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HISTORY
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MATERIALISM



Ireland 2020: An End to ‘Civil War Politics’ or Counter- Revolution by New Means?

REFLECTIONS ON COUNTER-REVOLUTION IN
IRELAND AND THE FORESIGHT OF LIAM MELLOWS

BY JOE DWYER

THE FEBRUARY 2020 general election represented a transformation of the Irish political landscape. The electoral surge towards the left-republican party, Sinn Féin, has chipped away at the political dominance and popular hegemony of the two traditional ‘civil war parties’: Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

Since the foundation of the State, the handover of power between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael marked a mainstay of Irish politics. At varying points in their history, both parties had shifted and veered from the political-centre to the political-right, and back again, with relative ease. Neither party has maintained a consistent ideological position decidedly separate from the other. Rather than by any ideological disagreement, the two parties were principally defined by their implacable opposition and aversion towards each other—particularly at a grassroots level. Once in office, neither pursued anything approaching a policy of radical social transformation. As John M. Regan notes, “The absence of class conflict, social revolution and social instability underpinned the post-revolutionary settlement.”¹ The political veteran Desmond O’Malley² described the political culture that existed between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, accordingly:

*There was little or no ideology involved. Office and not policy was the main objective. The reasons for the divisions in the 1920s were irrelevant and long forgotten except for a few well-worn phrases. But emotions were not. Distrust and loathing were the inheritances of the time.*³

The emotional reverberations of the 1920s is a reference to the Irish civil war; a ten month long conflict which served as the origin myth for both political parties.

Historical Background

IRELAND'S *revolutionary period* at the beginning of the 20th Century is typically characterised by three phases. Firstly, the *1916 Easter Rising* - a pitched rebellion contained mostly to the capital city of Dublin. Secondly, the *1919-21 Tan War* (or *War of Independence*) - a nationwide guerrilla military campaign waged against British Crown Forces. Concluding, finally, with the *1922-23 Civil War* - an internal conflict fought between the proponents and opponents of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty.

From the end of the 18th century onwards, underground revolutionary forces had engaged in a struggle for Irish national liberation from British rule. Since Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763-1798), the founding father of Irish republicanism, the stated aim had remained absolute and inviolable: an independent Irish Republic. By 1921, the militant forces of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) - alongside the women's auxiliary organisation Cumann na mBan -

Standing Up

The 1916 Easter Rising: a pitched rebellion



had brought the British Empire to the negotiating table. Following a six month 'truce', in December 1921, the Irish negotiation delegation returned from London with an agreed accord with the British government: the Anglo-Irish Treaty.

'The Treaty', as it was generally known, secured for Ireland a substantial, but limited, degree of self-government. Twenty-six counties were to become an Irish 'Free State' with its own parliament, judiciary, and armed forces. The remaining six north-eastern counties, six of the nine counties of the historic province of Ulster, would remain within the United Kingdom as 'Northern Ireland'. The new Irish Free State would exercise *Dominion Status* within the British Empire; akin to Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. Therefore, Irish Parliamentarians would be required to swear an oath of fealty to the British Monarch. For the most part, the British Military presence would cease to have a presence within the twenty-six counties.⁴ However, the economic exploitation and impact of imperial conquest would continue. British colonial interest in Ireland remained secure and safeguarded. It was not the thirty-two county independent Republic that so many had struggled and sacrificed to realise. Sinn Féin, the political expression of the independence movement, rapidly divided into two camps: those who were 'pro-Treaty' and those who were 'anti-Treaty'.

The civil war that followed, began on 28 June 1922, when pro-Treaty Free State forces, under pressure from the British Government, launched an attack on an anti-Treaty IRA garrison stationed inside the Four Courts building in Dublin.⁵ The conflict concluded on 24 May 1924, when the beleaguered IRA ordered its volunteers to dump arms.

In the aftermath of the civil war, two principal political

parties emerged. Splitting away from a demoralised and divided Sinn Féin; Fianna Fáil was founded in 1926 by Éamon de Valera alongside many of the leading anti-Treaty figures. Subsequently, in 1933; Cumann na nGael, the pro-Treaty party which had governed the Free State from its establishment until 1932, merged with various other pro-Treatyite groupings to form a new party: Fine Gael. As has been outlined, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael would go on to become the two dominant political forces within the twenty-six county State. So-called ‘civil war politics’ was born and soon became entrenched into society. In 1937, the Free State adopted a new constitution stripping away many of the symbolic vestiges of imperial rule. But, only in 1949, did the State declare itself a Republic; removing the final remnants of British interference within the twenty-six counties.



As Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael grew to dominate the electoral arena, those who remained faithful to the Sinn Féin party found themselves in a *political cul-de-sac*. Civil war defeat, combined with the ensuing exodus of many of its most capable activists to Fianna Fáil, saw Sinn Féin retreat into constitutional dogma and inward-factionalism.

As it sought to reject the new State and bypass its institutions, the party increasingly became characterised by expulsions, splits, and walkouts. The veteran republican, Maire Comer-

