

REPUBLICANISM REVISITED - DRAFT 1

Republicanism is a word to conjure with in the context of Ireland - whether North or South. Feelings and interpretations around the concept, and even more importantly in relation to its impact, are as divided as the island itself. Whether it is defined by the most recent wall slogans of nationalist West Belfast or the city-bank of Derry, or is rubbished by the historical revisionism that is at root tortured by the Yeatsian query - "Did that play of mine send out certain men the English shot ?"(1), the hagiographical focus on republicanism remains strong.

In 1974, a Repsol pamphlet (a reprint of a 1966 edition) was circulated by the Republican Education Department of the then Republican Clubs - later to become the Workers' Party. It asserted -

"The association of national freedom with a Republican form of Government originated in the 1798 period . . . Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen were the first to raise the demand for an independent Irish Republic. . . (2)

Enter stage left the populist Jacobin radicalism, influenced by the more contractual approach of the rebellious American colonists, to be deployed in an Irish setting against the 'British connection'. The Jacobin element that comprised the kernel of this late 18th century republicanism not only made an impact on Ireland, but swept in a cosmopolitan stream across progressive intellectual discourse, which had already been influenced by the writings of Rousseau and Paine, and the freshness of universalist concepts such as 'the rights of man'. While Wordsworth celebrated "the joy of being alive" (3) at such a time, politically active Corresponding Societies were adapting Jacobinism to English circumstances. E.P. Thompson has charted the interaction between such foci for political change in England, Scotland and Ireland. (4)

There was a recognition in Scotland that the thinking of the United Irishmen was at the leading edge of the debates of the times. Certainly, the reform leader, Norman Macleod, M.P. drew his definition of 'the People' from the writings of the Belfast Societies when he wrote an Open Letter to the Scottish Friends of the People in 1793 - "If we are asked who are the people ? We turn our eyes here and there, and cry Lo! The People; but we look around us and without partiality and predilection, and we answer 'the multitude of Human Beings, the living mass of humanity associated to exist, to subsist and to be happy. In them, and them only, we find the origin of social authority, the measure of political value, and the pedestal of legitimate power.'" (5)

In practical political terms in Ireland, the issue of who were the people was a matter of intense discussion, particularly when considered in terms of active citizenship. While Wolfe Tone, as Secretary of the Catholic Committee in Dublin, pursued the aim of substituting "the common name of Ireland in place of the denominations of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter" (6), not all supporters of the United Irishmen were convinced about either the validity or the feasibility of the concept. (7) Even the politically advanced William Drennan exuded caution when he wrote to his brother-in-law in December 1792 -

"Do not breathe any suspicions of the Catholics for the present. If they see we suspect them, they will suspect us. Let us not run a risk of losing them now when their business (of emancipation) is nearly decided and ours is but beginning . . . The cry of

revolution and republicanism is raised against us. No King, etc. Take great care to obviate this. Our present pursuits ought to terminate in an equal and impartial representation of the people, and let posterity go on to republicanism if they choose".

(8)

In reality, Drennan was playing realpolitik, given that he clearly did share Paine's view on the absurdity of the monarchy, and had no trouble in calling the armed Volunteers as 'Citizen soldiers', to arms in 1794. (9)

Although Tone and others made it clear that if Protestants did not take the risk of coming to grips with the problem of Catholic liberty, through empathy with their situation, it would continue to haunt them, nevertheless the unity between Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter has at times been over-exaggerated with regard to the 1790-1795 period. On the other hand the intrinsic elements of the civic republicanism of the period have largely been under-estimated. These can be held to include a clear emphasis on citizenship (however defined), and the fact that citizens need not share common blood (ethnicity) so long as they share allegiance to, and participation in, a common polity. However as the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizens underlined, that polity was seen as the nation: "The source of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation; no group, no individual, may exercise authority not emanating expressly therefrom". (10) Within that framework of authority there was also the derivation of classical republican thought that citizens have a responsibility of civic duty, and more than that, that the democratic process is actually fashioned through active political participation of citizens. The identification of legitimate power in the social authority of the people, rather than residing in a hereditary monarchy, was also an important element, as was the acknowledgement of that principle ethos of Jacobinism - egalite, which was translated as the erasure of all distinctions of status. Another feature of the philosophical approach was the focus on rationalism, which among other things led to a criticism of religious institutions, and the emergence of secularism. Finally, the traditions of conscious republicanism and internationalism were closely linked, although they were to come under severe pressure during the late French Republic and Napoleonic period.

