

## Book review: “Ireland and the Great War”

Friday 5 January 2024, by [THOMAS Martin](#) (Date first published: 24 December 2023).

**At the start of World War Two, Eamon de Valera’s government in the 26 counties of Ireland banned public commemoration of World War One.**

Commemoration had declined in the 1930s, according to Niamh Gallagher’s book *Ireland and the Great War*. It had also declined in England, as more and more people saw 1914-18 as a [waste of life to serve rival imperialist robbers](#). In the 26 counties, though, commemoration did not revive after 1945, or not until wreath-laying ceremonies in 2018.

Gallagher’s main finding is that Irish Catholic nationalists mostly backed the Allies right through to 1918.

This seems to fly in the face of facts. With the official killings and the six months of British martial law after Easter 1916, and with the British government in April 1918 announcing plans (never carried through) for conscription in Ireland, radical nationalists (regrouped in summer and autumn 1917 in the “new” Sinn Féin), triumphed. They swept the board in Ireland (outside the north-east) in the December 1918 Westminster election, set up an independent Irish parliament, and won a war of independence, 1919-21.

Those radical nationalists had all been pro-German, in different tones. Surely their triumph must have reflected a mass shift of opinion on the British-German conflict?

A look at the files of the *Irish Independent* confirms Gallagher’s account, however. That was the paper of William Martin Murphy, who had been at the centre of the bosses’ lockout which started the great Dublin Labour War in 1913-14.

On 12 May 1916 the British army shot James Connolly and Sean Mac Diarmada, the last two to die of the 90 condemned to death by courts martial after the Easter Rising. The shootings had started on 3 May. Outcry against them was already high. The remaining 75 would have their sentences commuted to life imprisonment, then be released within months. On that same day an *Irish Independent* editorial called for the killings to continue, repeating the message of a previous editorial on 10 May.

“Certain of the leaders remain undealt with, and the part they played was worse than that of some who have paid the extreme penalty. Are they because of an indiscriminate demand for clemency to get off lightly, while others who were no more prominent were executed?”

By 1917-8 Murphy and the *Irish Independent* had shifted. It became the chief newspaper giving favourable coverage to the anti-conscription effort and Sinn Féin. It hailed the by-election victory in East Clare in July 1917 of Eamon de Valera, a surviving commander from the Rising.

On the day after the Armistice, 11 November 1918, the *Irish Independent* carried on its editorial page, with a note “as passed by censor”, a warm report of what Sinn Féin people had told American journalists. “The demand for independence was no new thing; it had been uppermost in the mind of

Nationalists ever since England invaded the country... Asked as to what they would do if turned down at the Peace Conference [where Sinn Fein sought US support for Irish representation] they said they would carry on the fight as it had been carried on for seven centuries..." "On the charge of pro-Germanism, they explained that they were in reality pro-Irish".

The same issue reported:

"In Dublin the rejoicings were on an extensive scale... The news [of the German surrender] had quite an exhilarating effect on all classes, and it soon became evident that work and business had been disorganised for the day, a spirit of holiday-making being quickly evoked... As soon as the great news became known, flags of the Allies were displayed from all the public buildings, and from many shops, warehouses, and institutions".

Gallagher explicitly does not aim to describe the changing responses of radical nationalists, and says little about the changing responses of the Catholic Church. But those explain much of the paradox of apparently simultaneous rejection of and support for the war.

The radical nationalists – the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), the *Irish Volunteers*, and Arthur Griffith's Sinn Fein – were all pro-German, in one register or another, from August 1914 to April 1917. The IRB had been pro-German "in advance", since at least 1911. They all changed in April 1917, when the USA entered the war. From then on they supported the USA, and so also, with whatever demurs, the Allies.

Thus Arthur Griffith's paper *Nationality* had been appealing to US President Wilson's talk of self-determination:

"To the constituencies in Ireland now we say: the issue upon which you must vote is whether Ireland accepts England's rule and whatever England may decree. Or whether Ireland rejects that rule and claims from the Peace Conference the right that the Allies declare they stand for, the right that the United States declares it stands for — the right of Belgium, the right of Poland — the right of a nation to govern itself" (19 May 1917).

The Pope had deplored the world war from the start. "We implore those in whose hands are placed the fortunes of nations to hearken to Our voice. Surely there are other ways and means whereby violated rights can be rectified".

He also counselled no revolt against the warring governments, and cited as a chief cause of the war "the absence of respect for the authority of those who exercise ruling powers... The bonds of duty, which should exist between superior and inferior, have been so weakened as almost to have ceased to exist...".

