**They had a dream - the vivid faces before 1916**

**History, Vivid Faces, R F Foster, Allan Lane, hdbk, 464pp, €25**

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Formidable: Terence MacSwiney’s wife Muriel and sister Mary at Cathal Brugha’s funeral in Dublin in 1922. Terence MacSwiney had died on hunger strike in 1920. Picture courtesy of Prof Cathal MacSwiney Brugha.

As the centenary of the Rising approaches, Roy Foster’s Vivid Faces comes as a breath of fresh air: irreverent without being iconoclastic, it recalls to life those who have been mummified in the foundation myth of the state, turned into plaster-cast statue icons of pious remembrance.

The title is taken from Yeats’ great poem in which he recounts those he had dismissed as a collection of play-acting shop-boys and clerks, before going on to recant as he intones the names of MacDonagh and MacBride, Connolly and Pearse. Foster casts his net wider, capturing in all their vivid immediacy a cast of other and minor characters, some less famously remembered, some now forgotten, and those who have been deliberately written out of the narrative, the dedicated, the zealot, the fanatic, the sceptic, the detached observer, the fiercely patriotic searching for identity, and those succumbing to peer group pressure to go along for the ride.

We meet Terence MacSwiney, his wife and formidable sisters; Seán MacDermott, ubiquitously energetic with an IRB hand in most pies, and his universal attractiveness to women (my mother, who worked in Wynn’s Hotel in the years up to 1916 always referred to him as the best looking man she had ever seen); Madame Markievicz, endlessly active with the Fianna; the chronically dysfunctional Plunkett family and the Gifford sisters; the serried and competing ranks of multi-talented Ryan and Sheehy women, already sorting out dynastic succession in the new dispensation; and the Northerners like Alice Milligan, Patrick McCartan, Denis McCullough, Bulmer Hobson, and an army of interesting and active women whose part has been diminished in the received narrative. We meet them, individually and in groups, at work and at play, arguing and debating, flirting and marrying, training, arming and fighting, gelling and bonding and ultimately, disastrously, splitting apart.

In doing so Foster captures the spirit of the age for a generation of like-minded and closely knit young people who laid the foundations for the Rising and the struggle that was to follow. He mines diaries and personal letters, memoirs, contemporary press reports and the incomparable treasure-trove of the personal statements collected from survivors by the Bureau of Military History. It all comes very close to the spirit of an earlier revolutionary age of which Wordsworth wrote that “Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive/ But to be young was very heaven.”

In seeking to find what he calls the “tipping-points” in the crucial events and experiences which were game changers over three decades in the evolution of Irish society from the comfortable certainties of the Parliamentary party edging towards the achievement of Home Rule through non-violent action to the last desperate throw of the dice in armed revolt, he asks the same questions which persuaded Richard Mulcahy to collate his own personal archive: “to get back to see how a generation developed, interacted and decided to make a revolution which for many of them may not have been the revolution they intended or wanted.”

We encounter the same people so often that they become familiars on a journey. The fact that we know, as most of them did not, where it was all leading makes it all more intriguing and makes the book itself unputdownable.

The strands of revolt and divergence which were ultimately to be spun into open rebellion are discerned to be generational revolt against parental values, especially where these were conservative, unionist and protestant, chronic Anglophobia (although interestingly, more than a third of those listed were either born in England or spent time working there). There was, too, growing disillusionment with politics, especially as practiced by Redmond and his party, and impatience as Home Rule edged its tortuous way through Parliament. There was the enthusiasm generated by the ’98 Centenary, a rising tide of feminism, anger at the arming of Ulster, the formation of the Volunteers and finally the outbreak of war in Europe, the heavily circumscribed Home Rule Act (Redmond’s finest hour) and the threat of conscription — and behind all the hard men of the IRB guarding the Fenian flame and waiting their opportunity.

This is the story of the chattering classes, the jeunesse dorée of their generation, living close together, sharing the same experiences and aspirations, bonding in the Gaelic League and the Irish Colleges, especially Ring and Ballingeary which provided a rite of passage as they have done for succeeding generations of Irish adolescents, and generally disavowing Tod Andrews’ claim that there was no sex in the Movement.

For one thing it was throbbing with undeclared declarations of lesbian relationships and, more earthily, we have Piaras Béaslaí (better known for chaste contemplation of ethereal female representations of Éire in aisling poems) opportunely bedding the priest’s sister nightly in what was an interesting extension of the modh díreach as a quick way to master the language.

If the Gaelic League and the Irish colleges were the melting pot, it was the commemoration of ’98 which fanned the flame, informed by romanticised tableaux and pageants devised by Alice Milligan which presented the events as a grand coalition of Catholics and Presbyterians to throw off the Saxon yoke. This was a view which fatally coloured republican attitudes to the North then and since, leading to a simplistic view that contemporary unionism was a temporary aberration from which Protestants would soon recover. Of Milligan herself, Padraic Colum tartly commented that “it was as if there had been no Ulster plantation, no John Knox and no industrial Belfast.”

As it was, the tableaux, the street theatre, the staged funerals, the amateur dramatics and the melodrama of the music halls were more influential in forming opinion and creating a narrative than the Abbey, Yeats being at this time out of favour with advanced nationalists. Similarly the blizzard of little magazines and ephemeral sheets was more influential than the main national newspapers which were conservative in tone. Ironically, many of these radical anti-establishment activities, up to and including arming and training at Larkfield, were sustained by inherited money provided by the Plunketts, O Rahilly and Maud Gonne.

Easter Week was the culmination of all the street theatre, the great symbolic gesture. While this was a major tipping-point, there is no doubt that it was the brutal immediacy of the executions and the lack of due process which swung public opinion behind the rebels. Foster opines that both sides virtually colluded in the production of martyrs, with Pearse fulfilling his ambition of joining Emmet and Tone in the Pantheon, and General Maxwell contributing by way of militaristic obtuseness and heavy-handed coercion; It cannot be long, in these days of revisionist ecumenical commemoration, before someone proposes some public recognition of Maxwell’s essential role in the ultimate success of the Rising.

Finishing the book is like coming off an extended cruise on an ocean liner where one had got to know most of the passengers: Not all had completed the journey, some had disembarked at more congenial and less challenging places en route, some had been marooned on a desert island for having deviated from the true faith, some had jumped ship and others simply disappeared overboard, but one looks with greater understanding at their activities, and the subsequent behaviour of those who survived

This is the story of a small middle-class elite, the glitterati of their age who were nevertheless catalytic in changing the course of modern Irish history. The others who did not keep diaries or write letters are not included — who may well have been the foot soldiers in the struggle. Indeed Foster suggests that those who waged guerrilla war in the countryside in later years were drawn from a different tradition, carrying the genes of Fenianism and agrarian violence in what became a more brutal and certainly less romantic struggle.

One is left, too, with a note of sadness, of there having been a Rising but not a revolution, of disappointment at the frustration of expectations and the shattering of dreams. Those who began the great adventure with high hopes for social and political change, for the liberation of women and the loosening of clerical control, were either dead or disillusioned, especially the women who had contributed so much in the struggle. They saw new conservatives move in to take the spoils and to reinforce the parental values they had rebelled against, and the reinforcement of the hold of right-wing Catholicism on every aspect of Irish life.

It is all sadly summarised by Bulmer Hobson, a Belfast Quaker who was a tireless worker in the cultural revival and in forming the Volunteers, but was brutally written out of the script for his opposition to the Rising in a memorable phrase: “The phoenix of our youth has fluttered to earth a miserable old hen. I have no heart for it.”

But he also wondered: “How many people nowadays get as much fun as we did?”

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