***THE NORTH BEGAN***?

***ULSTER AND THE IRISH REVOLUTION 1900-25***

**TCD Centre for Contemporary Irish History/St Patrick’s College Drumcondra History Department**

**Influences and Inspirations section**

***Casement and Ulster: seeding separatism and misunderstanding***

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I have long argued that the role of Ulster and the northern counties – Tyrone in particular – in the birth of Irish separatism and the making of the Easter Rising, has been insufficiently recognised.

Just as it was the north, in a different configuration, that has thwarted the creation of an island state for a century now.

There was no single Irish nation even if, for opposite reasons, Unionists and Nationalists organised a similar resistance to London.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, the northern nexus involved a web of organisations, and of propagandising. These small groups covered language, culture and sport, linking with progressive Belfast politics and arts, while underneath was the renascent IRB, led or staffed by Denis McCullough, Bulmer Hobson and Patrick McCartan. They operated and recruited under various front organisations with titles such as the Dungannon Clubs and journals like *Uladh*.

Those three names, and their differing trajectories for half a century, tell the story of separatism and how it unfolded. None became leaders although McCullough was briefly President of Ireland in 1916 as head of the IRB. The north however, for a significant reason, played no role in the Rising, beyond a foray into Coalisland.

The linking of liberals and Republicans in the 1900s was not unlike the experience in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s before the firestorm. And indeed in the 1790s before another firestorm.

That northern nurturing moved, physically in some cases, to Dublin, blending with and giving political leadership to the burgeoning intellectual, academic, and socialist organisations moving over to separatism in the south.

This was in the period just before the Irish Volunteers, when the IRB or its inner junta was led by an old Dungannon Fenian, Tom Clarke, ably assisted by another northern political trainee, Sean McDermott. The Irish American leader Joe McGarrity, the key link to Germany, who long remained unreconciled to partition, was a Carrickmore man, like Pat McCartan. Major John McBride was educated in Belfast and James Connolly operated there as a trade unionist.

Around this Irish ferment and in an overarching role, was a further Ulsterman, Roger Casement. He was Hobson’s mentor and with F.J. Bigger, the solicitor antiquarian and United Irish romantic, they maintained at Bigger’s Belfast house, Ardrigh, something of a University for the city’s young nationalists - a number of them radical Protestants. Herbert Hughes and Joseph Campbell, developed in more aspects artistically. With Casement throughout, was his early mentor and collaborator, Alice Stopford Green.

Casement in his extensive writings, and with his indefatigability and organisational skills, played a significant role in the provision of coherent political analysis for the separatists. And this despite working in South America for a number of the key years.

He was an ersatz Ulsterman, but it is how he saw and defined himself. Coming as he did, from a rootless London-based family with a radical edge, Ireland was to become his child, and anglophobia his ideology. Ultimately he was to provide the core of independent Ireland’s foreign policy with his German Treaty in November 1914. Backing this up in 2000, Martin Mansergh said of Casement that he was someone, “legitimate to co-opt as a forerunner of Ireland’s independent foreign policy tradition.”

It is well known that Casement’s father, Captain Roger Casement, had radical views, even nationalist. He lived largely off the charity of his Antrim relatives. Casement’s mother, Anne Jepson (later Jephson), a Dublin Protestant, came from a progressive family, her mother Jane Ball running a ladies seminary at various addresses like Amiens Street and Dorset Street in the city in the 1830s and 1840s, before and after her marriage. This was at a time when women’s education in schools was rare. Casement’s parents also seemed not unlike Oscar Wilde’s in their racketiness and emotionalism.

Casement was totally embedded within the nationalist and separatist camp, indeed more than most who were, in 1916, to crash into armed politics. With a history dating back a decade, he was on intimate terms with the personnel in Belfast and, increasingly, with the revolutionary wing of the movement in Dublin from 1912 to 1914. Indeed he was outranked in seniority by few if any who were not also members of the IRB, a group he never joined or appears to have been asked to join.

A couple of examples of his correspondence tell of his impatience with the IPP and his ideas for a future Ireland: On 10 August 1905 (NLI 13158/2/1) he wrote to Bulmer Hobson saying, “If the “Party” were not so hopelessly in the quagmire of Parliamentary waiting – waiting but not doing – expecting something to “turn up”, now from the Liberals, now from the Conservatives, – it might be possible to form a national executive within and from them. They should have a Cabinet – a Prime Minister, a Secretary of Foreign Affairs, of Agriculture, of Home (& Police) of Education, and so through the list. Those men should make a special study of the departments of Irish life they were to overlook. If, instead of wasting their time and energies at Westminster they met in session and had their office in Ireland, they could do more in five years to build up an Irish State, and to create a confident reliant national mind in the country than by all the Parliamentary “successes” they will achieve in 50 years.”

And on 7 September 1909 (NLI 13158/6/34) it was, “I presume the Daily “Sinn Fein” is out. Is it any use? I cannot believe it can be. Griffith has not been able for over 2 years now to make that tiny weekly Sinn Fein of any weight or real feeling – I often wondered which was the poorest production “Sinn Fein” or “The Peasant” – and it certainly does seem as if our claim to possess any national character was indeed a poor one with such solitary exponents of it. I sent Griffith £50 for shares in the Daily Sinn Fein but I fear it is money thrown away – only I had promised it long ago – and wished for his sake I could have made it more. I have never felt confidence in him as a leader I may tell you, but I did not like to say a word to anyone that would weaken their faith. The meeting I attended in Dublin in December last convinced me of his narrowness – and that we cannot stand in our far too narrow Ireland.”

