198.

the impression of illegal activity lingered.<sup>212</sup> O'Brien, remarkably, remained free from police attention. He was, however, summonsed to appear in court in late 1918 because his dog killed the neighbour's cat. His letter to the police on this issue was one of great bravado — declaring that he was 'engaged in important munitions work' and would like the case heard at an early hour of the day.<sup>213</sup>

The INRF shared offices with the GLL in Fulwood House and there was a significant overlap of membership between the INRF management committee and the GLL Ard-Choiste. O'Brien and Murphy were on both committees from the outset while Dutton and McGrath later joined the Ard-Choiste.<sup>214</sup> In June 1918 the Ard-Choiste debated whether it should share rooms with the INRF, even if it paid rent. Concern was mounting that the focus of the INRF had moved from prisoners and their dependents to a more revolutionary one. Retrospective support for prisoners was very different to support for current or future violent campaigns.<sup>215</sup> Disgruntled GLL Treasurer Seán Timoney commented that the further the INRF was separated from the GLL the better.<sup>216</sup> O'Brien tried to reassure the meeting that no one could describe the INRF as a political organisation. Concerned with this lack of support from some members of the Ard-Choiste, O'Brien, McGrath and Murphy put a motion to a general meeting of members in January 1919 'authorising the Ard-Choiste to make arrangements in any way it sees fit to give help to the Fund at meetings of the League either by collections announcements or otherwise'. The attendance was noted as between 150 and 200 and despite some vociferous objections the motion was carried with only six votes against.<sup>217</sup> After a short struggle these three stalwarts of the London IRB had bent the GLL to their will. Following the Sinn Féin victory in December 1918, the escape of 4 prisoners from Usk in January 1919 and de Valera's escape from Lincoln in February 1919, the British began to release all the internees a few at a time so as to minimise mass public demonstration.<sup>218</sup> All were finally released by March

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<sup>212</sup> INRF minutes, 23 Oct. 1918 (NLI, MS 1563).

<sup>213</sup> O'Brien to clerk of police, Bedford, 21 Oct. 1918 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8461/42).

<sup>214</sup> See GLL, ACM, 30 Jan. 1917 & 2 July 1918 (NLI, MS 9779).

<sup>215</sup> See Nic Dháibhéid, 'Political violence and the Irish diaspora', p. 471.

<sup>216</sup> GLL, ACM, 25 June 1918.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 Jan. 1919.

<sup>218</sup> Murphy, *Political imprisonment*, p. 128.

1919. The INRF wound up its accounts<sup>219</sup> but was soon to re-emerge in a new guise when the War of Independence took off. (See Chapter 3).

## 2.9 Re-emergence of London Sinn Féin

Laffan regards the use of the 'Sinn Féin' soubriquet for the Easter Rising as one of the principal reasons for the party's importance post-1916.<sup>220</sup> He also describes Sinn Féin as the 'fad or craze of 1917'.<sup>221</sup> The release of the 1916 prisoners coupled with the conscription crisis energised the organisation in Ireland.<sup>222</sup> Sorcha McDermott remembered that in 1917 O'Brien asked some people to come to the Sinn Féin club at the Chandos Hall off the Strand 'to re-form it because there was no life in it'.<sup>223</sup> He then proposed that it should be called the 'Sir Roger Casement Sinn Féin Club'.<sup>224</sup> He was duly elected president of the club and later that year became president of the Central Executive of the Sinn Féin organisation in England and Wales. He was also that body's delegate at the Ard-Fheis and Comhairle of Sinn Féin in Ireland for the next few years.<sup>225</sup> A report on the Sinn Féin branches in Britain concluded that up to January 1919 'the branches have been confined to collecting money for the various national funds ... a work ... performed with the greatest success'.<sup>226</sup> It was a support organisation rather than actively involved in policy or planning. In 1921 the total Sinn Féin organisation in England consisted of just one branch in London and nine in Liverpool.<sup>227</sup>

## 2.10 Conclusion

In 1913 O'Brien was a peaceful cultural nationalist with a thriving business as a consultant engineer. The formation of the Irish Volunteers in London in late 1914, the

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<sup>219</sup> INRF minutes, 25 June 1919 (NLI, MS 1563).

<sup>220</sup> Laffan, *Resurrection*, p. 68.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>222</sup> Jon Parry, 'The black hand': 1916 and Irish republican prisoners in North Wales' in Paul O'Leary (ed.) *Irish migrants in modern Wales* (Liverpool, 2004), p. 146.

<sup>223</sup> Sorcha McDermott (IMA, BMH, WS 945, p. 3).

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>225</sup> For O'Brien's own list of his memberships and positions in various organisations see 'Proofs of Evidence of Defendant', *Rex v. O'Brien*, 1923 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8441/5).

<sup>226</sup> Report on Sinn Féin in Britain by Terence Whelan, 3 Jan. 1919 (NLI, Count Plunkett papers, MS 11405).

<sup>227</sup> See Pádraig Ó Caoimh to Robert Brennan, 23 Nov. 1921 (NAI, DFA, early series, Box 17/109).

onset of the First World War and the impact of the 1916 Rising all served to propel him into militant separatism. There is no doubt that the 1916 executions contributed significantly to his decision to join the IRB and to commit fully to the struggle for Irish freedom. What distinguished O'Brien from his peers, however, was his centrality. As the main driver of the prisoners' relief fund, the financial conduit for gun-running operations and leader of Sinn Féin and the GLL, he controlled all significant Irish-Ireland activity, both legal and illegal. The GLL was also forced into the separatist arena and, although it made some attempts to remain apolitical, this was indeed a challenge in the 1916-1921 period given O'Brien's over-arching leadership.

The prisoner experience post-1916 has been widely recognised by historians as a pivotal episode in the origins of the War of Independence. Nic Dháibhéid has highlighted the effect of INAAVDF on the 'sacralization of the Easter rebellion' because not only did it collect money but it also issued memorial cards and held requiem masses regularly for those who were executed or killed.<sup>228</sup> Murphy has emphasised how the prisoners became idols and 'a practical cause around which separatism re-organised and then widened its appeal'.<sup>229</sup> Laffan contends that the relief funds helped maintain morale after the Rising and did much to keep together people who might have drifted away from the movement.<sup>230</sup> He also suggests that the relief organisations showed more drive and energy than any other separatist element in the second half of 1916.<sup>231</sup> While not overtly 'sacralizing' the Rising, the INRF was crucial to this development because it alone kept track of all the prisoners in Britain and it successfully publicised their plight. It is clear that O'Brien was the driving force behind the relief fund in London and, although others might have taken up the challenge in his absence, it is doubtful they would have committed so totally to the cause. He coordinated the entire relief effort and ensured that as many as possible got safely back to Ireland. While his humanitarian credentials are impeccable, it is also possible that he was the first to grasp the potential for further revolutionary activity if this group could be managed and encouraged. The IRB in London, while very small, was intact

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<sup>228</sup> Nic Dháibhéid, 'Irish National Aid Association, p. 722.

<sup>229</sup> Murphy, *Political imprisonment*, p. 79.

<sup>230</sup> Laffan, *Resurrection*, p. 68.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

after 1916 and was much more capable of calculated action than any group in Ireland at that time.

What emerges from this analysis is the significant contribution which one individual can make to a revolution with the assistance of a small number of committed activists. Various individuals with a strong commitment to an independent Ireland were harnessed by a very small IRB group, not officially led by but certainly galvanised by O'Brien from June 1916 onwards. To praise O'Brien is not to diminish the roles of Sam Maguire, Seán McGrath and other secret gun-runners — but to point out that without his management and co-ordination the support from London would have been sporadic and disparate. In London therefore, organisational membership was far less important than individual commitment and contacts. O'Brien proved himself not just a loyal supporter of the Irish cause but a highly competent manager who delivered. More importantly, he developed a very close working relationship with Collins during 1917 and when the job of London envoy of the Irish Republic arose in 1919 O'Brien was the outstanding candidate.



## **‘The foolish catchword of self-determination’: London envoy of the Irish Republic, 1919-1921**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The resounding victory of Sinn Féin in the general election of December 1918 led to the establishment of Dáil Éireann in January 1919 and a resurgence in Irish nationalism both at home and abroad. For O’Brien this was one of the great moments of his life: ‘it is indeed heartening to see the dreams of one’s life gradually evolving into actual and solid fact’ he wrote.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter his role as envoy of Dáil Éireann in London and as founder of the Irish Self-Determination League of Great Britain (ISDL) is analysed. Survey histories of the Irish revolution usually dispatch this period in London in a few paragraphs, failing to recognise how important the activities of the Dáil’s London office were in terms of gun-running and propaganda. Never one to shy away from hard work, O’Brien relinquished his day job and committed himself fully to Irish nationalism in a manner deeply influenced by his relationship with Michael Collins and by his membership of the IRB. With an outward semblance of compliance with the law of the land, he was the determined financial manager of a significant gun-running operation and had no qualms about support for armed resistance in Ireland and on the British mainland during the War of Independence. As the public face of the ostensibly legal ISDL, O’Brien led Sinn Féin’s propaganda campaign for the recognition of Irish independence in London and conveyed its message to the world. He masterminded spectacular publicity for Terence MacSwiney and Archbishop Mannix and became a highly respected figure not just among the Irish in London, but also among other nationalities which campaigned for their independence from the British Empire.

### **3.2 London envoy**

After the December 1918 election Sinn Féin set up a foreign relations committee which comprised Eoin MacNeill, Nancy Wyse Power, Michael Collins, George Gavan

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<sup>1</sup> O’Brien to George Gavan Duffy, quoted in Mitchell, *Revolutionary government*, p. 156.

Duffy and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington.<sup>2</sup> Collins nominated O'Brien for the salaried post of London representative for a minimum of two or three years.<sup>3</sup> As noted in previous chapters, MacNeill knew O'Brien from his early GLL days and Gavan Duffy held O'Brien in the highest esteem. There was therefore significant support for Collins's suggestion and it suited Collins to install an IRB counterpart in London. It is unlikely that the other members of the committee knew of O'Brien's IRB membership. Several historians have drawn attention to the differences of opinion among those elected to Dáil Éireann on how to achieve independence. This complex debate centred on whether moderate political action or physical force should be the key driver of future progress. Townshend cites the relationship between the Dáil and the Volunteers as a crucial issue which needed to be resolved in 1919.<sup>4</sup> Laffan also highlights the differences which emerged at that time between the Sinn Féin party and the Volunteers.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the traditional Fenian physical-force line that politicians were not to be trusted was alive and well in the Dáil's first executive.<sup>6</sup> Some, like de Valera and Brugha, believed in the supremacy of the Dáil, while Collins saw the IRB as the guarantor of republican principles. O'Brien, safely ensconced in London, subscribed to the latter view.

O'Brien was confirmed as 'Envoy of the Irish Republic in London' after the first sitting of Dáil Éireann in January 1919.<sup>7</sup> Collins had advised him of his appointment in advance.<sup>8</sup> Harry Boland, another IRB stalwart, also wrote to him on 1 March 1919 looking for a full statement of his ideas for running the London bureau.<sup>9</sup> To stamp the Dáil's authority on the London office, Cathal Brugha, acting president of the Dáil Ministry, informed O'Brien that the Foreign Relations Committee of Sinn Féin 'will in future be a sub-committee of the Dáil acting under the Foreign Minister ... Count Plunkett. The Dáil therefore take over any responsibility that the committee has

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<sup>2</sup> Nancy Wyse Power (IMA, BMH, WS 587, p. 11).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> See Townshend, *Republic*, pp 86-89.

<sup>5</sup> Laffan, *Resurrection*, pp 277-84.

<sup>6</sup> Townshend, *Republic*, p. 86.

<sup>7</sup> O'Brien to F. MacHenry, 3 July 1933 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/20).

<sup>8</sup> Collins to O'Brien, 14 Jan. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8461/2).

<sup>9</sup> Harry Boland to O'Brien, 1 Mar. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8427/11).

carried as far as you are concerned.<sup>10</sup> Brugha had left the IRB after the 1916 Rising and did not approve of any secret society exerting control over the Volunteers or Dáil Éireann. This occasioned great animosity between himself and Collins.<sup>11</sup> In the event, O'Brien chose to ignore Plunkett who proved to be an ineffective Foreign Minister.<sup>12</sup> Instead, he reported to Collins on a daily basis from then until the summer of 1921.<sup>13</sup> As Collins's eyes and ears in London, O'Brien reported on a myriad of issues such as British public opinion, Irish prisoners, gun-running, intelligence, accounts, international trade, propaganda for Sinn Féin and, eventually, peace overtures. Collins, meanwhile, tried to keep track of all this London activity from the underground government in Dublin. O'Brien also wrote regularly to Ernest Blythe, Minister for Trade and Commerce, on matters as diverse as hackney horses, buttons, seed potatoes and plans to set up a motor industry in Ireland.<sup>14</sup> He also corresponded with Robert Brennan, Desmond FitzGerald, Erskine Childers, Austin Stack, Arthur Griffith, Gavan Duffy and Diarmuid O'Hegarty on a wide range of issues. Collins, however, was his superior and main contact.<sup>15</sup>

On becoming envoy O'Brien resigned from his engineering job and took a large reduction in salary, from £750 per annum to £500.<sup>16</sup> This was a significant gamble. The job of Irish republican envoy in London in 1919 had no prestige and as an affront to the British Empire could have led to his immediate arrest. He later insisted that the sacrifice was 'quite voluntary' and 'without any condition of later recompense'.<sup>17</sup> He rented offices for the 'Dáil Éireann Information Bureau' at 3 Adam Street, off the Strand in London. These offices were rented in his own name, describing himself as a manager in the family business, the *Music Trades Review*, lest there should be any objections to the Dáil Éireann project from the landlord.<sup>18</sup> The *Music Trades Review*

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<sup>10</sup> Cathal Brugha to O'Brien, 10 Mar. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8431/3).

<sup>11</sup> See James Quinn, 'Cathal Brugha, 1874-1922', *DIB*.

<sup>12</sup> See D. R. O'Connor Lysaght, 'George Noble Count Plunkett, 1851-1948', *DIB*.

<sup>13</sup> See Collins/O'Brien correspondence, 1919-1921 (NLI, AÓBP, Section IV, ii, 1); Dáil Éireann, Collins correspondence (NAI, Dáil Éireann (hereafter DE)/2, various files).

<sup>14</sup> See various correspondence between Blythe and O'Brien, 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8428/29).

<sup>15</sup> See NLI, AÓBP, Section IV, ii, 2-5.

<sup>16</sup> O'Brien to F. MacHenry, 3 July 1933 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/20). O'Brien had been working for a number of years in D. P. Battery Company, Victoria Street, London.

<sup>17</sup> O'Brien to F. MacHenry, 3 July 1933 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/20).

<sup>18</sup> Tenancy agreement, 3 Adam Street, 25 Mar. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8446/30).

offices were at 5 Duke Street, Adelphi, within a short walk of Adam Street so O'Brien could wander at will between the two premises and regularly used the *Music Trades Review* offices as a cover address for post sent from Dublin.<sup>19</sup> O'Brien must have been very impressed with the calibre of the personnel leading Sinn Féin given that he was prepared to put his future prospects in their hands. One wonders how his mother and sisters and his relatives in the family business regarded his resignation from a steady and well-paying profession to this very risky position and also whether they understood the full implications of his activities.

The office staff consisted initially of O'Brien, a secretary named Kathleen MacMahon and Fintan Murphy, general assistant to O'Brien.<sup>20</sup> Apart from her secretarial skills, MacMahon was useful because she allowed her home address to be used for receipt of correspondence from Dublin.<sup>21</sup> O'Brien insisted on proper procedures from the start so that the date was stamped on all in-coming post and memos to and from Collins were numbered in order to keep track of them and to detect any interference in delivery.<sup>22</sup> Printing of office stationery and leaflets was done in Ireland, whenever possible. The office soon established itself as a port of call in relation to all things Irish — both legal and illegal. By all accounts it was a happy place to work — Rose Killeen described the office as 'always filled with joy and laughter'.<sup>23</sup> O'Brien was loyal to his staff, which increased to six by late 1921, ensuring that they were properly remunerated and their families taken care of when some of them inevitably were interned for their activities.<sup>24</sup> O'Brien seems to have worked equally well with both men and women, as his co-operation with women committee members in both the GLL and the INRF demonstrated. He was occasionally given to misogynistic comment, opining that a certain position in Sinn Féin in London was hardly one for a

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<sup>19</sup> See O'Brien to Collins, 8 Dec. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/6).

<sup>20</sup> Fintan Murphy Senior, as he was sometimes referred to, was the father of Fintan Murphy Junior, member of the London Volunteers who moved to Ireland in January 1916 and had significant subsequent involvement in the Irish revolution. See Fintan Murphy (IMA, BMH, WS 370).

<sup>21</sup> MacMahon died in mid-1920 and was replaced by Maeve O'Brien (no relation of Art) for a short time before Elizabeth Brennan took up the role in late 1920.

<sup>22</sup> See Collins/O'Brien correspondence, 1919-1921 (NLI, AÓBP, Section IV, ii, 1).

<sup>23</sup> Recollections of Rose Killeen, n.d. in Fintan Murphy (Junior) to Desmond Ryan, 25 Feb. 1959 (UCDA, Desmond Ryan papers, LA10/152).

<sup>24</sup> See O'Brien to de Valera, report on the London office, 14 Apr. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/1).

woman,<sup>25</sup> but on the other hand, he was furious when an ISDL organiser in the north of England tried to exclude women from the organisation.<sup>26</sup>

### 3.3 Sinn Féin foreign policy

O'Brien was part of a wider diplomatic mission in which Dáil Éireann sent consuls and diplomatic agents to Russia, France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Austria, Denmark, Switzerland, the United States and South America.<sup>27</sup> The most important hubs apart from London were the United States (Harry Boland), Paris (George Gavan Duffy) and Rome (Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh). For the Sinn Féin leaders the presentation of their case for nationhood to the rest of the world was the central plank of their strategy to force the British government to grant Irish independence.<sup>28</sup> As Gerard Keown has noted, the new world order after the war and Versailles, in particular, meant that there were possibilities to promote the cause of Irish independence on the international stage like never before.<sup>29</sup> The concept of self-determination, which had been a key element of the Sinn Féin general election campaign in 1918, was espoused at the first sitting of the Dáil with a firm resolution that the 'Republic' of Ireland be recognised throughout the world.<sup>30</sup> As Laffan has noted, the fall of so many European monarchies towards the end of the First World War made the demand for a republic seem less absurd.<sup>31</sup> Fearghal McGarry writes that the shift of power from imperial to nation states which occurred in the post-war order decisively influenced the outcomes of the terms for British disengagement from Ireland.<sup>32</sup> Wilsonian self-determination became a rallying cry and the Dáil demanded the application of this principle to Ireland.<sup>33</sup> For this reason, as Inoue has observed, 'the activities carried out by Sinn Féin and Dáil Éireann from 1919 to 1921 were peculiar and exceptional in one point: 'their work centred

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<sup>25</sup> O'Brien to McGrath, 29 Oct. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8433/53).

<sup>26</sup> O'Brien to McGrath, 22 Nov. 1919, *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Dáil Éireann cabinet minutes, 5 June 1920 (NAI, DE/1/2). See also Fanning et al, *Documents on Irish foreign policy*, Vol. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Maurice Walsh, *The news from Ireland: foreign correspondents and the Irish revolution* (London, 2008), p. 106.

<sup>29</sup> Gerard Keown, *First of the small nations: the beginnings of Irish foreign policy in the interwar years* (London, 2016), p. 37.

<sup>30</sup> Dáil Éireann, Parliamentary Debates, 21 Jan. 1919 (Dublin, Stationery Office).

<sup>31</sup> Laffan, *Resurrection*, p. 163.

<sup>32</sup> Fearghal McGarry 'Independent Ireland' in Richard Bourke and Ian McBride (eds), *The Princeton history of modern Ireland* (Princeton, 2016), p. 116.

<sup>33</sup> Mitchell, *Revolutionary government*, p. 334.

mostly on foreign propaganda, rather than preaching their doctrines in Ireland'.<sup>34</sup> In particular, emphasis was placed on the contradiction between imperialism and democracy which was implicit in the British government's attitude to Ireland.<sup>35</sup>

Virtually all correspondence and funding for the foreign missions was channelled through O'Brien in London.<sup>36</sup> Large sums of money and daily correspondence were sent from Dublin to covering addresses in London and then dispersed by O'Brien's office throughout the globe. In April 1919, for instance, Collins sent £4,000 to O'Brien for transfer to Ó Ceallaigh in Paris.<sup>37</sup> O'Brien saw himself as *the* most senior 'diplomat' of the Irish Republic and shared his views on various foreign representatives with Collins. He reported that Ó Ceallaigh and Gavan Duffy were both representing Dáil Éireann in Paris in June 1920 and that while they had no personal quarrel their methods and views were very much at variance.<sup>38</sup> Dónal Hales, consul in Genoa, was deemed by O'Brien to be lacking in energy and responsibility, while Leopold Kerney, the trade consul in Paris, met with O'Brien's approval as 'a good business man' with knowledge of French business conditions.<sup>39</sup> In Switzerland Count Gerald O'Kelly lacked 'the necessary knowledge for political work'.<sup>40</sup> Keown has concluded that for all their propaganda activity, these representatives largely failed to gain any recognition for the Dáil.<sup>41</sup> The London office was by far the most dynamic — other representatives simply could not match O'Brien's work-rate, nor did they have large numbers of ex-patriate Irish to rival London. Dermot Keogh has described Paris as the Sinn Féin propaganda centre for Europe from 1919 to 1922<sup>42</sup> but this thesis shows that London should rank as equally important to Paris in that role. Paris propaganda was limited because the French press was not particularly sympathetic to

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<sup>34</sup> Inoue, 'Dáil propaganda and the Irish Self-Determination League of Great Britain', p. 47.

<sup>35</sup> Mitchell, *Revolutionary government*, p. 334.

<sup>36</sup> See Collins to O'Brien, 14 June 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8430/6); Collins to O'Brien, 6 July 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/3); Robert Brennan to O'Brien, 2 Mar. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8425/23).

<sup>37</sup> Collins to O'Brien, 16 Apr. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/11).

<sup>38</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 16 June 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8430/6). Ó Ceallaigh moved to Rome shortly afterwards. For an account of the various diplomatic missions of Dáil Éireann see Mitchell, *Revolutionary government*, pp 183-200.

<sup>39</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 16 June 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8430/6).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Keown, *First of the small nations*, pp 68-9.

<sup>42</sup> Dermot Keogh, *Ireland and Europe, 1919-1989* (Cork, 1990), p. 8.

the Irish given the pro-German stance of Irish nationalists during the war,<sup>43</sup> but O'Brien held court over a much more malleable international press entourage. Propaganda in London and in Britain in general also proved to of great significance in the Irish self-determination battle, as over time both Labour and some Conservative politicians came to support Irish self-determination.

### **3.4 The Irish Self-Determination League of Great Britain (ISDL)**

Fresh from his escape from Lincoln Jail in February 1919, de Valera turned his thoughts to the propaganda war in Britain. The ISDL was founded in March 1919 by O'Brien at de Valera's request.<sup>44</sup> O'Brien exhorted the Irish in Britain to rally to the movement as this was 'Ireland's golden hour'.<sup>45</sup> It was de Valera's intention that the ISDL would capitalise on the popularity of the concept of 'self-determination' in world political and diplomatic discourses as expounded by Woodrow Wilson.<sup>46</sup> That this organisation was not just a solo-run by de Valera is confirmed by Harry Boland who informed O'Brien that 'an auxiliary organisation under a new name' was favoured by headquarters.<sup>47</sup> Fitzpatrick notes that Boland was always alert to the value of front organisations whose appeal might extend beyond republicanism and Sinn Féin.<sup>48</sup> De Valera's hopes that the ISDL would band together the Irish in Britain to enhance the Dáil's claims for admission to the Paris peace conference proved overly ambitious. Refused admission to the conference, 'the Irish were forced to operate on the margins of the great debates and decisions'.<sup>49</sup> The initial rationale for the ISDL was, therefore, redundant by the time most branches were formed in mid-1919. Its secondary function as a propaganda machine against the British government was equally important, however, and more than justified efforts to build up the organisation. The exclusion from the peace talks is yet another reason why London became more important than Paris as a centre of diplomacy as time went on.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>44</sup> De Valera to O'Brien, 22 Mar. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/41).

<sup>45</sup> O'Brien to the Irish people in Great Britain, n.d. [June 1919] (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8436/16).

<sup>46</sup> Address by Woodrow Wilson to Joint Houses of Congress, 8 Jan. 1918, Library of Congress on-line catalogue (<http://lccn.loc.gov/unk82024173>) (accessed 28 Feb. 2013).

<sup>47</sup> Harry Boland to O'Brien, 5 Mar. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/41).

<sup>48</sup> David Fitzpatrick, *Harry Boland's Irish revolution* (Cork, 2003), p. 118.

<sup>49</sup> Laffan, *Resurrection*, p. 251. For a discussion of the dashed hopes of small nations, see Alan Sharp, *The Versailles settlement: peacemaking in Paris, 1919* (London, 1991), p. 195.

The first meeting of the ISDL was held in Manchester on 31 March 1919 and was chaired by O'Brien.<sup>50</sup> Two members of the Dáil — Boland and Laurence Ginnell — were present.<sup>51</sup> All of the first executive committee were members of Sinn Féin and the IRB was strongly represented.<sup>52</sup> P. J. Kelly from Liverpool was appointed chairman and subsequently president. A native of Tyrone, he was elected as an IPP councillor in 1914 but had changed allegiance to Sinn Féin by 1918.<sup>53</sup> William McMahon, a native of Limerick and a member of the IRB, the GAA and the Gaelic League was appointed secretary.<sup>54</sup> O'Brien was the prime mover in all ISDL activity, however, and became its vice-president. He was responsible for drafting the constitution and also co-ordinated all activities relating to the establishment of branches until Seán McGrath was appointed full-time organiser in September 1919.<sup>55</sup> It was O'Brien who selected McGrath,<sup>56</sup> his IRB membership no doubt a significant asset, in O'Brien's view, to his suitability for the job.<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Brennan (secretary to O'Brien from late 1920) described McGrath as 'a wonderful worker' who never spared himself for the ISDL and who also worked 'indefatigably for the prisoners held in various gaols'.<sup>58</sup> He focused initially on London before becoming national general secretary in November 1919. By March 1920 there were 86 branches with 7,300 members registered. Membership peaked at 26,972 in 214 branches in November 1920.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> O'Brien to hon. secretary Sinn Féin, Dublin, 9 July 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/41).

<sup>51</sup> A former Irish Parliamentary Party MP, Ginnell stood for Sinn Féin in the 1918 General Election and was briefly Director of Dáil Publicity until his arrest in May 1919. See Pauric Dempsey and Shaun Boylan, 'Laurence Ginnell, 1852-1923', *DIB*. See also Fitzpatrick, *Harry Boland's Irish revolution*.

<sup>52</sup> Minutes of Irish Self-Determination League of Great Britain (hereafter ISDL) provisional executive meeting in William McMahon to O'Brien, 8 Apr. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8436/17).

<sup>53</sup> For information on P. J. Kelly see John Belchem, *Irish, Catholic and scouse: the history of the Liverpool Irish, 1800-1939* (Liverpool, 2007), p. 120, and Sam Davies, 'A stormy political career: P. J. Kelly and Irish Nationalist and Labour politics in Liverpool, 1891-1936', *The Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, Vol. 148 (1999), pp 147-89.

<sup>54</sup> For a detailed account of William McMahon's activities see his witness statement: Liam McMahon (IMA, BMH, WS 274).

<sup>55</sup> See various correspondence, 1919, in NLI, AÓBP MSs 8426/41, 8435/11, 8436/14, 8436/17, 8436/26, 8433/54.

<sup>56</sup> See O'Brien to William McMahon, 7 Oct. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8433/53).

<sup>57</sup> See paragraph 3.8 in this chapter.

<sup>58</sup> Elizabeth MacGinley (née Brennan) (IMA, BMH, WS 860, p. 3).

<sup>59</sup> It is difficult to give accurate maximum membership figures for the ISDL. Seán McGrath's figure of 26,972 in 214 branches in November 1920 appears to be the most reliable. A commonly used figure of 38,726 for March 1921 involves an overlap in subscription years and is therefore inaccurate. See Seán McGrath, report to first annual conference of the ISDL, 25 Nov. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8425/28) and Seán Harvey, report to central executive of ISDL, n.d. (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8432/5).



As might be expected, there was significant overlap between membership of the ISDL and Sinn Féin. Rivalry between the two was a key feature of the early days of the ISDL.<sup>60</sup> Sinn Féin HQ in Dublin intended that British Sinn Féin branches would be superseded by the ISDL but some branches refused to merge.<sup>61</sup> In Scotland this meant that the ISDL never took hold. In England and Wales the ISDL eventually became the superior partner because O'Brien was president of Sinn Féin and controlled its activities. Conflict between the Gaelic League and the ISDL also surfaced. ISDL secretary McMahon was warned 'to keep a steady control or you will find men who would not touch the Sinn Féin movement 10 years ago, will by their push, arrogance and peacock conceit, boss you in this matter and the worst offenders are the recent converts of the English branches of the Gaelic League'.<sup>62</sup> O'Brien's political speeches at GLL functions during 1919 were also the subject of a complaint to the Coiste Gnótha in Dublin. His enthusiasm for the ISDL irritated those whose sole concern was the Irish language.<sup>63</sup>

The ISDL constitution stated that its two key objectives were the achievement of self-determination for Ireland and the care of Irish political prisoners in Britain.<sup>64</sup> The constitution also contained two clauses which had a significant impact on the development of the ISDL. The first limited membership to persons born in Ireland or who were of Irish descent.<sup>65</sup> This caused much dissatisfaction as time went on, because it excluded sympathetic Britons or others anxious to help. The ISDL leadership appears, however, to have been constrained by de Valera's desire for an organisation for Irish people only.<sup>66</sup> A second contentious clause restricted members from taking any part in British politics.<sup>67</sup> This inward focus undoubtedly limited the appeal of the ISDL and affected its growth.

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<sup>60</sup> O'Brien to Con Collins, 17 Apr. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8436/17).

<sup>61</sup> Report of extra-ordinary Ard-Fheis of Sinn Féin Dublin, 8 Apr. 1919 (NLI, Sinn Féin memorabilia, ILB300p5).

<sup>62</sup> Thomas Martin to William McMahon, 30 June 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8433/54).

<sup>63</sup> MacGiolla Bhríde to Ó Tuama, 6 Sept. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8433/39).

<sup>64</sup> ISDL constitution (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/9).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> De Valera to the Irish in England, Mar. 1919 (UCDA, De Valera papers, P150/630).

<sup>67</sup> ISDL constitution (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/9).

It was also expected that the ISDL would promote the Irish National Loan (established to fund Dáil Éireann's activities) by selling bonds to their members. Collins thought that branches of the ISDL could take care of this but O'Brien was adamant that they would need special committees made up of men and women who were used to dealing with such matters.<sup>68</sup> In promoting the loan to Londoners Collins professed 'his complete confidence in Mr. Art O'Brien in these matters'.<sup>69</sup> Despite O'Brien's best efforts, however, a campaign by the *Catholic Herald* claiming that subscriptions to the loan in Britain would be confiscated proved a hindrance.<sup>70</sup> The Home Office recorded that 'complaints are frequent that much of the money subscribed in London, as in Liverpool, to the Irish National Loan, is not going further than the collectors' pockets'.<sup>71</sup> The ISDL raised a disappointing £6,652 for the National Loan.<sup>72</sup> This was well below, for instance, the Munster Sinn Féin constituency average of £7,440 and significantly below the £12,067 collected in Cork city.<sup>73</sup> Records and correspondence in the Ó Briain papers indicate meticulous record-keeping and the dispatching of loan contributions immediately to Dublin.<sup>74</sup> However, because of concern about suppression of the London Dáil Office and the ISDL, all monies handled were kept in O'Brien's personal accounts. This left him vulnerable to criticism about accountability and ultimately came back to haunt him after he rejected the Treaty.

### 3.5 ISDL propaganda

In his public role as London envoy and de facto leader of the ISDL, O'Brien drew up detailed plans for the operation of a propaganda and information office in London.<sup>75</sup> Given his location at the heart of the British Empire, this propaganda campaign was as important as any gun-running. O'Brien wrote a comprehensive report for Dail Éireann on the need to provide daily information for all journalists in London, citing the War

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<sup>68</sup> See Collins to O'Brien, 27 Aug. 1919 & O'Brien to Collins, 29 Aug. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8423/7).

<sup>69</sup> Collins, promotional letter re: Irish Loan, 10 Oct. 1919, *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 9 Oct. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8437/7).

<sup>71</sup> Home Office reports on revolutionary activity in the United Kingdom (hereafter RROUK), 20 Jan. 1920 (TNA, Cabinet minutes (hereafter CAB) 24//97/24).

<sup>72</sup> Seán McGrath, ISDL Annual Conference Report, 25 Nov. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8425/28).

<sup>73</sup> Pat McCarthy, *Waterford: the Irish revolution, 1912-23* (Dublin, 2015), p. 65.

<sup>74</sup> Ledgers for Irish Loan (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8458/7).

<sup>75</sup> O'Brien, Proposal for extending propaganda in London, n.d. (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/37).

Office's *Ministry of Information* as an example.<sup>76</sup> In addition, he recommended a club for foreign journalists along the lines of one established by the British during the war. By befriending and entertaining foreign journalists he expected to enlist their help and sympathy. One of O'Brien's first diplomatic tasks was to entertain the Irish-American delegation of Frank J. Ryan, Frank P. Walsh and Edward F. Dunne who were en-route through London to the Paris peace talks following a fact-finding mission in Ireland.<sup>77</sup> O'Brien saw to it that the three were wined and dined at the Savoy Hotel and the Café Royal and also hired a private car for two days for their convenience.<sup>78</sup> He also presented them with a bound copy of all the press cuttings in relation to their visit to Ireland. As an established London business man, O'Brien adapted with ease to the style of diplomat within weeks of taking on his new role.

London was a major hub for the world's press and in a few short weeks O'Brien had assembled a large coterie of British and foreign journalists who gathered at his office for news of Ireland.<sup>79</sup> Daily news conferences on the state of Ireland were held in a room decorated with maps of Ireland which showed the result of the 1918 general election. Smaller maps and photos and a constant supply of pamphlets were made available to journalists. The London manager of the Universal News Service was effusive in his gratitude to O'Brien for 'the first exclusive news of De Valera's presence in America'.<sup>80</sup> While influencing the British press was important, O'Brien was even more intent on harnessing the power of the international media. In this regard, his fluency in French and Spanish was a huge asset. O'Brien's own views on journalism reflected his need to control, however. He believed that journalism should be a profession and that newspapers should be divided into sections — each written by an expert in his field. He suggested state prosecution and heavy penalties for erroneous information, opining that a newspaper 'should be an education to its readers instead

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> See Michael Hopkinson, *Irish war of independence*, p. 33.

<sup>78</sup> See receipts, London office Dáil Éireann (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/37).

<sup>79</sup> O'Brien's extensive press contacts are listed in his papers. See for instance NLI, AÓBP, MS 8433/48.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Welles Ritchie to O'Brien, 28 June 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS, 8460/17).

of mental poison'.<sup>81</sup> Presumably, he didn't share these thoughts with the journalists he was trying to woo in London.

A continuing theme in the correspondence between O'Brien and Collins from the start of the War of Independence was the dissatisfaction of both with the performance of the joint Dáil Éireann/Sinn Féin propaganda office in Dublin run by Desmond FitzGerald and Robert Brennan. FitzGerald succeeded Laurence Ginnell as Director of Publicity for Dáil Éireann in May 1919 and Robert Brennan had been in charge of Sinn Féin propaganda for some time. From mid-1919 onwards they both worked from the same office and combined their efforts.<sup>82</sup> FitzGerald travelled to London in September 1919 to review press strategy with O'Brien and initially they worked well together.<sup>83</sup> O'Brien was disappointed when FitzGerald returned to Dublin after a few weeks as he had helped make very valuable connections with members of the foreign press.<sup>84</sup> In December 1919 O'Brien reported that he, FitzGerald and Childers had taken journalists from Europe, South America, and Australia out to lunch singly or in groups.<sup>85</sup> Following a number of other visits to London by FitzGerald, however, O'Brien complained to Collins that FitzGerald's propaganda ideas were 'quite hopeless' and that he was careless [in terms of security] and would land them all in trouble.<sup>86</sup> Collins gave some comfort to O'Brien by reprimanding FitzGerald.<sup>87</sup> FitzGerald and Brennan, however, decided to operate independently of O'Brien. They travelled to London to initiate publicity for hunger strikes in Wormwood Scrubs prison in May 1920 (see below) and in July 1920 O'Brien was incensed by attempts by FitzGerald to establish a telegraphic news service in London independent of O'Brien's office.<sup>88</sup> O'Brien's exasperation at any form of interference was captured in another missive to Collins: 'I am very much bothered by irresponsible people making all sorts of statements without the true facts ... I should like to add to my office equipment a cage

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<sup>81</sup> O'Brien, lecture notes, n.d. (NLI, AÓBP, 8417/1).

<sup>82</sup> Robert Brennan (IMA, BMH, WS 779, p. 2).

<sup>83</sup> O'Brien to Diarmuid O'Hegarty, 28 Oct. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/17).

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> O'Brien to George Gavan Duffy, 13 Dec. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8425/21).

<sup>86</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 16 Sept. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8425/20).

<sup>87</sup> Mitchell, *Revolutionary government*, p. 105.

<sup>88</sup> O'Brien to O'Hegarty, 12 July 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8428/31).

in which I could lock up for the time being all these irresponsible people'.<sup>89</sup> O'Brien and Collins were also working to an IRB agenda about arms procurement in London from which the propaganda office was excluded and this did not make for good working relationships.<sup>90</sup>

Brennan's main responsibility was to keep O'Brien and the ISDL supplied with Sinn Féin pamphlets and leaflets. Much of this correspondence was initially sent to the office of the *Music Trades Review* but O'Brien then organised various cover addresses with sympathetic individuals throughout London.<sup>91</sup> In late 1919 FitzGerald and Erskine Childers launched the *Irish Bulletin* as a propaganda tool to highlight the tyranny of British rule in Ireland. Copies of each edition (up to five a week) were sent to London for distribution by the ISDL. Townshend points out that the *Bulletin* 'tirelessly depicted the conflict as a foreign invasion of a sovereign independent state'.<sup>92</sup> The *Bulletin's* relentless cataloguing of the terror of the Black and Tans found a sympathetic audience in Britain and also resulted in significantly increased newspaper coverage for the Irish situation worldwide.<sup>93</sup> The inability of Brennan and FitzGerald and their assistants to carefully wrap items which might land the receiver in trouble with the British authorities infuriated O'Brien. His complaints were dismissed by FitzGerald in a sarcastic riposte, however, suggesting O'Brien was insensitive to the unfolding War of Independence — 'unfortunately I can't reprimand the packer as he is under lock and key'.<sup>94</sup> O'Brien's missive to Childers enclosing 'a piece of string showing how a parcel is tied' must surely have endeared him even more to the propaganda office!<sup>95</sup>

In July 1920 O'Brien requested clarification of the relationship between the propaganda department and the offices abroad, making it clear that he was far from happy at the department's interference in London, but none was forthcoming.<sup>96</sup> In December 1920, O'Brien complained to Collins of their gross carelessness in sending

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<sup>89</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 7 Sept. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8427/1).

<sup>90</sup> See for instance Collins to O'Brien, 17 June 1920 (NAI, DE/2/285); O'Brien to Collins, 20 Aug. 1921 (NAI, DE/2/331).

<sup>91</sup> See O'Brien to O'Hegarty, 7 June 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/17).

<sup>92</sup> Townshend, *Republic*, p. 124.

<sup>93</sup> See Desmond FitzGerald, propaganda report to Dáil Éireann, 18 Jan. 1921 (UCDA, FitzGerald papers, P80/14).

<sup>94</sup> FitzGerald to O'Brien, 16 Dec. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, 8426/13).

<sup>95</sup> O'Brien to Childers, 3 May 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8421/8).

<sup>96</sup> O'Brien to O'Hegarty, 12 July 1920, Fanning et al, *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy*, Vol. 1, pp 81-2.

him a military manual by accident which was subsequently found in his office during a police raid.<sup>97</sup> Collins despaired that they were 'quite hopeless'<sup>98</sup> while apparently Gavan Duffy and Ó Ceallaigh, in Rome and Paris respectively, also had difficulties with Brennan and FitzGerald.<sup>99</sup>

O'Brien's criticism of the propaganda department was largely supported, therefore, by Collins and by other envoys abroad, so it seems that he had legitimate concerns, *as well as* a strong desire to stamp his own authority on the London propaganda operation. In January 1921 O'Brien again castigated FitzGerald for replying to less than five per cent of his memos from London.<sup>100</sup> FitzGerald responded with a trenchant criticism of O'Brien and the ISDL, complaining that their propaganda efforts in Britain were not very obvious or successful.<sup>101</sup> When Childers took over from FitzGerald, however, as Director of Publicity in early 1921, he wrote to Brennan, expressing surprise that he should be expected to manage the London or any overseas office, saying that surely the role was one of consultation rather than control.<sup>102</sup>

Despite this rather unseemly squabbling, Mitchell concludes that the Sinn Féin propaganda campaign had a strongly positive effect on public opinion and the foreign press.<sup>103</sup> Townshend concludes that by mid-1920 the British government was concerned that it was losing the propaganda battle.<sup>104</sup> As Maurice Walsh has commented, Dublin Castle was left behind by the speed with which the press shifted its interpretation of the Irish story: 'increasingly in dispatches the Castle itself was being identified as part of the problem, an obstacle to a fair settlement'.<sup>105</sup> Walsh also describes how foreign journalists were becoming adversaries of British government policy in Ireland and effective instruments in its failure.<sup>106</sup> The engagement of many of the British and foreign press was a direct response to O'Brien's engagement with them in London. Reports of the success of the underground Dáil government and the Sinn

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<sup>97</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 14 Dec. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8430/11).

<sup>98</sup> Collins to O'Brien, 21 Dec. 1920 & 5 Jan. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/7).

<sup>99</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 16 Dec. 1920, *ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> O'Brien to FitzGerald, 3 Jan. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/8).

<sup>101</sup> FitzGerald to O'Brien, 10 Feb. 1921, *ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Childers to Brennan, 30 Mar. 1921 (NAI, DFA, early series, Box 9/61).

<sup>103</sup> Mitchell, *Revolutionary government*, p. 105.

<sup>104</sup> Townshend, *Republic*, p. 298.