The 1970 Split

John Joe McGirl, Ruairí Ó Brádaigh and Charlie McGlade

ford later reflected, “as a modern state grows up, it becomes very difficult to avoid being enmeshed by it.”⁶ It was only in 1949, that the beleaguered party was revived, by a new generation of IRA leadership, to serve as the official political-wing of the republican movement. As Kevin Rafter outlines, such was its poor standing organisationally, “the IRA was able to simply take over Sinn Féin without any fuss and, in tandem, obtain a long-established political name.”⁷ Despite brief flourishes in electoral fortunes in the 1950s,⁸ the party largely remained, in the words of J. Bowyer Bell, “the depository of retired revolutionaries clinging to the idols of their youth.”⁹ Towards the end of the 1960s, as political violence erupted in the North, the republican movement again underwent a split. There were a myriad of reasons and personalities that lay behind this split. But principally, it was a divide between those advocating for a broad-based political strategy and those who wanted to maintain a more traditional militarist orientation. At the 1970 Ard Fheis (*party conference*), the split reached Sinn Féin and a walkout ensued. Those who left the conference, representing the militants, were soon branded: *Provisional* Sinn Féin. It was this grouping which would hold onto the ‘Sinn Féin’ mantle over subsequent years.¹⁰ As the north-

ern conflict waged on, a new generation, of mostly northerners, rose to positions of authority within Sinn Féin. These younger activists increasingly rejected false fidelity to outdated dogma and instead sought to develop new strategies of struggle; both militarily, via a revived IRA campaign, and electorally, via Sinn Féin. As Gerry Adams explains, prior to this strategic re-evaluation, “Sinn Féin was by and large perceived, and was in reality, a poor second cousin to the IRA.”¹¹ Over the course of the next three decades, through the adoption of greater tactical flexibility and revolutionary subjectivity, and under the combined political leadership of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, Sinn Féin was recast from a fringe protest grouping into a cutting-edge electoral machine. Following the end of the IRA’s campaign in 2005, the late 2000s saw Sinn Féin stand as a key political player in the North and a growing electoral force in the South.

2020: The ‘End of Civil War Politics’

THE RE-EMERGENCE of Sinn Féin, as a viable party of government, broke the cosy consensus that had existed between the two ‘civil war parties’. In the 2020 general election, for the first time ever, both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael saw a drop in their vote share and a loss of seats. While, under the leadership of Mary Lou McDonald, a resurgent Sinn Féin unexpectedly received the highest share of the vote and returned with just one seat short of Fianna Fáil.¹² With no party securing a parliamentary majority; government formation talks soon commenced with both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael ruling Sinn Féin out as a potential partner in government. On 15 June 2020, a final ‘Programme for Government’ was agreed between Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Irish Green Party.¹³ The most popular party in the State, Sinn Féin, was excluded from office; while the supposedly diametrically opposed ‘civil war par-

ties’ agreed to govern together. The once unthinkable had come to pass.

The crossing of this Rubicon led to a flurry of headlines heralding the “end of civil war politics.”¹⁴ In much of the accompanying commentary, the step was presented as the realisation of political maturity and progress. Writing for *The Irish Examiner*, Michael Clifford remarked, “politics in this State may be finally growing up.”¹⁵ While, in the *Sunday Independent*, Eoghan Harris suggested the coalition finally brought Irish politics “into the European mainstream.”¹⁶ Speaking in Dáil Éireann, the Fine Gael leader, Leo Varadkar, stated, “Civil war politics ended a long time ago in our country, but today civil war politics ends in our parliament.”¹⁷ The symbolism of the coalition was further demonstrated when the new Taoiseach, Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin, announced that the portraits of *both* Éamon de Valera and Michael Collins, the two nominal figureheads of civil war divide, would hang in his office.¹⁸ *Swords had been turned to ploughshares* and in the wake; the story of Sinn Féin’s unexpected advance was sidelined. The overriding establishment narrative was clear: the wounds of civil war were finally being healed.

However, unsurprisingly, such public discourse deliberately ignored the social, political, and ideological factors which lay behind the civil war conflict. It would be reductive and simplistic to solely present the civil war through a lens of personalities and parties. Especially through two political parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, both founded *years* after the civil war had concluded.

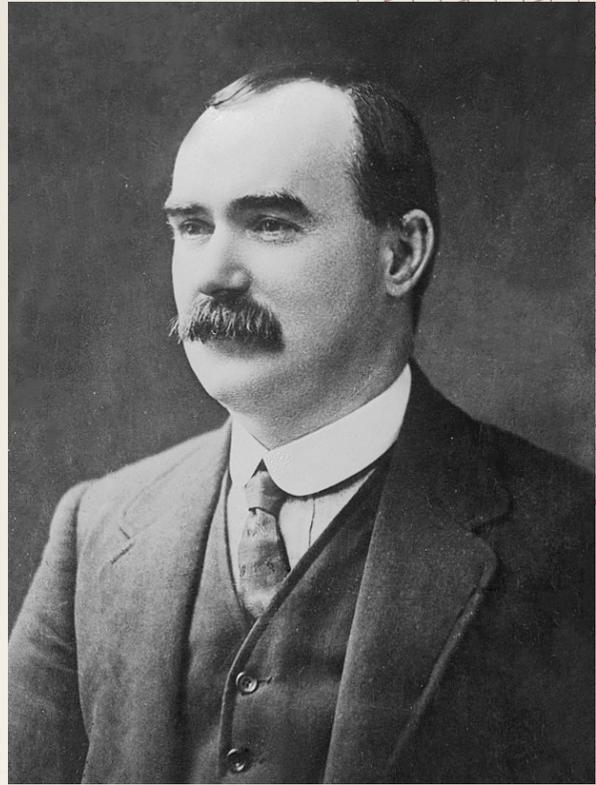
As Regan has outlined in detail elsewhere, the modern Irish State relies on three fundamental ‘foundation myths’. Firstly, the idea that the current twenty-six county State emerged from a popular nationalist revolutionary struggle rather than from an imposed British settlement cemented and enforced by a counter-revolution. Secondly, that the legal provenance of the new State and its institutions originate from the institutions of the revolutionary period (i.e. the First and Second Dáil Éireann and the revolutionary forces of the Irish Republican Army and

Cumann na mBan) rather than the suppression of these revolutionary bodies, with the actual legal provenance stemming from British statute. And thirdly, that the founders of the State upheld constitutional, democratic, and legal means to establish the State's institutions. Despite the reality that, summary executions and violent repression was a touchstone of Irish state-building and a utilised means of removing dissenting voices.¹⁹ These three 'foundation myths' provide a fixed narrative which has been reinforced and parroted by successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments.