E.P.Thompson in 'The Making of the English Working Class', has outlined how aspects of the Jacobin tradition were to appear in the weave of radical agitation throughout the 19th century until the new Socialism shifted emphasis from political to economic rights. (11) In the specific circumstances of Ireland one of the main aspects that was to break through periodically over the next century was the issue of separation from Britain. While separatism had always been an issue for the United Irishmen (12) the commencement of hostilities between Britain and France in 1793, and the introduction of the Insurrection Act in 1796, together with a draconian security policy against suspect areas and organisations, resulted in a heightened emphasis being placed on this strategic aspect. By Spring 1795, Tone, Thomas Russell, Samuel Neilson, the Simms brothers, Henry McCracken "and one or two more" climbed to MacArt's Fort, at the summit of Belfast's Cave Hill, and "took a solemn obligation. . . never to desist in our efforts until we have subverted the authority of England over our country and asserted her independence." (13)

It has been suggested that it was in fact Thomas Russell who was the main proponent of both the strand of revolutionary republicanism (14) that was most noticeable in the post 1795 period, and who also underlined the strategic importance of forging a broad class alliance. Tone, who was an admirer of Russell, was to link the concepts of civic republicanism with the separatist cause during his trial in 1798. In pleading guilty to the charges laid against him, he re-iterated his belief that -

“The connexion of England, I have ever considered the bane of Ireland and have done everything in my power to break it, and to raise three million of my countrymen to the rank of citizens”. (15)

It was this sentiment that was to be remembered as Tone’s epitaph and that was to win him the title ‘Father of Irish Republicanism’.

THE HEGEMONY OF IRISH NATIONALISM

Writing in 1972, his history of the Irish Republican Army, J. Bowyer Bell concluded - “... For a few, generation after generation what Pearse and Connolly began in the name of Tone on April 24th. 1916 is an unfinished legacy - but a clearly defined responsibility. As long as the British border cuts across the Republic of 1916, as long as Ireland and its people are neither free of exploitation nor Gaelic in tongue and heart, then men will turn to the task as defined by Tone no matter how bleak the prospects; to do less would be to betray the past and deny the future.” (16)

The Tone who was so little enamoured with the Belfast Harp Festival in 1792 (“The harpers again. Strum. Strum and be hanged. . .” July 13th in his Diary) may well not recognise aspects of the new republican inspiration, but what is interesting about the Bowyer Bell description is the clear predominance of a national sense of identity in the new strung republican quest. Two strong influences had wrought a mutually reinforcing impact on the republican tradition - the romantic nationalism of the mid 19th century -

“Life springs from death; and from the graves of patriot men and women spring living nations. . .” (Padraic Pearse’s Oration at O’Donovan Rossa’s grave)

and the influence of Catholicism -

“It is not those who can inflict the most, but those that can suffer the most, who will conquer. . .”

(Terence MacSwiney, (17))

What has been described as the “simple and apostolic tradition of nationalism” (18) had in effect taken root, fuelled by social and economic conditions and inspired by concepts of popular sovereignty and national self-determination. The agitation around the land issue in the latter part of the 19th century was to underline the importance of territoriality in the debate about self-determination.

It has been argued that over the period “Irish republicanism was to become a synonym for Irish nationalism. Or to put it another way, the idea of a republic became less an end in itself than a means towards a nationalist end”. (19) This assertion begs the questions (a) How valid is the concept of nationalism and all that it entails ? and (b) What is the impact of the intellectual legacy transmitted by Irish nationalism ? In short, when Thomas Davis serenaded ‘A Nation Once Again’, what precisely was he talking about ?

The extensive literature around the issue of nationalism (20) highlights the diversity of the concept as well as its flexibility. Indeed one would be forgiven for concluding that each national unit/experience is unique and should be discussed in its own terms if we are to avoid being drawn in to unhelpful generalisations. Nevertheless, conscious of this caveat, a number of assumptions seem self-evident -

* Nations are political phenomena, which are usually - but not always - related to a national territory.

* States are not necessarily nation-states (despite the misleading title of the United Nations) although increasingly they are fashioned around a national core or ethnic core.

* Democratic theory has often been underpinned by assumptions about the existence of nation-states, although nationalism itself is not necessarily democratic in outlook, but is invariably populist.

While recognising the limitations and problems associated with seeking to provide a definition of a nation, Anthony Smith is brave enough to hazard the following -

“A named human population sharing a historical territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members”. (21)