

THE BIG AND THE LONG FELLOW

Fearghal Mac Bhloscaidh

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The Big and the Long Fellow; or the Tragedy and Farce of the Irish Counter-Revolution.

Fearghal McCluskey

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In June 1920, the head of the British Army, Henry Wilson, feared ‘the loss of Ireland to begin with; the loss of empire in the second place; and the loss of England itself to finish with.’<sup>1</sup> Two years later, with Wilson’s corpse barely cold, Michael Collins, who apparently ordered his assassination, launched a civil war against his former republican comrades with British artillery. Unable to defeat the coalition of forces that coalesced under the flag of the Republic, the British recruited Irishmen to do it for them. The six counties, as Winston Churchill reassured an anxious James Craig, appeared safe now that ‘Collins had definitely drawn the sword against the enemies of the British Empire’.<sup>2</sup> This change in circumstances in large part rested on Collins’ acceptance of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, what Curzon, the partitioner of Bengal, deemed ‘an astonishing victory for the empire’, and what the Big Fellow himself apparently and prophetically described as akin to signing his own death warrant.<sup>3</sup>

During the southern civil war, republicans made a fatal error in militarising their opposition, but it rested nonetheless on principled anti-imperialism and the fact that the treaty effectively subverted Irish self-determination. Indeed, while he charted the course of the Government of Ireland Act (or the partition act) in 1920, David Lloyd George had ‘absolutely no doubt’ that ‘an emphatic majority’ in Ireland would demand ‘independence and an Irish Republic’.<sup>4</sup> The ‘Welsh Wizard’s’ subsequent threat of immediate and terrible war at the crucial moment in the treaty negotiations

formed the basis of the civil war. As Liam Mellows told the Dáil on 4 January 1922: ‘The people who are in favour of the Treaty are not in favour of the Treaty on its merits, but are in favour of the Treaty because they fear what is to happen if it be rejected. That is not the will of the people, that is the fear of the people’.<sup>5</sup>

In retrospect, two men appeared to dominate southern politics in the period. Michael Collins, the Big Fellow, was one; the other, Eamon de Valera—the Tall Fellow—apparently believed that history would record Collins’ greatness at his own expense. Yet this traditional concentration on ‘great men’ ignores the fact that both did indeed make their own history, but under circumstances directly found, given, and transmitted from the past. Ireland and its dead generations clearly weighed like a nightmare on the living. The calibre of leadership that emerged during the counter-revolution arguably doubled the burden, as the aborted class struggle in Ireland created circumstances and relationships that made it possible for a pair of grotesque mediocrities to play the part of heroes—one at the tail end of the revolutionary crisis precipitated by World War I, the other on the coattails of a global depression a decade later.<sup>6</sup>

In any event, the Irish counter-revolution spawned by the treaty and civil war, and then delivered under the ‘frugal comfort’ of de Valera’s independent Ireland, emerged after an unprecedented mass mobilisation in favour of an Irish Republic, where ‘the grassroots took the initiative’, while the leaders ‘responded, in apparent surprise and ill-humour’.<sup>7</sup> During the revolutionary period, not only did 300,000 affiliated trade unionists organise a wave of strikes and soviets in pursuit of the Workers’ Republic or co-operative commonwealth, but many within Sinn Féin itself viewed the revolution as a radical reconfiguration of Irish society. As the socialist Gaeilgeoir and vociferous critic of Free State censorship Liam O’Flaherty recalled of 1919: ‘There was wild talk of a Gaelic Communist Society. There was to be no more poverty, no more social conflict, no more hatred, no more ugliness’.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, however, as another socialist Gaeilgeoir, Brendan Behan, put it in *The Quare Fellow*: ‘The Free State didn’t change anything more than the badges in the warders’ caps.’

## Partition—putting the genie back in the bottle

Many historical accounts have perhaps deliberately reified the issues of partition and imperialism in their consideration of the creation of the southern state. In fact, these issues fused in the minds of the British statesmen who engineered the subversion of Ireland's revolution. Arguably, the counter-revolution should also be understood as the re-emergence of pre-war class divisions, when the economic movement finally reasserted itself as necessary after the receding of the revolutionary wave. As David Harvey has recently explained in general terms, when a violent organic crisis caused by capitalism's internal contradictions (in our case the First World War) suddenly subsides (but not without leaving marks and scars from its passage), 'the genie is, as it were, temporarily stuffed back into the bottle, usually by way of some radical readjustment between the opposing forces that lie at the root of the contradiction'.<sup>9</sup> The global imperial cataclysm threatened a post-Famine 'dominant Irish Catholic subculture' that emerged socially if not politically triumphant from the Land War and whose own interests closely aligned with those of the British Empire and its apparatus in Ireland. This class—deeply implicated in the colonial project—cherished the imperial 'values that ratified and reinforced capitalist institutions and processes, such as private property, "free market" competition, and individual acquisitiveness'. This 'West British' or shoneen tendency still holds enormous sway within the twenty-six counties to this day.<sup>10</sup>

