

Oxford Symposium Abstract

Private Lives and Posthumous Reputations: love and affection among the Irish revolutionary generation, 1890-1916.

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The Irish revolutionary decade of 1912-22, saw the rise of paramilitary movements within the island, the unsuccessful but symbolic insurrection known as the Easter Rising in 1916, the failure of the moderate Home Rule movement, and the guerilla war against the forces of the British Government from 1919 to 1921, culminating in the Anglo-Irish treaty which set up the Irish free State , subsequently the Republic of Ireland, leaving the north-east of the country under British rule as the dominion of 'Northern Ireland'. The people who made the revolution were generally young, radical , and extreme in their opinions; women were prominent in the radical organizations of these years, and ideas of socialism and feminism were important to them. Given the period, and what was happening in other European countries, it seems logical to suppose that an unconventional approach to sexual relations, and a rejection of bourgeois family modes, would also have been part of their world-view. However, several of the memoirs of the revolutionaries state that sexual relations between the revolutionaries were uncommon, and that a kind of Puritanism reigned.

This approach is repeated in most of the biographies of individual revolutionaries, which continue to appear in a near-hagiographical mode. Of course, the history of sex is never a straightforward subject- not least because the sources used are very often derived from law-courts or criminal records, creating a distinctly uneven approach. (This is true of the only substantial history of sexuality in Ireland.) It is hard, therefore, to recapture the intimate dimension of consensual relationships within people's individual lives. Moreover, the style of Irish revolutionary biography owes much to the model of saints' lives; it also reflects the sources available, which have been carefully screened (notably the records of the Bureau of Military History, recently opened, and the Pension Application records). Above all, perhaps, the way that the lives of the revolutionaries have been remembered and recorded overwhelmingly reflects the conservative and catholic ethos of the Irish Free State set up in the 1920s. The existence of feminist, socialist, secularist and even agnostic or atheistic ideas among the revolutionaries was written out of history; so was their approach to sex.

However, by studying diaries, letters and memoirs not intended for publication, and looking at the life-styles of the revolutionaries before they became immobilized into the heroic attitudes of the remembered revolution, it is possible to discern a different picture. The social structures through which young political radicals found each other, notably the Gaelic League summer schools and dances, gave an opportunity to meet in untrammelled and unchaperoned ways; this is one reason why the Catholic Church tried so hard to assert its control over the League. Nonetheless the diaries of some League organizers suggest that opportunities for flirtation and love-affairs were a large

part of their *raison d'être*. The lives of some of the prominent revolutionaries suggest a pattern of connections and inter-marriages, which helped to create – later- a sort of post-revolutionary ruling class. But before the post-revolutionary stabilization and re-clericalization of Irish society, radical siblings such as the Ryans or the Giffords or the Bartons were rejecting family norms; as Lynn Hunt as remarked in the case of the French Revolution, re-ordering patriarchalism and envisioning a new order of relationships was part of the revolutionary mind-set. The way revolutionary women chose new, symbolic names for themselves, often from Irish mythology, is also indicative of this process (there are parallels here, as in many other ways, with contemporary Russian revolutionaries).

One particularly interesting unpublished diary, which begins in the 1890s and continued for forty-odd years, is that of Rosamond Jacob- from a Quaker background but agnostic, radically nationalist, impatient with convention, she recorded her sexual frustration and desires very frankly, analysed the nature of her feelings (which she thought were more classically male than female), and recorded discussions about sexual freedom and traditional gender-roles with her radical comrades. She also read Freud, introduced to his thought by a Sinn Fein friend, and found his ideas instantly recognizable and exciting. Jacob's diary indicates a world where people repudiated the bourgeois norms of their parents; there were several established (and recognized) lesbian partnerships among the women of the movement, as well as children born out of wedlock; one of the key documents of homosexual life-style in this era is a diary kept by one of the most prominent revolutionaries, while other nationalist men constructed homosocial and 'Uranian' communities through educational institutions and boys' organizations.

Even the most romantic and 'pure' love-story of the revolution, the marriage of Grace Gifford to Joseph Plunkett in his prison-cell on the eve of his execution after the Easter Rising, presents another dimension when one reads the unpublished memoirs of Plunkett's sister, who records her belief that Grace was pregnant, probably by another man. Maud Gonne, the nationalist icon, and muse of W.B. Yeats, was considered a figure of scandal by many because of her illegitimate children and her separation from her husband. The experimental life-styles of other republican icons such as Constance Markiewicz were also seen as scandalous, before the revolution sanctified them. The unpublished diaries and letters of young revolutionaries such as Piras Beaslai, Liam de Roiste and Kevin O'Shiel, record a preoccupation with sex, the constant and alluring presence of prostitutes in the streets of Dublin and Cork, and struggles with desire; perhaps their contemporary James Joyce should be seen as less unusual and transgressive, in the Irish world, than he is usually presented.

However, the biographies of the revolutionaries have whitewashed their sexual lives from view. In the case of homosexuals such as Patrick Pearse and Roger Casement, conveniently dead fiancées were later invented for them (and the authenticity of Casement's erotic diaries was bitterly contested). The opposition of many women revolutionaries to traditional marriage-roles was air-brushed out of their histories, even though several of them continued to campaign against the reactionary approach to women's rights in the post-revolutionary state. The desire of young people –who were often from troubled or fractured domestic

backgrounds- to reject patriarchal and colonial authority in their intimate lives, as well as the life of their country, was left out of the picture. But during the revolutionary period of the early twentieth century, several of them clearly hoped for a less trammled world, creating a brotherhood or sisterhood of like-minded souls.

Nonetheless, if there had been a freethinking, sexually adventurous aspect to the revolutionary temperament before 1916, it was later suppressed. Partly because some of the principal figures were killed or executed, but more directly because the Catholic Church decided to support the revolution, in its more moderate aspects, and reasserted its authority over the record, as well as over the lives, of the revolutionary generation. Those who objected to this, such as Muriel MacSwiney, usually ended by leaving Ireland and trying to prolong their revolution abroad. It may be the case, as Eric Hobsbawm has written regretfully, that there is 'a persistent affinity between revolution and Puritanism; those revolutionaries for whom sexual, or for that matter cultural, libertarianism are really central issues of the revolution, are sooner or later edged aside by it'. This certainly happened in Ireland. But assembling the life-stories of such people, from 'unofficial' sources, is one method whereby that vital dimension of their lives may be recaptured.
