IRISH HISTORICAL MONOGRAPHS

The Fenian Ideal and Irish Nationalism, 1882–1916

M. J. KELLY

THE FENIAN IDEAL AND IRISH NATIONALISM, 1882–1916

This book analyses Fenian influences on Irish nationalism between the Phoenix Park murders of 1882 and the Easter Rising of 1916. It challenges the convention that Irish separatist politics before the First World War were marginal and irrelevant, showing instead that clear boundaries between home rule and separatist nationalism did not exist. Kelly examines how leading home rule M.P.s argued that Parnellism was Fenianism by other means, and how Fenian politics were influenced by Irish cultural nationalism, which reinforced separatist orthodoxies, serving to clarify the ideological distance between Fenians and home rulers. The book discusses how early Sinn Féin gave voice to these new orthodoxies, and concludes by examining the ideological complexities of the Irish Volunteers, and exploring Irish politics between 1914 and 1916.

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When I was a boy public opinion in Ireland was contemptible. The country was dead. The Fenians breathed the breath of life into it. Fenianism was crushed and the country went to the D. again. And Fenianism though morally changed saved the country again. The country is going to the D. now. Can Fenianism save it again? That is the question we have to face. We are again going the round of the circle.

R. Barry O'Brien to John O'Leary, 31 March 1891

Mr Parnell and his political friends have substituted constitutional agitation for lawless and revolutionary agitation. He has only succeeded in this by persuading his countrymen that his actions will result in success. If he be doomed to failure, the Fenians will once more gain the upper hand in Ireland.

Letter to *The Times* from Henry Labouchere M.P., 26 December 1885

Committees of insurrection sat constantly in the secret societies, and in the offices of the republican journals. We are ignorant of what passed there. They were probably rather engaged in observation than in action. The limited power of a conspirator, who has but scanty numbers at his disposal, only possesses influence as it ministers to a sentiment generally entertained, or a pre-existing passion.

Alphonse de Lamartine, *Histoire de la révolution de 1848*

To my parents

Contents

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Love to all my friends and family, to Granny, Nana and Arfer, Mum and Tom, Dad and Rita, and to my sisters and brother, Hannah, Laura, and Sam. My greatest debt is recorded in the dedication.

M.K.
November 2005

Abbreviations

A.F.I.L.	All-for-Ireland League
A.O.H.	Ancient Order of Hibernians
C.B.S.	Crime Branch Special Papers
C.L.S.	Celtic Literary Society
C.O.	Colonial Office Papers
C.S.O.R.P.	Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers
D.E.T.	*Dublin Evening Telegraph*
D.I.	*Irish Daily Independent*
D.M.P.	Dublin Metropolitan Police
D.P.B.	William O'Brien and Desmond Ryan (eds), *Devoy's Postbag*, (Dublin, 1948), i & ii
D.U.R.	*Dublin University Review*
F.J.	*Freeman's Journal*
G.A.A.	Gaelic Athletic Association
I.F.	*Irish Freedom*
I.H.S.	*Irish Historical Studies*
I.N.A.	Irish National Association
I.N.F.	Irish National Federation
I.N.L.	Irish National League
I.P.P.	Irish parliamentary party
I.R.	*Irish Republic*
I.R.B.	Irish Republican Brotherhood
I.T.C.	Irish Transvaal Committee
I.V.	Irish Volunteers
N.A.	National Archives, Dublin
N.L.I.	National Library of Ireland
P.R.O.	Public Record Office, London
R.I.C.	Royal Irish Constabulary
S.F.	Sinn Féin
S.V.V.	*Shan Van Vocht*
T.N.A. (P.R.O.)	The Public Record Office at the National Archives, Kew
U.I.	*United Irishman*
U.I.L.	United Irish League
W.F.	*Weekly Freeman*
W.I.	[*Irish*] *Weekly Independent*
Y.I.L.	Young Ireland League
Y.I.S.	Young Ireland Society

Introduction

Mr Casey's tears

I

Fenianism was the name, sometimes celebrated sometimes excoriated, given to the Irish revolutionary and republican movement active in Ireland and Britain from the late 1850s through to the First World War. It had sister organisations in the U.S.A. and elsewhere, the most important being the Irish-American Clan na Gael which bankrolled the organisation. Fenianism was organised through the Irish Republican Brotherhood (I.R.B.), under the leadership of the Supreme Council, and hierarchically structured around circles under the direction of a series of county centres. The Supreme Council consisted of a representative of each of the four provinces of Ireland, as well as one each from England, Wales, and Scotland. At various points in its history, provision was made for further nominees to join its highest deliberations. The membership was bound by an oath, committing it to secrecy and a readiness to fight to achieve an Irish republic when so instructed. Fenian orthodoxy demanded that Irish independence be achieved before attempts were made to address other Irish problems because only an independent Irish government could do so legitimately. The I.R.B. was also a secular organisation, strongly opposed to 'priests in politics', believing the clergy's role should be confined to the spiritual realm. The catholic hierarchy in Ireland responded in kind, condemning Fenianism and threatening known members with excommunication. From the mid-1860s Cardinal Cullen sought a papal denunciation of the movement by name, which he got in 1870.

After a decade of organisation, and under increasing pressure from Clan na Gael, the I.R.B. attempted a revolution through insurrection in 1867. As a military exercise it was an abject disaster, but it scored a major publicity coup, renewing the revolutionary tradition in Irish nationalism and creating a new generation of nationalist martyrs (many of whom were exiled as treason-felons under emergency legislation). Sympathy for the Fenians was further generated by the imprisonment of suspects in the aftermath of the rising. This sympathy greatly increased in 1868 following the government's treatment of a group of twelve Fenians who attempted to free a comrade from a prison van in Manchester. The rescue failed, a policeman was mistakenly killed, and three

Fenians were hung. It was the government's most severe response during the crisis period and immediately created the 'Manchester Martyrs'. Nationalist opinion in Ireland was outraged and popular pressure ensured a series of high profile masses were said for the martyrs by Irish catholic bishops. William Ewart Gladstone, the British prime minister from 1868, having already announced that his 'mission was to pacify Ireland', told the house of commons in May 1869 that 'the Fenian conspiracy has been an important influence with respect to Irish policy'.[1] The disestablishment of the church of Ireland in 1869 and the Irish Land Act of 1870, rightly or wrongly, were generally understood in Ireland to have resulted from Fenian pressures.

