

# 10.

## THE PARAMILITARIES

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### THE REPUBLICANS

To study unalloyed modern Republicanism one has to look intently at its progenitors, the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising. The closest one can approach them is to study the *Capuchin Annual* of 1966 when a Souvenir copy to celebrate the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Rising was issued. This is not an easy thing to do because the Annual of that year is a collectors' item.

These Republicans were a group of cultured intellectuals, and included a university lecturer, two poets and an author of repute. From the beginning of the Rising they were isolated in the General Post Office in O'Connell Street, Dublin. The odds against them militarily were twenty to one although it is most unlikely that they themselves calculated their disadvantage. Their gesture of defiance against Britain, and their attempt to awaken dying nationalism in their own countrymen lasted one week. Then they surrendered to prevent further bloodshed.

What the *Capuchin Annual* does, and it does it with heart-breaking poignancy, is to detail their last hours. There are photostats of their farewell letters to loved ones. The story is also told of their final contacts with their spiritual advisers, the Capuchin fathers. Consider one of their number, spending a last hour with his priest in the cell in Kilmainham jail. Because it was dark, the cell was lighted by a candle. This burned out. He did not complain. His resignation was total.

Soon they all faced an English firing squad. Even so many years afterwards, it makes the heart ache to think of poor James Connolly, one of their number, with his broken leg, being carried out, tied to a chair, and shot in a sitting position.

Setting aside for a moment the claim of some that the sacrifice of their own lives—for that is what it was, was unnecessary, and progress would have occurred without it, one cannot but honour their quixotic idealism.

It is most inappropriate, and very hurtful to the minority community, for Ulster Protestants to denigrate those men—one has in the past read with resentment vituperative comment about them. They would do well to accept that many reasonable people regard the 1916 leaders as heroes.

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After this brief reflection on early modern Republicanism, we can now go on to consider the violence of the 1950s. There were raids on army barracks in England early in the decade, but the stolen guns were recovered. In 1954 successful raids were made at barracks in Armagh and Omagh. In 1956 there were bombings and shootings, mainly on the border with the Republic. Six policemen were killed. These attacks carried on till 1962, but had very little general support. The violence gradually petered out without achieving anything.

In the summer of 1969 when the police and Paisleyites started attacking Catholic districts in earnest, there was no Republican presence in Belfast to come to their aid. It has been said that there were only five or six guns in West Belfast. In December of that year the Goulding socialist type Republicans and the 'physical force' section split into the Official Republicans and the Provisional Republicans. The Provisionals established a political wing called Sinn Féin, administered by Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness and Danny Morrison.

With the Unionist Government obstructing reforms and whole streets being laid waste by the Paisleyites, the 'Provos' gradually became a strong fighting force.

The Social Democratic and Labour Party (the SDLP) and the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association embarked on a programme of civil disobedience. NICRA sponsored 'days of disruption' to try and bring life in the province to a halt by non-violent means. Unlike India under the leadership of Mahatma Ghandi, these efforts were poorly supported. One is forced to conclude that a more violent approach had greater appeal to the Irish temperament.

Republican violence then really got into its stride. Mr Roy Bradford, Minister of Development before Britain was compelled by Unionist intransigence to suspend Stormont, on 28 April 1972 declared on television that 'the Republicans had abolished Stormont'. This was, to a great degree, correct.

Here was another watershed, but the Provisional Republicans did not realise that they should have then changed gear. They ought to have known that with the reforms at last beginning and being worthwhile, killing people would achieve nothing more. The minority had clearly begun to gain equal rights. From then on, the Republicans were fighting only for a United Ireland, which, generally speaking, the world thought should be a majority political decision. The British public has always had a great regard for their Army. The killing of 'our boys' caused furious resentment. Irishmen killing each other drew far less tears. Also there was almost uninterrupted murder of men of the RUC and UDR, members of both groups being as Irish as the Provisionals. Kidnappings and the killing of personages like Lord Mountbatten have resulted in great damage to the tourist industry. The limited resources of the Irish State have been heavily strained by policing requirements along the border with Northern Ireland. None of this tragic loss of life has achieved anything.