The Road to Civil War

DURING THE revolutionary period, the notion that the 'National struggle' would fall short of a wider social revolution was not unanticipated. Prior to the 1916 Easter Rising, James Connolly, the only avowed socialist of the rebel leaders, is said to have warned his Irish Citizen Army: "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."²⁰ In ideological terms, the independence movement had always been all-encompassing. As Feargal McGarry notes, IRA membership could often span from "right-wing bigots to communists."²¹ Similarly, Eoin Ó Broin characterises the post-1916 Sinn Féin party as an "uneasy but stable alliance" that accommodated all strands of thought; from conservatives, to pragmatists, to social radicals.²² At repeated stages throughout the period, the need to maintain unity between such disparate forces and individuals often trumped the ability to openly discuss what post-independence would look like.

It is necessary, however, to state that the social and ideological mix within the independence movement should not negate the revolutionary legitimacy of the liberation struggle from a Marxist perspective. In the case of Ireland, Karl Marx repeatedly argued that first its people had



The Great Connolly

"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."

to secure self-rule before any final push towards social emancipation could materialise. A fundamental step on the road to dismantling capitalism lay in the dismantlement of imperialism.²³ Adopting this ideological framework, V.I. Lenin reacted furiously when fellow socialists branded the 1916 Easter Rising as a "putsch" conducted by a "purely urban petty-bourgeois movement." Replying in force, Lenin wrote:

To imagine that social revolution is conceivable without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without the revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie with all its prejudices, without the movement of non-class conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against the oppression of the landlords, the church, the monarch, the foreign nations etc. – to imagine this means repudiating social revolution. [...] only

*those who hold such a ridiculously pedantic opinion could vilify the Irish Rebellion by calling it a “putsch.” Whoever expects a “pure” social revolution will never live to see it. Such a person pays lip service to revolution without understanding what revolution is.*²⁴

It is, therefore, entirely justifiable that the more socially radical and class-conscious republicans – be they James Connolly, Liam Mellows, Constance Markievicz, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, or Peadar O’Donnell – entered the nationalist movement despite all the trappings of bourgeois and liberal nationalism that lay within.

Liam Mellows

Irish republican, Sinn Féin politician, and revolutionary, Mellows was active in the Republican Brotherhood and the Irish Volunteers, fighting in the Easter Rising as well as the War of Independence.



It should also be noted that there were some brief flashes of *socialistic* aspiration during the revolutionary period. It is beyond the remit of this piece to outline them all entirely, but perhaps the most notable was the 1919 Democratic Programme of Dáil Éireann. The Democratic Programme was intended as a mission statement of the revolutionary government of the Irish Republic. It set-out in explicit terms that the:

nation’s sovereignty extends not only to all men and women of the nation, but to all its material possessions; the nation’s soil and all its resources, all the wealth and all the wealth-producing processes within the nation...

Furthermore, it declared that all rights in private property would be “subordinate to the public right and welfare.” It called for an end to the British Poor Law System and pledged to “ensure the physical as well as the moral well-being of the Nation.”²⁵ However, despite its official status, the Programme was far from representative of most members of the First Dáil. As

Brian Farrell notes, “most of its members had not read the document in advance; the few who had seen it in draft form were reluctant enough to subscribe to it and there was a last minute redrafting of the document only hours before the Dáil met.”²⁶ Indeed, even in its final diluted form, it still went largely ignored. It would later be dismissed in its entirety by the Free State Minister for Justice, Kevin O’Higgins, as “largely poetry.”²⁷

The ultimate undoing of the Irish revolution lay in the inability of the more socially radical republicans to instil revolutionary theory and class politics into the post-1916 independence movement. The socialist republican, Peadar O’Donnell would later opine: “the economic framework and social relationships,

which expressed tyrannical aspects of the conquest, were declared outside the scope of the republican struggle.”²⁸ For the duration of the Tan War, even traditional agrarian cleavages such as: *rancher against small farmer or landlord against tenant*, were momentarily parked in a bid to build national unity. As O’Donnell summarised, “We had a pretty barren mind socially.”²⁹

The Foresight of Liam Mellows

THIS POLITICAL downfall was perhaps best recognised by the leading Irish republican, Liam Mellows. Mellows was a committed IRA volunteer and Sinn Féin activist who had famously rallied volunteers in Galway during the 1916 Easter Rising and, whilst on the run, organised in the USA in support of the independence movement. Following the publication of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, in December 1921, Mellows became one of its most vociferous and implacable opponents. From his perspective, the Irish Republic had been proclaimed in Easter Week 1916. The Republic had subsequently been ratified by the people, via the 1918 general election, and took its place on the international stage through the 1919 Declaration of Independence.³⁰ Mellows was therefore incensed to see that it was being disestablished before his very eyes. Indeed, to make matters worse, the people dismantling it were the very same who had sworn to uphold it. As he remarked himself, the Treaty represented “not a step towards the Republic but a step away from it.”³¹

Seán Cronin is correct to lament that, when the Treaty came to be debated, “there were few radicals in the Second Dáil when it needed a radical stand.”³² In this respect, Mellows stands out as one of the few radicals who did make a worthy, albeit futile, stand. His debate contributions represented, in the words of Conor McNamara, “classic distillations of Irish republi-

can thought.”³³ A recurrent argument from the pro-Treaty benches was that rejection of the Treaty would lead to a full-scale invasion by British Forces and “immediate and terrible war” for the people of Ireland.³⁴ Mellows refuted this and famously retorted that to support the Treaty, under such conditions, “is not the will of the people, that is the fear of the people.”³⁵ He maintained that popular-will could not guide revolutionary practice if the people were being threatened and coerced by the enemy. He also rejected the economic arguments presented in favour of compromise; arguing, “We do not seek to make this country a materially great country at the expense of its honour in any way whatsoever.”³⁶ Despite his personal dislike of public-speaking,³⁷ the coherence and consistency of his argument meant that few could discount what he said entirely. Indeed, it is notable that the pro-Treaty speaker who followed him in the debate, Desmond FitzGerald, began his contribution by saying: “I want to say at the beginning, with regard to the last speaker before lunch, that I agree practically with every word he said.”³⁸ It was to be a cruel twist of fate that, just 11 months later, FitzGerald would sit as a member of the Free State cabinet that signed-off on the summary execution of Liam Mellows.