This interpretation of the succession of events placed the Fenians in a complex ideological position. Although pledged to the achievement of an Irish republic and rejecting any engagement with the British political process, it seemed clear that their actions had generated British attempts to ameliorate the condition of the catholic majority in Ireland. The question now arose regarding how far Irish nationalists could legitimately engage with the British political process in order to influence these and future developments. Isaac Butt, an Irish protestant Tory barrister, was alarmed by Fenianism but also saw an opportunity to build on the rapid politicisation it represented, focusing these energies on more productive methods. He proposed home rule as an alternative to Fenian separatist republicanism, arguing that devolved government within the union would satisfy Irish nationalist dignity while allowing Ireland the benefits of imperial partnership with Britain, the strongest and richest nation in the world. Over the course of the 1870s home rule became popular in Ireland, partly because it was associated with the interests of the Irish catholics, most obviously through demands for further reform of the land system and the state endowment of denominational education. In this way, agrarian activists and catholic nationalists (including the catholic hierarchy) became closely associated with Butt's party and at the 1874 general election sixty nominally home rule M.P.s were returned to Westminster. As home rule became a popular and, structurally, a more democratic movement, Butt's early protestant supporters became alienated and by the mid-1870s this once significant presence had become near irrelevant to its counsels.

The I.R.B.'s responses to these developments were confused. From 1870 it worked closely with Butt through the amnesty movement, campaigning for the release of Fenian prisoners – Butt's presidency of this organisation was possible owing to the tacit approval of the Supreme Council. Prominent Fenians who had avoided exile in the late 1860s became leading home rulers in the early 1870s, establishing a common career pattern that saw an early Fenianism evolve into a later commitment to constitutionalism and home rule; their Fenian links strengthened their nationalist credentials. Indeed, some later home rule M.P.s concocted fallacious Fenian connexions; others were

[1] Quoted in Alvin Jackson, *Ireland 1798–1998* (Oxford, 1999), p. 106.

never quite taken seriously because they lacked the requisite heritage.[2] More immediately, prominent Fenians who aligned with home rule gave the movement an enormous boost in particular regions. Such relationships evolved into a shadowy commitment by the I.R.B. to support Butt's home rule organisation for a fixed period, after which it would revert to orthodox I.R.B. activity. Co-operation formally ended in August 1876 and four members of the Supreme Council, including two M.P.s, were expelled for refusing to obey this injunction. These developments reflected a more serious problem facing the Fenian leadership, which was the weakness of I.R.B. authority: short of expelling large numbers from the organisation, there was little the Supreme Council could do to prevent the rank-and-file from becoming involved in proscribed political activities. This became very clear with the onset of the agrarian crisis of the late 1870s, which culminated in the Land War of 1879–82. Historians have shown how important I.R.B. members were as organisers of the Land League,[3] while Clan na Gael, initially impressed by Charles Stewart Parnell and J. G. Biggar's campaign of parliamentary obstructionism in the late 1870s, soon advocated support for the emergent land agitation and home rule despite its apparent incompatibility with Fenian orthodoxy.

Under these pressures the Supreme Council had became more rather than less dogmatic, but it was clear the I.R.B. could ill afford to distance itself completely from all political movements that attracted mass support but were incompatible with its principles, particularly given the pressure it was coming under from Clan na Gael. Following a series of agonising debates in the Supreme Council initiated by the Clan's leader, John Devoy, the Fenians partially acquiesced in the New Departure. This compact allowed I.R.B. members to agitate on behalf of an independent home rule party and for land reform while retaining the commitment to the achievement of independence through insurrection. There is probably little to be gained from trying to establish the extent to which Parnell's leadership of the home rule party in the 1880s was shaped by the New Departure but it was significant that his famous insistence that 'no man had the right to set the boundary to the march of the nation' was consistent with its provisions. Above all, the New Departure meant that those Fenians who thought about these things felt able to engage in political activities that did not explicitly repudiate Fenianism's ultimate objectives. This important development helped shape the relationship between the home rule movement and Fenianism during the period covered by this book.

[2] James McConnel, '"The Fenians at Westminster": The Irish Parliamentary Party and the Legacy of the New Departure' in *Irish Historical Studies* (*I.H.S.*), xxxiv, no. 133 (2004), pp 41–64.

[3] Donald Jordan, *Land and Popular Politics in Ireland* (Cambridge, 1994) contains many references, especially pp 223–7; Paul Bew, *Land and the National Question in Ireland, 1858–82* (Dublin, 1978), pp 91, 110–11, 132–4.

II

Owing to the seditious content of the Fenian newspaper *The Irish People*, its editor John O'Leary was convicted of treason-felony in 1866 and exiled for nearly twenty years. Thirty years later O'Leary wrote a diffident and evasive memoir of Fenianism in which he meditated on the relationship between the origins of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and Irish nationalism in general: 'The Fenian spirit is ever present in Ireland and needs at any time but a little organisation to make it burst into renewed activity.'[4] By associating Fenianism with the timeless Irish nation rather than the specifics of the I.R.B., O'Leary gave classic expression to the notion of Fenianism as the embodiment of a fundamental and irreducible Irish nationality. As Mark Ryan (the dominant figure in London Fenian circles) argued in response to the ascendancy of the home rule demand, 'for the time being the Voice of Fenianism – the real Voice of Irish Nationalism – was drowned, as it had been before, and since, in the welter of party politics.'[5] The Fenian distinction between nationalism and politics is one that will recur throughout this book, but it will be undermined by an account that suggests that the development of Irish separatism in this period can only be understood as part of wider political, social, and cultural changes. A more emblematic starting point, therefore, comes not from a man associated with the orthodoxies of Fenianism, but from the Irish Republican Brotherhood's greatest apostate. Analysing the progress of Irish nationalism and the transformation in Irish social relations that brought about the 'fall of feudalism in Ireland', Michael Davitt, the founder of the Land League, wrote:

> There has always been an erroneous impression in English and often in some Irish minds as to the actual extent to which the total separation sentiment prevailed among Irishmen. The numerical strength of the strongest revolutionary organisation by no means measured the strength of the feeling for complete independence. Millions of Irishmen were and are separatists in conviction and aspiration who would on no account become members of a secret society – nationalists who could see a perfectly consistent course in supporting a strong moral-force policy like Mr Parnell's where the immediate object might be some subordinate issue or question.[6]

