

West Cork

versus

Oxford

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Professor Foster

on

A.M.Sullivan

Aubane Historical Society

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**Professor Foster
on
A.M.Sullivan**

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A.M. Sullivan was a popular nationalist historian in the early Home Rule period. His *Story Of Ireland* was published in 1867. It covered what had been going on in Ireland from the earliest times until 1860. It went through a great many editions during the next forty years. The last edition I have seen was published in 1907. As far as I know it has not been published since.

Sullivan was a forgotten historian until Roy Foster made him the subject of his Inaugural Address into Oxford University in 1994.

Foster was hailed by former Taoiseach Enda Kenny, in a speech at Galway University, as the supreme Irish historian. His purpose in reviving Sullivan was to ridicule the history he wrote, and to ridicule the very idea of an Irish national history by ridiculing Sullivan's history.

Foster's Inaugural Address at Oxford became the first chapter of a book he published in 2001 called *The Irish Story*. The object of *The Irish Story* was to demolish *The Story Of Ireland* by demonstrating that there was no Story Of Ireland, only Irish *storytelling*.

The full title of Foster's book is *The Irish Story: Telling Tales And Making It Up In Ireland*.

The point of the book is made on the dust-cover, with a picture of a man in modern dress looking at Pyramids on the shore of Carlingford Lough.

Inside the book it is explained that the Irish tell themselves fairy stories about themselves and call it history. And Sullivan was the master craftsman in the production of fantasy as history. And his book, though out of print for a century, and forgotten, still kept the Irish locked into fantasy about themselves.

Sullivan had given such a powerful impulse to the fantasy state of mind in Irish culture that it continued to reproduce itself without him for four generations after he himself died and had been forgotten.

But Foster would break the spell, and enable us to see the real world.

Forgotten!

Why had Sullivan, who had been so influential for a long generation, become so forgotten so quickly?

Obviously because he was a Home Ruler, and Home Rule politics gave way to Republican politics and Republican action.

But Sullivan was more than just a Home Ruler. He was a founder of coherent constitutional nationalism in the years after the Famine. And he founded constitutional nationalism in opposition to conspiratorial physical force nationalism.

So, why was Foster, as a British historian of Ireland, so hostile to him? Presumably because he gave nationalist Ireland a coherent Constitutional foundation at a time when physical force conspiracy was thoroughly policed and had no prospect of succeeding.

Nationalist Ireland might have become extinct as a consequence of the Famine, as influential opinion in England expected. It was not physical force that saved it. The effectiveness of physical force lay in the future.

It was the establishment of a functional constitutional movement that saved it. Physical force only became effective in the changed social structure brought about by the constitutional movement.

Pearse, at the meeting that founded the Volunteers in 1913, said that “*the history of the 19th century might be described as the desperate attempt of a mob to realise itself as a nation*”. That is the most informative single sentence about anything that I have come across.

But the mob itself had to be constructed from the wreckage brought about by a century of Protestant Colonial Rule based on military conquest.

O’Connell raised the wreckage into a nationalist mob that he used as a battering ram to force Catholic Emancipation. He backed down on the issue of self-government at Clontarf in 1843. And, whether one thinks he was

right or wrong to back down, it is certain that the effect of backing down was demoralising.

And then the ‘Famine’ set in almost immediately. The English media had every reason to expect that a Celt would soon be as rare in Ireland as a Red Indian in Manhattan.

O’Connell’s movement evaporated in the course of the ‘Famine’. The attempt at physical rebellion failed utterly. Foster sneers at the *cabbage patch* rebellion but does not say what the right thing to do was. Was it to be philosophical, see Ireland in perspective as an unimportant fragment of the great British world, and let things take their course?

Sullivan tried to take part in that attempt at rebellion but it was over before he got there.

In the aftermath of the ‘Famine’ a group of Young Irelanders formed an *Independent Party*, but on the issue of Tenant Right rather than Independence. The Famine, by sweeping away millions of peasants, had made tenant-right a practical political project. But the Independents at Westminster submitted to bribery and Duffy emigrated in disgust—Sadlier and Keogh.

Sullivan then undertook the publication of nationalist newspapers, making the case for constitutional action and discouraging the physical force conspiracy of the Fenians. The Fenian leadership ordered his assassination but the order was not carried out.

