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The Transcendental Irish Republic, The Dream of Diaspora

J. Bouyer Bell

International Analysis Center, New York, New York

Irishmen and Irishwomen: In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for freedom.

. . . having patiently perfected her discipline, having resolutely waited for the right moment to reveal itself, she no seizes that moment, and supported by her exiled children in American and by gallant allies in Europe, but relying in the first on her own strength, she strikes in full confidence of victory. . .

Proclamation of the Irish Republic on Easter Monday, 1916

As the seven signers of the Easter Proclamation stressed, every generation of the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty — and six times in the previous three hundred years had done so by resort to arms. In April 1916 the Republic, virtually established in all Irish hearts, had at last been declared before the GPO on Sackville Street in Dublin, had come home and into reality, a dream made manifest; and, thus, Ireland was a nation once again. Abroad, for over a century, various exiled institutional forms had been shaped to contain, to maintain, and to encourage the Republican dream, the Republic. The pedestrian label of “government-in-exile” falls far short of the richness and ambiguity of that dream or the singular peculiarity of the Irish Republic. Most governments-in-exile have been quite straight forward. There are, for example, those driven from power by domestic or foreign enemies, forced to take up residence abroad, there maintaining a claim to legitimacy and orchestrating a return to power. Since the quarreling high kings of Celtic Ireland, there had never been an Irish-Irish regime and never,

ever, an island united under effective, independent, central control: — since 1800 Ireland had been an integral part of the United Kingdom. The other main variant of diaspora governance, rebels with pretensions to recognition declaring their existence as tactic from a liberated zone or, if need be, from abroad as a step toward power, too, was largely if not entirely inappropriate. Island risings were crushed, often in the egg, before the forms of governance were necessary; and the Irish rebels abroad only from time to time focused on a “government” as tactic being more concerned with martial tactics to erode British power. Thus, the long Irish experience is not so easy to slot, not even a sure entry in exile government unless an analyst opts to concentrate on one brief moment, a moment never of interest to the rebels and seldom even to the historian.

The Irish revolutionary experience indicates the elusive nature of legitimacy, the right to act for the nation — the essential foundation of governance no matter the form. For the Irish the crucial focus was the right to rule rather than the power to govern. Presently, few life-presidents or dictatorial generals possess more than the power to coerce. In exile most kings and dictators seldom possess more than the loyalty of their immediate family and contaminated cronies. Even monarchs, divinely chosen, found in time their legitimacy eroded unless they ruled in reality — after a decade in the diaspora the world moved on, their court grew quaint, their value debased. Somehow even after generations, after repeated failure, after schism and betrayal, the Irish Republic remained a luminous, validating ideal — a reality in Irish rebel hearts; a dream variously, vaguely, institutionalized, but a dream that conferred moral legitimacy on the believers, on each new generation of crusaders.

The Irish revolutionary tradition, rich, various, and persistent, a tradition easily noted, if in attenuated form, in the present island violence, can be traced to almost any focal point of analysis over a millennium. More reasonably, more specifically, the modern example, militant Irish Republicanism, arises from the dual currents of republican nationalism and the ideals of the age of reason.

These compelling ideals and ideas mixed with island particularism, past grievance, and inherited assumptions, inspired varying categories of rebels over the generations. The founding father of Irish Republicanism was Wolfe Tone, middle class, a Protestant, who saw in England the cause of all his country's ills and in physical force — violence — the necessary means to achieve a united Ireland of Protestant, Catholic, and Dissenter, an Ireland free and prosperous and, naturally, Re-

publican. His United Irishmen, a brief alliance of all three, failed to establish the Republic and Tone died in a Dublin prison cell. Robert Emmet failed and was hanged in 1803. The Young Ireland rebels of 1848, the island's contribution to the great year of European revolution, failed as well. Still the concomitant rural disorders continued to offer both challenge to the authorities and the propertied classes and also an opportunity for radicals and Republicans. Restrictions on Catholics engendered further grievance as did the inequities of the social and economic structure. Irish society was, of course, far more complex than the emerging patriot history depicting an evil England, selfish, arrogant, represented by absentee Protestant ascendancy, an alien government in Dublin Castle.¹ This was the exploited Ireland of evictions, transported felons, malnourished peasants, and the gibbet. This was the Ireland that Republican rebels sought to destroy — and generation after generation there were ample real not imagined grievances to inspire such rebellion.

In the broadest sense the London center of the United Kingdom increasingly in the nineteenth century made efforts to ameliorate the more pressing Irish grievances relating to land and religion and political participation and in the process to co-opt the more reasonable Catholic inhabitants. This process was accelerated by Irish moderates, often speaking in radical rhetoric, using all manner of political weapons and the threat of worse. And so, again, in the broadest sense the history of nineteenth century Ireland was one of accommodation to British power, to modernization, to central values, made swifter, if not possible, by vast demographic and social changes, by the self-interest of many of the Irish, by the seeming inevitable tides of history that swept away not only old grievance but also old languages, old habits and institutions. Victorian progress was at play on a small, isolated, island backwater. The Irish rebels, nationalists, Republicans, descendants of Tone, read history differently and, most important of all, found an unwanted, horrid ally, a deadly, unknown fungus, *phytophthora infestans*.