This extract points to one of the issues with which this book is concerned, namely the extent to which Irish nationalists were separatist between the Kilmainham treaty of 1882, which ended the Land War, and the 1916 Rising. The period begins with Parnell's repudiation of the insurgency of the Land War and the beginning of the long period when constitutionalism dominated Irish political debate and agitation. This phase ends with the Ulster crisis, the

[4] John O'Leary, *Recollections of Fenians and Fenianism* (London, 1896), p. 10.
[5] Mark Ryan, *Fenian Memories* (Dublin, 1945), p. 134.
[6] Michael Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland* (London, 1904), pp 119–20.

consequent undermining of constitutionalism, and the 1916 Rising. Shortly afterwards Irish politics was transformed, Irish nationalist demands intensified, Sinn Féin overwhelmingly won the 1918 general election, and a number of activists embarked on a guerrilla war intended to drive the British authorities from Ireland. This book examines some of the pre-conditions of this process. Although recognising that the events stimulating these developments were facilitated by the short-term pressures and opportunities afforded by the Great War, it will argue that the causes of this transformation can only be understood over the longer term; not that the Irish revolution would have occurred without the intervention of the war, but that the war generated a different crisis from the one which was previously developing as a result of the third home rule bill and the concomitant likelihood of some form of partition. In both processes separatists played prominent roles, moulding the political agenda to suit their ideological aspirations.

Davitt's observation that many separatists were not inclined to join secret societies is significant, for Irish separatism cannot be properly understood if the Irish Republican Brotherhood is considered the exclusive repository of separatist sentiment. Assuming that separatist sentiment was insignificant because the I.R.B. was organisationally weak is historically simplistic. Instead, it is useful to think about the tension between occurrent and dispositional attitudes. Many Irish nationalists inclined towards separatism, but supported home rule and a broadly constitutional approach for strongly pragmatic reasons. So complex were these sentiments that it is not absurd to believe Roger Casement's contention that John Redmond, leader of the home rule party after 1900, said privately to him on 8 May 1914: 'Well, Sir Roger, I don't mind you getting an Irish Republic if you can.'[7] Some held back from separatist activity because they were repelled by secret societies and their disreputable associations; others bowed to the authority of the proscribing authorities, especially the catholic church. As Frank Henderson recalled,

> Even though I had decided to take part in the Rising which I knew was to happen later and even though I did not know how such a Rising could be effective without some system such as the I.R.B., I could not reconcile the two viewpoints – the aim of the Brotherhood and the prohibition of the Church.
>
> Therefore when the Irish Volunteers were founded, the mental agony over this question which had disturbed me disappeared.[8]

Long before the Irish Volunteers were established in late 1913 a wide range of literary and cultural nationalist organisations provided an adjacent forum

[7] Undated manuscript by Roger Casement, 'Professor MacNeill's Connection With Me', Casement Papers (N.L.I., MS 36203/1).

[8] Statement to the Irish Bureau of Military History quoted in Michael Hopkinson (ed.), *Frank Henderson's Easter Rising: Recollections of a Dublin Volunteer* (Cork, 1998), p. 26.

to the I.R.B. for advanced nationalist activity. Notable were the Young Ireland Societies of the 1880s and the various circles associated with Arthur Griffith and William Rooney in the 1890s and 1900s. The cultural separatism of these groups formed part of a national debate that equally involved constitutional and separatist nationalists. More generally, however, the I.R.B. itself remained an important element in the texture of Irish society and politics. Fergus Campbell has drawn attention to their role as agrarian agitators in County Galway,[9] while, as suggested, the progress of the home rule party can be further illuminated by considering its interactions with the I.R.B. Although Parnell's catering to Fenian interests went into a minor key between the 'Kilmainham treaty' that ended the Land War in 1882 and the party split of December 1890, home rule politicians still tried to secure their separatist rivals as collaborators, protecting the ideological interests of advanced nationalism for strategic and ideological reasons. Other M.P.s felt the advantage of distancing themselves from the Fenian tradition. Redmond's failure to hold together a strong coalition of nationalist support during the protracted home rule crisis of 1912–18 partly stemmed from the growing ideological divergence between separatists and constitutionalists after the home rule party's reunification in 1900. Redmond's intensified imperial conception of home rule was paralleled with the development of a separatism strongly predicated on anti-imperialist ideas. Parnellism's notorious ambiguity had made home rule less vulnerable to radical, separatist critiques; Redmond's advocacy of imperial home rule left his ideological flanks exposed.[10]

A taxonomy of Irish nationalists out of sympathy with the Irish parliamentary party, however, is difficult to construct owing to the variety of political tendencies at work and the heavy reliance historians must place on police reports. Activists might be tagged as Fenians, I.R.B. men, 'suspects', 'advanced nationalists', 'physical force nationalists', 'Sinn Féiners', 'separatists', 'cultural separatists', or 'republicans'. To be fingered as an I.R.B. man in the police files suggests a precise act of political identification, to be labelled a Fenian was much more ambiguous. Despite such connotations, these appellations were often used interchangeably, although the latter three were rarely used by contemporaries. Labelling could also be deliberately misrepresentative. When reporting the general election results of 1895, the *Irish Times* provided an implicit political commentary by dividing the results between

[9] Fergus J. M. Campbell, 'Land and Politics in Connacht, 1898–1909' (University of Bristol, Ph.D., 1996), pp 222–262 and *idem*, 'The Social Dynamics of Nationalist Politics in the West of Ireland 1898–1918' in *Past and Present*, 182 (Feb. 2004), pp 175–211.

[10] For example, to the consternation of both separatists and constitutionalists Redmond reportedly described home rule to U.S. audiences in 1910 as a means to create a relationship between London and Ireland comparable to that between the federal and state authorities in the U.S. On his return to Ireland he denied making these statements and his fellow home rulers were keen to believe him. See Michael Wheatley, 'John Redmond and Federalism in 1910' in *I.H.S.*, xxxii, no. 127 (May 2001), pp 343–64.

