

Irish History Lessons

VI.

THE SUCCESS OF SINN FEIN.

Prior to the negotiations which led up to the signing of the Treaty, a curious thing had happened in Ireland. Its north-east corner, which had commenced the gun-running, was given a Parliament of its own. To understand the position you must imagine that Auckland should cut itself off from New Zealand and have a Parliament of its own. But why, you ask, why? Because the people inhabiting that north-east corner are peculiarly situated. They are the descendants of the English planters of whom you have read, or at least some of them are. They are curious in that, according to famous Ulster writers, they would resent being considered English, yet neither do they desire to be associated with the Irish of the South whom they regard as "Papishes"—that is blind and benighted followers of the Pope. But you will say, "Then Ireland is split into two nations. Why not let that corner have its way?" Well that would be fair enough if one did not remember one fact—namely, that in that corner there are almost an equal number of true Celts who yearn for a united Ireland, and who have suffered repeatedly in the name of Ireland.

But further let us say outright that the Orangemen are, except in the matter of religion, very little different from the Irish of the South. Ireland has been to both alike a mother. Both alike have inherited her hills and her airs. Surely some day a realisation of this will come to the men of the North. It is absurd to say that the question is a religious question. Some of the finest patriots in these last years even have been Protestants. "It isn't only a religious question," said an Orangewoman to me once, "it's a question of trade. Ulster is wealthy, the South is poor. You want our riches." Only one sentence of that was true. "It is a question of trade," but events have proved that it is the North that needs the South. When the buyers of the South by means of the boycott decided to punish the North for its outrages Ulster, prosperous Ulster, looked ruin in the face.

Ulster has been to England an excuse and an embarrassment. To those who hate the South it has been an excuse. "Can we desert Ulster?" has been a useful slogan. I see a time not far distant when we may hear it again. To freedom, loving statesmen it has been an embarrassment. Its clinging and gushing loyalty has often weakened them. It has shown itself on at least one occasion shamelessly willing to transfer its loyalty if thwarted.

Lloyd George, who is nothing if not acute, gave Ulster a separate Parliament before commencing negotiations with the South.

You will be wondering perhaps what has this to do with the success of Sinn Fein. Well I, in turn, will ask you a question. What has been the aim of every Irishman you have met or read of? A free united Ireland! Now I think you will see that an Ireland with two distinct Parliaments is not a united Ireland. All success is comparative. That means it can only be measured by what has gone before. Complete success is rare in this world. Some maintain that by patience complete success in this instance could have been obtained, others say it was wiser to take what one could, and when stronger seek the rest.

Measured by Redmond's Home Rule Bill of 1914 Sinn Fein's success in the comparative sense is indisputable. They obtained things that Redmond would not have mentioned at Westminster even in a whisper. Measured by Redmond then, they can claim success. Measured by Parnell they must, and do admit defeat. Parnell's intent, Parnell's slogan was "No Partition!" Measured by that standard the negotiators were beaten before they crossed the channel.

I cannot here set down the clauses either of the Treaty or of the Constitution that followed it. The delegation was at first led by de Valera, but he later, to Lloyd George's relief, decided that his place was in Ireland. One cannot help wondering what would have happened if he had stayed. Some say he was influenced by American public opinion which said President Wilson should not have gone in person to the Peace Conference. Had he stayed, there would have been no doubt as to whether the delegation

possessed full powers and we should have been saved a painful controversy and a more painful war.

Mr. Griffith took Mr. de Valera's place. His ideal had always been, not a Republic, but a Dual Monarchy. Mr. Lloyd George addressed himself to him and the delegation saw itself faced with a split. Mr. Gavan Duffy and Mr. Barton decided that as Mr. Lloyd George had heard Mr. Griffith and Mr. Collins he should hear them also. That un-solicited interview shows how far the delegates had drifted apart. Mr. Collins refused to go. Mr. Griffith went under protest. He told Lloyd George Ireland, in his opinion, should accept Dominion Home Rule. "A dual monarchy!" he kept repeating. "And what," said Lloyd George to Gavan Duffy, "is your difficulty?" "Our difficulty is that we do not desire to enter your Empire!" The meeting on that broke up.

Then came Lloyd George's ultimatum. Three out of the five were already decided. They were given till midnight. Griffith, Collins, and Duggan were resolved upon the Treaty. Barton and Duffy found themselves faced with the responsibility of war, and finally consented. Gavan Duffy was the last to sign. Then they went home.

Reading through the negotiations in view of what follows one is forced to this conclusion. The issue should never have been left to individual opinion. Had the negotiators been acting under a definite mandate, that is an order from the Dail, all the later discord might have been saved. So many assertions have been made and so many counter assertions that it is plain that confusion existed. As it was on their return to Ireland, de Valera as President of the Republic, rejected the terms.

The Dail by a narrow margin decided for Griffith and the Treaty, a decision substantially confirmed by the people later at the polls. Considerable discord grew between the parties, culminating in Collins's attack on the Four Courts which the Republicans held as a stronghold. Since then there have been, on both sides, deaths to mourn.

Too talkative Irishmen have informed the world that because of this Civil War their nation has become a laughing stock. What is there for mirth or for mockery in any civil war that the world has yet known. A civil war can only arise from a terrible simplicity and sincerity of purpose. I cannot imagine that Collins felt pleasure during that attack on the Four Courts, nor can I see that de Valera, for pleasure, has become a rebel at the crossroads, when he might have been head of his State and light of his nation. The only Irishman I despair of is the Irishman who thinks his country a laughing stock.

Ah, the love that has been poured out on Ireland, poured out, like Magdalen's nard, upon her weary feet! The heart-break of it! In this war comrade is fighting against comrade, brother against brother, each believing he is doing his best for Kathleen ni Houlihan. John McNeill's son died the other day in the Republican ranks. His two brothers are in the Free State Army.

"The Irish have even their virtues in excess," said a scholarly priest to me a month ago, not on this matter, but another. Then he added a strange saying that I took home to wonder over—"Too far East is West!" It is true and very true that saying, and all well, the East is prudent, safe, sincere, but some, some love the West!

And though the midnight of this discord be black and blind, though star has fallen after star, the spinning world will turn again and bring this land, this well-loved land into the gentle sun. Was it not spoken by a great and grieving heart—"No man can set the boundary to the march of a nation!"

Catholics have great need, in these days, to be able to answer honest seekers after truth. The person unable to give helpful information when questioned on the meaning of some religious belief is a reproach to Catholicity; when such a one fails, then, to prepare himself for another such encounter, he can with difficulty be excused from deliberate treason to our Holy Faith.

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