Isaac Butt, an (Irish) Imperialist Tory, was disgusted by the refusal of the Government to use the resources of its world Empire to feed the Irish masses, reduced to the verge of starvation by rack-renting, when the potato-blight struck, and by its insistence that grain should continue to be exported. He thought the purpose of the Empire was that its various parts should be mutually supportive. When it was shown that that was not its purpose, he founded the Home Rule Party.

The Party under Butt was only a loose association. It was tightened up and disciplined by Parnell. That was when Sullivan decided to enter Parliament. He refused to give a pledge of loyalty to Parnell and Parnell thought it prudent not to demand it as a condition of Party membership.

Sullivan was dead by the time of the Parnell Split, but most of his associates in the *Bantry Band* opposed Parnell's attempt to reduce the Party to a mere instrument of his dictatorship.

Fenians

The *Band* had a group of interconnected families at its core. It was influential in publishing, politics and business. And it differed from the Fenians in the matter of land reform as well as physical force.

The Fenian leadership saw emphasis on land reform as a distraction from the national question. The Sullivans and their associates threw themselves into the land agitation, which they saw as giving substance to the national question. They were active with William O'Brien, Canon Sheehan and D.D. Sheehan in the movement that ended the Colonial landlord system in 1903.

The best-known Fenian was probably Charles Kickham. When nothing much was happening in the field of physical force, Kickham set out to give Fenianism a literary presence by writing novels. His best-known novel, *Knocknagow*, was still widely read when I was young. It is clear from it that Kickham had idealised views of landlordism. It was an ideal based on Landlordism as it existed in England and it seemed that he wished it could be reproduced in Ireland. He did not envisage an Ireland of 'peasants' without landlords.

But the English landlords placed in supremacy in Ireland after the Williamite conquest, and protected by Penal Laws against their tenants for the better part of two centuries, could never play the part in Ireland that landlords did in England.

The Irish nation could not develop as a nation of landlords and tenants. In order to develop, it had to slough off the landlord system. That is what

Sullivan was engaged in. But, when Kickham could not find a publisher in Ireland for *Knocknagow*, Sullivan published it for him.

And it was the other Sullivan, T.D., who put Fenianism into memorable literature with *God Save Ireland* and *Deep In Canadian Woods*.

Rrrrrrevolutionaries!

Revisionist ideologues like to call the *War of Independence* a revolution, and then to demonstrate that, as a revolution, it failed. I do not remember it ever being referred to as a revolution by the people who took part in it—people amongst whom I grew up.

“*Revolution*” usually means social revolution. The War of Independence was not a class war of tenants against landlords. That social revolution had already been accomplished. The tenants in the main were no longer tenants. They were small farmers who had established themselves as independent owners of the land.

In order for the nation to act single-mindedly for a purely nationalist purpose, and not to be diverted by other issues, the bulk of the population had to be content with the social structure that existed. And that was the case, particularly in the Munster region where the War was fought, and the physical force movement was called upon to deliver what it had long been promising.

But, even then, physical force was not an alternative to the constitutional movement. It was an instrument of it. And it acted in a situation brought about by the constitutional movement.

How did it come about that a pitched battle could be fought between an Irish Army and the British Army in 1916? That could never have been brought about by conspiratorial organisation.

The Irish Army drilled openly on the streets of Dublin in preparation for war—as it did elsewhere. This was possible because of complications that had arisen within the constitutional movement. Redmond’s Volunteers,

which had become a recruiting agency for the British Army, drilled and paraded at home in an attempt to show that it was still a *national* force, and the Government did not feel confident that it could treat the other Volunteers as a completely different force which it might suppress without damaging recruiting.

The Irish Volunteers were constitutional until they went to war against the constitution. And that was why they were able to prepare to make war.

1916 Tactics

It is suggested by Tim Pat Coogan that Michael Collins thought the pitched battle in Dublin was a mistake, and that 1919 tactics should have been adopted in 1916. But the 1919 situation did not exist in 1916. And if occasional assassination was all that was done in 1916, the 1919 situation would probably not have come about.

It was the week-long pitched battle—the first since 1690—and the orderly surrender with which it ended, that changed the framework of things. No amount of assassination could have had that effect.

Assassination, in defence of an elected Government, of the agents of a hostile foreign Government, was something entirely different. It was constitutional.

