

A Review of Religion, Politics & Culture

Commonweal

MARCH 25, 2016



WHEN THE ESCALATOR STOPPED DAVID LODGE
ORSON WELLES'S SHAKESPEARE RICHARD ALLEVA

PETER QUINN
THE EASTER RISING OF 1916

MARK SHIFFMAN
THE LIMITS OF SCIENCE

LEAH LIBRESCO
SCREWTAPE IN VEGAS



\$3.95 US/\$4.50 CAN

www.commonwealmagazine.org



The Rising Revised

Roy Foster's Vivid Faces

Peter Quinn

In Ireland, a country accustomed to memorializing rebellions and battles that bear testimony to a turbulent history, the Easter Rising of 1916 has proved problematic. The fiftieth anniversary occurred when the republic was enjoying its first real economic boom, and there was a self-congratulatory pride in the Rising and its results. The official commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary, overshadowed by spiraling violence in Northern Ireland and the fear of appearing incendiary, was muted to the point of ignoring the Rising all together. It remains to be seen what this year's centennial will bring.

Among the multiple merits of Roy Foster's *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890–1922* (W. W. Norton & Co., \$29.95, 463 pp.) are the ways in which it moves past myths and conventional accounts to bring alive the intellectual ferment and the brilliant, often quarrelsome, sometimes eccentric women and men who brought about the Rising and fought over its aftermath, and whose legacy is honored, questioned, and contested to this day.

Peter Quinn, a frequent contributor, is the author of *Dry Bones and Banished Children of Eve* (both from Overlook Press), among other books.

Foster is professor of Irish history at Oxford and is well known to any serious student of what was, and in part remains, John Bull's other island. He is not a historian given to comfortable retellings of familiar stories. His 1988 volume *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972* confirmed his position in the front rank of revisionist historians regarded (and reviled) in some quarters as on a search-and-destroy mission against the nationalist narrative of Ireland's unbroken eight-hundred-year struggle against English tyranny.

If not exactly an *enfant terrible* (Foster was thirty-nine when the book was published), he was *terrible* enough to engender reactions that ranged from high praise, to thoughtful dissent, to apoplectic dismissal. In the end, he has advocated for a new generation of historians of all types—some who agree with his views, others who refute them, all of whom are indebted to him for calling into question versions and interpretations of Irish history long in need of reexamination. “To say ‘revisionist’ should just be another way of saying ‘historian,’ Foster commented in an article in the *Irish Review* titled “We are All Revisionists Now.”

Foster remains a formidable historian, fearless controversialist, and elegant stylist. His exhaustive, award-winning two-volume biography of W. B. Yeats—*The Apprentice Mage*

(1997) and *Arch-Poet* (2003)—was described by Seamus Heaney as “independent, vigorous, liberal and, occasionally, consciously provocative.” Among his other works, *Luck and the Irish: A Brief History of Change from 1970* succeeded in skewering the “Celtic Tiger” and its run-amok self-dealing shortly before the cat was skinned and turned into a handbag.

Vivid Faces, his latest work, is an enlightening and absorbing examination of the many threads that came together to bring about the Easter Rising and that unspooled in the events that followed. The Dublin he evokes was small in size and sprawling in the ceaseless, freewheeling debates, controversies, and creative energies that made the city seem far larger and more significant than a provincial capital.

With a population barely a tenth of London’s, the city was blessed (and cursed) by a high degree of familiarity and intimacy among enemies as well as friends. In 1902, brash, upstart novelist James Joyce was able to meet William Butler Yeats and tell the already-renowned poet, “We have met too late. You are too old for me to have any effect on you.” Approached by undergraduates in a pub, noted journalist and polemicist Arthur Griffith, the founder of Sinn Féin (literally “Ourselves” but often translated as “Ourselves Alone”) and for a brief time president of the Irish Republic, bought them a drink and chatted informally.

The “vivid faces” of Yeats’s poem “Easter 1916” belonged not just to acquaintances greeted with “polite meaningless words,” but to four who would play leading roles in the Rising (three of whom were executed): Countess Markievicz (“That woman’s days were spent in ignorant good-will”); Patrick Pearse (“This man kept a school”); Thomas MacDonagh (“So daring and sweet his thought”); and John MacBride, the ex-husband of Yeats’s *objet du désir*, Maud Gonne. (“He had done most bitter wrong / To some who are near my heart.”)

