ERNEST BOYD

# THE SACRED EGOISM OF SINN FÉIN

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# Содержание

# Gnathai Gan Iarraidh
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## I
## THE CULT OF ALTRUISM

In this age of sacred egoisms and oppressed nationalities the drama – or melodrama – of international politics has been enriched by a variety of distressed heroines, in the shape of small nations, whose salvation has inspired professions of altruism slightly incompatible with the previous records of the rescuers as revealed to the impartial observer. The shortage of paper and man-power notwithstanding, the printing presses of the Latin and Anglo-Saxon worlds have poured forth an undiminished stream of most enheartening and uplifting sentiment relating to the rights and virtues of subject races. Prior to August 1914 small nations were happy if they succeeded in escaping the attention of their powerful neighbours, but they have now been raised from the relatively obscure fame conferred upon the more unfortunate by those sympathetic or patronizing friends of liberty who have flourished characteristically in the

English-speaking countries. What was once the hobby of select groups of forward-looking Liberals has become the prerogative of their erstwhile opponents, the orthodox imperialists and upholders of predatory patriotism. Indeed, in many instances, the professional gladiators of freedom find themselves deprived of their occupation, since their philosophy of domestic and international politics conflicts seriously with the current official dogmas. The rescuing of small nations has become a "controlled industry," and appropriate literature is issued in the shape of Blue Books and White Papers, or in the less ostentatious, if equally suspicious, form of inspired press propaganda.

Ireland had long been a subject of melancholy reflection in those quarters devoted to international altruism of a not too personal kind. Even the British Liberal found an occasional tremor in his voice as he contemplated the state of Irish affairs, and remembered his own virtuous conduct of the case for self-government in Ireland. That voice, however, broke into sobs of indignation only when uttering judgments upon the iniquities of men further from home, and his enthusiasm for so proximate a victim of imperialism was checked by the tangible and daily proofs of his own futility, less evident where his plea concerned a more remote beneficiary. Distance lends enchantment to the Liberal view of international politics. For that reason it is natural to find the strongest expressions of commiseration for Ireland outside the precincts of the Island Race, and, in fact, the Irish people have been accustomed to derive considerable satisfaction

from the manifestations of good-will which they have received from Continental countries. The sympathetic foreigner, when not an Englishman, is spared the suspicions which his ignorance of the actual facts might have earned for him, for both parties are likely to be at a mutual disadvantage in this respect. Moreover, the claim of a Frenchman, for example, is overwhelmingly reinforced by the knowledge of material assistance rendered, none being so introspective as to question the motive of those historic replies of the French nation to the call of Ireland. In return, did not Ireland alone distinguish herself in 1870 by a far-sighted rejection of Prussianism, at a time when the Hun fought for the recovery of Alsace amidst the plaudits of the politicians, statesmen, and, above all, the moralists of Anglo-Saxondom? When the Irish organized a brigade to assist France against Prussia, the obstructionist and condemnatory attitude of the British Government seemed only further proof that Ireland's real friends must not be sought in England. These reciprocal manifestations of international appreciation are the definite crystallization of a sentiment confirmed in Ireland by the fact that British and West British scholars have singularized themselves by an indifference and hostility respectively towards the language and civilization of the Irish nation. Continental scholars, on the other hand, have displayed an interest in Gaelic studies which cannot but induce in the Irish people a comforting sense of their own dignity and importance.

Everything, therefore, has combined to give Ireland a belief

in her own international identity, and, recollecting her ancient grandeur, she has felt entitled to the sympathy which her subsequent misfortunes have earned amongst all disinterested students of a history by no means negligible in the evolution of European civilization. When the great Allied crusade for the liberation of small nationalities began, and the world resounded to the cries of protest against the tyrants of subject races, the Irish people were touched by this dramatic vindication of their age-long contention. For a brief period the scepticism of centuries made way for a degree of faith sufficient to bring a number of distinguished Nationalists into the ranks of England, and under their impulse Ireland – as distinct from the West Britons – contributed what has remained her military share in the conflict. The "loyalists," of course, were relieved at the opportunity of exchanging the dubious pleasures of mutiny and gun-running for the more sonorous activities of a war for freedom. Having scotched political self-determination at home, they became seized of a praiseworthy ambition to confer that denied benefit upon the unenlightened foreigner. As for the mere Irish, they gradually realized the symbolism of this loyal gesture, the Ulsterior motive became apparent: the war was on behalf of the small nations, but one had been forgotten. What is one amongst so many, it may be asked? But the Irish could not rise to that level of almost divine impartiality which is the natural sphere of the Britisher when he has decided to right a wrong. The relative importance of Ireland could not be as apparent to

an Irishman as to his benevolent conqueror.