<sup>105</sup> Walsh, *News from Ireland*, p. 122.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

Féin courts were common and contributed significantly to demonstrating the reality of the Irish Republic to the world at large but, in particular, to a British audience.<sup>107</sup>

### 3.6 British support for Irish self-determination

George Lansbury, editor of the *Daily Herald*, organised a public meeting in support of Irish self-government at the Albert Hall on 15 November 1919.<sup>108</sup> O'Brien was invited but was not impressed with the low turnout and the poor quality of the speakers.<sup>109</sup> The *Daily Herald* championed the cause of Russia and the Bolshevik revolution but was also very sympathetic to the Irish nationalist cause. Lansbury himself had been interested in Irish affairs since 1887 when he visited Ireland as part of a group of East London radicals.<sup>110</sup> He visited Dublin again during the lock-out in 1913 and through the *Daily Herald* organised assistance for the workers in money and in kind.<sup>111</sup> With the adoption of a 'democratic programme', which was a statement of social values, as one of its foundation documents, Dáil Éireann attempted to position itself favourably with the delegates to the third international socialist/labour conference held at Berne in February 1919.<sup>112</sup> The conventional wisdom was that the Berne conference would influence the Versailles peace talks.<sup>113</sup> Dáil Éireann's socialist credentials were acknowledged at Berne and resolutions endorsing the Irish right to self-determination and calling for peace talks were passed.<sup>114</sup> In this context, on 2 April 1919, the *Daily Herald* published an article by de Valera in which he outlined Sinn Féin's aim to have Ireland recognised as an independent nation within a league of nations.<sup>115</sup> In an editorial preface to this article, Lansbury committed the *Daily Herald* to a policy of self-determination for Ireland.<sup>116</sup> The ISDL policy which precluded non-Irish from joining meant that his involvement was not encouraged as much as it might have been. As his

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<sup>107</sup> Maurice Walsh, *Bitter freedom: Ireland in a revolutionary world, 1918-1923* (London, 2015), pp 127-44.

<sup>108</sup> See John Shepherd, 'Lansbury, George, 1859-1940', *ODNB*.

<sup>109</sup> O'Brien to Thomas Johnson, 21 Nov. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8427/31).

<sup>110</sup> George Lansbury, *My Life* (London, 1928), p. 64.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>112</sup> Emmet O'Connor, 'Neither democratic nor a programme: the democratic programme of 1919', in *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. XL: 157 (May 2016), p. 102.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>115</sup> *Daily Herald*, 2 Apr. 1919.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

biographer observed: ‘that the link was less close with the Irish was no fault of the paper: it was due partly to the choice of Sinn Féiners, who wanted no English friends’.<sup>117</sup> O’Brien was quite critical of the *Daily Herald* and in a letter to the assistant editor, who happened to be his GLL friend W. P. Ryan, castigated it and the labour movement in general for being more supportive of Russia than of Ireland. His caustic comment ‘that no matter to what class or party an Englishman belongs he is always at bottom an enemy of the true aspirations of Ireland’ was unlikely to win him many friends.<sup>118</sup> Clearly, had O’Brien been thinking strategically in terms of propaganda, he should have made a stronger effort to win the *Herald’s* support. Also, whatever the ISDL’s official position, Irish people were actually drawn to other causes. Basil Thomson, director of Intelligence for the Home Office, began occasional reports on revolutionary activity in the UK for the British cabinet in mid-1918.<sup>119</sup> In January 1920 Thomson reported evidence that the IRB — ‘the extreme section of Sinn Féin’ — was in direct touch with the Soviet government in Russia.<sup>120</sup> Another Home Office report described a meeting held to celebrate the third anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution which had a large audience ‘which consisted principally of aliens, Jews, Sinn Féiners and other degenerates’.<sup>121</sup> The Home Office used the titles ISDL and Sinn Féin interchangeably, and clearly saw the potential danger of a merger of protest forces.

The British Labour Party was active in supporting Irish self-determination and many branches passed resolutions in favour of it.<sup>122</sup> Ivan Gibbons has noted that Labour’s emergence as a viable alternative government in the years after the First World War required the party to have a prudent response to the revolution in Ireland, avoiding unchecked militancy, but marking Labour out as different to the other parties.<sup>123</sup> When Erskine Childers volunteered to assist in the Irish cause in 1919, one of his strongest recommendations was that the ISDL engage with the Labour Party.

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<sup>117</sup> Raymond Postgate, *The life of George Lansbury* (London, 1951), p. 190.

<sup>118</sup> O’Brien to Liam Ó Riain, 9 May 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8440/2).

<sup>119</sup> Thomson was Director of Intelligence at the Home Office from 1919. See Noel Rutherford, ‘Sir Basil Home Thomson, 1860-1939’, *ODNB*.

<sup>120</sup> RROUK, 15 Jan. 1920 (TNA, CAB 24/96/58).

<sup>121</sup> RROUK, 11 Nov. 1920 (TNA, CAB 24/114/90).

<sup>122</sup> See for instance Twickenham Branch of Labour Party to O’Brien, 15 Oct. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/18).

<sup>123</sup> Ivan Gibbons, ‘Labour and Irish revolution: from investigation to deportation’ in Laurence Marley (ed.), *The British Labour Party and twentieth century Ireland* (Manchester, 2016), p. 71.



O'Brien dismissed this idea out of hand because 'anything in the nature of education for the working class here' was futile.<sup>124</sup> Aside from keeping the ISDL out of politics, it is quite possible that an innate class snobbery by O'Brien in relation to 'the working class' was the real reason for his non-engagement. P. J. Kelly, then ISDL president, also advised against collaboration with the Labour Party because 'we cannot forget that all the essentials of war are made and manufactured by British trade unionists; that nine tenths of the army of occupation [in Ireland] are the sons and brothers of British workers'.<sup>125</sup> Hart argues that many ISDL branches were 'little more than Labour Party branches under another name' but the recent work of Geoffrey Bell finds that although some individuals were members of both Labour and the ISDL, the latter prized its political independence.<sup>126</sup> The leadership of the ISDL remained staunchly anti-Labour and this filtered through to the branches. It was undoubtedly a serious strategic failure by the ISDL not to engage formally with the Labour Party, one which was even more damaging than their failure to engage with Lansbury and the *Daily Herald*. O'Brien must shoulder much of the blame for this narrow and introverted policy.

### 3.7 The ISDL at the Royal Albert Hall

The ISDL decided to organise its own meeting at the Royal Albert Hall on 11 February 1920. The programme for the meeting contained photographs of the key figures in Dáil Éireann and advertisements for the Dáil loan, and the phrase 'Irish Republic' was prominent.<sup>127</sup> O'Brien invited Griffith and MacNeill to be the key speakers. They were openly booked into the Jermyn Court Hotel in London and attended a luncheon organised for foreign journalists. They were then allowed to travel unmolested by the authorities to speak at the Albert Hall. One possible explanation is the argument advanced by Mitchell that the British government was reluctant to arrest Griffith because he was seen as a moderating influence.<sup>128</sup> Seán Ó Lúing suggests that Griffith

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<sup>124</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 10 June 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/11).

<sup>125</sup> P. J. Kelly, Address to ISDL Annual Conference, Nov. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8432/8).

<sup>126</sup> Hart, *Mick*, p. 227; Geoffrey Bell, *Hesitant comrades: the Irish revolution and the British Labour movement* (London, 2016), p. 47.

<sup>127</sup> Souvenir programme for mass meeting of Irish residents in London, Albert Hall, 11 Feb. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8461/37).

<sup>128</sup> Mitchell, *Revolutionary government*, p. 51.

was happy to travel to England as the police there were much more law-abiding than in Ireland: ‘Ní bheadh aon laraí saighdiúirí ag gabháil a threo ann chun a ngunnaí d’iompó air go hobann agus é a chur den tsaol’.<sup>129</sup>

The meeting, which was much more successful than Lansbury’s effort, was extensively covered by the British and Irish press. *The Times* described the purpose of meeting as ‘recognition of the Irish Republic’ and reported that the hall, which could accommodate 10,000, was ‘filled to overflowing’.<sup>130</sup> The *Irish Times* correspondent noted that ‘the Sinn Féin flag was displayed from various parts of the balconies and other parts of the hall and the green robes of the stewardesses gave a touch of colour to the scene’.<sup>131</sup> MacNeill was quoted as saying that ‘this was the twentieth century and Ireland and the people of Ireland were not to be intimidated’.<sup>132</sup> The *Irish Independent* drew attention to the call ‘for recognition of the demands made by the Irish people through their elected representatives’.<sup>133</sup> This flagrant celebration of the Irish Republic in London was a triumph for O’Brien and his colleagues and showed how the London-Irish could be roused into a very effective protest movement. It was undoubtedly a major show of defiance at the heart of the British Empire. This did not go unnoticed by the authorities. At this time O’Brien began to feature in Basil Thomson’s Home Office reports.<sup>134</sup> In February 1920 it was reported that O’Brien had pneumonia — the result of two broken ribs when knocked down by a taxi on the Strand in London — and was not expected to recover or resume his secret gun-running activities.<sup>135</sup> In the event he did recover after some weeks rest. Although O’Brien was firmly on the Home Office radar as a gun-runner from early 1920, no attempt was made to arrest him or his associates until the IRA campaign started in Britain at the end of 1920. This proved a major failing of British intelligence because, as described below, the IRA was now firmly established in London.

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<sup>129</sup> Seán Ó Lúing, *Art Ó Gríofa* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1953), p. 336. Translation: There would be no lorry full of soldiers who would suddenly turn their guns on him and kill him.

<sup>130</sup> *The Times*, 12 Feb. 1920.

<sup>131</sup> *IT*, 12 Feb. 1920.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *II*, 12 Feb. 1920.

<sup>134</sup> RROUK, 15 Jan. 1920 (TNA, CAB 24/96/58).

<sup>135</sup> RROUK, 26 Feb. 1920 (TNA, CAB 24/99/48).

### 3.8 The IRA and the IRB in London, 1919-1920

In addition to his organisation of the ISDL, O'Brien was also leading underground Irish revolutionary activity in London. After the Rising, the Volunteers in London had petered out. The revitalisation of Sinn Féin in Ireland in 1917 and de Valera's presidency of both Sinn Féin and the Irish Volunteers seems to have gone unnoticed in London. Despite the re-organisation of London Sinn Féin mentioned in Chapter 2, there was little activity. When the War of Independence began, however, Sinn Féin GHQ in Dublin demanded the reorganisation of the Irish Volunteers in London, presumably for gun-running purposes.<sup>136</sup> Seán McGrath, O'Brien's right-hand man, took charge of this.<sup>137</sup> In this new incarnation, the use of the name IRA began to take hold.<sup>138</sup> London soon boasted four companies with a total membership of 106.<sup>139</sup> In addition to gun-running, the IRA also saw their function as 'a vigilant intelligence at the heart of the British government'.<sup>140</sup> They also provided assistance to Irish prisoners, armed protection to Sinn Féin personnel who visited London and overnight security at O'Brien's home.<sup>141</sup>

At a meeting in O'Brien's office in September 1919 an IRB circle on the lines of a military council for London was established. It comprised O'Brien, Fintan Murphy, Seán McGrath, Seán Golden and brothers Denis and Joe Carr. Denis Carr outlined the two prong strategy agreed: the organisation of an open IRA body under the direction of Reggie Dunne and a strengthened arms procurement system led by Carr himself.<sup>142</sup> The fact that O'Brien confirmed Carr's IRB membership for the Military Pensions Board in 1934 and dated it from September 1919 confirms Carr's recollection.<sup>143</sup> It places O'Brien firmly at the centre of IRB and IRA operations in London where the IRB occupied the senior position. Subsequently, Collins recommended that all IRA men in

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<sup>136</sup> O'Brien, handwritten notes, 1935 (NLI, AÓBP, 8427/22). O'Brien refers to Sinn Féin in his notes, but it was more likely IRA members of Sinn Féin who put the pressure on.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Noonan, *IRA in Britain*, p. 46.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>140</sup> Report of London IRA to Military Service Pensions Board, 1934 (IMA, MSPC-RO-605).

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Denis Carr, application for military service pension, Dec. 1936 (IMA, MSP34 REF 27243).

<sup>143</sup> O'Brien to Military Service Pensions Board, 27 Apr. 1935, *ibid.*

London be brought into the IRB but this did not occur.<sup>144</sup> Relations between the two groups as in Ireland were somewhat strained but McGrath wrote that in December 1919 'it was decided to sink our differences'.<sup>145</sup> Noonan also makes the point that once the IRA began to openly defy British rule from 1919 onwards the role of the IRB became less important.<sup>146</sup>

For obvious security reasons, the number involved in arms procurement was small. Sam Maguire and Seán McGrath were the key London gun-runners with O'Brien as the conduit for funds. According to de Valera, O'Brien operated directly under the leadership of Michael Collins and was the intermediary between Collins and the military men in England.<sup>147</sup> Patrick (Pa) Murray described how Maguire and O'Brien, in particular, worked closely together to ensure the necessary finances and accommodation for those sent to London to acquire arms.<sup>148</sup> O'Brien reported regularly on his meetings with 'Sam' to Collins.<sup>149</sup> His [O'Brien's] central involvement in gun-running is confirmed by a rare memo from Collins to O'Brien, which is unusually specific in that it acknowledges receipt of guns and lists them by quantity and brand, i.e. 1 x Colt 450; 1 x 320 automatic; 24 revolvers.<sup>150</sup> Confirmation of the wider gun-running operation in Britain is to be found in the Collins' correspondence held in the Mulcahy papers at UCD archives.<sup>151</sup>

Given that O'Brien, McMahan and McGrath were members of the IRB and that Volunteer companies existed in several areas in Britain, it was no surprise that the ISDL was infiltrated by both the IRA and the IRB. IRB control was hardly the intention of the founder of the ISDL, de Valera, who had renounced the IRB and all it stood for in 1917.<sup>152</sup> As noted earlier in this chapter, O'Brien, however, played a key role in installing McGrath as the national organiser and thus ensured IRB control was

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<sup>144</sup> Seán McGrath interview, Ernie O'Malley notebooks (UCDA, 17b/100).

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Noonan, *IRA in Britain*, p. 82.

<sup>147</sup> *IP*, 13 Aug. 1949.

<sup>148</sup> Patrick Murray to Florence O'Donoghue, 14 Jan. 1959 (NLI, Florence O'Donoghue papers, MS 31296(1)).

<sup>149</sup> See for instance O'Brien to Collins, 28 Nov. & 3, 5, 10 Dec. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/6).

<sup>150</sup> Collins to O'Brien, 17 Jan. 1920 (NLI, Ó Briain papers, 8430/1).

<sup>151</sup> See UCDA, Mulcahy papers, File 7/A.

<sup>152</sup> See Ronan Fanning, *Éamon de Valera: a will to power* (London, 2015), pp 56-7.

maintained at all times.<sup>153</sup> In his statement to the BMH William McMahon recalled that all the ISDL organisers were members of the IRB who reported 'likely persons to start a company of Volunteers'.<sup>154</sup> Hart has calculated that the total membership of the IRA in Britain during 1919 to 1923 was about 1000, not all of whom were active.<sup>155</sup> Noonan's more recent study suggests a membership of between 2200 and 2500.<sup>156</sup> Both agree that the number in London was about 100.<sup>157</sup> The number of IRB, due to its secretive nature, would have been much less. Although there was infiltration of the ISDL, particularly at leadership level, the vast majority of its 27,000 members were not members of either the IRA or the IRB.

O'Brien had just one direct and rather unfortunate involvement with those who actually provided the guns. In early 1919 he recommended an ISDL member named John Charles Byrne as a suitable gun-runner. Frank Thornton believed that Byrne infiltrated the ISDL and ingratiated himself with McGrath and O'Brien by posing as a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (some of whom handed over guns and ammunition for the Irish cause) and also by talking of encouraging mutiny in the British army at home and in Ireland.<sup>158</sup> According to Patrick O'Daly, Byrne was 'strongly recommended by O'Brien as someone who was trustworthy and could give good intelligence regarding the movements of special intelligence officers coming to Ireland'.<sup>159</sup> Byrne travelled between Dublin and London for some months delivering arms under the name of John Jameson. However, he was rumbled as a spy in March 1920 by Collins and his associates and was shot dead in Glasnevin. This was the first major upset for O'Brien and it called his judgement into question as he had inadvertently endangered the lives of his colleagues in Dublin.<sup>160</sup> After Jameson was killed, as Hart has noted, blame circulated widely and Collins and O'Brien each held the other responsible for this grave breach of security.<sup>161</sup> In spite of this squabble, the Jameson fiasco did not substantially alter Collins's trust in O'Brien and for the most

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<sup>153</sup> See O'Brien to William McMahon, 7 Oct. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8433/53).

<sup>154</sup> Liam McMahon (IMA, BMH, WS 274, p. 3).

<sup>155</sup> Hart, 'Operations Abroad', p. 71.

<sup>156</sup> Noonan, *IRA in Britain*, p. 52.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51 and Hart, 'Operations Abroad', p. 73.

<sup>158</sup> Frank Thornton (IMA, BMH, WS 615, p. 38).

<sup>159</sup> Patrick O'Daly (IMA, BMH, WS 387, p. 25).

<sup>160</sup> For an account of the 'Jameson' incident see Hart, *Mick*, pp 224-38.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 236-7. See also O'Brien to Collins, 28 Jan. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8430/1).

part they carried on as before and corresponded on a daily basis. Their relationship was not without its tensions, however. Collins berated O'Brien for the behaviour of some of the people who travelled over from London: 'above all they should not be telling their business to everybody here who happens to be a member of the Dáil, or a member of Dublin Corporation'.<sup>162</sup> O'Brien replied somewhat tetchily: 'I have to use the material at my disposal and unfortunately these people are not always discrete [sic]'.<sup>163</sup>

### 3.9 ISDL support for prisoners

The IRA opened a new 'Defence of Ireland Fund' in May 1919. In London this fund became known as the Irish National Aid Central Distress Fund and was run by the INRF and supported by the members of the ISDL. As chairman, O'Brien took control yet again.<sup>164</sup> The fund was used for the legal defence of those arrested in Britain and to support their families. Legal defences were more likely to be used by the Irish charged in Britain because there was little chance of their being acquitted by a sympathetic jury or judge. Not recognising the court was a strategy which sometimes worked to the accused's advantage in Ireland but was ineffective in Britain.<sup>165</sup> Providing for the relief of prisoners gave the local branches of the ISDL a tangible objective for fund-raising and for consciousness-raising and they also visited prisoners in jail.

McConville argues that the main reason for transferring prisoners from Ireland to the British mainland was to deprive them of public support. He outlines how the ISDL addressed this by organising daily protests outside Wormwood Scrubs in support of about 150 prisoners who had been on hunger strike since 21 April 1920.<sup>166</sup> The protestors paraded around the prison saying the rosary, waving republican flags and singing 'God Save Ireland'.<sup>167</sup> The prisoners then set fire to their cells and smashed doors and windows in response and in this way the hunger strike became a national

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<sup>162</sup> Collins to L [London office], 27 May 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8430/5).

<sup>163</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 31 May 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8430/5).

<sup>164</sup> David Foxtan, *Revolutionary lawyers*, pp 294-5.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.* pp 173-8 and Noonan, *IRA in Britain*, p. 297.

<sup>166</sup> McConville, *Irish political prisoners, 1848-1920: theatres of war*, p. 723.

<sup>167</sup> Murphy, *Political imprisonment*, p. 169.

sensation.<sup>168</sup> The protests received significant additional attention when Londoners attacked the protesters in May 1920. The *Irish Times* described the protests as ‘assuming vast proportions and numbering several thousand’.<sup>169</sup> O’Brien briefed the press and printed hundreds of posters and thousands of handbills.<sup>170</sup> In a memo to all the ISDL London secretaries, O’Brien congratulated them for ‘their mobilisation at short notice, focusing attention on the scandal of Wormwood Scrubs Prison’.<sup>171</sup>

O’Brien was deeply concerned about the prisoners on hunger strike. He sought a general permit from the Home Office to visit them and review their health.<sup>172</sup> At his request, a large number of prisoners were removed to hospital and some to private nursing homes.<sup>173</sup> Many were prevailed on to give up the protest.<sup>174</sup> Patrick Rankin described the hospital visits by ISDL members as ‘a heaven-sent blessing’.<sup>175</sup> On the death of O’Brien in 1949 a letter writer to the *Nenagh Guardian* recorded his pleasant memories of O’Brien and McGrath visiting him in hospital after being released from Wormwood Scrubs following a hunger strike.<sup>176</sup> After some time in medical care the prisoners simply walked out and returned to Ireland.<sup>177</sup> As Murphy has commented, the combined impact of hunger strikes in Mountjoy and Wormwood Scrubs meant that by May 1920 the capacity of the authorities to hold Irish rebels in prison, either in Ireland or in Britain ‘seemed to be in tatters’.<sup>178</sup> O’Brien and his mobilisation of the ISDL were crucial to this outcome — hunger strikes without public support in Britain would not have had any significant impact.

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<sup>168</sup> McConville, *Irish political prisoners, 1848-1920: theatres of war*, p. 723.

<sup>169</sup> *IT*, 27 Apr. 1920.

<sup>170</sup> Murphy, *Political imprisonment*, p. 169.

<sup>171</sup> O’Brien to all London ISDL branch secretaries, 3 May 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8432/8).

<sup>172</sup> O’Brien to George Gavan Duffy, 24 Apr. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/26).

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> This particular hunger strike did not have sanction from Sinn Féin HQ and resulted in a split among the prisoners. See Murphy, *Political imprisonment*, pp 168-73 for more detail and also the problems it posed for O’Brien and the ISDL.

<sup>175</sup> Patrick Rankin (IMA, BMH, WS 671, p. 20).

<sup>176</sup> *Nenagh Guardian*, 20 Aug. 1949.

<sup>177</sup> A dispute between the Dáil and the ISDL about who would be responsible for travel expenses for the prisoners delayed them in London somewhat. See Murphy, *Political imprisonment*, p. 172.

<sup>178</sup> Murphy, *Political imprisonment*, p. 173.

### 3.10 Terence MacSwiney

Terence MacSwiney was well-known to O'Brien from his imprisonment in Britain post-1916. In fact, the last photograph of MacSwiney as a free man saw him in the company of O'Brien and J. J. O'Kelly at the Gaelic League Ard-Fheis in Cork in early August 1920.<sup>179</sup> When arrested on 12 August 1920 in Cork City Hall, MacSwiney was a member of Dáil Éireann, commandant of Cork No. 1 Brigade IRA and also Lord Mayor of Cork. In addition, he was president of the local branches of the Gaelic League and Sinn Féin. He immediately commenced a hunger strike in support of other prisoners in Cork Jail who were also on hunger strike.<sup>180</sup> On 16 August MacSwiney was tried by court martial and sentenced to two years imprisonment for possession of documents 'likely to cause disaffection to his Majesty'. He was taken by boat from Cork to Pembroke in Wales for transfer to Brixton prison. It was at this juncture that O'Brien's expertise in courting the foreign press came into its own. Although O'Brien's role has been noted by MacSwiney's biographers, not enough emphasis has been placed on how he supported the family and how he capitalised on the propaganda potential of the hunger strike.<sup>181</sup> Mary MacSwiney described O'Brien as a 'guardian angel'.<sup>182</sup> In the first instance, O'Brien brought Muriel and Mary (wife and sister of MacSwiney) to stay in his own home in Ealing.<sup>183</sup> He held daily press conferences on MacSwiney's condition and journalists flocked to O'Brien's office in London from all over the world. His linguistic abilities ensured that the French and Spanish press kept up a relentless campaign which made the British government deeply unhappy.<sup>184</sup> O'Brien reported to Collins that he received 'from 20 to 30 telephone calls from different organs of the Press every day ... and MacDonnell [the solicitor] is down at the Home Office two or three times every day'.<sup>185</sup> Seán McGrath later recalled O'Brien's extraordinary energy

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<sup>179</sup> Photograph of MacSwiney, O'Brien and O'Kelly, Aug. 1920 (NLI, National Photographic Archive, POLF 173).

<sup>180</sup> Murphy, *Political imprisonment*, p. 174. See also Moirin Chavasse, *Terence MacSwiney* (Dublin, 1961); Francis J. Costello, *Enduring the most: the life and death of Terence MacSwiney* (Dingle, 1995).

<sup>181</sup> See Chavasse, *Terence MacSwiney*; Costello, *Enduring the most*; Dave Hannigan, *Terence MacSwiney: the hunger strike that rocked an empire* (Dublin, 2010).

<sup>182</sup> Mary MacSwiney to Archbishop Peter Amigo, n.d. (Southwark Diocesan Archives (hereafter SDA), Amigo papers, Ireland correspondence, R66.1/62).

<sup>183</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 23 Aug. 1920 (NAI, DE/2/4).

<sup>184</sup> Hannigan, *Terence MacSwiney*, pp 158-9.

<sup>185</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 25 Aug. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/9).



and ability in controlling this propaganda campaign — preparing the daily bulletins, visiting MacSwiney in Brixton and meeting dozens of press correspondents each day.<sup>186</sup> Walsh credits the suffragettes with the development of daily bulletins on the conditions of hunger strikers and suggests that this led to a new type of prison literature which emphasised endurance and suffering.<sup>187</sup> Accounts of MacSwiney's hunger strike and death therefore fed into 'a new and influential humanitarian strain of public opinion around the world' and were no longer directed only at the British government.<sup>188</sup> In addition to press releases about MacSwiney's condition, O'Brien also issued statements attacking the British government for treating Irish political prisoners as common criminals and he also repudiated arguments allegedly made by Lloyd George that MacSwiney's release would damage the morale of the RIC.<sup>189</sup> Despite an intervention by King George V, the government did not back down lest 'the army and police in Ireland would mutiny'.<sup>190</sup> In addition, the government's humiliation following the release of earlier hunger strikers had not abated.

The ISDL mobilised the Irish of London to pray outside the prison every day. Muriel and Mary MacSwiney and O'Brien moved in to the Jermyn Court Hotel (in central London) in mid-September so that they could be near the prison in the event of any sudden change in MacSwiney's condition.<sup>191</sup> Family and friends were allowed to visit MacSwiney each day and O'Brien also visited regularly and was apparently asked by MacSwiney to look after his wife and child.<sup>192</sup> The pressure on O'Brien as he watched MacSwiney deteriorate was significant. Murphy outlines how Collins demanded that O'Brien establish if MacSwiney was being forcibly fed and, if so, to identify the doctor involved.<sup>193</sup> In the event no such evidence was produced but the lingering death was deeply stressful for all involved. A sense of the horror is conveyed

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<sup>186</sup> *IP*, 13 Aug. 1949.

<sup>187</sup> Walsh, *Bitter freedom*, p. 261.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

<sup>189</sup> Press releases by O'Brien, 3 Oct. 1920, n.d. (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8448/4).

<sup>190</sup> Murphy, *Political imprisonment*, p. 178.

<sup>191</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 16 Sept. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8425/20). Obviously, when this decision was made it was expected that MacSwiney had only days to live. In the event, the hotel bill mounted to £629 – a staggering amount given that the overall funeral expenses for London, Dublin and Cork were £436. See analysis of MacSwiney funeral expenses in O'Brien to Collins, 9 Feb. 1921 (NAI, DE/2/4).

<sup>192</sup> Chavasse, *Terence MacSwiney*, p. 173.

<sup>193</sup> Murphy, *Political imprisonment*, p. 180.

in O'Brien's letter to Collins on 20 October 1920 in which he describes 'terrible paroxysms of delirium' and 'terrible screaming and shrieking' emanating from MacSwiney.<sup>194</sup> Gavan Duffy urged O'Brien to take a holiday after MacSwiney's death: 'you have gone through more than any man should be asked to undergo ... in working and constant anxiety'.<sup>195</sup> In the most recent biography of MacSwiney, Dave Hannigan refers to O'Brien's 'macabre' involvement in having a death mask of MacSwiney made and suggests that O'Brien saw only the propaganda value in MacSwiney's struggle and had no concern for the man himself.<sup>196</sup> Nothing could be further from the truth as testified in the very deep bonds of friendship which were forged between O'Brien and the MacSwiney family. O'Brien always hoped that MacSwiney would be released.<sup>197</sup> As Murphy argues, given the previous release of hunger strikers by the government, MacSwiney and his supporters had good reason to believe that they would not have 'to choose between abandoning their strike and death'.<sup>198</sup>

When MacSwiney died on 25 October O'Brien accompanied Mary and Muriel to pay their last respects and also went with Muriel and MacDonnell, the solicitor, to protest at the Home Office's decision not to allow them custody of the body unless it was removed immediately to Cork.<sup>199</sup> After some hours debate, the Home Office released the body without restrictions and MacSwiney was removed to Southwark Cathedral where Archbishop Amigo had agreed to hold a funeral service. As early as May 1918, Amigo had warned Lloyd George that 'while we boast that we are out to protect the small nationalities [in the war] we are alienating the splendid Irish race'.<sup>200</sup> On 30 August 1920 he expressed his profound disapproval of the government's actions in relation to MacSwiney in a letter to *The Times* and on 5 September he sent a telegram to the prime minister begging clemency 'for Cork's Lord Mayor who is dying

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<sup>194</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 20 Oct. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/11).

<sup>195</sup> George Gavan Duffy to O'Brien, 25 Oct. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, 8426/27).

<sup>196</sup> See Hannigan, *Terence MacSwiney*, pp 157-8.

<sup>197</sup> O'Brien to Gavan Duffy, 15 Oct. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/27).

<sup>198</sup> William Murphy, 'Dying, death and hunger strike: Cork and Brixton 1920' in James Kelly and Mary Ann Lyons (eds), *Death and dying in Ireland, Britain and Europe: historical perspectives* (Sallins, 2013), p. 300.

<sup>199</sup> Chavasse, *Terence MacSwiney*, p. 184.

<sup>200</sup> Amigo to Lloyd George, 28 May 1918 (SDA, Amigo papers, Correspondence re: Ireland, R66.1, Part 1).

in my diocese'.<sup>201</sup> However, many of Amigo's flock were appalled that he would allow the remains of an Irish rebel into his cathedral.<sup>202</sup> This also reflected widespread unease in the Catholic Church about the morality of hunger strikes.<sup>203</sup> In addition, as Michael Snape has observed, the war-time politics of nationalist Ireland and the neutral stance adopted by Pope Benedict XV 'did throw into question Catholic good faith during the course the war'.<sup>204</sup> One man criticised the archbishop for 'using the Cathedral to advertise the death of a member of a seditious society which is ruining Ireland and which did its utmost to stab us in the back during the time I was fighting overseas'.<sup>205</sup> This in turn gave ammunition to Protestants in England who were opposed to Catholic integration into national life.<sup>206</sup> Terence MacSwiney's life and death raised all of these very sensitive issues for Amigo's flock.

The emotional impact of MacSwiney's death on O'Brien was noted by a member of the GLL who described him 'as pale with a redness around the eyes' when he announced the funeral arrangements.<sup>207</sup> In a letter sent the same day, he described the death of MacSwiney as 'a glorious martyrdom and ... a magnificent example to us all'.<sup>208</sup> As Murphy has noted, it was crucial to the hunger strikers that their protest be presented as good, honourable and heroic.<sup>209</sup> O'Brien and the ISDL were fully aware of the significant impact of a carefully stage-managed funeral, as was evident in the case of O'Donovan Rossa and Thomas Ashe, and they ensured that MacSwiney's funeral became a major event.<sup>210</sup> Townshend describes the death of MacSwiney as 'a global media event' which meant that the British authorities were helpless in preventing his

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<sup>201</sup> *The Times*, 30 Aug. 1920; Copy of Amigo telegram to Lloyd George, 5 Sept. 1920 (SDA, Amigo papers, Correspondence re: Ireland, R66.1, Part 1).

<sup>202</sup> See J. E. James to Amigo, 26 Oct. 1920; G. F. Corden to Amigo, 27 Oct. 1920, *ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> See Murphy, *Political imprisonment*, pp 188-9.

<sup>204</sup> Michael Francis Snape, 'British Catholicism and the British army in the First World War', *Recusant History*, 26:2 (2003), p. 318.

<sup>205</sup> R. Manners to Amigo, 26 Oct. 1920 (SDA, Amigo papers, Correspondence re: Ireland, R66.1, Part 1).

<sup>206</sup> Snape, 'British Catholicism and the British army', p. 318.

<sup>207</sup> Margaret Impie to Barbara Carter, 1 Nov. 1920 (NLI, Barbara and Dorothy Carter correspondence, MS 20721/1).

<sup>208</sup> O'Brien to William Stockley, 25 Oct. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8440/1).

<sup>209</sup> Murphy, 'Dying, death and hunger strike', p. 304.

<sup>210</sup> The ISDL borrowed £3000 from Dáil Éireann to pay for the funeral, however. In June 1922 Seán McGrath confirmed that there were no ISDL funds available to repay this loan. See McGrath to O'Brien, 21 June 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8422/9).

funeral becoming ‘another great republican manifestation’.<sup>211</sup> Hawkers sold mourning cards and republican rosettes.<sup>212</sup> Foreign correspondents were amazed that the flags and uniforms of an army at war with Britain were openly paraded in London.<sup>213</sup> Walsh has also highlighted the fact that this was a key event which brought the Irish conflict home to a British audience.<sup>214</sup> It was reported that 30,000 people filed past the coffin which was draped with the tricolour in Southwark Cathedral and that Irish and non-Irish alike lined the streets of London next day as the cortège passed.<sup>215</sup> *The Times* reported the attendance of the central executive of the ISDL and twenty-seven ISDL London branches.<sup>216</sup> Gladys Ní Eidhin marched with the central branch of the GLL and noted that ‘it was strange to feel that we were following our dead through the enemy city’.<sup>217</sup> Not all attendees at the funeral were anxious to be identified, however. Joe Devlin, Nationalist MP for Belfast Falls and T. P. O’Connor, the Liverpool-Irish MP, asked Amigo for permission to go to the cathedral via the archbishop’s house ... ‘you will understand the delicacies involved’.<sup>218</sup> A report by the Dáil’s propaganda department commented that ‘the endurance and death of Alderman MacSwiney received extraordinary publicity and impressed the world with the heroic nature of Ireland’s struggle against England’.<sup>219</sup> Without question, O’Brien managed the hunger strike and death of MacSwiney to elicit the maximum publicity and sympathy for both MacSwiney and the Irish independence cause. In doing so, he also provided extensive humanitarian support for MacSwiney and his family. The Home Office fuelled the anti-British propaganda campaign when contrary to their ‘no restrictions’ agreement they confiscated MacSwiney’s remains at Holyhead and shipped them directly to Cork to avoid a planned memorial in Dublin and a funeral cortège from there to Cork.

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<sup>211</sup> Townshend, *Republic*, p. 194.

<sup>212</sup> Walsh, *Bitter freedom*, p. 263.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>214</sup> Walsh, *News from Ireland*, p. 79.

<sup>215</sup> Costello, *Enduring the most*, pp 227-8.

<sup>216</sup> *The Times*, 27 Oct. 1920.

<sup>217</sup> Gladys Ní Eidhin to Barbara Carter, 7 Nov. 1920 (NLI, Barbara and Dorothy Carter correspondence, MS 20721/1).

<sup>218</sup> T. P. O’Connor to Amigo, 27 Oct. 1920 (SDA, Amigo papers, Correspondence re: Ireland, R66.1, Part 1).

<sup>219</sup> Copy of report on Propaganda Issues, 18 Jan. 1921 (UCDA, De Valera papers, P150/1409).

### 3.11 Archbishop Mannix

In August 1920, Archbishop Daniel Mannix of Melbourne planned to travel from the United States to Ireland and to Liverpool. An Irishman, and former president of Maynooth College, known to be sympathetic to the establishment of an independent Ireland, he had spent some time in the United States in the company of de Valera and had referred to Ireland in some of his speeches as ‘a country ruled by an alien government’.<sup>220</sup> Concerned at the potential impact of his visit, the British government banned him from landing in Liverpool and from travelling to Ireland. Having been removed from his ship and transferred to an army destroyer off Queenstown, Mannix was brought ashore in Penzance on 11 August 1920. He immediately took the train for London, because although banned from visiting Liverpool he was free to go elsewhere.<sup>221</sup> The leadership of the Roman Catholic Church in Britain remained aloof from Mannix but the ISDL organised a demonstration to support him in Trafalgar Square on 15 August 1920. Further meetings were held in Liverpool, Manchester, Wigan, Newcastle, Preston and South Wales. The Liverpool and Manchester gatherings attracted attendances of 20,000 and therefore the ISDL’s association with Mannix conferred a degree of credibility and stature on the organisation.<sup>222</sup> A resolution condemning the British government’s ‘petty persecution’ of the archbishop was passed at each meeting and reports were sent to the Irish, Australian, English and continental press.<sup>223</sup> Mannix was unequivocal in his support for Irish independence and fearless in the face of British government attempts to silence him. At a Newcastle-upon-Tyne ISDL meeting in late 1920, Mannix heard all the speakers declare openly that they were members of the IRA ‘of which they were said to be very proud’.<sup>224</sup> In addition, meetings which Mannix held for clergy only, were well attended and gave

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<sup>220</sup> John Dunleavy, ‘Turbulent priest: how the British government’s decision to bar Archbishop Mannix from Ireland helped rally the exiles in Britain’, *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and History Society*, 62 (2010), p. 187.

<sup>221</sup> *The Times*, 11 Aug. 1920.

<sup>222</sup> Dunleavy, ‘Turbulent priest’, p. 192.

<sup>223</sup> ISDL memo re: campaign in support of Dr. Mannix (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8433/14).

<sup>224</sup> Newcastle-upon-Tyne police report, 1 Dec. 1920 (TNA, HO 144/22281).

leadership on the Irish question where none was forthcoming from most British bishops.<sup>225</sup>

Colm Kiernan is in no doubt that the death of MacSwiney radicalized Mannix by outraging his moral sense and turning him into an Irish republican.<sup>226</sup> Mannix visited MacSwiney on several occasions in Brixton prison, assisted Bishops Amigo and Cotter at the funeral Mass and led the funeral procession to Euston. He subsequently became committed to a policy of total separation of Ireland and England, whereas prior to that he was happy to accept what the people decided, i.e. dominion status or any form of association.<sup>227</sup> This was change indeed for a man who had called the Easter Rising 'truly deplorable'.<sup>228</sup> When Mannix left England late in 1920 'nobody was more relieved than the English government [who] in avoiding one problem by imposing the original ban ... created the wider problem that the ban worsened relationships with all Irish nationalists whether at home or abroad.'<sup>229</sup> Once again, O'Brien had masterminded a highly successful propaganda campaign for the Irish cause. The combined impact of MacSwiney and Mannix undoubtedly stirred British consciences and influenced various peace initiatives which are discussed in Chapter 4.

### **3.12 Independence allies in London**

From the early 1900s many Irish separatist activists began to see parallels between their struggle for independence and those of India and Egypt. An article in Bulmer Hobson's *Republic* newspaper noted that in England 'the Indian people are spoken of with studied contempt and their leaders [are] threatened with ... prosecution for sedition'.<sup>230</sup> In April 1907, *Republic* published a detailed account of the struggle for Egyptian independence.<sup>231</sup> These independence campaigns ran in parallel to the Irish campaign in London. As with many Irish, Indians moved 'to the heart of the empire

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<sup>225</sup> Dunleavy, 'Turbulent priest' p. 192.

<sup>226</sup> Colm Kiernan, *Daniel Mannix and Ireland* (Dublin, 1984), p. 154.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 156-66.

<sup>228</sup> B. A. Santamaria, *Daniel Mannix: a biography* (Melbourne, 1984), p. 76.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>230</sup> *Republic*, 7 Mar. 1907.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 Apr. 1907.

that oppressed them'.<sup>232</sup> In seeking to understand the attraction of the main city of the empire to radicals and especially those who sought independence from the Empire, Nicholas Owen highlights the fact that imperial liberalism as it was practiced in the metropole actually gave freedom to Indian nationalists to express their views more openly than at home.<sup>233</sup> Khan also identifies the role of the 'European metropolises' — London, Paris and Geneva — in nationalist awakening.<sup>234</sup> In these cities she writes 'both the mature and budding nationalists not only found avenues in which to express and organise their programs but also allies to help develop them.'<sup>235</sup> The same point was made in relation to the Irish in Britain by Basil Thomson to the Home Secretary when he decried the situation whereby the Irish Sinn Féiner 'may commit acts in England or Scotland for which he might lose his liberty if he committed them in Ireland'.<sup>236</sup> Thomson sought, but did not achieve, legislation in Britain which would give power to remove Sinn Féin activists to Ireland 'the effect of which would be instantaneous for the last thing these agitators desire is to return permanently to their own island'.<sup>237</sup>

Shapurji Saklatvala, an Indian national, came to London to work in the family business in 1905.<sup>238</sup> Over time, he became involved in a variety of social and political causes. Described as 'an Indian communist', he regularly spoke about Ireland and its parallels with India at public meetings and became friendly with O'Brien.<sup>239</sup> Saklatvala bore several similarities with O'Brien. Although reared as a member of the Parsi religion, he was educated at a Catholic school in Bombay. His first job in the Tata company (owned by his extended family) was in mining and exploration, similar to O'Brien's work in Spain and France. Like O'Brien he worked for a period with British

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<sup>232</sup> Nicholas Owen, 'The soft heart of the British Empire: Indian radicals in Edwardian London', *Past and Present*, 220 (Aug. 2013), p. 144.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>234</sup> Khan, *Egyptian-Indian nationalist collaboration*, p. 52.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>236</sup> Basil Thomson to Home Secretary, 2 Dec. 1920 (TNA, HO 317/48).

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>238</sup> Saklatvala was a member of the family who owned Tata, a large iron and steel business, which is still a global firm today. See Mike Squires, 'Shapurji Saklatvala, 1874-1936', *ODNB* and Sehri Saklatvala, *The fifth commandment: a biography of Shapurji Saklatvala* (World Library .org, WPLBN0002170194) (accessed 12 Nov. 2015).

<sup>239</sup> Kate O'Malley, *Ireland, India and Empire, Indo-Irish radical connections, 1919-1964* (Manchester, 2008), p. 24.

Westinghouse and in a firm of consulting engineers before returning to Tata in 1912.<sup>240</sup> Despite a quite comfortable place in English society he chose to go against the grain and sided first with various nationalist causes and then increasingly with the communist cause. While O'Brien spent the pre-war years embracing cultural nationalism, Saklatvala was more concerned with social issues and joined the Social Democratic Federation and supported the suffragettes. He attended meetings in support of Indian nationalism and greater equality for all while O'Brien attended meetings on Irish nationalism and cultural separateness. When they both eventually met in 1919 they had much in common and much to contribute to each other's campaigns; they formed an affectionate and supportive friendship. Kate O'Malley has highlighted the significance that Indo-Irish radical connections had on the Indian nationalist movement.<sup>241</sup> She refers to contacts between Irish and Indian nationalists in London as a 'contra-imperial, nationalist alliance of which the British government was both aware and apprehensive'.<sup>242</sup> O'Brien was the central axis for this connection in London from 1919 to 1922. Comparisons between British atrocities in Ireland and India were common. When the report on the Amritsar massacre of unarmed civilians in India (April 1919), was published in June 1920, a Home Office report documented 'a commotion among the Irish and Indian extremists who held a meeting on 3 June'.<sup>243</sup>

A British intelligence report in 1919 noted that Saklatvala's speeches were 'always of the most extreme and violent type, demanding immediate self-government for India and the evacuation of the country by the British'.<sup>244</sup> He was also described as a strong advocate of class warfare.<sup>245</sup> A police report following a raid on his house in October 1920 concluded that 'he is a red hot Bolshevik ... a dangerous man'.<sup>246</sup> In a letter to 'Comrade' O'Brien, in December 1919, Saklatvala offered written material of potential interest to the Irish cause.<sup>247</sup> O'Brien replied in kind, greeting 'Comrade

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<sup>240</sup> See Sehri Saklatvala, *Shapurji Saklatvala*, pp 10-54.

