



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

The Colonial Venture of Ireland, Part 4

by Wendy McElroy

In the North, treatment of Catholics deteriorated as one of the most infamous measures in Irish history was passed — the Special Powers Act of 1922. Catholic-rights advocate Bernadette Devlin explained,

It gave the authorities power to arrest people without a warrant on suspicion “of acting or of having acted or being about to act” in a manner prejudicial to the state — and to hold them for indefinite periods without charge or trial. Under the act, the police had the right to search persons and premises without a judicial warrant, to close roads or bridges, to declare curfews, to prohibit meetings, to arrest any individual who “by word of mouth” spreads false reports or makes false statements, to suppress the circulation of any newspaper, film or gramophone record and to arrest and hold without trial, habeas corpus or the right to consult a lawyer — anyone doing anything calculated to be “prejudicial to the preservation of the peace or maintenance of order” in Northern Ireland. One of its most relevant provisions is the clause denying an inquest to any prisoner who died while in custody.

In April 1922, the IRA seized the “Four Courts” in Dublin — the center of the Irish judicial system — and held them for three months, even against shelling. As the IRA ran out of ammunition, de Valera pleaded with them to negotiate, which they did. The brief civil war ceased but the cost was high: more than 600 dead, more than 3,000 wounded. President Griffith died of a heart attack shortly thereafter. Days later, his successor Michael Collins was killed in an ambush. As for the rebels, the Irish government executed 78 — more executions than occurred under the British during the Anglo-Irish War.

For Britain, a major cost was — once again — world opinion. The *London Times* declared,

It is the plain fact that it is Irish discontent, which now more than anything else blocks and must block a close understanding between American and British democracies. If it is true, as seems incontrovertible, that for the future welfare of the world nothing is so essential as the maintenance of

harmony between Great Britain and the United States — then it is purely lamentable that the Irish sore should be suffered to continue running.

But all would not be well. In the North, self-government led to a de facto second-class citizenship for Catholics. Moreover, by the spring of 1924, most of the nationalist prisoners had been released from English jails and returned to Ireland, which many refused to accept as divided. Upon de Valera's return, he addressed a welcoming crowd with the words, "As I was saying when I was interrupted ..." De Valera organized a new political party, Fianna Fáil — the Warriors of Destiny — that rejected the legitimacy of the Free State Dáil. Nevertheless, he took the controversial "Oath of Allegiance" in order to become a member and so use that agency against itself.

An upswing in violence

The next years saw a tremendous upswing in IRA violence, with government outlawing the organization. A public safety act was passed, giving a five-man tribunal the power to intern or execute political criminals, but juries and witnesses were usually too frightened of IRA reprisals to serve or give testimony.

The 1932 election brought de Valera back to power as president. He repealed the Public Safety Act, abolished the "Oath," and released his old comrades from prison. Soon, a constitutional crisis in Britain would present him with an opportunity: King Edward abdicated his throne and was succeeded by George VI. De Valera successfully pressed a demand: the full independence of the 26 counties, now to be called Éire. In 1937, de Valera introduced a new Irish constitution that officially recognized the "Roman Church as the Guardian of the Faith." The North protested. Where, they asked, was the non-sectarian state promised? Article 2 of the Constitution, which maintained that the Southern government had authority in the North, was a particular sore point.

Much of the subsequent history of the divided island revolves around attempts to unite North and South, resistance to that union, religious intolerance, and an enduring hostility towards Britain. During this process, the North and South — Protestants and Catholics — continued to develop along different paths.

In September 1939, Britain declared war on Germany, thus entering World War II. The South was generally sympathetic to the Allied cause but de Valera maintained official neutrality. (The more radical IRA, however, worked rather ineffectively to sabotage the British war effort.) On the occasion of Hitler's death, Éire was one of the few governments to express official condolences to the German ambassador.

World War II further defined the separate identities of the North and South and cemented Ulster's ties to Britain. Neutrality by the South had been a statement of sovereignty, which was

cemented on April 1, 1949, when the Republic of Ireland Act declared Éire to be a republic. In 1955, the Republic of Ireland joined the United Nations and its diplomats began to speak out as Third World victims of colonialism.

The IRA “spoke out” in a different manner. In 1954, they had successfully raided the Armagh Barracks and captured most of the arms of Southern Ireland. Between 1956 and 1962, an IRA border campaign — called The Border War — was directed against authorities in the North. But by 1962 the IRA appeared to be giving up the ghost when its publicity bureau announced,

The Leadership of the Resistance Movement has ordered the termination of “The Campaign of Resistance to British Occupation.” All arms and other materials have been dumped and all full-time active service volunteers have been withdrawn.

Years of calm

To the British, Northern Ireland ceased to be a burning issue. One historian estimated that, in 1964 and 1965, the House of Commons devoted less than one-fifth of 1 percent of its time to discussing Ulster. One reason: Northern Ireland was stable. These were “the Brookeborough years”, named after the Ulster leader Lord Brookeborough. There was a relative, if uneasy, calm between Protestant and Catholic. The two groups lived in different parts of town; the former attended public school, the latter parochial school. They did not even meet on the sports field: Catholics played Gaelic ball, and Protestants played soccer. Mixed marriages were rare. Local government allocated housing, jobs, and social welfare, and they made sure that Protestants were at the top of the list.