The Attack on the Four Courts

DESPITE MULTIPLE attempts to hold the two sides together, by March 1922 civil war looked to be unavoidable. On 26 March, the IRA elected a new sixteen-member Army Executive loyal to the Republic and opposed to the Treaty. Mellows was among those elected.³⁹ On 15 April 1922, the IRA Dublin garrison seized the Four Courts to serve as a new IRA headquarters. The choice of location was not without intended symbolism. The building had previously been occupied by rebel forces during the 1916 Easter Rising. Indeed, some of the anti-Treaty IRA men who entered the Four Courts in 1922 were

the same who had entered it six years prior. However, symbolism aside, there is little to indicate that the IRA was bracing itself for what was to follow. As Michael Fewer explains, “very little planning was carried out, or measures put in place, then or later, for a realistic military defence of the Four Courts complex.”⁴⁰ Demonstrative of this lax attitude, over the subsequent weeks, Mellows continued to walk from the occupied Four Courts to the Dáil⁴¹ in order to carry out his Parliamentary duties and daily cross-paths with pro-Treaty colleagues.⁴²

For a period, an uneasy stand-off persisted. However, this hiatus was to break on 22 June 1922 when the IRA assassinated the British Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson outside his home in London.⁴³ The British establishment was outraged by the provocation. In the House of Commons, Winston Churchill called for action to be taken against the “band of men” stationed in the Four Courts.⁴⁴ The pro-Treaty leader Michael Collins, who had previously been the IRA’s Director of Intelligence, was well aware that if he did not act, the British would soon move in to do so.⁴⁵ Therefore, on 28 June, the Free State National Army gave notice to the IRA garrison stationed in the Four Courts to evacuate within twenty minutes or the building would be taken by force. A short time later, with the IRA volunteers refusing to withdraw, the 18-pounder gun situated across the River Liffey opened fire. The siege of the Four Courts had begun.⁴⁶ Civil war in Ireland had commenced.

After three days of shelling, at midday on 30 June, the Four Court garrison surrendered. Despite the strenuous objection of Liam Mellows.⁴⁷ The captured IRA volunteers were taken to Mountjoy Jail. Once there, in line with republican policy, they requested to be treated as prisoners of war. The IRA men were swiftly informed that the Free State commanding officer overseeing their arrest had ordered that no such concessions were to be granted.⁴⁸ The commanding officer in question was none other than a certain: Eoin O’Duffy. O’Duffy would later gain notoriety when, in 1932, enamoured with the fascist corporatism of Italy and Germany, he founded the proto-fascist Army Com-

rades Association, colloquially known as ‘the Blueshirts’. He would later serve as the first leader of Fine Gael and form Irish Brigade to fight on the side of Francisco Franco during the Spanish Civil War. However, back in June 1922, this early designation of *criminality* is perhaps one of the first indicators of the counter-revolutionary nature of the conflict that followed. Former comrades had become common criminals overnight. British Statute had supplanted revolutionary defiance. In the words of Regan, from the outset of the fighting, pro-Treatyites presented the civil war “not as a struggle between competing revolutionary factions but as a war against actions which were deemed criminal, not ideological.”⁴⁹

However, the conflict was fundamentally ideological. Indeed, it was from his cell in Mountjoy that Liam Mellows produced his greatest contribution to republican ideology. It was a report, written in two parts, which would become known as: *The Notes from Mountjoy*. A piece of writing which Seán Cronin would later celebrate as “the only radical document to emerge from the civil war.”⁵⁰