In 1841 the population of Ireland was 8,175,124, the most densely populated country in Europe despite steady emigration to Britain and the United States. The rural poor, mostly Catholic, often, especially in the West, recent Irish-speakers, twenty-five percent of the island population spoke only Irish in 1801, had prospered to a degree on potato cultivation. Very small holdings could feed a family. Fed on potatoes and milk and sometimes fish the Irish were the healthiest poor in Europe. And when blight came or fish or milk were short, they lived on the margin. This rural, residue Gaelic culture may have been ulti-

mately doomed in ethnocentric Europe by the iron laws of economics. English had replaced Irish at remarkable speed. Emigrations was growing as an outlet for those willing and able to leave. There was narrowing ground in Europe for the isolate, the marginal, the separate; but no one saw that disaster not progress would accelerate the process. On September 9, 1845, the first report appeared of the potato blight, the mysterious fungus disease. There had been other blights but none so complete, so devastating as this — twice as bad in 1846, a little better in 1847, and then worse in 1848-1849. Between 1845 and 1851 the population declined by 2,225,000 largely as a result of disease (especially cholera), starvation, and emigration. The death figures, always, still in dispute (750,000, 1,000,000, 1,500,000) only indicate the scope of the horror. Ireland was changed, utterly changed, and no place more so than in the hearts of those who survived, those at the edge of risk — articulate nationalists, the Catholic emigrants, the idealists. In America the survivors poured in — 250,000 in 1851. Year after year, they arrived, embittered, ruined, exhausted, without resources, aliens in a strange land, country folk in cruel cities. They believed then and many of their heirs do now that the famine was not a social necessity but political oppression.

England, Perfidious Albion, the source of all Ireland's ills, had been revealed as a dark, Satanic power, had destroyed an ancient bucolic, Gaelic culture. "Progress" was but the propaganda face of Victorian oppression and imperial exploitation. After the famine some of the Irish might have faith in rural agitation, barn burning, cattle maiming, at best parochial, parish nationalism, and others in constitutional politics, monster meetings, leagues and elections. Some, soon many, identified Irish nationalism with Catholic grievance.²

The Irish Republicans, adamantly separatist, did not. They saw concession, especially to Catholics, as co-optation by the oppressor. They assumed on the evidence of the nation's troubled history that Britain had no right to rule. The United Kingdom had been united by force and must so be destroyed. Constitutional or parliamentary means were ultimately insufficient. Increasingly the alienated, especially but not solely in the huge Irish diaspora in the United States, felt that Ireland could only be a nation once again by recourse to physical force. And physical force would have to be more effectively organized and deployed than had been the case in previous futile risings, in the sporadic agitation of rural Ribbonmen, in the failed conspiracies of the past. The radical Irish nationalists, fed on just and real grievance, comforted by similar analysis from the continent, did not

feel just rebels, an honorable enough profession, but rather heirs to a submerged, oppressed Ireland. They were honorable rebels with just cause, legitimate, authorized by the peoples' will. Within them an old Ireland and a new existed, an Ireland yet without banners, without an army, without form — a dream. They heard trumpets inaudible to the conventional, a call to just war.

On March 17, 1858, James Stephens founded in Dublin the Irish Republican Brotherhood, drawing into a single organization the various strands of radical Irish nationalism then on the island. The new IRB was secret, oath-bound, dedicated to the achievement of an Irish Republic already "virtually established in the hearts of men." The new brotherhood thus possessed a superior moral authority to that of the alien, illicit British occupier. The Irish people had the right, the duty, the patent responsibility to expel the British from Ireland and thus establish the Republic. In the IRB there was an organization so dedicated. There was now banners including the green-white-and-orange tricolor, for the faithful, for the Republic, for Ireland — flags for the secret army. And until such time as a risen people on a free island might devise other forms, the Supreme Council of the IRB was to act as the legitimate government of Ireland. The IRB had recognized that the Republican movement must have the moral authority, not simply the capacity, to deploy physical force, must be accepted as the legitimate vessel for the old Irish dream. The form, even the function, of that vessel was of far lesser importance; in fact, the more detailed the structure the more prospect of alienating some of the faithful drawn to a luminous Republic not a sharp-edged, earthly institution of governance. What did matter was the need to act, to shape history. In 1858 the conspirators, the faithful, the Irish had the IRB. Established simultaneously in America, the exile nationalists had the Fenian Brotherhood (IFB). In 1858 the greatest immediate asset of the IRB appeared, in fact, to be that American diaspora of the IFB where grievance festered, where Republican sentiment waxed, where skills and resources abounded. Then with organization seriously underway in Ireland and in the diaspora, the American Civil War imposed something of a recess on conspiracy but opened certain possibilities.

Many Irish immigrants enlisted in the American war, mostly on the side of the Union for they resided in the North and felt the cause congenial. Despite the mix of motives, many of the Irish felt that their military experience could be turned to Irish advantage, gain not only the sympathy of the triumphant Union government but more specifically shape an Irish army for use

against the British empire. Thus the Fenians under John O'Mahony emerged from the war aware that there were 200,000 Irish-American veterans, many dedicated nationalists, an organization in the IFB eager to act, and an administration in Washington sympathetic to Irish aims. Some of the Fenians felt that O'Mahony was not the man for the job, too focused on the home island when the British were vulnerable in Canada, too fond of the centralized organizational structure.³ In December 1865, the organization met in Philadelphia, replaced O'Mahony with William Randall Roberts and established a Fenian-democratic Senate wing. And the militants now looked to Canada. Roberts summed up the relation of rebel military success and government.