Unionists (Conservatives and Liberal Unionists) and Separatists (Liberals, Parnellites, and Anti-Parnellites).[11] In general, however, 'advanced nationalist' provides a useful umbrella term for activists whose aspirations were more radical than the official aims of the Irish parliamentary party, and although the phrase suggests teleological assumptions, it is more satisfactory than the politically loaded 'extremist', which implies sympathy for political violence. For just an advanced nationalist need not be wholly separatist and/or republican, she could equally be wholly committed to peaceful means. Political affiliations in this period were riddled with such complexities, the most important stemming from the ambiguous status of agrarian agitations directed by organisations aligned with constitutional nationalism. As the great Indian nationalist Gopal Krishna Gokhale observed of his nationalist compatriots: 'There is at times a great deal of moderation among some of those who are called Extremists and, on the other hand, there is no small amount of what is the reverse of moderation among some who are called Moderates.'[12]

It is perhaps unnecessary to point out that all discussion of nationalist strategy was shaped by the central problem of how Ireland's nationhood could be restored; embedded in such arguments were more complex questions regarding the moral legitimacy of any approach. No political strategy was exempted from such assessment because it was understood that the end, Irish nationhood, would in some sense embody the means by which it was achieved. Indeed, the most violent advocate of dynamite 'outrages', Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, came up with a moral justification for the possible murder of civilians.[13]

A further complication raised by the phrase 'advanced nationalist' is that it suggests an a priori spectrum of correspondences between the possible constitutional settlements for Ireland and the extent to which an Irish nation would be achieved. Something of the confusion such questions raised was evident during the 1886 home rule parliamentary debates. Opinion divided on whether an Irish nation already existed, or whether the passage of the bill would create one. There was not a shared sense of the possible distinction between a nation and a nation-state. In this book, the use or not of the description 'advanced' does not imply a moral judgement regarding the extent to which the recipient was a nationalist; it is not intended to imply that some nationalists were more nationalist than others. For while many Fenians would have applauded such assumptions, developments in Irish cultural nationalism had greatly complicated the possible means by which nationalists might adduce their commitment. By some reckonings, for example, home rulers active in the Gaelic League and absorbed in the peasant culture of the west of Ireland might be considered more attuned to their Irishness than the I.R.B. man preoccupied by the politics of the Dublin corporation.

[11] *Irish Times*, 16 July 1895.
[12] G. A. Natesan (ed.), *Speeches of Gopal Krishna Gokhale* (Madras, 1920), p. 305.
[13] Seán McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners, 1848–1922: Theatres of War* (London, 2003), pp 338–9.

A further issue is raised by how recent histories of the Irish revolution have reinvigorated class-based analyses of that revolution. For instance, work by Senia Pašeta and Patrick Maume has done much to illuminate the sensibilities of the catholic middle class between Parnell and Pearse. Both writers argue strongly for the marginality of Irish separatism and, in particular, republicanism before 1916.[14] A more advanced nationalist *mentalité*, it will be argued, could be found in working-class political and social associations, a tendency reinforced by the marginality of working-class socio-economic interests to the home rule movement. It is important to be conscious of this political strata when considering Tom Garvin's account of the revolutionary elite as constituted of the 'men in the middle'. Garvin's marginal yet educated petit-bourgeoisie, positioned between the men of the labourers' organisations and Pašeta's university-educated putative civil servants, found in advanced nationalism an answer to their social and vocational frustrations.[15] Like R. V. Comerford's Fenians of the 1860s and '70s, these were (mainly) men 'trying to find a more significant place for themselves in the world'.[16]

Although the explanatory force of Comerford's mode of socio-economic analysis is made evident in his work – 1867 can be portrayed as a (failed) revolution of rising expectations – Irish separatists are generally approached in this book through what might be considered an ironic empathy rather than a detached scepticism. While acknowledging subconscious causal motivations, it seems useful to pursue an analysis rooted in how the separatists saw themselves and justified their actions.[17] Such an approach makes sense if Irish politics in this period are thought about in terms of the problem of legitimate authority. All collective actions of historical or political significance are sanctioned by some kind of authority, political or ideological, and among the primary tasks of the historian is the analysis of such authority, how it is achieved, sustained, and exercised. Historians of the modern period are chiefly concerned with the nature and legitimacy of state authority. Indissolubly linked to such study is the analysis of collective action that is not sanctioned by the state authority. In Ireland the authority of the British state was in

[14] Patrick Maume, *The Long Gestation: Irish Nationalist Life 1891–1918* (Dublin, 1999); Senia Pašeta, *Before the Revolution: Nationalism, Social Change and Ireland's Catholic Elite, 1879–1922* (Cork, 1999).

[15] Tom Garvin, *Nationalist Revolutionaries in Ireland, 1858–1928* (Oxford, 1987), and *idem*, 'Great Hatred, Little Room: Social Background and Political Sentiment Among Revolutionary Activists in Ireland, 1890–1922' in D. G. Boyce (ed.), *The Revolution in Ireland, 1879–1923* (London, 1988), pp 91–114.

[16] R. V. Comerford, *The Fenians in Context: Irish Politics and Society 1848–82* (Dublin, 1985, 1998), p. 249.

[17] To gauge how unhelpful overt hostility to the I.R.B. can be when actually trying to understand advanced nationalism see John O'Beirne Ranelagh, 'The Irish Republican Brotherhood in the Revolutionary Period, 1879–1923' in Boyce, *Revolution in Ireland*, pp 137–56.

permanent crisis, generating a relationship between the British government and Irish nationalists that L. P. Curtis has styled as torn between coercion and conciliation and Paul Bew conflict and conciliation.[18] Suppression of nationalist insurgency – in this period primarily agrarian – combined with legislative attempts to redress Irish grievances, usually in the face of powerfully entrenched interests. Great steps were taken, such as the succession of land acts after 1870 and the democratisation of local government in 1898. Home rule formed part of this evolving agenda because it was conceived by Gladstonian liberals as the means to render the state authority legitimate in order to secure the union. As an 1887 pamphlet by the Parnellite M.P. T. P. Gill demonstrated, even avowed home rulers were left uneasy by Gladstone's adoption of their demands:

> It is a strange, and one may be allowed to say a somewhat humiliating thing for all parties, that Ireland today, in pleading with England for home rule, should have need to assure her that home rule is not only a safe and vitally necessary policy for Ireland, but equally safe and equally necessary for the integrity of the British empire.[19]

This was a remarkable admission. To admit that it was 'humiliating' for Irish nationalists to 'plead' that home rule was good for the union and the empire served to emphasise the extent of the compromise over earlier Irish nationalist ideals that home rule represented. Moreover, as the 1886 home rule parliamentary debates demonstrated, rebellious home rule M.P.s were transformed by Gladstone's conversion into loyalists. Anti-home rulers quoted earlier speeches by Irish nationalist M.P.s which had stated that only complete separation could ultimately satisfy the Irish nation. Sometimes nationalist M.P.s responded by denying they had been quoted accurately, but in more honest responses they argued that Gladstone's conversion had transfigured Anglo-Irish relations, ending a centuries-long conflict. These highly emotional exchanges, in which home rulers literally avowed their love for the prime minister, were extraordinarily theatrical and moving moments of reconciliation. Ending a period of tentative courtship, this love blossomed into the 'union of hearts'. The pre-nuptial settlement demanded that home rulers provisionally acknowledge British state authority.

