



# A SURVEY OF THE REPORTS OF FRENCH CONSULS IN IRELAND 1814-1929

BY MARK TIERNEY



Paul Cambon.

any which appear were due to some French political upheaval rather than some Irish situation. Thus there is very little from February to June for the year 1848, as the uncertainty of the French government's position made it difficult for the consul in Dublin to know to whom he should address his dispatches. A similar situation arose during and after the Franco-Prussian war from September, 1870 until April, 1871, when it was impossible to communicate with Paris in any case. However, no such problem arose during the 1914-1918 War, and thus the Easter Rising of 1916 is fully documented.

Many of the consuls who served in Dublin seem to have already spent some time in England, and their ability to speak, read and understand English was an essential qualification for an appointment to Dublin. Being conversant with the English scene, and especially English politics, they were thus equipped in a special way to make dispassionate and cool analyses of Irish affairs. They do not attempt to solve problems, but rather to give an objective account and commentary upon a particular Irish

situation or crisis. As outsiders, with a European or continental outlook, they had a wider perspective than the local observer. That is not to say that they were always right, but what they say is interesting and worthwhile.

The French authorities looked upon Ireland as part of the United Kingdom, or 'Great Britain', as they usually called the British Isles, from 1814 to 1922. There were French consuls in other parts of Great Britain (Swansea and Glasgow) who operated, as did the consul in Dublin, under the surveillance of the French ambassador in London. For his part, the ambassador sifted the evidence coming in from the consuls, and wrote to Paris giving his assessment of the situation or problem on hand. All these dispatches, whether from the consul in Dublin or the ambassador in London, are



Marie - Alfred Blanche.

It seems to be little known that, from 1814 on, successive French governments maintained an accredited consul, or agent, in Dublin, whose main job was to send information on Irish affairs to Paris. Every month, and sometimes every week, a lengthy dispatch left Ireland for Paris, and these are now available to scholars in the archives of the French foreign office, the Quai d'Orsay, Paris. They provide new insights into Irish history from 1814 to 1929, this latter date being the terminal point for consultation.

Unlike many agents representing foreign powers in Dublin during the nineteenth century, these French consuls were not Irishmen holding an honorary position, but trained, professional diplomats. An unbroken line of Frenchmen lived and worked in Dublin, and their names are recorded in the *Bulletin* of the French diplomatic corps, which has appeared annually from 1814 to the present day. It is also possible to check their names and addresses in Dublin in the pages of various Irish directories or almanacs which appeared regularly during this same time. Thus *Piggot's Dublin Directory* for 1824 states that the French consul in Dublin was a Monsieur Romain, whose office was at 43 St. Stephen's Green. *The Dublin Almanac* for 1842 mentions a Monsieur Marescheau, French consul, at 30 Lr. Gloucester St, while *Thom's Irish Almanac* for 1851 refers to a count De Lantivy, French consul, at 51 Westland Row. Their dispatches were written on official note-paper, with the stamp and seal of the *Consul de Dublin*.

Their dispatches are written in French, in long-hand up to the eighteenth-nineties, after which many are type-written. For the most part they are long and detailed, and provide commentary on political, social, economic, military and religious affairs. The consuls moved around freely in the capital city, as well as in the provinces, and one gets the impression that they are giving first-hand information, based on personal observation. They had, of course, to depend very much on their own resources, having no backup service of a large staff of secretaries or modern media facilities. There are very few gaps, and

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filed under the heading 'Ireland', in strict chronological order and in bound volumes, though contained within the general series on England (Angleterre). It is only after 1918 that Ireland stands on its own in the general catalogue of documents in the Quai d'Orsay. Between 1814 and 1918, the Irish volumes are interspersed among those dealing with England and, indeed, form a kind of subsection of the English material.