Constitutional Government?

The claim of the British Government to be governing Ireland constitutionally depended entirely on the Home Rule Party in its Redmondite development. The governing parties of the United Kingdom state had stopped contesting elections in the greater part of Ireland long before 1918. The constitutionality of Crown government in Ireland then depended on the Oath of Allegiance taken by the Home Rule MPs who held the majority of the Irish representation.

The collapse of Irish constitutional nationalism in 1918 was therefore also the constitutional collapse of British government in Ireland.

To deny this is to deny constitutionality any definite meaning.

Foster denies it. And he describes those who took the 1918 Election to have established in Irish life a form of constitutionality independent of the Crown as “*visionaries*” whose mindset was one of hysterical “*exaltation*” and delusion, characterised by “*Anglophobia*”, leading to “*psychotic Anglophobia*”.

Irish Delusions

The term “*Anglophobia*” is used repeatedly in both his *Modern Ireland* and *The Irish Story*.

A “*phobia*” is a mental disease. It is a morbid and irrational condition produced by, or giving rise to, groundless hate or fear. He claims that the idea that English rule in Ireland over a long period was consistently destructive of Irish society, and was structurally sectarian, is not an idea that one arrives at by reasonable investigation of recorded history. It is a mad notion of *Anglophobic* lunacy! And A.M. Sullivan is responsible for it.

And sectarianism did not begin when England, after the final conquest of 1688-90, imposed a strictly Protestant (Anglican) religion of State in Ireland, and brought in a Protestant colony which it set up with a Parliament, and upheld that regime for a hundred years, after which it upheld Protestant Ascendancy against the mass of the Catholic Irish under direct British rule.

No, that was not sectarian. What was sectarian was that the Catholic population, excluded from political life for close to a century and a half, because it was Catholic, eventually forced its way into political life as Catholic.

If one is not in tune with Foster’s own preconceptions, what one hears him saying is that *what is not Protestant is sectarian*.

Nothing of that kind is to be found in reverse in Sullivan’s book.

‘Patriot Parliament’

The Irish Parliament that was abolished in 1800 was an exclusively Protestant body, representing the small colonial stratum that lived by exploiting the Catholic populace.

Sullivan accepted it as an Irish national body when it protested against some English restrictions on its economic activity. Because of those protests it was hailed as the “*Patriot Parliament*”, and Sullivan regretted its passing.

The Patriot Parliament might have made itself a real national body by gradually incorporating representatives of the Catholic population into its Constitution. The Catholics were willing to be incorporated. If they had been, the course of Irish history would have been profoundly different. But the Patriots remained fundamentally anti-Catholic to the bitter end.

Its end was that it was abolished as a failure and a nuisance by the British Parliament that had set it up.

But Sullivan regretted its passing. He was so little of a sectarian in outlook that he did not seem to notice that the abolition of the Parliament brought greater freedom of action to the Catholics!

If the national movement by the end of the 19th century was composed almost entirely of Catholics, that was not because of Catholic sectarianism. It was because of Protestant sectarianism. The Protestant body, with only individual exceptions, would not taint itself through political association with Catholics. The state of mind with which the Protestant colonial adventuring began in 1691 persisted right through to the Third Home Rule Bill, and after.

Dying Out?

The Catholics did not isolate themselves. They were discarded by the Protestant State system based on the Williamite conquest.

The destiny imagined for them by the conquerors was that they would wither away. Many peoples withered away in the presence of British Power—military, political, and (so to speak) moral. British Power is withering. The decent thing to do in its shade was to wither.

The great Gladstonian Liberal, Sir Charles Dilke, only stated an obvious fact when he wrote, in *Greater Britain*, that—

“The Anglo-Saxon is the only extirpating race on earth. Up to the commencement of the now inevitable destruction of the Red Indians of Central North America, of the Maoris, and of the Australians by the English colonists, no numerous race had ever been blotted out by an invader; ...the Spaniards not only never annihilated a people, but have themselves been all but expelled by the Indians of Mexico... The Portuguese..., the Dutch, ...the French... have conquered but not killed off the native peoples. Hitherto it has been nature’s rule, that a race that peopled a country in the early historic days should people it to the end of time.