It was difficult for Ireland to reconcile herself to the thought that she, who had engaged so much sympathetic attention, was now being overlooked. Rather than risk the danger of a loyalist rebellion in the midst of England's great war, the British Government decided to put the strain on nationalist Ireland, rather than test the insistent love of the professional patriots. No doubt it would have been disconcerting to the imperialist illusion, had Ulster proceeded to stab its "mother country" in the back, when asked to accept the measure of autonomy constitutionally and democratically conferred upon the Irish people. England preferred to rely upon the good-will of her political adversaries, mistrusting the capacity for sacrifice of her vociferous friends. Even then, Ireland might have been disposed to fight for those "larger aspects" of freedom so dear to the progressive philosophers of English politics, who have never yet been thus commanded: that the charity of political democracy begins abroad. Omniscient bureaucracy, in rapid process of becoming omnipotent, so met the efforts of those Irish who would have the national character of the military alliance preserved, that the alliance did not take place. Rebuffed in her natural demand for some tokens of national recognition as a fighting unit amongst the Allies, Ireland began to realize the importance of establishing an identity which was ignored, and was in danger of being forgotten.

Naturally resentment fixed upon the authors and mediators

of the "sacred union" which had failed to fulfil itself, and its weapon was that originally forged for the defence of the conquest of a measure of autonomy abandoned under the terms of the political truce. The armed forces which had been brought into existence by the threat of a loyalist rebellion were turned to the task of asserting the existence of a forgotten small nationality. In due course the Easter Rising took place, and by a blood-sacrifice Ireland once more claimed the rights which, she had been assured, were being enforced on the battlefields of Europe. Death having become more valuable than life, as a result of the new belligerent philosophy of a world at arms, Irishmen determined to demonstrate that there are more ways than one of dying for freedom. The hopelessness of the enterprise proved its ultimate strength, for desperate courage has a peculiar influence upon the pacific civilian, to which category the vast majority of the Sinn Féin public belonged. Just as the militarist is enraged by the spectacle of defiant courage over which he has no control, so the non-combatant patriot is effected by what impresses him as mystic valour. Even official testimony now records the triumph of that insurrectionary failure, in so far as the stiffening of the national purpose is concerned.

Unfortunately for Ireland, sentimentalism has become so fashionable in international politics, that realism, whether in thought or action, is abhorrent to minds soothed with sonorous phrases, and but dimly conscious of the facts behind the words. The mirage of glory not only obscures the material horror of

war, but it conduces to a certain impatience of ideas which are not coloured by the prevalent megalomania of idealism. The Irishman who dares to bring forward the case of his own country in discussion with belligerents is regarded as an inferior egotist, whose vision is so warped and limited that he cannot realize the great issues at stake. Otherwise intelligent men talk to him of the German hegemony of Europe and, by extension, of the world, with a seriousness differing from that of the Pan-German League only in its abhorrence of that incredible ambition. The rhetorical exuberances of Teutonic chauvinists are accepted as plain statements of policy by those who would not listen to their own Jingoes. The actual, or contemplated, depredations of one imperialism are not contrasted with those of another, but are used as a foil to the liberal and progressive aspirations of outraged political virtue. An inability to take either party at their own estimate is nevertheless comprehensible in a people whose scepticism of Liberalism is equalled by a corresponding doubt as to the possible differentiation of two imperialisms.

Acute and not wholly orthodox exponents of the British international point of view have expended much ingenuity in finding a formula expressing the conscious or sub-conscious sense of rectitude which pervades the Englishman in this debate with Ireland. Britain is depicted by these critical friends as a well-meaning, if blundering, commercialist, whose imperial adventures, like the amorous adventures of races unblessed by puritan *Kultur*, must be regarded as venial sins. British

imperialism, they say, is not deliberate and systematic; it aims at no hegemony, and is thereby innocent of those evils which the "free peoples of the world" are invited to destroy. As we have the testimony of several hundred years of Anglo-Irish history in refutation of this comfortable illusion, it is enough to say, for the present, that the matter presents itself with no such simplification to the Irish mind. Consequently, viewed in the light of this *Herrenmoral*, so natural in an imperial race, international events take on a significance wholly incomprehensible to the unfortunate victims of a transfigured and transcendental commercialism. Ireland, therefore, can neither understand nor make herself understood, so long as discussion is confined to the unrealities of international politics. She is obliged to grasp with pathetic gratitude at the straws of comfort blown in her direction by the winds of the European debate, wherein she serves the purposes of *tu quoque* repartee.