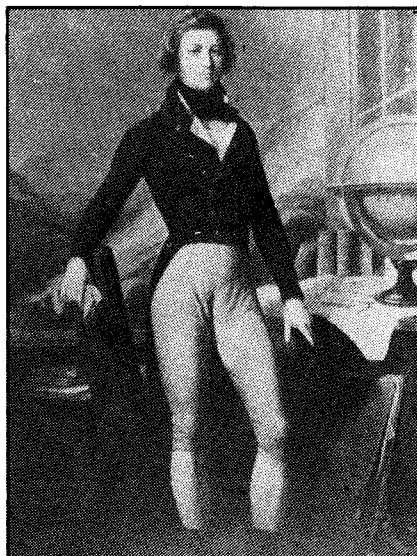
There are five major series in the French foreign office with material of Irish interest. A complete list of all the volumes relating to Ireland is given on page 165. It has seemed best to highlight the more important volumes and subjects treated of, in order to illustrate the kind of material which may be found in the Quai d'Orsay. The following is only a summary of a selection of historical documents, and the selection has been a personal one, i.e. referring to subjects which the present writer found interesting. I have followed a chronological order.

### I Correspondance Politique De L'Origine A 1871

#### 3<sup>e</sup> Partie: Correspondence Politique des Consuls, 1826-1870 Angleterre

There is material of Irish interest in twelve volumes in this series. Volume 13 covers the years 1841 to 1844, and contains a considerable amount of information on the Repeal Movement and Daniel O'Connell. The volume is entirely given over to Irish political affairs during these years, ending in June, 1844. There are descriptions of O'Connell's famous monster meetings, and of the early days of the Young Irelanders.

Volume 14 is the most important one in this series, covering the period from July, 1844, to February, 1848. There is some very important material on the Great Famine, sent by Monsieur A. Vaubicourt, the French consul in Dublin. Thus on 30 October, 1845, he reported to Paris that 'the scourge which has hit many parts of the continent has not spared Ireland. Indeed, it can have a most fatal influence on the country, and I thought it my duty to draw the attention of king (Louis Philippe) to the situation, while at the same time I shall continue to keep a close watch on the progress of the famine'. One notices a clear anti-English bias in the consul's dispatches, and he is severely critical of the way in which the government handled the crisis: 'The government is more concerned in controlling the making of illicit whiskey than of trying to feed the starving poor' (15 November, 1845). And in analysing the reaction of the Irish people to the famine, Vaubicourt notes that:



Louis Philippe.

*The poorer Irish country people, because of their deep religious convictions, are convinced that Divine Providence has visited them in this way as a punishment . . . They are cowed and depressed by their new Enemy: fever, pestilence and Famine. their reactions are similar to their attitude in the past to oppressive governments and landlords: a sense of helplessness. They adopt a Doomsday approach and hardly dare to help themselves [23 July, 1846].*

Volume 42 covers the year 1867, and deals almost exclusively with the Fenian Rising, concentrating on the months of March, April and May. There are almost day-to-day dispatches, recounting scenes in Tallaght, Kilmallock, Kerry, Drogheda, etc . . . The American Fenians, such as Godfrey Massy and John Morrissy, are shown to have been among the principal instigators. The French consul considers that the way in which the judge passed sentence of death on some of the Fenians was 'barbarous' (5 May, 1867). 'They seem to have forgotten that these men are U.S. citizens and that their execution would harm relations between England and the United States.'

### II Correspondance Politique 1817 A 1896

#### Angleterre

This is a very long series, with over one hundred volumes. Only five of these have material of Irish interest, but they are a rich mine of information and commentary on the Land War, first and second Home Rule Bills, Parnell, Davitt, etc. The most important volume, which deals exclusively with Irish affairs, is volume 77, covering the years 1886 to 1888. The French consul in Dublin in 1886 was Baron de Cussy, and he had a deep knowledge of English politics. He realised that a new phase had begun in Irish history. In fact, he was one of the first commentators to recognise the

Ulster question and to appreciate the die-hard attitude of the Orangemen. As early as 9 January, 1886, de Cussy sounds the following warning about the Unionist opposition to Home Rule: 'They are getting ready for an armed resistance against any attempt to impose independence for Ireland. This may be said for certain, that unless certain demands, on the nationalist side be moderated, the sword will be called in, sooner or later, to settle the dispute.'