It's exclusion from the state forced this elite to mobilise the masses and pay lip service to grievances among Irish workers and the poor, 'despite the fact that [its own] programme entailed the creation of an Irish bourgeois state' that would institutionalise 'lower-class Catholics' social marginalization, immiseration, and emigration.' Fenianism and then Connollyite socialism sought to overturn the hegemony of the Catholic cleric and capitalist, offering a synthesis of the derived concepts of the radical Enlightenment and the inherent *mentalité* of the Irish rural (and by degree urban) poor that 'oscillated between visions of a pastoral Gaelic commonwealth and the radical, half-assimilated ideals of the French Revolution and the United Irishmen', with the socialism of the Second International thrown in for good measure.<sup>11</sup> During

the revolution, this popular ideology manifested itself in a potent new fusion of syndicalism and anti-imperialism.

As Kerby Miller outlines, the post-Famine consolidation of the shoneen class meant that, by the second half of the 19th century, mass emigration and Irish poverty were 'really more attributable to profit-maximization among Catholic commercial farmers and rural parents... than to the machinations of Protestant landlords or British officials.' This class rode to hegemony on the back of a land war, which relied on the very rural precariat that their dominance had driven to near liquidation. As the Fenian social radical Matthew Harris noted, the alliance of the small and large farmer in the Land League represented 'the union of the shark and the prey'.<sup>12</sup> Millions of people from the subsistence sector of rural Irish society (smallholders, cottiers, and landless labourers) crowded into the slums of New York, Liverpool, or Glasgow. In this respect, 'faith and fatherland' Catholic nationalism rested upon on a century-long conveyor belt of emigration. This vicious social cycle survived the revolutionary period. Yet, the Easter Rising and the wartime pause in emigration meant that for a brief period the Irish rural and urban working class possessed the opportunity, ideology, and determination to challenge their fate. That they ultimately failed constitutes one of the enduring tragedies of Irish history.

Arguably, the Free State constituted an ideological realignment of social forces previously apparent during the 1913 lock-out; namely pro-imperialist Catholic capital, the Catholic Church, right-wing sectarian populism (including Arthur Griffith), and the British state on the one hand, and the wretched of the earth on the other with the active and tacit support of revolutionary Fenianism and the emergent radical elements of petit bourgeois cultural nationalism. The most reactionary element of the shoneen pole gravitated to William Martin Murphy and Tim Healy (the uncle of Kevin O'Higgins who would head the Free State's Party of Order when the economic movement again reasserted itself). Partition and two reactionary confessional regimes on both sides of the border constituted the means by which this revolutionary genie was eventually forced back into the bottle for a half century.

The neo-Fenian grouping within this lock-out polarity emerged as the embryonic revolutionary leadership in 1916, a coalition riven by internal tensions that arrived stillborn because of the post-Rising executions. Since the movement's inception in the mid-Victorian era, Fenianism had always, at best, contained a 'socialistic tendency (in a negative sense, directed against the appropriation of the soil)... being a lower orders movement.'<sup>13</sup> In this respect, while republicanism emerged from the class relations within Irish society and in particular the post-famine economic forces that compelled millions of Irish to emigrate to the United States' north-east seaboard, the movement itself exhibited a persistent tension between a conspiratorial bourgeois nationalism akin to contemporary European revolutionary organisations and a more working-class and democratic mentality shaped by the reality of many Irish people's lives at home and in the industrial centres of the Atlantic archipelago.

By the Edwardian period, the plight of the Irish working class evoked Fenian sympathy but not socialism. Indeed, Seán Mac Diarmada expressed the Irish Republican Brotherhood's (IRB) instrumentalist and conspiratorial attitude to Larkin in a famous 1913 letter.<sup>14</sup> Michael Collins largely inherited this mindset, for while he would have pragmatically followed Connolly into hell as a military leader and ridiculed Pearse's 'air of a Greek tragedy' in the GPO, socially Collins favoured Irish capitalism and tended to view the workers' struggle in instrumentalist terms. This voluntarist impulse appeared intrinsic to Fenianism, but like contemporary movements on the continent, it left adherents vulnerable to the political fleshpots of the radical right. Connolly's admonition to the Irish Citizen Army (ICA) springs to mind here: 'In the event of victory, hold on to your rifles, as those with whom we are fighting may stop before our goal is reached. We are out for economic as well as political liberty.'<sup>15</sup>