Observing from the wings, many nationalists were troubled by this rapprochement, especially adherents of Wolfe Tone's unambiguous republican

[18] L. P. Curtis, *Coercion and Conciliation in Ireland, 1800–1892: A Study in Conservative Unionism* (Princeton, 1963); Paul Bew, *Conflict and Conciliation in Ireland, 1890–1910: Parnellites and Radical Agrarians* (Oxford, 1987); also on this theme Andrew Gailey, *Ireland and the Death of Kindness: The Experience of Constructive Unionism 1890–1905* (Cork, 1987).
[19] T. P. Gill, 'The Home Rule Constitutions of the British Empire' in *The Irish Question*, no. 14 (London, 1887), p. 3.

separatism. For although the famous third clause of the 1873 I.R.B. constitution permitted support for 'every movement calculated to advance the cause of Irish independence', it emphasised that any such movement must be consistent 'with the preservation of its [the I.R.B.'s] own integrity'.[20] Advanced nationalists increasingly questioned whether the constitutionalist argument that home rule was Fenianism by other means could be justified. The New Departure needed continual reaffirmation, which, as this book seeks to demonstrate, became ever more difficult.

As suggested, denying the legitimacy of British state authority was fundamental to the Fenian ideal. Consequently any form of political engagement with this authority had to be approached with great caution. As Joseph Chamberlain's famously over-blown description of the Irish government suggested, to live by these standards was very difficult:

> I do not believe that the great majority of Englishmen have the slightest conception of the systems under which this free nation attempts to rule a sister country. It is a system which is founded on the bayonets of 20,000 soldiers encamped permanently as in a hostile country. It is a system as completely centralised and bureaucratic as that with which Russia governs Poland, or as that which was common in Venice under Austrian rule. An Irishman at this moment cannot move a step, he cannot lift a finger, in any parochial, municipal, or educational work, without being confronted, interfered with, controlled by, an English official appointed by a foreign government, and without a shadow or shade of representative authority.[21]

Cultural nationalism provided separatists with a source of authority with which to contest this Foucaldian nightmare. By studying Irish history, literature, and the Gaelic language, and mingling this with the advocacy of economic ideas predicated on the ideal of Irish self-reliance, essentialist ideas of the Irish nation emerged that were by definition irreconcilable with British state authority. This revealed the disjunction between nation and state that characterised Ireland's existential status, a disjunction which home rule promised to sustain. Comprehending the status quo in this way configured the Irish nation as an alternative and unimpeachable source of authority that legitimised the actions of advanced nationalist initiates. This was the Fenian ideal. Tracing the evolution of this authority is one of the major purposes of this book. And although it is clear that the conclusions cultural nationalists reached were massaged by pre-existing sensibilities, an alertness to this should not obscure cultural nationalism's capacity for winning converts. Nor should sight be lost of how a sustained engagement with such ideas could intensify commitment:

[20] Quoted in Charles Townshend, *Political Violence in Ireland: Government and Resistance since 1848* (Oxford, 1983), p. 239.
[21] Quoted in John J. Clancy, 'The "Castle" System' in *The Irish Question*, no. 5 (London, 1886), p. 3.

as with all political convictions, emotional and intellectual passions combined. On the other hand, it is crucial that neither separatist evangelical zeal nor future political developments obscure the extent to which cultural nationalism was not exclusively tied to a separatist trajectory. Many nationalists were convinced that home rule was sufficiently compatible with this exalted version of Irish nationhood to be acceptable, just as a significant proportion of unionists embraced a version of Irish Ireland. In some cases, for example, the imperial-federation ideal of inter-dependent but culturally distinct nations was projected as an alternative political framework. Importantly, in these cases an Irish polity's legitimacy still stemmed from its compatibility with 'the nation'.

Through an analysis of the evolution of advanced nationalist versions of this *mentalité*, the lines of continuity with the post-1916 political transformation should become clearer. Although aiming to clarify the activities and significance of Irish separatists in this period, this book further complicates the overall anatomy of Irish nationalism. And by attending to the difficulties Irish separatists faced in maintaining their appeal while distinguishing themselves from constitutional nationalists, this account seeks to avoid reasserting the old binary distinction between separatist and constitutionalist. Advanced nationalism is examined as part of the texture of Irish society. It was neither the antiquated legacy of mid-Victorian Fenianism nor simply the descendant of urban/rural traditions of hostility to established authority. Instead, an ideologically sophisticated and strategically determined separatist vanguard emerged, and the analysis which follows to some extent affirms P. S. O'Hegarty's account of a small group of determined I.R.B. members sustaining separatist aspirations.[22] However, Irish separatism was a more complex and popular political and cultural presence in Irish nationalist society than it has appeared in previous accounts. This phenomenon can be best understood through a broadly chronological analysis of advanced nationalism in its strategic and contingent aspects, rather than through a simple chronicle of heroism (or 'terrorism').

III

With the other 'fellows' James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus was driven from Clongowes to Dublin, home for Christmas in 1891.[23] It was a lively, festive journey. The boys cheered and were cheered; greeted by the 'peasants' that lived on the roadside, they greeted them in their turn. All was suffused by the 'lovely smell' of 'rain and wintry air and turf smouldering and corduroy'. But this comforting return to the safety of family, so economically evoked, was not without political significance. 'The drivers pointed with their whips to

[22] P. S. O'Hegarty, *The Victory of Sinn Féin* (Dublin, 1924), pp 13–14.
[23] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Oxford, 2000), pp 16–33.