<sup>241</sup> O'Malley, *Ireland, India and Empire*.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>243</sup> RROUK, 10 June 1920 (TNA, CAB 24/107/44).

<sup>244</sup> Col. Carter to V. G. W. Kell, 10 June 1919 (TNA, KV2/611).

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>246</sup> Police report, 18 Oct. 1920, in secret service file (TNA, KV2/612).

<sup>247</sup> Saklatvala to O'Brien, 3 Dec. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/17).



Saklatvala' and signing himself 'Yours fraternally'.<sup>248</sup> That seems to be as far as O'Brien's brush with communism went. While he did not embrace the communist ethos, he seems to have had no problem associating with communists during this period. Strongly negative attitudes to communism generally had yet to develop in the populace at large and there was still widespread admiration for the Bolshevik achievements of 1917.<sup>249</sup> Saklatvala, like O'Brien, had difficulties with the Labour Party and deplored 'the attitude of alleged British socialists ... who go to work every day to produce munitions'.<sup>250</sup> The irony of this, of course, was that it was these very munitions that O'Brien was buying on the black market. Saklatvala also castigated Labour for their lack of interest in the heroic sacrifices and success of other peoples and described them as 'selfish conceited golliwogs'.<sup>251</sup> O'Brien was not quite so derogatory but one can see how their mutual loathing of British Labour made them cosy companions.

Egyptian nationalists had also been campaigning in London since the early 1900s. In 1907 an Egyptian nationalist club was formed in London to demand complete independence and the right to self-determination.<sup>252</sup> Khan has highlighted the importance for the Egyptians in seeking out allies who understood 'their need for dignity as well as freedom' and their desire to be independent and sovereign as nations.<sup>253</sup> Mitchell describes O'Brien as 'a key if covert' adviser to the Egyptian negotiators in London in 1920. O'Brien reported to Collins that two of the negotiators called to his office to discuss the details of the Egyptian independence agreement.<sup>254</sup> The level of independence agreed with Egypt in July 1920, however, was not highly regarded by de Valera and certainly not regarded as a suitable model for Ireland.<sup>255</sup> Around this time O'Brien also found time to assist Ibrahim Rashid, an Egyptian student, to write *An Egyptian in Ireland*, a book which was strongly sympathetic to

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<sup>248</sup> O'Brien to Saklatvala, 4 Dec. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/17).

<sup>249</sup> Andrew Thorpe, *A history of the British Labour Party* (London, 1997), p. 63. The Labour Party amended its rules in 1924 to ensure that Communist Party members were excluded from membership.

<sup>250</sup> Saklatvala to O'Brien, 21 Apr. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8427/16).

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Malak Badrawi, *Political violence in Egypt, 1910-1925* (London, 2000), p. 25.

<sup>253</sup> Khan, *Egyptian-Indian nationalist collaboration and the British Empire*, p. xi.

<sup>254</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 27 Aug. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/9).

<sup>255</sup> Mitchell, *Revolutionary government*, p. 108.

Irish nationalism and advised the Irish not to accept an agreement like the Egyptian one.<sup>256</sup>

In October 1920 O'Brien advised Collins that they should give advice and support to Burmese nationalists.<sup>257</sup> A political commission from Burma seeking independence from Indian control arrived in London to negotiate with the India Office and two of its members visited O'Brien.<sup>258</sup> He reported to Collins that they were 'anxious to know all about Ireland' and were thinking of travelling to Ireland. O'Brien was particularly impressed when they told him that all their national and literary and cultural societies (400 approx.) had 'one governing council which governs them in all political matters' and relayed this news to Collins with obvious enthusiasm.<sup>259</sup> Such a controlled system was music to O'Brien's ears. Any inherent suggestion of totalitarianism or dictatorship was clearly of no consequence to him. O'Brien was keen to help but the liaison was discontinued when Arthur Griffith indicated to Collins that he saw little point in the Burmese coming to Ireland.<sup>260</sup> Although the ISDL leadership showed an inclination to support fellow independence seekers and they might at very least have garnered some alternative strategic ideas, there was anxiety in Dublin that any alliances might dilute the Irish effort. Griffith reassured the Dáil in June 1919 that there would be co-operation but not alliance with Egyptian and Indian nationalists.<sup>261</sup>

From 1919 onwards, O'Brien's Scottish nationalist friends from the early 1900s began to seek support from Sinn Féin and the ISDL for a Scottish independence campaign. The ISDL was seen as a very effective model by the Scots and Erskine of Mar and William Gillies began to correspond again with O'Brien and also met him from time to time.<sup>262</sup> In February 1920 the Scottish National Committee announced that it was preparing with the Irish Republic for 'the dawn of that not far distant day when English control of Ireland and Scotland will cease'.<sup>263</sup> The Scottish nationalists also sought financial support from Sinn Féin. It seems they had grand plans for a Celtic daily

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid., See Ibrahim Rashid, *An Egyptian in Ireland* (London, 1921).

<sup>257</sup> Mitchell, *Revolutionary government*, p. 108

<sup>258</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 2 Oct. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/11).

<sup>259</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 7 Oct. 1920, *ibid.*

<sup>260</sup> Collins to O'Brien, 20 Oct. 1920, *ibid.*

<sup>261</sup> Mitchell, *Revolutionary government*, p. 106.

<sup>262</sup> O'Brien to Gavan Duffy, 10 July 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/27).

<sup>263</sup> Scottish National Committee statement, 9 Feb. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8427/18).

newspaper and a Scottish version of the ISDL.<sup>264</sup> A sum of £250 was granted in September 1920, but a promise of more was not fulfilled.<sup>265</sup> On the death of MacSwiney, Erskine of Mar urged the Irish and the Scots to stand together to avenge his death and combine to achieve independence.<sup>266</sup> There is a very strong sense in all of this correspondence that the Scots wanted to latch on to the much more vibrant Irish campaign. Gavan Duffy was unimpressed by the weak Scottish campaign.<sup>267</sup> In December 1920 O'Brien told Erskine of Mar that the Dáil had decided that no more money would be forthcoming.<sup>268</sup> In an article for the *Scottish Independent* in 1928 O'Brien suggested that the main difference between Scotland and Ireland was that Scotland had 'to a very great extent accepted the union with England, whereas Ireland has never ceased to contest it'.<sup>269</sup>

### **3.13 The effect of the IRA campaign in Britain on the ISDL**

In late 1920, the IRA started a campaign of arson and bombing in Britain. This was encouraged by Collins as reprisal for the arson and destruction conducted by the Crown forces in Ireland.<sup>270</sup> It began in Liverpool on the night of 27-28 November with the destruction of a number of warehouses and factories. Over the next few months, the IRA attacked railway lines, signal boxes, set fire to barns and hayricks, targeted electricity, water and telephone installations, and generally sought to attack infrastructure which would inconvenience the British public and draw attention to the horrors of the Anglo-Irish war.<sup>271</sup> Hugh Early recounted how he and other volunteers set a ring of farm fires extending over seven miles around Liverpool and commented that 'it was really a prestige affair and a hit back for the reprisals carried out by the British forces in Ireland'.<sup>272</sup> Gilbert Barrington stated that the general military value of these attacks lay in their effect on the insurance companies and that they created the

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<sup>264</sup> Erskine of Mar to O'Brien, 11 Oct. 1920, *ibid.*

<sup>265</sup> O'Brien to Ian McArthur, 1 Sept. 1920, *ibid.*

<sup>266</sup> Erskine of Mar to O'Brien, 26 Oct. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8428/21).

<sup>267</sup> Gavan Duffy to O'Brien, 29 July 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8427/18).

<sup>268</sup> O'Brien to Erskine of Mar, 21 Dec. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8428/21).

<sup>269</sup> *Scottish Independent*, June 1928.

<sup>270</sup> Noonan, *IRA in Britain*, p. 138.

<sup>271</sup> Belchem, *Irish, Catholic and scouse*, pp 275-6.

<sup>272</sup> Hugh Early (IMA, BMH, WS 1535, p. 6).

impression that the IRA had a widespread military organisation on mainland Britain.<sup>273</sup> The campaign continued until the Truce in July 1921. As Noonan has commented, 'the fact that attacks might have the effect of alienating the general population in Britain, including those of Irish descent, seems to have been of little concern to the Volunteers, those born and raised in Britain included'.<sup>274</sup> McConville calculates that about fifty-five people were convicted of offences during this IRA campaign.<sup>275</sup> The offences included shooting with intent to murder, conspiracy in relation to arson and murder, possession of arms, explosives and ammunition with intent, cutting telegraph wires and treason felony.<sup>276</sup> The prisons ranged from Durham in the far north to Dartmoor in the west of England, to Usk in Wales and to London. This complete scattering of the prisoners made the work of O'Brien and the INRF difficult and expensive in terms of travel.

This IRA campaign began to have a major effect on the ability of the ISDL to function. O'Brien himself had been described in Home Office reports as a provider of arms to Ireland as early as April 1920.<sup>277</sup> Paul McMahon notes that the Special Branch of the London Metropolitan Police was at maximum strength during 1919-21. Plain clothes officers attended public meetings within Irish circles and followed suspects and recruited informers. There was also systematic interception of suspects' mail.<sup>278</sup> O'Brien's personal post seems to have escaped this attention, however, as there is no reference to it in Home Office or War Office reports. By contrast there is an extensive file on post intercepted to and from Saklatvala.<sup>279</sup>

On 30 November 1920, the police raided O'Brien's London offices, the family business and his home. On the basis of documents seized the Home Office reported that O'Brien

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<sup>273</sup> Gilbert Barrington (IMA, BMH, WS 773, p. 5).

<sup>274</sup> Noonan, *IRA in Britain*, p. 141.

<sup>275</sup> McConville, *Irish political prisoners, 1848-1920: theatres of war*, p. 765. See also list of all these prisoners in DFA, early series, Box 7/46/9/1.

<sup>276</sup> McConville, *Irish political prisoners, 1848-1920: theatres of war*, p. 766.

<sup>277</sup> RROUK, 15 Apr. 1920 (TNA, CAB 24/103/86).

<sup>278</sup> Paul McMahon, *British spies and Irish rebels: British intelligence and Ireland, 1916-1945* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2008), p. 100.

<sup>279</sup> See Shapurji Saklatvala (TNA, KV2/612).

‘has been financing the Sinn Féin representatives abroad as well as the persons concerned in attempting to introduce munitions from Germany to Ireland. He has also been negotiating with Indian and Egyptian extremists and has been attempting to get an Irishman trained as an aviator. The question of his internment is being considered’.<sup>280</sup>

The British secret service reported that in the light of the IRA campaign Saklatvala ‘appears to be a little frightened and is afraid of visiting Art O’Brien’.<sup>281</sup> A British army intelligence report also noted the role of the Labour Party in providing information to the ISDL about the trend of public opinion in England and in parliamentary circles. The report concluded that this was of immense importance to Sinn Féin when deciding its policy of outrage in Ireland and England.<sup>282</sup> This was confirmation for the British government that the ISDL was providing essential support to Sinn Féin in Ireland and from then on it was under severe pressure from police. Seán McGrath was deported to Ireland without charge on 21 February 1921 and interned in Ballykinlar. Thomas Faughnan, ISDL treasurer, met the same fate on 12 April 1921, as did his successor C. B. Dutton on 18 May 1921. Brian O’Kennedy replaced McGrath as ISDL organiser but was also deported on 14 May 1921.<sup>283</sup> All of these arrests began to impact on the ISDL and left it lacking in leadership in the period leading up to the Truce. Trials of ISDL members in relation to the IRA outrages in Britain generated negative publicity for the organisation. The ISDL central executive issued a strongly worded statement to the press on 24 May 1921 in which it emphasised that the ISDL was ‘a perfectly legal organisation’.<sup>284</sup> While the vast majority of the ISDL members were law-abiding citizens, given the activities of its leaders and a number of members, it was somewhat disingenuous to claim ‘perfectly legal’ status.

O’Brien escaped arrest by going into hiding in the London home of Sidney Parry, whose wife Úna [Gertrude] was a first cousin of Roger Casement.<sup>285</sup> Parry was

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<sup>280</sup> RROUK, 16 Dec. 1920 (TNA, CAB 24/117/16).

<sup>281</sup> Reports on Saklatvala, 1 Dec. 1920 (TNA, KV2/611).

<sup>282</sup> Record of the rebellion in Ireland in 1920-21, Vol. II, Intelligence, p. 44 (Jeudwine papers, Imperial War Museum, London).

<sup>283</sup> *Irish Exile* (hereafter *IE*), July 1921.

<sup>284</sup> Press release by Standing Committee of ISDL, 24 May 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8448/4).

<sup>285</sup> Methold Sidney Parry (1863- 1937), Antrim-born but London-based banker who assisted Arthur Griffith in the formulation of plans for an agricultural loan bank. He owned a rubber plantation in Africa and was a member of the Roger Casement Sinn Féin club in London.

apparently a supporter of dominion home rule who needed 'to be helped along the road towards a republic'.<sup>286</sup> A death threat to O'Brien from the Black and Tans in November 1920 precipitated his going on the run.<sup>287</sup> Basil Thomson mocked O'Brien in his weekly report by suggesting that he feared the Black and Tans as a child feared a bogey man.<sup>288</sup> During this period O'Brien also stayed with Agnes Newman, sister of Roger Casement, in Kensington and finally moved to the home of J. H. MacDonnell, the ISDL solicitor, in Battersea.<sup>289</sup> By June 1921, O'Brien was still in hiding in London and 'finding it difficult to work'. He noted that Scotland Yard had completed a seven page report on him and that the order for his arrest has been signed.<sup>290</sup> An internment order was eventually issued against O'Brien in mid-May 1921, but as he was still well hidden, police were unable to enforce it.<sup>291</sup> O'Brien's enforced seclusion coincided with a bout of ill-health brought on by exhaustion. On his return from MacSwiney's funeral in Cork he had taken to the bed at the Jermyn Court Hotel for some weeks.<sup>292</sup> In a letter to de Valera in April 1921, O'Brien said this period of ill-health actually lasted for some months and meant that he could only do 'intermittent snatches of work'.<sup>293</sup> His frenetic pace had finally caught up with him. At this point, he also began to refer to himself as manager of 'an ordinary commercial enterprise' viz. *The Music Trades Review*, which he used as a cover for his less than legal activities.<sup>294</sup> It appears that the family members involved in the business continued to indulge his Irish nationalism and allowed him full access to their offices.<sup>295</sup> During this period his inaccessibility incurred the further wrath of Robert Brennan who wrote to Collins trying to ascertain how he should contact O'Brien in hiding.<sup>296</sup> O'Brien was visited by two or three messengers from his office each day<sup>297</sup> and by Sam Maguire,<sup>298</sup> but he

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<sup>286</sup> Diarmuid O'Hegarty to de Valera, 4 May 1921 (NAI, DE/2/1).

<sup>287</sup> Mitchell, *Revolutionary government*, p. 253.

<sup>288</sup> RROUK, 5 Feb. 1921 (TNA, CAB 24/119/42).

<sup>289</sup> Elizabeth MacGinley (née Brennan) (IMA, BMH, WS 860, p. 1).

<sup>290</sup> O'Brien to RMG [Collins], 22 June 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8430/17). The only report available in TNA about O'Brien is a War Office file c. 1920 which consists of two rather than seven pages. (TNA, WO, 35/206/17).

<sup>291</sup> Murphy, *Political imprisonment*, p. 198.

<sup>292</sup> O'Brien to A. T. Davies, 13 Nov. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/23).

<sup>293</sup> Fanning et al, *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy*, Vol. 1, pp 128-32.

<sup>294</sup> O'Brien to Home Office, 9 Dec. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8437/4).

<sup>295</sup> O'Brien to Gavan Duffy, 28 June 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8421/4).

<sup>296</sup> See for instance Brennan to Collins, 13 June 1921 (NAI, DFA, early series, Box 21/128/4).

<sup>297</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 23 Feb. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/1).

could easily claim not to have received missives from Brennan. O'Brien enjoyed the seclusion because it allowed him to catch up on arrears of work and essentially to work on matters he deemed important.<sup>299</sup> He reported to de Valera that his office sent out 598 letters on behalf of Dáil Éireann in the period January to April 1921 and forwarded 110 items to the offices abroad.<sup>300</sup> Despite his efforts, he was nonetheless concerned that members of Irish support groups in Britain had difficulty grasping the idea that the Dáil government was a real government.<sup>301</sup>

The early months of 1921 saw the ISDL under increasing police pressure and with a distinct lack of leadership due to the seclusion of O'Brien. In addition, expenses were mounting for the ISDL. Foxtan calculates that some £5,000 in costs was incurred in legal defence between January and July 1921 alone.<sup>302</sup> A renewal of sorts occurred in March 1921 when the ISDL London District Committee began to publish a monthly newspaper called *The Irish Exile/An Deoraidhe Gaodhlach*.<sup>303</sup> No doubt fearing police attention, there was no named editor and few attributed articles. The *Irish Exile* became a very useful propaganda tool for the ISDL and surprisingly no attempt was made by the British authorities to suppress it. A key theme in all editions was the martyrdom of Irish patriots, with regular references to Kevin Barry and Terence MacSwiney. Some of the content on Ireland was reproduced from the *Irish Bulletin*. Irish-Ireland themes also figured prominently and included a buy-Irish in Britain campaign. It is difficult to ascertain accurate and verifiable circulation figures for the *Irish Exile* but an ISDL report in April 1922 put the monthly figure at 10,000.<sup>304</sup> The paper later proved a significant source of information during the Treaty negotiations. After the Treaty was signed both proponents and opponents used the newspaper to set out their arguments to win over the ISDL membership. A survey of the newspaper's content however, confirms the ISDL as a largely inward-looking organisation rather than one seeking to maximise its potential, with no contribution from outsiders to its articles or features.

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<sup>298</sup> Elizabeth MacGinley (née Brennan) (IMA, BMH, WS 860, p. 2).

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, report on London office, 14 Apr. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/1).

<sup>301</sup> Mitchell, *Revolutionary government*, p. 157; O'Brien to Collins, 11 May 1921 (NAI, DE 2/245).

<sup>302</sup> Foxtan, *Revolutionary lawyers*, p. 295.

<sup>303</sup> This paper was published until June 1922.

<sup>304</sup> ISDL, *Report of the Third Annual Conference*, 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8433).

### 3.14 The ISDL and the Catholic Church

Archbishop Bourne's concern about church services in Irish discussed in Chapter 1 paled into insignificance when the IRA campaign of arson and destruction in Britain began in late 1920. Elevated to the rank of cardinal in 1910, Bourne was generally regarded as unsympathetic to the Irish cause and was incensed at the IRA attacks in Britain. Fitzpatrick suggests that as long as Irishness signified 'nothing more sinister than saints and shamrock', it could be treated with benevolence by British Catholics, Protestants and unbelievers alike.<sup>305</sup> Kester Aspden has also noted that 'an anxiousness not to give a handle to their critics set a limit to how far English Catholicism felt able to identify with Ireland's cause'.<sup>306</sup> Bourne's views on Irish independence are outlined in notes in his personal papers. He supported Irish self-government, but only within the British Empire.<sup>307</sup> He was also less than popular among the London-Irish because he said a special Mass in November 1920 for the military killed in Ireland.<sup>308</sup>

In February 1921, Bourne sent a letter to all churches in his diocese in which he referred to 'the tragedy of Ireland' and advised Catholics that they should refrain from sympathy and co-operation with organisations which were in opposition to the laws of God and the Catholic church — despite the fact that they might be impelled 'by legitimate love of country or urgent longing for the realisation of lawful aspirations'.<sup>309</sup> In addition, Bourne re-issued a letter by Cardinal Manning, first published in 1867 in the context of the Fenian up-rising, in which he stated categorically that all conspiracy whether against the church or the state was sin and that rebellion was a mortal sin.<sup>310</sup> Bourne decried 'the foolish catchword of self-determination' and claimed that its implications in India and 'other non-Christian lands' would ultimately mean the destruction of Christianity.<sup>311</sup> Archbishop Mannix retorted that self-determination was

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<sup>305</sup> Fitzpatrick, 'A curious middle place', p. 32.

<sup>306</sup> Kester Aspden, *Fortress church: the English Roman Catholic bishops and politics, 1903-1963* (Leominster, 2002), p. 76.

<sup>307</sup> Bourne, notes, n.d. (WDA, Bourne papers, BO 5/36a).

<sup>308</sup> Lloyd George to Bourne, 29 Nov. 1920 (WDA, Bourne papers, BO 5/36a).

<sup>309</sup> *IT*, 14 Feb. 1921.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>311</sup> Bourne, Lenten Pastoral Letter, 1921 (WDA, Bourne papers, BO 5/36a).



‘no catchword ... it is an eternal principle for which men were told they were fighting in the war’.<sup>312</sup>

O’Brien responded robustly to the cardinal’s statement which he deemed ‘narrow and unchristian’ in attitude.<sup>313</sup> This response was in line with instructions from de Valera ‘to create a good storm in London re: Bourne’.<sup>314</sup> A group of London Catholics, mainly members of the ISDL, arranged a protest meeting on 18 March 1921 at the Kingsway Hall in London. At the meeting it was pointed out that the cardinal made no protest when English recruiting agents went to Ireland during the war and made use of the ‘foolish catchword’ of self-determination.<sup>315</sup> Referring to a letter published in *The Times* in November 1920, P. D. O’Hart thanked Archbishop Gore, Church of England archbishop of Canterbury, for his support and suggested that it was left to the non-Catholic bishops to support the Irish.<sup>316</sup> A further resolution taken at the meeting alleged that the cardinal’s letter ‘was written at the dictates of a bigoted anti-Irish coterie’.<sup>317</sup> This strong wording had echoes of previous grievances, with the persistent perception among Irish Catholics that English Catholics regarded them as inferior.

Bourne sent an observer to the Kingsway Hall meeting who reported an attendance of about 800 ‘mostly young people of the clerk and shop-assistant type’.<sup>318</sup> The report noted a comment by Richard Purcell that Irish people would rather die without the priest than have the priest interfere in politics. The report also referred to comments about ‘wire-pulling between the Cardinal and Rome ... to do down the Irish cause’. Abusive comments in relation to the cardinal were also relayed to him — that

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<sup>312</sup> Kiernan, *Mannix*, p. 165.

<sup>313</sup> Copy of O’Brien press release, 15 Feb. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/12).

<sup>314</sup> De Valera to O’Brien, 15 Feb. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/1).

<sup>315</sup> *IE*, Apr. 1921.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*; See also *The Times*, 18 Nov. 1920, which published a letter from seventeen Church of England bishops urging an end to reprisals in Ireland – a stance in marked contrast to that of the Roman Catholic Church in England.

<sup>317</sup> Copy of protest meeting press release, 19 Mar. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/12).

<sup>318</sup> Report of meeting at Kingsway Hall, 18 Mar. 1921, unsigned (WDA, Bourne papers, BO 5/36a).

he had a swollen head and that he had insulted the whole Irish race.<sup>319</sup> The *Daily News* reported that Bourne was referred to as 'The Black and Tan cardinal'.<sup>320</sup>

Bourne was not without his supporters, however. Unsigned handwritten notes in the Bourne files in relation to the meeting described it 'as full of claptrap'.<sup>321</sup> In an editorial, the *Westminster Chronicle* referred to 'vulgar abuse' as the only prominent thing about the meeting and expressed serious concern at the 'revolutionary sinful insubordination against ecclesiastical authority' which was demonstrated.<sup>322</sup> The *Evening Standard* assured the cardinal that approval for his actions in 'responsible circles' was practically unanimous not only in Britain but also in Rome while the *Morning Post* described the Kingsway Hall event as a Sinn Féin meeting of 'wild young Irish men and a larger number of women' and noted that prominent Catholics were conspicuous by their absence.<sup>323</sup>

Bourne's intervention was in marked contrast to that of Archbishop Amigo of Southwark.<sup>324</sup> While in Rome in January 1921, Amigo supported Irish clergy who were trying to ensure that the Pope was not pressurised by the British government into issuing a statement condemning Sinn Féin.<sup>325</sup> This was a very real fear, because as David Miller has commented, the Vatican had tended to value the friendship of the world's strongest power, albeit a Protestant one, rather than the desires of Ireland, a small Catholic nationality.<sup>326</sup> John Hagan, rector of the Irish College in Rome, informed Archbishop Walsh in Dublin that the Pope was about to pronounce against murder by all sides in Ireland but this would be taken both by friend and enemy as a death blow aimed at Irish aspirations.<sup>327</sup> Bourne's intervention and intransigence did not impress Walsh who was said to be 'disgusted' at the pastoral letter.<sup>328</sup> Amigo nailed his colours

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

<sup>320</sup> *Daily News*, 19 Mar. 1921

<sup>321</sup> Handwritten notes, unsigned (WDA, Bourne papers, BO, 5/87/1).

<sup>322</sup> *Westminster Chronicle*, 17, n.d. (WDA, Bourne papers, BO 5/36a).

<sup>323</sup> *Evening Standard*, 19 Mar. 1921; *Morning Post*, 19 Mar. 1921.

<sup>324</sup> See Clifton, 'Amigo, Peter Emmanuel', *ODNB*.

<sup>325</sup> John Hagan to Archbishop Walsh, Dublin, 21 Jan. 1921 (DDA, Archbishop Walsh papers, correspondence 1921).

<sup>326</sup> David Miller, *Church, state and nation in Ireland, 1898-1921* (Dublin, 1973), p. 449.

<sup>327</sup> John Hagan to Archbishop Walsh, 21 Jan. 1921 (DDA, Archbishop Walsh papers, correspondence 1921). For a more detailed discussion on this topic, see Dermot Keogh, *The Vatican, the bishops and Irish politics, 1919-1939* (Cambridge, 1986), pp 39-42.

<sup>328</sup> Thomas J. Morrissey, *William J. Walsh, Archbishop of Dublin, 1841-1921* (Dublin, 2000), p. 344.

firmly to the mast in his own pastoral letter of November 1920 when he urged his clergy and people not to tolerate or condone the actions of the military in Ireland which he said would 'sap the moral foundations of the government'.<sup>329</sup>

After this furore, Bourne began to soften his stance and following a meeting of the English hierarchy, he wrote to Lloyd George on 6 April 1921 to express grave concern about 'the condition of Ireland'.<sup>330</sup> He also urged 'the withdrawal of the auxiliary troops and an end to reprisals on innocent persons'.<sup>331</sup> A week later the *Irish Independent* carried a quote from the cardinal in the *Chicago Tribune*, in which he declared that 'a discontented Ireland is of no value to the Empire and an Empire without justice is of no value to civilisation'.<sup>332</sup> While it cannot take full credit for Bourne's moderated stance, the ISDL led by O'Brien was certainly responsible for holding Bourne to account and demonstrating that Irish Catholics in London would not be cowed by his unsupportive attitude. De Valera complimented O'Brien warmly on the campaign: 'our people in Rome have reported that your London meetings were most timely and helpful'.<sup>333</sup>

### 3.15 Conclusion

From 1916 to 1919 the main focus of O'Brien and his London colleagues was prisoner relief. With the onset of the War of Independence they were called upon to breathe new life into gun-running activities and to establish an Irish self-determination propaganda organisation in Britain. O'Brien's role as envoy of the Irish Republic in London was the pivot on which all of this activity turned. As the financial conduit for the gun-running funds and the de facto leader of the ISDL, O'Brien's activities became infinitely more complex and challenging and he and a small cohort of Londoners including Seán McGrath and Sam Maguire sought to deliver on every request from Collins in particular, and Dáil Éireann in general. There were relatively few people appointed on a salary by Dáil Éireann at home or abroad so O'Brien had reason to believe that he was one of the inner circle whose opinion mattered to Collins, de

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<sup>329</sup> *IT*, 1 Dec. 1920.

<sup>330</sup> Bourne to Lloyd George, 6 Apr. 1921 (WDA, Bourne papers, BO 5/36a).

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>332</sup> *II*, 11 Apr. 1921.

<sup>333</sup> De Valera to O'Brien, 21 Apr. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/1).

Valera and Griffith. Having given up his engineering job he saw himself as one of the key shapers of the new independent Ireland which he believed was imminent. He ensured that his office now became the public face of Dáil Éireann in London and moved about with impunity until late 1920, putting his stamp on world-wide propaganda in support of Irish independence.

O'Brien and his close ally McGrath took the ISDL from a standing start to membership of nearly 27,000 and ensured that the Irish self-determination message was heard by the British public. The ISDL was central to prison relief activities from 1919 onwards and was the lead organisation in protests in support of prison hunger strikes in Britain in 1920. ISDL members turned out in their thousands to support Archbishop Mannix and to march at Terence MacSwiney's funeral — activities which rattled both the British government and the Catholic hierarchy in Britain. O'Brien's greatest triumph was undoubtedly the Royal Albert Hall meeting of February 1920 when he introduced Griffith and MacNeill to 10,000 cheering supporters. The ISDL was not without its flaws, however. Although its stated objective was self-determination for Ireland, there was also an underlying attempt to maintain the Irish in Britain as a race apart. Whatever de Valera's initial plan may have been, it appears that a key role of the ISDL became the consolidation of an Irish-Ireland ethos among the Irish in Britain. This anglophobia, coupled with its restrictions on membership and political activity, blinded the organisation to the possibilities for support from the wider community and limited its potential. O'Brien who commanded such authority, must take the blame for not attempting to steer the organisation in a more collaborative mode.

O'Brien dispersed money to various Sinn Féin and Dáil Éireann offices throughout the world and was at the heart of republican diplomatic efforts during the 1919 to 1921 period. He also saw himself as an important thinker and strategist on independence issues affecting India, Egypt, Burma and even Scotland and was much more comfortable with those activists than he was with the British Labour Party. These contacts enhanced his view of himself as an important and influential diplomat. Had he got any encouragement from Dublin it is likely he would have made much more of

these connections, but in the event, Griffith seemed to have realised the futility of this long before O'Brien did.

Parallel to his public activities O'Brien continued to manage the underground activities of the IRB and the newly constituted IRA. Michael Collins had moved with great speed to install O'Brien as London envoy and he did not disappoint. He was happy to pursue an IRB agenda in parallel with his propaganda duties and controlled the finance for the gun-running operation in London throughout the War of Independence. Until late 1920 his gun-running was for a country he had never lived in, but when the IRA targeted his fellow-countrymen in Britain he had no crisis of conscience. The IRA campaign in Britain brought home the reality of the War on Independence to ISDL leaders when they were arrested in early 1921, and when it forced O'Brien into hiding. It is telling however, that neither the arrests nor the threat of same dampened their enthusiasm for the cause and they simply continued when they were released, or in O'Brien's case when he emerged from hiding, as will be discussed in Chapter 4. These men were fully committed to militant action and able to withstand all adversity. Faced with an IRA campaign in mainland Britain, it was inevitable that the Catholic Church would condemn the concept of self-determination. ISDL members showed that they were not cowed by hierarchical disapproval when they stood up to Cardinal Bourne in March 1921 and could take some credit for changing his hard-line stance against Irish self-determination.

By early 1921 O'Brien was a committed Irish republican militant having fully embraced the War of Independence, while outwardly leading the ISDL as a 'perfectly legal' organisation and adhering to his life-long commitment to the cultural-nationalism of the Gaelic League. He enjoyed being the Irish envoy in London and worked tirelessly on its behalf. Delegation was not his strong suit, however, so it is not surprising that he became overwhelmed with work. He took control of the development of the ISDL, the drafting of its constitution and the employment of a national organiser and dealt with its rivalries with Sinn Féin and the Gaelic League. At the same time, he liaised daily with Collins and provided finance for the gun-running operation and Sinn Féin foreign offices. When the MacSwiney and Mannix campaigns took off he worked day and night. His additional work with the INRF and the GLL

meant that he must have been under pressure constantly. By doing too much for every organisation he controlled, he, by his own admission, was unable to consider the further development of the London office and to seize 'opportunities for special propaganda'.<sup>334</sup> This control, however, came from his perfectionist personality and the need to do every job to the best of his ability rather than egotistical traits. O'Brien genuinely worked hard for the cause of Ireland at a time when there was very little prospect of reward for himself. His acceptance of the envoy job had, after all, resulted in a significant cut in salary and the constant prospect of arrest.

By late 1920 he was very much on the police radar and lucky to have escaped imprisonment. Concerns about his health began to emerge, there were question marks over INRF expenditure on legal fees for prisoners and suggestions that his accountancy skills were not the best. Collins kept faith with O'Brien, however, ignoring the criticisms of Robert Brennan, and there is no doubt that O'Brien's meticulous attention to detail contributed to the smooth running of the Collins' operation. Despite his poor health and his enforced seclusion O'Brien still had his finger on the pulse of all Irish nationalist activity in London. He was now about to embark on a new and exciting phase of diplomatic activity which saw him welcomed as a regular visitor to the corridors of power in Downing Street.

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<sup>334</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, report on the London office, 14 Apr. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/1).

## **‘The tragedy of the so-called Treaty’: Mediator and diplomat, 1920-1921**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The historiography of the period leading up to and including the Treaty negotiations has concentrated on the main players but has largely ignored the intermediaries who were monitored and supported by O’Brien in London.<sup>1</sup> His own role in the Truce and Treaty negotiations merits just one line in Frank Pakenham’s *Peace by ordeal* where his formal introduction of de Valera to Lloyd George in July 1921 is mentioned.<sup>2</sup> This chapter reveals O’Brien’s extensive involvement in various peace initiatives and his centrality in the interactions between the British government and de Valera in the summer of 1921. His attempts to bring some clearly defined strategy to the proceedings and his inclination to move well beyond his brief as envoy are analysed and a deeper understanding of this period in London emerges. O’Brien was excluded from the final negotiating team to his great distress and the reasons for this are discussed. The chapter concludes with analysis of his anti-Treaty stance which was immediate and vehement. His extensive written records provide a unique case study of an individual’s conversion from loyal supporter and daily correspondent of Collins to cheer-leader in Britain for de Valera’s anti-Treaty campaign.

### **4.2 Pressure for a settlement to the Irish question**

Pressure from various sources on the British government from late 1920 onwards resulted in attempts to broker a peace agreement. In November 1920, the British Labour Party abandoned the concept of dominion rule for Ireland and recommended that the British army be withdrawn and Ireland left to solve her own problems.<sup>3</sup> Labour became *the* major critic of the government’s increasingly brutal attempts to

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<sup>1</sup> See Hopkinson, *Green against green: the Irish Civil War* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Dublin, 2004), Pakenham, *Peace by ordeal*; Townshend, *Republic*.

<sup>2</sup> Pakenham, *Peace by ordeal*, p. 82.

<sup>3</sup> Gibbons, ‘Labour and Irish revolution’, p. 24.

suppress the Irish War of Independence.<sup>4</sup> The ‘Bloody Sunday’ killings in Dublin on 21 November 1920 caused horror and revulsion in both Britain and Ireland and led the Labour Party to appoint its own commission on Ireland. Its report in December 1920 concluded that ‘those in the pay of the British government kill people in cold blood’ and was a damning criticism of British policy in Ireland.<sup>5</sup> This embarrassed the government and depicted the Conservative and Liberal coalition as an administration out of touch with the British public’s sensibilities and with wider international opinion.<sup>6</sup> As Gibbons has pointed out, the Labour Party had to tread a fine line between support for Irish nationalism and maintaining its position as the next government-in-waiting.<sup>7</sup> In focusing on atrocities committed by the Black and Tans it could align itself with a civil liberties rather than a militant republican agenda.<sup>8</sup> The report on Ireland was followed by 500 meetings throughout Britain with attendances ranging from 500 to 5000.<sup>9</sup> The scale of the meetings prompted O’Brien to reconsider his stance vis-à-vis Labour. He organised an ISDL information campaign for their speakers and supplied leaflets and pamphlets.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, he remained dubious: ‘While our league will do nothing to hamper their work, we must realise that our strength lies in ourselves, in our own organisation, which we must keep purely Irish all the time and free from all English political parties’.<sup>11</sup> O’Brien still felt that only the ISDL could make the case for Ireland to the British people. This overlooked the crucial consideration that the Labour Party had a much broader base and could perhaps have enhanced rather than damaged the ISDL by association. Erskine Childers was far more perspicacious and reiterated advice given to O’Brien in early 1919. He recognised the work of the ISDL in England as valuable, but felt that ‘to turn the scale there must be support from some purely British section: and the section to be influenced should be Labour’.<sup>12</sup> This advice was ignored and the ISDL maintained its isolationist stance.

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<sup>4</sup> Thorpe, *British Labour Party*, p. 52.

<sup>5</sup> *Report of the Labour Commission to Ireland* (London, 1921); C. L. Mowat, ‘The Irish question in British politics (1916-1922)’, in Desmond Williams (ed.), *The Irish struggle, 1916-19* (London, 1966), p. 147.

<sup>6</sup> Gibbons, ‘Labour and Irish revolution’, p. 71.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 69-87.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Mowat, ‘Irish question’, p. 147.

<sup>10</sup> O’Brien to Desmond FitzGerald, 10 Jan. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/8).

<sup>11</sup> O’Brien to all ISDL branches, 5 Jan. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8432/40).

<sup>12</sup> Copy of memo by Erskine Childers, n.d. (TNA, WO 35/206).



Not all Conservative politicians were supportive of their government's policy in Ireland. While not anxious to give in to Irish nationalist demands, some Conservatives were loud in their criticism of the Black and Tans.<sup>13</sup> Lord Robert Cecil called for an enquiry into reprisals and voted against the government on the issue, as did Lord Henry Cavendish-Bentinck and Oswald Mosley.<sup>14</sup> Cavendish-Bentinck and Mosley subsequently became chairman and secretary respectively of the Peace with Ireland Council. Established in October 1920 by Basil Williams, the historian,<sup>15</sup> who had befriended Childers during service in the South African War, and by George Berkeley,<sup>16</sup> the council sought to solve the Irish problem and to awaken public feeling in England on the subject. In the same manner as the ISDL, the council sought to establish local committees and to use petitions, addresses, public meetings and displays of moral indignation to influence British public opinion.<sup>17</sup> In sharp contrast to the ISDL, however, Williams aimed for a 'purely English movement' which could not be accused of being a fifth column of Sinn Féin.<sup>18</sup> Although some leading members of the council were Conservatives, it also embraced old Liberals, Labour Party members, non-party individuals and Church of England bishops and clergy. Kevin Matthews describes how discontent with Lloyd George's policy on Ireland was 'boiling over' and notes that even Asquith's Liberals were making in-roads by criticising the handling of the situation.<sup>19</sup>

In early 1921 Childers initiated a system whereby regular parliamentary questions were asked in the House of Commons about the situation in Ireland. The questions were sent to O'Brien who sent them to sympathetic MPs.<sup>20</sup> Hansard reports of April and May 1921 show a sustained campaign by MPs Joseph Kenworthy (Liberal, Hull Central), William Wedgwood Benn (Liberal, Leith), Henry Cavendish-Bentinck

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<sup>13</sup> D. G Boyce, *Englishmen and Irish troubles: British public opinion and the making of Irish policy, 1918-22* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> See Richard Pares, 'Basil Williams, 1867-1950', *ODNB*.

<sup>16</sup> Berkeley was a wealthy ex-British army officer living in Oxfordshire who had a keen interest in Irish affairs. He helped fund the Howth gun-running and went to Belfast in July 1914 to assist in training the Irish Volunteers. See George Berkeley (IMA, BMH, WS 971, 995); Denis McCullough (IMA, BMH, WS 915, p. 8) and Bulmer Hobson (IMA, BMH, WS 53, p. 3).

<sup>17</sup> Boyce, *Englishmen and Irish troubles*, pp 64-5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>19</sup> Kevin Matthews, *Fatal Influence: the impact of Ireland on British politics, 1920-1925* (Dublin, 2004), p. 32.

<sup>20</sup> Mitchell, *Revolutionary government*, p. 250.

(Conservative, Nottingham) and Oswald Mosley (Conservative, Harrow) to embarrass the government about the behaviour of its forces in Ireland.<sup>21</sup> Kenworthy, in particular, found a new question every day with which to assail the Home Secretary or his representative. *The Times* reported that Wedgwood Benn asked questions about a raid on Childers's house in Dublin — appalled that someone who had performed distinguished service in the war should be treated thus.<sup>22</sup> Kenworthy and Wedgwood Benn, while they were old 'radical' friends of Childers,<sup>23</sup> had no significant Irish populations in their constituencies and were motivated purely by opposition to government policy in Ireland.

### 4.3 Peace initiatives

Unlike some other Dáil representatives abroad, O'Brien was not a TD, yet he was catapulted into a central role in all peace initiatives due to his presence in London. From early 1920 to late 1921, he was the key conduit between Sinn Féin and three intermediaries who attempted to arrange some form of settlement between the British government and the Dáil: A. T. Davies, Charles Russell and Archbishop Patrick Clune. Another intermediary, Patrick Moylett, operated outside O'Brien's control and this annoyed him immensely.

Peace initiatives were defined on the Irish side by changes in leadership between late 1920 and early 1921. Initial moves encouraged by Arthur Griffith became the responsibility of Michael Collins when Griffith was imprisoned after the Bloody Sunday killings on 21 November 1920. When de Valera returned from the US at the end of December 1920 he immediately sought to take control. O'Brien was very close to Collins and knew Griffith since the early days of the GLL. By contrast, O'Brien had had much less contact with de Valera but had established his bona fides with him when he supported the prisoners in 1916 and when he agreed to establish the ISDL.

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<sup>21</sup> See *Hansard 5 (Commons)* debates April and May 1921; and specifically *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, 140, cc 17-8 (4 Apr. 1921); *ibid.*, 140, cc 253-5 (14 Apr. 1921); *ibid.*, 140, cc 1263-9 (14 Apr. 1921); *ibid.*, 142, cc 23-6 (24 May 1921).

<sup>22</sup> *The Times*, 13 May 1921.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Boyle, *The riddle of Erskine Childers* (London, 1977), p. 248.