Casement was to bring guns into Ireland twice, something nobody else could boast. Once he started down the military road few others did more, which is not to say that he had the necessary ruthlessness to prosecute a war or encourage a Rising for its own sake.

As it turned out, neither did Bulmer Hobson nor Eoin McNeill, another Antrim man. Casement came to Ireland from Germany, and as we know, trying desperately to stop the Easter Rising starting because it had no chance of success. He went so far as to tell his captors of the plans.

He also had no ability to judge the Craig and Carson Unionists. Being so out of sympathy with them (and not actually an Ulster Protestant), he could only sneer or make the self‑deceptive error, common to most nationalists to this day, that Unionists were misguided Irishmen and, given their suspicion of England, people who would easily turn into Irish patriots – even into Irish Irelanders like him.

Eoin MacNeill was not greatly different. As we know he published an article entitled *The North Began*, in a Gaelic League journal edited by Pearse, An Claidheamh Soluis, on 1 November 1913 calling for an historical repeat of the organising of the Volunteers of the 1780s.

They had effected legislative independence for Ireland, an early form of devolution or home rule, although only for the Irish Anglican caste, the Protestant Ascendancy.

McNeill wrote in the article “history shows and observation confirms that the Orange democracy and the Presbyterian rural party are home rulers in principle and essence.” He ended by remarking, “Some years ago, speaking at the Toome Feis, in the heart of ‘homogeneous Ulster’, I said that the day would come when men of every creed and party would join in celebrating the Defence of Derry and the Battle of Benburb. That day is nearer than I then expected.”

He was not a revolutionary or separatist. Significantly he was averse to any adventures in the north, indicating that Ulster Catholics were too prone to violent responses. He knew the world of the Woodkern and the Ribbonmen, and later of Hibernianism, too well.

However he could not have been more wrong in his grasp of Unionism but his view prevailed throughout nationalist Ireland, and to this very day in Sinn Fein. It was and is delusional for if it was ever believed the Protestants were not Irish, the essence of Republicanism would be removed turning it into little more than militant nationalism.

McNeill’s assessment may have been faulty but creating a counterweight to the UVF was not. The fact remains that the Volunteers are with us in the form of the IRA, that is Oglaigh na hÉireann.

What McNeill did get obliquely right was understanding that element in Presbyterian i.e. Scottish Ulster that values devolution more than integration and that keeps Ulster intransigent. David Trimble expanded that view, once saying Unionism could have it both ways. I don’t necessarily agree but the loyalty of Queen’s Rebels is the driver.

Casement veered between thinking Carson and the Unionists ‘home rulers in principle and essence’ or bluffers. He rarely treated them seriously, much as Redmond and the IPP failed to do. The Ulsters’ Britishness however was not skin deep, rather it was, and is, conditional. A century later, the Union remains the reality and Northern Ireland a place apart.

Another, southern Protestant response, much favoured by women – Oscar Wilde’s mother Speranza being an early example – was to link into the coming power, at first only into the Gaelic cultural and language revival, but slowly from there into nationalism, separatism and thence Catholicism, by conversion or marriage. This was true of the many northern Protestant women who surrounded Casement although they were not the marrying kind, and it remains true to this day. Oddly gay men are not so susceptible, perhaps because of a metropolitan outlook, one Casement did not share.

Bulmer Hobson was not so sanguine about the Ulster Protestants. As perhaps the earliest military-minded separatist, and since 1911 on the IRB’s Supreme Council, he had proposed in July 1913 to the Dublin Board of which he was chairman, a plan of action in response to the UVF. As he wrote “it was decided, that the members of the IRB in Dublin should commence drilling immediately.” Largely under the instruction of his Fianna, this began in a National Foresters Hall on Dublin’s Parnell Square. But what Hobson was noising abroad, in particular, was a unified national force inaugurated by someone of prominence who could become the focal point of a movement. He was also concerned “that the IRB must not show its hand.” He seized the opportunity MacNeill’s article presented. After discussions with him, facilitated by The O’Rahilly, a giant public meeting was arranged to establish a modern version of those earlier Volunteers.

The thirty-man Provisional Committee of the Irish Volunteers included Hobson, MacNeill, Casement, MacDermott, Joseph Campbell, Pearse, The O’Rahilly, and Tom Kettle of the United Ireland League. Col. Maurice Moore (brother of the writer George Moore), also a member of the League, was to become the Volunteers’ Inspector General. Hobson ensured his own people, such as Joseph Campbell, were involved and that Casement became Treasurer. Although Arthur Griffith chose not to join, the new organisation did represent a wide range of opinion and bodies. But the core was separatist.

The North may have begun the process of separation but it was not the Unionists, rather the work of the IRB, assisted by Asquith and his government, that led inexorably to partition. The brief war in Northern Ireland from 1920 to 1922 left 500 dead in Belfast and 100 police fatalities in the north, showing the IRA’s power, then and since.

What the North began and saw effected was something of an aberration, obviously distorted like much else by the First World War. Irish separatism was and is a minority pursuit.

It has taken the best part of a century to unravel history back to where we were in 1910.

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