Bodenstown. They cheered.' To this day, Irish republicans gather at Bodenstown churchyard in November to stand by Wolfe Tone's grave and remember Ireland's 'republican' dead. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this day became known as Decoration Day, because the graves of United Irishmen, Young Irelanders, and Fenians were decorated with flowers. At Bodenstown itself, pieces of ivy were taken from the churchyard wall and kept as mementoes or good luck charms. As Joyce knew,[24] ivy was also worn as a memorial to Parnell, a symbolic blurring of the line between separatist and home ruler. The famous row during the Dedalus Christmas dinner that forms part of the opening of *Portrait* sustains the theme. Mr Casey and Simon Dedalus take Parnell's side against the clericalist Dante ('The bishops and the priests of Ireland have spoken, said Dante, and they must be obeyed'). Ostensibly, the dispute was over whether Parnell should have remained leader of the home rule party after he was named in Captain O'Shea's divorce proceedings. Things soon descended into a furious row concerning the role of the catholic church in Irish politics. Dante's defence of the authority of the catholic church against 'renegade catholics' saw Mr Casey and Simon push the classic Fenian line on the need to separate the spiritual and the political spheres. 'We go to the house of God, Mr Casey said, in all humility to pray to our Maker and not to hear election addresses.' Stephen is puzzled. Like his father, he is 'for Ireland and Parnell', but so must be Dante for she once hit a man on the head with her umbrella when he took his hat off when the band played *God Save the Queen*. Ever more provoked, Mr Casey and Dante abandon any pretence that they are having a reasonable discussion. Banging the table with his fist, Mr Casey gets to his feet:

> Didn't the bishops of Ireland betray us in the time of the union when bishop Lanigan presented an address of loyalty to the Marquess Cornwallis? Didn't the bishops and priests sell the aspirations of their country in 1829 in return for catholic emancipation? Didn't they denounce the Fenian movement from the pulpit and in the confession box? And didn't they dishonour the ashes of Terence Bellew MacManus?

In this brief outburst Mr Casey provides in skeleton outline a Fenian interpretation of modern Irish history. Every time Fenian sentiment became strong the catholic church used its spiritual authority to undermine it. The church supported the act of union following the United Irishmen rebellion, it fooled Irish nationalists into believing that catholic emancipation somehow answered their wider aspirations, it failed to get behind the I.R.B., and when the remains of the Young Irelander MacManus were returned from the United States to Dublin for burial in 1861, Paul Cullen, the archbishop

[24] James Joyce, 'Ivy Day in the Committee Room' in *Dubliners* (Harmondsworth, 1968), pp 116–33.

of Dublin, refused to say the funeral mass. This task was left to the renegade Fenian priest Father Patrick Lavelle. Although there is no simple identification to be made between the author and Stephen, it is clear where Joyce's sympathies lay. He ruthlessly skewers the anti-Parnellites for their sectarianism by having Stephen recall that Dante forbade him from playing with Eileen, a protestant girl. Mr Casey's outburst thrills Stephen and provokes Dante into leaving the house, raging 'Devil out of hell! We won! We crushed him to death! Fiend!'

Joyce was writing in the 1900s, looking back on his childhood and youth. For his father's generation, Irish history could be made sense of as a conflict between Britain (or, more likely, England), the catholic church, and a Fenianism which was understood in the general sense suggested by O'Leary and Ryan. There is much to be said for this reading, for one of the most important themes in nineteenth-century Irish history is the strengthening of the catholic church, both institutionally and as spiritual guardian to the majority of the Irish population. Part of this achievement stemmed from the hierarchy's capacity to convince a succession of British governments that a strong catholic church in Ireland was not a threat to the stability of the union. By the end of the century the church had, broadly speaking, achieved its aims and its anti-Parnellism was consistent with this overall trend. But for Joyce's generation things were rather more complicated. Whereas the catholic church, renegade priests aside, had opposed Fenianism, the home rule party's relationship with the separatists was rather more ambiguous. It was not that the catholic church's authority had been supplanted by the home rule party but that the effectiveness of the home rule–agrarian dynamic had left these other political forces trailing in its wake. Both the Fenians and the catholic hierarchy had to come to terms with the popular appeal of a political movement that was not so much opposed to the Fenian or catholic interests but had successfully redefined the most pressing questions in Irish politics. Much of what follows focuses on how advanced nationalists responded to this, attempting in turn to redefine the issues in line with evolving conceptions of the Fenian ideal.

The greatest shock in Joyce's scene is left for the end. Mr Casey sobs 'Poor Parnell! . . . My dead king!' and 'Stephen, raising his terrorstricken face, saw that his father's eyes were full of tears.' This moment of paternal fragility becomes ever more significant as the novel progresses. More pertinently, Mr Casey's 'sob of pain' recalls the visit made by the elderly James Stephens, the first I.R.B. president, to Parnell's grave where he too 'sobbed'.[25] These famous scenes, one fictional, the other true, reflected something of the ambiguous Fenian passions that animated the Dublin milieu Joyce knew as the child of lower middle-class catholics, and his works are filled with Fenian motifs, references, and commentary. Not one to stand dumb when confronted with Fenian xenophobia (most memorably in the 'Cyclops' episode of *Ulysses*), Joyce

[25] See above, p. 61.

nonetheless understood the highly emotional tribalism of Fenianism. For Fenianism met the authoritarianism of catholic and British Ireland with a credo of political liberation that had a strongly individualist bent. It was symptomatic of an adult need to defy inadequate authorities, be they British, Irish, or Roman. Mr Casey's rhetoric had carried him along, empowered by his certainty and the vigour of the argument; Dante's vicious triumphalism confronted Mr Casey with Irish realities, provoking tears of grief and a childlike frustration.

1

Dublin Fenianism in the 1880s

'The Irish culture of the future'?

I

Historians have largely neglected the activities of the Irish Republican Brotherhood in the 1880s, tending to focus on the two great flash-points of 1867 and 1916. R. V. Comerford, when concluding his brilliantly iconoclastic *The Fenians in Context*, dismissed Dublin Fenianism in 1882, claiming it had 'deteriorated into a miscellany of purposeless gangs'.[1] John Newsinger's critique of Comerford offers a cursory and Marxisant reading of Fenianism in the years following the excitement of 1867.[2] Even P. S. O'Hegarty, ever the advocate of the centrality of the I.R.B. in pre-1922 Irish politics, was muted on the subject of the 1880s. Writing in 1952, O'Hegarty argued that 'Parnell had crowded the I.R.B. out of public life, and out of the public mind, but it was there, underground, all the time, small in numbers, very often divided, without effective leadership, and without any current policy save that of keeping the separatist spirit alive and maintaining the framework of a separatist organisation.'[3] Against the ascendancy of Charles Stewart Parnell, a disciplined and highly organised home rule party, and the land war, the military stratagem of the Fenians appeared outmoded and irrelevant, consigned to the melancholic bar-room reminiscences of the increasingly aged men of '67.