In March 1920 A. T. Davies,<sup>24</sup> a confidante of Lloyd George's and permanent secretary to the Welsh Education Board, informed O'Brien that 90 per cent of the members of the House of Commons wished for a settlement with Ireland and were asking what they could do.<sup>25</sup> This communication in itself was an inherent recognition of O'Brien's position as Irish envoy by the British authorities and this was not lost on him. He replied in trenchant terms that England should treat Ireland as a peer and withdraw her troops which were terrorising the people.<sup>26</sup> Davies and O'Brien met in July 1920 and again in late November 1920. O'Brien reported to Collins and Griffith that when Davies insisted that Lloyd George would not recognise a republic he sent him packing.<sup>27</sup> O'Brien also told Griffith that Davies had suggested a meeting 'with Lloyd George and his cabinet members on one side and yourself, de Valera and myself on the other'.<sup>28</sup> Davies, therefore, considered O'Brien a senior figure in the peace negotiations and this must surely have increased O'Brien's sense of his own importance. There is no record of Griffith's reply. Both Collins and O'Brien were distrustful of Lloyd George's emissaries. O'Brien dismissed the likes of Davies and Hamar Greenwood, as 'obsequious shopkeepers' whose only concern was 'to please the boss'.<sup>29</sup>

During the discussions with Davies, Sir Charles Russell contacted O'Brien in July 1920.<sup>30</sup> Descended from Ulster Catholics, Russell, a solicitor by profession, had a keen interest in Irish affairs and was a leading proponent of Catholic interests in Britain.<sup>31</sup> O'Brien recorded that initially Russell would not contemplate an Irish republic but eventually agreed with O'Brien that the demand was quite logical. However, he knew of no politician in England who would accept the idea. O'Brien impressed on Russell that it was open to Lloyd George to contact Griffith and Dáil Éireann at any time to open peace talks. There the matter rested.<sup>32</sup> This emphasis, from the outset, on a

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<sup>24</sup> See Robert V. Smith 'Sir Alfred T. Davies, 1861-1949', *ODNB*.

<sup>25</sup> A. T. Davies to O'Brien, 19 Mar. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8427/25).

<sup>26</sup> O'Brien to A. T. Davies, 23 Mar. 1920, *ibid*.

<sup>27</sup> A. T. Davies to O'Brien, 28 July 1920, *ibid*.; O'Brien to Collins, 24 Nov. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8430/10); O'Brien to Griffith, 2 Dec. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8427/26).

<sup>28</sup> O'Brien to Griffith, 2 Dec. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8427/26).

<sup>29</sup> Collins to O'Brien, 6 Dec. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/7); O'Brien to Collins, 24 Nov. 1920, *ibid*.

<sup>30</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 15 July 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/12).

<sup>31</sup> See Richard Davenport-Hines, 'Sir Charles Russell, 1863-1928', *ODNB*.

<sup>32</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 15 July 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/12).

republic as a non-negotiable goal is significant and explains O'Brien's immediate rejection of the Treaty.

#### 4.4 The Moylett mission

Patrick Moylett, a Galway business man, was the first Irish person to attempt to find a settlement of the Irish situation.<sup>33</sup> Moylett was a strong Sinn Féin supporter and he established a large importing firm in the Dublin docks which provided ideal cover for gun-running.<sup>34</sup> A rather vague sort of sanction seems to have been given to Moylett to conduct talks with the British. Owen McGee describes how Griffith 'gave Moylett no credentials' but instructed him to let the British government know that a truce and a conference, unhampered by preliminary conditions, could be speedily arranged between representatives of the British government and representatives of Dáil Éireann.<sup>35</sup> According to his memoir, Moylett spent six to eight weeks in London in October/November 1920.<sup>36</sup> Ronan Fanning is in no doubt that Moylett acted secretly on Griffith's behalf when he was treating with Lloyd George's intermediaries in October 1920 and when he met the prime minister in 10 Downing Street.<sup>37</sup> C. J. Phillips of the Foreign Office wrote detailed memos about Moylett's visits believing his credentials to be real and 'authentically emanating from the headquarters of Sinn Féin'.<sup>38</sup> In addition, H. A. L. Fisher advised Lloyd George to allow Moylett to visit Griffith in prison as he heard that Griffith was 'very anxious to re-open negotiations'.<sup>39</sup> Robert Brennan credited Moylett with making considerable progress on a plan for an armistice and amnesty so that settlement terms could be considered.<sup>40</sup> Moylett would not have crossed the threshold of Downing Street had British officials not regarded him as a genuine intermediary. His effort failed because the British government wanted to exclude Collins and Richard Mulcahy from any amnesty that would be given

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<sup>33</sup> Moylett is referred to briefly in Mitchell's *Revolutionary government* and in Hart's *Mick: the real Michael Collins* but Ronan Fanning in *Éamon de Valera* seems to be the first to accord his efforts some recognition.

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed account of all Moylett's activities see his memoir (UCDA, P78). See also his statement to the Bureau of Military History (IMA, BMH, WS 767). There is no mention of O'Brien in either document.

<sup>35</sup> Owen McGee, *Arthur Griffith* (Sallins, 2015), p. 237.

<sup>36</sup> Patrick Moylett memoir (UCDA, P78/19).

<sup>37</sup> Fanning, *Éamon de Valera*, p. 88.

<sup>38</sup> C. J. Phillips, memo, 19 Nov. 1920 (PA, Bonar Law papers, 102/7/6).

<sup>39</sup> H. A. L. Fisher to Lloyd George, 24 Dec. 1920 (PA, Lloyd George papers, LG/F/16/7/64).

<sup>40</sup> Robert Brennan (IMA, BMH, WS 779, p. 93).

in the event of a truce.<sup>41</sup> Fanning suggests that this initiative ran into the sand because Lloyd George was still attempting to ‘crush murder’ and ‘make peace with the moderates’.<sup>42</sup>

It seems that there were very different agendas at play with a power struggle between Collins and Griffith undermining a consistent approach. Whereas Collins and O’Brien held out for major concessions on a republic, Griffith was prepared to parley if invited. O’Brien was irritated by Moylett’s presence in London and would have been even more annoyed had he known that Moylett had several meetings in Downing Street.<sup>43</sup> Although Moylett called to O’Brien’s office, he talked in ‘mysterious’ ways and gave nothing away.<sup>44</sup> Collins disingenuously reassured O’Brien that he had no idea of what Moylett’s mission was.<sup>45</sup> In fact Moylett reported daily to Griffith and twice weekly to Collins.<sup>46</sup> When details of Moylett’s mission were leaked to the *Irish Independent* in December 1920, a wounded O’Brien described Moylett as ‘a blathering fool’ and threatened to resign as he could not ‘remain in a position of apparent trust and yet not be trusted’.<sup>47</sup> Collins, likewise, seemed annoyed at Griffith taking the initiative. He mollified O’Brien by disparaging Moylett as belonging to ‘the class of busybodies who were humming around with all sorts of claims of their own importance [and] with all sorts of suggestions for the settlement of Ireland’.<sup>48</sup> At this point Griffith was in prison and was in no position to give any support to his emissary. Collins’s final comment to O’Brien: ‘I think we have come well out of this danger’ is indicative of the very negative view they shared about this particular peace initiative.<sup>49</sup> This episode gives a clear indication of how uncoordinated peace efforts were on the Irish side in late 1920. It was quite difficult for the British to work out who was in charge. The correspondence between Collins and O’Brien contradicts Hart’s view that ‘if it had been up to Collins, a truce between the IRA and the British government would

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<sup>41</sup> Collins to O’Brien, 15 Dec. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, 8426/7).

<sup>42</sup> Ronan Fanning, *Fatal path: British government and Irish revolution, 1910-1922* (London, 2013), p. 244.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 50-71.

<sup>44</sup> O’Brien to Collins, 12 Dec. 1921 (NAI, DE/2/251).

<sup>45</sup> Collins to O’Brien, 1 Nov. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/7).

<sup>46</sup> Patrick Moylett (IMA, BMH, WS 767, p. 59).

<sup>47</sup> O’Brien to Collins, 12 Dec. 1920 (NAI, DE/2/251).

<sup>48</sup> Collins to O’Brien, 15 Dec. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/7).

<sup>49</sup> Collins to O’Brien, 10 Dec. 1920, *ibid.*

have been declared in December 1920'.<sup>50</sup> In addition, Hart's statement that Collins was flexible about the details of a truce short of surrendering arms misses the point that the fate of IRA arms and ammunition was a major issue in any potential truce.<sup>51</sup>

#### 4.5 Archbishop Clune

The next intermediary was Archbishop Patrick Clune and unlike Moylett, he was closely monitored by O'Brien. A native of Clare, Clune was ordained in Dublin in 1886. He left for Australia three years later and in 1910 became archbishop of Perth.<sup>52</sup> According to O'Brien, Clune became involved at the request of important English people with connections to the government.<sup>53</sup> Miller notes that Mannix was the preferred intermediary of the Vatican but Lloyd George considered him 'a suspicious person' — presumably after his grand tour of England with the ISDL at his side. Clune, by contrast, had shown loyalty to the Empire in his role as chaplain to the Australian army during the First World War.<sup>54</sup> The brutal death of his nephew, Conor Clune, at the hands of the Crown forces in Dublin Castle on Bloody Sunday, may have lessened his loyalty, however.

Commenting on the fact that the British government had now engaged with Russell, Davies and Clune, O'Brien divined that this indicated a greater anxiety for peace.<sup>55</sup> Warming to his theme, O'Brien advised Griffith:

If a Truce can be concluded under conditions sufficiently secure, definite and satisfactory, the subsequent negotiations would, I think, even if they did not lead immediately to a settlement and recognition, open up possibilities of our making a big score in the game which would considerably hasten settlement and recognition.

O'Brien was concerned, however, that Clune was 'not equal to carrying on negotiations of this sort with a man like Lloyd George' and that the archbishop was

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<sup>50</sup> Hart, *Mick*, p. 267.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>52</sup> See Anne Dolan, 'Patrick Joseph Clune, 1864-1935', *DIB*; See also D. F. Bourke, *The history of the Catholic Church in Western Australia, 1829-1979* (Perth, 1979). Clune was archbishop of Perth from 1910-1935.

<sup>53</sup> O'Brien to Griffith, 2 Dec. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8427/26).

<sup>54</sup> Miller, *Church, state and nation*, p. 473.

<sup>55</sup> O'Brien to Griffith, 2 Dec. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8427/26).

‘inclined to be indiscreet and too confiding’.<sup>56</sup> O’Brien reminded Clune that he was Lloyd George’s envoy and not vice versa and this was welcomed by Collins.<sup>57</sup> O’Brien also advised Clune to beware of Lloyd George’s treachery.<sup>58</sup>

During this period O’Brien sent a detailed memo to Collins on what Dáil Éireann should demand from the British.<sup>59</sup> This confirmed that O’Brien believed firmly in the attainment of a republic. In addition, he listed the withdrawal of all English forces, payment of the amount overpaid in Irish taxes since 1800 and indemnity for all acts of destruction and violence since 1914 as essential elements of a peace agreement. ‘Such an offer would strike the imagination of the world’, O’Brien wrote, and would prove ‘a bold and exceptional move’. He maintained that the success of this strategy would be predicated on his expertise in engaging with the foreign press in London.<sup>60</sup> Collins was ‘struck a good deal’ by the force of this argument and agreed to talk it over with ‘the leading men of experience’.<sup>61</sup> No further action seems to have been taken, however.

O’Brien’s conception of the republic came directly from the 1916 Rising when, as Laffan argues, ‘the executed leaders were seen as having died not simply for an independent Ireland but specifically for a republic’.<sup>62</sup> O’Brien saw Pearse as the iconic leader of all that followed from 1916 and he therefore raised the banner for a republic at every opportunity.<sup>63</sup> Campaigning for a republic ruled out any compromise such as dominion status within the Empire and the clarity of the concept had many advantages from a propaganda perspective. It is highly unlikely that O’Brien reflected on the actual form of government which would underpin this republic. In fact, for O’Brien and ISDL members, the day to day operation of a new Irish state was of little interest — they were focused on the grand idea of independence and were isolated from ambiguities about the future which were a feature of debate in Ireland where as

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<sup>56</sup> O’Brien to Collins, 12 Dec. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8430/11).

<sup>57</sup> See O’Brien to Collins, 23 Dec. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8430/11); Collins to O’Brien, 31 Dec. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/7).

<sup>58</sup> O’Brien to Collins, 9 Dec. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8430/11).

<sup>59</sup> O’Brien to Collins, 12 Dec. 1920, *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Collins to O’Brien, 15 Dec. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/7).

<sup>62</sup> See O’Brien to Collins, 12 Dec. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8430/11); Laffan, *Resurrection*, p. 241. See also O’Brien to Collins, 12 Dec. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8430/11).

<sup>63</sup> See O’Brien speech to Gaelic League, Birmingham, 24 Feb. 1935 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8417/3).

Laffan has noted, many Sinn Féin supporters saw ‘the republic’ as a slogan or battle cry rather than a concrete objective to be obtained.<sup>64</sup>

As Clune’s visits to Downing Street continued, O’Brien began to reassess him and in December 1920 remarked that the archbishop was ‘more hardened to the task’ and not so nervous and better able to tackle Lloyd George and his friends.<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, the talks broke down in late December 1920 on the key issue of the refusal of the IRA to surrender their arms. Unlike all previous initiatives Collins and O’Brien were supportive of the Clune mission and had willed it to succeed. Hopkinson concludes that the Clune mission was the most substantial missed opportunity for peace in the War of Independence and that the military and political consequences were ‘dire’ in terms of lives lost on both sides during the first six months of 1921. He blames the breakdown on the pressure brought to bear on Lloyd George by the British military and Conservative opposition from within his cabinet.<sup>66</sup>

O’Brien assured Collins that the Clune negotiations had strengthened the Sinn Féin position because it was the ‘first time the English government have come up to the point of actually opening direct negotiations and I think they have learnt a very good lesson of the solidarity of the Irish nation and of the deep rooted conviction and moral strength with which our people are fighting’.<sup>67</sup> He re-iterated his view that Dáil Éireann should clearly state its requirements for peace and make them known to the outside world.<sup>68</sup> He also emphasised how important it was that ‘we state our terms first’.<sup>69</sup> Many commentators on the peace initiatives and the negotiations have highlighted the absence of a clearly delineated Dáil policy for a settlement.<sup>70</sup> Pakenham’s conclusion that the Irish ‘never made it plain to the British that they stood on the rock of the republic and would in no circumstances enter the Empire’ vindicates

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<sup>64</sup> Laffan, *Resurrection*, p. 245.

<sup>65</sup> O’Brien to Collins, 23 Dec. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8430/11).

<sup>66</sup> Michael Hopkinson, ‘The peace mission of Archbishop Clune’, in Laurence M. Geary and Andrew McCarthy (eds), *Ireland, Australia and New Zealand: history, politics and culture* (Dublin, 2008), pp 208-9.

<sup>67</sup> O’Brien to Collins, 23 Dec. 1920 (NLI, Ó Briain papers, MS 8430/11).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> O’Brien to Collins, 29 Dec. 1920, *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> See Fanning, *Éamon de Valera*, p. 107, Hart, *Mick*, p. 268; Mansergh, *Unresolved question*, p. 205; Pakenham, *Peace by ordeal*, p. 313.



O'Brien's opinion.<sup>71</sup> In his position as go-between O'Brien saw the need for clarity much more acutely than the principal Irish political leaders. But his pleas fell on deaf ears. It was not that his suggestion was ignored, however, it was simply that Dáil Éireann was unable to agree on a strategy.<sup>72</sup>

#### 4.6 An attempt to transfer O'Brien

It is obvious that O'Brien who liked to work in a very systematic and controlled fashion found the exigencies of working in this ever-changing situation difficult. A revolution was probably not the ideal theatre for a man of O'Brien's punctiliousness and love of control. In December 1919 he described himself as 'killed with work'.<sup>73</sup> A friend urged him not to burn the candle at both ends — 'you didn't look too well when last I saw you and your temper hadn't improved'.<sup>74</sup> September 1920 saw him working every night 'up to 10 or 11 o'clock'.<sup>75</sup> In November 1920 he suffered a severe attack of neuritis in his head and neck.<sup>76</sup> The following month he was overwhelmed by work, anxiety and mental fatigue.<sup>77</sup> What Collins, who was living day-to-day in a war situation, made privately of these complaints is hard to know but he responded with great sympathy.<sup>78</sup> Collins had also suffered bouts of ill-health, including chronic kidney and stomach problems, and empathised with O'Brien.<sup>79</sup> O'Brien, in turn, expressed his concerns about Collins to de Valera in May 1921 — that he was 'running the risk of a breakdown'.<sup>80</sup> Their respective ill-health is a reminder of the huge toll a revolution can take on personal health.

In February 1921 O'Brien complained of a shortage of staff and sought the appointment of his old friend C. B. Dutton as his assistant.<sup>81</sup> He had been dismissed from his stockbroking firm due to his Irish-Ireland activities.<sup>82</sup> Meanwhile, O'Brien was

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<sup>71</sup> Pakenham, *Peace by ordeal*, p. 313.

<sup>72</sup> See Lee, *Ireland, 1912-1985*, pp 48-9; Townshend, *War of Independence*, 331-7.

<sup>73</sup> O'Brien to R. A. Foley, 4 Dec. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8427/7).

<sup>74</sup> Cormac [?Ó Ceallacháin] to O'Brien, 7 Dec. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/40).

<sup>75</sup> O'Brien to William Martin, 18 Sept. 1920, *ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 20 Nov. 1920 (NAI, DE/2/326).

<sup>77</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 14 Dec. 1920, *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Collins to O'Brien, 8 Nov. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/7).

<sup>79</sup> Hart, *Mick*, p. 264.

<sup>80</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 3 May 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/1).

<sup>81</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 7 Feb. 1921 (NAI, DE/2/327).

<sup>82</sup> See O'Brien to Collins, 7 Apr. 1921 (NAI, DE/2/329).

still in hiding and informed Collins that there was a warrant out for his arrest.<sup>83</sup> At the same time he corresponded with Collins about the buying and storage of ‘literature’ — a code for arms.<sup>84</sup> Collins asked O’Brien ‘to keep in touch with the various political barometers known to you’ because of a rumour that Lloyd George proposed to abolish partition and implement home rule.<sup>85</sup> O’Brien also felt the need to get de Valera on to his own wavelength and wrote offering to meet him to discuss propaganda and the position of affairs generally in Britain. He repeated his complaints about lack of staff and money to de Valera and emphasised the importance of London as a centre for dispersing worldwide propaganda with its concentration of foreign journalists.<sup>86</sup> In his reply, de Valera expressed confidence in O’Brien and was ‘glad at all times to have suggestions as they occur to you’.<sup>87</sup> Dutton’s appointment was approved and he began to work full-time with O’Brien in April 1921.<sup>88</sup>

In January 1921 de Valera asked Robert Brennan to head up a Foreign Office as Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs.<sup>89</sup> His correspondence with Collins over the next few months show how he struggled to understand the dispersal of funds for overseas offices through O’Brien in London and how he [Brennan] attempted to keep control of this expenditure.<sup>90</sup> As noted in Chapter 3, he and O’Brien did not get on. In a vain attempt to whip O’Brien into line, Brennan drew up new rules for all the Irish representatives abroad insisting that all correspondence should go through his department and that quarterly expenditure reports and monthly accounts should be furnished.<sup>91</sup> O’Brien simply ignored all of these instructions and continued to take his day to day advice from Collins. This may not have been the wisest move as Brennan clearly had the ear of de Valera. Fanning argues that in early 1921 de Valera set about

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<sup>83</sup> O’Brien to Collins, 21 Feb. 1921 (NAI, DE/2/328).

<sup>84</sup> O’Brien to Collins, 11 Feb. 1921 (NAI, DE/2/327).

<sup>85</sup> Collins to O’Brien, 9 Feb. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/28).

<sup>86</sup> O’Brien to de Valera, 23 Feb. 1921 in Fanning et al, *Documents on Irish foreign policy*, Vol. 1, p. 112.

<sup>87</sup> De Valera to O’Brien, 15 Feb. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/1).

<sup>88</sup> O’Brien to Collins, 7 Apr. 1921 (NAI, DE/2/329).

<sup>89</sup> Brennan, *Allegiance*, p. 297. See also de Valera to Brennan, 6 Feb. 1921 (NAI, Department of Foreign Affairs (hereafter DFA), early series, Box 14, no. 96).

<sup>90</sup> See Brennan to Collins, 1 Apr., 13 July, 3 & 8 Aug. 1921: Collins to Brennan, 19 Aug. 1921 (NAI, DFA, early series, Box 21/128).

<sup>91</sup> Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs (Brennan), Instruction to all representatives of the Irish Republic abroad, 30 May 1921 (NAI, DE/2/526).

re-establishing his power base by trying to curb Collins's influence.<sup>92</sup> De Valera certainly made a determined effort to encourage Collins to travel to the United States in early 1921 but Collins rather than outwardly rejecting the idea let it drift until the idea melted away.<sup>93</sup> De Valera also attempted to take control of the peace moves by instructing 'everything that is proposed to deal officially with peace must be submitted to me'.<sup>94</sup> On 22 March 1921, Brennan castigated O'Brien for his poor performance on a number of issues and copied the letter to Collins who attempted to keep the peace by sympathising with O'Brien.<sup>95</sup> Collins, meanwhile, attacked Brennan and his staff again for carelessness and poor packaging.<sup>96</sup> Brennan's memoir of the period, *Allegiance* makes no reference to O'Brien which is probably indicative of their non-existent relationship.<sup>97</sup> But Collins also found it necessary to reprimand O'Brien citing his dissatisfaction with communications from London and his astonishment at some of the delays.<sup>98</sup> De Valera, however, appreciated the pressure O'Brien was under and suggested they would move some of the London work to Paris: 'This will relieve your office somewhat' he wrote, 'How you managed to keep all the irons hot which you were expected to in the past is more than I know'.<sup>99</sup>

On 4 April 1921 de Valera asked O'Brien to become the envoy of the Irish Republic in Madrid saying they would get someone who could move around more freely in London instead of him.<sup>100</sup> McGee sees this as an attempt by de Valera to lessen O'Brien's influence on the peace initiatives but, if it was, it was somewhat half-hearted with de Valera telling O'Brien that it was only a suggestion and he would leave the decision entirely up to himself.<sup>101</sup> Gavan Duffy first suggested the move, apparently without any malice, on the basis that O'Brien who had fluent Spanish would be very effective in Madrid because Spain had a big influence in South

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<sup>92</sup> Fanning, *Éamon de Valera*, p. 92.

<sup>93</sup> See Townshend, *Republic*, pp 233-4.

<sup>94</sup> De Valera to Brennan, 24 Apr. 1921 (UCDA, De Valera papers, P150/ 24).

<sup>95</sup> Brennan to O'Brien, 22 Mar. 1921; Collins to O'Brien, 24 Mar. 1921 (NAI, DE/2/329).

<sup>96</sup> Collins to Brennan, 22 Apr. 1921 (NAI, DFA, early series, Box 21/128/4).

<sup>97</sup> Robert Brennan, *Allegiance* (Dublin, 1950).

<sup>98</sup> Collins to O'Brien, 25 Apr. 1921 (NAI, DE/2/239).

<sup>99</sup> De Valera to O'Brien, 19 Mar. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/1).

<sup>100</sup> De Valera to O'Brien 4 Apr. 1921, *ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> McGee, *Arthur Griffith*, p. 243; de Valera to O'Brien, 4 Apr. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/1).

America.<sup>102</sup> As O'Brien's seclusion in London had lessened his effectiveness there, Madrid would afford him more scope for propaganda. As a long-time critic of O'Brien, Brennan could not hide his enthusiasm for this idea and thought 'GD's suggestion re Art an excellent one'.<sup>103</sup>

O'Brien firmly rejected de Valera's suggestion that he move to Spain. His response was self-important but, nonetheless, captured his unique position in London and his value to the Irish cause:

My position in the Irish organisations is an exceptional one ... and my general experience ... is also of exceptional character ... London is the most important and delicate centre for our work ... it is very important to have someone in charge who has a thorough grip on all the diverse reins.<sup>104</sup>

The prospect of being moved finally spurred him to produce a detailed report on the work of the London office for Dáil Éireann in April 1921.<sup>105</sup> O'Brien described the voluminous correspondence generated by press enquiries, prisoner relief and information for the other Irish envoys abroad. Long hours of overtime were the norm and he complained that he had no time to develop the work of the office. He successfully pleaded with de Valera for more funds. In April 1921 a vote of £4000 per annum was agreed by Dáil Éireann for the London office.<sup>106</sup> In addition, O'Brien's special request for an increase in salary from £500 to £750 was approved because of the housing crisis his situation had provoked.<sup>107</sup> He had fled his house in Ealing and rented a new apartment for his mother — the combined rent of both establishments coming to £380 per annum.<sup>108</sup> De Valera seemed newly enthused about O'Brien's role at this time, urging him to be constantly on the alert because 'it is likely that we will

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<sup>102</sup> George Gavan Duffy to Robert Brennan, 5 Mar. 1921 in Fanning et al, *Documents on Irish foreign policy*, Vol. 1, p. 115.

<sup>103</sup> Brennan to de Valera, 29 Mar. 1921 (NAI, DE/2/256).

<sup>104</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 7 Apr. 1921 (NLI, Ó Briain papers, MS 8429/1).

<sup>105</sup> Report on the work of the London Office of Dáil Éireann, 14 Apr. 1921, *ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 14 Apr. 1921; de Valera to O'Brien, 2 May 1921, *ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> Collins to O'Brien, 30 Apr. 1921 (NAI, DE/5/2/31).

<sup>108</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 14 Mar. 1921, *ibid.*

have to use you as our fighting arm' and suggesting that they both keep in closest consultation.<sup>109</sup> O'Brien had succeeded in cementing his position after a rocky phase.

As peace overtures continued into the summer of 1921 O'Brien decided that it would be safe for him to emerge from hiding. He also received a safe passage document from Dublin Castle for travel between London and Dublin when the truce came into effect.<sup>110</sup> Barry Egan, a Cork Sinn Féin officer who was also assisting de Valera in London, had urged de Valera to organise the safe passage for O'Brien 'because I have the highest respect for his intelligence, judgement and experience'.<sup>111</sup> O'Brien then decided his accommodation needs could best be met by installing himself in the Grosvenor Hotel beside Victoria Station and close to the British government offices in Whitehall and Downing Street. He remained in the hotel until early 1923, an extravagance which raised concerns in the IFS government once he rejected the Treaty.

#### 4.7 Truce

Throughout early 1921 there were continued rumours of settlement and various official and semi-official emissaries passed back and forth between both sides. Mitchell argues that the direct approach was not favoured by the British government because it wanted to draw out the Irish position in advance of committing itself.<sup>112</sup> It was also trying to avoid acknowledging the Dáil's authority.<sup>113</sup> De Valera decided that General Smuts of South Africa might assist Dáil Éireann in its settlement mission.<sup>114</sup> In April 1921, he sent Maurice Moore and P. J. Little to South Africa to liaise with Smuts.<sup>115</sup> On 4 June 1921 O'Brien wrote to de Valera recommending that he arrange for Tom Casement (brother of Roger) to come immediately to London because he was an intimate friend of General Smuts who was due in London for the Imperial

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<sup>109</sup> De Valera to O'Brien, 21 Apr. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/1).

<sup>110</sup> Safe passage document, 11 July 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8461/11).

<sup>111</sup> Barry Egan to de Valera, 6 July 1921 (UCDA, De Valera papers, P150/1413). Egan was the proprietor of Egan's jewellery shop in Patrick Street, Cork.

<sup>112</sup> Mitchell, *Revolutionary government*, p. 295.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> Smuts was prime minister of South Africa from 1919 to 1924. See Shula Marks 'Jan Christiaan Smuts, 1870-1950', *ODNB*.

<sup>115</sup> See Daithí Ó Corráin, 'A most public-spirited man': the career and contribution of Col. Maurice Moore, 1854-1939', *Studia Hibernica*, 40 (2014), p. 118.

Conference.<sup>116</sup> O'Brien took it on himself to keep Smuts informed of the Irish situation once he arrived in London.<sup>117</sup> Casement and O'Brien persuaded Smuts to go to Dublin to meet de Valera, Griffith and Childers in early July 1921.<sup>118</sup> Smuts, however, was a champion of dominion status and urged de Valera to accept this lest he alienate support for the Irish cause among the dominions.<sup>119</sup> Smuts also advised de Valera to accept partition and concentrate on the twenty-six counties.<sup>120</sup> As Pakenham has noted, such terms were ill-suited to Irish pride.<sup>121</sup> Mansergh highlights the fact that the Imperial Conference in itself, however, moved the British government towards a settlement. Many of the dominions had a vested interest in solving the Irish question because they had Irish overseas votes to be won or lost.<sup>122</sup>

King George V's speech at the opening of the Northern Ireland parliament on 22 June 1921 has generally been regarded as the catalyst for successful talks about a Truce.<sup>123</sup> Smuts is credited with drafting the speech which contained no condemnation of the IRA because it was hoped an atmosphere of conciliation could be created.<sup>124</sup> Lyons writes that the King's evident emotion and long-expressed desire to have done with the terrorism in Ireland gave Lloyd George the impetus he needed to move forward.<sup>125</sup> Liberal and Labour criticism certainly moved Lloyd George along the road to peace<sup>126</sup> but Lionel Curtis was in no doubt that the decisive and determining factor was public opinion in Britain.<sup>127</sup> Such public opinion was, in no small way, influenced by the propaganda engineered by O'Brien since the establishment of the ISDL in early 1919. Public opinion in the US in support of Ireland had also led to an 'hysteria of hate' against Britain from people who 'would cripple Britain and destroy the Empire'.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 8 June 1921 (NAI, DE/2/526).

<sup>117</sup> Mansergh, *Unresolved question*, p. 161.

<sup>118</sup> Townshend, *Republic*, p. 307.

<sup>119</sup> Smuts to de Valera, 4 Aug. 1921 (NAI, DE/2/262).

<sup>120</sup> John Bowman, *De Valera and the Ulster question, 1917-1973* (Oxford, 1982), p. 53.

<sup>121</sup> Pakenham, *Peace by ordeal*, pp 86-7.

<sup>122</sup> Mansergh, *Unresolved question*, p. 172.

<sup>123</sup> Lyons, *Ireland since the famine*, p. 424.

<sup>124</sup> Fanning, *Fatal path*, p. 260.

<sup>125</sup> Lyons, *Ireland since the famine*, p. 425.

<sup>126</sup> Kenneth O. Morgan, *The age of Lloyd George: the Liberal Party and British politics, 1890-1929* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London, 1978), p. 84.

<sup>127</sup> Curtis to B. C. Waller, 22 Aug. 1921 (Bodleian Library, Oxford, Lionel Curtis papers, MS 89).

<sup>128</sup> Michael G. Fry, *And fortune fled: David Lloyd George, the first democratic statesman, 1916-1922* (New York, 2011), p. 305.

Fanning concludes, however, that the British prime minister could only talk to Sinn Féin when the Northern settlement had been put in place.<sup>129</sup> By the summer of 1921 a much starker political choice faced the British between martial law for the whole of the twenty-six counties or negotiations with Sinn Féin.<sup>130</sup> On the Irish side, the relinquishing by Lloyd George of the demand for a surrender of arms and the critical shortage of men and materials which the IRA then faced made it opportune to seek peace.<sup>131</sup> De Valera's view that the best settlement was likely from Lloyd George's coalition government as opposed to a possible Conservative/Unionist government was also central to the decision to engage.<sup>132</sup> Negotiations on a truce began in Dublin on 5 July and the Truce came into effect on 11 July 1921. Despite the impending Truce, O'Brien sent Collins documentation in relation to the use of various gasses for offensive purposes on 9 July 1921.<sup>133</sup> Clearly, if hostilities had not ceased Collins was prepared for drastic action. McMahon notes that British intelligence sources were aware of this possibility too.<sup>134</sup>

Basil Thomson's weekly report of 21 July 1921 noted 'the return to London' of O'Brien 'who is now openly recognised as the diplomatic representative of the "Irish Republic" in this country'.<sup>135</sup> This must surely have incensed Thomson who had little doubt that the militant side of the ISDL was still active and making ready should hostilities be renewed.<sup>136</sup> The Truce had, however, transformed the political situation and the administration of the Irish counter-state was now in a position of equality with the British administration.<sup>137</sup> On 31 July 1921, in a show of great defiance, the Richmond ISDL branch hired the steam launch 'Royal Thames', raised the republican flag and with an Irish piper in attendance sailed from Richmond to Chertsey. Over 200 people enjoyed the trip and an open air céilí was held at their destination.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Fanning, *Fatal path*, p. 245.

<sup>130</sup> Hopkinson, 'Archbishop Clune', p. 208.

<sup>131</sup> Lyons, *Ireland since the famine*, p. 425.

<sup>132</sup> Fanning, *Éamon de Valera*, p. 92.

<sup>133</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 9 July 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8430/18).

<sup>134</sup> Paul McMahon, 'British intelligence and the Anglo-Irish truce, July – December 1921', *Irish Historical Studies*, 35:140 (Nov. 2007), p. 534.

<sup>135</sup> RROUK, 21 July 1921 (TNA, CAB 24/126/55).

<sup>136</sup> RROUK, 11 Aug. 1921 (TNA, CAB 24/127/19).

<sup>137</sup> Mitchell, *Revolutionary government*, p. 300.

<sup>138</sup> *IE*, Sept. 1921

#### 4.8 De Valera in London

De Valera arrived in London, on 12 July 1921 accompanied by Plunkett, Barton, Stack, Childers and Griffith and received a most enthusiastic reception. *The Times* reported ‘extraordinary scenes ... with an orderly crowd of hundreds of Irishmen and Irishwomen’ and the unfurling of a republican flag.<sup>139</sup> The *Irish Times* recorded how the visitors had refused the hospitality of the British government and would be guests of Art O’Brien and the ISDL at the Grosvenor Hotel.<sup>140</sup> The next day, crowds gathered around the hotel to catch a glimpse of de Valera.<sup>141</sup> He was too busy to greet them but O’Brien reassured them of his appreciation of their loyalty.<sup>142</sup> Childers held daily conferences for all the newspapermen in London and he and O’Brien worked closely together to prepare press releases.<sup>143</sup> Lily O’Brien, a secretary with the Irish visitors, wrote that the press photographers ‘were like a zoo with their cameras ready to devour us’.<sup>144</sup> O’Brien also kept a close eye on British officials who wandered in and out of the Grosvenor and stymied an attempt by E. W. Grigg, private secretary to Lloyd George, to isolate Childers and extract inside information from him.<sup>145</sup>

At his first meeting with Lloyd George, de Valera was introduced by O’Brien in his capacity as the London envoy of the Irish Republic.<sup>146</sup> De Valera met Lloyd George four times between 14 and 21 July and was accompanied to and from Downing Street by O’Brien and Robert Barton on each occasion.<sup>147</sup> The prime minister’s personal secretary recalled that he [Lloyd George] aimed to impress on de Valera the greatness of the British Empire and to get him to recognise it and the King.<sup>148</sup> Jackson notes that the British felt confident they could make a loyal dominion out of ‘the unpromising materials supplied by Ireland’, now that the Northern question was settled.<sup>149</sup> This was

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<sup>139</sup> *The Times*, 13 July 1921.

<sup>140</sup> *IT*, 13 July 1921.

<sup>141</sup> *IE*, Aug. 1921.

<sup>142</sup> *IT*, 14 July 1921.

<sup>143</sup> Copy of Childers’s diary, 18 July 1921 (UCDA, De Valera papers, P150/1489).

<sup>144</sup> Lily O’Brien to Molly Childers, 14 July 1921 (Trinity College Dublin Archives (hereafter TCDA), Childers collection, Molly Childers papers, MS 7850/839).

<sup>145</sup> E. W. Grigg to Lloyd George, 14 July 1921 (PA, Lloyd George papers, LG/F/86/1/11).

<sup>146</sup> Pakenham, *Peace by ordeal*, p. 82.

<sup>147</sup> See *IT*, 15 & 19 July 1921; *The Times*, 22 July 1921.

<sup>148</sup> Frances Stevenson, *Lloyd George: a diary*, ed. A. J. P. Taylor (London, 1971), p. 227.

<sup>149</sup> Alvin Jackson, *Ireland, 1798-1998* (Oxford, 1999), p. 258.



not quite what de Valera had in mind and as the British proposals amounted to no more than dominion home rule no progress was made.<sup>150</sup> Despite this, Thomas Jones, deputy secretary to the British cabinet, felt that the contact had been most helpful because de Valera and Lloyd George had met face to face and alone for the first time.<sup>151</sup> Commenting on the Irish delegation, Jones concluded that O'Brien was the most diplomatic member 'as an ambassador should be, and it is more difficult to read his mind'.<sup>152</sup> This was indeed recognition of the Dáil's envoy as a diplomat rather than a terrorist.

#### 4.9 O'Brien the diplomat

On de Valera's return to Dublin, O'Brien informed him that he had discussed 'the North-East difficulty' with Thomas Jones and maintained that as England had caused this difficulty it should 'deal with it'.<sup>153</sup> John Bowman argues that throughout 1921 de Valera was trying to make some federal settlement with Ulster more tolerable to doctrinaire republican opinion and that his overall policy can be summarised as working towards an accommodation with Ulster.<sup>154</sup> It is clear that he authorised O'Brien to attempt to soften up the British on his behalf. On 6 August, O'Brien related a comment by Jones that 'while the PM feels that he cannot coerce the six county people he is doing all he can'.<sup>155</sup>

The correspondence between de Valera and Lloyd George which finally led to the Treaty negotiations commenced on 24 June 1921 and continued until 30 September 1921.<sup>156</sup> O'Brien became concerned, however, at being left in the dark about much of this correspondence. He complained to Collins that he had no idea what was going on and was bombarded by the press with all sorts of questions and 'had no guide as to how to steer'.<sup>157</sup> Similarly, he wrote to de Valera that his position in London seemed 'very indefinite' and that he was disappointed and dissatisfied at

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<sup>150</sup> Pakenham, *Peace by ordeal*, p. 81.

<sup>151</sup> Thomas Jones, *Whitehall diary: Ireland, 1918-1925*, iii, ed. Keith Middlemas (Oxford, 1971), p. 90.

See also Rodney Lowe 'Thomas Jones, 1870-1955', *ODNB*.

<sup>152</sup> Jones, *Whitehall diary*, iii, p. 91.

<sup>153</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 26 July 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/2).

<sup>154</sup> Bowman, *De Valera and the Ulster question*, pp 44-5.

<sup>155</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 6 Aug. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/2).

<sup>156</sup> See *Official correspondence relating to the Peace Negotiations, June-September 1921* (Dublin, 1921).

<sup>157</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 28 July 1921 (NAI, DE/2/331).

the lack of communication.<sup>158</sup> O'Brien, a stickler for systems and certainty, found it very unsatisfactory to be excluded and no doubt, his ego was also wounded. He was disgruntled at being shunted aside just as the main act was about to commence. In a bid to reassert his role he visited de Valera at his house in Blackrock where it was agreed that any future communications to the British government would be channelled through him.<sup>159</sup>

By August O'Brien was back on centre stage and personally delivered letters to Downing Street with Joseph McGrath and Robert Barton on 11 and 25 August. This was more than just acting as postman as they were met by Austen Chamberlain and Thomas Jones on 11 August because Lloyd George was on holiday. In a 'verbatim' report of the meeting for de Valera, Barton and McGrath concluded that Chamberlain felt this particular reply would bring the negotiations to an end.<sup>160</sup> A footnote attached at the end said, however, that O'Brien disagreed and didn't think that 'Chamberlain's statement, manner and tone bear quite so serious a significance'.<sup>161</sup> Chamberlain was indeed very rattled after the meeting and reported to Lloyd George that the reply was 'a definite rejection of their proposals and goes out of its way to reject dominion status'.<sup>162</sup> Jones reported to Lloyd George that Chamberlain met the Cabinet later that afternoon and that his nervous manner conveyed a mild panic.<sup>163</sup> Jones, however, met the three Sinn Féin representatives and 'gossiped with them' before they left.<sup>164</sup> This, he said, gave them the opportunity to emphasise that the letter was 'a friendly reply'.<sup>165</sup> He noted that O'Brien did most of the talking at this meeting and that he refused to regard the situation as critical, advising Jones that all negotiations take time and insisting that the prime minister could persuade the British public of the value of any initiative he wished to take.<sup>166</sup> This conversation combined with O'Brien's disagreement with Barton and McGrath on the attitude of Chamberlain identified him

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<sup>158</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 28 July 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/2).

<sup>159</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 26 Aug. 1921, *ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> Barton to de Valera, 11 Aug. 1921 (UCDA, De Valera papers, P150/1474).

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> Austen Chamberlain to Lloyd George, 11 Aug. 1921 (PA, Lloyd George papers, LG/F/7/4/24).

<sup>163</sup> Thomas Jones to Lloyd George, 11 Aug. 1921 (PA, Lloyd George papers, LG/F/25/2/2).

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> Jones, *Whitehall diary*, iii, p. 95.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

as a man of strong opinions who clearly saw himself as having a lead role in the discussions.

The next day O'Brien went alone to Downing Street to meet Jones, ostensibly to discuss the dates when Lloyd George might reply to de Valera. Instead he and Jones had a long conversation where Jones accused Sinn Féin of 'evicting the King and putting Ulster outside the Empire'.<sup>167</sup> In a letter to Lloyd George, Jones outlined the full details of his conversation with O'Brien as follows:

after defending in the usual style for some time the claim for complete independence and the impossibility of renouncing that ideal in view of the sacrifice made for it he made it quite clear

(1) that he regarded de Valera's reply as merely a step in the negotiations intended to educate the British public as to what Sinn Féin stood for

2) that while you might be disappointed with the tone of the reply there was nothing in it that would lead to the termination of the truce

3) that we could offer nominal 'Independence' to Ireland as we had done in Egypt putting it in the first clause in the Treaty ... and taking it away piecemeal in the rest of the Treaty

4) he rather vaguely hinted that 'sovereign independence' was one of the spectres that prolonged negotiations might dissolve

5) I said I thought a large body of moderate opinion in Ireland would back the Government's proposals. He thought it would be a minority.<sup>168</sup>

Jones also stated that O'Brien kept on talking about 'their ready allegiance to the Crown and their utter dislike of 'Empire'.<sup>169</sup> If this was the case, O'Brien was moving into the dangerous territory of providing interpretations of de Valera's correspondence without instruction or authority. His complete omission of reference to a republic is difficult to understand given his convictions. On the other hand, one must also be wary of Jones's own agenda — he was trying to show Lloyd George that he too was contributing to the negotiations and was presumably putting his own spin on the situation. He may have heard what he wanted to hear. Mansergh notes that Jones was 'emotionally involved' in the negotiations and had a personal commitment to a settlement in Ireland on a

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<sup>167</sup> Thomas Jones to Lloyd George, 11 Aug. 1921 (PA, Lloyd George papers, LG/F/25/2/6).