If we can get a foothold on which to raise the Irish flag we shall be recognized . . . A government once established, it will have the sympathies of every Irishman. Irishmen in every quarter of the land seeing that we are working instead of talking, the cause will go triumphantly forward . . .⁴

And however improbable creating a liberated zone in Canada rather than in Ireland, militarily confronting the empire three thousand miles from the home island, from a neutral base, the scheme had a realistic base. There were limited British military resources in Canada and in America the Fenians in theory had assets to counter any imperial move. There were tens of thousands of eager Irish veterans. There was money. There were three warships purchased at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. President Andrew Johnson and Secretary of State William Henry Seward appeared sympathetic to the venture, prepared to accept a Fenian victory in Canada as an accepted fact.

O'Mahony, who had insisted that the struggle should be in Ireland, that the only purpose in a Canadian raid — a mere diversion — might be to drag the United States into war with England. Yet, the Canada option grew more appealing. O'Mahony, who set up his own orthodox brotherhood, loyal to the agenda and structure of the IRB in Ireland, but attracting only about ten percent of the American Fenians, decided to pre-empt Roberts and the Senate wing. His troops would seize the island of Campo Bello between Maine and New Brunswick. This raid in April 1866, the first in a series of Fenian incursions over the next several years, failed just at the time that the Senate wing authorized their own invasion across the Niagara River. The Fenian force under banners initialed IRA for the Irish Republic Army arrived in Canada just after midnight April 1, 1866; and

after serious fighting with hastily assembled British troops withdrew in the early hours of June 3. Everything had gone wrong. The invasion force had not been properly marshalled. The Americans far from sympathetic had closed off access to Canada cutting off reinforcements. The Senate wing of the Fenians had been penetrated by informers — as had O'Mahony's organization. The Canadian Irish, untouched, had remained quiescent. The British had been stronger and more effective than anticipated. The Campo Bello raid was a fiasco and the second invasion spectacular but also a failure. In 1870 a small invasion from St. Alba in Vermont, betrayed by an informer, swiftly collapsed. The next year in October an invasion force of forty Fenians seized the Hudson Bay post of Pembina and were immediately arrested by American troops — Washington claimed the area — thus ending the Canadian invasions, repeated at Pembina as farce. One of the dominant figures of the Fenian movement, an opponent of the Canadian option, John Devoy felt that a splendid opportunity had been lost to turn the American civil war veterans and the Irishmen in the British Army into the "finest fighting force" in Ireland's history. What was needed — a united organization, ably and wisely led — had not existed.

In order to fashion a united organization in the American diaspora, Clan na Gael was established in 1867 and gradually superseded the Senate wing and the rump Fenian Brotherhood of O'Mahony. The Clan recognized the IRB Supreme Council as, in fact, the government of Ireland until such time as the people of Ireland would be free to choose their own form. This IRB Centre was not the government-in-exile planned by the Senate wing when they invaded Canada seeking to liberate a base from which to proclaim the nation, nor within Ireland, it was not an alternative, if covert, illicit, alternative government to that of the crown. It was, rather, an aspect of the IRB claim to represent the Irish nation, and so to possess the power to wage war.⁵ The IRB in Ireland was an almost classical revolutionary conspiracy focused on organizing a rising, a traditional insurrection employing agents, patriots, conspirators and military men — and as such it enjoyed broad if often unarticulated Irish support. As a conspiracy the IFB on the island, too, failed to create a united organization, ably and wisely led. The Irish 1867 rising failed, betrayed by informers, inept planning, British skill, and Irish bad luck. In 1867 the IRB as well as the failure of the island rising directed two escape attempts in Britain that unwittingly produced spectacular violence — an attack on a Manchester police van carrying a Fenian leader and a fatal explosion at Clerkenwell prison in London. Each generated massive publicity.

In fact the IRB and the Clan by 1867 had devised a whole spectrum of basic revolutionary tactics beyond simple insurrection: conspiracy, open revolt, assassination, bombing in Britain, diplomacy in Europe and America, front organizations, prison escapes, songs and ballads and banners, martyrs and patriots and always publicity. And the movement was transnational. The major IRB leaders — Thomas Clark Luby, who formulated the IRB Oath in 1858, John O'Leary, who wrote for the first Fenian publication *Phoenix*, John Devoy, who directed the infiltration of the British army from Ireland and founded the Irish Nation and the Gaelic America, Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, who joined the IRB in 1858 and later financed *The Dynamiters* as well as John O'Mahony and William Randall Roberts of the Canadian invasions — all appeared on the American scene as did the founder James Stephens. In fact only Stephens and O'Leary made their major contribution in Ireland, for the Fenian center of gravity shifted to American and to the supposedly subordinate Clan after 1867. In a real sense there was a feeling that an Irish nation had — for the time being — spread over both sides of the Atlantic. Not a specific, lasting geographic diaspora, a place, the Irish Republican "diaspora" existed wherever the Irish were denied their nation. Ireland as a Republic existed in Fenian hearts, so that where they were so too was the nation. In the American diaspora the Fenians were simply on the long road to power, to ensuring that the Republic would later be able to take more conventional form on the island. To that end Roberts wanted a government-in-exile in Canada as a visible indicator to the direction of history. To that end Roberts and O'Mahony invaded Canada just as the IRB sought to rise in Ireland and act in Britain. To that end the IRB eager to wage war assumed the moral right to do so by proclaiming the Supreme Council's right to act as the government of Ireland. The only governmental function that the IRB pursued, and that erratically as time passed, was to wage war.