Catholic clerics thus had a choice, to emphasise the general opposition to war or to emphasise support for "ruling powers". Gallagher recounts that most bishops in Ireland supported the war effort, while opposing conscription. William Walsh, archbishop of Dublin (the same Walsh who had backed priests and the AOH in their action against the workers in the Dublin Labour War of 1913-14), and Edward O'Dwyer, bishop of Limerick, were more pacifistic, but not outright anti-war.

Gallagher gives an account on four main axes. Voluntary recruitment to the British Army in Catholic Ireland remained high even in 1918. It was reduced by war-weariness, but less so than in many areas of England and Protestant Ireland. "War work" such as nursing, collecting spagnum moss to dress wounds, and increasing farm output to meet war shortages, remained popular.

German submarines sank many ships off the coast of Ireland, including fishing boats off the south

coast, the transatlantic liner *Lusitania* (7 May 1915), and a mailboat with many passengers, the RMS *Leinster* (10 October 1918).

The IRB-adjacent *Spark*, 16 May 1915, said of the *Lusitania* that the Germans had given warning, the British navy had failed to give protection, and the British crew had fumbled. *An t-Oglach*, 29 October 1918, the then paper of the Irish Volunteers, said of the *Leinster* that there were many British troops aboard, but focused hope on “the ruler most definitely committed to the principles of democracy and self-determination [i.e. US President Wilson] seem[ing] destined to have the greatest voice in a peace settlement”.

The *Irish Independent*, by 1918 sympathetic to Sinn Féin, called the sinking of the *Leinster* “a diabolical crime”, and that, according to Gallagher, was the more common view just two months before Sinn Féin’s election triumph.

The Irish-Canadian Rangers got a warm welcome when they visited Ireland in early 1917. The pacifistic Bishop O’Dwyer invited officers to his home.

Canada had conscription in World War One, from 1 January 1918, with riots in protest, but among French-Canadians. In Australia two referendums on conscription failed after strong Irish-Australian opposition (October 1916 and December 1917), and led to the Labor Party expelling its leader, Billy Hughes.

Daniel Mannix, archbishop of Melbourne and before that president of Maynooth seminary in Ireland, was a central leader against conscription. By August 1920 his Irish Catholic nationalism had angered the British government so much that it seized him off a ship travelling from the USA to stop him visiting Ireland.

Mannix, however, promoted “loyalty” in 1914 (see, for example, *The Age*, 15 December 1914). Even in 1919 he had [“no design against the Empire”](#). He was a conservative in Australian politics, supporting the Lyons conservative government in the 1930s and the Catholic-dominated right-wing 1955 split from the Labor Party to form the Democratic Labor Party.

At a mass meeting in Melbourne to support Britain on 6 August 1914, John Gavan Duffy was put on the platform as the Irish Catholic voice. He was the son of Charles Gavan Duffy, a Young Ireland leader of the 1840s who later became premier of Victoria; and brother of Louise Gavan Duffy, an Easter Rising insurgent, and of George Gavan Duffy, who was Roger Casement’s defence lawyer in 1916 and a Dail Eireann delegate both to the Peace Conference and to the Treaty negotiations in 1921.

“Mr John Gavan Duffy said he spoke to them as an Irish Catholic Nationalist. In this hour of Great Britain’s need Irishmen forgot all the injustices of the past, and they would stand shoulder to shoulder, knee to knee, to fight the battle of the Empire”. (*The Age*, 7 August 1914).

Part of the story behind the paradoxes here must be that views on the war never fell neatly into pro-war and anti-war. Everywhere, some were “jingos”, swallowing their government’s war agitation whole and eager to crush rival nations. In some countries, some had the internationalist policy shared with nuances by Lenin, Luxemburg, and others: turn the imperialist war into a civil war; work to overthrow the warring regimes and replace them by workers’ governments which would make peace without annexations or indemnities.

Many people were neither jingos nor internationalists. Most people never faced a choice whether to vote for war credits or not, as the German Social Democrat MPs famously did. The war was a fact decided above their heads. They could not end it at will. (The Bolsheviks found it hard enough to seal

peace for Russia even after taking power in October 1917). Many then thought that they must "go through with it". They might be sceptical of their governments, to one degree or another; wish peace sooner rather than later; and shift along that axis as war went on. Yet (unless a force like the Bolsheviks intervened to shape the outcome) they would do that without becoming internationalists or socialists, or ceasing on some level to side, mostly, with the army in which their relatives and friends served.