The great tragedy of the civil war was that despite considerable co-operation between ordinary Sinn Féin and Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU) members during the revolution, the leadership crust on the magma of mass activism constituted very cold material indeed. During the foundation of Sinn Féin in 1917, Peadar O'Donnell lamented how 'nobody noticed that Connolly's

chair was left vacant, that the place Connolly purchased for the organised labour movement in the independence struggle was being denied.'<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, he recollected that 'we lost out in 1921 because there was no day to day struggle making for differentiation so that in those days we were forced to defend ranches, enforce rents and be neutral in strikes...the Free State was in existence long before the name was adopted'.<sup>17</sup> Certainly, the Labour leadership under Thomas Johnson too closely resembled Emmet Stagg's infamous characterization of it as the political wing of Saint Vincent de Paul.<sup>18</sup> It is difficult to dispute Kieran Allen's conclusion that Ireland's 'only became an aborted revolution because no political force emerged which could fuse national and social demands.'<sup>19</sup> The North and the issue of partition loomed large in this negation. What emerged as the second Sinn Féin party contained a leaven of bourgeois Catholic nationalists unprepared to rupture cross-class solidarity to attract the Protestant working class.

When the Free State election of 1922 arrived, this grouping coalesced with the pro-imperialist Redmondite rump to secure just shy of 40 percent of the vote in the South. In the North, Unionist employers and their political representatives had reasserted their authority by forging an Orange economy in the crucible of the 1920 pogrom. Perhaps looking on admiringly, in February 1923, one Cork employer hoped for 'another Mussolini arising in this country'.<sup>20</sup> He would not have long to wait. Having made short work of militant republicanism, the Free State trounced a wave of labour militancy in 1923, partly sparked by the returned Jim Larkin. Kevin O'Higgins, who dismissed the Democratic Programme as 'mostly poetry', was foremost amongst the well-heeled Catholic public-school boys who led the Party of Order, which sought to 'vindicate the idea of law and ordered government, as against anarchy'.<sup>21</sup>

The First World War constituted an organic crisis in which a multiplicity of potential pathways emerged, but the subsidence of this revolutionary wave led to the reconfiguration of pre-war class relations in a different form—the dual issues of partition and empire and the manner in which the emerging Free State elite handled them appear crucial in the consolidation of the century-old constitutional order that still pertains.

## Big Fellow

As previously argued, Michael Collins' facile conspiratorial mindset and limitless ego perhaps blinded him to the irrevocable damage that his voluntarism inflicted on the prospects of an all-island republic. Collins' willingness to compromise with the treaty also rested on an overly pessimistic appreciation of the situation before the July 1921 truce. His rather two-dimensional conception of the conflict also owed a great deal to the militarist tradition within Fenianism. Ironically, he had his position not due to his undoubted organisational ability, but because the mass of the Irish population effectively demanded a new dispensation. In fact, the British themselves were far less sanguine about their ultimate prospects. Prior to the July 1921 truce, General Macready presented the London government with a binary choice: all out or get out! That is, complete coercion or withdrawal. The commanding officer of the Cameron Highlanders, stationed in Cork after a stint fighting on the White side in the Russian Civil War, had little doubt that an 'official policy of ruthlessness, could easily have quelled the actual active Sinn Féin revolt', but that 'the discontent would merely have smouldered underground. It would have burst into flames as soon as we withdrew.'<sup>22</sup>

These divergent positions rested partly on Collins' myopia. Collins was, however, not alone in this misunderstanding: many who opposed the treaty, while highly principled in their republicanism and anti-imperialism, had likewise elevated armed struggle, believing their own mythology of trench-coated flying columns driving the Brits from Ireland. The IRA lost the civil war because they mistakenly chose to fight it, blind to Mao's subsequent formulation of the guerrilla army as fish swimming in a sea of popular support. This partly emerged from the organisation's origins within the conspiratorial Fenian tradition. Indeed, Collins' ability to achieve majority support for the treaty in the Dáil rested on his role as IRB president and his prestige as IRA commander. As John Regan quite credibly argues: 'Collins was too practical and too ambitious a man to pass up an opportunity for either national or self-advancement, least of all as he saw in the case of the Treaty and events of 1922 where the two coincided.' In the process, he subverted the secular, anti-

sectarian, egalitarian, and anti-imperialist tendencies within the republican tradition and helped deliver a conservative, Catholic, and pro-Imperialist Free State and a discriminatory Orange northern Pale.

The new provisional government's chairman convinced sufficient republicans to win the Dáil vote while avoiding an immediate split within the IRA, for which his fledgling army appeared ill-prepared. Yet Collins headed a government composed mainly of conservatives such as Arthur Griffith, a dual monarchist who conducted government business from a snug in the Bailey on Dublin's Duke Street and negotiated the treaty 'muzzy with whisky', W.T. Cosgrave, who Collins described as 'that bloody little altar boy', and Kevin O'Higgins, the self-proclaimed 'most conservative revolutionary ever'.<sup>23</sup> These pro-treaty politicians were distinctly uncomfortable with the Big Fellow's overt military power and, more pertinently, his conspiratorial role within the IRB. Nonetheless, his influence and, ultimately, the pro-treaty majority relied on his non-political roles. In March 1922, the constitutional nationalist leader John Dillon perceptively stated that 'without Collins, Griffith would not last a fortnight.'<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, like many a continental post-war military hardman, Collins' rather primitive rhetoric about stepping stones and republics masked his role as the tool of the indigenous elite and their international masters. Clearly, 'in historical struggles one must distinguish... the phrases and fancies of parties from their real organism and their real interests, their conception of themselves from their reality.'<sup>25</sup>