Undoubtedly it was a gross injustice to partition Ireland. Nevertheless most unionist-minded people have lived all their lives in a divided Ireland, so to bundle them into an all-Ireland Republic against their will would be further injustice. Killing Irish policemen or UDR soldiers, because they support the status quo, is indefensible. These men and their friends passionately reject a united Ireland, and until they are persuaded otherwise they should not be harmed. As things stand now, bitterness—understandable bitterness—has continued to grow and must last at least a couple of generations even if violence were to cease forthwith.

From 1969, Republican extremism grew worse and worse, financed by robberies of banks and post offices, more frequently in the Republic of Ireland. Another source of money was from well-meaning but extremely deluded Americans locked in a time-warp situation in which their world was the world of 1916. For them, the excesses of the Black and Tans occurred only yesterday. Repeated appeals from both Fianna

Fáil and Coalition Governments to them have fallen on deaf ears.

Supporters of Unionism—even, occasionally, others, by mistake—were mown down. Although a warning was given before civilian targets were bombed, there were errors here too like what happened at the 'La Mon' restaurant, Belfast, where diners were indiscriminately slaughtered. Later the world saw on their television sets ambulance men and police collecting human remains in plastic bags after the bombing of a Belfast omnibus station. The higher echelons of the judiciary were a Republican target. New Catholic members of the judiciary who, thanks to the pressure of civil rights movement had been elevated, were also murdered.

This book could be filled by lists of excesses by the Republicans in the same way as it could be filled by the injustices previously carried out by the Unionists. Unfortunately 'two wrongs do not make a right'.

Not satisfied with the level of violence, a breakaway group, the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) was formed to indulge in more extreme excesses. Its political wing was named the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP). It was Marxist, anti-British and anti-Protestant.

The Irish reputation worldwide was by now taking a severe beating, and people who regarded the Unionists and the British as the evil forces were now turning against the native Irish.

In the 'ghettos', the Republicans took over the administration of 'justice' with kangaroo courts. Knee-capping became a favourite punishment. The *Irish Times* of 20 August 1981 records the case of a teenage boy who arrived in hospital after 'a court' had decided that his arm should be sawn off at the elbow as a punishment for an alleged crime committed against the Nationalist community.

At this time I received a letter from Tom Enright of New York, a Republican sympathiser, who was our indulgent host when Father Faul and I attended the hearings on Northern Ireland at the House of Representatives in Washington. Tom told me how one day he was working in his garage when a driver pinned him between two cars, seriously damaging both his knees. 'Now,' I replied, 'you can appreciate how much I hate knee-capping.' I never heard from Tom again!

There was tarring and feathering of girls who had consorted with British soldiers, and shaving of women's heads. When a mob in West Belfast attacked someone for something they disapproved of, they often used *camáns*, the hurley stick of Ireland's historic game.

Then the depths were plumbed for me, and I am sure for many others previously proud to be Irish, when dozens of Republican prisoners smeared the walls of their cells with their own excrement. This they kept up for weeks on end. Their aim in doing this was to be treated as political prisoners. In this they were unsuccessful. Some of these later went on hunger strike and died for their convictions, which made one realise something of the depth of the tumultuous feelings that motivated them.

### **THE LOYALIST PARAMILITARIES**

It is a most difficult task to disentangle the various Protestant organisations, and their relationships with each other, because, at times, some of them merged. At other times they presented an almost reputable facade, some members finding it useful to belong to the Unionist Party. Diffused through them all is an element of bigotry, violence and, in some cases, even murder. A common sentiment they have shared was a desire to safeguard Protestant privilege, and to apply varying degrees of pressure to squeeze out Catholic residents from predominantly Protestant housing estates. The Rev. Ian Paisley can be discovered moving on the fringe of many of them.