<sup>168</sup> Jones, *Whitehall diary*, iii, pp 96-7.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

dominion basis.<sup>170</sup> After de Valera's first meeting with Lloyd George, Jones had written that de Valera had agreed to 'drop the Republic', was willing to be 'within the Empire', to recognise the King and go without a navy.<sup>171</sup> De Valera would surely have challenged the veracity of such a statement.

Assuming Jones's recollections were accurate, however, there are two possible interpretations of O'Brien's intervention at this meeting. He either calmed the British down or was deeply disloyal to de Valera. He may have been fearful that negotiations would falter and was attempting to keep the negotiating channels open or else he did a solo-run with his own particular version of settlement proposals. Surprisingly, apart from mention in Jones's diary, O'Brien's intervention has not been recorded in the historiography of the period. Jones thought it important enough to write a detailed report to Lloyd George on the substance of the meeting and it is quite plausible that O'Brien's influence was crucial at this point in keeping the channels of communication open. This episode shows a more flexible attitude to the 'republic' by O'Brien than heretofore, but one has to ask on whose authority was he operating? He appears to have over-stepped his role as envoy.

Lloyd George gave his reply to Barton and O'Brien on 13 August.<sup>172</sup> When de Valera sent the next letter he gave Barton specific instructions 'not to interpret the letter' and to take O'Brien with him only 'if available', inferring that O'Brien's presence was not essential.<sup>173</sup> This suggests that de Valera was alert to O'Brien's earlier interventions and did not approve. His fury barely disguised, O'Brien wrote to de Valera complaining of the difficulty of having 'two with equal authority' involved [himself and Barton] and asserted that he had no interest 'in wasting time in playing an inessential part'.<sup>174</sup> De Valera's response was curt and unambiguous: 'As a member of the Ministry and present at all our discussions RB [Barton] knew our views very thoroughly. It was intended that he

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<sup>170</sup> Mansergh, *Unresolved question*, p. 176.

<sup>171</sup> Jones, *Whitehall diary*, iii, p. 90.

<sup>172</sup> Barton to de Valera, 13 Aug. 1921 (UCDA, De Valera papers, P150/1474).

<sup>173</sup> De Valera to Barton, 24 Aug. 1921 (TCDA, Childers collection, Barton papers, MS 7833-53-91).

<sup>174</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 26 Aug. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/2).

would take charge, therefore the instructions were explicit'.<sup>175</sup> De Valera suggested that O'Brien could accompany Barton 'to offer counsel' and 'to take note of what occurred for your own guidance later'.<sup>176</sup> Suitably chastened, O'Brien agreed to abide by his 'definite instructions'.<sup>177</sup>

Jones and O'Brien met for an hour on 28 August when O'Brien pressed the need for the British government to put pressure on Ulster to join the new Irish state.<sup>178</sup> But, as Alan J. Ward has observed, by then the burning issue was not partition but the relationship between the twenty-six counties and the United Kingdom. De Valera was much more concerned about removing allegiance to the Crown than achieving a united Ireland.<sup>179</sup> While this may be another example of O'Brien briefing without instruction, it is clear that Downing Street felt he was worthy of their time and attention. Another delicate issue addressed by O'Brien and Jones concerned the return of the bodies of British soldiers in Ireland who had been killed or kidnapped. O'Brien assured Jones that at a later date 'when the general atmosphere lends itself ... both sides will effect this necessary and Christian purpose'.<sup>180</sup>

The events of the summer of 1921 saw de Valera gradually reining in O'Brien given his tendency to act without authority. Without doubt O'Brien revelled in his 'ambassadorial' role on visits to Downing Street. At the Home Office Thomson could not resist a swipe at O'Brien by noting how he was 'anxious to make the most of the occasion'.<sup>181</sup> O'Brien's plan to issue Irish 'passports' caused Thomson further concern.<sup>182</sup> His association with Indian revolutionaries in the period leading up to and during the peace negotiations was also noted with some alarm. Saklatvala addressed the Roger Casement Sinn Féin club on 6 October 1921 on the theme of 'The fall of the British Empire' amid

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<sup>175</sup> De Valera to O'Brien, 31 Aug. 1921, *ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 2 Sept. 1921, *ibid.*

<sup>178</sup> Jones to Lloyd George, 29 Aug 1921 (PA, Lloyd George papers, LG/F/25/2/6).

<sup>179</sup> Alan J. Ward, *The Irish constitutional tradition: responsible government and modern Ireland, 1782-1992* (Dublin, 1994), pp 161-2.

<sup>180</sup> O'Brien to Jones, 22 Sept. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/27).

<sup>181</sup> RROUK, 1 Sept. 1921 (TNA, CAB 24/127/80).

<sup>182</sup> RROUK, 14 Oct. 1921 (TNA, CAB 24/129/8).

increasing evidence that Sinn Féin was encouraging Indian nationalists to revolt.<sup>183</sup> On 9 October, no doubt attempting to up the ante at the negotiations, O'Brien addressed a large ISDL meeting in Woolwich and declared that the only peace was that which allowed 'the government of the Irish Republic to go ahead without interference'.<sup>184</sup> On 23 October 20,000 people gathered in Trafalgar Square to remember Terence MacSwiney and heard O'Brien declare that 'in the history of the world there was no human sacrifice to equal that made by him for his country'.<sup>185</sup> The republic was very much on his agenda again but to his great distress, the Treaty negotiations in London were moving ahead without him.

#### **4.10 Treaty negotiations**

The Treaty negotiations began on 11 October 1921. De Valera controversially remained in Ireland and the chosen delegates were Arthur Griffith, Michael Collins, George Gavan Duffy, Robert Barton and Éamonn Duggan. As has been well-documented, they proceeded to London as 'envoys plenipotentiary' to negotiate a settlement but were expected to submit a complete draft of the treaty to Dublin before signing.<sup>186</sup> On the British side the negotiations were dominated by the 'big four' of Lloyd George, Austen Chamberlain (lord privy seal and Conservative leader), Lord Birkenhead (Conservative lord chancellor) and Winston Churchill (Liberal colonial secretary).<sup>187</sup> The British team also included Hamar Greenwood (the last chief secretary for Ireland), Gordon Hewart and Laming Worthington Evans. Thomas Jones and Lionel Curtis were the secretaries on the British side, while Erskine Childers and John Chartres filled that role for the Irish negotiators. Mansergh describes how the 'dialectical exchanges' between de Valera and Lloyd George during the summer of 1921 facilitated Anglo-Irish negotiations but resolved none of the difficult issues on the future nature of Irish sovereignty.<sup>188</sup> Pakenham has observed that 'in the minds of British progressives and of the outside world ... a presumption had been established

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> RROUK, 20 Oct. 1921 (TNA, CAB 24/129/37).

<sup>185</sup> *IE*, Nov. 1921

<sup>186</sup> Pakenham, *Peace by ordeal*, p. 102.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>188</sup> Mansergh, *Unresolved question*, p. 170.

that the final settlement would leave Ireland a member of the Empire'.<sup>189</sup> The plenipotentiaries were intent on explaining de Valera's external association concept but it was 24 October before the first Irish proposals were presented to the British. Mansergh believes that the initiative had passed to the British at that stage.<sup>190</sup> O'Brien's pleas to the Irish to state their terms much earlier in the year had come to nothing, but he may well have been correct in his view that this was crucial to success.

The British government arranged the specific dates and times for the Treaty conferences with O'Brien who was also consulted on whether official note-takers were required.<sup>191</sup> On the day the talks commenced O'Brien requested permission to introduce each member of the Irish delegation to the British side. This was scuppered by Lloyd George who introduced himself to each individual.<sup>192</sup> O'Brien had no further part in the Treaty negotiations. He was, however, rewarded with a place on the Committee on the Observance of the Truce and attended several meetings during October and November.<sup>193</sup> The most recent account of the truce period finds that by and large both sides honoured the agreement.<sup>194</sup> Gun-running from Britain continued during the negotiations, however, despite protests from the British side.<sup>195</sup> Clearly O'Brien saw no conflict of interest in continuing to fund such activities while he sat on the Truce committee but then neither did Collins who did not regard the importation of weapons as a breach of the ceasefire.<sup>196</sup> Guns were also sent to Ireland from the US by Harry Boland during the Truce.<sup>197</sup> Barton recalled that it was not a fixed plan of cabinet to re-arm during the Truce but was a 'rather sub-rosa business' conducted by Collins and Brugha.<sup>198</sup> A consignment of Thompson guns bound for Ireland was seized at Liverpool on 21 November 1921.<sup>199</sup> McMahon notes a real concern on both sides that hostilities might resume at any point and highlights the fact that the negotiations

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<sup>189</sup> Pakenham, *Peace by ordeal*, p. 90.

<sup>190</sup> Mansergh, *Unresolved question*, p. 178.

<sup>191</sup> O'Brien to Griffith, 8 Oct. 1921 (NAI, DE/2/304/1/1-2/10).

<sup>192</sup> Jones, *Whitehall diary*, iii, p. 119.

<sup>193</sup> Anglo-Irish Treaty delegation minutes, 1921 (NAI, DE/2/304/1/8-9/9).

<sup>194</sup> Pádraig Óg Ó Ruairc, *Truce: murder, myth and the last days of the Irish War of Independence* (Cork, 2016), p. 302.

<sup>195</sup> See Noonan, *IRA in Britain*, pp 196-204.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>197</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Harry Boland*, p. 246.

<sup>198</sup> Robert Barton (IMA, BMH, WS 979, p. 32).

<sup>199</sup> P. Daly to Collins, 1 Dec. 1921 (UCDA, Richard Mulcahy papers, 7/A/7).

were tense, with British intelligence reports fostering distrust and apprehension in Whitehall.<sup>200</sup> General Macready, one of the British representatives, was unimpressed with his colleagues on the Truce committee. He reported to Mark Sturgis in Dublin that O'Brien looked as if he was dying of drink and Childers of consumption and that he did not care which man went first.<sup>201</sup>

The ISDL held a meeting at the Royal Albert Hall on 26 October 1921 to welcome the Irish delegates to London. The *Irish Times* reported that an audience of 5,000 greeted the delegates with a wild outburst of cheering and it quoted Arthur Griffith acknowledging 'the strength, the solidarity and the unconquerableness [sic] of the Irish race'.<sup>202</sup> O'Brien was the master of ceremonies at this meeting and revelled in his role as representative of the Irish nation in London. His own photograph took pride of place on the first page of the programme while de Valera was relegated to page two. This was a vain attempt to signify that *he* was still in charge in London. The *Irish Independent* reported that Scottish, Indian and Egyptian supporters were also present.<sup>203</sup> In the meantime, the Irish delegation took up residence at rented houses in Hans Place and Cadogan Gardens, quite separate from O'Brien's previously established base at the Grosvenor Hotel. O'Brien and Mark Ryan were dinner guests in Hans Place on the night the delegation arrived but seem to have had few visits thereafter.<sup>204</sup> In his classic account of the negotiations, Pakenham lists many who assisted the main delegates such as Childers, John Chartres, Fionán Lynch and Diarmuid O'Hegarty. That he does not mention O'Brien suggests his access to the delegation and input was limited.<sup>205</sup> The lack of detailed footnotes in Pakenham's work makes scrutiny of the sources difficult, but a trawl of both O'Brien's own papers and various Irish and British Treaty sources confirms his isolation from the negotiations.

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<sup>200</sup> McMahon, 'British intelligence and the Anglo-Irish truce', p. 538.

<sup>201</sup> Michael Hopkinson (ed.), *The last days of Dublin Castle: the diaries of Mark Sturgis* (Dublin, 1999), p. 220. This is the only reference to alcohol in relation to O'Brien uncovered in this research. It is possible that his demeanour was due to his general ill-health or indeed *chagrin* that he was not at the main table.

<sup>202</sup> *IT*, 27 Oct. 1921.

<sup>203</sup> *II*, 27 Oct. 1921.

<sup>204</sup> Kathleen Napoli McKenna, 'In London with the Treaty delegates', *Capuchin Annual* (1971), p. 320.

<sup>205</sup> Pakenham, *Peace by ordeal*, pp 92-143.



Feeling increasingly marginalised, O'Brien received some sympathy from Margaret Gavan Duffy (wife of George) who was sorry that he was depressed.<sup>206</sup> Collins did send O'Brien some memoranda in relation to naval and air defence and the national debt on 25 October describing them as 'some of the most vital papers'.<sup>207</sup> On 12 November, O'Brien invited George Gavan Duffy to join him at the Grosvenor Hotel 'to discuss matters more freely ... despite the attitude of reticence which you and the other delegates have shown so plainly towards me'.<sup>208</sup> On 23 November Collins sent him a copy of the latest proposals suggesting they might cause a breakdown in the talks.<sup>209</sup> O'Brien advised against ceding harbours which he regarded as objectionable from a self-respect and practical point of view. He also counselled that certain clauses would mean recognition of the Crown in Ireland.<sup>210</sup> He invited Collins 'for a chat' but this did not occur prior to the signing of the Treaty. O'Brien also tried to influence Childers by sending him a memo on how the Egyptian independence delegation broke off talks on the issue of defence.<sup>211</sup>

The episodes above indicate how desperately O'Brien wished to be involved in the negotiations. A thorough search of the Treaty material in the National Archives and of papers of the various participants has revealed no particular decision to exclude O'Brien from the deliberations. By appointing him to the Observance of the Truce committee and continuing to recognise him as London envoy, de Valera and Collins probably thought O'Brien had an important role. For a man of O'Brien's egocentrism such a secondary role was personally insulting. He appeared blind to the fact that the five members of the delegation were elected TDs — a distinction he simply did not have. It galled him to see Childers and John Chartres, such recent converts to the Irish cause, occupying prominent positions in the Treaty secretariat. In addition, Chartres as Dáil envoy in Berlin and Gavan Duffy as envoy in Rome would both have been regarded by O'Brien as somewhat junior to him.<sup>212</sup> O'Brien was not alone in his

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<sup>206</sup> Margaret Gavan Duffy to O'Brien, 20 Oct. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/28).

<sup>207</sup> Collins to O'Brien, 25 Oct. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8430/21).

<sup>208</sup> O'Brien to George Gavan Duffy, 12 Nov. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/26).

<sup>209</sup> Collins to O'Brien, 23 Nov. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8425/9).

<sup>210</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 23 Nov. 1921, *ibid.*

<sup>211</sup> Copy of Childers's diary, 24 Nov. 1921 (UCDA, De Valera papers, P150/1489).

<sup>212</sup> See Brian P. Murphy, *John Chartres: mystery man of the Treaty* (Dublin, 1995) and G. M. Golding, *George Gavan Duffy: a legal biography, 1882-1951* (Dublin, 1981).

frustration at having no impact on the negotiations. His fellow Dáil Éireann envoy Harry Boland was equally frustrated, unable as he was, to influence the delegates in London and ‘without access to their private intentions’.<sup>213</sup> Boland, however, was many miles away in Washington, whereas O’Brien was close by.

As part of the negotiations, the British government agreed to an Irish request for an assessment of the welfare of Irish prisoners in Britain. O’Brien was appointed Inspector of Prisons,<sup>214</sup> a role not instanced in the work of Murphy or McConville, although some of O’Brien’s activities at this time are recounted by them. Despite his ill-feeling towards the delegation, O’Brien leaped into action and was quickly embroiled in a row with the Home Office which saw his function pertaining only to prisoners transferred from Ireland. He insisted that the Irish delegation raise the matter with the British cabinet to ensure that Irish prisoners arrested in England were given equal status.<sup>215</sup> However, the delegation was busy with more pressing matters and largely ignored him. O’Brien visited Wormwood Scrubs, Wandsworth, Pentonville and planned to go to Dartmoor and Parkhurst — both some considerable distance from London. In the meantime, he continued to harass Childers for a response from the delegation about the status of the ‘English’ prisoners.<sup>216</sup> Childers agreed with O’Brien and thought the lack of interest from the delegation ‘disgraceful’.<sup>217</sup> On 1 December 1921 Childers told O’Brien that Collins would talk to him later that day about the matter.<sup>218</sup> However, when Collins rang, O’Brien was unable to speak with him due to laryngitis.<sup>219</sup> As the Treaty moved swiftly to a conclusion, the ‘English’ prisoner issue became further marginalised but would rear its head again in 1922 as discussed in Chapter 5.

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<sup>213</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Harry Boland*, p. 255.

<sup>214</sup> Childers to Thomas Jones, 12 Nov. 1921 (TCDA, Childers papers, MS 7792).

<sup>215</sup> O’Brien to Childers, 18 Nov. 1921 (TCDA, Childers papers, MS 7797).

<sup>216</sup> See O’Brien to Childers, 25 & 30 Nov. 1921, *ibid.*

<sup>217</sup> Copy of Childers’s diary, 1 Dec. 1921 (UCDA, De Valera papers, P150/148).

<sup>218</sup> Childers to O’Brien, 1 Dec. 1921 (TCDA, Childers papers, MS 7797).

<sup>219</sup> O’Brien to Childers, 5 Dec. 1921, *ibid.*

#### 4.11 O'Brien's rejection of the Treaty

The Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed on 6 December 1921.<sup>220</sup> It effectively made Ireland a dominion of the British Empire and despite attempts to lessen the impact of an oath of allegiance to the King by allowing allegiance to the constitution of the Irish Free State, the very existence of an oath to the King proved too much for many republicans.<sup>221</sup> It also confirmed partition and ceded major ports to the British. It certainly did not please the die-hards who favoured a republic. Bill Kissane believes that the Treaty negated the very argument made in the Sinn Féin case for self-determination: that Ireland was a European nation rather than a British colony.<sup>222</sup> Ward is equally definite noting that 'the negotiators accepted a twenty-six county Ireland with dominion status under the Crown'.<sup>223</sup> Acceptance of the fact that Ireland's future lay in negotiating an independent space within the Empire was anathema to many. Those who argued that the Treaty was signed under threat of war saw this as just another example of British oppression and the absence of complete sovereignty. O'Brien was firmly of this view and was adamant that the Treaty did not achieve independence. The fact that his great friend Collins could not sway him in favour of the Treaty suggests a strong underlying allegiance to a republic.

Hart notes that the Treaty split the republican movement in Britain as thoroughly as in Ireland, with pro and anti-Treaty camps rapidly being established on either side of an uncertain middle ground; with IRA members found in all three groups.<sup>224</sup> In a letter to Úna Parry, O'Brien described the Treaty as a terrible tragedy: 'The document is so cunningly worded ... the wording so ambiguous ... [it] will lead to continual quarrels and misunderstandings'. He claimed that the agreement conceded dominion status, English sovereignty, partition and the maintenance of English domination in Ireland.<sup>225</sup> Parry was astonished that Collins and Barton had signed: 'the men who died, died for a republic and I would rather be dead with them'.<sup>226</sup> This

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<sup>220</sup> For a detailed account of the negotiations and agreement see Pakenham, *Peace by ordeal*.

<sup>221</sup> Mansergh, *Unresolved question*, pp 191-2.

<sup>222</sup> Bill Kissane, *The politics of the Irish Civil War* (Oxford, 2005), p. 61.

<sup>223</sup> Ward, *Irish constitutional tradition*, p. 162.

<sup>224</sup> Hart, *IRA at war*, p. 161.

<sup>225</sup> O'Brien to Una Parry, 9 Dec. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8425/26).

<sup>226</sup> Una Parry to O'Brien, 10 Dec. 1921, *ibid*.

correspondence indicates deeply held beliefs by O'Brien and Parry — and as it was not intended for public consumption can be taken as an accurate indication of their views. They were both clearly very upset at the result of the negotiations. When Childers went to say goodbye to O'Brien he found him despairing, and bitter at not having been consulted.<sup>227</sup>

In Townshend's analysis of the Treaty split he contends that many waited to see how others reacted and that it was not an immediate decision for most of the rank and file.<sup>228</sup> O'Brien was very different and within hours of the signing had signalled his intentions. By contrast, Boland waited over a week to come out openly against the Treaty by which time the lines of division had become clearer.<sup>229</sup> O'Brien's sole interest was in announcing his own views to the world regardless of his responsibilities to Dáil Éireann. This again showed his bombastic temperament and also indicated a complete blurring of the lines between his role as an envoy and his personal opinions. All the same, it is interesting to note that three of the main envoys appointed by Dáil Éireann (O'Brien, Ó Ceallaigh and Boland) rejected the Treaty, perhaps having a much clearer view of its implications from their positions abroad. While Ó Ceallaigh also immediately denounced the Treaty, this was less significant in Rome than it was in London or the US where there were large Irish communities awaiting direction.<sup>230</sup> When de Valera rejected the Treaty in a public statement on 9 December, the process of taking sides accelerated.<sup>231</sup>

On 8 December 1921, just two days after the Treaty was signed, the *Irish Exile* carried a half page article by O'Brien on its front page.<sup>232</sup> He urged readers not to be misled into rejoicing and thanksgiving at the signing of the Treaty and criticised the use of the threat of war by the British side to force the Irish delegation to sign. He did not single out any particular aspect of the Treaty agreement for criticism nor did he mention the absence of a republic. He advised ISDL members that they might be called on 'to steady the nation and our race under a sudden and unexpected blow' and

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<sup>227</sup> Copy of Childers's diary, 7 Dec. 1921 (UCDA, De Valera papers, P150/1489).

<sup>228</sup> Townshend, *Republic*, p. 356.

<sup>229</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Harry Boland*, p. 259.

<sup>230</sup> Patrick Maume, 'Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh, 1882-1966', *DIB*.

<sup>231</sup> Townshend, *Republic*, p. 350.

<sup>232</sup> *IE*, Dec. 1921.

advised them ‘to watch and pray’. This letter represented a frantic attempt by O’Brien to prevent pro-Treaty enthusiasm taking a firm hold in Britain; it was also sent to various Irish and British newspapers. A Mr D’Arcy of London replied to its publication in the *Irish Independent* rejecting O’Brien’s advice and insisting that Irish people the world over were rejoicing.<sup>233</sup> *The Times* gushed: ‘a race long alienated from England has found in the agreement a gift from God’.<sup>234</sup> Hopkinson describes a more ambivalent response in Ireland itself, where deep reservations about constitutional and Northern issues were felt alongside a desire for peace and a strong feeling that the terms offered were the best that could be expected.<sup>235</sup>

On 10 December O’Brien wrote to de Valera to protest against ‘the tragedy of the so-called Treaty’.<sup>236</sup> While he blamed those who signed the agreement, he castigated the cabinet and particularly de Valera’s fateful decision not to go to London: ‘you, as the one who had been abroad more than the others are the most to blame’. O’Brien reminded him that he had alerted him in July to problems that allegiance to the Crown would cause after he heard Griffith and de Valera discussing ‘getting around it’.<sup>237</sup> Having vented his spleen on de Valera and the signatories, he then moved up a gear by suggesting that the delegation failed because they made ‘no effort to counteract the publicity of the enemy’ and ‘our prestige dropped every day’. This, he believed, was because *he* as ‘diplomatic agent of the Republic’ was not allowed to handle the publicity and worse, was not ‘consulted, advised or informed in any way’. O’Brien felt humiliated by the cabinet in Dublin: ‘Had I been working for men and not for a cause I would have resigned months ago’.<sup>238</sup> Pakenham supports O’Brien’s theory that the publicity surrounding the initiation of talks was poor in that a dominion settlement became the ‘reasonable’ course and the republic became the ‘unreasonable’ course<sup>239</sup> but whether O’Brien could have prevented this is moot.

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<sup>233</sup> *II*, 10 Dec. 1921.

<sup>234</sup> *The Times*, 19 Dec. 1921.

<sup>235</sup> Hopkinson, *Green against green*, p. 35.

<sup>236</sup> O’Brien to de Valera, 10 Dec. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8425/9).

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>239</sup> Pakenham, *Peace by ordeal*, p. 90.

Despite his diatribe, he urged de Valera not to resign as it would create a split and arranged to travel to Dublin to meet de Valera face to face.<sup>240</sup>

O'Brien met Collins in London on 7 December prior to the latter's return to Dublin. He also wrote to Collins at length on 8 December. For O'Brien the Treaty was a 'catastrophe' and while he understood that Collins had signed under threat of war he felt sure that if he and Collins 'had been negotiating on our side we should have got better terms and I feel quite confident that we would never have signed a document like the present one'.<sup>241</sup> O'Brien could not in conscience recommend the agreement but if 'the fighting men' thought that it was best to give it a chance he would fall in with their decision. He reiterated the advice given to de Valera that they should do their utmost to avoid a split. With remarkable foresight he could not see 'the possibility of this being accepted or rejected by An Dáil with a big enough majority to ensure general consent in the country'. He closed by assuring Collins that his feelings for him were 'no less friendly' and signed himself 'do chara go buan'.<sup>242</sup>

Writing in the *Irish Exile* a few months later, O'Brien said he regarded the republic proclaimed in 1916 as the basis for the government of Ireland. The general election of 1918 confirmed this and the first Dáil Éireann in 1919 was the government of the independent republic. This had not been recognised by the Treaty and therefore it behove all loyal ISDL members to continue to strive for recognition of the republic.<sup>243</sup> He reminded ISDL members that their constitution expressly listed the objectives of the organisation as being the principle of self-determination for Ireland and the recognition of the Irish Republic proclaimed in Dublin at Easter 1916. The great weakness with this argument was that self-determination was a concept open to wide interpretation and did not necessarily mean a republic.

O'Brien's closeness to the MacSwiney family may have influenced his stance. Mary MacSwiney (sister of Terence) was one of the strongest anti-Treaty voices in the immediate aftermath of the negotiations. Few leaders of the revolution witnessed a

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<sup>240</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 10 Dec. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8425/9).

<sup>241</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 8 Dec. 1921, *ibid.*

<sup>242</sup> Translation: Your dearest friend.

<sup>243</sup> *IE*, May 1922.

hunger striker's sacrifice as closely as O'Brien did and the effect on him should not be underestimated. Laffan describes how some of the more dedicated republicans regarded the Irish people with deep distrust and notes that Mary MacSwiney had difficulty with the concept that the Irish people might change their opinions over time and come to accept something less than a republic in the short term.<sup>244</sup> This rigidity of thinking and inability to compromise was also typical of O'Brien's personality. It also tied in with a concept noted in Chapter 3 where certain members of the ISDL thought they knew what was best for 'the Irish'.

Laffan has written that many IRA men experienced exhilaration and a degree of fulfilment during the War of Independence which would be impossible to maintain in the peacetime world.<sup>245</sup> He suggests that a civil war of sorts was already underway even before the Treaty was signed between those who wanted peace and those who were quite happy to fight on.<sup>246</sup> It is possible that O'Brien enjoyed the subterfuge and excitement of gun-running and had no appreciation for the reality of the situation in Ireland. It is also possible that he was concerned that his international contacts — Indian, Burmese and Egyptian — would think less of him for accepting the Treaty. His Egyptian friend Makram was effusive in his congratulations to him on his anti-treaty stance.<sup>247</sup> Saklatvala, the Indian nationalist, was also scathing of the Treaty.<sup>248</sup>

Basil Thomson saw in O'Brien's rejection of the Treaty evidence of his extremism and alleged that he had exercised a sinister influence over young Irish men and women in Britain for a long time.<sup>249</sup> He also believed that O'Brien 'played the part of a dictator' and was therefore losing popularity among the Irish in London.<sup>250</sup> Thomas Jones noted that on 9 December 1921 Lloyd George referred to O'Brien as 'that swine' and opined that 'nothing is so pitiable as a small man trying to handle big things'.<sup>251</sup> Lloyd George may never have had a great opinion of him but this statement was coloured by O'Brien's rejection of the Treaty. Prior to this, O'Brien's interventions

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<sup>244</sup> Laffan, *Resurrection*, p. 348.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 303.

<sup>247</sup> W. Makram to O'Brien, 9 Dec. 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8428/32).

<sup>248</sup> Saklatvala to Fowler, 30 Nov. 1922 (NLI, Joseph Fowler papers, MS 27097/5)

<sup>249</sup> RROUK, 15 Dec. 1921 (TNA, CAB 24/131/62).

<sup>250</sup> RROUK, 12 Jan. 1922 (TNA, CAB, 24/132/9).

<sup>251</sup> Jones, *Whitehall diary*, iii, p. 186.

and opinions were reported in detail by Jones to the prime minister. Indeed, Jones had collected O'Brien's autograph as well as those of the delegation, for his young daughter.<sup>252</sup> Could it be that Lloyd George's rage was because someone they thought was an ally had let them down?

Elizabeth Brennan, O'Brien's secretary, had her own views of his reasons for rejecting the Treaty.<sup>253</sup> Her absolute hatred of O'Brien, however, suggests these opinions should be treated with some caution. Highly critical of O'Brien's installation in the Grosvenor Hotel for the duration of the Treaty negotiations, she remarked that 'Griffith was a very astute man and he had seen during the first negotiations in July what sort of a man Art Ó Briain was and that he would not be pleasant or easy to work with'.<sup>254</sup> Her comment — 'it was evident to the delegates that he would want to dictate to them' is illuminating. She also revealed that the clear determination of the delegation not to include O'Brien 'enraged him'. Most damningly she alleged that during the negotiations he was active 'in intriguing against the proposed articles of the Treaty'. She concluded that if he had been included in the talks he would have supported the Treaty.<sup>255</sup>

In her BMH statement, Nancy Wyse Power, who worked for Dáil Éireann in Berlin in 1921, recalled meeting Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh in Paris during the Treaty negotiations and that he complained O'Brien was writing to him and undermining the negotiators.<sup>256</sup> She also recalled how John Chartres 'who knew and liked O'Brien' described him as difficult. She concluded that O'Brien was a vain man who resented being excluded from the negotiations.<sup>257</sup> Contemporaneous correspondence between Ó Ceallaigh and O'Brien, however, indicates that Ó Ceallaigh was equally sceptical about the progress of the delegation.<sup>258</sup> On 29 November he wrote 'as it stands at the

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<sup>252</sup> Thomas Jones to Childers, 24 Oct. 1921 (TCDA, Childers papers, MS 7792).

<sup>253</sup> Elizabeth MacGinley (née Brennan) (IMA, BMH, WS 860, p. 5).

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 5-8.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>256</sup> Nancy Wyse Power (IMA, BMH, WS 732, p. 13).

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>258</sup> See Ó Ceallaigh to O'Brien, 4 Nov. 1921 & 17 Nov. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/25).



moment it appears to me as a lamentable surrender'.<sup>259</sup> Clearly, Ó Ceallaigh had as little confidence in the outcome as O'Brien had.

Attributing O'Brien's rejection of the Treaty purely to his vanity is somewhat unfair. An examination of his statements and letters throughout 1920-1 reveals he was a regular promoter of the concept of the republic. Hence his dismissal of Sir Charles Russell and A. T. Davies as discussed above. His proposals sent to Collins for a settlement in December 1920 espoused a republic. In an article in the November 1921 issue of the *Irish Exile*, O'Brien referred to letters from members concerned about the tone of British propaganda during the Treaty negotiations which seemed to be leaning towards dominion status within the British Empire for Ireland. He moved to reassure them that 'the ideals for which our great dead made their epic sacrifices are still our fixed and guiding stars'.<sup>260</sup>

Rather than assign any one reason to his anti-Treaty stance, it is perhaps more realistic to accept that decisions such as this are always multifaceted. While O'Brien undoubtedly had egotistical traits, he had far more to gain career-wise from acceptance of the Treaty than from its rejection. He was effectively Collins's right hand man in London and could realistically have expected a prestigious position in the diplomatic service of the IFS. His immediate rejection of the Treaty is also telling – this was not a man who waited to see what way the wind was blowing so that he might decide which side offered him the better future. O'Brien, notwithstanding his disappointment, continued to try to influence Irish affairs and sought and was granted admission to the Dáil session on 14 December 1921.<sup>261</sup> He stayed in Dublin for a few days, returned to London for Christmas and then came back to Dublin, staying at the Gresham, where he watched events unfold until the Dáil voted to accept the Treaty on 7 January 1922.

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<sup>259</sup> Ó Ceallaigh to O'Brien, 29 Nov. 1921, *ibid.*

<sup>260</sup> *IE*, Nov. 1921.

<sup>261</sup> O'Brien to O'Hegarty, 10 Dec. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8424/1).

#### 4.12 O'Brien's relationship with Collins

When the Treaty was signed, Collins and O'Brien had worked closely together for five years. The nature of their relationship can be teased out by taking an overview of their experiences together as outlined in this thesis. They knew each other from their GLL days but became close allies when Collins was secretary to the INAAVDF from early 1917, in particular with regard to their agenda to keep track of the deportees and prisoners in Britain and ensure they were not lost to the cause.<sup>262</sup> When O'Brien was appointed London envoy Collins sent him a brief note saying 'you're the one' and it is clear that he was very much the choice of Collins for the London job.<sup>263</sup> The daily correspondence between the two was polite and respectful with only occasional expressions of exasperation or annoyance on either side – mostly in relation to third parties who irked them. Even the Jameson incident described in Chapter 3 did not derail their friendship. Apart from their correspondence they also met face to face at least twice in 1917 (see Chapter 2) and Collins was in London in November 1919 and had several discussions with O'Brien.<sup>264</sup> In June 1920 O'Brien met Collins for breakfast at the Hamman Hotel in Dublin.<sup>265</sup> They regularly expressed concern for each other's health and well-being,<sup>266</sup> and Collins made it clear to O'Brien on several occasions that he valued his opinions.<sup>267</sup> They also forged a closeness through their mutual antipathy to Desmond FitzGerald and to Patrick Moylett and in their general distrust of Lloyd George and his emissaries. Despite the on-going War of Independence Collins found time to seek out a suitable agricultural college and work experience on a farm for a young protégé of O'Brien's.<sup>268</sup> It is also telling that Collins sent some of the Treaty negotiation papers to O'Brien in November 1921 despite his exclusion from the main delegation. Collins decision to make time to see O'Brien before he left London after the Treaty signing also indicates a close relationship between the two. O'Brien's

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<sup>262</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>263</sup> Collins to O'Brien, 14 Jan. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8461/2).

<sup>264</sup> O'Brien to O'Hegarty, 5 Nov. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/17).

<sup>265</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 26 June 1920 (NAI, DE/2/284).

<sup>266</sup> See for instance Collins to O'Brien, 8 Nov. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/7) and O'Brien to Collins, 30 Apr. 1921 (NAI, DE/2/239).

<sup>267</sup> See for instance Collins to O'Brien, 3 Jan. 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/7), 20 Oct. 1920 (ibid., MS 8426/11), 11 July 1921 (ibid., MS 8430/18).

<sup>268</sup> See O'Brien to Collins, 9 July 1919 and Collins to O'Brien, 21 July & 5 Aug. 1919 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/11).

subsequent letter to Collins cites the importance of ‘frankness’ among close friends – hence his detailed explanation of his rejection of the Treaty to Collins.<sup>269</sup> Their friendship was undoubtedly strong and personal until the Civil War — but as with many close bonds at the time did not survive the onset of that war. Despite an extensive trawl of the Ó Briain and other relevant papers no evidence of the reaction of O’Brien to the death of Collins was unearthed for this dissertation.

#### 4.13 Decline of the ISDL

The central executive of the ISDL, of which O’Brien was a member, met on 18 December 1921 in Manchester and issued a statement to the effect that while it regretted that Ireland had not achieved complete independence it would ‘pledge support to the government of the Irish Free State’.<sup>270</sup> The March 1922 edition of the *Irish Exile*, however, carried a full page advertisement for the ‘Uphold the Republic Fund’ — an appeal to the Irish abroad for funds to maintain the struggle for Irish independence — signed by Cathal Brugha and Austin Stack.<sup>271</sup> Clearly there were serious differences of opinion in the ISDL. Diarmuid Fawsitt reported to Collins on rumours that the ISDL was engaged in anti-Treaty activity and concluded that it was subsidising the *Irish Exile* which had a definite anti-Treaty stance. He also noted that attempts were being made to have all fund-raising channelled through the general secretary of the ISDL for republican rather than relief causes and that ‘the general attitude of officials in AOBs [sic] department and also in the office of ISDL is inimicable [sic] to the Treaty’.<sup>272</sup>

The first six months of 1922 were tense and confused in Ireland as various attempts were made to settle the military and political divisions occasioned by the Treaty.<sup>273</sup> The Irish abroad, particularly in Britain, were left without direction. An ISDL general meeting to review the Treaty was held on 1 April 1922 and voted by 103 to 48 to await the result of the general election in Ireland and to review the situation then.

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<sup>269</sup> O’Brien to Collins, 8 Dec. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8425/9).

<sup>270</sup> *IE*, Feb. 1922.

<sup>271</sup> *IE*, Mar. 1922.

<sup>272</sup> Diarmuid Fawsitt to Michael Collins, 27 Mar. 1922 in Fanning et al., *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy*, Vol. 1, pp 413-15.

<sup>273</sup> Hopkinson, *Green against green*, p. 52.

O'Brien was reported to have left the meeting 'crestfallen'.<sup>274</sup> Thomas Martin (stalwart of various London-Irish organisations over many years) wrote to Griffith in vitriolic terms about O'Brien. 'The bounder has had his first rebuff', he remarked, 'and drastic economies we have made will result in the organisation being rid of his sycophants as paid servants'.<sup>275</sup> This comment referred particularly to Seán McGrath, the national general secretary of ISDL and a staunch ally of O'Brien. The cutting nature of this remark was typical of the hatred engendered by O'Brien after he rejected the Treaty. His anti-Treaty stance may also have allowed those who never had much time for him before to vent their views publicly. Undaunted, in an article in the *Irish Exile* O'Brien urged members to remember their role as 'the Irish abroad' which was to work continuously for the sovereignty of the motherland and to 'ensure that the people at home vote on such a momentous question free from external threat' — returning again to the theme he first raised on 8 December 1921 that the five signatories were coerced under threat of war. While not advocating any resort to arms, he did, however, make this strong statement: 'As the Republican Government still actually exists and functions we can still actively work for its international recognition'.<sup>276</sup> O'Brien had clearly no intention of supporting the IFS government.

As Moulton has noted, moderate Irish nationalists in Britain welcomed the Treaty.<sup>277</sup> A thanksgiving ceremony was held in London on 8 December 1921 and the Treaty was also accepted by the *Catholic Herald* — the leading paper of the Irish-Catholic community in Britain. It argued that the Treaty freed the Irish in Britain from the burden of Irish politics and hoped that they would now concentrate their energies on building Catholic schools and other institutions in Britain.<sup>278</sup> Thus the squabbles of the ISDL were but a minor aspect of the reaction of the Irish in Britain to the Treaty and while they were turbulent for those involved the ripple effect was negligible. The anti-Treaty movement in London was small — probably no larger than one hundred active members. This abandonment of republican activity was not particular to London and Britain. In the United States, the Treaty and the Civil War caused a large fall in

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<sup>274</sup> RROUK, 6 Apr. 1922 (TNA, CAB 24/136/34).

<sup>275</sup> Thomas Martin to Griffith, 8 Apr. 1922 (NAI, DFA, early series, Box 15).

<sup>276</sup> *IE*, May 1922.

<sup>277</sup> *Revolution Papers*, 11 Oct. 2016.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*

membership of Irish nationalist organisations. As Hopkinson has noted, leading Irish Americans ‘reacted with bewilderment’ to events as they unfolded in Ireland.<sup>279</sup> De Valera’s rejection of the Treaty shocked many Americans and the exile nationalist cause was left ‘without much of its *raison d’être*’.<sup>280</sup>

#### 4.14 Conclusion

There has been a tendency in the historiography of the Treaty to see all Irish and British interaction as linear leading up to a grand finale of talks in October 1921. Teasing out O’Brien’s role with different intermediaries shows that there were opportunities for peace at an earlier stage had there been more unanimity and focus on the Irish side. Both Moylett and Clune had made it to the inner circle of Lloyd George’s government and might have made more progress if a clearly defined strategy was in place from Collins, de Valera and Griffith. O’Brien continually sought a more specific strategy from them to no avail. He was a highly competent businessman and an organisational genius and if encouraged would have established clear objectives for any settlement. This is not to suggest that O’Brien would have been a more successful negotiator, but he would certainly have presented a more coherent strategy in the early stages. He was a supremely organised person to whom the shifting sands of the leadership of the peace process and the lack of clarity in strategy was incomprehensible. His advice, if taken at the start of the proceedings, would have greatly enhanced the strength of the Irish team. He was being paid the not inconsiderable sum of £750 per year to represent the Dáil in London and to provide advice and assistance yet he was largely ignored. The British side was far from a coherent monolith in the early stages of the negotiations. Martin Pugh highlights the anomalous position of Lloyd George as a premier without his own majority party, who also had very idiosyncratic working habits — committing little to paper and working late into the night having slept by day.<sup>281</sup> How much more might the Irish delegation have achieved had they followed O’Brien’s advice and set out a very clear exposition of their position at the start?

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<sup>279</sup> Hopkinson, *Green against green* (Dublin, 1988), p. 47.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>281</sup> Martin Pugh, *Lloyd George* (London, 1998), p. 148.

While O'Brien was full of his own importance and could be quite petulant and difficult to work with, it is possible that he would have been a strong support to republican aims had he been allowed greater access to the negotiating team. Although his own account is the only evidence of the advice he claimed to have given Collins and de Valera at various stages during 1921, it is clear from all his dealing with them and with the intermediaries that he had a very strong sense that dominion status was not enough. It is also noteworthy that in late 1921, de Valera and O'Brien were the two people who had the most experience of Downing Street, yet they never came near the negotiations. Clearly, O'Brien had a very good working relationship with Thomas Jones and it is quite possible that O'Brien would have stood up to the threat of war from Lloyd George, given his own strong, some might say bullying, personality.

Despite O'Brien's rather tetchy attitude to the delegation there was no formal attempt to side-line him during the Treaty negotiations. Until July 1921, however, his main contact with the Sinn Féin leaders had been by correspondence. The arrival in London of people who actually lived in Ireland as equal negotiators with the British meant that his role was diminishing by the day before ever the Treaty was signed. The reality is that he found the changing parameters during 1921 very unsettling and found it difficult to accept that opinions other than his own had any merit. Pakenham writes about 'the bewilderment felt by men of taut and rigid principles when confronted with an infinitely more fluent-minded and adaptable colleague'. He was contrasting Stack and Brugha with Collins.<sup>282</sup> Arguably, O'Brien experienced the same predicament.

The Anglo-Irish Treaty changed many lives irrevocably. On the grand scale, the people of Ireland began their journey to full independence. On a personal level, many, including O'Brien, found their lives taking a decided turn for the worse. Having been the leading Irishman in London he now found himself cut adrift and ploughing a lonely furrow among a population which had by and large moved on and accepted the new IFS. Chapter 5 analyses O'Brien's trials and tribulations from 1922 to 1924. His sense of rejection was deeply internalised and he moved from being an obsessive perfectionist to a bitter and increasingly rigid thinker. This affected not just his political

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<sup>282</sup> Pakenham, *Peace by ordeal*, p. 96.

life but also his personal life. An unhappy and complaining individual now replaced the previously rigid workaholic.

