

Limerick condemns the Rising

by Denis O'Shaughnessy

All shades of Irish life, from the ordinary person in the street, to religious, politicians, journalists and business people, condemned the 1916 Rising. National newspapers were exceptionally critical, with the *Irish Times*,¹ in the aftermath of the executions, stating 'the safety of the whole kingdom and the peace of Ireland is at stake, and executions were the only possible course.' The *Irish Independent*² stated 'We are no advocates of undue severity but undue leniency to some of the worst firebrands would be just as bad.' Worst of all was the Unionist organ, the *Cork Constitution*³ which advocated 'the penalty of the hangman's rope for the ringleaders.'

Limerick was no exception. Strangely, the *Limerick Chronicle*, a Unionist newspaper, while publishing detailed reports of the Rebellion, refrained from any criticism in the aftermath, confining its editorials to comments to the Great War, which of course was then raging.

One would imagine then, that the *Limerick Leader*, would have been the last newspaper to condemn the Rising. Not so, the editor, Newcastle West man, Con Cregan, who was an avowed Nationalist and the first secretary of the newly formed Limerick Volunteers in 1913, and who corresponded with Padraig Pearse, one of the leaders of the Rebellion who had been executed, took the part of the majority and his editorial of May 10, referred to the insurrection as a 'wholly insane enterprise.'

Even the members of the City Regiment of the Irish Volunteers, who had mobilised for the aborted National uprising, were critical, and the *Limerick Chronicle*⁴ reported that at an important special meeting the following motion was passed:

that in view of the occurrences which have taken place in Dublin, we, the Limerick city Regiment of the National Volunteers, take the

opportunity afforded by this, our first meeting since the regrettable happenings, of once more renewing our implicit confidence in the Irish leader and his colleagues and that we express our absolute and unqualified determination to follow the leadership of Mr. Redmond and whenever and whatever way required up to the spirit and the terms of the attitude he has taken up, and the policy he has laid down regarding the Irish situation.

Soon after, two prominent members of the Limerick Volunteers, Con Colbert and Captain Ned Daly, were executed for their part in the Easter Rebellion.

Interestingly, in the same issue of the *Limerick Chronicle*, the Press Association reported that the arrest of Sir Roger Casement near Fenit on Good Friday, after the aborted attempt to land arms from a German ship, 'has created feelings of satisfaction, and the people are proud that Kerry has the distinction of having secured such an important capture.'

At a meeting⁵ of the Limerick County Council, Mr. Quinlan stated:

they had to congratulate themselves that Limerick City and County had not in any way been thrown into disorder or confusion, and that the sad business in Dublin had not been brought home to their own doors. It was a time of gloom. A gloom had been cast over the country and they were all grieved to see the capital of their country in ruins. When the melancholy proceedings which had brought about the destruction of life and property were sifted, the result would transfer from the shores of Ireland the responsibility for the anguish that had been caused.... [and] that we, the Limerick County Council, renew our confidence in the Irish Party and Mr. Redmond, and earnestly appeal to the Government to deal

leniently with our misguided fellow countrymen who took part in the late rebellion.

An amendment was proposed by Mr. Mackey, in which he stated:

that as the facts of the revolt in Dublin and other parts of the country are as yet but little known to us, it would be well for the present, at least from the point of view of a democratic body such as this Council, to give the charity of silence to the prevailing expression of regret for the unfortunate events of the past few days.

Mr. Coleman suggested that Mr. Mackey's motion be added to the resolution proposed by Mr. Quinlan. The chairman, Mr. W. R. Gubbins, JP, stated that he thoroughly agreed with what had been stated by Mr. Quinlan and the other speakers. "The whole proceedings that led to the disturbances were regrettable and the less said about them the better. There never was a time when confidence in Mr. Redmond was more needed than the present," he said, concluding the meeting.

In the 'Rebel County' Cork the Council passed a resolution⁶ 'that we, the Cork County Council, beg to assure His Majesty the King, of our loyal support in the war and in the government of our country.'

Other censures

There were those in action in the Great War who were also appalled by the Dublin Rising. A letter, published in the 6 May edition of the *Limerick Leader*, from an unnamed Irish officer, described the horrors of a recent gas attack before commenting on the Rising:

I have just learned how the people and our friends have come through the trials in Dublin. Their trials have been ours. I don't think my condition of overstrain alone could

possibly account for the dejection of spirit the news has thrown me into. It puts Ireland back a generation. It was cruel and foolish. Why, oh why, have the sufferings of war been brought irresponsibly without an atom of practical wisdom, into the lives of Dublin and Ireland. Violence of arms – what a terrible thing it is and how hard to find it justified by moral law.