The resurgence of violence

In the late 1960s, the relative calm shattered. Terence O’Neill — a former captain in the British army — succeeded Brookeborough and during an economic recovery an influential Catholic middle class had emerged, with many Catholics going to Queen’s University in Belfast where they drank deep of the civil rights movement in America. Using the tactics of that movement — even down to singing “We Shall Overcome” — Catholics demanded civil rights in Ulster.

A march on the city of Derry was planned. Here, the depth of feeling that separated Catholic from Protestant could be judged by a semantic dispute. Protestants called Ulster’s second largest city by the name “Londonderry,” while Catholics used the older name of “Derry,” even though the city had been renamed while Shakespeare lived. On October 5, 1968, the Derry police broke up the civil rights march in full view of the world’s cameras. Seventy civilians and 11 policemen were wounded. TV viewers were shocked by police beatings and the use of water

cannon. The march and the civil rights movement's most prominent leader was Devlin, who described the impact on world reaction:

I think the impact on the public opinion was something like what happened after Dr. King's people were beaten up by Bull Connor's policemen on that bridge in Alabama. Suddenly, fair people everywhere could see us being treated like animals.... In retrospect, I realize the police had actually done us a great favor. The civil rights movement had started out as a small middle-class pressure group, but it took only one day of police violence to transform it into a mass movement.

Soon, the movement born in civil rights would lose ground to more violent forces.

On August 12, 1969, a group of Protestants assembled in Derry to commemorate almost three centuries of Protestant rule. Attacked by Catholics, they retaliated. When the police made baton charges to separate the groups, the angered crowd torched a police vehicle and, by nightfall, full-scale rioting had broken out. In the end, there were at least six dead and hundreds wounded.

Two days later, 300 British soldiers in full battle dress arrived in Derry and 600 more followed on the streets of Belfast. At first, the Catholic population accepted the troops, offering them cups of tea. Devlin recalled the turning point in their attitude:

A minor incident between soldiers and a few taunting children erupted into a major riot. The military commander promptly slapped a curfew on the [Catholic] area and ordered a house-to-house search for concealed weapons. While people choked and wept from the huge amounts of tear gas poured into the area, the troops kicked in doors; they smashed and looted many of the houses they searched, roughing up anyone who protested. Residents poured into the streets to demonstrate against their behavior and the troops opened fire: three Catholics were shot dead and another was crushed to death under an armored car. After that, Catholics understandably began viewing the army as a hostile occupying force.

Within months, the familiar pattern had returned to Ireland: bombing, shooting, assassination, reprisal, and counterreprisal.

After the 1921 partition of Ireland, the IRA had rebelled. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the IRA had launched a bombing campaign against England. Twenty years later, it had started a futile guerilla campaign in the rural and border areas of Northern Ireland. Now, in 1969, the IRA was revived as a Catholic defense force, financed by Irish who lived in America and England. As it revived, the IRA split into two sections: the Official and the Provisional wings. (Today, the term "IRA" commonly refers to the latter, which is widely considered a terrorist organization.)

The Officials interpreted Northern Ireland within a Marxist framework and had as their ultimate goal an all-Ireland republic. They directed violence against British authority and avoided

attacking Northern Protestants. The Provisionals were a socialist paramilitary group which was less discriminating in its violence.

The new Northern leader Brian Faulkner took a hard line toward the IRA and Catholic unrest. In 1971, the Loyalist Ulster Defense Association was formed from a number of smaller organizations, and attacks on Catholics increased. In retaliation, the IRA transported their bombing to England, where they declared a guerilla war.

Eddie McAteer of the Catholic Nationalist Party expressed the futility many must have felt at this turn of affairs:

You have this cyclical appearance of the Irish struggle for freedom. At times there is a constitutional movement; then they weary of it because you cannot accomplish very much by talking peacefully. When they weary of constitutionalism, then there is an outbreak of violence. At times we wander about in such matters as civil rights, civil liberties, and so on. But all of these I insist are side issues, really. You have the old racial colonial struggle going on, and this is the key to the whole problem.

With the reemergence of the IRA, the major forces that would play out those cycles within Ireland for the coming decades were in place.

Many observers contend that if the British were to leave Northern Ireland, blood would flow in Northern streets and the South might erupt in civil war. They argue that centuries of differing development have made the North and South into truly separate entities. Others contend the opposite, arguing that the complete withdrawal of the British from the North is the only hope for Ireland. These two positions — and those in-between — constitute the ongoing debate and dilemma that is Ireland.

As for the British, Eddie McAteer declared in the spring of 1972,

I am not anti-British, but I do complain that the British mind seems incapable of realizing that other countries would wish to deprive themselves of the services of British rule. If we had been allowed to develop normally, it is possible that we would have married the two bloodstreams, the two religions, and the two cultures here in the north of Ireland, but we have not succeeded because Britain wished to retain her foothold here. And now we are sadly the last imperial aspidistra in the British window and it looks as if she is determined to hang onto us.

*Wendy McElroy is the author of **The Reasonable Woman: A Guide to Intellectual Survival** (Prometheus Books, 1998).*

This article was originally published in the August 2004 edition of *Freedom Daily*.