

A revolution of ideas

NO MEMBER of the Workers' Party should have any hang-ups about commemorating men like Connolly and Pearse and the historic events which took place in Dublin in Easter Week 1916. We have built our own party with our own policies, our own dreams and visions of the future. We are a party with our feet firmly planted in the present and our eyes fixed on a future which we have clearly mapped out. But the modern structures which we have so painfully erected are built on the very solid foundations set down for us in the past by men like Tone and Connolly.

We do not necessarily agree with everything these men said, or everything they did, anymore than we agree to-day with everything we ourselves said or did in the past. But we can understand the context in which those things were said and done and we realise that all of them were part of our historical and political development. It was the events of our past and the struggles of our past that made us the people and the party we are to-day. Tone and Connolly and Pearse helped to shape our destiny just as Billy McMillan or Joe McCann or Malachy McCurrin did in more recent times.

It is quite ridiculous and childish to attempt to ignore 1916, to forget about it, to pretend it never happened or worse still to pretend it had no significance. (If people have hang-ups about 1916 because the provos claim to be the successors of Connolly and Pearse then that's even more ludicrous and childish — there's no more connection between them than there is between the Red Army Faction and the Red Army.) I believe it had great significance for all the people on this island and still has to-day. It was a revolution of ideas which has made us all think in completely different terms from the pre-1916 perspective on politics, economics and society. Our political parties have been formed with the objectives of either supporting and promoting these ideas or of bitterly opposing them or in the case of Fianna Fáil, of speaking in support of them but acting in a totally contrary fashion.

History for the vast majority of people is what they are taught in school. What they are taught in school is what the State and the church wants them to think. I was taught that Easter Week 1916 was a Poets' Rebellion of idealists, a blood sacrifice inspired by

TOMÁS MAC GIOLLA argues that 1916 still has great significance today.



the crucifixion of Christ, futile but brave and heroic. All I was told of Connolly was that he was shot in his chair and someone wrote a beautiful poem about it. Everything I subsequently read about it proved to me what a huge sham and lie this was, an insult to everyone who participated and in particular to the Dublin working class.

The commemorative events for the 50th anniversary in 1916, the newspaper articles, the many books written and in particular the week-long television programme, all of these restored James Connolly to his rightful position as the dominant figure of 1916. It was finally clear to all that this was a workers' rather than a poets' rebellion. Of course there were poets and idealists who fought and died in the streets of Dublin just as there were poets and idealists who died in Flanders or the Somme as Francis Ledwidge and Thomas Kettle did, and many of them had the same ideals, as is evident from Tom Kettle's lines

*Died not for flag nor King nor
Empire
but for a dream born in a
herdsman's shed
and for the secret scripture of the
poor.*

But the hard organised core of fighting men and women was provided by the

realists of the Dublin workers in the Irish Citizen Army led by James Connolly. They were fighting for a dream born in bitter hungry struggle in the 1913 lock out, the longest and greatest battle between workers and bosses seen in any country and which had a profound effect on trade union and working class organisation throughout Europe and America.

There was an inevitability and a stark logic to Connolly's determination to lead an insurrection in 1916 which is evident from even the most perfunctory study of his words and the events of the four or five years before. Three events will suffice to demonstrate what I mean.

Sir Edward Carson's Ulster Volunteers and open rebellion had a dramatic effect throughout Ireland, and not least on Connolly who said 'For forty years the Home Rule Party had been preaching peace and had got very little for their pains. On the other hand Sir Edward Carson had preached force for a few short months and had got all he demanded.'

Secondly, the long and bitter struggle in 1913 with Jim Larkin, ending in defeat and in particular the brutal batoning of workers in O'Connell Street and the murder of three workers, James Nolan, John Byrne and Alice Brady during the lock out had convinced Connolly that a workers' revolt was inevitable.

The final straw was the declaration of war in August 1914. This had the most traumatic effect on Connolly, the international socialist, who really believed in 'the brotherhood of man' and saw the war as 'the working class of Europe slaughtering each other for the benefit of Kings and financiers'. He correctly thundered against socialists in Europe who had protested against war but then went to the front to slay their brothers. He called on them to rise up saying

The signal for war ought also to have been the signal for rebellion; when the bugles sounded the first note for actual war, their notes should have been taken as the tocsin for social revolution.

From then on it was inevitable and logical that Connolly would practise what he preached and attempt a social revolution in Dublin. He was fighting for socialism, for independence, for neutrality and against war.