One generation gets over the turmoil caused by the Park murders, and enters upon chance of brighter days, when a new witch's cauldron of trouble is spilled over to a succeeding generation. I do feel lonely at the thought of Ireland. You will exhaust facts and argue about it, but you won't eradicate a new suspicion of Irishmen this ghastly thing has created. The pity of it.

A Limerick man, living in London, wrote condemning the Rising, believing in the justice of Home Rule. 'I am sorry that some of my misguided countrymen have in open rebellion played into the enemy's hands.'⁷

The world press generally condemned the Rising, with the London correspondent of the *Freeman's Journal*⁸ stating that

the whole American people recognise it the rising to be an insane act of an insignificant proportion of the population, engineered by German agents and financed by German gold, and none appear to be more indignant in their denunciations of it than the great body of the Irish-Americans. Deplorable as it has been, it is not without compensation in the evidence it has adduced not only in America but in all parts of the globe of the fact that the overwhelming majority of the Irish race throughout the world wholeheartedly support the attitude of Mr. Redmond and his colleagues in their attitude to the war.

The *New York Press*⁹ stated that:

the German war machine plotters must have been mad to think that such a miserable affair as the whole thing would achieve anything except to make laughing stock of their victims, and arouse Ireland more than ever to send their men to shed their blood for the causes which is

the cause of all civilisation, and to which no people have been more devoted than the men of Ireland. What fools the military intriguers in Berlin have always been from the first day to the last.

M. Jean Herbetta, in the *Echo de Paris*,¹⁰ stated:

the rebels are evidently a small number of misguided individuals and traitors to their country. Germany is trying to poison the Irish nation. The public malefactors must be struck down pitilessly so as to stop the poisoned source. The British Government will not neglect their duty, since Mr. Asquith has promised to produce proof of the treason organised by Germany."

Australia, too, also joined in the condemnations, the Arch-Bishops and Bishops of New South Wales deploring and condemning German-managed Irish Rising, advocate immediate installation of Home Rule for Ireland as a remedy.

The Mayor of Limerick, Stephen B. Roche, while not joining in the general condemnation, was fearful that the Rising in Dublin would spread to Limerick, and wrote the following letter to the *Limerick Chronicle*, dated 28 April:

With all the force and power which my words can command, as Mayor of my native city, I earnestly appeal to my fellow citizens, of every class, in the present most serious condition of affairs which has arisen in Limerick and all over Ireland, to do nothing that may result in exposing the lives and property of people resulting in danger or destruction. I know that in making this appeal I can confidently reflect on the good sense of the citizens and upon the law abiding character of our ancient and historic city being worthily maintained in this time of stress and difficulty, and when it is all over, as well hope it will be, we shall be able to rejoice that we came through the crisis together with our reputation of our city for restraint and forbearance intact.

The Mayor's wishes were granted when the Limerick Volunteers, who had gathered for manoeuvres in Killonan on that fatal Easter weekend, submitted

to the countermand of Chief of Staff Eoin McNeill to call off the Rising. The Mayor played a major part in the surrender of arms of the Volunteers, which was demanded by the Military Authorities. The *Limerick Chronicle*¹¹ stated that 'the uneasiness which has been felt in the city, owing in large measure to the unhappy disturbances in Dublin, and in a lesser degree to those which have taken place in some isolated districts of the country, have been considerably allayed by the important proceedings at the Town Hall last night.'

The newspaper was referring to the surrendering of the arms under the supervision of the Mayor at the Town Hall, in the presence of the Military Authorities. The report continued:

There was some talk that difficulty might possibly be experienced in getting the Sinn Feiners to comply with this imperative notice, but fortunately the good sense of the men in heeding the wise counsel given to them on so serious a matter, proved to be in the right direction, a decision which is very much due to the thoughtful action of the Mayor who exerted himself most unselfishly in bringing about the agreeable and most desirable result. By yesterday he had succeeded in getting the Volunteers to come round to his views, and towards evening, it became known that the Mayor, after a conference with the Sinn Fein party in the city, had been able to enter an arrangement under which the arms and ammunition with the Sinn Fein Volunteers would be given into his custody and passed at once into the possession of the Military Authorities who very kindly consented to the arrangement in question. The hours for surrendering the arms, etc., were arranged for eight o'clock to ten, and the proceedings throughout were an assurance in themselves that people have at last seen the end of this very unhappy business. The Volunteers began to arrive with their arms, etc., after eight o'clock, and by nine o'clock more than one half of the number had given over the weapons. The surrender went on until after ten o'clock, and by that time all, with very few exceptions, had handed in their rifles, the few who had not done so having, it was said, been unable to attend, but

having given satisfactory assurance they would do so within the stated time. There was another sitting at the Town Hall this evening, when the Volunteers delivered up the remaining arms in possession of individual members, to the Mayor, who handed over the weapons to the custody of the police.