In essence, Collins secured treatyite support by arguing that it provided the freedom to achieve freedom, by espousing a pessimistic assessment of the IRA's chances under 'immediate and terrible war', by promising a republican Free State constitution, and by engaging in a covert, northern offensive with anti-treatyites.<sup>26</sup> The latter point in particular deserves attention, for while Collins publicly signed two pacts with James Craig in 1922 and liaised with the British government over the implementation of the treaty, he also arranged secret IRA military operations against the northern state involving pro- and anti-treaty factions through the structures of the IRB. This involved Collins exchanging British rifles for IRA weapons with the anti-treaty IRA in Cork under Liam Lynch and then sending the arsenal to

the northern IRA to defend the besieged nationalist population. Both factions co-operated in an abortive offensive in March 1922, and the republican garrison in the Four Courts was still in communication with pro-treaty HQ about a further joint northern attack when Collins shelled the building. Churchill famously communicated his satisfaction: 'If I refrain from congratulation it is only because I do not wish to embarrass you. The archives of the Four Courts may be scattered but the title deeds of Ireland are safe'.<sup>27</sup>

John Regan has done much to challenge the revisionist stereotyping of the southern civil war as a straight fight between Free State democrats and IRA dictators.<sup>28</sup> In fact, Collins effectively ordered Griffith to provide retrospective governmental sanction for his unilateral appointment of 'the War Council of Three'—Richard Mulcahy, the future Blueshirt leader, Eoin O'Duffy, and Collins himself. Similarly, the clandestine toing and froing between pro- and anti-treaty republicans in relation to the proposed joint northern offensive undermines some of the statist commentary about the negligible importance of partition within southern nationalism. Rather than a side issue, the North appeared crucial during the interregnum in southern violence. Nevertheless, even before the first British shell hit the Four Courts on 28 June 1922, Collins, Mulcahy, and O'Duffy had clearly abandoned any challenge to the Orange state. That they were still in negotiations with the republican garrison speaks either to their utter confusion, endemic duplicity, or both.

The treaty itself apparently offered a non-violent means of ending partition through the Boundary Commission. Certainly this characterised the interpretation of Arthur Griffith, who told de Valera in November 1921 that the Free State would gain 'most of Tyrone, Fermanagh, and part of Armagh, Down', thereby apparently obliging Ulster unionists to accept unity.<sup>29</sup> On 3 December, de Valera told the Dáil cabinet that the oath and Ulster still required amendment. The negotiators returned to London, 'prepared to face the consequences—war or no war'. De Valera provided Griffith with definite instructions to 'try and put the blame on Ulster' in the event that a deal could not be reached.<sup>30</sup> On 5 December, Griffith capitulated on Ulster and the Irish delegation signed the treaty without consulting Dublin. The following day, Lloyd George told his cabinet that the Boundary

Commission 'would possibly give Ulster more than she would lose'.<sup>31</sup>

From the outset, Collins sold the treaty to republicans through the IRB network. While the country at large may have favoured acceptance, even if Mellows rightly identified fear as the fundamental motivation, most men and women within the republican movement opposed the deal. There is no doubt that the brotherhood and Collins' force of personality helped secure a majority in the Dáil. As de Valera later confessed, 'By the "stepping stone" pretence many soldiers of the Republic were led astray until now, having fought against the Republic, they have committed themselves far too much ever to come back'.<sup>32</sup> The North loomed large in the defeat of the Republic since the issue helped delay conflict between republicans and Free State until the latter held the military upper hand.

The treatyites lost little time in neutralising the northern issue. At a céilí in Clones on 6 December, Eoin O'Duffy assured Frank Aiken and other northern IRA commanders 'with great vehemence that the signing of the Treaty was only a trick; that he would never take that oath and that no one would (be) asking to take it. He told us that it had been signed with the approval of GHQ in order to get arms to continue the fight'. In March 1922, Collins told the Tyrone IRA that 'partition would never be recognized even though it might mean the smashing of the Treaty'.<sup>33</sup> Before he went to London in May with the proposed Free State constitution, Collins told the Belfast IRA leader Roger McCorley that 'he was going to London within a few days to see Lloyd George and he would tell him that he could take his bloody Treaty'. As late as August, Collins apparently told the pro-treaty northern IRA that if a political policy failed against the North, 'the Treaty can go to hell and we can all start again'.<sup>34</sup> Yet, after the assassination of Collins at Béal na mBláth, northern IRA petitions met with short shrift, Mulcahy informing another Belfast leader, Seamus Woods, in October that 'the policy of our Government here with respect to the North is the policy of the Treaty' and 'I don't presume to place any detailed interpretations on what are called "assurances that GHQ would stand to the North"'.<sup>35</sup> In effect, this merely confirmed Free State policy since May.