## **‘A spectacular fall from grace’: Anti-Treaty rebel and prisoner, 1922-1924**

### **5.1 Introduction**

O’Brien’s rejection of the Treaty made his position as London envoy untenable. He had one last ‘diplomatic’ outing to the Irish Race Conference in Paris before the IFS began to pursue him for funds from the envoy accounts. He then began fund-raising and propaganda activities for the republican side. In this chapter the activities of anti-Treaty republicans in London are assessed and O’Brien’s new incarnation as de Valera’s man in London is analysed. As McGee has noted, the Ó Briain papers are a very valuable source for the often overlooked Civil War period of de Valera’s career.<sup>1</sup> O’Brien attempted to mould the ISDL into an anti-Treaty organisation but failed miserably and antagonised much of his London support. His anti-Treaty activities led to his arrest in March 1923. His subsequent deportation to Ireland became the subject of a sensational court case when he challenged the legality of the deportation, and he became a household name in Britain and Ireland. The close co-operation between the IFS government and the British security services during this episode and the fall-out from O’Brien’s legal action is analysed in this chapter. O’Brien’s rejection of the Civil War in evidence given at a subsequent Old Bailey trial for sedition alienated him from what little remained of his republican support base. In July 1923 he was sentenced to two years in prison. Personally and financially shattered, O’Brien’s was indeed a spectacular fall from grace.

### **5.2 The Irish Race Conference in Paris**

At the Irish Race Conference in Paris in January 1922 the fissures in the Irish body politic were visible. As Keown has noted, a conference designed to showcase the unity and purpose of the Irish nationalist movement and to establish a transnational structure to link the diaspora to Ireland, had instead laid bare the deep divisions over

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<sup>1</sup> Owen McGee, Introduction to Art Ó Briain papers, p. 8 (NLI).



the Treaty.<sup>2</sup> Originally mooted by the ISDL, the organisation of this world congress had been taken over by the republican Department of Foreign Affairs in the summer of 1921.<sup>3</sup> Douglas Hyde, Eoin MacNeill and de Valera were the key speakers and O'Brien was in attendance, but plans to protest at British terror in Ireland were now redundant given the Treaty. Attention was devoted instead to 'the more pleasant task of discussing the future of Irish culture and civilisation'.<sup>4</sup> This was a fairly benign comment on the proceedings. Dermot Keogh describes the conference as 'a combination of the bizarre and the tragic'.<sup>5</sup> Nancy Wyse Power, who attended, described it as a disastrous affair full of slander, backbiting and disagreement.<sup>6</sup> MacNeill reported to the Department of Foreign Affairs about the difficulties he and other IFS government representatives had in ensuring that O'Brien and de Valera did not divert the conference to anti-treaty purposes.<sup>7</sup> De Valera out-manoeuvred the IFS representatives and was elected president of 'Fine Gael' — the new organisation set up by the conference. He also packed its executive committee with republican sympathisers, O'Brien among them.<sup>8</sup> In the ultimate insult to the new government, at the conference gala dinner Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh proposed a toast to the 'Republic' and de Valera replied as 'President of the Republic'.<sup>9</sup> The committee of 'Fine Gael' continued to meet in Dublin over the next few months but Gavan Duffy, IFS Minister for Foreign Affairs, decreed that it should receive no more public funding, having already cost an alarming £6,000.<sup>10</sup> On returning to London, O'Brien began to issue press bulletins attacking the IFS and supporting de Valera.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Keown, *First of the small nations*, p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> See O'Brien's retrospective report to P. McCartan, Apr. 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8456/6).

<sup>4</sup> *IE*, Feb. 1922.

<sup>5</sup> Dermot Keogh, 'The treaty split and the Paris Irish Race convention, 1922', *Études Irlandaises*, XII-2 (1987), p. 167.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Wyse Power (IMA, BMH, WS 732, p. 13).

<sup>7</sup> Preliminary report of Eoin MacNeill on the Irish Race Conference, 1922 (NAI, DFA, early series, Box 11).

<sup>8</sup> Keown, *First of the small nations*, p. 95.

<sup>9</sup> Keogh, 'Paris Irish Race convention', p. 167.

<sup>10</sup> Gavan Duffy to Desmond FitzGerald, 20 June 1922 (UCDA, Desmond FitzGerald (hereafter FitzGerald papers), P80/395).

<sup>11</sup> RROUK, 2 Mar. 1922 (TNA, CAB 24/133/98).

### 5.3 Financial squabbles

From early 1919, O'Brien was the recipient of and conduit for large sums of money from Dáil Éireann. The cost of running the London office mounted over time. The Dáil granted £500 to cover the six months from 26 September 1919<sup>12</sup> but by April 1921 it decided that a hefty £4,000 per annum was needed for the London office.<sup>13</sup> Denis Carr recalled that sums of £1,000 per month were also being spent on arms in Britain in 1919-20.<sup>14</sup> In addition, all funds for other foreign representatives were channelled through London. When he included the foreign and gun-running figures, O'Brien calculated that he had managed £60,000 for Dáil Éireann in 1921 alone.<sup>15</sup> Throughout this period there were regular requests from Dublin, particularly from Collins, for up-to-date accounts. These were invariably late with O'Brien pleading pressure of work.<sup>16</sup> To complicate matters, all the London funds were held in O'Brien's private bank accounts to avoid confiscation by the British authorities. But trust in O'Brien was absolute. In October 1921, for instance, Collins sent him £14,000 to place in a deposit account in the names of trusted friends.<sup>17</sup>

O'Brien also spent a considerable amount of money maintaining the style he thought befitted the dignity of the republic's representative.<sup>18</sup> The account for his own accommodation, listed under a heading 'with special delegates and visitors' at the Grosvenor Hotel, was £558 from October to December 1921. The cost of accommodation for almost the entire Treaty delegation and its entourage was £3,307 for about twenty people — none of whom were at the plush Grosvenor at the Dáil's expense.<sup>19</sup> O'Brien continued to draw a salary of £750 per annum. Elizabeth Brennan, his secretary, recalled that he seemed 'more concerned with the official dignity attached to his position than with the national cause' and this struck her as being at

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<sup>12</sup> Dáil Éireann cabinet minutes, 26 Sept. 1919 (NAI, DE/1/2).

<sup>13</sup> De Valera to O'Brien, 2 May 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/1).

<sup>14</sup> Denis Carr (IMA, MSP34, Ref 27243).

<sup>15</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 6 Mar. 1922 (NAI, DE/5/2/32).

<sup>16</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 13 July 1920 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8426/3).

<sup>17</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 15 Oct. 1921 (NAI, DE/5/2/30).

<sup>18</sup> Townshend, *Republic*, p. 69.

<sup>19</sup> London Office of Dáil Éireann accounts, Oct. to Dec. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8432/27).

variance with the sacrifices that many of the ministers had endured in Ireland.<sup>20</sup>

Following O'Brien's rejection of the Treaty, alarm bells sounded in Dublin in relation to the funds he held. As Mark Callanan has noted, Collins was concerned with financial propriety even at the height of the War of Independence and it is possible that irrespective of the Treaty the hammer was about to fall on O'Brien's extravagances in London.<sup>21</sup> O'Brien's admission to Collins in August 1921 that 'by force of circumstance I now have two flats, a house, a suite of rooms at an hotel and three offices' must have caused some concern.<sup>22</sup> The impetus to recover the money must also be put in the context of a newly formed Provisional government which was trying desperately to get a grip on the chaos in civil government and administration following the departure of the British.<sup>23</sup>

On 19 January 1922 George McGrath, the accountant-general in the Department of Finance, demanded details of all the accounts of the London office within one week and requested that accounts already submitted for the six months up to December 1921 be re-done under a new system of vouched expenses.<sup>24</sup> Expense vouchers soon became a bone of contention. O'Brien insisted that 'the balance of un-vouched items are my own expenses and from their nature not vouchable except by myself' — a statement likely to enrage any accountant!<sup>25</sup> O'Brien waited a month before he replied at length to McGrath explaining that Collins was well acquainted with (and by implication had approved) the London accounts, but he offered to come to Dublin to explain them in person rather than revise them.<sup>26</sup> When McGrath insisted on receiving the revised accounts, O'Brien rebuked him for the 'the extraordinarily discourteous tone' of his letters.<sup>27</sup> Outraged at this insult to his integrity, O'Brien complained of leaks to the British press about the London accounts and claimed that no other Dáil foreign office had been put under such scrutiny.<sup>28</sup> Amounts handled in

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<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth MacGinley (née Brennan) (IMA, BMH, WS 860, pp 4-5).

<sup>21</sup> Mark Callanan, *Ireland, 2022: towards one hundred years of self-government* (Dublin, 2007), p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Collins to Robert Brennan, 1 Aug. 1921 (NAI, DFA early series, Box 21/128/1).

<sup>23</sup> Hopkinson, *Green against green*, p. 89.

<sup>24</sup> George McGrath to O'Brien, 19 Jan. 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8422/9).

<sup>25</sup> O'Brien to Dutton, n.d., *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> O'Brien to McGrath, 18 Feb. 1922, *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> O'Brien to McGrath, 22 Feb. 1922, *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> O'Brien to George Gavan Duffy, 29 Apr. 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8425/1).

the other offices were, of course, but a fraction of the amounts handled in London. Had O'Brien resigned and surrendered all monies the matter would have ended but his obstinacy led to rumour and innuendo that he had mishandled large sums. O'Brien's decision to go on a few weeks holiday in Europe in March 1922 exacerbated the situation.<sup>29</sup>

It is important, nonetheless, to recognise that O'Brien was not the only target of the Department of Finance. The accountant-general was critical of all account-keeping by the Department of Foreign Affairs for the period 1919-21.<sup>30</sup> Nancy Wyse Power in the Berlin office, who also rejected the Treaty, complained that she was greatly harassed by Finance for vouchers for every penny spent since May 1920.<sup>31</sup> She explained that 'in the conditions then prevalent in Berlin, bribery was one of the chief items of expenditure and one does not get vouchers for that!'<sup>32</sup> Gavan Duffy informed the accountant-general that it was never his practice to produce vouchers when in Paris or Rome and that all monies were in his personal accounts 'as in other places'.<sup>33</sup> Gavan Duffy also agreed that the late government allowed Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh to do as he liked in terms of hotel expenses in Paris.<sup>34</sup> When O'Brien saw no objections raised to Ó Ceallaigh's prolonged stay at the Grand Hotel in Paris, he too must have felt entitled to similar grandeur, particularly given his self-perception as the senior foreign representative. It appears, therefore, that O'Brien's financial activities were similar to those of the other representatives abroad at the time. In relation to gun-running funds, Richard Walsh estimated that between £10,000 and £12,000 went astray during the gun-running operation in Britain but not all of it had been under O'Brien's control.<sup>35</sup> Walsh took a realistic view of this loss pointing out that keeping detailed accounts is not a normal feature of illegal gun-running operations. In addition, he believed that it was quite ridiculous that 'a few thousands missing' should cause so much suspicion then and since'.<sup>36</sup> It is clear therefore that the pursuit of O'Brien for

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<sup>29</sup> See Gavan Duffy to O'Brien, 9 Feb. 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8429/28).

<sup>30</sup> McGrath to Gavan Duffy, 29 Apr. 1922 (NAI, DFA, early series, Box 21).

<sup>31</sup> Nancy Wyse Power (IMA, BMH, WS 732, p. 14).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Gavan Duffy to McGrath, 29 Mar. 1922 (NAI, DFA, early series, Box 21).

<sup>34</sup> Gavan Duffy to McGrath, 11 July 1922, *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Richard Walsh (IMA, BMH, WS 400, p. 132).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

the funds was politically motivated on account of his anti-Treaty stance rather than as a result of any impropriety.

O'Brien's reluctance to give up the money 'to the Irish government' should also be seen in the context of the *realpolitik* of the day. Many in Ireland questioned the legitimacy of the new government. As Hopkinson has written, the vote on the Treaty was more a desire for settled conditions than a major vote of confidence in the pro-Treaty government.<sup>37</sup> Kissane has noted that as late as August 1922 the government came in for severe criticism for having failed to call a meeting of Dáil Éireann since the general election in June.<sup>38</sup> He also states that both Griffith's Dáil and Collins's Provisional government were of a temporary nature and that the basic feature of parliamentary democracy — a governing executive responsible to parliament — was absent for the first part of 1922.<sup>39</sup> O'Brien was aware of the on-going communications between pro-and anti-Treaty protagonists and probably expected that matters would be sorted out if not amicably, certainly without a civil war. Nevertheless, the accountant-general was scathing in his assessment of O'Brien. He suggested that the London envoy took the anti-Treaty side simply to avoid having to account for financial irregularities to the Provisional government and accused him of relying on 'a game of bluff'.<sup>40</sup> Much of McGrath's criticism centred on concerns about a sum of £14,000 placed in an account in Barcelona in December 1921 which he believed that O'Brien had siphoned off.<sup>41</sup> O'Brien had in fact, acted under specific instructions from Collins and returned the money to the London fund shortly afterwards.<sup>42</sup>

#### **5.4 Prisoners' champion**

The dissatisfaction displayed by Irish prisoners in English jails was a significant factor in O'Brien's rejection of the Treaty. In a blunt telegram to Collins on 13 January 1922 he stated 'resentment here is very deep and I anticipate serious trouble if [prison]

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<sup>37</sup> Hopkinson, *Green against green*, p. 111.

<sup>38</sup> Kissane, *Irish Civil War*, pp 157-8.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>40</sup> Transcript of George McGrath interview by British Attorney General, Archibald Bodkin, 24 May 1923 (UCDA, FitzGerald papers, P80/748); McGrath to O'Hegarty, 28 Mar. 1923, *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> McGrath to O'Hegarty, 28 Mar. 1923 (UCDA, FitzGerald papers, P80/748).

<sup>42</sup> See Daniel McCarthy (IMA, BMH, WS 722, p. 19).

matters are not dealt with satisfactorily and immediately'.<sup>43</sup> Murphy describes a general frustration with the leadership of Sinn Féin and the IRA among prisoners in both Ireland and Britain who were not released immediately the truce was announced.<sup>44</sup> He also highlights the fact that the release of the leaders left a vacuum in which where there was little thought of strategy or calm assessment of the Treaty negotiations. Resentment was understandable 'among internees who believed they were at the back of the queue for the rewards of peace'.<sup>45</sup> Those kept in prison *after* the Treaty were often isolated because their potential supporters had moved on to new fights and new political priorities.<sup>46</sup> O'Brien was always very close to the prisoners and absorbed their frustrations and anxieties to a greater extent than most other leaders.

O'Brien's main complaint was that prisoners convicted of revolutionary activity in Britain were treated less favourably than prisoners in Ireland. The *Daily Herald* reported the resentment of the Irish in Britain on this issue.<sup>47</sup> It appeared that these prisoners would be left to languish indefinitely in jail. British reluctance to release prisoners arrested in Britain was confirmed by the Home Office when it stated that 'the outrages of which these men were convicted were organised by the Irish Self-Determination League of Great Britain, which is still maintaining the claim of Ireland to absolute independence and which might at any moment declare for an Irish republic and renew the campaign of outrage in this country'.<sup>48</sup> Following pressure from the IFS government, the British reluctantly agreed to release pre-truce convicts in return for an amnesty for British army members captured in Ireland.<sup>49</sup> This did not satisfy O'Brien who remained a thorn in the side of the Irish government by insisting it was not doing enough to free Irish members of the Connaught Rangers who had mutinied in support of Irish independence. As McConville has noted, there was a particular sensitivity on the British side about soldiers who had violated their oath of loyalty and aided the

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<sup>43</sup> O'Brien to Collins, 13 Jan. 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8445/21).

<sup>44</sup> Murphy, *Political imprisonment*, pp 224-30.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

<sup>47</sup> *Daily Herald*, 13 Feb. 1922.

<sup>48</sup> Edward Troup, Home Office, to Howarth, 23 Jan. 1922 (TNA, HO 144/4645).

<sup>49</sup> Murphy, *Political imprisonment*, p. 248.

republicans in various ways.<sup>50</sup> In the event, the Connaught Rangers were freed in January 1923 but the last republican prisoners were only released in July 1926.<sup>51</sup>

The prisoner issue finally brought O'Brien's career as London envoy to an end. Enraged by articles published in the *Catholic Herald* which suggested that he was conducting propaganda against the Irish government, O'Brien wrote to the *Irish Independent*. In defending himself, he lashed out at the incompetence of Éamonn Duggan, Minister for Home Affairs, for his handling of prisoner releases.<sup>52</sup> This was the last straw for Gavan Duffy, the new Minister for Foreign Affairs, who moved to sack O'Brien. Duggan trenchantly pointed out that if O'Brien and others had succeeded in defeating the Treaty no prisoners would have been released at all.<sup>53</sup> The Provisional government minutes confirm that one of Duggan's first tasks in January 1922 was to request the release of all Irish prisoners convicted in Britain during the War of Independence.<sup>54</sup>

## 5.5 Dismissal

O'Brien's activities after the Treaty had caused serious concern in Dublin. By the end of February 1922, Griffith was in touch with Mark Ryan in London, who supported the Treaty, to ask whom he would recommend to succeed O'Brien.<sup>55</sup> Even Ryan, for so long O'Brien's mentor, friend and personal physician, could not persuade him to accept the Treaty. On 25 February George Gavan Duffy instructed the Accountant General to cease sending money for overseas offices through London.<sup>56</sup> O'Brien was summoned to a meeting with IFS officials on 28 March 1922 but failed to attend. On 16 April Gavan Duffy terminated his position as Dáil envoy in London.<sup>57</sup> When O'Brien protested, Gavan Duffy replied: 'You do not yet seem to realise that you have been

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<sup>50</sup> McConville, *Irish political prisoners, 1848-1920: theatres of war*, p. 766.

<sup>51</sup> McShea, Leonard and Johnston — convicted of the murder of a police constable at Londonderry Jail in December 1921.

<sup>52</sup> *Catholic Herald*, 25 Feb. & 15 Apr. 1922; II, 17 Apr. 1922.

<sup>53</sup> *CE*, 7 Apr. 1922.

<sup>54</sup> Provisional Government minutes, 17 Jan. 1922 (NAI, Department of An Taoiseach (hereafter DT) /1/1/1).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 Feb. 1922.

<sup>56</sup> Gavan Duffy to Accountant General, George McGrath, 25 Feb. 1922 (NAI, DFA, early series, Box 21/131).

<sup>57</sup> Gavan Duffy to O'Brien, 16 Apr. 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8425/1).

conspicuously discourteous both to the Cabinet and to myself'.<sup>58</sup> Despite angry protests from O'Brien the decision was unanimously confirmed by the cabinet on 23 May 1922.<sup>59</sup> Gavan Duffy, once so friendly with O'Brien, had clearly had enough. In his final letter he accused O'Brien of 'attempting to erect his office into a kind of super-Dáil'.<sup>60</sup> O'Brien responded that his sacking was outrageous given that he held his credentials from the President of the Republic, Éamon de Valera. He was also hurt given his long association with Gavan Duffy.<sup>61</sup> In a bizarre twist, O'Brien's loyal friend C. B. Dutton was appointed as the new London envoy. This was very advantageous to O'Brien because Dutton allowed him to move freely in and out of the London office and seems to have accepted his seniority in all matters. There was, therefore, very little change in London initially.

In spite of Dutton's support, O'Brien's world was now beginning to fall apart. Still refusing to accept his fate, he wrote to Griffith to demand an enquiry into his sacking, to no avail.<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile, the issue of the money rumbled on. O'Brien met Collins for lunch at the Shelbourne Hotel in Dublin on 14 June 1922 to discuss the issues and three days later sent Collins an extensive document offering to negotiate a settlement of the London accounts.<sup>63</sup> He complained of his 'ignominious dismissal' at the hands of Gavan Duffy and not unreasonably requested various allowances be paid to him for a number of months to compensate him for giving up his profession to serve the Irish state. He also sought assurances that rental agreements in his name for the London office at Adam Street would be taken over by a solicitor and that he would be indemnified for other expenses he had entered into. He confirmed that he would hand over all London assets if these conditions were met. The London assets must have been dwindling rapidly as he was still in the Grosvenor Hotel and had received no money from Dublin since the beginning of 1922. Collins agreed that a solicitor should

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<sup>58</sup> Gavan Duffy to O'Brien, 22 Apr. 1922, *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Colm Ó Murchadha to O'Brien, 23 May 1922, *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Gavan Duffy to O'Brien, 9 May 1922, *ibid.* Copies of the full correspondence between O'Brien and Gavan Duffy in relation to the dismissal are held in NAI, DFA, early series, Box 19/122. This file also contains a summary of the London accounts in early 1922.

<sup>61</sup> O'Brien to Gavan Duffy, 17 May 1922 in Fanning et al, *Documents on Irish foreign policy*, Vol. 1, p. 459.

<sup>62</sup> O'Brien to Griffith, 27 May 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8422/9).

<sup>63</sup> O'Brien diary entry, 14 June 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8457/7); O'Brien to Collins, 17 June 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8423/13); O'Brien memo (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8425/11).



take over the lease for the office but all other requests were declined.<sup>64</sup> Collins's concern about the funds was motivated by the fact that he himself had been severely criticized by the Dáil trustees for spending without authority.<sup>65</sup> He was castigated for trusting O'Brien and felt let down by him.<sup>66</sup> A planned further meeting between them was cancelled following the beginning of the Civil War.<sup>67</sup>

## 5.6 General Election 1922 and Civil War

The general election in Ireland on 16 June 1922 returned 58 pro-Treaty candidates and 35 anti-Treatyites out of a total of 128. The balance of seats was won by Labour(17), Farmer(7), University(4) and Independent(7) candidates.<sup>68</sup> By the time the Dáil convened, the anti-Treaty side led by de Valera, had decided not to take their seats and the IFS government moved ahead on the basis of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty. Noonan has concluded that there is very little evidence available about anti-Treaty IRA activity in Britain in the first half of 1922 and he estimates a very low level of gun-running.<sup>69</sup> O'Brien recalled that the London IRB met immediately after the Treaty and were all against it. When the Supreme Council advised that members could adopt whichever side they wished in relation to the Treaty, the IRB disbanded in London at the end of January 1922.<sup>70</sup> Sam Maguire, the leading organiser of the gun-running in London, accepted the Treaty and returned to Ireland. Despite a Home Office intelligence report in August 1922 describing O'Brien as 'devoting his time ... to obtaining materiel for use by the rebels in Ireland', his main efforts at the time were concentrated on securing control of the ISDL, organising publicity for de Valera and hanging on to the cash he held in London.<sup>71</sup> There was therefore a lack of coherence and leadership on the gun-running side.

The assassination of Field Marshall Sir Henry Wilson in London on 22 June 1922 sent a shockwave through Westminster and Whitehall and triggered the opening

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<sup>64</sup> See O'Brien to Collins, 28 June 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8423/13).

<sup>65</sup> Dutton, memo, 7 June 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8425/11).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 6 Oct. 1922, *ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Lyons, *Ireland since the famine*, p. 457.

<sup>69</sup> Noonan, *IRA in Britain*, pp 219-21.

<sup>70</sup> O'Brien memo, 1935 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8427/22).

<sup>71</sup> RROUK, 31 Aug. 1922 (TNA, CAB 24/138/73).

exchanges of the Civil War with an attack on the Four Courts on 28 June 1922.<sup>72</sup> Wilson, a career officer in the British army who rose to the rank of Chief of the Imperial General Staff, was elected as Unionist MP for North Down in May 1922.<sup>73</sup> He then began advising the new Northern Ireland government on security issues and was blamed by many republicans for attacks on Catholics in Belfast.<sup>74</sup> Dutton and Fintan Murphy were immediately arrested at the Dáil's London office but held for only a brief period as the arrest of Reggie Dunne and Joseph O'Sullivan at the scene meant the spotlight was off other republicans in London. O'Brien was in Dublin but on his return the next day he called to the Home Office to complain about the insolence of Scotland Yard in searching his office when it was well known who he was and what his business was.<sup>75</sup> He was, it seems, oblivious to his sacking which had occurred a month earlier. O'Brien instructed J. H. MacDonnell to represent Dunne and O'Sullivan.<sup>76</sup> This was paid for out of the disputed Dáil funds. This response suggested that O'Brien had no qualms about the assassination. Dunne's membership of O'Brien's IRB circle until its demise in January 1922 was also a factor in his support for Dunne. O'Brien does not seem to have had any direct connection with the killing and given that he was very much out of favour with Collins at that stage it is unlikely that he was consulted. Despite MacDonnell's efforts Dunne and O'Sullivan were convicted after a short trial and sentenced to death. Whether the assassination was a local initiative or authorised by Collins has been much debated by historians. If one accepts Hopkinson's theory that Collins was outwardly pro-Treaty but was trying to undermine it covertly by private adherence to republican aims, Dunne, who was initially pro-Treaty, fits the category of assistant he might have used.<sup>77</sup> Seán McGrath was in no doubt that 'the order had been given by Collins before the Truce had been confirmed'.<sup>78</sup> Hart is emphatic, however, that Dunne's 'deep desire for unambiguous patriotic action' led to the killing.<sup>79</sup> More recently, Noonan has concluded that there was strong but not conclusive evidence that Collins generated the idea if not the actual timing of the

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<sup>72</sup> Townshend, *Republic*, p. 404.

<sup>73</sup> See Keith Jeffery, *Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: a political soldier* (Oxford, 2006).

<sup>74</sup> Foxtan, *Revolutionary lawyers*, p. 340.

<sup>75</sup> O'Brien memo, 24 June 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8421/31).

<sup>76</sup> Foxtan, *Revolutionary lawyers*, pp 341-2.

<sup>77</sup> See Hopkinson, *Green against green*, p. 118.

<sup>78</sup> Seán McGrath interview, n.d. (UCDA, Ernie O'Malley notebooks, 176/100).

<sup>79</sup> Hart, *IRA at war*, pp 159-64.

event.<sup>80</sup> Either way, Hart concludes that the death of Wilson was ‘very nearly’ the last violent act of the republicans in London and the IRA certainly collapsed.<sup>81</sup> Republicans sent Patrick Murray to England in September 1922 as an organiser but this proved largely unsuccessful.<sup>82</sup>

The onset of the Civil War also threw the ISDL into turmoil. On 29 July 1922, O’Brien, Seán McGrath and a number of other London based members attempted to assume control. This was condemned by the pro-Treaty P. J. Kelly and Hugh Lee as an attempt to ‘divert the influence of ISDL to a policy of revolt and the use of the *Irish Exile* to attack Free State Leaders’.<sup>83</sup> They affirmed their support for the Provisional government ‘in the effort to secure ordered government in Ireland, based upon the will of the Irish people’.<sup>84</sup> The Home Office cited Kelly’s jealousy of O’Brien as a key motivating factor in his pro-Treaty stance, noting that he was ‘trying to smash O’Brien’.<sup>85</sup> The ISDL fell apart in late July 1922. Under O’Brien it became a ‘London based radical rump, disparaged and disowned by early promoters of the movement in Liverpool’.<sup>86</sup> The Home Office reported that O’Brien’s popularity was diminishing rapidly and that many ‘former admirers complain of his autocratic pose’.<sup>87</sup> The London organiser for the ISDL resigned with the gripe: ‘No man could stand the domineering manner of Art O’Brien who endeavours to make a one man show of the League regardless of the opinion of either leaders or members’.<sup>88</sup>

## 5.7 Summer 1922 in Dublin

O’Brien travelled over and back to Dublin every few weeks during the first six months of 1922 and kept up a regular correspondence with Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh to ascertain how political matters were developing.<sup>89</sup> On 4 July he and Ó Ceallaigh were arrested at the latter’s house. They were taken to Portobello Barracks but released without

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<sup>80</sup> Noonan, *IRA in Britain*, pp 225-7.

<sup>81</sup> Hart, *IRA at war*, p. 162.

<sup>82</sup> See Hopkinson, *Green against green*, pp 254-5.

<sup>83</sup> Statement of P. J. Kelly and Hugh Lee, n.d. (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8432/5).

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> RROUK, 23 Mar. 1922 (TNA, CAB 24/134/81).

<sup>86</sup> Belchem, *Irish, Catholic and scouse*, pp 280-1.

<sup>87</sup> RROUK, 10 Aug. 1922 (TNA, CAB 24/138/56).

<sup>88</sup> RROUK, 20 July 1922 (TNA, CAB 24/138/15).

<sup>89</sup> See various correspondence between O’Brien and Ó Ceallaigh, Jan. to June 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8425/18).

charge the next day.<sup>90</sup> Seemingly unconcerned about the possibility of re-arrest, O'Brien returned to Dublin for a funeral at the end of July and was duly arrested at the Shelbourne on 2 August 'by a military man with revolver at the ready'. He was held at Portobello until 7 August when he was transferred to Maryborough prison.<sup>91</sup> On hearing of his arrest, Seán McGrath and Dutton rushed to Dublin. They met Collins on 18 August and insisted that there was no impropriety with regard to funds.<sup>92</sup> They reassured Collins that there was no intention to use the money 'for other purposes' (a euphemism for guns) and an agreement was reached with W. T. Cosgrave that O'Brien would be released and a writ served against him for the money.<sup>93</sup> O'Brien had calculated the amount of funds at £7,506.9.5 on 13 April 1922<sup>94</sup> but the Department of Finance served a writ for £8,755.17.1.<sup>95</sup> Cosgrave was adamant that O'Brien should be compelled to render 'a full and complete account of his office and pay over the sum of money due to Dáil funds'.<sup>96</sup> O'Brien left Dublin on 25 August.<sup>97</sup> The funeral of Collins took place on 28 August so he clearly did not stay for that event — and would hardly have been welcome. He received a strongly-worded anonymous letter before he left — 'they ought to have put a bullet into your worthless carcass [sic], you foul member of a bloody mutinous gang — get out of the country you mad fool'.<sup>98</sup>

The writ infuriated O'Brien and he resorted to his well-honed method of seeking legal advice and then further legal advice. Whatever funds he had at the turn of 1922 rapidly dissipated as he became more and more embroiled in costly litigation. Self-obsessed and oblivious to the wider context of the Civil War, O'Brien's focus was on *his* income, *his* integrity and *his* future. Dutton kept the government in Dublin happy for some time after his appointment as envoy but after a few months moved firmly to the anti-Treaty camp. The London office of the first Dáil Éireann was closed down in September 1922 as far as the IFS government was concerned but lingered on in its new incarnation as London office of the Irish Republican government.

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<sup>90</sup> O'Brien press release, 10 July 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8425/17).

<sup>91</sup> O'Brien diary entries, Aug. 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8457/7); II, 3 Aug. 1922.

<sup>92</sup> Memo by Dutton, 29 Aug. 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8420/10).

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> London Office of Dáil Éireann accounts, Oct. to Dec. 1921 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8432/27).

<sup>95</sup> See John A. Costello to Sec. Dept. of Finance, 9 Oct. 1926 (NAI, Attorney General papers, 66/26).

<sup>96</sup> W. T. Cosgrave to Hugh Kennedy, 20 Oct. 1922 (NAI, DT/S6903).

<sup>97</sup> O'Brien diary entry (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8457/7).

<sup>98</sup> Anonymous letter addressed to O'Brien, posted 23 Aug. 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8461/14).

On 6 October 1922 O'Brien wrote a memo to de Valera detailing the writ served against him and advising that the cost of defending himself could be as high as £1,000.<sup>99</sup> In a crucial letter — one which O'Brien would use again and again to defend himself from accusations of misdemeanour in relation to money — de Valera wrote: 'I expect the temporary government for the Republic to be set up in a few days ... I will offer you re-appointment after asking of course, as a preliminary, for a full statement of the position in London, offices, accounts etc. ... you should be indemnified for the costs of your defence'.<sup>100</sup> At O'Brien's request, Austin Stack and de Valera sent him a letter directing him to hold the London funds on behalf of the 'Republic'.<sup>101</sup> More importantly from O'Brien's point of view, the republican Minister for Home Affairs, Patrick Ruttledge, wrote to O'Reilly Solicitors in Dublin giving them full permission to defend his action against the writ instituted by the IFS government.<sup>102</sup> While this was somewhat careless from a 'government' with such poor finances, this letter and de Valera's of 13 October 1922 were used by O'Brien to justify all his subsequent legal expenditure and his occupation of the moral high ground. In O'Brien's defence, this research uncovered a letter from Ruttledge to de Valera in which he stated: 'As this action so vitally concerns the republican government it is only reasonable that we should indemnify him'.<sup>103</sup> De Valera replied that the indemnity 'should certainly be given'.<sup>104</sup> An opportunity to prove in court that 'Cosgrave and Co. are not the legal successors of the Republic' could not be squandered.<sup>105</sup> By the time that de Valera and Ruttledge grasped the level of the costs involved, O'Brien's horse had bolted.

## 5.8 De Valera's man in London

While in Dublin in July 1922 O'Brien wrote to de Valera to offer his services unreservedly either in Ireland or elsewhere. De Valera urged him to return to London immediately and to use all his press contacts for a propaganda campaign in support of

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<sup>99</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 6 Oct. 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8423/13).

<sup>100</sup> De Valera to O'Brien, 13 Oct. 1922, *ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Austin Stack and de Valera to O'Brien, 22 Nov. 1922, *ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Ruttledge to O'Reilly, 22 Nov. 1922, *ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Ruttledge to de Valera, 27 Nov. 1922 (UCDA, De Valera papers, P150/1710).

<sup>104</sup> De Valera to Ruttledge, 28 Nov. 1922, *ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> De Valera to Ruttledge, 21 Nov. 1922, *ibid.*

the republic.<sup>106</sup> In particular, O'Brien was asked to focus on the threat of war used by the British in relation to the Treaty and to state that Griffith and Collins were 'acting dictatorially ... a law unto themselves'.<sup>107</sup> O'Brien offered de Valera all the accounts (but not the funds!) of the London office as soon as there was someone available to audit them for the republican government.<sup>108</sup> He advised that he would close the London office and hold the funds at interest keeping a reserve of £500 for possible costs in his legal action. Instead of closing the office, however, he kept it open until mid-1923 and continued to reside in the Grosvenor Hotel and draw down his salary.

On 21 November de Valera, as president of the newly constituted 'Government of the Republic of Ireland', wrote again to O'Brien asking for his assistance in regard to publicity in England.<sup>109</sup> Count Plunkett, who was also anti-Treaty, asked O'Brien to arrange 'a shower of letters to the English Press' in a manner which would appeal 'to Englishmen' and was confident O'Brien would 'set things humming'.<sup>110</sup> De Valera also pandered to O'Brien's self-importance describing him as 'the doyen' of the overseas mission for the Republic in a letter in which he asked him to act as superintendent of all the continental countries.<sup>111</sup> Correspondence between de Valera and O'Brien during this period shows that de Valera still hoped that world opinion could be swayed in favour of a republic and that he would be invited once again to meet Lloyd George.<sup>112</sup> This was not as unrealistic a position as it might now seem. In September 1922 the British were concerned that there was only one signatory to the Treaty — Duggan — who had 'neither died nor ratted'.<sup>113</sup> Hopkinson notes that Churchill had concerns at that stage that de Valera would return to his position as a 'political negotiator'.<sup>114</sup> O'Brien made it clear to de Valera that he did not intend to be sidelined in any further negotiations. 'It is not a question of personality but of service to the nation' he insisted.<sup>115</sup> Clearly, he was still smarting from his exclusion from the

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<sup>106</sup> De Valera to O'Brien, 4 July 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/8).

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 19 Oct. 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8423/13).

<sup>109</sup> De Valera to O'Brien, 21 Nov. 1922, *ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Plunkett to O'Brien, 27 Oct. 1922, *ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> De Valera to O'Brien, 22 Nov. 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8422/10).

<sup>112</sup> See various de Valera/O'Brien correspondence, *ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> Cope to Curtis, 29 Sept. 1922 (PA, LG/F/3/50).

<sup>114</sup> Hopkinson, *Green against green*, p. 234.

<sup>115</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 30 Oct. 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8461/3).

Treaty negotiations. At de Valera's request, he made extensive arrangements to organise and fund republican envoys in Paris (Leopold Kerney), Genoa/Rome (Dónal Hales) and the US (Laurence Ginnell) during late 1922 and early 1923.<sup>116</sup> O'Brien was also actively involved in channelling money from the US through London to Dublin for the republicans during late 1922 and early 1923. Nearly £8,000 was transferred but intercepted by intelligence services in Dublin.<sup>117</sup> In light of subsequent financial issues between the republicans and O'Brien, it must be emphasised that they continued to trust him with large sums of money. He may have been extravagant but O'Brien was not inherently dishonest.

In late 1922 de Valera asked O'Brien to co-ordinate a complaint to the International Red Cross about the ill-treatment and executions of republican prisoners.<sup>118</sup> O'Brien's penchant for copious correspondence and recourse to legal advice before taking action exasperated de Valera who in February 1923 wrote: 'for goodness sake ... the making of the protest is the important thing ... to aim at absolute perfection in this world is to fail. Life is too short'.<sup>119</sup> As on many previous occasions, O'Brien's obsession with detail had blinded him to the urgency of the situation. In January 1922, while he was busy compiling mountains of paperwork for the Red Cross but making no formal complaint, thirty-four republican prisoners were executed.<sup>120</sup>

During the latter half of 1922 and the early months of 1923 O'Brien ran the Dáil Éireann London office largely as he had done prior to the Treaty — except that he was now providing propaganda information for newspapers and MPs in support of the republicans. He closed the office in Adam Street and moved to an office at the *Music Trades Review*, the family business (also known as G. D. Ernest & Co.), which was just a few doors away at 5/6 Duke Street. He continued to assist prisoners either in jail or as they were released. He presided over meetings of the Roger Casement Sinn Féin club and organised a Mass for the repose of the souls of Dunne and O'Sullivan.<sup>121</sup> O'Brien now faced competition as the IFS had also opened a publicity office, run by Frank

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<sup>116</sup> See various correspondence, Nov. 1922 to Feb. 1923 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8422/10).

<sup>117</sup> See O'Hegarty to Col. Carter, 4 June 1923 (UCDA, FitzGerald papers, P80/748).

<sup>118</sup> De Valera to O'Brien, 22 Nov. 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8422/10).

<sup>119</sup> De Valera to O'Brien, 22 Feb. 1923 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8424/14).

<sup>120</sup> Hopkinson, *Green against green*, p. 228.

<sup>121</sup> RROUK, 5 Oct. 1922 (TNA, CAB, 24/139/64).

McDonagh, in nearby Chandos Street.<sup>122</sup> One of McDonagh's first jobs was to arrange a Mass for Griffith and Collins at Southwark Cathedral on 11 September. Clearly he was moving in on O'Brien's pitch!

O'Brien also organised an anniversary commemoration for Terence MacSwiney at the Essex Hall in London in October 1922. An attendance of about one thousand people gave him some hope for the future.<sup>123</sup> Thanking O'Brien, Mary MacSwiney remarked that Terence was remembered in the city that murdered him when his name could not even be mentioned in Cork, the city he was murdered for.<sup>124</sup> O'Brien, however, mourned the lack of life in the republican movement in London and felt that some big effort was required to re-energise it.<sup>125</sup> Trying to revive the movement was not easy in the face of the increasingly bitter Civil War in Ireland.<sup>126</sup> Kissane believes that after the death of Collins the IFS government embarked on a new political programme that drew much of its vigour from the policy of deliberately closing down every avenue of peace in the interests of driving their opponents into the political wilderness.<sup>127</sup> According to McMahon, the vast majority of the Irish community in Britain supported the IFS but the Civil War left them disillusioned, apathetic and silent.<sup>128</sup> A sense of this disillusion is captured in a letter sent to Dublin's lord mayor Laurence O'Neill by ISDL member Henry Benson: 'The death of Michael Collins is a national calamity but the deplorable vendetta now existing between rival forces of Irishmen ... will steadily sap the morale of our manhood and reduce the country to ruins and despair'.<sup>129</sup> While McMahon also argues that this left the field open for anti-Treaty extremists who were organised, fanatical and vociferous, this analysis does not really stand up to scrutiny.<sup>130</sup> Extremists they may have been, but they were in complete disarray, had no popular leader and were virtually invisible to all but the

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<sup>122</sup> Frank McDonagh to Desmond FitzGerald, 1 Sept. 1922 (UCDA, FitzGerald papers, P80/331/16).

<sup>123</sup> O'Brien to Eamonn O'Donnelly, 13 Nov. 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8425/17).

<sup>124</sup> Mary MacSwiney to O'Brien, 27 Oct. 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8428/36).

<sup>125</sup> O'Brien to Fowler, 23 Nov. 1922 (NLI, Joseph Fowler papers, MS 27097/5).

<sup>126</sup> Moulton, *Ireland and the Irish in interwar England*, p. 148.

<sup>127</sup> Kissane, *Irish Civil War*, p. 84.

<sup>128</sup> McMahon, *British spies*, p. 107.

<sup>129</sup> Henry Benson to Laurence O'Neill, 25 Aug. 1922 (Privately held papers). Benson was the landlord of the Turk's Head hotel in Bradford and was involved in gun-running during the War of Independence. See Richard Walsh (IMA, BMH, WS 400). I am grateful to John Kennedy, great-grandson of Henry Benson, for access to his papers.

<sup>130</sup> McMahon, *British spies*, p. 107.



British secret service, the IFS government and the republican leadership. The Irish in Britain were in fact tired of republicanism and were turning their attention to local matters.<sup>131</sup> In a scathing dismissal the Home Office reported in December 1922:

More than 90% of the Irish in Great Britain are in favour of the Free State ... the remaining small minority are not among those who count socially, politically or in the commercial world ... they are mainly young men and women led by fanatics and intriguers ... the majority have neither pluck nor intelligence.<sup>132</sup>

In spite of this lack of support, O'Brien continued to rally his diminishing troops by arranging meetings and protests, delivering handbills at all Catholic churches and placing special emphasis on the horror of the IFS executions of republicans.<sup>133</sup> His loyal Indian nationalist friend Saklatvala supported O'Brien during this period urging the Irish to form a republican Labour party.<sup>134</sup> Saklatvala was also briefed to ask questions in the House of Commons about why the British government did not intervene to stop the executions in Ireland as it had done recently in Greece.<sup>135</sup> At a meeting of Bermondsey ISDL on 21 January 1923 to celebrate 'the Irish Republic's fourth anniversary', O'Brien addressed a group of six hundred having been introduced as 'the deputy of President de Valera'.<sup>136</sup> The crowd was encouraged by various speakers to take a solemn vow to do all in their power to achieve a republic. One speaker referred to Collins as 'Churchill's chum'.<sup>137</sup> A new Irish Republican Prisoners Fund was started 'to provide comforts for the men in the mountains'.<sup>138</sup> The Home Office reported that O'Brien was also using weekly meetings of the GLL at the Minerva Café in Holborn as a cover for meeting 'Irish extremist men'.<sup>139</sup> The War Office compiled a report on O'Brien and noted that he stressed two main issues in his speeches — that the five signatories of the Treaty should have been arrested and that Britain should withdraw the threat of war against the Irish people if they rejected the

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<sup>131</sup> RROUK, 2 Nov. 1922 (TNA, CAB 24/139/93).