For the Fenians and for the Irish people what was crucial was the legitimacy to act bestowed by the existence of the Irish Republic in the hearts of all. The form this legitimacy assumed, the IRB, the Fenian Brotherhood, the Senate wing, Clan na Gael and, more particularly rather than more generally, the Supreme-Council-as-government or the government-in-exile proposed in Canada, was another and lesser matter concerned with means and not ends. Mostly, the Fenians focused on means, quarreling, dividing, retiring in isolation, bombing in Britain, agitating. Always they kept the Republican faith however often the Republic had to be delayed, however often the dedicated feuded over means. In the years after the Canadian adventures, the center of

physical force shifted to those in America; the Clan, as events within Ireland revealed promising possibilities and new rivals.

In Ireland the IRB increasingly became a mass movement rather than a hidden conspiracy, a broad current competing with those focused on Disestablishment, the land question, education, and on, most especially, the Home Rule, a movement under Charles Stewart Parnell. In 1874 John Devoy decided on the New Departure to support Parnell's Home Rule Movement. Other Fenians, later expelled from the orthodox movement, founded the Land League to support rural agitation and the New Departure. Seemingly even the physical force conservatives had recognized the changing time in that the new IRB constitution of 1873 indicated that the Fenians would delay the promised war against England until it was endorsed by a majority of the Irish nation. The IRB would henceforth only wage war after some sort of plebiscite — an unlikely event. In the meantime Devoy and the IRB would pursue the New Departure. He spent the money from O'Donovan Rossa's Skirmishing Fund intended for terrorism in England on the Land League founded by the Fenians Michael Davitt, Matt Harris, Patrick Egan and Thomas Brennan. Despite the revolutionary rhetoric used by many, at times by Parnell, and the aims of the radicals, the New Departure led to reform within the United Kingdom, real enough, not revolution, increasingly the province of the Clan. In Ireland the Fenians evolved into respectable, usually retired, rebels admired even by the Church. Although violence did not disappear on the island, it was sporadic. On May 6, 1882, in Phoenix Park, Dublin, The Invincibles, mostly impatient ex-Fenians, assassinated the new Chief Secretary, Lord Frederick Cavendish, and Under-Secretary, T. H. Burke. The killings were the most spectacular resort to physical force on the island for the remainder of the century with violence mostly limited to traditional rural disturbances.

Elsewhere, however, the faith in physical force had not been lost and the Clan organized and financed an extensive dynamite-terror campaign in Britain. Neither dynamite nor British concession nor assassins nor Home Rule brought the Republic any closer. In fact concession and co-optation and the promise that sooner or later Home Rule would pass parliament put an end to many Irish national aspirations, seemingly swept away Republican dreams. The Clan in America grew moribund. The IRB awaited a never-heard call to war. Fenian felons emerged to irrelevance and retirement. The Fenian fevers had long, long passed even if the currents of nationalism still ran swiftly.

Cultural nationalism blossomed. On November 1, 1884, the Gaelic Athletic Association was founded to encourage tradi-

tional Irish sports and former Fenians were among its patrons. On August 16, 1892, the National Literary Society was founded; and in November Douglas Hyde, later first President of Ireland in 1938, gave an address "On the Necessity for De-Anglicizing the Irish People." Hyde and others founded the Gaelic League on July 31, 1893, to revive the Irish language. The centenary of Wolfe Tone's United Irishmen Rising in 1898, a focus for revived IRB activity, introduced a new generation of Irishmen to the Republican ideal. So there was movement, then, on the political side as well. James Connolly founded the Irish Socialist Republican Party in 1896. The Ancient Order of Hibernians, part social, part political, both pious and nationalist, was revived in America in 1898 and in Ireland in 1902. In 1905 the radical, Republican Dungannon Club, an IRB-front, held its first meeting in Belfast in 1905. All of this, harbingers in retrospect, William Butler Yeats and the Abbey Theater, Patrick Pearse's Irish-Ireland school St. Edna's at Rathfarnham in south Dublin, the arrival of the old Fenian felon Tom Clarke from the United States in December 1907 and the emergence of the Sinn Fein party in 1908, the mix and blend of old currents and new, proved important. There had already been great excitement during the Anglo-Boer War. Irish men, including Major John McBride, husband of Yeats's love Maude Gonne, had gone to Africa to fight with the Boers against the common British foe. There was more excitement as in Britain the conservatives in general and the Tories in particular thwarted the natural progress of Home Rule, playing the Orange Card by urging Protestants, Unionist in Ireland, to resist — a resistance that appeared to even the more moderate Irish to be treasonous.

Mostly the sensible saw only a new Irish pride, a difficult but not impossible Home Rule political problem, a United Kingdom with ample room for diversity and an Empire with ample opportunity for all ambitions. Dublin opinion, arising in a small, intimate city, both elegant and miserable, was more apt to be attracted by social and economic agitation — the great strike of 1913 led by James Larkin and broken by the weight of conservative power — than by any threat from radical nationalists. Few suspected the revival of the IRB — and few would have been concerned other than the British police authorities. Almost no one could credit a Fenian-Republican revival. Sinn Fein was run by Arthur Griffith using the Austro-Hungarian monarchy as a model. Pearse had run his school into debt not into the vanguard of a new Ireland, Connolly commanded a tiny, futile band of discredited socialist agitators. The cultural nationalists quarrelled about aesthetic issues, wrote poems, put on plays. Real politics was not the province of old Fenians like Tom Clarke

but of the great parties — in Ireland the Parliamentary Party of John Redmond — and the great issues — in Ireland how to achieve constitutional Home Rule. If the Republic had ever existed in the hearts of the Irish, there was by 1914 little real evidence that it did so any longer.

