

Book Review - "Bitter Freedom": Ireland in a Revolutionary World

Wednesday 23 March 2016, by [CROWE Kieran](#) (Date first published: 17 March 2016).

Maurice Walsh's *Bitter Freedom* is a revealing exploration of the Irish independence struggle in its international context, after the 1916 Easter Rising, finds Kieran Crowe.

Maurice Walsh, *Bitter Freedom: Ireland in a Revolutionary World* (Faber and Faber 2016), 544pp.

Despite a crowded field of books released in time for the 1916 centenary of the Easter Rising in Dublin against British rule in Ireland, this new history of the years after the event has attracted a particular interest. Subtitled *Ireland in a Revolutionary World*, Walsh introduces his objective as being to look at the Irish independence movement in the full international and contemporary context, which is often lacking. The book does do this: it contains fascinating insight into how the high tide of old imperialism, worldwide, affected events. Of just as much interest, however, is the level of detail that the author has provided into the social, political and economic aspects of independence that are often overlooked.

The book opens as World War One has finally come to an end, and the consequence of both the war and the rebellion are becoming apparent. The combination of hypocrisy and brutality shown by the British authorities meant that those rebels who survived the rising had been more than vindicated in the eyes of their country folk. Once out of prison, they join forces with Sinn Féin, up to then a small and mostly propagandistic political party. In a mere couple of years, Sinn Féin leaves the fringes to become a mass movement uniting almost every stripe of radicalism imaginable. A spectrum of tendencies – republicans, democrats, Celtic revivalists, liberal Catholics, agrarian reformers and even feminists and other social radicals from the intellectual milieu of Dublin – all gathered behind the green, white and orange banner. The result was an incredibly vibrant and potent, but not always coherent, political force for change.

The relationship of this mass movement with organised workers and the left was even more complex. The socialist James Connolly's Irish Labour Party allied itself to Sinn Féin without joining it, but agreed to support a Sinn Féin government. Connolly himself had not survived the vengeful British firing squads, depriving the left of its greatest agitator and propagandist. This meant that socialists and trade unionists were only one element among many influencing the direction of the independence movement, which was not clear on its full agenda.

There was not to be a long wait for the Sinn Féin government. When post-war elections were held at the end of 1918, Sinn Féin candidates were returned in every part of the country apart from the Protestant-Unionist dominated North, wiping out the old establishment and its compromises with imperialism. Now, this young movement for change had the mandate, it had to act. An independent parliament, the Dáil Éireann, was convened in Dublin and proclaimed itself to be only legitimate government of the whole island. Walsh emphasises that this was not just a gamble that British would

not simply shoot them all; there was also a real danger that their revolutionary government would be viewed as nothing more than an irrelevant bit of play. To avoid either form of defeat, there was both an international and a domestic strategy.

The international strategy was predicated on two key interventions. One was sending Éamon De Valera to the United States. Partly, this was to capitalise on the strong support the new government would receive from the American-Irish community, and partly this was to appeal the democratising rhetoric of American President Woodrow Wilson. The other mission was sending an official envoy of Ireland, Sean O'Kelly, to the massive international peace talks that followed the war, as Ireland's voice in the new settlement and world order that was emerging from the ashes.

Both of these expeditions were to prove frustrating. The Irish in Paris expected to be accepted with all the dignity and honours that should be granted to a sovereign European nation, at a time when many were being recognised for the first time. It was not to be, because Ireland had a fundamental problem that places like Czechoslovakia and Hungary did not: Ireland was the colony of an empire that had been on the winning side of the war. Talk of small nations' rights did not extend to any of those that Britain and France regarded as part of their territory. O'Kelly received full recognition only from Bolshevik Russia, and was bemused that it was a young Vietnamese man, the future Ho Chi Minh, with whom he had the most in common.

De Valera met with more enthusiasm in America, but the US Government was deaf to it. He also had to engage with vastly more complex racial politics than he had expected. There was hostility to him, even violent protest, from right-wing US army veterans and the Klu Klux Klan in some towns. Perhaps just as shockingly to himself, he also got an uninvited endorsement from pioneering African-American activist Marcus Garvey. In both America and Paris, the lesson being learned the hard way was that simply being European and white was not enough to be taken seriously for a nation on the wrong side of imperialist power.