<sup>132</sup> RROUK, 7 Dec. 1922 (TNA, CAB 24/140/53).

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> RROUK, 30 Nov. 1922 (TNA, CAB 24/140/37).

<sup>135</sup> O'Brien to Ó Cruadhlaoidh, 29 Nov. 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8428/36). In the event, Keir Hardie MP asked the question. See *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, 159, cc 884-5 (22 Nov. 1922).

<sup>136</sup> RROUK, 25 Jan. 1923 (TNA, CAB/24/158/49).

<sup>137</sup> Frank McDonagh to Desmond FitzGerald, 21 Jan. 1923 (UCDA, FitzGerald papers, P80/331/33).

<sup>138</sup> RROUK, 25 Jan. 1923 (TNA, CAB/24/158/49).

<sup>139</sup> RROUK, 11 Jan. 1923 (TNA, CAB/24/158/15); RROUK, 1 Feb. 1923 (TNA, CAB/ 24/158/75).

Treaty.<sup>140</sup> Seán McGrath, still very much O'Brien's closest associate, was described as the 'go-between' with English arms agents.<sup>141</sup> O'Brien was also under pressure from republicans in London to give up on the ISDL and to form a new republican organisation.<sup>142</sup> Brian Hannigan was to the forefront in this campaign but O'Brien would not yield.<sup>143</sup> Clearly by this stage, the republican movement was, as Moulton has described it, 'weakened and embittered'.<sup>144</sup>

## 5.9 Deportation

Michael Collins was averse to co-operation with the British security forces against anti-Treaty republicans in England and preferred to have his own men on the ground.<sup>145</sup> After his death, Cosgrave adopted a new approach and by the end of 1922 the Irish and British security services co-operated closely together.<sup>146</sup> Despite the lacklustre organisation of the republicans in Britain, Desmond FitzGerald believed that the republicans in Ireland were getting 'stuff' from England in fairly large quantities.<sup>147</sup> In December 1922 the British government indicated to the IFS government that while they were anxious to assist in combating the threat from the anti-Treaty IRA, they were not planning to take any action against activists in England 'except on the initiative of the Irish government'.<sup>148</sup> If such assistance was required, they envisaged a situation where those arrested in England would be conveyed to Ireland for trial.<sup>149</sup> By 13 January a perceived increase in anti-Treaty activity in Britain led to the dispatch of

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<sup>140</sup> Art O'Brien (TNA, WO 35, 206/17).

<sup>141</sup> RROUK, 9 Nov. 1922 (TNA, CAB, 24/140/2).

<sup>142</sup> See O'Brien to Hannigan, 17 Oct. 1922 and Fr. O'Connell to O'Brien, 17 Jan. 1923 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8433/4).

<sup>143</sup> Hannigan had been an active member of the ISDL and the IRA but now wished to establish the *Irish Freedom League* in order to heal divisions between various factions in London. He was the London leader most favoured by the republican government. See Ó Ceallacháin to Chief of Staff, 9 Jan. 1924 (UCDA, De Valera papers, P150/1776).

<sup>144</sup> Moulton, *Ireland and the Irish in interwar England*, p. 153.

<sup>145</sup> McMahon, *British spies*, p. 105.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>147</sup> Desmond FitzGerald to Richard Mulcahy, 2 Dec. 1922 (UCDA, FitzGerald papers, P80/338/3).

<sup>148</sup> Michael McDunphy to the Irish Free State (hereafter IFS) Executive Council, 1 Jan. 1923 in Ronan Fanning, Michael Kennedy, Dermot Keogh and Eunan O'Halpin (eds), *Documents on Irish foreign policy*, Vol. II, 1923-1926 (Dublin, 2000), p. 24.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

the Irish director of Intelligence, Diarmuid O’Hegarty, to London to confer with his counterpart Colonel John Carter.<sup>150</sup>

In the early hours of 11 March 1923 about 100 people were rounded up in Britain under regulation 14B of the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act and deported to Ireland.<sup>151</sup> There was no real terrorist threat in Britain at the time so this action was taken solely in the context of the British government’s desire to shore up the Treaty — any unravelling of which would have been detrimental to the wider Empire. Ward refers to the ‘dying gasp of imperial paramountcy’ which the British government was trying to preserve alongside Irish independence.<sup>152</sup> O’Brien was arrested at 57 Drayton Gardens, London, where he was staying with his mother and sister. He was taken by train to Liverpool with the other deportees, including Seán McGrath, and thence to Kingstown on *HMS Castor*. From Kingstown the group was transferred in two navy destroyers to the North Wall, where they were arrested and taken to Mountjoy. In all, they spent twenty-two hours on board ship in cramped and unsanitary conditions.<sup>153</sup> The *Belfast Newsletter* reported the arrest of ‘the notorious Art O’Brien’.<sup>154</sup>

In an interesting parallel, the British government had consulted the Indian government in December 1920 about deporting Saklatvala to India.<sup>155</sup> The Viceroy, however, rejected the idea. ‘A man of his type’, he wrote, ‘would do considerably more harm [here] amongst half-educated workers ... than in England where the level of intelligence is much higher’.<sup>156</sup> Clearly, the IFS government had no such concerns given it intended to put all the deportees in jail immediately. The Home Office was initially very pleased with the effect of the deportations believing that they had brought the anti-Treaty organisation in London to a standstill.<sup>157</sup> Citing ‘a well-informed correspondent’, a Home Office report suggested that most people were

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<sup>150</sup> IFS Executive Council minutes, 13 Jan. 1923 in Fanning et al, *Documents on Irish foreign policy*, Vol. II, p. 31.

<sup>151</sup> See NAI, DT/3/S2156 for names and addresses of all those arrested. For accounts of the deportations and ensuing legal actions see McConville, *Irish political prisoners, 1920-1962: pilgrimage of desolation*, pp 139-51 and Foxton, *Revolutionary lawyers*, pp 346-70.

<sup>152</sup> Ward, *Irish constitutional tradition*, p. 182.

<sup>153</sup> Report of Metropolitan Police to Treasury Solicitor, 6 Sept. 1923 (TNA, MEPO 38/111).

<sup>154</sup> *Belfast Newsletter*, 13 Mar. 1923.

<sup>155</sup> J. W. Hose to Sir Vernon, 29 Dec. 1920 (TNA, KV2/613).

<sup>156</sup> Viceroy of India to Secretary of State, n.d., *ibid*.

<sup>157</sup> RROUK, 22 Mar. 1923 (TNA, CAB 24/159/66).

relieved that O'Brien was in custody because 'all of them could see he was likely to lead them into trouble'.<sup>158</sup> In addition, all the IRA's officers in Liverpool and Newcastle were arrested, as were several from Birmingham and two from London.<sup>159</sup> A report from Moss Twomey to Liam Lynch dated 5 April declared that the chances of further operations in Britain were now negligible if not altogether impossible.<sup>160</sup>

This action of the British government caused a furore on both sides of the Irish Sea with questions asked in both the Dáil and the House of Commons as to the propriety of the move.<sup>161</sup> In the Dáil Thomas Johnson, leader of the Labour Party (the only opposition in the Dáil), expressed concern as to whether the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act was used in contravention of Ireland's new status.<sup>162</sup> He believed the British government's actions implied that it still had supreme control in Ireland and also noted that the same government was now composed of people who would like to belittle the amount of authority that had been won by the Treaty.<sup>163</sup> Cosgrave moved quickly to quell any objections stating 'we asked for those prisoners ... we got those prisoners ... the parties to the agreement in this case are equal'.<sup>164</sup> Kevin O'Higgins insisted that 'none of us lost a wink of sleep as to whether it was or was not a derogation of sovereignty' and in reference to O'Brien claimed that one of those deported 'had sailed away with £7000 of public funds'.<sup>165</sup> The fury of Cosgrave and O'Higgins on being challenged about the deportations leaps from the pages of this debate. Allegations of being in cahoots with or under the control of the British were trying their patience to the limit.

O'Brien's old friends and supporters Saklatvala and Lansbury leapt into action in the House of Commons querying the legality of the deportations.<sup>166</sup> The House of Commons kept up the pressure and before the end of March, the British government had established an advisory committee to which the deportees could make

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<sup>158</sup> RROUK, 28 Mar. 1923 (TNA, CAB 24/159/77).

<sup>159</sup> O/C Britain (Pa Murray) to C/S (Liam Lynch), 30 Mar. 1923 (NAI, DFA, early series, captured documents, Box 7).

<sup>160</sup> Hopkinson, *Green against green*, p. 255.

<sup>161</sup> See Foxton, *Revolutionary lawyers*, pp 350-3 for a detailed account of the legal aspects involved.

<sup>162</sup> *II*, 21 Mar. 1923.

<sup>163</sup> Dáil Éireann debates, 20 Mar. 1923 (Stationery Office, Dublin).

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> *FJ*, 13 Mar. 1923.

representation. The IFS government agreed to allow individuals to travel back to Britain for the hearings and also allowed the detainees to avail of legal advice. O'Brien was quick to grasp this opportunity. He alone of all the deportees had the personal wealth to engage in legal action and he instructed his solicitors to make an application for a writ of habeus corpus in the divisional court in London. Subsequently, O'Brien argued that the 'Republican Government' initiated the case by sending O'Reilly solicitors into Mountjoy to assist him and was therefore responsible for the costs.<sup>167</sup> He did admit, however, that it was his sister Geraldine who engaged the London solicitors Gisborne, Woodhouse & Co.<sup>168</sup> They charged 100 guineas and expenses to travel to see O'Brien in Mountjoy.<sup>169</sup> In the next few weeks, Geraldine O'Brien, on behalf of her mother, paid them a further £1,250 for her brother's defence.<sup>170</sup>

The British Habeus Corpus Act of 1679 specifically prohibited imprisonment of his Majesty's subjects in prisons 'beyond the seas'.<sup>171</sup> The basis for O'Brien's legal challenge was that the establishment of the IFS separated it from Britain and therefore meant the Home Secretary had no control over the deportees in Ireland. O'Brien's case was heard in the divisional court on 10 April 1923 but was rejected. The application was renewed before the court of appeal on 13 April when Patrick Hastings, KC, appearing for O'Brien, declared it was 'illegal to remove the King's lièges across the water'.<sup>172</sup> The fact that O'Brien did not recognise the King was irrelevant according to Hastings because he was still a British subject.<sup>173</sup> In a unanimous decision the court ruled that O'Brien had been illegally deported and must be produced before the court on 16 May 1923. An appeal by the British government to the House of Lords against this embarrassing decision failed. O'Brien's case had succeeded in making a mockery of the British government. As Foxton comments, the judgement 'represents a rare and triumphant vindication of the rule of law in litigation arising from the Irish struggle of

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<sup>167</sup> O'Brien memo, 6 July 1923 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8445/6).

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Invoice from Gisborne's, Mar. 1923 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8437/27).

<sup>170</sup> Gisborne's to Geraldine O'Brien, 16 Mar. 1923 & receipt from Gisborne's, May 1923, *ibid*.

<sup>171</sup> See Porter R. Chandler, 'Praemunere and the Habeus Corpus Act considered in connection with the Irish deportations and the case of ex-parte O'Brien', *Columbia Law Review*, 24:3 (Mar. 1924), p. 276.

<sup>172</sup> Harold Scott, *Your obedient servant* (London, 1959), p. 51. Scott was the Home Office official charged with dealing with the fallout from the deportations.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

independence'.<sup>174</sup> Ironically, in accepting O'Brien's argument, the Court of Appeal also cemented the status of the IFS as a separate judicial entity to the UK. This point was not lost on Hugh Kennedy, the Irish Attorney General, who was busy trying to devise a constitution which would move the sources of judicial authority away from the Crown.<sup>175</sup> 'The judgement', he wrote, 'is of great interest to the Free State embodying as it does the recognition by English law of the co-equality of the country with Great Britain'.<sup>176</sup>

The British cabinet met to discuss the appeal decision and decided that it was necessary to introduce a bill to indemnify the Home Secretary and the Attorney General from civil or criminal charges in relation to the deportations.<sup>177</sup> The penalties for breach of the Habeus Corpus Act of 1679 included prison for life and forfeiture of all goods and chattels, so the pair were understandably worried. Although this bill was passed, the government endured widespread criticism in the Commons.<sup>178</sup> The O'Brien case became a 'cause célèbre' in British legal circles and the Indemnity Bill was described by Lord Justice Sankey some years later as 'an ad hoc order of council to legalise ex post facto acts which were clearly ultra vires'.<sup>179</sup>

In terms of the deportees, the logical consequence of O'Brien's victory was that the British government now had no control over them and had to rely on the goodwill of Cosgrave to effect their transfer back to Britain. It transpired that the British had had doubts about the legality of the operation from the beginning and had made an informal agreement with Cosgrave that he would return the deportees if requested to do so. On 9 May 1923 he wrote to O'Hegarty instructing him to send the prisoners back stating: 'We gave the undertaking previous to apprehension'.<sup>180</sup> Within days all the deportees were on their way back to Britain 'as a matter of grace, not of law'.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Foxton, *Revolutionary lawyers*, p. 360.

<sup>175</sup> See Thomas Towey, 'Hugh Kennedy and the constitutional development of the Irish Free State, 1922-1923', *The Irish Jurist*, 12:2 (1977), pp 355-70.

<sup>176</sup> Report of Irish Attorney General, 1923 (NAI, Attorney General papers, 66/26).

<sup>177</sup> *The Times*, 15 May 1923.

<sup>178</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 18 May 1923.

<sup>179</sup> *The Times*, 15 Mar. 1928.

<sup>180</sup> Cosgrave to O'Hegarty, 9 May 1923 (NAI, DT/S6903).

<sup>181</sup> Chandler, 'Praemunire', p. 274.

O'Brien returned to Britain on the steamship *Cambria* under escort of four National army officers and was handed over to three Scotland Yard detectives.<sup>182</sup> Considerable press coverage made O'Brien a household name in Britain and Ireland. According to the *Daily Mail*, he 'stood debonair and smiling in court ... waiting for the Attorney General to produce "the body" while 'two women stepped up to him and kissed his hand'.<sup>183</sup> Not quite as impressed, Harold Scott of the Home Office described him as 'a small dark-haired man with a pointed beard and bright dark eyes, looking more like a prosperous shopkeeper than a revolutionary'.<sup>184</sup> The *Manchester Guardian* described 'a quite unconventional' scene in court where the newspaper men crowded around Mr O'Brien and interviewed him: 'one has never seen a discharged prisoner interviewed under the judges' noses in open court before'.<sup>185</sup> Giving a wonderful sense of the theatricality of it all, it then described how 'he set off followed by swirling crowds of Irish friends, journalists and random sightseers'.<sup>186</sup> The *Pall Mall Gazette* was less impressed opining that 'we are overrun with Irish crime and Irish pauperism ... and should be able to return very large parcels of undesirables'.<sup>187</sup> *The Times* summed up the attitude of many in Britain: 'No one outside a small group of fanatics and dreamers can have the smallest sympathy for Mr O'Brien ... but the issue decided was of great constitutional importance'.<sup>188</sup> The *Daily News* lauded the decision as 'a warning to all future British governments of the danger of tampering with the liberty of British subjects'.<sup>189</sup>

O'Brien's long-time friend Saklatvala congratulated him in a telegram: 'Hearty congratulations, also thanks of British citizens whom you have protected against fanciful arrest by a cabinet of incompetent lawyers and easy-going home secretary ... you have also baffled plans of so-called Irish Free State whose head is like any slave-boy running after imperial chariot'.<sup>190</sup> The Home Office reported that many extremists

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<sup>182</sup> *Pall Mall Gazette*, 14 May 1923.

<sup>183</sup> *Daily Mail*, 17 May 1923.

<sup>184</sup> Scott, *Your obedient servant*, p. 50.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>186</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 17 May 1923.

<sup>187</sup> *Pall Mall Gazette*, 10 May 1923.

<sup>188</sup> *The Times*, 10 May 1923.

<sup>189</sup> *Daily News*, 10 May 1923.

<sup>190</sup> Saklatvala to O'Brien, 14 May 1923 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8437/26).

were elated at O'Brien's success but believed the republican cause was lost.<sup>191</sup> In a follow-up search in April the police raided the homes of London republicans whose names were found on the deportees. The net was closing in on the few remaining organisers.<sup>192</sup> For all the furore caused by the deportations, the actions taken had the desired effect of removing O'Brien from the republican scene in London. Tim Healy, the Governor General of the IFS, personally thanked the Home Secretary some months later, opining that without the British action 'The Free State was down and out'.<sup>193</sup>

### 5.10 Seditious conspiracy

O'Brien and Seán McGrath were immediately re-arrested after their release at the Old Bailey on 16 May and charged with seditious conspiracy including the destruction and prevention by force of arms of the Government of Ireland as by law established.<sup>194</sup> *Rex v. O'Brien and others* opened on 27 June 1923; the others were McGrath, Michael Galvin, Anthony Mularkey, Thomas Flynn, Seán O'Mahony TD, Patrick Fleming and Denis Fleming.<sup>195</sup> The prosecution regarded O'Brien as head of the conspiracy 'just as de Valera was in Ireland'.<sup>196</sup> The evidence against him consisted of transcripts of various anti-Treaty speeches given at ISDL meetings, copies of the *Republican War Bulletin* found on his person, copies of fund-raising letters he wrote for the republican government and evidence from his bank accounts of approximately £8000 transferred to Dublin banks in late 1922 and early 1923.<sup>197</sup> At the request of the British government, IFS army officers were dispatched to London to give evidence against O'Brien in particular.<sup>198</sup> The extraordinary nature of this co-operation between the IFS and British governments has come to light in this dissertation following a detailed analysis of O'Brien's trial papers.<sup>199</sup> The decision was undoubtedly personally vindictive given O'Brien's role in scuppering the deportation plan. The four army

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<sup>191</sup> RROUK, 17 May 1923 (TNA, CAB 24/160/49).

<sup>192</sup> *The Times*, 16 Apr. 1923.

<sup>193</sup> See W. C. Bridgeman to Caroline Bridgeman, 23 Oct. 1923 (Shropshire Archives, Correspondence of W. C. Bridgeman, 4629/1/1923/54) (<http://www.shropshirearchives.org.uk>) (accessed 23 Oct. 2017).

<sup>194</sup> *Rex v. A. P. O'Brien and others*, trial transcript (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8418/3).

<sup>195</sup> *II*, 28 June 1923. See also O'Brien seditious trial files, 1923 (TNA, HO 144/3577) and the criminal records (TNA, CRIM 1/235-6).

<sup>196</sup> *II*, 28 June 1923.

<sup>197</sup> *Rex v. A. P. O'Brien and others*, trial transcript (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8418/3).

<sup>198</sup> IFS Executive Council minutes, 4 May 1923 (NAI, DT/3/S6903).

<sup>199</sup> See copy of transcript of trial of *Rex v. Art O'Brien*, June 1923 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8437/3).



officers were not named in court for security reasons but referred to as witnesses A, B, C, and D. The purpose of the IFS witnesses was to confirm that Ireland was in a state of civil war at the time of the alleged offences. The *Freeman's Journal* reported that an unnamed IFS army officer gave evidence in London of various acts of hostility by the IRA.<sup>200</sup> Despite the subterfuge, O'Brien was able to identify one of the four as Major Charles McAlister because he had escorted some of the deportees back to Britain.<sup>201</sup> The McAlister family have also confirmed that he gave evidence against O'Brien and even managed to take in a tennis match at Wimbledon during the trial.<sup>202</sup> A memo in the National Archives of Ireland clearly identifies all four army officers: McAllister[sic],<sup>203</sup> Captain J. J. Smyth, Captain Thomas Taylor and Colonel George Pope Hodnett.<sup>204</sup>

When cross-examined at length by the prosecution O'Brien declared his belief that 'force and warfare are essentially wrong'.<sup>205</sup> He emphasised that the republic could not be attained by force of arms.<sup>206</sup> This despite his long-term role as a committed gun-runner! Even during his deportation in Dublin, O'Brien's sanction was sought by Dutton for the purchase of 'electrical appliances' — code for firearms.<sup>207</sup> He did admit to working for the maintenance of the republic with de Valera and Liam Lynch and agreed that maintenance of the republic was not consistent with the continuance of the IFS government.<sup>208</sup> Similarly, McGrath deplored the Civil War and suggested that the anti-Treaty forces should have surrendered sooner.<sup>209</sup> Convicted of seditious conspiracy, O'Brien was sentenced to two years in prison on 4 July 1923.<sup>210</sup> McGrath received a similar sentence.<sup>211</sup> The judge concluded that O'Brien and McGrath were party to 'a wicked seditious conspiracy to overthrow His Majesty's

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<sup>200</sup> *FJ*, 29 June 1923.

<sup>201</sup> See notes for counsel, trial of Art O'Brien (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8440/16).

<sup>202</sup> Interview with Conor McAlister, Terenure, Dublin, grandson of Charles McAlister, 25 Oct. 2016.

<sup>203</sup> McAlister is the correct spelling.

<sup>204</sup> Colonel Carter to General Hogan, 22 June 1923 (NAI, DT/S6903).

<sup>205</sup> *Rex v. A. P. O'Brien and others*, trial transcript, June 1923 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8437/3).

<sup>206</sup> *II*, 3 July 1923.

<sup>207</sup> Dutton to O'Brien, 4 Apr. 1923 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8437/26). This letter was sent with a coded signature — L. C. B. O'Moore — with Dutton's initials C. B. underlined.

<sup>208</sup> *Rex v. A. P. O'Brien and others*, trial transcript, June 1923 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8437/3).

<sup>209</sup> *II*, 4 July 1923.

<sup>210</sup> *FJ*, 5 July 1923.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.* Two of the others, O'Mahony and Patrick Fleming were acquitted while the rest received sentences of one year in prison.

government in Ireland'.<sup>212</sup> This particular turn of phrase must surely have convinced all present that dominion status and not independence was what had been achieved by the Treaty. His one-time confidant in Downing Street, Thomas Jones, declared himself happy that 'the treacherous villain Art O'Brien' had been arrested.<sup>213</sup> A demonstration in support of O'Brien and McGrath outside Brixton Prison a few days later was addressed by Shapurji Saklatvala who insisted 'there could be no halfway house as far as freedom [for any country] was concerned'.<sup>214</sup>

O'Brien's use of the legal system which many republicans chose not to recognise, his expenditure of large sums of money predicated on alleged approval by de Valera and a sense that this was all about him and his battle with the British government made him deeply unpopular in republican circles. The fact that the result of the deportation case was the confirmation of the status of the IFS was a further vexation. O'Brien's evidence in court in the sedition case, in particular the way he denounced force and warfare, infuriated republicans in London and in Ireland. In addition, prosecution questions about his finances led to press reports that O'Brien earned £730 a month, had an allowance of £120 a month for his accommodation at the Grosvenor Hotel and was still installed there over a year after the Treaty.<sup>215</sup> In an even more damning comment, he confessed to having spent an astronomical £3,600 on legal fees.<sup>216</sup> The self-obsession and arrogance of O'Brien was exposed for all to see. The republican approach was either not to recognise the court or to use it for a public display of defiance. By his actions, O'Brien had moved outside the fold of both the older Fenians and the new republicanism and was clearly concerned only with his own defence. Perhaps O'Brien felt he had done enough for Ireland at that stage and was too disillusioned to continue fighting for the republican cause. Foxton makes the important observation that 'gestures of defiance by prisoners before British courts did not carry the same heroic resonance as in Ireland'. Furthermore, because appearing in court did not raise the same ideological issues as the recognition of Crown courts in

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<sup>212</sup> *FJ*, 5 July 1923.

<sup>213</sup> Thomas Jones, *Whitehall diary: 1916-1925*, i, ed. Keith Middlemas (Oxford, 1969), p. 237.

<sup>214</sup> RROUK, 24 May 1923 (TNA, CAB 24/160/51).

<sup>215</sup> *FJ*, 3 July 1923.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*

Ireland, prisoners tended to engage more fully with the process.<sup>217</sup> With O'Brien in prison and Dutton, as he described himself 'ar seachrán' trying to avoid arrest, the London office of the first Dáil Éireann finally came to an end in mid-1923.<sup>218</sup>

The habeus corpus appeal and the sedition trial had a very detrimental effect on O'Brien's personal finances and he required a loan of £1,500 from the *Music Trades Review*, details of which he endeavoured to keep from his mother.<sup>219</sup> His persistent belief that his legal costs should be met by republican funds harked back to his initial contact with de Valera after the Treaty. Rutledge and de Valera discussed the costs involved for the sedition trial but were reluctant to commit funds as O'Brien was likely to be convicted and because they thought the Irish in London should raise the money.<sup>220</sup> Dutton informed de Valera that O'Brien 'felt let down and very despondent at not having a word of appreciation from you'.<sup>221</sup> This occurred at a time when the republican soldiers in many areas had neither clothing nor footwear nor adequate food.<sup>222</sup> De Valera suggested that 'O'Brien's sense of proportion was lacking' and wondered if he had forgotten the scores of [republican] soldiers who have been 'tried and executed without legal defence'.<sup>223</sup> The gulf between O'Brien's understanding of the republicans' status during the Civil War and the reality on the ground was breathtaking. He saw his trial as a great propaganda case for the Irish Republic and believed that 'success would be a triumph well worth the money expended'.<sup>224</sup> Moreover, his freedom was essential, in his view, to the republican cause. His self-obsession became a major liability to the republicans as it had to the IFS.

To a man used to his comforts prison was certainly a hard station. Many republicans went from being on the run in the mountains in harsh weather to the relative comfort of prison, whereas O'Brien had to leave the grandeur of the Grosvenor Hotel. His sister Geraldine and some of their London-Irish friends, including Saklatvala, embarked on a campaign to have him and others released. When that met

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<sup>217</sup> Foxton, *Revolutionary lawyers*, p. 333.

<sup>218</sup> Translation: wandering, i.e. from house to house, to avoid arrest.

<sup>219</sup> O'Brien to Gisborne, 24 Dec. 1923 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8437/26).

<sup>220</sup> Rutledge to de Valera, 13 June 1923 (UCDA, De Valera papers, P150/1710).

<sup>221</sup> Dutton to de Valera, 14 & 21 June 1923 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8445/6).

<sup>222</sup> See Hopkinson, *Green against green*, p. 219.

<sup>223</sup> De Valera to Dutton, 23 June 1923 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8445/6).

<sup>224</sup> O'Brien memo, 6 July 1923, *ibid*.

with no success, an appeal seeking political prisoner status was launched. Archbishop Amigo lent his name to this appeal.<sup>225</sup> First class misdemeanant status, the nearest British equivalent to political status, was finally granted in May 1924.<sup>226</sup> Some personal letters during O'Brien's deportation and imprisonment survive and give an insight into the very loving family he possessed. Geraldine affectionately addressed her brother as 'Dear old Ponch', a soubriquet which O'Brien might perhaps have wished was kept private! She described how their maid 'provided the necessary touch of comedy by putting her head on the gas stove and weeping' when he was arrested. More worryingly she told him that she and her mother were given notice to quit their flat because of the 'fracas'.<sup>227</sup> The trio seemed to have maintained a strong and close relationship despite O'Brien's Irish activities and there was never any suggestion of estrangement.

Undeterred by his imprisonment, O'Brien instructed his solicitors to claim damages for false imprisonment in relation to his deportation to Ireland. Encouraged by this, a further 106 detainees made similar claims. An attempt by O'Brien, as the lead litigant, to collect £50 from each deportee towards his own legal expenses failed miserably.<sup>228</sup> The compensation amounts paid ranged from £200 to £1,500 with the average award being around £400.<sup>229</sup> Despite seeking a rather extravagant £7,000, O'Brien was awarded just £441. In all, the compensation cost the British government £54,140.12.0.<sup>230</sup> Harold Scott described it as a costly mistake which, however, he was forced to admit 'may prove one day to be the cornerstone our liberty'.<sup>231</sup>

### **5.11 Political and financial collapse**

The IFS government appointed James McNeill, brother of Eoin, as High Commissioner to London on 2 January 1923 but he struggled to find a role for himself and found

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<sup>225</sup> Geraldine O'Brien to Amigo, 24 Dec. 1923 (SDA, Amigo papers, Correspondence re: Ireland, R66.1, Part 2).

<sup>226</sup> See Geraldine O'Brien to Amigo, 19 May 1924, *ibid.*; *II*, 14 May 1924. For description of this status see McConville, *Political imprisonment, 1848-1920: theatres of war*, p. 318.

<sup>227</sup> Geraldine O'Brien to O'Brien, 19 Mar. 1923 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/25).

<sup>228</sup> RROUK, 28 June 1923 (TNA, CAB 24/160/95).

<sup>229</sup> List of compensation awards made to deportees to Ireland, Sept. 1923 (TNA, MEPO 38/111).

<sup>230</sup> See Foxton, *Revolutionary lawyers*, p. 369.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

navigating the corridors of Whitehall difficult.<sup>232</sup> In remarkably similar tones to those of O'Brien in 1921 and 1922, McNeill complained bitterly about being harassed by the Department of Finance and kept in the dark about the political issues of the day: 'Obviously the High Commissioner cannot be an ambassador but he need not be an office boy'.<sup>233</sup> In December 1923, the 'Government of the Republic of Ireland' appointed Brian Hannigan as *its* representative in Britain and asked Dutton and Fintan Murphy to assist him.<sup>234</sup> Together they attempted to replace the ISDL with the Irish Freedom League (IFL) but it never took off.<sup>235</sup> The main result of the elevation of both McNeill and Hannigan was that they put a firm end to O'Brien's reign as London envoy.

When he was released by the newly elected Labour government in July 1924 it was 'to an appalling state of confusion' in both his personal and other affairs.<sup>236</sup> His abject misery was summed up in a letter to de Valera: 'After 18 months in jail, I find my home wrecked, my mother and sister in a poor state of health and my affairs generally in chaos. I am bothered by creditors and others on every side. My own health is impaired and I am sick with worry'.<sup>237</sup> In addition, the Irish in Britain had moved on to a phase defined by the autonomy of the IFS.<sup>238</sup> O'Brien, however, insisted that he would continue the struggle for the recognition of the Irish Republic.<sup>239</sup> Bizarrely, he then claimed to de Valera that he was still the envoy of the Irish Republic in London, arguing that just because the office was closed down it did not mean his appointment was terminated.<sup>240</sup> In a trenchant response, an exasperated de Valera replied that he had terminated O'Brien's appointment in July 1923 and stated that confidence in O'Brien had been shattered by his persistent refusal to furnish accounts, his squandering of large sums of money on his own legal defence and his statements during his trial.<sup>241</sup> In spite of this, and presumably because they thought he still had

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<sup>232</sup> Keown, *First of the small nations*, p. 122.

<sup>233</sup> James McNeill to Desmond FitzGerald, 2 Mar. 1923 in Fanning et al, *Documents on Irish foreign policy*, Vol. II, pp 66-8.

<sup>234</sup> Domhnall Ó Ceallacháin to Dutton, 31 Dec. 1923 (NLI, AÓBP, MS, 8445/4).

<sup>235</sup> Moulton, *Ireland and the Irish in interwar England*, p. 244.

<sup>236</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 24 July 1924 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/2).

<sup>237</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 7 Sept. 1924, *ibid*.

<sup>238</sup> Moulton, *Ireland and the Irish in interwar England*, p. 153.

<sup>239</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 24 Sept. 1924.

<sup>240</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 6 Sept. 1924 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/2).

<sup>241</sup> De Valera to O'Brien, 10 Sept. 1924, *ibid*.

money they could access, de Valera and Stack invited O'Brien to meet them in Dublin on 16 September 1924. He attended but re-iterated his conviction that he had taken the court case under instruction from the republican government which owed him money rather than the other way around.<sup>242</sup> His doggedness won the day as they agreed to set up an enquiry into his dismissal.<sup>243</sup> O'Brien then challenged the composition of the enquiry, further correspondence ensued, and all attempts by de Valera and Stack to wrest any money from him failed.<sup>244</sup> It is also difficult to see what authority, if any, they held by the end of 1924 to run enquiries or courts with what Foxtan describes as 'that unrelenting pursuit of financial rectitude which was one of the curious characteristics of the Irish revolution'.<sup>245</sup>

Rumours of O'Brien squandering money on his own defence were rife in London-Irish circles. Sections of the now very diminished ISDL were aggrieved and accused him of plundering their funds, but there is no evidence to support this accusation. The perceived rejection of the republican forces in the testimony of McGrath and O'Brien also hardened opposition against them. Never one for self-criticism O'Brien blamed the republican government in Dublin for spreading false information about him.<sup>246</sup> He called a meeting in London on 19 September 1924 at which both he and McGrath defended their stance on funds and the republic and denied any wrong-doing. A unanimous vote of confidence in them was passed but it masked the fact that their greatest critics declined to attend the meeting.<sup>247</sup> The reality was that what little remained of the ISDL was now divided in its loyalty to O'Brien. Some attempts were made to reconcile the ISDL with the IFL but Hannigan complained to de Valera that O'Brien was 'so objectionable' that no merger was possible.<sup>248</sup> Most officers of the IFL thought O'Brien and McGrath should be ostracised

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<sup>242</sup> O'Brien report of meeting with de Valera and Stack, 10 Sept. 1924 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8438/1).

<sup>243</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 24 Oct. 1924 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/2).

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Foxtan, *Revolutionary lawyers*, p. 374.

<sup>246</sup> O'Brien to de Valera, 11 Aug. 1924 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/2).

<sup>247</sup> O'Brien report of meeting, 19 Sept. 1924 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8438/1).

<sup>248</sup> Brian Hannigan to de Valera, 30 Sept. 1924 (NLI, Austin Stack papers, MS 17079).

from the republican movement unless absolved for their evidence at the sedition trial. This did not augur well for any rapprochement.<sup>249</sup>

In an attempt to unify the various republican strands in Britain, de Valera advised that they should all come under the Sinn Féin banner.<sup>250</sup> This was anathema to O'Brien who regarded the ISDL as a personal fiefdom and seemed oblivious to the fact that he had lost control of great swathes of it. In a final humiliation for O'Brien and McGrath, de Valera informed them in April 1925 that the ISDL would no longer be recognised if it did not join Sinn Féin.<sup>251</sup> De Valera regretted that 'circumstances have made imperative this decision to deny it [the ISDL] further recognition'.<sup>252</sup> O'Brien deeply resented this interference from Dublin. Before the Treaty, Irish organisations in London had a sense of superiority by helping the 'poor Irish at home' as they moved towards independence. After the Treaty 'the Irish at home' were more assertive and in control of their own destiny. Most Irish in London realised that, but O'Brien clung to a belief that he knew what was best for Ireland. In fact, his influence had all but disappeared. By the late 1920s and early 1930s Irish activity in Britain centred around commemoration of 1916 and the Manchester Martyrs, the repatriation of Casement's remains and some Gaelic League classes.<sup>253</sup> The 'republic' was off the agenda.

In 1926 renewed attempts were made by the Department of Finance in Dublin to recoup the London funds.<sup>254</sup> This was on foot of information that O'Brien had sued the *Catholic Herald* for defamation in relation to the funds issue and was awarded damages of a paltry £600 given the magnitude of O'Brien's debts.<sup>255</sup> The advice from solicitors to John A. Costello, the Irish attorney general, was that chasing this money might not justify the expenditure of money and time.<sup>256</sup> A recent decision of the English courts had ruled that Judgement Extension Acts no longer applied in Ireland (another recognition of the IFS as a separate entity) and therefore they would need to

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<sup>249</sup> Copy of report by Fintan Murphy and Tomás O'Sullivan, 2 Oct. 1924, *ibid.*

<sup>250</sup> De Valera to O'Brien, 28 Aug. 1924 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/2).

<sup>251</sup> De Valera to O'Brien, 20 Apr. 1925 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/1).

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>253</sup> Moulton, *Ireland and the Irish in interwar England*, p. 248.

<sup>254</sup> Ó Braonáin to Attorney General, 7 Oct. 1926 (NAI, Attorney General papers, 66/26).

<sup>255</sup> *Daily Mail*, 27 Apr. 1926.

<sup>256</sup> James O'Connor to John A. Costello, 31 Aug. 1926 (NAI, Attorney General papers, 66/26).

establish fresh substantive proceedings in England.<sup>257</sup> Costello's comment that 'the defendant is really no mark for the money due by him' brought an end to these proceedings.<sup>258</sup> The writ was only finally extinguished in 1935 when O'Brien joined the Irish civil service.<sup>259</sup>

## 5.12 Conclusion

The years immediately after the Treaty saw a catastrophic collapse in O'Brien's fortunes, both politically and personally. From being the leader of Irish nationalism in London he came to be treated, in his own words, as 'some national pariah — an untouchable whom every good nationalist should avoid'.<sup>260</sup> His anti-Treaty activities alone did not cause this disgrace. It was his attempt to hi-jack the ISDL, which had democratically decided to support the Treaty, for his own ends that started the rot and alienated his support. He was regarded as autocratic and dictatorial and seemed oblivious to the fact that republicanism in Britain was of very little interest to all but a few diehards. In Britain and in London, in particular, the Irish had moved on.

While encouraged by de Valera and Ruttledge to challenge both the writ and the deportation, O'Brien embarked on expensive legal actions with funds that were not his own. Ironically, this activity succeeded in confirming the IFS as a legal entity in its own right and led to increased co-operation between the Irish and British governments. O'Brien's evidence condemning the Civil War was the final nail in his coffin as far as republicans were concerned. Had he remained in jail in Mountjoy, and become a martyr for the cause, he might well have fared much better. By contrast, his friend and fellow envoy Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh spent most of the Civil War in prison in Ireland, joined Fianna Fáil and became a minister in the 1932 government and had an altogether happier experience after the Treaty. O'Brien had only himself to blame for his downfall and bleak future. His family, who valued his business acumen despite his political views, provided some consolation. He was welcomed back into the family business with open arms on his release from prison and became managing director of

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<sup>257</sup> John A. Costello to Sec. Dept. of Finance, 9 Oct. 1926, *ibid.*

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>259</sup> See O'Brien, application for reinstatement to Irish civil service, n.d. (NAI, DT/S5735/A).

<sup>260</sup> O'Brien to Ó Ceallaigh, 6 May 1932 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8461/20).



G. D. Ernest and Co. and chief editor of the *Music Trades Review*, its main publication. He held this position until 1935. It was not a very lucrative position, however, and his legal debts continued to be a burden.

When de Valera came to power in 1932, he initiated a civil service scheme to reinstate republican sympathisers who had been dismissed after the Treaty. To the surprise of many, not least the Department of Finance, who deemed his case to be 'of quite an exceptional nature', O'Brien was re-instated and appointed Irish Minister to France in 1935.<sup>261</sup> In Chapter 6 his years in the wilderness, his French sojourn and his retirement to Dublin are discussed.

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<sup>261</sup> Sec. to Minister for Finance (Honohan) to P. S. Ó Muireadhaigh, 28 Sept. 1934 (NAI, DT/3/S6159).

## **‘Redemption’: London, Paris and Dublin, 1925-1949**

### **6.1 Introduction**

O’Brien emerged from prison to a life far less exciting than he had been used to. He worked in the family publishing business and shunned all political activity for some years after the final demise of the ISDL in 1925. His life-long love of the Irish language and his GLL friends sustained him through this period but he was never again the force he had been in London-Irish circles. Financial embarrassment and the advice of friends eventually led him to seek reinstatement in the Irish civil service in the 1930s. His unexpected appointment as Irish Minister to France in 1935 was final recognition of all his hard work for the Irish cause and went some way to heal his bruised ego. However, he still had an inability to separate his own interests and welfare from the greater good of the country and generated several unnecessary squabbles along the way. He came to live in Ireland for the first time in 1939 and settled in well to a new life in Dublin. This chapter traces O’Brien’s later years, from 1924 until his death in 1949.

### **6.2 Life after prison**

On his release from prison in July 1924 he once again threw himself wholeheartedly into Gaelic League (GLL) affairs and continued as president. GLL membership levels were low and O’Brien blamed this collapse on disillusionment with the Treaty and dissension caused by the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly there had been tensions in the GLL in relation to the situation in Ireland during the Civil War. O’Brien offered to resign as president in January 1922, due to pressure of work rather than his anti-Treaty stance, but the Ard-Choiste was happy to wait until he could give the GLL his full attention again.<sup>2</sup> A row erupted in October 1922 when some members wished to make announcements about an anniversary Mass for Terence MacSwiney at GLL events. Some thought this anathema to their non-political status and cited a new rule

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<sup>1</sup> Ó Briain, ‘Gaedhil thar Sáile’, p. 123.

<sup>2</sup> Máire Nic Aodhacháin to O’Brien, 28 Jan. 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8436/11).

of the Ard-Choiste in this regard. O'Brien, however, ignored the objections and insisted the announcements were made.<sup>3</sup> Further dissent occurred when there was an attempt to collect funds for O'Brien's trial defence in 1923 — many GLL members simply refused to contribute.<sup>4</sup> In January 1923 a GLL member wrote: 'Old Art is still the god of our small world. I don't like him any better than I did — though he is still a good republican'.<sup>5</sup> This sentence summed up the attitude of many to O'Brien. Though not popular he was respected.

In 1928 the GLL was boosted by the arrival of an enthusiastic new general secretary, Proinnsias Ó Duinn, who worked in the office of the Irish High Commissioner. Ó Duinn had served in the Volunteers in Cork under Terence MacSwiney and O'Brien's great regard for MacSwiney was a natural tie to bind them together.<sup>6</sup> Under his guidance, a new enthusiasm took hold, but numbers remained static. A strong republican, with great regard for Patrick Pearse, Ó Duinn made the repatriation of Casement's remains one of the great causes of his life.<sup>7</sup> He and O'Brien worked well together and oversaw the annual publication of elaborate *Guth na nGaedheal* booklets.<sup>8</sup> In 1931 O'Brien called a special general meeting of the GLL because he felt that it was out of touch with the work of the Gaelic League in Ireland and needed to revitalise its activities.<sup>9</sup>

O'Brien's mother died in March 1928 and he was honoured by the attendance of Archbishop Cotter of Portsmouth at the obsequies.<sup>10</sup> In September 1930, he attended the funeral of Lord Shandon, his father's relative and a former lord chancellor of Ireland. O'Brien was described as a cousin of the deceased in newspaper reports.<sup>11</sup> There is no evidence, however, of any contact between the two despite the

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<sup>3</sup> O'Brien to Nic Aodhacháin, 16 Oct. 1922, *ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> RROUK, 31 May 1923 (TNA, CAB 24/160/56).

<sup>5</sup> Gladys Ní Eidhin to Barbara Carter, 22 Jan. 1923 (NLI, Barbara and Dorothy Carter correspondence, MS 20721/2).

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Colm Ó Duinn, Templeogue, Dublin, son of Proinnsias, 31 Oct. 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Donncha Ó Súilleabháin, 'Proinnsias Ó Duinn', *Feasta* (Nollaig, 1974), p. 17. He lived to see Casement's remains returned to Ireland in 1966.