“It is no exaggeration to say that in power the English countries would be more than a match for the remaining nations of the world...”

The Irish did not wither. They survived in the first instance as Gaels, drawing elements of the Norman English into their culture. After Gaelic civilisation was subverted, and rule by fanatical Protestant fundamentalists was imposed, with the object of removing them from the scene because they would not become Protestants (that is, give up their traditional culture), they survived as non-Protestants.

It could be said that, in the first half of the 18th century, they survived as non-people. They were not even acknowledged subjects of the Crown. In 1760 the Crown acknowledged that they existed, but they existed without the right to own land, to be educated, to join the professions, or to engage in political activity.

It was of course indecent of them to have survived under such brutalising circumstances, but they did survive.

Catholic Development

Because they survived they had to do something with themselves. They were, after all, the great mass of the people, and, once their continuing existence was acknowledged officially, nothing constructive could be done in Ireland without them.

In the late 18th century, in the era of “Grattan’s Parliament” and the United Irish movement, they were willing to be phased into the colonial system of the Irish Parliament. In order to facilitate this, their leaders adopted resolutions denying authority to the Pope on anything but the barest religious doctrines. But it was no use. The “*Patriot Parliament*” wouldn’t have them.

The Parliament was abolished by its creator. Intimate Protestant supervision of Irish life eased off under the looser authority of the British State. The declining Protestant colonial stratum, still wealthy and influential, through the monopolies it granted itself when it was in political power, refused to converge in a joint development with the Catholic populace.

The Catholic populace was therefore obliged to undergo its own development, out of its own resources, and traditions, in continuous conflict with the Protestant body, which remained intent on defending its privileges, hopefully expecting that Britain would still find a way of reversing that whole development of Catholic political self-confidence. That expectation continued until the shocking event of the Truce between the British Army and the IRA in 1921.

Latter-Day Die-hards

The Protestants had it all. They had it for a very long time. But they frittered it all away. So it is understandable that a little group of ideological

die-hards should get together to console themselves by telling each other a different story.

History can only be written from some particular vantage point. The major history-writing force in the world in recent centuries has been the English intelligentsia. English history is the history of an absolute nationalism, forged half a millennium ago, when England wrenched itself apart from Europe and set out on a campaign to dominate the world.

A fundamentalist and elitist Protestantism was at the core of that nationalism. It still is, in slightly dissimulated form. Its story is one of victimhood, suffered in its struggle to bring truth to a fallen world.

It has an official Martyrology. Fox's *Book Of Martyrs* has never been out of print, since its publication in the 16th Century, and its production is still celebrated regularly on radio and television.

Even when the Empire was on the brink of absolute world dominance, as it appeared to be in 1914 when launching the War that it expected to be over by Christmas, it never let go of the ideology of victimhood in the service of Truth. As I write, it is in torment because Europe is not doing its bidding: European tyranny insists on depriving it of the privileges of EU membership after it leaves the EU.

Irish View

It is futile from an Irish national viewpoint to complain about what England is and it is fatal to imagine that it is not what it is, and to believe in the ideal façade that it presents in the passing moment.

The only thing to do is to see what it is, accept it as a matter of fact, and find a way of living despite it.

William O'Brien knew from experience what England was, and the English politicians knew that he knew, and on that basis there was collaboration between them to rid the country of the landlord system that had served its purpose—or failed to serve it.

John Redmond lived in the House of Commons façade, missed the reality of things, and got thirty or forty thousand Irishmen killed waging wars of destruction on Germany and Turkey.

A.M. Sullivan wrote what was a remarkably dispassionate history, considering that his political starting point lay in the ‘Famine’. It is not a wild Millenarian fantasy, and there is scarcely a trace in it of the inevitable destiny that is standard in any popular history of England.

But it is written from the vantage point of the Irish. Therefore it grated on Foster, whose vantage point is clearly that of the Protestant colonial stratum that owned Ireland for a couple of centuries, but threw it all away out of blind sectarianism—and is looking for somebody else to blame.

He says, about O’Connell’s lieutenants in the 1820s:

“They were adept at playing the numbers game in terms of electoral pressure... Protestant influence at the polls was decisively challenged and beaten. Populism and clerical influence had arrived openly in Irish politics...” (*Modern Ireland*, p299).