The end of an era

THE ERA opened up by the Easter Rising of 1916 has come to a close. Attempts to reclaim its spirit by fringe nationalist groups are futile: for there is now a widespread, if inchoate awareness of two things. First, the Easter Rising placed emotional burdens on Irish nationalism it has not been able to sustain. The Rising, via the execution of its leaders by the British, set in train a series of events which destroyed the existing Irish political establishment led by John Redmond and replaced it with another, a Sinn Féin one, led by Eamon de Valera which was to dominate Irish political life for forty years.

During that time, the state never came within sight of achieving the objectives for which the revolution had supposedly been initiated. To take one simple example: Irish emigration was higher in the 1950s than it was in the last decades of British rule. The change of policy initiated by Lemass and Whitaker in the late fifties — which brought greater economic success — was based on a rejection of the fundamental economic and social philosophy of the Easter rebels. Secondly, the Easter Rising legitimised the use of force for Irish nationalist ends. For all the awful bitterness of the Home Rule crisis of 1912—14, very few human lives were lost; compare this to the carnage, north and south, of 1916—23.

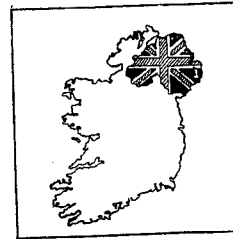
People in Ireland today are very uncomfortable about these facts. They prefer to praise the indisputable heroism of the Dublin insurgents and pass over the uncomfortable implications — which almost everyone is aware of — in silence.

Some people also have a difficulty in evaluating the effects of the Rising because they do not know what was lost by it. The Irish parliamentary party leaders, who commanded the popular support of most of the Irish people from 1880 to 1916 became the forgotten men of de Valera's Ireland. They represented the accumulated political capital of an increasingly self-confident middle-class Catholic Ireland. It would be absurd to describe Redmond's party as a repository of the finest political wisdom — though its general cultural level was considerably more broadly based than most of Sinn

PAUL BEW explains why 'the spirit of 1916' cannot be reclaimed.

Féin. For one thing, Redmond's party was packed to the gills with agrarian 'radical' tub thumpers at a time when agrarian radicalism was well past its sell-by date. For another, it had little to say of any value about the north.

But Redmond was frank about the deficiencies of his party. He did not see it as a suitable new governing elite; it was too marked by the narrow tasks imposed by the land and home rule struggles. Redmond intended to open up government to a broad strand of talent in Irish society. Equally, home



9.—Níl an éiríocht náisiúnta iomlán saor, áfach. Tá sé concaete i gcúige Uladh á coimeád as Sasana fós: Aontroim, dúh, doire; tír eòsain, ard thaca; fíor manac. Romáin: éire le saorab, éire le Saold.

The translation of the caption from the *Christian Brothers' 1950's history book for primary school pupils 'Eire Sean agus Nua'* reads 'The national territory is incomplete however. Six counties in the province of Ulster are under English control: (in capital letters) ANTRIM, DERRY, TYRONE, DOWN, ARMAGH, FERMANAGH. Ahead: to free Ireland, to Gaeltice Ireland.'

rule was conceived essentially as democratisation; a more sensitive, more intimate form of government than Dublin Castle bureaucracy. For Redmond and his colleagues, once this debt owed to history was paid by Westminster then the Irish could take a full part as equals for the first time in wider UK parliamentary and imperial concerns.

Contrast this with the Sinn Féin revolution. The new revolutionaries — those who survived the war of independence and the civil war that is — were determined that they exclusively would constitute the new political class of Ireland; they were equally sure of the plausibility of a distinctive Irish policy in the economic, social and cultural fields. Very few people in the old Irish party had any such belief; hence the scepticism of its leadership over matters such as compulsory Irish.

For good or ill, the Sinn Féin men had their way. Redmond's benign and uncritical view of imperialism did not prepare him for the carnage of the First World War. Many of his best supporters died in Europe and thus the marginal radicals were given their chance. But ever since Lemass started to unpick the elements of an economic nationalist strategy in the 50s, we have been moving back to the world of Redmond. Of course, the intimate Redmondie involvement in Westminster — which would have survived home rule — is impossible to recreate, but a more relaxed, less charged version of Irish political destiny already exists with Brussels to some degree playing the role Redmond envisaged for London.

Redmond would easily recognise a world in which a government in Dublin exists predominantly for political and democratic reasons and on which economic and social policy evolves pragmatically with relatively little input (save perhaps on the north) from nationalist ideology. This is why the spirit of 1916 will not return; not because anyone 'betrayed' it, in so far as it could be it was made the guide to government policy for forty years and it failed. No amount of demagoguery this Easter — and there will be some — can conceal this fact: the Irish people have moved on.