De Cussy also realises the role which the Conservative party has played in fomenting the situation in Ulster and on 24 February he accuses Lord Randolph Churchill of using phrases in Belfast 'certain to incite the people to civil war (une invitation a la guerre civile)'. He also was one of the first to point out that the real problem in the north-east part of Ireland was Scottish rather than English. He found that Scottish troops, all over Ireland, were unpopular, and on 31 May, 1886, described a clash 'between the Dubliners and Scottish troops in a back street in the capital city'. Finally, he is aware of the religious dimension to the struggle between the Irish and the Scottish in Ulster. He notes how the Orange-men always refer to Catholics as 'papists', and that this religious antagonism is felt at every level of society, so that even 'the workers are totally divided along religious lines' (July, 1886). As a result of de Cussy's dispatches, the French authorities sent a second French consul to Ireland, Monsieur Boeufve, who operated for the most part out of Belfast. Thus did the French, at this early date, recognise the 'Two Irelands' which were emerging from the struggle for Home Rule.

### III Correspondance Politique Et Commerciale 1897 A 1918

#### Grande Bretagne.

There is only one volume given up to Irish affairs in this series, catalogued under the title 'NS volume 4: Irlande 1897 à 1914'. Containing over four hundred folios, written on both sides, it covers in detail such important historical events as the Local Government Act, the Boer War, the visit of Queen Victoria in 1900, the Land Acts of 1903, the Third Home Rule Bill, the rise of Sinn Fein, the Volunteers, the Curragh Mutiny, the Howth Gun-running, etc. Much of this volume is taken up with the dispatches of Monsieur Paul Cambon, the French ambassador in London, whose observations on the Irish situation are most enlightening and well-informed. He was on personal terms with many of the people involved, and, as he remained in London from 1900 to 1920, he had a long-standing appreciation of both the Irish and English situations. This volume also contains the dispatches of the French consuls resident



Michael Davitt, from a portrait by William Orpen.

in Dublin and Belfast.

What emerges from a study of these reports is the very unsettled state of Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century. 'Irish opposition to English rule is as deep today (1897) as ever, though perhaps it does not express itself so openly as previously.' And as one enters the twentieth century, there are numerous warnings of civil war and insurrection. The visit of Queen Victoria was supposed to win over the Irish to British rule, but Paul Cambon sees it in a different light: 'She is coming over to save what she can of her links with Ireland, before they are severed, but all the trouble will be in vain. Anyone who has been asked his opinion on the matter says: 'It is too late'. (12 March 1900). The queen's visit 'is only a kind of calm before the storm. Nothing will have changed' (5 April, 1900).

These French dispatches are a useful antidote to the propaganda which filled the English newspapers at the time, and show how the Conservative government's attempt to put into practice their principle of 'constructive unionism' failed miserably in the long run. Monsieur Brault, the French consul in Dublin, wrote in March, 1903.

*If one can believe all the Conservative propaganda about the New Ireland which is going to emerge from this latest piece of British legislation [i.e. the Land Act,] then the country is undoubtedly on the threshold of a Golden Age. The question one has to ask is, however, how long will this Golden Age last, and whether an Age of Fire may not follow it ('et si l'age de feu ne lui succédera pas trop tôt).*

Another corrective to the usual interpretation of Irish history between the years of 1912-14 is provided by the comments of the Ulster situation by the French consuls. Their point of view may be summed up in the following way: The English government was so distracted by

the Northern Ireland anti-Home Rule noises, that it had failed to notice the more sinister and powerful forces for independence in the south. Thus instead of saying that 'the North began', it would be truer to say that 'the North acted as a blind', allowing the forces of Irish militant nationalism to thrive and develop in the South. Paul Cambon sees the real significance of the Irish Volunteers from the very beginning: 'The National Volunteers have not been formed to fight against the Ulster Unionists, but rather in order to expel the English soldiers from Ireland (*en vue de chasser de l'île les soldats anglais*)'.