The Ulster Protestant League, formed first in the early thirties 'to safeguard the employment of Protestants', was at that time deeply involved in the sectarian riots of 1935. A policeman, J.W. Nixon, who had been discharged from the force, was an enthusiastic member of the Ulster Protestant League and later became a Stormont MP.

By 1956 the League, reactivated as a result of IRA activity, sheltered some very disreputable characters like E. Lusty who was also a member of the Unionist Party.

Also in the fifties, at a meeting attended by J. McQuade (later an MP at Stormont), C. McCullough (later a Unionist senator), Frank Millar (whose son became secretary of the Unionist Party), B. Spence (brother of Gusto Spence, later

jailed for the Malvern Street murder) and the Rev. Ian Paisley, a new organisation, Ulster Protestant Action, was formed. These people and others organised themselves for an attack should the IRA move against Protestants. They possessed a few guns. They also concentrated on keeping Catholics out of jobs. At a rally sponsored by Ulster Protestant Action in June 1959 the Rev. Ian Paisley spoke to a meeting which ended in the worst riots of that year in Belfast. In 1961 Ulster Protestant Action contested, rather unsuccessfully, seats on Belfast Corporation.

Another organisation was subsequently set up, the Ulster Constitution Defence Committee. It too had the Rev. Paisley as an early member. It grew out of Ulster Protestant Action. One of its members from the beginning was a man called Noel Doherty. Within it, again under the influence of the Rev. Paisley, the Protestant Volunteers was formed. These two organisations developed side by side, the Ulster Constitution Defence Committee, as far as one can make out, dominating. They included in their ranks many members of the B-Specials. They ran counter to the Orange Order which they regarded as too meek and mild. These groups regarded journalists as enemies, the Rev. Paisley describing them as 'the whirring multitudes of pestiferous scribbling rodents'. The two groups were linked when they were involved in a series of explosions which helped to bring down Capt. O'Neill.

Another group, this time within the Orange Order, was the Orange Defence Committee. Its main aim was to stimulate the Order into a more aggressive stance.

The Ulster Loyalist Association was an umbrella group of right-wing Unionist Party members, started by Mr William Craig, MP. It was anti-Paisley. Its meetings sought to prepare Ulster Protestants for a violent outcome of the current troubled situation.

The Ulster Workers' Council was a splinter group of Ulster Protestant Action. Its main success, a very large one, was to organise the Ulster Workers' Strike in 1974, which brought the British Labour Government to its knees, exposing for all to see the lack of courage of Mr Harold Wilson and his Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mr Merlyn Rees. It also succeeded in breaking up the power-sharing executive created at Sunningdale.

The Red Hand Commandos were started by a dubious East Belfast resident, John McKeague, a Free Presbyterian and a homosexual. The group was mainly composed of teenagers. It was involved in bombings and sectarian assassinations in Belfast.

The Shankill Defence Association was another group led by McKeague which was very active in the pogroms in Belfast in 1959.

The Loyal Citizens of Ulster was a small group of mainly UVF and UPV men (Ulster Protestant Volunteers) led by the eccentric Major Ronald Bunting. One of its activities was to harass and attack the Burntollet march of the People's Democracy.

Tara was set up by W. McGrath, who himself believed that the Northern Ireland Protestants were a lost tribe of Israel. McGrath was imprisoned for sexual abuses which occurred at the Kincora Boys' Home, where he was a housefather. He had been involved with Rev. Ian Paisley as far back as the Divis riots in 1964.

The Ulster Freedom Fighters were established in May 1973 and were responsible for a number of sectarian killings. They were said to be an offshoot of the UDA.

The Orange Volunteers were originally associated with Mr William Craig's Vanguard movement, and were active in the Ulster Workers' Strike and probably had ties with the UVF.