Many enlisted voluntarily not because they were especially pro-British, but because they identified with other Irish who had long served in the army, and because enlistment offered good and stable pay, and no greater danger of death or maiming than dangerous jobs like construction or dock work. Recruitment in Ireland was highest from the urban working class. By 1915, nearly half the pre-war members of Larkin's and Connolly's Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, the union which had fought the great Labour War of 1913-14, were in the British Army.

Women, and older men, did "war work" because their relatives and friends were in the army, and they wanted to help them.

Revulsion against the war grew in every country, but whether that translated into class struggle against the war-makers - as it did in Russia in 1917 and Germany in 1918 - or into more conservative forms depended on the political forces in the field.

James Connolly's first call in 1914, for a ban on exports of food from Ireland to avoid starvation, was also taken up, and maybe first, by Arthur Griffith, who had been against the workers in the Labour War of 1913-14. According to Owen McGee, "Griffith's initial response to the outbreak of the First World War... was... to organise a public anti-war demonstration to emphasise that Sinn Fein stood for 'neither King nor Kaiser but Ireland'," a slogan that would be taken up by Connolly from October 1914.

All the radical-nationalist press carried broadly the same themes as taken up by James Connolly after 29 August 1914: denial of German atrocities in Belgium; claims that German hegemony would allow more freedom all round; praise for Germany as a benign empire (based on defining the "German empire" only as Germany proper, and ignoring German rule in Africa or in Poland). All were pretty much indifferent to the fact, pointed out by the radical nationalist Margot Trench in October 1914, that the pro-German line meant "goodbye to unity between north and south for two generations" (or, as it turned out, more): they had already largely (tacitly) despaired of combatting partition.

Arthur Griffith, by then not a member of the IRB but close, wrote in *Sinn Fein Weekly* (12 September 1914):

"In the history of modern Europe there is no parallel to the treatment of Ireland by England. Because of this we regard no enemy of England as an enemy of ours. If a robber has overcome us — if we lie bleeding and bound at his feet, and he be in his turn attacked, we do not inquire into the character or motive of the attacker before we decide where our sympathy lies. We follow our instinct and our commonsense".

Even aside from the Irish-exceptionalist special pleading (what about Poland? Or Ukraine?), the fundamental argument was thin. If a robber attacks you, and someone attacks the robber, in a world dominated by rivals in plunder, best check whether the assailant may not be equally rapacious. Griffith continued:

"If the Germans, instead of being a great and civilised people, who have led the world in science, art,

literature, and government for the past fifty years, were all the English paint them to be, the fact would not alter our position a hair's breadth. We are Irishmen — our duty to our country demands us to regain Ireland's national and political liberties, and until England has restored them, England remains Ireland's enemy.

"The slave-mind is manifested to-day in the Irish people who babble about 'Belgian neutrality', 'our ancient friendship for France', and the 'German atrocities'. We are not Belgians, and what has happened, is happening or may happen to Belgium is not our prime concern... We, too, must think only of ourselves. 'German atrocities' — if they really had happened — could have no effect upon Ireland's attitude".

The *Irish Volunteer* (24 November 1914) carried a "science fiction" column pretending to report a declaration made by the Emperor of Germany on arrival in Ireland, some time in 1915, after conquering England:

"To the People of Ireland — We have watched with interest your splendid fight for national freedom, and whilst we know that many Irishmen were in the late lamentable war on the side of their actual and our would-be oppressors, we fully recognise that your popular army — The *Irish Volunteers* — have refused to sell their country by joining England against us, we have, therefore, decided to allow you the completest measure of freedom any country could desire".

Indeed, the coverage in *Irish Freedom*, *Sinn Fein Weekly*, and *Irish Volunteer* suggests that Connolly adapted his arguments from them, rather than developing them independently; and that for all concerned the arguments were "good reasons" spun round a policy adopted for other reasons, i.e. the supposed realpolitik of backing the "enemy's enemy" .

That maybe explains how the pro-German ideologising was disposable, was in fact thin concoction to rationalise supposed "realpolitik", got little grip on broad opinion, and was dropped so quickly in April 1917.

The currency of Catholic-hierarchy and narrow-nationalist versions of anti-conscriptionism, and the absence of international-socialist versions, explains why the revulsion against the war in its later years could take Catholic-nationalist-militant but socially-conservative forms. As Kevin O'Higgins, who would be deputy prime minister 1922-27, put it: "We were probably the most conservative-minded revolutionaries that ever put through a successful revolution".

The value of Lenin's and Luxemburg's stance on World War One was not just that they opposed it, but that they did so with a consistent working-class internationalist policy.

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