They *were* the numbers. And they ‘played’ themselves at elections. And Catholic priests supported them on the issue of ending the law excluding Catholics from political office. And had not the Protestant Bishops sat in the House of Lords of the Irish Parliament?

Well, it can be conceded that the Protestant Bishops of the Ascendancy were not *populist* clerics!

Our Cleverest Irish Historian

The dust-cover of Foster’s assault on Sullivan, *The Irish Story*, is decorated with lavish praise of him by Colm Tóibin, John Banville, Owen Dudley Edwards, and Anthony Clare. The only surprise here is Colm Toíbin who wrote a good historical novel, *The Heather Blazing*—the only worthwhile historical novel about modern Ireland that I have seen—but then

it seems that he ran out of Irish historical perspective and went in search of exotic themes as recommended by Seán Ó Faoláin.

The ultimate accolade was, of course, that which was delivered by the former Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, at Galway University a couple of years ago.

Foster was chosen to be the outstanding Irish historian by the Fianna Fail/Fine Gael political Establishment in the 1970s. They could not cope with the way things had gone in the North, blamed it on the way history was written, and sponsored the invention of new history which was not history at all. Foster makes no secret of it. He thinks that the best form of history is Amnesia (*The Irish Story*, p36).

The most accurate piece of praise on that dust-cover comes from English television journalist Robert Kee. Foster, he says, is “*One of our cleverest historians and our cleverest Irish historian*”.

It was clever to present the forgotten Sullivan as the Herodotus of Irish history and assert that, though forgotten, he set an unbroken pattern of invented history as a fairy-story, a “*wonder tale*”. The critical faculty of Establishment Ireland had collapsed in bewilderment under the impact of the War in the North.

That War was what provided the opportunity for a new history. The new history said that the Northern War made it necessary. But then the new, amnesiac history did not deal at all with the strange political structure of Northern Ireland in which the War developed.

The indictment of Sullivan is as follows:

“The theme was established from the beginning: Ireland as the isle of Destiny, invaded from Spain by Milesians (and thus implicitly linked from its origins to Catholic Europe); The themes are legitimate independence, equal status with other European nations, the capacity for self-government: Home Rule 3,000 years avant le lettre. This mercilessly present-minded preoccupation drives on through Christianity, accomplished peacefully in Ireland alone... On the story rolls through

centuries of bondage; ... 'national' unity is forever dangled as the object of quest, and just as cruelly removed... This distinctively 19th century language is constantly used for all periods” (p7).

“It is well worth dwelling on this hugely influential text because it best encapsulates the formalities, motifs, elisions, parallelisms and—of course—gaps that characterise the story. Sullivan defended this decision to present a narrative based on ‘chief events’ that were ‘easily comprehended and remembered’; minor incidents or qualifications which might ‘confuse or bewilder’ were dropped” (p6).

The suggestion here is that something essential was left out of the narrative. But Foster does not say what was left out that should have been in. His purpose was not to “*revise*” the narrative in the sense of improving it.

I looked up the reference given by Foster and found that the quotation he gives is from Sullivan’s Chapter 36, in which he says that he omits many incidents from this chapter in order to give a general outline of the Geraldine League, but that they will be given in the next chapter. They are given in Chapter 37. And the main incident left out of Chapter 36 is the massacre of Mullaghmast—the massacre of the Irish nobility of Laois by Sir Francis Cosby at a great dinner to which he had invited them.

With regard to the assertion that Sullivan wrote history as a kind of perpetual present in which all things exist together timelessly, and substantial change brought about by the causative interaction of different forces is denied, I give a couple of extracts. (I could find nothing supportive of the ‘Isle of Destiny’, ‘fairy-story’ mode!)