Foster leaves no doubt that far from a monochromatic landscape of traditional nationalists, pre-revolutionary Ireland was a kaleidoscope of advocates and activists for “secularism, socialism, feminism, suffragism, vegetarianism, anti-vivisectionism” who co-existed—and sometimes collided—with “sacrificial ultra-Catholicism and old-style Fenianism.” Unsurprisingly, this being Ireland, words mattered a great deal, and despite the best efforts of the Gaelic Leaguers and Irish-language revivalists, the words were almost all English.

“The generation who came to maturity between 1890 and 1916,” writes Foster, “lived in a world where Irish writing in the English language was not only innovative, powerful, and sought after by English and American publishers; it was also immersed in the political and cultural debates of the day.”

Though the Easter Rising is thought of as informed and led by poets like Patrick Pearse and Joseph Mary Plunkett, poetry was only one tributary among the “streams of printer’s ink” poured out in plays and newspapers. In addition to imports from England and America, there were myriad

homegrown newspapers. Notable for their vehemence and vitriol, they “created the influences most directly brought to bear on the revolutionaries.”

In Foster’s view, the impact of the theater was so great that the Easter Rising seemed, in a political sense, “a climatic performance...the result of intense rehearsals conducted since the turn of the century.” Cork and Belfast hosted theater companies that performed “radical and experimental dramas.” In Dublin, the proliferation of theater companies was such that one observer mistook the Proclamation of the Irish Republic pasted on the wall of the GPO for a playbill.

Most famous of all was the Abbey Theatre. Under the direction of Yeats and Lady Gregory, it was heartily disliked in nationalist circles for preferring apolitical aestheticism to agitprop drama. (One nationalist journalist called it a “plague house.”) Disapproval boiled over into outright riot when the Abbey premiered J. M. Synge’s masterpiece, *Playboy of the Western World*, which was instantly anathematized as “obscene” and a “slur” on Irish womanhood.

Yeats earned himself further opprobrium when he called in the constabulary to put down the riot. Several years later, post-independence, when another riot erupted over Sean O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars*, Yeats once more took the stage and famously announced, “You have disgraced yourselves again. Is this to be the ever-recurring celebration of the arrival of Irish genius?” He was calling the police, he said, but this time “they’re your police.”

In politics as much as art, the past cast a long shadow over the revolutionary generation and its ambitions for national renewal. Maud Gonne, Patrick Pearse, and Alice Milligan were among those who looked to the heroic warrior myths of Cuchulain and Fionn mac Cumhaill both as the root of Irish identity and a model for the nation they hoped to create. Marxist James Connolly saw socialism as growing from the same values and practices as those of pre-conquest Ireland.

Others looked at the Irish situation from a different angle. Rosamond Jacob, an intellectual and Quaker-turned-agnostic member of Sinn Féin, theorized that what set the Irish apart, especially from the English, was that they “suffer from a frightful sex repression.” This, she contended, was “why they are so given to violence and fighting”; the English on the other hand “had a gastro-intestinal complex, which is worse.”

The cynosure of patriotic remembrance was the Rising of 1798, which unlike the Young Ireland fizzle of 1848 and the Fenian debacle of 1867 presented a real threat to British rule. The focus on ’98 fed the hope of tapping into what Foster deems the “supposed political unity between Catholic and Protestant in 1798, so often invoked and so hard to recapture.” Mostly missing, it seems, was attention to the Great Famine, the midcentury catastrophe, which through death and emigration practically halved the population and altered Ireland more profoundly than any other event in modern history.

Although Foster doesn’t address the lacuna directly, the portrait of the revolutionary generation that emerges (con-

veniently compressed in a helpful appendix of thumbnail biographies) suggests an explanation. These were mostly educated men and women, clerks, civil servants, teachers, journalists, many with college degrees, drawn to the urban centers of Cork, Belfast, Dublin, and London. The land was more a matter of vacation than vocation, a place for Gaelic League summer schools and spiritual reconnection with “a prelapsarian Irishness.”

Few had a conscious connection to the lowest rung of landless laborers and cottiers whom the famine had sent to their graves or to America. The details of the famine, the harsh fate inflicted on some while others prospered, had the potential to divide rather than unite. It was in America where the acid-etched memories of the famine, voiced by unrepentant Fenians like Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa and the indefatigable John Devoy, were unforgotten and a ready source of anti-British fervor.

In the 1880s, Charles Stewart Parnell, an aristocratic, charismatic Anglo-Irish landlord, succeeded in forming a political coalition that placed the issue of Home Rule—a limited form of self-government that would return control of domestic affairs to a parliament in Dublin—at the center of British politics. Parnell was ruined by an extra-martial affair, and for a time the cause of Home Rule went into eclipse.