Certainly all the old Fenian institutions had atrophied. The Clan had given up dynamite, fallen on evil days, lay quietly. The IRB would not move unless the people called, unless Britain went to war, such adversity being Ireland's opportunity from the time of Tone. The new cultural nationalism — some of the minor poets to be found even in the IRB — was an appeal to ancient Celtic values, shaped for rather than summoned up by contemporary purpose. It was rarely atone to Republican aspirations. Young lads might engage in hurley, speak Irish, attend the Abbey, dream Celtic dreams, but the responsible, even the simple, rested content, awaited Home Rule, feared Orange violence but not Green rebellion. Romantic Fenian Ireland was in the grave.⁶ And then in August 1914, the United Kingdom went to war, a great European war, in time a world war, a war absorbing all of the Crown's attention and resources, a war that offered the Republicans the prospect of opportunity.

When the United Kingdom entered the great war, became vulnerable, the IRB had as well as opportunity an additional and crucial asset. The loyalist opposition to Home Rule had led to a near-mutiny of British officers at the Curragh Military camp and the organization of illegal gun-running by the militant Ulster Volunteer Force. This had been countered by the subsequent gun-running into Howth by the Irish Volunteers, formed in November 1913. Private armies had come to Ireland — including, even and also, the Irish Citizen Army, founded in November 1913, by James Connolly. Thus the IRB began discussions of a rising on September 9, 1914, less than a month after the war began. The militant established a secret Military Council. Sir Roger Casement would contact Germany for aid and the Irish Volunteer would be deployed to rise on the cue of the Military Committee. In December 1915, the Supreme Council of the IRB formally decided on an insurrection. The result was the Easter Rising of 1916, the Proclamation of the Republic, by the Military Committee including Patrick Pearse, first President of the Republic, who had joined the IRB in December 1913. James Connolly, to the confusion of subsequent more orthodox socialists, as did many of his European colleagues, chose nationalism, brought into the Rising his Citizen Army. The Rising was plagued by confusion, the failure of Casement's German connection — he was captured, tried, and hanged — divisions within the Volun-

teers, and a swift and brutal British response. Thus the insurrection was seemingly transformed from a revolt with a real chance of success, an opportunity with Germany aid to catch the British garrisons unprepared and seize much of the island, launch a real war, into a blood sacrifice so admired in Pearse's poetry and by later ballad makers. In any case, in Dublin at least, between April 24 and 29, there was at last in Ireland a Republic. This Easter Republic led not just to glory but also to the gallows for Casement, to a firing squad for all the Proclamation signers and the Dublin city military commanders — except Eamon De Valera, an American by birth — and to internment in Wales for the rebel Volunteers. And there for a generation, it was assumed, matters would rest until the next cycle of militancy, until the blood sacrifice watered a new generation of Irish rebels.

Even a cursory reading of the Proclamation of the Republic indicates that for the faithful such an ideal was very real — “she strikes in full confidence of victory.” The ideal, often haltingly represented by Fenian institutions, had been made tangible in front of the GPO, a spiritual exile, a Republic, home at last, focus of a nation once again. The Fenians in exile had already pursued war as would any state — even at one point appointing a Minister of War. The Supreme Council of the IRB, the American Fenians Brotherhoods, Clan na Gael wanted real armies, real ranks and uniforms, wanted a navy — and bought three warships, wanted real weapons — and funded the development of the submarine. They wanted allies not secret suppliers nor covert friends. They spoke not to secret agents but to President Johnson in Washington. In 1876 John Devoy and the Clan interviewed the Russian Ambassador in Washington only to be exposed to Russian realism, “. . . you are really a small party; you don't represent Ireland.”⁷ What the Ambassador missed was that the faithful *did* represent Ireland, their Ireland, their Republic which was to be found not in power or in statistics but in the hearts of the Irish. In December 1877, two Clan agents proposed to the Spanish Government a plan to seize Gibraltar — a suggestion also rejected by Madrid orthodoxy. In Russian eyes the Fenians may have been a small party, not worth alliance in the Spanish view, but Fenians assets were real. The invasions into Canada had not been all farce. Their dynamite campaign was deadly. The murdered were dead. Their war was moral and just in their own view. Even when their tactics appalled the conventional or alienated their own, the war against Satanic England — source of all Irish evils — for a great many Irish remained legitimate, just. That was especially so as the Fenian fever faded amid the New Departure and the amelioration of

grievance and as real violence, as real sacrifices became less likely. Then all had been changed, utterly changed.

The Republic had been proclaimed on Easter Monday, 1916. There was a real government, an Irish president, and an open, uniformed Irish Republican Army fashioned from the Irish volunteers and Citizen Army. Yet by the end of the month, the Republic had been returned to an exile, first only in the hearts of Irish patriots but within a year in the hearts of the Irish. Rebellion did not have to wait another generation but to the surprise of the IRB arose across the island. The institutions of rebellion were various. There was still the IRB with the Supreme Council's governmental pretensions. The Irish Republican Army volunteers looked to their Army Executive for authority. The Sinn Fein party, with De Valera as president, assembled in October 1917 all separatist political opinion to run for a Republican Dail Eireann using the British general election in December 1918 as means. And abroad there was a revived Clan na Gael eager to bring America and particular the American Government — dedicated to the rights of small nations — into the Irish cause.