The dominant figure in the northern drama, Michael Collins' role remained ambiguous, oscillating between tragic hero, villain, and fool. Certainly, many within the British establishment held the latter view. During the treaty negotiations, Mark Sturgis described Collins as 'just like a big, young, pleasant prosperous self-satisfied cattle-dealer in a big way of business, with which Ireland is full'. Another leading official, the arch-imperialist Lionel Curtis, called Collins 'a corner boy *in excelsis*' who could 'never quite see the picture through his own reflection in the glass'.<sup>36</sup> Elsewhere, Curtis described negotiating with Collins as being like 'writing on water', to which Lloyd George dismissively replied, 'shallow and agitated water'.<sup>37</sup> IRA commanders in Belfast appeared to plump for 'tragic hero'. Woods lamented how the Free State had abandoned the attitude of 'the late General Collins',<sup>38</sup> later complaining to Ernie O'Malley that the army constituted a 'mob under Dick Mulcahy's control', while his close associate McCorley recounted how, 'when Collins was killed[,] the northern element gave up all hope'. Nevertheless, from the republican perspective, the evidence points to Collins as Iago rather than Othello.<sup>39</sup>

The stepping-stone strategy had several strands, but relied initially on an overly pessimistic view of republican military capacity linked to the age-old constitutional nationalist position that compromise with the British state represented a pragmatic step towards freedom. Collins promised to introduce a republican constitution, which secured an uneasy truce within the IRA and facilitated the electoral pact of 20 May. This envisaged a Sinn Féin coalition cabinet proportionate to the relative pro- and anti-treaty vote on 7 January being established after the 16 June elections. More decisively, his stratagem included a secret joint-IRA offensive against the North, which operated as the unseen safety net under Collins' high-wire political manoeuvring.

Collins partly neutralised partition through the Ulster Council, established by O'Duffy at Clones in January but headed by Frank Aiken. This included all the Northern Divisions: Charlie Daly and Joseph McKelvey, the then anti-treaty commandants of the 2nd (Tyrone) and 3rd (Belfast) Northern Divisions, Aiken of the neutral 3rd (Armagh), and the pro-treaty 1st and 5th commanded by Joe Sweeney (Donegal) and Dan Hogan (Monaghan) respectively.<sup>40</sup> In March,

the long-time Ulster IRB leader Pat McCartan wrote that 'the IRA in the six counties are all anti-Treaty almost to a man. They, however, are out against partition rather than the Treaty. They feel they have been let down'.<sup>41</sup> In short, the northern issue jeopardised the treaty and, in a counter-intuitive and skilful move, Collins actually manipulated the issue to delay open confrontation with republicans. Free State GHQ at Beggar's Bush essentially bought the loyalty of the northern IRA with military hardware and empty promises.

By March, O'Duffy controversially replaced Charlie Daly with GHQ loyalist Tom Morris, an episode sanctioned by Mulcahy and Collins.<sup>42</sup> Free State forces would execute Daly and three other republicans at Drumboe, Donegal, on 16 January 1923. Nevertheless, the same month, and with arms transferred from Liam Lynch's 1st Southern Division, the IRA in mid-Ulster seized two barracks and killed crown forces, provoking an orgy of reprisals in Belfast. Through the auspices of the IRB, the IRA Coalition Army Council, including Mulcahy, O'Duffy, Mellows, Lynch, and O'Connor, agreed to co-operate in a subsequent cross-border campaign. This precipitated the arrival in Donegal of a contingent of experienced republican soldiers from Munster under the command of Seán Lehane and Charlie Daly in late April, who, according to Rory O'Connor, would 'command both Republican and Free State troops in the area'.<sup>43</sup> Rather than operating in tandem, however, the relationship between Free State and republican forces in Donegal quickly descended into acrimony.

The republicans had the will but lacked the resources, the Free State the resources but not the will. By the time they attacked the Four Courts, GHQ had effectively hung the northern IRA out to dry by allowing the 2nd and 3rd Northern Divisions to initiate a general uprising (two weeks apart) while they ordered southern pro-treaty units to stand down. The inevitable unionist reprisals and the implementation of internment effectively destroyed the IRA in the six counties. By 2 June, the British had rejected Collins' republican constitution and threatened to reinvade, as 'the time had come for them to choose between de Valera and the Treaty'.<sup>44</sup> Suitably chastened, Collins came to heel on 13 June, helped in no small part by the British bombardment

of mixed republican and Free State forces at Belleek (18 May–3 June). Whether or not Collins called off the aforementioned Sinn Féin electoral pact on 14 June in Cork hardly mattered, as his acceptance of the, as yet unpublished, imperialist constitution killed the pact. The British government vetoed the Irish people's right to elect a coalition government in a free election involving parties apart from Sinn Féin. In effect, republicanism was once again illegal, as Lloyd George confirmed the British government 'could not allow the republican flag to fly in Ireland.' If Michael Collins couldn't deal, 'the British would have to do so'.<sup>45</sup> On 28 June, Collins dealt, four days after the British had cancelled their own attack on the Four Courts.