For its part, the British government wavered between coercion and conciliation. Arthur Balfour, chief secretary of Ireland (1887–1891) and an unapologetic Tory imperialist, sought to square the circle by proposing “to kill Home Rule through kindness.” Over time, major sources of contention—land ownership, the educational system, and local government—were largely settled. But, as historian F. S. L. Lyons observed, “the urge to independence obstinately refused to die.” The explosive potential of the “Irish Question”—what form of self-government Ireland would be offered and what form it would accept—smoldered Vesuvius-like, dormant but unextinguished.

The issue seemed finally resolved with the passage of the Third Home Rule Bill in 1914, which partitioned six of Ulster's nine counties (thus guaranteeing a Protestant majority) in a separate entity and reserved matters of foreign policy and the economy to Westminster. The begrudging manner in which Home Rule was granted and the limitations it included strengthened the impression many had of the Irish Parliamentary Party and its leader, John Redmond, as more concerned with English sensibilities than Irish aspirations. Still, when war broke out in Europe and implementation of Home Rule was postponed, Redmond faced no serious political challenge.

Redmond's loyalty to parliamentary forms and civil discourse paled beside the fierce, uncompromising rhetoric of hardliners like Pearse, whose famous graveside eulogy for long-exiled Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa—delivered just nine months before the Rising—was powerful, eloquent, and

incendiary (“we pledge to Ireland our love, and we pledge to English rule in Ireland our hate”).

On occasion, the indictment of English rule strayed into the fanciful. In his self-referential poem “The Rebel,” Pearse wrote, “My mother was born in bondage, in bondage my mother was born.” (Pearse was born to a middle-class family in Dublin.) Foster quotes the assertion of Geraldine Plunkett, the privileged daughter of Count and Countess Plunkett, that “in Ireland before 1916 the metaphor of ‘slavery’ to describe Ireland's position ‘was not a poetic fiction; it was an actual fact.’”

The actual fact was that Redmond and the government in London badly underestimated the extent of the bitter anti-English animus and distrust left behind by centuries of misrule. The roots of Irish nationalism were a potent mix of history, memory, myth, grievance, and a quasi-religious sense of a unique identity. Foes and friends both indulged the notion of a distinct “Irish race.” (This eugenic sense of race-based distinctions was a pan-European phenomenon.)

Yeats's image of a “withered Rose Tree,” which if properly watered would have its “green come out again / and spread on every side,” might not rank among his greatest poems, but it was on the mark: “‘But where can we draw water,’ said Pearse to Connolly...O plain as plain can be / There's nothing but our own red blood / Can make a right Rose Tree.” In the end, what killed Home Rule and the Irish Parliamentary Party was the steely resolve of revolutionaries led by Pearse and Connolly, the support of Fenians in America, and the ignorance and insensitivity of the government in London.

Ironically, the first armed challenge to British rule wasn't carried out by the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Led by Dublin-born barrister Edward Carson, the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force was premised on resistance by “all means necessary” to the passage of Home Rule by a democratically elected parliamentary majority. No matter how fulminous or treasonous the threats, the British government, aware among other things of the strong Unionist sentiment in the officer corps, refrained from taking any action.

Supplied with guns from Germany, the Ulster Volunteers were quickly matched in numbers if not firepower by the Irish Volunteers. Thanks to what Foster labels Prime Minister Asquith's “inept and pusillanimous” handling of the crisis, Ireland seemed to be sliding toward civil war until the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, an event that Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) member Seán Mac Diarmada presciently grasped would lead to a European war, “and that will be our time to strike.”

When the Rising finally came, it was amid a muddle of missed signals and plans gone awry. Originally scheduled for Easter Sunday, it was delayed by orders and counter orders among those in on the IRB-directed conspiracy and those not. What might have been a wide-scale insurrection was largely confined to Dublin. Still, the rebels fought with what Foster describes as “discipline and valor,” fending off a far larger British force for almost a week. Though the rebellion

was suppressed and the leaders shot, Pearse's hope that the "inspirational and radicalizing effect of their revolutionary gesture would endure" proved prophetic.

A growing sense of the rebels' place in the pantheon of nationalist martyrs and ham-handed government efforts at coercion led to a groundswell of sympathy and support. With the "incomprehensibly obtuse" attempt to impose conscription, which up to this point had been deemed provocative and given the large number of volunteers unnecessary, public opinion swung decisively behind Sinn Féin. (The British press had come to use the name of Arthur Griffith's small separatist party as shorthand for the entire movement. It stuck.)