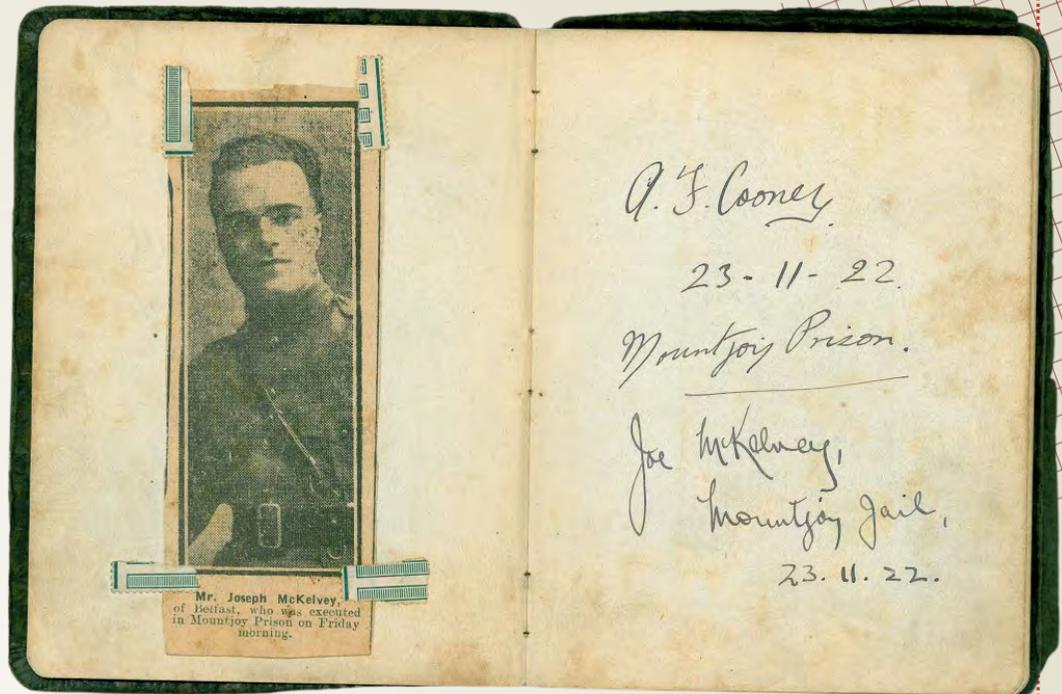
The Notes from Mountjoy

ON 18 AUGUST 1922, the anti-Treaty IRA volunteer Ernie O’Malley, who had escaped arrest following the fall of the Four Courts, wrote to Mellows seeking strategic guidance on the escalating civil war outside.⁵¹ Following some general correspondence relating to minor matters, Mellows wrote to O’Malley again, on 26 August, with the first-half of a full report providing his perspective on the wider political situation. Three days later, on 29 August, the adjoining second-half was posted. Copies of both *Notes* were also sent to the leading anti-Treatyite Austin Stack for his consideration. Their contents were never intended for publication or outside consumption. However, as Cronin outlines, the *Notes* would reveal Mellows to be “the most clear thinking and far

sighted Republican leader of the civil war period.”⁵² Taken in totality, his analysis represented: a repudiation of the conservatism of the Catholic Church, a rejection of the moderation of the Irish Labour movement, and a break-away from the exclusively militarist focus of Irish republicanism.

In September 1922, O’Malley made copies of the *Notes* for the attention of Liam Lynch, the IRA Chief of Staff. Unfortunately, the Cumann na mBan courier tasked with delivering them to Lynch was intercepted by the Free State authorities.⁵³ Recognising the propaganda value contained within, the *Notes* were printed in full, with accompanying pro-Treaty commentary, in both the *Irish Independent* and *The Irish Times* on 22 September.⁵⁴

The first of the *Notes*, dated 26 August, begins with a plea for greater cohesion between republican political and military strategy. Within the IRA, there had been a tendency to focus exclusively on military matters. As Cronin notes, “Republicans had no politics, they sometimes liked to claim.”⁵⁵ At the IRA Convention of 26 March 1922, it was reported that a popular cry from the floor was, “We don’t want any politicians.”⁵⁶ Mellows recognised the folly of this attitude. In his *Notes*, he outlined how the previous six months had witnessed “responsible officers in their desire to act as soldiers, and because of their attitude towards ‘politicians’ [...] only judge of situations in terms of guns and men.”⁵⁷ Such posturing had allowed *politics* to fall into the hands of others. Particularly, into the hands of individuals removed from the military strategy. As Peadar O’Donnell reflected, Liam Lynch was unable to “descend from the



The Mountjoy Notebook

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high ground of the Republic to the level of politics.”⁵⁸ In such a vacuum, an individual like Éamon de Valera became the *de facto* political voice of the anti-Treatyites. It was a role which he himself admitted he was ill-suited for. In a private correspondence to Mary MacSwiney, de Valera wrote, “Every instinct of mine would indicate that I was meant to be a dyed-in-the-wool Tory or even a Bishop, rather than the leader of a revolution.”⁵⁹

The *Notes* called for the formation of an alternative Provisional Republican Government to enact a popular programme of reform. Mellows argued that this should be done as a matter “most urgent” to counter any budding support for the Free State Provisional Government. This proposed alternative government would, therefore, be tasked with ensuring that the 1919 Democratic Programme was “translated into something definite.” Maintaining that only

a truly revolutionary programme could win over the working-classes and Labour movement to the cause of the Republic. To achieve this, Mellows quoted at length from an article featured in the 22 July edition of *Worker's Republic* (the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Ireland). This apparent endorsement was unquestionably the most controversial aspect of the *Notes*. The reproduced quote stated that:

*Under the Republic all industry will be controlled by the state for the Workers and Farmers benefit. All transport, railways and canals. etc. will be operated by the State – the Republican state – for the benefit of the workers and farmers, all banks will be operated by the state for the benefit of Industry and Agriculture, not for the purpose of profit making by loans, mortgages, etc. That the lands of the aristocracy (who support the Free State and the British connection) will be seized and divided amongst those who can and will operate it for the Nation's benefit, etc.*⁶⁰

Perhaps predictably, when the *Notes* were published in the national newspapers, this citation received particular attention. It was promptly presented as evidence that the anti-Treatyites were hellbent on establishing a “Communitistic State” in Ireland.⁶¹ In the *Irish Independent*, the *Notes* appeared with a cover-article drafted by the Free State Publicity Department. The introductory text, warned that “the new Republican programme is to be dangled before the eyes of the landless men, the unemployed, the thousands of people whom starvation is facing, so

that the situation may be ‘utilised for the Republic.’” Furthermore, it cautioned its readers that, “in the history of politics few things can be more callously unscrupulous than this programme.”⁶²

The two *Notes* concluded by listing various topics and areas of interest which Mellows suggested required greater “propaganda” attention. In effect, this represented a call for greater political education within republican ranks. Mellows argued that concepts like ‘imperialism’ needed to be explained to ordinary people:

*What the rejection of it [imperialism] by Ireland means. What its acceptance by Ireland means. This should be fully explained. What Imperialism is; what Empires are; what the British Empire is – its growth.*⁶³