The domestic strategy also had two elements. One was the inevitable, violent confrontation with the armed forces of British rule, familiar to us from block-busting films. The other element, known as the 'constructive work', might make for less drama on screen, but was no less significant in scale or significance. Michael Collins, best remembered since for his prowess as a guerrilla leader, had concluded after living through 1916, that any subsequent uprising had to be more than simply an armed one. Collins matched his recruitment of assassins and spies with a parallel recruitment of lawyers, accountants and administrators. With the Dáil up and running, its executive decisions were backed with a painstakingly constructed economic arm, financed by Sinn Féin activists via a system of 'republican bonds'. This was so effective, it paid for an extensive Dáil staff, and even a republican bank was launched to help to fund some basic land reform for the poor.

As the struggle heated up, British rule began to grow tenuous in many parts of the country. The Dáil administration assumed a further civil function: it established republican courts to settle disputes and provide a working alternative to British law. The judgements were enforced by republican volunteers, but were deliberated on by actual lawyers in the movement. This was a full and working alternative to British rule. When the war escalated further with the arrival of the notorious 'Black and Tan' militias to crush the insurrection, it was not simply armed rebels that they were there to crush. It was only in the North that this movement did not displace British authority. The Unionist movement that prevailed there was, in its own way, a mass movement as hegemonic and potent as the republican one, albeit with entirely repressive aims.

The war escalated, and so did the social conflict. It is in this context that Irish 'red-flagging' needs to be understood: workers' and poor farmers' struggles rose with the national struggle, but did not do so without contradiction with the national struggle. Dáil courts would rule on land disputes, but

could not or would not always find equitable outcomes. It was often very difficult enforcing rulings where significant family and social ties (or grievances) existed between complainants. Some impoverished farmers would turn to violence and banditry of their own.

Meanwhile, trade-union activity was rising. This had generally been viewed benignly by the republican movement in the cities, where the disputes were almost always against major (often British) employers. Sympathies got tested to destruction, however, when the unions began to organise rural labour. The unions and the Labour Party occasionally indulged in revolutionary socialist rhetoric and symbolism, notably during the weeks of the so-called 'Limerick Soviet', but in reality they were still deferring to Sinn Féin in any question of government, and would end strikes and other actions as soon as immediate grievances could be resolved. This was to be a loss of independence that would hold back socialists in Ireland for a very long time.

The British finally conceded to negotiate with Sinn Féin, the first time they had acknowledged a revolutionary government in any colony since the America Revolution in the Eighteenth Century. There was initial jubilation, but it was short-lived. The ambiguous nature of the British offer broke the diverse movement in two. Walsh is not interested in apportioning blame in the run up to Ireland's tragic civil war. Rather, he depicts the tensions and anxieties that erupted within in it, as well as showing how the revolutionary promise of independence was largely obliterated by it. With the unity of the movement gone, the republican institutions, which had been so hard fought for, mostly faded away. One side glumly stuck to appropriated institutions the British left behind, while the other attempted to fight on without the financial, organisational or political support that had previously sustained them. This contrasted sharply with the North, where Britain quickly helped to consolidate a new reactionary order.

Ireland, like so many de-colonised countries after it, ultimately disappointed the hopes and aspirations of the people who had liberated it. Its underdeveloped national economy struggled to operate in an inclement world economy and Ireland became a weak, cash-starved state. Its government presided over a country ridden with bitter political differences, and increasingly relied on religious institutions to substitute for the progressive ones it had failed to establish.

Walsh would not have titled the book *Bitter Freedom* if he did not want to take quite an unflinching look at the early years of Irish independence, which conclude to show that the struggle did not arrive at a progressive outcome. However, by contrasting the high tide of the republican movement with the bleakness of the post-civil war era, what he has done is expose the fundamentally revolutionary nature and intent of that movement in its heyday, as well as its weaknesses. As the legacy of 1916 continues to loom large over Ireland to this very day, it is useful to remember that duopoly of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael that has dominated most of a century does not represent the real breadth of spirit of the original struggle in any way. The two big parties' combined share of the vote in Ireland this February fell to an historic low. More real spirit of those times can be found with the rainbow of radicals that have arisen in opposition to those two parties.

Kieran Crowe

P.S.

* "Bitter Freedom: Ireland in a Revolutionary World". Counterfire. March 17, 2016:
<http://www.counterfire.org/articles/book-reviews/18233-bitter-freedom-ireland-in-a-revolutionary-wo>

[rd](#)