The triumph was made complete by the massive support for Sinn Féin in the post-war election of December 1918, which wiped out the Irish Parliamentary Party and set the stage for summoning a Dublin parliament (Dáil Éireann). British refusal to recognize the new government and IRA raids on local police barracks quickly intensified into a brutal, nasty conflict. Under the leadership of Michael Collins, the IRA avoided direct confrontation in favor of what turned out to be innovative, highly effective guerilla warfare. Lloyd George's decision to dispatch a thuggish, ill-disciplined force known as the Black and Tans only fueled resistance.

The war ended in a truce followed by a peace conference and a treaty that tossed the apple of discord amid the ranks of Sinn Féin. "A means to an end, not an end in itself," as Michael Collins described it, the treaty settled for a twenty-six-county Free State instead of a republic. (Northern Ireland had already been granted Home Rule.) It also required an oath to the British king. A majority of the public approved, but not the irreconcilables led by Eamon de Valera.

"When hostilities broke out between ex-comrades in Dublin," Foster observes, "the conditions of 1916 were recreated with brutal irony." The combatants suffered no lack of conviction or passionate intensity. The Civil War became an enduring source of division and bitterness that arguably "burnt a deeper mark on the Irish historical memory than the War of Independence: certainly a more painful one."

Revolutionary Ireland quickly joined romantic Ireland in the grave. The conservatism and clericalism of the Free State left fervid republicans like Ernie O'Malley, hero of the War of Independence who chose the losing side in the Civil War, embittered and adrift. Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, widow of a martyr of the Rising, summed up the disillusionment of many of her contemporaries when she wrote that Ireland was "rapidly becoming a Catholic statelet...with a narrow, provincial outlook plus a self-satisfied smugness." Whether this result was imposed or embodied the will of the majority is another matter.

Writers like Sean O'Casey and Sean O'Faolain were dismayed by the prudishness of the Free State. The imposition of censorship buried their dream that an independent Ireland would nurture an era of creative energy and experimentation. The avant-garde achievement of Ireland's most famous exile—James Joyce's *Ulysses*—served as "an emblem of the

kind of cultural innovation which they had hoped would follow their revolution, but which seemed singularly lacking in the new Ireland."

Without slighting the stability and order that the Free State brought to Ireland, no small feat in light of the violence and turmoil that came before, Foster wonders what might have been if more of the views and values of the revolutionary generation had been adopted: "the educational ideas of Pearse, the organizational genius of MacDermott and Collins, the social egalitarianism of Connolly and Mellows, the cultural imagination of MacDonagh, the secularism of the Sheehy-Skeffingtons."

Readers of Foster's book might disagree with some of his conclusions and characterizations. Labeling St. Enda's, Pearse's school, as a "kind of *madrassa*" seems at best a stretch. More attention should have been given to the important relationship between the revolutionary generation and Irish America. Pearse, Yeats, Gonne, Connolly, et al., all traveled to the United States and were influenced by their extensive interactions with Irish Americans. As the revolution went on, those connections became central to its outcome.

The Rising's centenary is already generating a raft of conferences, books, and scholarly papers. The old arguments about what faction or party "own" the revolution will blaze anew. The question of whether the game was worth the candle—whether the country would have been better off with a version of Home Rule little different from what war and civil war produced—will be reargued. The conundrum of Northern Ireland remains unsettled, its explosive potential contained but by no means erased. The temptation to fit the facts to the argument rather than vice versa—in the words of historian Joe Lee, "to prostitute history to propaganda"—is ever present.

"Every revolution," wrote Emerson, "was first a thought in one man's mind, and when the same thought occurs to another man, it is key to that era." Foster succeeds in capturing the interplay of minds that brought about the Irish revolution in all its untidy contingencies and unintended consequences. Free of hagiography or propaganda, his account gives us back the undervalued actors—many women—who but for luck or gender or an accident of timing might have played a leading role, their once-vivid faces now faded and forgotten. Whatever revisions he makes come across as elucidations.

Revolutions are easier to begin than to conclude. They move at their own speed, with their own dynamic. Often enough the losers in the short term prove triumphant in the end. Only recently thought of as Europe's most Catholic country, a secularized Ireland has become the first nation in the world to approve same-sex marriage by popular vote. For anyone seeking to understand the drama and flesh-and-blood urgency of a revolutionary generation increasingly aware of its inability to control the forces it unleashed, *Vivid Faces* is an essential text. ■