Collins' corpse was hardly cold when the new Free State purged the 'revolutionaries, Irish-Irelanders and most especially the militarist-republicans' from the government.<sup>46</sup> The conservative southern elite singularly failed to challenge partition and, while consolidating the Free State, carried out a proxy war on behalf the empire against militant republicans and working-class radicals.

### **Tall Fellow**

In an ironic twist, the man identified by the British as the key to compromise after 1919, de Valera, ended up leading many anti-treatyites back into the constitutional fold after 1926. De Valera and Cathal Brugha had renounced IRB membership after 1916, arguing that Sinn Féin's democratic mandate removed the necessity for a conspiratorial secret organisation. Indeed, de Valera's attachment to republicanism, never mind Fenianism, enjoyed a relatively recent vintage. He apparently joined the IRB as a pragmatic means of advancing within the Irish Volunteers and keeping in the loop vis-à-vis the Easter Rising. De Valera was never a doctrinaire republican, a fact confirmed by the notorious Cuban policy which he expounded while on his tour of the United States in February 1920, suggesting that Britain declare their own Monroe Doctrine in the wake of Irish independence. De Valera did, however, represent a far more cerebral opponent for Lloyd George than Collins. During the preliminary post-truce discussions of July 1921, the British failed to pin the Sinn Féin president down on partition or empire. De Valera

calmly replied that he could accept both—a republic for twenty-six counties or dominion status for the whole island—which led Lloyd George to compare negotiating with the Long Fellow to picking mercury up with a fork—to which Dev apparently replied, why didn't he use a spoon?

While a range of arguments abound as to his refusal to go to London for the treaty negotiations, or indeed to accept an agreement that in substance differed very little from his Document #2, de Valera, ever Jesuitic, appeared to balk before the treaty because it violated Irish self-determination, particularly under the threat of renewed war in 1922. He also appeared intent on keeping as much of the Sinn Féin popular coalition together as possible. His proposal of external association, conjured within his algebraic mind while he tied his shoelaces one morning, sought to square republican principle with the circle of imperial pragmatism. It would permit the British to save face while allowing the greatest number of Sinn Féiners to avoid breaking their oath. It was on this basis that he formed the electoral pact in 1922—an agreement scuppered by British intransigence and refusal to countenance the Free State's proto-republican constitution. Despite what contemporary imperialists and many modern historians argue, there was nothing remotely undemocratic about this pact. Indeed, Lloyd George owed his position as prime minister to a similar arrangement during the coupon election in 1918.

While he would use the issue to great effect, de Valera accepted partition in the secret Dáil Éireann private sessions—a fact that undermined a great deal of his subsequent irredentist bluster about reclaiming the fourth green field.<sup>47</sup> Like his approach to many other issues, de Valera essentially adopted a policy of pragmatic partition, simultaneously manipulating and monopolising the issue to kick the Blueshirts and marginalise the republicans.<sup>48</sup> This irredentism found vocal expression in occasional publicity trips to Newry Gaol and in his condemnation of the Free State's craven abandonment of northern nationalists during the 1925 Boundary Commission debacle when Cosgrave's government agreed to keep the existing boundaries in return for the cancellation of its contribution to Britain's war debt, or as de Valera put it, when the Free State 'sold Ulster natives for four pound a head' to clear 'a debt we did not owe'.<sup>49</sup> He



then rode into power on the back of the land annuities campaign, the Great Depression, and a manifesto so socially radical in tone as to lend credence in some quarters to the Free State red smear.

In power, however, he quickly reconciled himself to a form of southern nationalism that, like northern unionism, viewed partition as an ideological imperative. When challenged on his position, he quipped that if he wished ‘to know what the Irish want, I [need only] look into my own heart’. Irish in this sense must have stood for petit-bourgeois, Catholic male! His misogynistic ‘stone-age conception of womanhood’ and devout Catholicism found public expression in the 1937 constitution, which also sanctified the right to private property, or as Peadar O’Donnell remarked: Dev’s constitution made the clergy ‘the watchdogs of the private property classes’.<sup>50</sup> In effect, a stable southern democracy relied on bourgeois ethno-religious nationalism being able to banish its universalist Irish republican rival to the North. Despite Fianna Fáil’s opportunistic and hypocritical irredentism, the border operated as a cordon sanitaire for Gaelic Catholic purity. Yet the Ireland that de Valera dreamed of continued to experience mass emigration, confirming the continuity in economic structure. The loss of two million Irish people in the first half-century of independence also acted as a social safety valve against radical challenges to the status quo. The implications for the lower orders found slightly comic expression in a purported telephone call between de Valera and O’Donnell:

‘You’ve got to remember Dev’,—said O’Donnell—‘that damn nearly a million Irish people left there, while you were Taoiseach’. ‘Ah, be fair now’,—said de Valera—‘if you had been in my place there’d have been emigration, too’. ‘Yes, Dev, that’s quite true’;—O’Donnell claims to have replied—‘If I had been in your place there would have been a great many people who would have left the country. But they would not have been the same people!’<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

De Valera, ironically, represented a constitutional nationalist who led republicans up the garden path. Collins, on the other hand, was a conspiratorial

republican who walked the most reactionary elements within southern society into power, blinded by his own ego and will. Both men exhibited a mutual idealism that dealt heavily in symbolism but came up short in terms of societal change. Both negated movements for considerable social change conditioned by global crises in capitalism—Collins in 1922 and de Valera in 1932. The majority of the IRA rejected the treaty because of its monarchical and imperial clauses. The British imperative throughout was an intra-nationalist civil war or, failing that, one between Republic and Empire. Collins’ hubris facilitated the former. The notion that partition occupied a relatively unimportant position in these disputes ignores Collins’ concerted attempts to prevent republicans from monopolising the issue. Like many other nationalist revolutionary leaders, Collins exhibited a dictatorial instinct that some of his republican opponents may have shared, but which their conduct, apart from an over-quoted off-hand remark by Rory O’Connor, did not reflect. Indeed, by 18 June the Four Courts garrison had broken with the IRA Executive—a schism only healed by Collins’ bombardment of the former. The leading Brother and Free State police chief, Seán Ó Murthuile, recounted how Collins sought to maintain the IRB as an element within the body politic to advance the republican cause.<sup>52</sup> Outside Richard Mulcahy, who consistently defended extrajudicial murder by Free State troops during the civil war, Eoin O’Duffy represented the Big Fellow’s closest ideological heir. Counterfactual histories inspired by Neil Jordan’s hagiographic film ignore the distinct possibility that but for a (Republican/British/Free State—take your pick here) bullet, Collins’ most likely trajectory would have been that of other nationalist authoritarians across the patchwork of successor states in Central and Eastern Europe such as Horthy in Hungary or Pilsudski in Poland.

The regime that Collins helped establish received little more than a renovation under de Valera’s Fianna Fáil, which cynically employed irredentist rhetoric while it cut its cloth to suit the social forces that had underpinned the previous Cumann na nGaedheal regime, namely the Catholic Church and business class. Ironically, de Valera consummated Collins’ stepping stone for twenty-six counties, but neither the Big nor the Long Fellow came close to fulfilling

the socially radical potential that underpinned so much revolutionary activity between 1916 and 1921. As Sean Ó Faoláin commented, the Free State ‘was and is to this day a middle-class putsch. It was not a society that came out of the maelstrom. It was a class’.<sup>53</sup> Behan’s *Quare Fellow* never actually enters the stage, but serves as a conceit against which the playwright can project his opposition to the brutality, pettiness, bigotry, and heartlessness of mid-twentieth-century Irish society. A condemned man, the Quare Fellow might also serve as a metaphor for the country that never materialised, the Ireland of Larkin in 1913 or Connolly, Clarke, and Pearse in 1916, the Workers’ Republic or creative commonwealth that enthused tens of thousands of Irish workers north and south of the border. A just society that the Big and Long Fellows, in their own ways, helped to subvert—the first time as tragedy and the second as farce.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Newsinger, *The Blood Never Dried*, pp. 115–116.
- <sup>2</sup>Churchill to Craig, 7 July 1922 (PRONI, CAB 6/75).
- <sup>3</sup>Newsinger, p. 122.
- <sup>4</sup>*Hansard*, HC Deb 31 March 1920, vol. 127, c 1323.
- <sup>5</sup>Quoted in Seán Cronin, *The Revolutionaries* (1971), p. 180.
- <sup>6</sup>This paragraph obviously borrows heavily from Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1851), yet an argument could be made that Ireland enjoyed the dubious honour of suffering two Louis Napoleons.
- <sup>7</sup>Arthur Mitchell, *Revolutionary Government in Ireland*, p. 242.
- <sup>8</sup>Quoted in Mitchell, *Revolutionary Government*, p. 43
- <sup>9</sup>David Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*.
- <sup>10</sup>Kerby A. Miller, *Ireland and Irish America: Culture, Class, and Transatlantic Migration* (Field Day, 2008), pp 84-6.
- <sup>11</sup>Ibid. .
- <sup>12</sup>Ibid, p. 80; Harris quote from Fergus Campbell, *Land and Revolution in the West of Ireland* (Oxford, 2005), p. 25.
- <sup>13</sup>Marx to Engels, 30 November 1867
- <sup>14</sup>Seán Mac Diarmada to Joseph McGarrity, 12 Dec 1913 (NLI, McGarrity papers, MS 17,618/1)
- <sup>15</sup>C.D. Greaves, *Life and Time of James Connolly*, p. 403.
- <sup>16</sup>Quoted in Arthur Mitchell, *Labour in Irish Politics*,

1890-1930 (New York, 1974), p. 83.