In the December 1918 election, Sinn Fein returned 73 members, the Irish Parliamentary Party 6, the Unionist 25 and Independent Unionist one. On April 1, 1919, the Sinn Fein members not in jail met as Dail Eireann, reaffirmed the existence of the Republic, fashioned a government with De Valera as *Priomh Aire* — President, and then adjourned. They moved underground when the Dail was declared illegal on September 12, 1919. All Dail members were on the run during the Anglo-Irish struggle between 1919 and 1921. Few seemed greatly concerned about the institutions that gave form to the Republic. The president in June 1919 left for the United States for eighteen months. The IRB continued to exist, dominated by Michael Collins who was also Minister of Finance and Commander of the IRA. He was not Chief of Staff and the IRA remained loyal to the Army Executive. The Dail was in flight, Irish political institutions met in secret, courts in barns, ministers in attics. What mattered was the Republic existed in real life, whatever the form, home from exile.

The vicissitudes of the real contrasted to the ideal Republic began only when the British sought by concession to achieve an accommodation with militant Irish nationalism. At Westminster the British Parliament passed the Government of Ireland Act on December 23, 1920, which set up a six-county administration in part of historic Ulster, protection for and mean concession to the Loyalists. The Act failed as a general solution when the Irish rebels continued their guerrilla war. On July 9, 1921, there was

a truce between the IRA and the British army. In October a delegation from Dail Eireann, not including De Valera, home from America, was welcomed by Prime Minister David Lloyd George as a delegation from Sinn Fein. On December 6, the Irish delegation signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty and so began an almost theological disputation on the nature of the Republic, of Ireland, and of the appropriate means of governance. Defenders of the Treaty, like Collins and Griffiths, felt Ireland after 800 years had won much, the freedom to be free, while their opponents felt the terms a betrayal of the Republic. On December 14, the Second Dail met in Dublin to debate the Treaty. Liam Mellows, a Fenian radical, clearly put the Republic's case: the delegation had no right to sign away the Republic.

They had no power to agree to anything inconsistent with the existence of the Republic. Now either the Republic exists or it does not. If the Republic exists, why are we talking about stepping towards the Republic by means of this Treaty? I for one believed, and so believe, that the Republic exists, because it exists upon the only sure foundation upon which any government or republic can exist, that is, because the people gave a mandate for that Republic to be declared.⁸

The Republic had been proclaimed Easter Monday, transmuted from Irish hearts to the streets of Dublin, confirmed by the First Dail in 1919, and was beyond the tinkering of the Second Dail or the reach of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. De Valera's efforts then and later to find a formula to fit the ideal Republic within the necessary demands of the British Government were futile. The purists could see no need of formulas and the pragmatists found his arguments irrelevant.

On January 7, 1922, the Second Dail approved the Anglo-Irish Treaty 64 to 57. Two days later Griffith became President to succeed De Valera, president not of the Republic but of the Provisional Government. Gradually, imperceptibly, inevitably the country slipped toward civil war. Just as the Irish had between 1918 and 1921 evolved the archetype for all subsequent national liberation struggles, the asymmetrical juxtaposition of the people's will against imperial power, so too did they indicate the cost of transforming the dream into the everyday, the ideal into institutions. The ensuing civil war was more costly, more painful than the previous struggle, the Tan War.

The devout Republicans, the purists, felt that the Dail

could not vote away the real Republic, the people in De Valera's words, had no right to do wrong. The faithful members of the Second Dail, thus felt they were the *real* and legitimate government of Ireland — even though Republicans stood in the Third Dail elections — not to advantage. The IRA loyal to its Executive still dedicated to the Republic of 1916 confirmed by the First Dail fought against what evolved into the army of the Irish Free State. The IRA lost the confused and irregular civil war, dumped arms and waited for a better day. Sinn Fein deserted by the Free State, attenuated by the political confusion and the results of the Dail election, with De Valera as president remained loyal to the Republic. And De Valera, president of Sinn Fein, President of the Republic, recognized by the Second Dail, pragmatist at the end, left his party, the tyranny of the dead, the legacy of the blood sacrifice, and formed Fianna Fail. In time he took it into the Free State Dail. The real Republicans, who believed in a tangible ideal, a dream too luminous to deny, remained in exile within the nation in the IRA or Sinn Fein or the Second Dail.

In foreign exile the Fenians had fashioned only those institutions that would permit the faithful to wage moral war against the British. Few cared very much about the form — only diligent investigation can unearth much evidence of a serious government-in-exile although ample example of moral justification for physical force. When the Republicans in 1923 went into internal exile and rapidly increasingly political irrelevance the existing forms for Republican remembrance — Sinn Fein, the Second Dail handful of faithful, the IRA, a secret army with limited arms and no ideas as much dedicated to past grievance as future action — were more convenience, heritage, than consciously shaped structures of internal, covert opposition to the Free State and the United Kingdom. The faithful continued to believe that the Republic, the dream, *did* exist, required their loyalty, their service, and even at times their lives. The other Ireland seized on the every day, milk prices, postage stamps, elections, and promotion, existed on a lesser if real level. The Republicans might at times eschew deserved pensions or government employment — or were so denied — but sent their children to school, rode the buses, mailed their letters with the Free State stamps. They, the faithful went about their business in a country that after 1932 had De Valera and Fianna Fail in power, in power at least for twenty-six counties, in power after the 1937 Constitution of a Eire-Ireland but not in control of the Republic. And all the while their loyalty was to *the* Republic, more real than real, a compelling, luminous dream held in the hearts of internal exiles. In 1938 the few remaining Republican members of the