Editorial

The following editorial, written by Con Cregan, editor of the *Limerick Leader*, in the 10 May, 1916 issue of the paper is worthy of being reproduced in full:

The public mind of Ireland is but slowly recovering from the stunning blow of horror inflicted upon it by the insurrection in Dublin on Easter Monday. That wholly insane enterprise had in its very element of sadness and tragedy, that there is not a man of the Irish race the world over capable of realising facts but abhors and condemns with vehemence the "mad campaign" as the most Rev. Dr. Kelly, Bishop of Ross, aptly described it.

The solitary redeeming feature in connection with the whole uprising is that the outbreak was the work of a small minority, most of whom were themselves more innocent, if well-meaning, dupes of others, and that it is denounced by none more loudly or more vigorously than by the vastly overwhelming majority of the Irish people themselves both at home and abroad.

The actions of public bodies and Nationalists organisations all over Ireland as well as the messages received by Mr. Redmond from Irish societies and prominent representative Irishmen beyond the seas make it clear beyond question that the insurrection has not or approval of the Irish race, and that in the words of Mr T F O'Connor, "the overwhelming majority of the people of Ireland condemned, reprobated and sorrowed over what has taken place." There is no need now to dwell on the fatuity and short-sightedness of the man who embarked upon and encouraged this utterly hopeless and chimerical undertaking of setting up an Irish Republic by force of arms.

The survivors amongst those who carried out or allowed themselves

be made the instruments of such stupendous folly are today sadder and wiser men, and now that the revolt has been crushed and extinguished it would be unwise and unjust on the part of the authorities to persist in any action that might be looked upon as vindictiveness on their part. Enough examples have been made in all conscience in the shooting of the twelve who have already paid the extreme penalty and to any ordinary mind it is evident that there is no necessity for any further blood-spilling over the regrettable happenings. Further executions as a deterrent are wholly unnecessary, for apart altogether from the disastrous failure of the insane attempt made by the insurgents, the feeling and opinion of Irishmen at home and abroad may safely be relied upon to prevent any repetition of the madness that marked Easter Week of 1916.

In the course of an able article showing the wisdom of what it describes as the "drastic severity" of the Military Tribunal in Dublin and appealing for clemency towards the insurgents, the *Freeman* very properly states: "Everywhere one turns, among all classes of the population, and especially the Nationalists of Ireland who for the past two years have been fighting and circumscribing the evil influences that have produced such tragic results, there is one universal argument being used. Men are pointing the contrast with South Africa, where the victorious General who put down the rebellion, is the great good fortune of South Africa and its enduring union, loyalty and peace, happened also to a wise and prudent statesman. There when the King's Arms were triumphant, only one rebel was shot. People are asking why the difference? There would be some explanation of the severity practiced here if the mass of the Irish people were in sympathy with the revolt, if the young Irish reserve battalions had been false to their trust, if anywhere in Ireland there was anything but an important minority that approved the insanity of the insurrection. Then the executions might be explained as intimidatory and preventative. But the conditions in Ireland are the reverse of all that. Everywhere in England and in Ireland there is acknowledgment of

the excellent spirit displayed by the manner of the people in the tragic crisis.

The occasion is certainly one for clemency, and if they have the interests of good feeling in Ireland at heart, the Military Authorities will realise that fact in time. Mr. Redmond has taken an active interest in this matter, and it is considered that as a result of representations to the Government on the point there is practically an end of the executions. In the House of Commons on Monday he asked the Prime Minister whether in view of the facts, which he mentioned, the Government would see their way to issue instructions to the military authorities in Ireland to extend clemency to the other persons involved. Mr Asquith in his reply, which appears in full in another column, took occasion to mention the fact that the Irish Leader "has strongly urged upon the Government and his arguments have not fallen on unwilling ears."

The London correspondent of the *Freeman* says that the general impressions left by the reply was that it is permissible to believe Mr. Redmond's representations have had a considerable effect in staying the hands of the executioners. Everyone who wishes to avoid bitterness of feeling in Ireland and values peace and harmony in the country and a development of the good relations which Mr. Redmond's policy set up between our people and England, will earnestly hope, and do all that can be done to ensure that a prudent and merciful spirit will guide the military authorities in dealing with the remaining insurgents to be tried by them.

References

- 1 *Irish Times*, 6 May, 1916.
- 2 *Irish Independent*, 12 May, 1916.
- 3 *Cork Constitution*, 3 May, 1916.
- 4 *Limerick Chronicle*, 12 May, 1916.
- 5 *ibid*, 6 May, 1916.
- 6 *Limerick Leader*, 1 May, 1916.
- 7 *ibid*, 10 May, 1916.
- 8 *ibid*, 12 May, 1916.
- 9 *ibid*, 6 May, 1916.
- 10 *ibid*.
- 11 *ibid*.