In politics, as in literature and art, realism is abhorrent to the Anglo-Saxon temperament. Wherever the English language is spoken there is implanted the tradition of moral and intellectual compromise. Revolutions are blanketed with reforms, unless, as happened in 1641, they can assume the dignity of a religious crusade. Social problems are discreetly shelved by Acts of Parliament, and the facts of life delicately obscured by a literature unique in its emasculation. Thus America condemns as unpleasantly improper the only honest record of actual warfare in the trivial mass of Bairnsfatherly war books, *Le Feu*, by

Henri Barbusse, a Frenchman unspoiled by the cult of anæmia. Sanctimonious reflections upon the superiority of Anglo-Saxon morals are the response to the urgent question of venereal diseases as a by-product of war. The sexual problems arising out of militarism are the commonplaces of all literature dealing with the subject, but when the English-speaking world becomes for the first time conscripted, and is faced with the military system on a broad scale, the characteristic stampede to fact-proof shelters takes place. The half-world is not to be made safe for democracy, but must be declared taboo. So man becomes chaste by prohibition.

That the present war is at bottom a struggle between two cultures, the Anglo-Saxon and the German, is indicated by the remarkable way in which the ideals of the former have permeated the Allied world, strengthening the natural preponderance, linguistic and material, of the element represented by the United States and the British Empire. The hands that are fighting may be the hands of France, Belgium, Italy, Roumania, Serbia, Japan, China, America, and San Marino, but the voice is the voice of Britain, whose most admirable mouthpiece is Dr. Woodrow Wilson. The result is the reaction of the world to the stimuli of recent history in the perfect British manner. When the Russian Revolution occurred there was but little response to the revolutionary contagion, which had, nevertheless, affected Europe on the previous occasions of similar social upheavals. England, of course, was the great buttress of reaction against

the French Revolution, which could not recommend itself on religious and moral grounds to the great Empire of respectability. Yet, France did succeed in infecting Europe with revolutionary ideas. Russia, on the other hand, has evoked only the response of the strikes in Germany and Austria. Elsewhere the reception of this dramatic transition from official words of freedom to popular action has been mixed and lukewarm. Nobody who understood the fundamental abhorrence of real liberty in the English-speaking countries could have been surprised at England's unconcealed chagrin, and the subsequent hostility of all but a handful of the people to the progress of revolutionary government and diplomacy. What a relief when Germany finally imposed silence – and her terms – on Russia!

The prevailing tone of sentimental idealism in international affairs is, therefore, unpropitious to those who, like the Russians and the Irish, insist upon interpreting *au pied de la lettre*, the pious phrases which adorn the discourses of altruistic statesmen. Be the victims of oppression only far enough away from immediate Allied control, then their wrongs bedim the eyes of the professors of Liberty, whose vision becomes too blurred to distinguish the close presence of political phenomena which demand attention. In consequence, Ireland's movement of self-assertion did not receive the good press which the occasion might normally have warranted. America, though neutral at the time, denounced the "disloyalty" of Sinn Féin in the best Colonial style, leaving to the American-Irish the hyphenated distinction, shared with their

American-German fellow-citizens, of displaying a very natural sympathy with their kin in "the old country." The racial ties of these two sections of Americans were, until intervention replaced benevolent neutrality, the only evidence of resistance to that anglicization of Allied opinion which has already been noted. Once, however, Dr. Wilson had declared his intention of making the world safe for democracy, repressive measures soon eliminated those manifestations of opinion. They had been denounced, but tolerated, only so long as it was legally impossible to suppress freedom of speech without injuring the interests of the highly articulate Allies and their friends.

The unsophisticated Irishman in the United States had to reconcile himself to the paradox of the American denunciation of the Easter Week Rising, as if the analogous revolt of the founders of that great plutocratic Republic had not differed only in so far as it was successful. The American separatists were alike untroubled by the representations of the unionistic minority, and the preoccupation of England with the war against her commercial rival of the period. But the Irish separatists made not even a romantic appeal to a people whose appetite for uplifting sentiment may be gauged by their profound conviction that the "moral leadership of the world" had been thrust upon them, after the outbreak of war, by an appreciative Destiny. It is true that, during the two years when this particular megalomania possessed the soul of America, her energies were exclusively concentrated upon the supply of munitions of war,

with occasional humanitarian homilies, addressed to the Hun, and emphatic protests against the Allied blockade, which was denounced as illegal and unjust, but has become much more stringent under Wilsonian auspices. It is hard to decide which of these two not wholly unrelated phenomena is the greater tribute to the triumph of Anglo-Saxon culture; America's condemnation of the Irish Republicans as "traitors," or her reinforcement, when a belligerent, of blockade measures previously described as indefensible.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.