Second Dail gave their moral right to rule to the IRA Army Council to add additional authority to the forthcoming bombing campaign in Britain. After the war — the remaining Republicans mostly spent the years interned at the Curragh military camp in County Kildare — the tiny IRA absorbed the equally tiny and irrelevant Sinn Fein merging for no great purpose all the institutions that had retained the faith. On Easter Monday 1949, the coalition government of old Free Staters and tamed Republicans declared Ireland a Republic. It was not a united thirty-two country Republic, not a real Republic. The faithful ignored the maneuver. In theory — and for the old generation in reality — the government of Ireland still rested within the IRA Army Council, chosen at a democratic Army Convention by the twelve-man elected Army Executive. When the Troubles came to Northern Ireland in 1969 and the IRA split, the Provisional IRA, then loyal to abstentionism (the refusal to recognize the puppet institutions of the Dail in Leinster House and the Northern provincial parliament at Stormont) assumed the pure Republican mantle. The Provisional Army Convention met but twice, the Army Executive from time to time, so that the government-in-internal exile came to rest with the Army Council.

The Provisional IRA Army Council, pragmatists, hard men with decades of secret war as experience, by the eighties, had little interest in the old theological arguments of the Second Dail or the abstentionists. The last of those faithful to the past principles left to form Republican Sinn Fein after the IRA Army Convention in 1985 voted to end abstentionism — a tactic. They do still care, just as have each generation of Irish rebels, about their moral right to deploy physical force in the name of the Republic. The Fenians sought not to government but to wage war, just war, war for an ideal held in Irish hearts that proffered moral superiority to evil England. And so they did. The volunteers of 1916 inherited this legitimacy and briefly made manifest in Ireland the elusive Republic, created a liberated zone in Dublin, in Irish hearts. Their immediate successors in the IRA, in the Dail, in the Tan War, had acted for the Republic declared on April 24, 1916. All these institutions were focused on maintaining an Irish independence denied by imperial pretensions as much as achieving freedom. Ireland was free. Ireland was a Republic. And when the Anglo Irish Treaty presented less than the dream, the idealists insisted on pursuing an uncompromising course, beyond formula, beyond realization. After the turmoil of the civil war, the IRA had the prospect of action but as the assets wasted, after De Valera left, when the old soldiers retired, when the Free States and then Eire-Ireland grew too real and Northern Ireland

too secure, increasingly the institutions in internal-exile were not so much subversive as persistent, witness not a conspiracy. In all the various visible, often viable forms, the essence of exile had always been the necessity of moral sanction that an ideal Republic offered believers — Fenians bombers, Irish Volunteers, IRA guerrillas, and today's Provisional gunmen. The organizational, institutional, and theological facets of the visible institutions may — and did — fascinate the analytical but not those with guns. What they needed, what they received was sanction to act, to wage war, to defend the dream in being, to deny lesser alternatives, to persist

For analytical purposes an Irish government-in-exile, external or internal, has always had a small role. As soon as possible, in April 1919, the Irish rebels simply formed a "real" government and validated the Republic declared in 1916 but long present in Irish hearts. Before and after the Tan War, Dails, only a few were interested in fashioning institutions of governance. The Irish Republic never gave rise to a mirror-image of the conventional except in 1919-1922. There were no shadow cabinets or search for formal recognition. The Fenians wanted Russian or Spanish aid in waging war, Sir Roger Casement wanted German arms to aid the insurrection. Today the Provisional IRA want Libyan arms rather than recognition as a government of internal exile. Recognition of the Irish cause was always sought, of Irish rights, Irish Republican legitimacy — always and particularly in America where, then and previously, the Irish diaspora promises much. And a whole spectrum of means have been there employed — machine politics, new myths, spectacular operations abroad, petitions and pressure, direct mail campaigns and access to the president. The need for a "government" never seems to have been pressing. In any event from the founding of the Fenian Brotherhood, the diaspora has been the arena for splits and schism, ideological quarrels, personal vendettas, real divisions and those contrived by the jealous. A practical step was to avoid the creation of a "government" that might engender more opposition than support. Always the Republic attracted more volunteers to a single, compelling vision, transcendental not quantifiable, not pieced out in policies and issues and specifics, in all the necessary day-to-day promises. Everyone could be a Fenian, a Republican.

Until 1916 the need was to wage war. After 1916 with the creation of the First Dail, the Republic really existed and only the Tan War ameliorated disputation within the parties of the faithful so debilitating in the American diaspora. The response to the problem met with a particularly Irish response — the institution-

alization of vagary. Just as members of the IRB rarely referred to their organization by name — the firm, The Triangle — the Dail was as vague in Ireland about form and future and policies as had been the Republicans in exile. The most important facet of the Dail was that it was the elected Dail of the Republic. More was not needed even when more was achieved — Republican courts in the country or Soviet Russian recognition in Moscow. Then after the civil war and the desertion of De Valera, the Republicans in internal-exile found no need — or possibility — of really governing. They sought and possessed in their eyes and those of many of the Irish the right to do so at some future moment if the people acquiesced and in the meantime the IRA could use force, particularly against the British crown, to further the Republican cause.