End Of Milesian Ireland. Chapter 53

“I have narrated at very considerable length the events of that period of Irish history with which the name of Hugh O’Neill is identified. I have done so because that era was one of most peculiar importance to Ireland; and it is necessary for Irishmen to fully understand and appreciate the

momentous meaning of its results. The war of 1599-1602 was *the last struggle of the ancient native rule* to sustain itself against the conquerors and the jurisdiction of their civil and religious code. Thenceforth—at least for two hundred years subsequently—the wars in Ireland which eventuated in completing the spoliation, ruin, and extinction of the native nobility, were “*wars in behalf of the English sovereign as the rightful sovereign of Ireland*. Never more in Irish history do we find the authority of the ancient native dynasties set up, recognized, and obeyed. Never more do we find the ancient laws and judicature undisturbedly prevailing in any portion of the land. With the flight of the northern chieftains all claims of ancient native dynasties to sovereignty of power, rights, or privileges disappeared, never once to re-appear; and the ancient laws and constitution of Ireland, the venerable code that had come down inviolate through the space of fifteen hundred years, vanished totally and forever! Taking leave, therefore, of the chapter of history to which I have devoted so much space, we bid farewell to Milesian Ireland—Ireland claiming to be ruled by its own native princes, and henceforth have to deal with Ireland as a kingdom subject to the Scoto-English sovereign...”

James the Second. Chapter 62:

“All writers have agreed in attributing to James the Second a disregard of the plainest dictates of prudence, if not of the plainest limits of legality, in the measures he adopted for the accomplishment of a purpose of unquestionably equitable, laudable, and beneficent—namely, the abolition of proscription and persecution for conscience sake, and the establishment of religious freedom and equality.

It may be said, and with perfect truth, that though this was so, though James was rash and headlong, it mattered little after all, for the end he aimed at was utterly opposed to the will of the English people... that it was out of all possibility he could have succeeded, whether he were politic and cautious, or straightforward, arbitrary and rash. For the English nation was too strongly bent on thorough persecution, to be barred in its

course, or diverted into tolerance or humanity by any power of king or queen...”

Rebellion. Chapter 58:

“It was only after 1605 that the English government could, by any code of moral obligations whatever, be held entitled to the obedience of the Irish people, whose struggles previous to that date were lawful efforts in defence of their native and legitimate rulers against the English invaders. And never, subsequently to 1605, up to the period at which we have now arrived — 1798— did the Irish people revolt or rebel against the new sovereignty.

On the contrary, in they fought for the king, and lost heavily by their loyalty. In 1690 once more they fought for the king, and again they paid a terrible penalty for their fidelity to the sovereign. In plain truth, the Irish are, of all peoples, the most disposed to respect constituted authority where it is entitled to respect, and the most ready to repay even to be shortest measure of justice on the part of the sovereign, by generous, faithful, enduring, and self-sacrificing loyalty.

They are a law-abiding people — or rather a justice-loving people ; for their contempt for law becomes extreme when it is made the antithesis of justice. Nothing but terrible provocation could have driven such a people into rebellion.

Rebellion against just and lawful government is a great crime. Rebellion against constituted government of any character is a terrible responsibility. There are circumstances under which resistance is a duty, and where, it may be said, the crime would be rather in slavish or cowardly acquiescence; but awful is the accountability of him who undertakes to judge that the measure of justification is full, that the moral duty of resistance is established by the circumstances, and that, not merely in figure of speech, but in solemn reality, no other resort remains.”

Brendan Clifford
August 2019

West Cork has been the focus of much new historical study in recent decades. This is most welcome. But most of that new study has been based on a fundamental misrepresentation of its history especially during the War of Independence.

It was based on a fraud – the breaking of the basic rules of historical scholarship; blatant distortion, censoring and misrepresentation of historical sources; use of anonymous interviews - one with a dead participant of the Kilmichael Ambush; innuendo and insinuation of alleged sectarianism and ethnic cleansing as the driving force in the War of Independence in West Cork.

This was initiated and promoted by the cream of the History Department in TCD and faithfully copied by the rest of academia and the media.

Members of the Crossbarry & Kilmichael Commemoration Committee in conjunction with the Aubane Historical Society are proud to have played a part in discrediting this revisionism and under their auspices the Fóram Stairé Iarthar Cóircaí (The West Cork History Forum) is now being convened as a focus for dealing with the proper history of West Cork.

It will be launched on 9th August 2019 at the West Cork Hotel with talks on the Kilmichael Ambush, the Battle of Crossbarry and the launch of a new publication on the West Cork Historian, A. M. Sullivan, and “*West Cork versus Oxford*”.

The leading revisionist of our era, Professor Roy Foster, launched his career in Oxford with a vitriolic assault on Sullivan’s best known book – *The Story of Ireland*. It is appropriate therefore that Sullivan be given his due in any discussion of history in and about West Cork.

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