

## EDITORIAL

### TOWARDS A NEW IRISH IDENTITY

**I**t was a bold undertaking for a group of professors and graduates of the National University of Ireland to launch a new Journal in 1912 dedicated to serious intellectual analysis of major issues in Letters, Philosophical Subjects and the Sciences. Given the pressures on Irish journals it is something of a pleasant surprise that, seventy-five years later, we are able to launch the 300th issue of *Studies*. It is a good reason to celebrate and even to engage in a little gentle trumpet blowing.

The need for intellectual analysis was obvious in 1912. The land struggle had largely been settled by Wyndham's Act of 1903 after a long and relatively non-violent campaign. The University Question had been resolved by the Act of 1908. A new spirit of national pride and self-help had been reflected in the literary renaissance, the language revival and the co-operative movement, all of which crossed political and religious divides. But the seeds of division were also obvious. The imminent possibility of Home Rule had led to increased tension between North and South, and Nationalists were shortly to be divided between the more militant group who were to lead the 1916 rising and those who would have been content with a devolved Parliament. Socially the poverty and squalor in Dublin and other cities were among the worst in Europe. There was high unemployment, and conditions and pay for urban and rural workers occasioned justifiable unrest. The disaster of the Great War was but two years away.

Just as the generation of 1912 had to face crucial decisions which would affect the self-image of the different groups on the island as well as the way they related to each other for years to come, so we too face similar decisions. In this issue of *Studies* we try to look at some aspects of our current identity in the areas of politics, faith, economics, law, anthropology and literature. The most urgent aspect, though, as in 1912, is the Northern conflict.

#### **Northern Ireland**

The Northern conflict is a complex interaction of a Nationalist-Unionist problem within Northern Ireland, the North-South relationship within the whole island and the nature of the links

between the Dublin and London governments. Within this context the task facing the people of the Republic is to decide which is more important to them: the political unity of the country, or justice for both Catholics and Protestants within Northern Ireland. There seems to be a growing number in the country who would put justice first and the positive support for the Anglo-Irish Agreement was an indication of this. However, there is a danger that as a growing disenchantment with unity becomes increasingly articulated there will be less and less concern about the responsibility people in the Republic have towards those living in Northern Ireland.

The most powerful of all the groups involved in the conflict remains the British government. They have enormous security resources at their disposal, far greater than the Dublin government, yet the number of killings continues to increase. It is hard to believe their resources are being used to the maximum. There remains also continued public concern over the attitude of the government towards the killings of unarmed civilians carried out by the security forces.

However it must be obvious by now that a security policy on its own will do little to bring about political progress. The Anglo-Irish Agreement has been a brave effort on behalf of both governments. One of its aims was to provide nationalists with a political forum in which their voice would be heard. Yet the amount of practical changes it has brought for nationalists is still very small. There is also no indication whatever that unionist opposition to any kind of Dublin involvement will decrease. In these circumstances it might be more constructive if both governments, at the most opportune time, were prepared to use the Agreement as a bargaining chip.

This would involve suspending the Agreement for a limited period to allow negotiations to take place. The only outcome that should be accepted by the two governments would be a willingness by unionists to accept some form of power-sharing. Under the terms of the Agreement the Anglo-Irish Conference ceases to have any influence over those areas of government that are devolved to a local administration that enjoys cross-community support. But the Conference will continue to influence areas that are not devolved. There is no way that unionists are going to agree to some form of power-sharing and at the same time to some continued involvement of the Dublin government in Northern Ireland. Therefore as a *quid pro quo* for power-sharing the two sovereign governments should consider abandoning Dublin involvement completely. It would be quite feasible for them to devise an alternative structure for co-operation. However, if unionists continue to refuse any form of

power-sharing the Agreement should be re-activated, but this time the power of the Dublin government should be increased. The choice facing unionists, then, would be: some form of power-sharing without the Anglo-Irish Agreement, or else a much stronger Agreement, amounting in practice to joint authority.

There is a much stronger moral case for pressurizing unionists to accept power-sharing than there is for pressurizing them to accept Dublin involvement. Those who see the latter as morally desirable as well as being vital for any political progress need to show that there is some actual possibility of unionists being brought to accept it.

Of course the corollary of power-sharing is that Northern nationalists take on responsibility for the institutions of the State. This will not be easy for them to do, but there can be no peace without a painful price being paid by both communities.

Again part of the price the South should be willing to offer would be changes in Articles Two and Three of the Constitution in order to develop a new North-South relationship, once power-sharing was in place.

The Northern conflict continues to be the most destructive and bitter engagement in Western Europe since the Second World War. That is why so many articles in this issue of *Studies* touch on it.

### **Social Justice**

In terms of social justice, living conditions and material well-being, North and South, have improved greatly over the decades since 1912 and the Welfare System has blunted the edge of underlying poverty. Yet the picture is still very bleak. Some 358,000 people are unemployed on the island as a whole. The rising emigration figures are an indication of the hopelessness so many feel of the possibility of any real improvement. The disaster of unemployment is now reaching into all levels of our society. A two-tier social-welfare system relegates the unemployed to the status of 'undeserving poor' with the lowest rates of welfare benefits, and a daily struggle to survive. Both North and South there are calls to reduce welfare benefits. While in the South these have so far been resisted for the most part, in the North the implementation of the Fowler Report is already having a negative impact. Various Economic and Social Research Institute reports have documented how little social mobility there is in the Republic and how income, education and privilege remain in the same social groups from generation to generation.

We are, then, a divided society in which many groups like the poor,

women, travellers, the separated who have re-married, Catholics within N. Ireland and Protestants within the context of the whole country, find themselves in weak positions. What perhaps is needed is a new concept of community embracing both majority and minority groups on the island as a whole. Only with this will there be support for strong government action on behalf of weaker sections of the community, especially with issues like job creation where there is a price to be paid in terms of living standards.

There is gloom on the island, especially among the young, some of whom have even a sense of nihilism. Yet it would be wrong in an anniversary issue like this not to look beyond the gloom at the positive elements in our identity. There is still something unique about the people living on this island. Northern Catholics and Protestants, so divided at home, have no problem relating to each other abroad. Irish emigrants would so often prefer to bring their children up at home, if only the jobs were there. Perhaps our positive element has something to do with the gift of imagination, with our sense of history, our openness to religious experience, our willingness to speak of death, our experience of being a relatively small island community. In the end most people living on the island, for all our problems, would not want to live anywhere else.

Finally it is only right in a special issue like this to pay tribute to the many writers who over the years have given their painstaking labour to make up the pages of *Studies*. Without them and the readers in over thirty countries who have remained loyal to us we would not be celebrating our seventy-fifth anniversary.