He outlined how an Irish Free State, still situated within the British Empire, only represented the maintenance of British imperialist interests by domestic means. He warned that Ireland’s rulers would no longer “use British arguments to cloak their action, but Irish ones ‘out of our own mouths’, etc.”⁶⁴ As Desmond Greaves notes, such analysis and description of the new means of imperial domination pre-empted much of R. Palme Dutt’s later articulation of *neo-colonialism*.⁶⁵ In the latter half of his *Notes*, Mellows again returned to the need for early political education. He appealed for his comrades on the outside to “concentrate on youth” because “salvation of country lies in this – both boys and girls.” Reflecting on the Treaty split, he remarked, “the reason for so many young soldiers going wrong [pro-Treaty] is that they never had a proper grasp of fundamentals. They were absorbed into [the] movement and [the] fight – not educated into it. Hence no real convictions.”⁶⁶

The other controversial aspect of the *Notes from Mountjoy*, was Mellows’ critique of the Catholic Church hierarchy. He began by outlining the Church’s historic opposition towards Irish republican struggle through the decades. He condemned the Church’s “exaltation of deceit and hypocrisy” and denounced it for treating religion as “something to be preached about from pulpits on Sundays, but never put into

practice in the affairs of the nation.”⁶⁷ Although, excoriating of the Catholic hierarchy, Mellows made clear that his attack was not against Catholicism as an article of faith. Indeed, he argued that the hierarchy in fact presented a “danger to Catholicism in Ireland from their bad example.” To counter their negative example, Mellows proposed that “propaganda” be produced on the life of Cardinal Désiré-Joseph Mercier (1851-1926), the Belgian Cardinal who had rallied Belgian nationalists during the German occupation in 1914.⁶⁸

Unfortunately, when the IRA Executive eventually met on 16 and 17 October, in Ballybacon, Co. Tipperary, Mellows’ proposals were not even considered for discussion. Undoubtedly, the press coverage and the accompanying ‘red scare’ tactics had damaged their reception. Also, as McNamara explains, by this point the outside republican leadership was largely preoccupied with “fighting for their own survival.”⁶⁹ The civil war had quickly descended into a primarily rural conflict of ambush and assassination. Mellows was himself uneasy with the presentation of his Notes in the press. Writing to his comrade, Seán Etchingham, he remarked, “Of course you saw the publication of my hastily written ideas that fell into their hands [Pro-Treaty]. The effort to brand it ‘communistic’ is so silly. I only referred to the “Worker” [*Workers’ Republic*] because it had set forth so succinctly a programme of constructive work that certainly appealed to me.”⁷⁰

At this point, it is necessary, to note that Mellows never considered himself a ‘socialist’. Given the general conservatism of Irish society, it was not a label that sat easy for many republicans of this period. As a member of the clandestine Irish Republican Brotherhood, Mellows preferred to style himself as traditionalist in the Fenian mould. As O’Donnell later wrote:

Mellows was a great Fenian who saw the poor as the freedom force of the nation; as [Wolfe]Tone did. He was influenced by the lessons of Irish history, his experience as an organiser of the Fianna⁷¹, his memory of the men who rose with him in Galway and the way of life of the prisoners around him in Mountjoy. It was clear to him that the middle class, which lurked in the shadow of the republican

*movement from its rise to popularity, was no part of the freedom forces; it had no aim that could not be realised in Home Rule within the British Empire.*⁷²

While in America, he was asked by Nora Connolly, daughter of James Connolly, and Frank Robbins, of the Irish Citizen Army, for his opinion on socialism. His response was only that he had read James Connolly’s *Labour in Irish History* and agreed with its conclusions, “but he was not sure that he understood Connolly’s Marxism.”⁷³ His time spent in America certainly broadened his thinking and brought him into contact with more radical thinkers. As Greaves records in detail, this included Irish-American radicals such as Patrick L. Quinlan, J.E.C. Donnelly, and Con O’Lyhane.⁷⁴ Undoubtedly, Mellows was mindful that his thinking was increasingly *to the left* of many of his comrades back home. Indeed, in a moment of political frustration whilst in Philadelphia, he wrote to Nora Connolly, “I’m beyond redemption [...] Am looked on as wild, hot-headed, undisciplined – liable to get [the] movement into trouble – dubbed a Socialist and Anarchist.”⁷⁵ However, as O’Donnell notes, Mellows repeatedly returned to Irish history for guidance rather than contemporary socialist-thinkers on the European Continent.⁷⁶ His famous pronouncement in *The Notes from Mountjoy*: “We are back to Tone – and it is just as well – relying on that great body ‘the men of no property’...” is representative of this train of thought.⁷⁷ Tone had famously stated, on 11 March 1796, that, “If the men of property will not support us, they must fall; we can support ourselves by the aid of that numerous and respectable class of the community, *the men of no property*.”⁷⁸ Such thinking was certainly in-step with Mellows’ own conclusions by the end of August 1922.

Unfortunately, Mellows did not get the chance to expound on his thinking or develop his ideas any further. On 7 December 1922, two Pro-Treaty politicians were ambushed by the IRA, and one of them, Seán Hales, died. The Free State cabinet was incensed by the ambush and in reprisal ordered the summary execution of four republican prisoners. Those selected were Rory O’Connor, Dick Barrett, Joe McKelvey,

and Liam Mellows. It is not known why these four were chosen. A prevailing theory was that a man was chosen to represent each of Ireland's four provinces; to send a stark warning to IRA

Mellows Murdered

Without trial, Mellows, O'Connor, Barrett, and McKelvey were murdered by the Free State on the morning of 8 December 1922. "*Slán Libh, Lads*" [Goodbye, Lads] were Mellows' final words.