<sup>8</sup> *Guth na nGael* was an elaborate celebration of Gaelic culture and language published for St Patrick's Day.

<sup>9</sup> Notice of special general meeting, GLL, 21 Jan. 1931 (UCDA, Desmond Ryan papers, LA10/73).

<sup>10</sup> *II*, 23 Mar. 1928; O'Brien to Cotter, 28 Mar. 1928 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8428/19).

<sup>11</sup> *Morning Post*, 15 Sept. 1930.

fact that Shandon lived in Kensington for the last years of his life. Shandon's memoirs refer only to O'Brien relatives who lived in the United States.<sup>12</sup> An obituary in the *Daily Mirror* described how Shandon was a prominent figure at the reception given in Claridges Hotel by the Irish High Commissioner in honour of W. T. Cosgrave and the other Saorstát delegates at the 1926 Imperial Conference.<sup>13</sup> It was unlikely therefore that the cousins would have been comfortable companions.

In 1926, de Valera sent P. J. Little to London to raise funds for Fianna Fáil. O'Brien flatly rejected an approach for assistance. Referring to this episode some years later, he wrote: 'I am not of an unforgiving disposition but I am not altogether a simpleton'.<sup>14</sup> His rift with de Valera ran deep. In addition, this form of politics was light years away from the simplicity of the grand concept of Irish independence to which O'Brien and his ISDL cohorts had been wedded. Richard Dunphy writes that from the beginning Fianna Fáil was totally electorally orientated and that mobilisation of the electorate was its first organisational task.<sup>15</sup> It would have been hard for O'Brien to support a party in which he would have no active part and the grind of developing strategy and policy to win votes was not his style. His sister Geraldine claimed he was never interested in party politics.<sup>16</sup>

### **6.3 Redemption: Minister to France**

O'Brien maintained a warm relationship with Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh. Their friendship went back to the early days of the Gaelic League, through the 1916 internments in England, their role as envoys for Dáil Éireann and their anti-Treaty stance. When the Department of Finance again sought the London funds in early 1932, O'Brien turned to Ó Ceallaigh in despair. Referring to his 'damnable persecution' by Finance, he implored Ó Ceallaigh to assist him because he could not understand the vindictiveness and injustice which had been done to him and his colleagues in London.<sup>17</sup> Ó Ceallaigh was

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<sup>12</sup> Ignatius O'Brien, *The reminiscences of Lord Shandon, 1926* (Kings Inns Archive, Dublin, unpublished document).

<sup>13</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 13 Sept. 1930.

<sup>14</sup> O'Brien to Ó Ceallaigh, 6 May 1932 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8461/20).

<sup>15</sup> Richard Dunphy, *The making of Fianna Fáil power in Ireland, 1923-1948* (Oxford, 1995), pp 77-8.

<sup>16</sup> Geraldine O'Brien, handwritten notes, n.d. (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/27).

<sup>17</sup> O'Brien to Ó Ceallaigh, 6 May 1932 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8461/20).

supportive and met O'Brien several times during 1932 and 1933.<sup>18</sup> Remarkably, O'Brien and George Gavan Duffy were reconciled, with the latter providing advice on how the 1922 writ for the funds might finally be disposed of amicably.<sup>19</sup> He also advised O'Brien against pursuing a claim for reimbursement of his legal fees.<sup>20</sup> Gavan Duffy's wife, Margaret, also supported O'Brien's campaign for 'satisfaction'.<sup>21</sup> The debt was finally written off by the Department of Finance in 1933 for various reasons including 'the certainty that no part of the sum in question was used by Mr. O'Brien for personal purposes'.<sup>22</sup> This was vindication indeed for O'Brien but it is doubtful if Finance shared this opinion with him.

When de Valera came to power in 1932 he established a commission to enable those who lost civil service positions during the Civil War to be reinstated to their original or an equivalent position.<sup>23</sup> This key principle meant that O'Brien, if successful in his application, could expect reinstatement at envoy or ambassadorial level. In July 1933, on the advice of Ó Ceallaigh, O'Brien applied for reinstatement.<sup>24</sup> He believed this would be 'a most complete reply' to his enemies. Describing his business affairs as 'balanced on a precipice', he asked Ó Ceallaigh to expedite a settlement.<sup>25</sup> He also indicated a desire to make peace with de Valera in the name of 'the cause in which we are both leaders'.<sup>26</sup> O'Brien's years in the political wilderness had done little to dampen his self-importance!

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<sup>18</sup> See various O'Brien/Ó Ceallaigh correspondence (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8461/20).

<sup>19</sup> Gavan Duffy to O'Brien, 25 Dec. 1932 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8428/19). It seems that as early as 1924 Gavan Duffy had made his peace with O'Brien. See Geraldine O'Brien to Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh, 29 Jan. 1924 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8437/7). In late 1922 Ó Ceallaigh noted that Gavan Duffy was anxious to recover the respect of his pre-Treaty friends. See Ó Ceallaigh to O'Brien, 28 Oct. 1922 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8434/4).

<sup>20</sup> Gavan Duffy to O'Brien, 25 Dec. 1932 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8428/19).

<sup>21</sup> Margaret Gavan Duffy to O'Brien, 25 Jan. 1933, *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Art O'Brien, reinstatement file (NAI, Dept. of Finance (hereafter FIN) E/115/50/33).

<sup>23</sup> See Art O'Brien, reinstatement file (NAI, DT/S5735).

<sup>24</sup> O'Brien to Ó Ceallaigh, 5 July 1933 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8433/24). See also O'Brien to MacHenry, 3 July 1933 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/20).

<sup>25</sup> O'Brien to Ó Ceallaigh, 5 July 1933 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8433/24). An extensive trawl of archive material in NAI, NLI and UCDA has failed to find any correspondence between Ó Ceallaigh and de Valera on the issue of O'Brien's re-instatement. However, both were in London for negotiations with the British government in late 1932 and Ó Ceallaigh would have had ample opportunity to remind de Valera of O'Brien's contribution to the republican cause. Ó Ceallaigh did write to the Department of Finance on O'Brien's behalf. See Ó Ceallaigh to McEntee, 20 Mar. 1935 (NAI, FIN/E/115/50/33).

<sup>26</sup> O'Brien to Ó Ceallaigh, 5 July 1933 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8433/24).

O'Brien's reinstatement application was successful but the Department of Finance suggested he was too old to be offered a job and should be given a pension instead.<sup>27</sup> De Valera overruled this decision and on 7 May 1935 the Executive Council of Saorstát Éireann ratified O'Brien's appointment as 'Envoy extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary at Paris'.<sup>28</sup> This was a very important diplomatic posting because by 1932 Ireland had the right to exchange diplomatic representatives and to negotiate treaties in her own right.<sup>29</sup> In addition, relations between Ireland and France during the 1930s were friendly.<sup>30</sup> The salary was £900 per annum with a £1000 representation allowance and £300 car allowance.<sup>31</sup> This posting also included responsibility for Belgium and must have exceeded even O'Brien's usual lofty expectations. No one else reinstated at this level had had such a spectacular falling out with de Valera. O'Brien's efforts in the cause of Irish independence were thus belatedly recognised with a significant prize. The ultimate irony, of course, was that his credentials were signed by George V, 'King of Great Britain, Ireland and the British Dominions beyond the seas'.<sup>32</sup> Officials in the Department of External Affairs<sup>33</sup> were far from happy about the reinstatement of O'Brien and other 'republicans' such as Leopold Kerney, Seán Nunan and Robert Brennan, because the appointments blocked promotion for candidates who had entered the department by examination.<sup>34</sup>

O'Brien took up his new post on 16 July 1935. His sister Geraldine travelled with him to Paris to perform the duties of hostess at embassy functions. On arrival at the Gare du Nord, O'Brien was met by what he termed 'several members of the Irish colony' who greeted him with an address in Irish.<sup>35</sup> Photographs of 'Le nouveau Ministre d'Irlande' arriving and subsequently presenting his credentials to the French

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<sup>27</sup> Art O'Brien, reinstatement file, memo, 27 Mar. 1935 (NAI, FIN/E/115/50/33).

<sup>28</sup> Copy of Saorstát Éireann, Executive Council minutes, 7 May 1935, in Art O'Brien, reinstatement file (NAI, DT/S5735).

<sup>29</sup> Michael Kennedy and J. M. Skelly (eds), *Irish foreign policy, 1919-1966: from independence to nationalism* (Dublin, 2000), p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Patterson, 'Ireland, Vichy and post-liberation France, 1938-50' in Kennedy and Skelly, *Irish foreign policy*, p. 96.

<sup>31</sup> Copy of Saorstát Éireann, Executive Council minutes, 7 May 1935, in Art O'Brien, reinstatement file (NAI, DT/S5735).

<sup>32</sup> Copy of O'Brien's credentials as Minister to France (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8461/22).

<sup>33</sup> The Foreign Affairs department was re-named External Affairs in 1922.

<sup>34</sup> See Michael Kennedy, 'Leopold Kerney, 1881-1962', *DIB* and Keogh, *Ireland and Europe*, pp 38-9.

<sup>35</sup> O'Brien to Rúnaí, Dept of External Affairs (hereafter DEA), 16 July 1935 (NAI, DFA, Paris Embassy, 46/15).

president Lebrun featured in several newspapers.<sup>36</sup> The *Irish Press* reported receptions and dinners held for the Turkish, Bulgarian, Cuban, Venezuelan and Uruguayan ambassadors during the month of May 1937.<sup>37</sup> The *Irish Independent* described a reception for 500 guests which included the Archbishop of Paris in June 1938.<sup>38</sup> He was invited to address the American Club of Paris in March 1938 where he described partition as 'a flagrant interference by a foreign government in the affairs of a neighbouring state'.<sup>39</sup> Since the ascent of de Valera to power, government foreign policy had begun to challenge dominion status and all it entailed. In reality, the partition question was the least of de Valera's concerns given the economic war with Britain and the unsettled European situation but O'Brien was in his element when he embarked on some good old-fashioned anti-British rhetoric.<sup>40</sup> All the outward impressions were that he was enjoying his ambassadorial role to the full.

Despite the great good fortune of his reinstatement, O'Brien fell back into his disputatious and self-absorbed ways. Within a few months of arriving in Paris, he wrote to the assistant secretary in External Affairs accusing him of discourtesy.<sup>41</sup> This had its origins in O'Brien's objection to routine 'house-keeping' requests.<sup>42</sup> Throughout 1936 he complained variously of not having enough staff, of fault-finding by the Department, of being discouraged and unable to use his initiative and of chaos and indiscipline in the Paris legation which (naturally) was his predecessor's fault.<sup>43</sup> O'Brien also became embroiled in a dispute about whether personal items such as gifts could be sent to Dublin in the diplomatic bag.<sup>44</sup> Joseph Walshe, secretary of the Department

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<sup>36</sup> See *Le Matin & Le Journal*, 16 July 1935 and *Daily Mail*, 30 July 1935.

<sup>37</sup> *Irish Press* (hereafter *IP*), 31 May 1937.

<sup>38</sup> *II*, 24 June 1938.

<sup>39</sup> *IT*, 26 Mar. 1938.

<sup>40</sup> See Fanning, *Éamon de Valera*, pp 159-198 for a discussion of de Valera's foreign policy during 1932-8.

<sup>41</sup> O'Brien to Seán Murphy, 30 Dec. 1935 (NAI, DFA, Paris Embassy, 46/15).

<sup>42</sup> See Murphy to O'Brien, 4 Jan. 1936, *ibid*.

<sup>43</sup> See O'Brien to Rúnai, DEA, 20 & 21 July 1936, 16 Oct. 1936, *ibid*.

<sup>44</sup> O'Brien to Rúnai, DEA, 20 July 1936, *ibid*.

of External Affairs, largely ignored O'Brien's grievances.<sup>45</sup> He had far more important concerns during the 1930s than O'Brien's welfare.<sup>46</sup>

An essential requirement of the job was the provision of political reports for the Department of External Affairs. O'Brien's most notable contribution was an assessment of communism in France in 1936.<sup>47</sup> He was generally slow to write political reports on grounds of pressure of work.<sup>48</sup> Given the unfolding situation in Europe in the mid-1930s it might have been expected that O'Brien would take this critical aspect of his diplomatic duties more seriously. As Mervyn O'Driscoll has pointed out, the lack of effective analysis of the European situation by both O'Brien and Charles Bewley, his counterpart in Berlin, was a serious handicap to the Irish government in 1936.<sup>49</sup> In addition, although de Valera wished to maintain a neutral stance in relation to the Spanish Civil War,<sup>50</sup> O'Brien was a Franco supporter.<sup>51</sup> The *Irish Independent* reported that he and his sister visited their friends in 'Nationalist Spain' while on holidays in the South of France in 1938.<sup>52</sup> Clearly, he had left any communist affinities behind him in 1920s London.

O'Brien was at the centre of a farcical dispute in May 1937. He was incensed when a French military band played 'O'Donnell Abú' instead of the national anthem to honour a winning Irish show-jumping team at the International Horse Show in Paris. The departmental secretary advised that while a complaint was appropriate, O'Brien should accept an apology and the playing of the correct anthem at some future point in the competition. Instead he embarked on what could only be described as a feverish attack on officials at the competition and at the French Foreign Office over several days, out of all proportion to the offence committed. The surviving documents in the

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<sup>45</sup> See for instance Walshe to O'Brien, 7 Oct. 1936, *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> For an account of Joseph Walshe's career see Michael Kennedy, "Nobody knows and ever shall know from me that I have written it': Joseph Walshe, Éamon de Valera and the execution of Irish foreign policy, 1932-8', *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 14 (2003), pp 165-83.

<sup>47</sup> O'Brien to Joseph Walshe, 6 July 1936 in Crowe et al, *Documents on Irish foreign policy*, Vol. IV, 1932-1936 (Dublin, 2004), p. 457.

<sup>48</sup> O'Brien to Rúnaí, DEA, 19 Mar. 1936 (NAI, DFA, Paris Embassy, 46/15).

<sup>49</sup> Mervyn O'Driscoll, *Ireland, Germany and the Nazis: politics and diplomacy, 1919-1939* (Dublin, 2004), p. 183.

<sup>50</sup> Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth century Ireland: nation and state* (Dublin, 1994), p. 95.

<sup>51</sup> O'Driscoll, *Ireland, Germany and the Nazis*, p. 188.

<sup>52</sup> *II*, 30 July 1938.



National Archives relating to this episode do him no credit and raise serious questions about his suitability in terms of judgement and temperament for an ambassadorial post.<sup>53</sup>

#### 6.4 Retirement to Dublin

O'Driscoll suggests that O'Brien's objection to attending British Commonwealth diplomatic functions in Paris may have led to his resignation. O'Brien in fact retired in October 1938 having served an extra year after the mandatory retirement age at the specific request of de Valera, so there was no question of early resignation.<sup>54</sup> He and his sister then went to St Jean de Luz in south-western France for the winter months.<sup>55</sup> The family business in London was dissolved in 1938 having limped on without him for a few years.<sup>56</sup> With no permanent home in London, there was no incentive to return there, so in early 1939 they both moved to Dublin for the first time where they rented a flat in Connaught House at 53 Pembroke Road. They were welcomed to Dublin by unattributed notes in the *Irish Times* which perhaps came closest to the truth about O'Brien: 'stormy petrel that he was, he never lost the bonhomie and kindness of outlook which are his special mark'.<sup>57</sup> Short-tempered and quick to take offence, he did retain the loyalty and support of a large circle of friends such as Dutton, Seán McGrath, W. P. Ryan, Ó Ceallaigh and several members of the GLL throughout his life. He also renewed his friendship with Douglas Hyde, now installed as first President of Ireland, at a lunch in Áras an Uachtaráin on 27 November 1939.<sup>58</sup>

O'Brien was also invited to several events. He officially opened Feis Maitiú in April 1941 and urged the young people attending to rally in defence of 'the spiritual heritage of the nation'.<sup>59</sup> In July that year he was a guest of the Spanish Minister at the embassy in Shrewsbury Road.<sup>60</sup> He also officially opened an Aeríocht (festival) at St

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<sup>53</sup> See O'Brien to Walshe, 14 May 1937 in Crowe et al, *Documents on Irish foreign policy*, Vol. V, 1937-1939 (2006), pp 65-70.

<sup>54</sup> O'Driscoll, *Ireland, Germany and the Nazis*, p. 256. See Seán Murphy, DEA to Sec. Finance, 19 May 1937 (NAI, FIN/E/115/50/33).

<sup>55</sup> *IT*, 31 Oct. 1938.

<sup>56</sup> *London Gazette*, 7 Jan. 1938.

<sup>57</sup> *IT*, 19 Dec. 1939.

<sup>58</sup> Appointment notes, President of Ireland (NAI, President's records, P/1/P1299).

<sup>59</sup> *IP*, 14 Apr. 1941.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 July 1941.

Patrick's College Drumcondra in August 1942 for the new political organisation Ailtirí na hAiseirí.<sup>61</sup> Committed to a corporate Christian state, the completion of 'the resurrection of 1916' and the renewal of the Irish language, this organisation espoused an essentially fascist one-party state.<sup>62</sup> It is not clear if O'Brien joined the party and he is not listed as a member in R. M. Douglas's detailed history.<sup>63</sup> However, its aims in relation to 1916 and the Irish language were very close to his heart. His leanings towards Franco might also have made the corporate Christian state ideology attractive. In the event, he gave a rather poignant address to the gathering referring to himself as a member of the passing generation and regretting that they had failed to save the Irish language. He urged those present to grasp the language as a spiritual tonic which would speed them on to vigorous effort in all spheres of national life and help drive out the virus of the foreign enemy.<sup>64</sup>

As always, O'Brien kept a close eye on the press and in 1940 took issue with an *Irish Times* article which alleged that many Irish dances were 'invented' by two Englishmen in London in the early 1900s. Appalled at this slur on his and O'Keefe's magnum opus, he pointed out that their *Handbook of Irish Dance* was a serious attempt to preserve Irish dances and that it included sources for all dances.<sup>65</sup> In 1944 Maurice O'Connell and Brian Brooks of London sent him all the minute books from the beginning of the GLL to enable him to write its history.<sup>66</sup> O'Brien wrote a short article on the GLL for the *Capuchin Annual*, 1944, but due to illness did not get around to writing a full history. The minute books were later deposited in the National Library of Ireland.<sup>67</sup>

In February 1940 O'Brien's solicitor expressed concern to de Valera that O'Brien was impoverished due to his low pension rate.<sup>68</sup> A clearly exasperated official

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 4 Aug. 1942.

<sup>62</sup> See R. M. Douglas, *Architects of the resurrection: Ailtirí na hAiséirghe and the fascist new order in Ireland* (Manchester, 2009).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> O'Brien, Aeríocht notes, Aug. 1942 (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8417/6).

<sup>65</sup> *IT*, 9 Nov. 1940.

<sup>66</sup> Fintan Murphy to Desmond Ryan, 24 Oct. 1953 (UCDA, Desmond Ryan papers, LA10/152).

<sup>67</sup> At O'Brien's request Donnchadh Ó Súilleabháin wrote this history and published *Conradh na Gaeilge i Londain, 1894-1917* in 1989. Ó Súilleabháin worked in London for a time in the 1930s and was a member of the GLL.

<sup>68</sup> Seán Ó hUadhaigh to de Valera, Feb. 1940 (NAI, DT/97/9/126).

in the Department of Finance pointed out that O'Brien had been given an extension of a year to age 66, that his pension was calculated on eighteen years actual service plus an additional five years bonus and that he received a lump sum of £884 on retirement. The same official came to the nub of the problem when he remarked that he appreciated that O'Brien was unable to maintain the same standard of living in Dublin as he had done as ambassador in Paris.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, presumably to increase his earnings, he was appointed by the government to the board of Slieve Ardagh Mining Ltd. in 1941 at a fee of £100 per annum.<sup>70</sup> This must have been interesting for him given his early career experience in the mines of France and Spain. Mianraí Éireann Teoranta took over Slieve Ardagh in 1943 and O'Brien remained on the board of the new company.

### **6.5 Exiles Aid Association**

In September 1940 Proinnsias Ó Duinn, who had laboured with O'Brien in the GLL and was now working in the National Museum in Dublin, decided to set up a committee to assist friends in London who were suffering appalling hardship due to the Second World War.<sup>71</sup> The first meeting of the 'Exiles Aid Association' was held at Wynn's Hotel on 25 September 1940. The attendance included O'Brien, Desmond Ryan, Ó Duinn and several former members of the London GAA and the GLL. O'Brien was unanimously elected chairman of the new group and proceeded to give a lengthy speech in Irish and English emphasising the importance of helping 'their kith and kin' in their hour of need. He said he had a number of old people in mind and he was sure others at the meeting had as well, who 'because of their sacrifices and meritorious service for and to Ireland should be given safe harbour here now'.<sup>72</sup> The committee met very regularly over the next year or so but their plans to repatriate people from the London area ran into various problems. Exit permits were hard to come by, some unions in Ireland objected because these people might take their jobs, but most significantly very few

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<sup>69</sup> Secretary, Dept. of Finance to Ó hUadhaigh, 17 Feb. 1940, *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *IP*, 5 Mar. 1942. Slieve Ardagh was a government-sponsored mining company created in response to the coal crisis brought on by the war.

<sup>71</sup> See for instance Ó Duinn to Desmond Ryan, 30 Sept. 1940 (UCDA, Desmond Ryan papers, LA10/171).

<sup>72</sup> Exiles Aid Association minutes, 25 Sept. 1940 (Privately held papers of Proinnsias Ó Duinn). I am grateful to Colm Ó Duinn for access to his father's papers.

Irish in London actually wanted to come home.<sup>73</sup> The committee liaised with the Irish Red Cross and the Department of External Affairs and ultimately decided to fund-raise for the Council of Irish Societies in London.<sup>74</sup> O'Brien attended meetings sporadically but intervened significantly to stop the committee becoming involved in the care of Irish prisoners in Britain, declaring it outside their remit.<sup>75</sup> This was a return to the O'Brien of old, obsessed with organisational rectitude. The work of the committee gradually petered out and a decision to wind it up and to divert any funds to the Irish Red Cross was made in December 1941.<sup>76</sup> O'Brien was given responsibility for the final audit of accounts.<sup>77</sup> Clearly, there were no lingering concerns about his financial rectitude.

## 6.6 The death of O'Brien

O'Brien's health had been in decline for some years. During his last years in Ireland, he was in significant pain from rheumatoid arthritis but, according to his sister bore the discomfort stoically.<sup>78</sup> He died on 12 August 1949 at his Dublin residence. After a funeral Mass in St Mary's Church, Haddington Road, he was buried in Dean's Grange cemetery.<sup>79</sup> His great friend Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh, then President of Ireland, attended the funeral and in a statement described O'Brien as a distinguished son of Ireland who served her throughout his life with loyalty and devotion.<sup>80</sup> De Valera, unable to attend as he was in Paris, described O'Brien as 'always a trusted friend and a devoted soldier of Ireland'.<sup>81</sup> Attendance at the funeral included General Seán Mac Eoin, Minister for Justice; Seán McBride, Minister for External Affairs; Seán Lemass (representing de Valera) and Mrs Eoin MacNeill — a kaleidoscope of pro and anti-Treaty representation.<sup>82</sup> Others included Mrs Margaret Pearse, Mrs Caitlín Brugha and

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<sup>73</sup> Exiles Aid Association minutes, 25 Sept. & 21 Nov. 1940.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 Oct. 1940.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 Oct. 1940.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 Dec. 1941.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Geraldine O'Brien, handwritten notes, n.d. (NLI, AÓBP, MS 8460/27).

<sup>79</sup> The choice of Dean's Grange cemetery may have been related to the erection of a cross there in 1929 in memory of Dunne and O'Sullivan, killers of Sir Henry Wilson, by 'their London friends' of whom O'Brien was one.

<sup>80</sup> *CE*, 13 Aug. 1949.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 Aug. 1949; see Kathleen O'Connell diaries, 11 Aug. 1949 (UCDA, Kathleen O'Connell papers, P155/82).

<sup>82</sup> *IP*, 15 Aug. 1949.

O'Brien's Gaelic League friends Sceilg and Fiachra Éilgeach. Seán McGrath and Fintan Murphy came from London for the funeral.<sup>83</sup> McGrath's statement to the London press summed up his feelings:

We salute a noble Irish patriot and leave it to future historians to record how as representative of the Republican government he courageously and fearlessly led us here in the dark days of Ireland's fight for freedom. Few have done more or suffered more than Art for the ideal of an Ireland not merely free but Gaelic as well, not merely Gaelic but free.<sup>84</sup>

O'Brien left the main bulk of his small estate valued at £508 to Geraldine with some personal items designated for his other sister Christine Ryley and her two sons, who lived in Bournemouth.<sup>85</sup> Keenly aware of the historical value of the papers he held from his various Irish activities in London, he directed that they be held in one collection at the National Library of Ireland and requested that 'any student ... historian or writer be permitted to use them'.<sup>86</sup> Geraldine planned to write a biography but also suggested to Desmond Ryan, son of W. P., that he might be interested in writing some form of memoir of Art.<sup>87</sup> Neither plan came to fruition. Geraldine organised some of the papers and made several notes which are now part of the Ó Briain papers at the National Library. She left a touching tribute to her brother in these notes, describing how he worked without sparing himself for the goal of Irish independence. She declared that his judgement was ever calm and considered and that he was always cheerful and full of fun. Her desolation and loneliness on his death was, she wrote, 'indescribable'.<sup>88</sup> Clearly, despite being temperamental in his public persona, O'Brien was a loving and loyal brother to her.

## 6.7 Conclusion

O'Brien endured much hardship after the Treaty. His disappointment with the agreement upset his equilibrium, derailed his worldview and made him focus in on

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Will of Arthur O'Brien (NAI, CH/HC/PO/S/102/8470). In the event, Christine predeceased him in January 1949.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Geraldine O'Brien to Desmond Ryan, 8 Sept. 1953 (UCDA, Desmond Ryan papers, LA10/158). The papers were lodged in the National Library in November 1953 after Geraldine's death.

<sup>88</sup> Geraldine O'Brien, notes, n.d. (NLI, AÓBP, 8460/27).

himself. In *Vivid faces* Foster cites a quotation from Seán Ó Faoláin which highlights the dilemma of 'revolutionaries' who are involved in movements arising out of 'a dissatisfaction with things as they are but without any clear or detailed notion as to what will produce satisfaction in the end'.<sup>89</sup> In O'Brien's case, it seems he lost 'the habit of happiness' somewhere around 1922 and struggled to adapt to the new reality of an independent Ireland which did not conform to his expectations.

His rehabilitation by de Valera in 1932 was an unexpected acknowledgement that he was owed significant recompense for his long years of service. He was also exceptional in that any others reinstated at senior level were not former adversaries of de Valera. O'Brien's appointment to the board of Slieve Ardagh Mining when his financial problems were raised is further evidence that he was very highly regarded by de Valera and his cabinet despite past differences. However, his inability to enjoy his ambassadorial role to the full shows a self-absorption in which he was oblivious to the hundreds who worked for Irish independence and were either killed or faded into oblivion and poverty. Moulton describes O'Brien as irascible and paranoid.<sup>90</sup> These personality traits came to the fore after the Treaty and have cast a long shadow over O'Brien's contribution to the Irish revolution.

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<sup>89</sup> Foster, *Vivid faces*, p. 331.

<sup>90</sup> Moulton, *Ireland and the Irish in interwar England*, p. 106.

## CONCLUSION

In 1979 the *Irish Post* described Art O'Brien as 'one of the most significant figures which the Irish community in Britain has produced in the context of Ireland's struggle for nationhood'.<sup>1</sup> This thesis tested that assertion. Biography is a challenge to the historian because of the need to remain aloof from the subject but to afford the subject a fair and accurate assessment of his or her life. In O'Brien's case his copious papers were undoubtedly a spur to this historian to undertake the dissertation, so it was important that his role was not over-stated simply because he left behind so much evidence. Equally, his contribution should not be diminished because of some of his less than appealing personality characteristics. The thesis, therefore, has been mindful of the challenges that beset biography and has endeavoured to present a balanced and nuanced assessment of the subject.

London-born, privately educated and with only a slight connection to Ireland after his father's death, O'Brien's journey from wealthy electrical engineer to leader of Irish militant nationalism in London was, by any measure, quite extraordinary. That he became the leading Irish revolutionary in London despite his background suggests a significant level of commitment and organisational ability. Notwithstanding O'Brien's high profile and centrality in London, surprisingly there has been no biographical study of the man and his times. The key research questions that underpinned this analysis of O'Brien's transition from cultural nationalist to militant anti-Treaty republican were: What was the role of cultural nationalism in a diasporic context? What factors pushed O'Brien into militarism and once committed what contribution did he and his London colleagues make to the Irish revolution? What was O'Brien's role during the Truce and the Treaty? How can his rejection of the Treaty be explained? How did he subsequently respond to the formation of the IFS and what were the contours of his anti-Treaty activity in London? The purpose of this thesis was to examine and interrogate the life of O'Brien and to broaden the focus of histories of the Irish

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<sup>1</sup> *Irish Post*, 2 Dec. 1979.

revolution to include diaspora communities. It is hoped that this, the first biography of O'Brien, will also significantly complement his unparalleled collection of papers.

In the first instance, this thesis demonstrates that O'Brien's significance has been grossly under-estimated. Following extensive cultural immersion in the GLL, he managed gun-running, prisoner relief and propaganda in London with extraordinary attention to detail from 1915 to 1921. A workaholic, with engineering, linguistic and management skills, he single-handedly ensured that a small group of London-Irish advanced nationalists were galvanised in support of both the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence. His leadership role across several organisations — the GLL, INRF, IRB, ISDL, IRA and Sinn Féin — was a critical component of the revolutionary effort in London and, without his pivotal presence, the Londoners would have lacked cohesion and drive. Moreover, without the London gun-running operation, revolutionary activities in Ireland would have been severely compromised. The key factor about O'Brien, is that regardless of his controlling behaviour, he drew people into the Irish nationalist and militant fold and kept them there, quite happy to work under his guidance. Despite his own high level of activity, his many 'enterprises' would have floundered unless he had significant co-operation and support from a wide number of people. His skill was to enthuse a cohort in London who stood by him and reached out from that base. It is also important to realise that while he became egocentric after his dismissal in 1921, his earlier behaviour should not be confused with egotism — he behaved the way he did because he believed he knew best how to achieve Irish independence. He was certainly guilty of rating his own opinions too highly but there is a profound difference between this and being guilty of doing everything for his own advancement. It is a fundamental finding of this thesis, therefore, that his actions prior to the Treaty were for the most part motivated solely by his commitment to Irish self-determination.

Sinn Féin was fortunate that O'Brien was willing to sacrifice his career and accept the post of London envoy in 1919. There were few, if any, on the London-Irish scene who could match O'Brien's abilities. Fluent French and Spanish enabled him to influence the foreign press in London and his family background in publishing meant that he was familiar with Fleet Street and its modus operandi. His personal status and



wealth as an electrical engineer afforded him status and recognition in London, something denied to many Irish. The on-going support of his relatives in the family business was an added bonus. For all his tetchiness and ill-humour, O'Brien was clearly a much-loved son, brother and nephew who charmed the extended family into supporting his work for Irish independence. In addition, his bachelor status and the comfort of a settled home provided by his mother and sister gave him the freedom to work night and day for the cause.

Ability, status and support do not fully explain *why* O'Brien devoted his life to the Irish cause, however. While not denying his underlying commitment to Irish independence, this thesis shows that O'Brien stayed involved because he rose quickly to the summit of every organisation that he joined. Not for him the hard graft of the foot-soldier! His business acumen and command of Irish meant that he stood out from the crowd among the London-Irish, was held in high esteem and inspired confidence. Success in one organisation led to requests for his assistance in others. In addition, invitations to assist, organise or manage boosted his ego and satisfied his desire for control and influence. O'Brien relished being in charge and the more responsibility he obtained the more he thrived. Success bred success and propelled him to the heart of the Irish revolution. It was a lucky coincidence for London-Irish nationalism that when it most needed a leader O'Brien was seeking an outlet for his management skills. The second major factor in O'Brien's commitment to the Irish revolution was his close working relationship with Michael Collins. More than anything else, O'Brien was Collins's man in London, and he was a competent manager who delivered. His role as confidant and advisor to Collins is central to understanding O'Brien's commitment to the Irish revolution. They were both of similar dynamic temperament and it is clear that O'Brien held Collins in the highest regard until the Treaty was signed.

A key finding of this thesis is that the Gaelic League of London (GLL) fits into a model of typical diaspora activity rather than a radicalisation model. O'Brien's initial foray into Irish nationalism was purely cultural. Irish activities in London were controlled and curtailed by the need for the Irish to assimilate and maintain their livelihoods. These activities were also part of a common diasporic thread which met

the needs for immigrants to connect with home. This thesis therefore challenges the view that the GLL was a hotbed of revolution and concludes instead that it was actively preparing for home rule in Ireland. Separatist Irish nationalism was very much a minority tendency in early twentieth-century London and militant Irish nationalism was virtually non-existent. While the London experience of the GLL was inherently different to that of Gaelic League members in Ireland, it should alert historians to beware of generalisations which paint the League in Ireland as the natural precursor to revolution.

For O'Brien and his friends, joining the Irish Volunteers in 1914 in defence of home rule was *the* crucial factor in their initiation into militarism. The Volunteers gave a respectability to militarism which enticed them in. As the Volunteers subsequently moved to a republican agenda, like many in Ireland, they moved seamlessly with it. Numbers involved in militant Irish nationalism in London were low — probably around 150 at most. They would probably have confined their efforts to gun-running were it not for the introduction of conscription in Britain in January 1916. This was *the* major spur to Londoners to move to Dublin — escaping the war rather than any heroic Irish nationalism was the push factor. Most came to Dublin with little inkling of an imminent rebellion. The vast majority of Irish nationalists in London manifested their support for Irish independence in the relatively safe confines of prisoner relief and the ISDL.

The extent of O'Brien's input as 'the brains behind' the care system developed for Irish prisoners and internees in Britain after the 1916 Rising is highlighted in this thesis. Without the dedication of O'Brien and INRF members it would have been impossible for the INAAVDF in Dublin to keep track of where prisoners and internees were and it is doubtful that the oft-mentioned sense of camaraderie in the camps and prisons would have developed without the extensive system that he put in place. The INRF care of Irish prisoners and internees in Britain was compassionate and efficient and this work significantly enhanced the coherence of the republican movement in both Ireland and Britain between 1916 and 1921. Conversely, there could well have been a complete collapse of any form of republican sentiment in London in the absence of a focus on prisoner relief. It was O'Brien's genius to understand the need

for such focus in the absence of any military activity post 1916. The period between 1916 and 1919 was somewhat lacklustre in revolutionary terms, particularly for those who lived in London. By prolonging the prisoner relief effort into 1918 and getting many in the GLL to engage with relief efforts, O'Brien ensured that a much broader support base was in situ in London when the War of Independence began.

This thesis contends that the ISDL led by O'Brien was a highly effective propaganda tool — albeit with some flaws. Its membership level of 27,000 masks the capacity of this committed group to bring out large crowds as required, throughout the length and breadth of England. It was an astounding achievement to fill the Albert Hall in February 1920 with supporters of Irish self-determination and it is clear that British initiatives like the Peace with Ireland Council were prompted by ISDL activity in Britain, as well as abhorrence of British atrocities in Ireland. The banning of Archbishop Mannix from Ireland and the hunger strike, death and funeral of Terence MacSwiney, would have had little or no propaganda effect in Britain, without the protests of the ISDL. O'Brien's establishment of the ISDL also earned him the respect of Scottish, Burmese, Egyptian and Indian independence movements. Under O'Brien's leadership, the campaign for Irish independence was seen as vibrant and effective and his views were sought by many who wished to emulate his success. The achievements of the ISDL are more impressive still when the hostile environment in which it operated is taken into account. However, O'Brien must shoulder much of the blame for the isolationist stance of the ISDL. He was less than diplomatic in his relationships with many who might have furthered Ireland's cause and clearly missed opportunities for alliances with George Lansbury of the *Daily Herald* and with the British Labour Party.

Paris has generally been regarded as being at the forefront of Irish diplomacy during the period 1919-1922 but this thesis shows that London should rank equally with Paris given the central role which O'Brien played in ensuring that Sinn Féin propaganda was relayed to the world's press. His role in dispersing funds to the Sinn Féin offices abroad was also crucial to their survival. Not least, once Sinn Féin failed to gain admission to the Paris peace talks, mediation in London became the most significant element of its 'foreign' policy. O'Brien's role as mediator in late 1920 and 1921 far outweighed the significance of any diplomatic activity in Paris at that time.

This thesis suggests that O'Brien might have brought much-needed stability and organisation to the Treaty negotiations if he had been given any encouragement by Griffith, Collins or de Valera. O'Brien was involved in various peace initiatives in 1920 and early 1921 and was close to Collins and de Valera until the Treaty negotiations began. He was also welcomed to Downing Street, where his opinions were relayed directly to Lloyd George. It is quite puzzling, therefore, that O'Brien, who had liaised on a daily basis with Collins for three years and who had attended to de Valera's every need in London from January 1921, was abruptly side-lined. He had a much stronger personality than many of the Irish delegates and could well have challenged the British side. His domineering and at times petulant personality did not endear him to all, but it is possible that these very qualities might have been useful at the negotiating table. Accounts of the Treaty have focused on the actual negotiations, but this research indicates that there is a much wider story to be told about personalities, motivation and the selection of the negotiating team.

O'Brien was also a relative rarity — a high profile anti-Treatyite who survived the Civil War and kept complete papers. These papers provided this researcher with a unique opportunity to assess why someone so closely aligned with Collins chose to reject the Treaty. This analysis shows that his reasons were multi-faceted and much more nuanced than a spiteful reaction to his exclusion from the Treaty talks. O'Brien had so much to lose personally that his rejection of the Treaty only makes sense if it was his unshakeable conviction that it was wholly unsatisfactory. It is also clear that well into late 1922 he was hopeful of a revision of the agreement. O'Brien's commitment to the Irish Republic was demonstrated by his complete support for de Valera after the Treaty and in his renewed enthusiasm for gun-running and propaganda. He was deeply troubled by the outcome of the Treaty negotiations and by the allegations of financial impropriety made against him by the IFS. This led to a focus on defending himself at the expense of the Irish cause. While he rationalised these actions to himself as essential to republican propaganda, in reality he abandoned that cause in favour of saving his own skin. The loss of his personal fiefdom, the ISDL, was the cruellest blow of all and this left him bitter and

disillusioned. It was at this point that he became totally self-absorbed and a liability to both the IFS and the republicans.

O'Brien's court cases in 1923 are central to an understanding of the development of security relationships between Britain and the fledgling IFS. There was a high level of co-operation between the IFS and the British governments during the latter stages of the Civil War. The deportation plan shows how desperate the British were to shore up the Treaty as the IFS fought for its survival. Both governments were co-dependent at that stage and there is a marked sense of equality and respect between them. The grand deportation plan collapsed in disarray and initially appeared to have no redeeming features. O'Brien's habeus corpus case made a mockery of the British government and, having gained control of their 'most-wanted' villains from Britain, the IFS simply sent them all back again without even putting up a fight. And yet, O'Brien's immediate re-arrest negated any personal gain and put an end to republican activity in London. That the case affirmed the independent status of the IFS was an unanticipated bonus for Cosgrave but highly ironic for O'Brien; inadvertently he gave a much needed fillip to the IFS while also strengthening British civil liberty legislation. The IFS decision to send army officers to give evidence at O'Brien's subsequent trial at the Old Bailey, the record of which lay buried in the accounts of O'Brien's 1923 sedition trial, was yet another significant episode in the rapprochement between both states.

O'Brien's row with de Valera and Stack over the London funds in 1924 led to his exclusion from the republican fold. The late 1920s and early 1930s were times of poverty and rejection for him — his sole support being the GLL, which retained him as president in spite of all his woes. Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh proved himself a loyal friend to O'Brien when he encouraged his reinstatement to the Irish civil service and ensured he was not forgotten by de Valera. The appointment of O'Brien as Minister to France in 1935, when there were thousands clamouring for favour, was an acknowledgement of his significant contribution to the Irish revolution. O'Brien was not the best choice and lacked essential diplomatic skills. The decision to reinstate him raises questions about the integrity and the depth of de Valera's foreign policy. If diplomatic postings were

merely favours to his republican cronies, where did that leave his analysis of the volatile world of the mid-1930s?

O'Brien was undoubtedly a complex man — a perfectionist who did not suffer fools gladly and who had a highly inflated sense of his own importance. He could be charming and diplomatic but was temperamental and caustic on occasion. At times he was overwhelmed by the work he embarked on and inevitably made poor decisions on occasion. What is markedly absent, however, is any form of personal reward for all his endeavours until 1919. His work for Ireland was sustained by the income from his engineering career and he must have spent significant sums from his own pocket before his appointment as envoy. There were few kudos for the rather bleak job of prison visitation. Gun-running ran the risk of imprisonment or even death if found guilty of treason. Even his appointment as envoy in 1919 meant a reduction in salary and supporting Terence MacSwiney as he lay dying was a gruesome task. The first promise of personal reward was in late 1920 when it was suggested that O'Brien might be involved in peace negotiations. Instead his world collapsed around him and the events of the 1922-4 period completely obscured his earlier successes. Yet, O'Brien inspired great loyalty from a small number of friends who stuck with him through all his vicissitudes — Seán McGrath, C.B. Dutton and Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh — all of whom clearly understood his immense contribution to the Irish cause, whatever his faults.

Whether life in Ireland lived up to any of his dreams is difficult to ascertain as this period of his life was the least documented by himself and others. Writing about Desmond Ryan, Frances Flanagan notes that as a boy 'he conjured Ireland in highly romantic terms as a far-off El Dorado'.<sup>2</sup> She also writes about others 'who had heavily invested their lives in a movement they expected to proceed in a particular direction'.<sup>3</sup> Both comments are applicable to O'Brien, and his dreams in relation to the Irish language were certainly unfulfilled. Nevertheless, he was able to spend his last years in an independent, albeit partitioned, Ireland.

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<sup>2</sup> Frances Flanagan, *Remembering the revolution: dissent, culture and nationalism in the Irish Free State* (Oxford, 2015), p. 165.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

De Valera paid a warm tribute to O'Brien when he died: 'there was never a man who was more whole-heartedly or more self-sacrificingly loyal to Ireland and to the course of the Irish language and Irish independence'.<sup>4</sup> Although obituaries are of their nature flattering and effusive, de Valera's choice of the word 'self-sacrificingly' was the appropriate term to describe O'Brien's endeavours between 1916 and 1921, when he gave of himself whole-heartedly to the cause of Irish independence.

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<sup>4</sup> *IP*, 13 Aug. 1949.

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## G: INTERVIEWS

Nuala Acton	20 Sept. 2015, 22 Mar. 2016
Conor McAlister	25 Oct. 2016
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