Paul Cambon provides some new insights into the Curragh Mutiny of March, 1914. The value of his dispatches lies in the fact that he had personal conversations with people in the war office in London and got their *vies verbatim*, which he quotes at length. He sees the Curragh Mutiny as a drawing back from responsibility by the British government when forced to take an unpopular decision. In a report from London, dated 28 March, 1914, Cambon quotes a conversation he had with Sir Edward Grey, the foreign secretary, in which Grey told him that 'the real significance of the Curragh Mutiny lies in the fact that it will force Redmond into a compromising mood vis-à-vis Home Rule. For it shows beyond a doubt that in no way can the government coerce Ulster into a united Irish parliament in Dublin.' In other words, partition became a reality after the revelations of the Curragh Mutiny.

#### IV La Guerre, 1914-1918: Grande Bretagne

##### *Irlande: Vols, 545, 546, 547.*

The French authorities looked upon the 1916 Rising within the context of World War 1. All the material relating to the Easter Rising is contained in volume 545 of this series, and covers the period from March, 1915, to November, 1916. The French consul in Dublin throughout 1916 was Monsieur J. de Longchamps. He sent a long report to Paris on 18 April, 1916, stressing the anti-war feelings in Ireland. He suggested that the French foreign office should try to contact certain members of the Irish clergy and win them round to a pro-war (i.e. pro-French) point of view. They should send some French priests to lecture on the war situation, and even some priests from Alsace to show how the minority have been ill-treated by the Germans in Alsace. What alarmed the French consul was the growing sympathy for Germany among the Irish, and he warned of the consequences of the St Patrick's Day parade by the Volunteers: 'It is clear that a rebellion is possible in the country.'

Colonel de la Panouse, the French military attaché in London, took a special



A Co. Limerick landlord under close police protection.

interest in the Easter Rising. He sent a lengthy dispatch to Paris on 25 April, 1916, saying that 'it is all part of a German plot to keep as many British troops as possible occupied in Ireland and away from the Western Front'. He sees more than a coincidence in the fact that the Dublin rising and the bombardment by a flotilla of German warships on the east coast of England occurred simultaneously. The bombardment of Lowestoft and the Dublin rising were both part of an overall plan to disengage British troops from the continent. He even thought that the Germans might effect a landing on the east coast of England to boost this scare-tactic of bombardment.

Monsieur Paul Cambon, the French ambassador in London, also assesses the Easter Rising, in a dispatch sent to Paris on 3 May, 1916. He is astonished at the way in which the Irish have turned away from their former friend, France. The breakaway began when France and England signed an entente, although he admits that the anti-Catholic policy of the French government since 1905 had also helped to cool French-Irish relations. On the other hand, no one should be surprised if the Irish have turned to the Germans for help, as in the past they have turned to Spain and France for military aid. And there were two main reasons why Ireland in her present need might seek German help: (i) Germany would bring England to her knees and then England would have to give in to Ireland and (ii) the Germans would help to boost Irish industry, 'something which the English have neglected to do'.

Paul Cambon is one of the first to recognise the fact that the future in Irish politics belongs to Sinn Féin, and that the days of the Nationalist Party are over. Thus, in his dispatch of 3 May, 1916, he notes how

*the Sinn Féiners have won over the sympathy of the majority of the Irish people. The question is no longer simply that of Home Rule for Ireland, but separation. The republican flag has been raised in Dublin; the clock has been*



Cardinal Van Rossum, Limerick, 1928.

*put back fifty years in Ireland and one can safely say that the days of the Fenians have returned. The continuation of the policy of Home Rule is impossible. ('La continuité de la politique de Home Rule est impossible')*

Monsieur de Longchamps sent an equally important dispatch to Paris on 6 May, 1916, apologising for not writing earlier 'because of the complete disruption of the Irish postal service during the previous week' He saw the rising as a combination of Fenianism and socialism, and remarked how the conditions of work, and accommodation, among the lower classes in the Irish cities were 'deplorable'. 'Social justice is still non-existent in many parts of Ireland'.