volunteers nationally. With O'Connor for Leinster; Barrett for Munster; McKelvey for Ulster; and Mellows – despite being a Leinsterman – standing in for Connacht given his association with Galway during Easter Week 1916.⁷⁹ However, Desmond Greaves presents a much more compelling argument, and instead suggests that the real motivation was considerably more calculated and politically-minded. Indeed, he argues that the four were selected in a moment of opportunism because their silence assisted the consolidation of the new Free State. As he asks, "Who can deny that when these four tongues were silenced the world became much safer for 'official history?'"⁸⁰

Thus, on the morning of 8 December 1922; Mellows, O'Connor, Barrett, and McKelvey were shot by firing squad. They received neither trial nor sentence. The new government's justification for their execution was solely given in terms of retribution for Seán Hales. The executions caused widespread revulsion, and even the Hales family issued a letter to the press repudiating the '*Mountjoy murders*.'⁸¹ The Cannon who accompanied the condemned men to their fate, later relayed that the final thing he heard before the volley of gunfire was Liam Mellows utter the words, "*Slán Libh Lads* [*Goodbye Lads*]."⁸² With this extra-judicial execution, Mellows was silenced forever. It would be left to others to pick up his work and interpret his words.

What Followed

IN HIS NOTES, Mellows identified that capital would support the Treaty compromise. As he

wrote; “money and the gombeen man⁸³ – are on the side of the Treaty, because the Treaty means Imperialism and England.”⁸⁴ Following the civil war, many defeated anti-Treatyites consoled themselves with the notion that their defeat was primarily due to ‘betrayal’. However, the unfortunate truth was that those who took the pro-Treaty side were never *truly* with the revolution to begin with. As Gerry Adams later summarised:

The Cumann na nGael government which ruled the new Free State from 1922 to 1932 represented the most pro-imperialist elements in the state. Their economic interests in commerce, banking, trade, large farming concerns, brewing and distilling, or in sections of the high professional groups, required free trade with Britain and close political and cultural ties with her. It was not that they sold out the republic of 1916: as Liam Mellows said of them at the time, ‘the men with a stake in the country were never for the republic.’⁸⁵

Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, one of the most advanced socialist republicans of the revolutionary period, had initially been cautious about taking up a side in the Treaty split. However, by February 1922, she could already see that all the reactionary forces of the old-guard were lining up behind the Free State, “There is a regular stampede for it of all the moderates, and the ‘safe’ people with stakes in the country, of the press, and the clerics.”⁸⁶ It was a trend that was not lost on the pro-Treaty leader Michael Collins. Prior to his death, during an IRA ambush on 22 August 1922, Collins ruefully confided to a colleague, “I wish we [pro-Treaty] had the bishops against us.”⁸⁷

Once the civil war had concluded and the new State was firmly embedded, the main beneficiaries were, unsurprisingly, the middle class bourgeoisie and the ruling classes. The counter-revolution had served its purpose. One of the earliest measures of the Free State was the passage of the Amnesty Bill. A piece of legislation which indemnified “persons who supported the British Government for the last few years, by carrying out orders, or being in any way responsible for acts, which would be or might be the subject of legal proceedings.”⁸⁸ By 1924, a



Nora Connolly

Summarised the post-civil war mood well, describing how, “The first fiery resistance became a long sad retreat, with the executions strung out like milestones along the way. We felt beaten and deflated.”

Free State Business Committee expressed concern that:

*Those who won the fight have not done well out of the victory, whereas pro-British ascendancy who lost the fight have done disproportionately well and got a new lease of life from the Free State.*⁸⁹

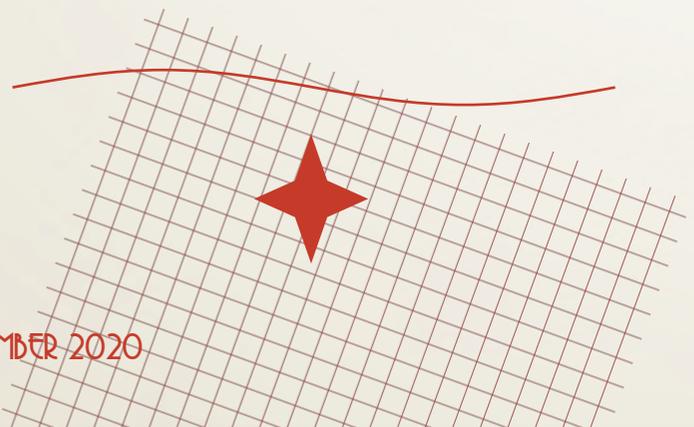
In the words of Cronin, the 1919 Democratic Programme “remained a dead letter.”⁹⁰ The new Free State administration oversaw a programme of conservative fiscal policies and *laissez-faire* economics. Agriculture remained the primary economic focus with the 1926 census showing 53% of the Free State’s work-force employed in the agricultural sector.⁹¹ When the Secretary of Industry and Commerce pushed for a modicum of state-directed industrial development the cabinet rejected it outright.⁹² The level of social expenditure bequeathed by the outgoing British administration was deemed “inappropriate for a poor, small country” and, accordingly, the Free State cut back on welfare measures. Most notorious of these cuts was the old age pension in 1924.⁹³ Despite the promise of the Democratic Programme, little importance was placed on the “physical well-being” of the Nation. ‘Health’ was lumped together as a junior partner within the Department for Local Government and it was not until 1947 that it became a Department in its own right.⁹⁴ As Dermot Keogh concluded, “even the harshness of the times cannot account for the swinging economic cuts made on the poorer sections of the community during the 1920s.”⁹⁵