Yet something more penetrating than merely political marginalisation had afflicted the Fenians. A number of violent and dramatic departures from the Fenian orthodoxy of Kickham, O'Leary, and Stephens seemed to have debased the creed. Desmond Ryan, the most eloquent of the post-1916 Fenian writers, encapsulated this redundancy with disarming logic, in a phrasing packed with resonance and implication. 'All the Invincibles had been Fenians. Fenianism was in decay.'[4]

[1] R. V. Comerford, *The Fenians in Context* (Dublin, 1985), p. 243.
[2] John Newsinger, *Fenianism in Mid-Victorian Britain* (London, 1994). See *Saothar*, xvii (1992), pp 46–56, for an antagonistic discussion between Newsinger and Comerford.
[3] P. S. O'Hegarty, *A History of Ireland under the Union* (London, 1952), p. 633.
[4] Desmond Ryan, *The Phoenix Flame* (London, 1937), p. 272.

As Parnell returned to London following his release from Kilmainham gaol, the brutal murder of the newly installed chief secretary Lord Frederick Cavendish and the under-secretary T. H. Burke by the Invincibles in Phoenix Park on 6 May 1882 shook political opinion throughout Britain and Ireland.[5] Parnell had to be dissuaded by Gladstone from resigning the leadership of the home rule party in response,[6] an action contrasting starkly with his notorious defence in parliament of the so-called Manchester Martyrs in 1878.[7] The Fenian paper *The Irishman* associated the crime with the 'soiling slough of Russian Nihilism', arguing that Ireland's proper response was '[a]nguish but not despair, for the crime is not Ireland's'.[8] It was 'not Ireland's' for the crime did not fit into a paradigm of Fenian revolution. A letter purportedly from the Leinster I.R.B. executive condemned the Invincibles for 'crime and outrages . . . as foreign to our organisation as is the enemy to our soil'; the Invincibles had 'set at naught the authority of the Supreme Council'.[9] In departing from the Fenian ideal, the assassins had forfeited their claim to the sympathies of the advanced vanguard, exculpating Fenianism of any responsibility for the stabbings. Nonetheless, in confluence with the associated dynamite campaign against political sites in England financed from America and inspired by O'Donovan Rossa,[10] Fenianismin – addition to proving politically inefficacious – had fallen into disrepute.

In response, during the 1880s elements within Fenianism underwent a process of reinvention, with the factionalism identified by Comerford superseded by a fresh cleavage of much greater long-term significance. A second generation of Fenians, qualitatively distinct from their fathers and uncles, responded to the ascendancy of constitutional nationalism by developing within Fenianism a fresh separatist dynamic based on the nurture of a distinctly Irish culture. John O'Leary was its charismatic centre. The major but not the only vehicle for this autodidacticism were the Young Ireland Societies. Originating in Dublin in 1881, but soon scattered throughout Ireland, England, and Scotland, they were arguably the organisational crucible of the literary revival and the cultural nationalism of the *fin de siècle*.[11] History, education,

[5] See Tom Corfe, *The Phoenix Park Murders* (London, 1968). Also, the ludicrously self-aggrandising P. J. P. Tynan, *The Irish National Invincibles and their Times* (London, 1894).

[6] F. S. L. Lyons, *Charles Stewart Parnell* (London, 1978), p. 209.

[7] Ibid., p. 54.

[8] *Irishman*, 13 May 1882, also 21 Apr. 1883, and 15 Mar. 1884 for Glasgow Y.I.S. view that in Russia people were 'goaded into Nihilism by the cruel acts of tyrants and despots'.

[9] T.N.A. (P.R.O), C.O. 904 10/200–4, 'Investigations regarding secret societies and individuals 1882–1884'. See bibliography for details of police reports.

[10] See K. R. M. Short, *The Dynamite War* (Dublin, 1979), and numerous references to Rossa in Terry Golway, *Irish Rebel: John Devoy and America's Fight for Ireland's Freedom* (New York, 1998).

[11] On the Scottish dimension see Máirtín ó Catháin, 'Fenian Dynamite: Dissident Irish Republicans in Late Nineteenth-century Scotland' in Oonagh Walsh (ed.), *Ireland Abroad: Politics and Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (Dublin, 2003), pp 164–5.

and commemoration became touchstones for the Y.I.S., prompting W. B. Yeats to write in 1891, before the full influence of the distorting lens of Parnell's death was felt:

> These new folk, limited though they be, are conscious. They have ideas. They understand the purpose of letters in the world. They may yet formulate the Irish culture of the future. To help them, is much obscure feeling for literature diffused throughout the country. The clerks, farmers' sons, and the like, that make the 'Young Ireland' Societies and kindred associations, showed an alertness to honour the words 'poet', 'writer', 'orator', not commonly found among their class.[12]

In this chapter an examination of traditional Dublin Fenianism in the 1880s, illustrating its paralysis, will provide a context and contrast for the activities of the Young Ireland Society, where Fenianism could be found at its most dynamic. Implicit to the approach taken is the sense that Parnellism, rather than achieving political hegemony after the Kilmainham Treaty, functioned in an atmosphere of uneasy compromise. This was heightened by the lack of formal barriers between advanced and constitutional nationalism. For Parnellite M.P.s, especially those with latent Fenian sympathies like William O'Brien, the public meetings of the Young Ireland Societies provided substantial Dublin and provincial forums. This interaction established a pattern that, in various forms, survived the length of the home rule party's existence: party patronage was provisionally extended to, and provisionally accepted by, organisations nominally hostile to constitutionalism. Rather than merely a glamorous accessory to Parnellism, Fenianism was integral to its articulation; clarification of Parnell's famed ambiguity, and Irish constitutional nationalism more generally, can be found by examining its rhetorical and organisational relationship with the separatists. Parnell's rhetorical strategy during the split, and, in particular, his request that constitutionalism be given one more chance to work, was continuous with the interactions between home rulers and the Young Ireland Societies in the 1880s.