In effect the Irish experience indicates that what matters is the reality of the dream. Exiles must carry more than files and rubber stamps in their baggage, must find more than arms to return their emigre regime to control. Thus De Gaulle and his Free French grew legitimate in time with the rising prospect of Allied success and the declining inevitability of a Thousand Year Reich; and with the alienation of the home French population in response to the German occupation arrogance they became France. In time De Gaulle himself alone for many embodied France. Later he could institutionalize himself in a new constitution; but in 1940, he represented, almost alone at first, a dream of a Free France — a dream once caught, once spread that transformed his pretensions into reality. The faith of the Afghanistan mujahedin could focus only on agreed opposition to the alien, Russian occupier. After the Russians withdrew confusion began. On most matters there is almost no unity, at best only tolerance and recourse to local opposition. The mujahedin have never felt a compelling need for moral justification in waging war or for a central government. The Palestinians, in fact, waged an irregular war by various means including terror in order to fashion a national dream. Once Palestine had been summoned up, the PLO was taxed to find further means to act as the years passed. And then the leadership was challenged to provide direction — “leadership” — when resistance was spontaneously snatched by children throwing rocks. In 1989, then, a Palestine government-in-exile was declared in part to capture their own in the occupied zone, in part to move history at a faster pace, in part to present an effective outward face to the dream — and thus in part to avoid relegation to exile futility. In all three cases the “government” but haltingly represented the dream — De Gaulle as France, the mujahedin as a quarreling committee united by

mutual suspicions, and the PLO as classic, exile bureaucrats rushing their banner to the head of the parade. All are surely typical cases, each expressing in tangible form the dream. In Ireland more than in most nations, the dream not only inspires but also authorizes the moral use of violence — without this, the validating blast of invisible trumpets, IRA murder is simply murder — a view strongly and mistakenly held by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. With the validating of the dream, all Irish institutions become transient, all British power a legitimate target. Dreams, of course, regardless of their material form, have always proven difficult of analysis, beyond quantification. Yet, in revolutionary matters such dreams move history.

For a great many people, Irish men and women of this and other generations, the Republic, the ideal, is and has been as real as real, requires action as well as acceptance, endows armies and men with a legitimacy not easy to transfer, not easy to transfer even to a recognized government, a real state, elected officials, the orthodox institutions. It is even possible from time to time to see this dream, the Republican validation, plain in its effect on the faithful. One of the most compelling rituals in Ireland presently is an IRA funeral. There along some parish lane or in the Milltown Cemetery in Belfast for one shining moment, as the procession straggles forward behind a lone piper and the coffin covered by tricolor, theory becomes fact. Standing at the graveside, the shattered family, the crowd of everyday people of no property, red necked and rumped, motley, damp, and the honor guard of nervous young men, together watch a quickly snatched volley. Pistol shots hastily fired by a masked volunteers proffers the Republic's only honor, hastily, illegal, compelling. There, at the grave of one more of Pearse's patriot dead, a volunteer dead for the Republic, the dream is real and the nature of any form, any government in external or internal exile irrelevant. And it would appear that as long as that dream lives so too will the invisible Republic inspiring war, inspiring at time, perhaps, forms more amenable to analysis but always indicating the necessary reality of faith behind revolutionary practice and structure.

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FOOTNOTES

¹Patriot history has played an enormous part in shaping the ideology, assumptions and even agenda of the Irish Republican movement — and has been the standard version of the state until most recently. The impact of the present Northern Troubles has inspired not only an analysis of the continuing violence but also the reality of past assumptions. On many of the most important nodes of concentration the jury is still out, even the facts remain uncertain so that even as elegant a work as R.F. Foster's recent *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* must skim swiftly over bogs of controversy.

²In consciously fashioning Irish national ideology during the nineteenth century a narrowing of the term excluded those "less" Irish producing the single tradition — Catholic, Gaelic speaking, Celtic in culture, older and more island bound — that has caused so much contemporary difficulty. The Republicans in theory, if not always in practice, remained true to their non-sectarian tradition and point with pride to Irish Protestant Republicans (few on the ground at present since the Provisional IRA often arises from very traditional roots and real sectarian conflict).

³As a general rule revolutionary organizations for various inherent reasons tend to be divided — those who stay together ossify together — but Irish Republicanism has been especially prone to schism. One reason is that the variety strands do not knit easily — in particular the radical, secular continental ideas with more narrow, highly conservative parish nationalism. Presently, for example, there are the Provisional movement — heirs to all including schism, the Workers Party on the left, the only new Stalinist socialist party in Europe and once, long ago, the Official IRA, the Republican Sinn Fein, seized on the verities or inherited principles, and the small, competing bands of gunmen left after the collapse of the Irish Republican Socialist Party that managed to unite the strands only briefly through the charisma of the founder Seamus Costello.

⁴Brendan O'Cathaoir, "American Fenians and Canada," *The Irish Sword*, Vol. VIII, No. 31, Winter 1967, pp. 79-80.

⁵Although there is an enormous literature on the Fenians — the generic term for nineteenth century Irish rebels — if not yet a definitive work, little is focussed on the nature of any government-in-exile. It was not very important to the involved and has

not been at all important to historians.

⁶A revolutionary ritual is the gravesite oration, a crucial step in the martyr pattern. The most important such speech in modern Irish history was that given at Glasnevin by Pearse over the grave of O'Donovan Rossa indicating the general tranquility of the nation and the Republican insistence that the crucial elements for rebellion, nevertheless, existed. All rebels spend much of their political life waiting for the golden moment to rise and most do so possessed of almost criminal optimism.

Life springs from death: and from the graves of patriot men and women spring living nations. The Defenders of this Realm have worked in secret and in the open. They think that they have pacified Ireland. They think that they have foreseen everything, think that they have provided against everything; but the fools, the fools, the fools! — they have left us our Fenian dead, and while Ireland holds these graves, Ireland unfree shall never be a peace.

⁷Sean Cronin, *Irish Nationalism, A History of Its Roots and Ideology*, Dublin, The Academy Press, 1980, p. 92.

⁸Cronin, *Irish Nationalism*, p. 147.