- <sup>17</sup>Quoted in Conor Kostick, *Revolution in Ireland*, (Pluto, 1996), p. 172.
- <sup>18</sup>Emmet O’Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland* (Cork, 1998), p. 187.
- <sup>19</sup>Kieran Allen, *1916: Ireland’s Revolutionary Tradition* (Pluto, 2016).
- <sup>20</sup>*Manchester Guardian*, 24 Feb 1922.
- <sup>21</sup>Memo to Army Inquiry 1924, 11 Jan 1923 (UCDA Mulcahy Papers P/7/C/21).
- <sup>22</sup>Sheehan, *British Voices*, p. 192.
- <sup>23</sup>For Griffith’s two favourite pubs and their centrality to his business as acting president of Dáil Éireann, see Mitchel, *Revolutionary Government in Ireland* (1995), p. 51; ‘Muzzy with whiskey’ is Erskine Childers description.
- <sup>24</sup>Dillon to O’Connor, 23 Mar. 1922 (TCD, Dillon papers, MS 6744/880).
- <sup>25</sup>From Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852).
- <sup>26</sup>Frank Aiken (UCDAD, O’Malley notebooks, P17b/193/3-4).
- <sup>27</sup>Cited in Michael Hopkinson, *Green against Green* (1988), p. 126.
- <sup>28</sup>For a comprehensive and critical view of the historiography of the civil war, see John Regan, *Myth and the Irish State* (Dublin, 2013).
- <sup>29</sup>Griffith to de Valera, 8 Nov. 1921 (UCDAD, de Valera papers, P150/1914/8).
- <sup>30</sup>Meeting of Dáil cabinet, 3 Dec. 1921 (Ibid, P150/1371/179-82).
- <sup>31</sup>CC, 6 Dec. 1921 (TNA, CAB 23/27/17).
- <sup>32</sup>De Valera to Luke Dillon, 7 July 1923 (UCDA, de Valera papers, P150/1197).
- <sup>33</sup>2nd ND report (NLI, Thomas Johnson papers, MS 17,143).
- <sup>34</sup>Tim Pat Coogan, *Michael Collins* (London, 1991), p. 383.
- <sup>35</sup>Mulcahy to Woods, 20 Oct. 1922 (UCDA, Mulcahy papers, P7/B/287).
- <sup>36</sup>Paul Murray, *The Irish Boundary Commission and its Origins, 1886-1925* (UCD, 2011), pp 76-7.
- <sup>37</sup>Hopkinson, *Green against green*, pp 105-6.
- <sup>38</sup>Woods to Mulcahy, 29 September 1922 (UCDA, Mulcahy papers, P7/B/77).
- <sup>39</sup>In Shakespeare’s tragedy the eponymous hero Othello is manipulated and betrayed by the Machiavellian Iago.
- <sup>40</sup>O’Duffy to Michael Collins, 10 March 1922, (NAI,

DT S1801/A).

<sup>41</sup> Patrick McCartan to Maloney, 31 March 1921 (NLI, McGarrity papers, MS 17645).

<sup>42</sup> Michael Collins's Diary, 16 Mar. 1922 (UCDAD, Mulcahy papers, P7a/62); O'Duffy to Collins, 10 Mar. 1922 (NAI, DT, S1801/A); O'Duffy to Mulcahy, 21 Feb. 1922 (IMA, A/0664/2); Mulcahy to O'Duffy, 27 Feb. 1922 (IMA, A/0664/2).

<sup>43</sup> Letter from Rory O'Connor, Mountjoy Jail, 15 Sept. 1922 (UCDA, Aiken papers, P104/1253/1).

<sup>44</sup> British Cabinet Conclusions, 2 June 1922 (NAL, CAB/23/30).

<sup>45</sup> Cabinet minutes, 5 April 1922 (NAL, CAB/23/30).

<sup>46</sup> John M. Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution, 1921-1936* (Dublin, 2001), p. 259.

<sup>47</sup> Dáil Éireann debate, Monday, 19 Dec 1921 Vol. T No. 6.

<sup>48</sup> Bowman, De Valera and the Ulster question (1983).

<sup>49</sup> *An Phoblacht*, 11 Dec. 1925.

<sup>50</sup> Cited in Thomas Murray, *Contesting Economic and Social Rights in Ireland* (2016), p. 148.

<sup>51</sup> Cited in Boyce et al. *Political Thought in Ireland since the Seventeenth Century* (2008), p. 175.

<sup>52</sup> Ó Murthuile memoir (UCDAD Mulcahy Papers P7a/209).

<sup>53</sup> *Selected Essays of Sean O'Faolain* (2016), p. 231