II

Evidence for the day-to-day activity of the I.R.B. is sparse and rather anecdotal; little systematic intelligence was commissioned by the government. The Land War and home rule had diverted resources and attention away from Fenianism, with the organisation reported upon only when the authorities saw fit. But Dynamitard activity and the Invincible shock galvanised the home office into action and, notwithstanding departmental turf wars over the control of

[12] W. B. Yeats, *Representative Irish Tales* (Gerrards Cross, 1891, 1991), p. 32.

information, the government became better informed.[13] In Dublin, the metropolitan police gave Superintendent William Reddy a special responsibility to keep tabs on the movements and activities of the leading Fenians of the city. This was a task fraught with dead-ends and futile investigations, with numerous extant police reports containing little more information than the routes taken by suspects between their homes and various pubs and hotels. They were reliant on paid informers, who were notoriously unreliable, melodramatic, and expensive.[14] For example, 'Andrew' claimed in 1886 that Sullivan – discussed later in this chapter – had a well-organised band of 900 men and 150 revolvers. It is difficult to credit numbers of this magnitude, and such reports must be approached with the same slightly weary scepticism Reddy extended to them. Moreover, 'Andrew' claimed Sullivan would have no trouble getting money from the U.S. to commit outrages: 'If Sullivan says the thing must be done it must be done.'[15] Letters alleging the reorganisation of the Invincibles and the imminent assassination of members of the government – most especially Balfour – proliferated, the vast majority proving hoaxes, driven by vendetta or a transparent political agenda. The Dublin Metropolitan Police (D.M.P.), for example, received a gloriously lurid twelve-page letter written in thick red ink and signed 'A Loyal Informer'. Prompted by a supposed threat to Balfour's life, it advocated 'disfranchising the whole of Ireland' and putting Ireland under 'strict military control'; it concluded by praising Balfour's 'Cromwellianism'.[16] Memoranda from Dublin Castle urged continual vigilance, one of 1883 recommending that particular attention be paid to

> suspects from Dublin who may take excursions into the country during the summer. Many members of the secret societies avail of picnic parties and other large excursions for the purpose of meeting and making arrangements. . . . Excursions of members of the Antiquarian Society in particular should be carefully watched.[17]

[13] Bernard Porter, *The Origins of the Vigilant State: The London Metropolitan Police Special Branch before the First World War* (London, 1987); Richard Hawkins, 'Government versus Secret Societies: The Parnell Era' in T. Desmond Williams (ed.), *Secret Societies in Ireland* (Dublin, 1973), pp 100–12.

[14] The eastern division of the Royal Irish Constabulary requested permission to grant £12 a month to commercial traveller and informer 'Quentin' of County Carlow and Kilkenny. 'In order to do this [gain intelligence], he says, he will have to spend a great deal more money than heretofore both on traveling [*sic*] expenses and his living – and besides, he is obliged to frequent public houses, and spend a large sum on standing drink.' T.N.A. (P.R.O.), C.O. 904 10/551, 16 June 1884.

[15] D.M.P. 1887. The files of the Dublin Metropolitan Police are housed in the National Archive (N.A.) in Dublin. They are filed by year and are not systematically classified, hence the inconsistent references given.

[16] D.M.P. 1887.

[17] D.M.P. 1883 315 w/1716.

One policeman duly reported one Sunday in the summer of 1887 that groups were heading for the suburb of Dundrum, occasionally as many as 400, sometimes marching in a military style to Fenian songs and talking of oaths.[18] These men were probably members of the Gaelic Athletic Association (G.A.A.), the cultural nationalist organisation established by Michael Cusack (Joyce's 'The Citizen' in *Ulysses*) in 1884 to promote Gaelic games, and it is not hard to imagine them teasing the watchful policemen with exaggerated mutterings.

However, the severity with which the Fenians dealt with their own should not be underestimated. One informer's account of the murder of Bernard Bailey in October 1883 suggests the actions of a 'vigilance committee', an I.R.B. disciplinary body. Bailey had been employed by his brother-in-law Whelan, who kept a tailor's shop and was suspected of distributing arms among the Dublin Fenians. Bailey was sacked following a row over the shop's management and threatened to inform the authorities of Whelan's Fenian activities. Two days later he was ordered out of his bed by William Brophy and John Dunne. Having been brought to a vacant house in Temple Bar's Skipper's Alley, he was guarded day and night for three weeks by three armed men before being murdered. According to the informer, his wife was told he had been sent to safety in the United States. The decade was punctuated with occasional murders of this kind, and although it is difficult to confirm the veracity of this account, it is feasible.[19]

Fenianism also acted as a self-supporting network of contacts and assistance. John Clancy, a retired publican and highly influential sub-sheriff, later nicknamed the 'mayor-maker' on account of his influence in municipal politics, and the model for Joyce's Long John Fanning,[20] was suspected of using his influence to find work for known Fenians. Through Clancy, Pat Malloy, J. J. O'Brien, William Branton, and James Boland obtained employment in the service of the Dublin corporation in 1885,[21] Boland as an inspector of paving.[22] As a leading figure in the Paviour's Society, Boland became an influential Dublin Fenian. He is now principally remembered as Harry Boland's father.[23] Both Malloy and Boland had Invincible connections, Boland joining

[18] D.M.P. 1887 'Fenian doings in Dublin City 16th May to 7[*sic*] June 1887'.

[19] The report is wrongly filed among the D.M.P. papers of 1883.

[20] John Wyse Jackson and Peter Costello, *John Stanislaus Joyce* (London, 1997), pp 194–5. John Clancy was imprisoned in 1866, at the height of Fenianism, in Mountjoy prison for treasonable practices. Later a member of the Land League, he was arrested in 1882 under the Protection of Person and Property (Ireland) Act 1881, and imprisoned at Kilmainham. On release he was elected to Dublin city council for Inn's Quay Ward. On becoming sub-sheriff in 1885 he resigned his seat. T.N.A. (P.R.O.), C.O. 904 17/107, Fenian Suspects Vol.1.

[21] D.M.P. 1885.

[22] T.N.A. (P.R.O.), Balfour Papers 30/60/2 Intelligence Notes, 16–31 Mar. 1890.

[23] See David Fitzpatrick, *Harry Boland's Irish Revolution* (Cork, 2003), pp 18ff.