The post-civil war republican movement found itself in a political quagmire. Nora Connolly summarised the mood well, describing how, “The first fiery resistance became a long sad retreat, with the executions strung out like milestones along the way. We felt beaten and deflated.”⁹⁶ It was not long before the splits and splinters began. The first came in 1926. Now prepared to enter the Free State Parliament, Éamon de Valera, the Sinn Féin party president and political figurehead of the anti-Treatyites, left to found Fianna Fáil.⁹⁷ Fianna Fáil would go on to become “one of the most effective political organisations ever to operate in any western democracy.”⁹⁸ Those who remained with Sinn Féin stood isolated from the new political

mainstream. As the young republican Frank Ryan, arguably one of the closest there was to a successor to Mellows, wrote during the 1927 general election:

Honestly, I can’t take sides in what I consider a domestic row between moderates [Fianna Fáil and Cumann na nGael]. I’m more concerned with trying to hold together the remnants of the 100 per cent revolutionaries, so that there will be someone left to talk – at least – of Lalor⁹⁹ and Connolly.¹⁰⁰

As Fianna Fáil gained momentum, Sinn Féin’s support base dwindled. Frank Edwards¹⁰¹ later reflected on this period of activism, saying “You can’t keep people, potential revolutionaries, going forever on a diet of hustings, commemorations, flags, banners and Bodinstowns.”^{102 103} There were fleeting attempts to launch alternative political vehicles. Chiefly, in a bid to unshackle radical republican activists from their more conservative comrades inside the Sinn Féin party. In February 1931, an IRA Convention authorised the establishment of Saor Éire as a new left-orientated republican political party. A Free State Justice Department report would later call the Saor Éire programme “frankly communistic” and the party was proscribed in October 1931.¹⁰⁴ By 1933, the proposal was resuscitated, and the Republican Congress was founded by left-wing republicans. Unlike Saor Éire, the Congress was not intended to be a political party and instead presented itself as an umbrella-organisation for republicans and anti-imperialists irrespective of party or organisational affiliation. However, in the words of Edwards, the Congress soon suffered “a disastrous split” and swiftly disintegrated.¹⁰⁵ As previously outlined, it would take the outbreak of a long protracted conflict in the north of Ireland, during the second half of the century, to recast Sinn Féin once again as an effective political alternative.



Conclusion

MELLOWS' IDEOLOGICAL positioning was perhaps best encapsulated by a speech he delivered in New York City on St Patrick's Day, 1918. There Mellows stated:

*It is the workers of Ireland who are fighting now, it is the workers who have always fought the battle for freedom, and it is to the people that we propose to give Ireland when she is free. [...] This is the present movement in Ireland. It is not called socialism. It is called many names. Some have called it Sinn Féin, but call it what you will, Ireland wants to continue her old civilisation along the lines of socialism, communism, or co-operation.*¹⁰⁶

Mellows was not a Marxist. Indeed, he was even uncomfortable with the label of 'socialism'. However, what set him apart from others of his generation was his instinctive understanding and ability to read of the dynamics of revolution. As Peadar O'Donnell later summarised, although Mellows' *Notes* consisted of only "the bare bones of a social policy," they nonetheless presented "the glimmerings of a successor to James Connolly was in our midst."¹⁰⁷ This was an observation echoed by Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, who wrote following his execution to the *Irish World*, "He of all men might have taken James Connolly's place – of late especially he had moved along the paths trodden by Connolly."¹⁰⁸ Like Connolly, Mellows recognised that national liberation could not be syphoned off from wider social emancipation. He foresaw that the middle-classes could not be left to lead the independence movement and that the working classes - or the 'men of no property' as Wolfe Tone termed it - had to be front-and-centre of republican struggle.

During the Dáil debates on the Treaty, Mellows warned his colleagues that once the Free State came into existence:

...you will have a permanent government in the country, and permanent governments in any country have a dislike to being turned out, and they will seek to fight their own corner before anything else. Men will get into positions, men will

*hold power, and men who get into positions and hold power will desire to remain undisturbed and will not want to be removed, or will not take a step that will mean removal in case of failure.*¹⁰⁹

Although spoken in January 1922, the words are almost prophetic for what took place in June 2020 following the February election. The two right-wing parties of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael abandoned their pretence of supposed historical animosity and coalesced. They did so solely to keep Sinn Féin away from the levers of power. They did so to hold onto power.

The Irish State remains the product of a counter-revolution. For most of its existence, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have jointly acted as custodians of this counter-revolutionary acquisition. As Regan argues, "The difference between Collins and de Valera in December 1921 was tactical not ideological and extraordinarily subtle for all that."¹¹⁰ Accordingly, it should come as little surprise that the *political heirs* of de Valera and the *political heirs* of Collins were so readily able to reconcile after decades of stage-fighting and shadow-boxing. Both, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, rose out of the bourgeois elements of the independence movement. Neither party was ever truly revolutionary. Neither party was ever socially radical. *Full* national liberation and social transformation had long been parked by both.

The aftermath of the February 2020 election saw the deliberate and concerted exclusion of the collective political-left from power and office by an old-guard, right-wing, political establishment. The fact that the most popular party in the state, Sinn Féin, was precluded from government formation talks demonstrated, in ideological terms at least, that 'civil war politics' was not overcome. It had simply been recast. Despite media commentary and fanfare, the coming together of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael was *not* the final healing of the age-old divide of the revolutionary period. But rather, it represented the latest symptom of the continued subjugation of an unfinished revolution. It was counter-revolution by new means.

As we approach one-hundred years since the execution of Liam Mellows, it is notable that his

political heirs are still considered – to borrow a phrase of his – ‘beyond redemption.’

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2 Who himself attempted, in 1985, to break the political duopoly of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael by establishing his own party: the Progressive Democrats.

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4 Under the terms of the Treaty, the British Army maintained a military presence in three deep water ports within the Free State (Berehaven [Cóbh], Spike Island, and Lough Swilly).

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7 Rafter, K. (2005) *Sinn Féin 1905-2005: In the Shadow of Gunmen*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan p. 81

8 See the 1955 Westminster Election and 1957 Irish General Election.

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