By far the most militant and lethal group in Northern Ireland since the troubles began was the Ulster Volunteer Force. The name first appeared to describe a faction providing Sir Edward Carson with his main source of manpower in opposition to the Home Rule Bill in 1922. In as far as one can risk giving such assemblies credit for it, this was an above-board grouping. However it was brought into being again in 1966 by men from the disintegrating Ulster Protestant Action. The leading lights in the formation of the UVF were William and Gusty Spence. The titular head of the group was Gusty, while William, who had previously been election agent for Mr James Kilfedder, MP, Speaker of the new Ulster Assembly, was credited with being the brains of the early movement. Many of their associates had criminal records, and they built up a large file of sectarian assassinations and bombings. Three of their number, two of whom were known to Rev. Ian Paisley,

murdered a harmless young Catholic, Peter Ward, outside a public house in Malvern Street, Belfast. One of the murderers was Gusty Spence who, with the others, received a long jail sentence. After the Malvern Street murder the UVF was outlawed; the embargo was subsequently lifted, only to be re-applied in 1975.

The most horrendous desperadoes of the UVF were known as 'the Shankill Butchers'. Catholics were captured, beaten, clubbed and dispatched by having their throats cut. Police, finding the victims, hardened as they were by what had been happening in Belfast previously, were nauseated. One unfortunate victim, left for dead, survived, and after his recovery was driven around loyalist areas by police. He managed to identify his torturers who were given life sentences when they were brought to court.

The Ulster Defence Association emerged in 1971 as an umbrella organisation encompassing a number of smaller groups. After many false starts, disputes and allegations of the use of protection rackets, they were firmly taken over by A. Tyrre. They held marches in paramilitary garb. Members of the UDA were undoubtedly involved in murder and bombings. That they were never proscribed has been a source of resentment to the Catholic community, because they were by far the largest paramilitary organisation. The UDA played a large part in the successful Ulster Workers' Strike. (For the uninitiated there is another organisation operating in Northern Ireland, the Ulster Defence Regiment. This is a Government sponsored military force, almost entirely Protestant in composition, but under the direct control of the British Army. There are no prohibitions about Catholics joining the UDR. There is a great risk of assassination of its members, especially Catholics, by the Provisional IRA who regard the UDR as a special target. It is noteworthy that several members of the force have been convicted of sectarian murder of Catholics.)

One of the most repulsive and contemptible of paramilitary activities has been their strategy, if it could be dignified thus, of sectarian killings. Both sides have indulged in this but the bulk of it has been by loyalists. Innocent people, mostly working-class, going to their place of work or even after they had arrived, have been shot. In the same way, employers of either religious persuasion, who were working for the security

forces, have suffered in the same way. The vast majority of these people have had no firm political commitment, they were soft targets who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, easily identified and murdered.

In the subculture of the two opposing paramilitary groups it has leaked out that they hold covert meetings to share out areas of influence, and sort out their differences. Both sides are said to operate protection rackets.

There are some distinguishing characteristics between them as to how they run their wars. This is presumably due to the fact that they hold different religious beliefs (or more likely in their youth have had different religious teachings). They also have a different racial origin. In recent times there has been some imitation—Protestants have lately suffered knee-capping.

Where the police in their searches have found home-made machine guns their owners have been virtually all Protestants, demonstrating that community's higher mechanical skills. Meanwhile Republican activists have mastered the intricacies of electronic bomb detonators.

When Protestants bomb a Catholic public house or social club they give no warning. The IRA setting bombs almost always give a warning which in a few cases may be late or garbled.

I was discussing the killing of a Catholic with a Unionist notability in my local area. His concern was not so much for the murdered man as for the foolish boy who had spoilt his life by having to undergo a long prison sentence.

The ten heroic Republican foot soldiers, in what I would describe as their misplaced idealism, fasted to death. Protestant hunger strikers gave up in two or three days when they realised that their aims would not be achieved. This has happened on many occasions, and can now be regarded as the norm.