In reference to the execution of the leaders of the Easter rebellion, Paul Cambon wrote on 12 May, 1916, to say that 'England has been cold-blooded as usual in her dealings with Ireland . . . General Maxwell has been given full military powers, whereas the Rebellion was not just a military affair, but both political, social and economic'.

The French government sent two missions (or groups of envoys) to Ireland in 1916 to enquire into the true situation there. The first arrived on 3 June, the second mission was from 7 to 14 October. In each case French Catholic priests or bishops were used, and their reports throw much light on the Irish scene after the rebellion. They reported that Irish sympathies were completely behind Sinn Féin and hostile to the allies. 'People openly wear the Green, White and Yellow colours in the streets.' In reference to Sinn Féin, the French mission in June, 1916, said that the new party was like 'a rather narrow river, which had suddenly burst its banks and covers today a vast extent of territory'. They also noted that 'many of the Sinn Féiners have steeped themselves in ancient Irish history, but they know nothing about modern

European history. This ignorance of the recent past in a handicap to finding a solution to what is a historical problem'.

One final quote is worth giving in reference to 1916, and it is contained in a dispatch from Colonel de la Panouse on 24 April, 1917, describing the scenes in Dublin on the anniversary of the Easter Rising. 'Many people in Ireland wish for a general election. If it were to be held, *Sinn Féin would sweep the board*. It is probable that the Redmondite nationalists would in nearly every case be replaced by Sinn Féiners.' Thus did the French military attaché in London see that the most significant consequence of the 1916 Rising was the emergence of a new Irish political party, which was destined, in the not-too-distant future, to become the *de facto* government of the new Ireland.

## V Europe 1918-1929

### *Irlande 18 volumes.*

It was only in 1972 that the French Foreign Office released what is the greatest single body of documents relating to Ireland preserved in the Quai d'Orsay. They are contained in eighteen bound volumes, and contain the dispatches of the French consul in Dublin during these years. They cover the era of the War of Independence, the Treaty, the Civil War, and the early years of the Irish Free State. France, during these years, was represented in Ireland by Monsieur Alfred Blanche, who arrived in Dublin towards the end of 1917 and remained there until 1930. He was personally sympathetic towards the Irish independence movement. Fluent in English (he had served in both Glasgow and Swansea), he was in a position to both understand and comment upon the Irish scene. He had more than twenty years service behind him in Copenhagen, Sarajevo and Reykjavik.

The volumes in this series, all on Irish affairs, are divided as follows:

- 1-8: Internal Affairs, June, 1918 to December, 1929;
- 9-10: Army and Navy Affairs, January, 1922 to November, 1929
- 11: Religious Questions, January, 1922 to December, 1929;
- 12-14: Foreign Affairs, December, 1921 to December, 1929;
- 15-17: Economic Affairs, January, 1922, to December, 1929;
- 18: Miscellaneous Affairs, 1918 to 1929.

The most interesting section of this correspondence is that relating to the period following on the Treaty. Monsieur Blanche wrote from Dublin on 14 January, 1922, to say that he had made contact with some influential people in the new government, and is thus able to pass on information which he has learnt in a private way. He asked for instructions as to how he should deal with the new Irish government 'since it is

the only real authority in the twenty-six counties'. He was apparently fascinated by the way in which the early sessions of the Dáil operated, noting the lack of experience on the part of its members, and concluding that it was 'only a skeleton of a parliament'.

In several of his dispatches, Blanche suggests French aid for the new Irish Free State government (i.e. the provisional government) and that they should not hesitate 'to give aid to the Irish people and help them find their own identity'. However, by January, 1923, Blanche had become disenchanted with the new Irish government and told Poincaré, the French foreign minister, that 'it was not greatly respected; it is enthroned in an ivory tower in government buildings; I [Blanche] have been to government buildings, and have been confronted by an armed guard' (30 January, 1923). He had some hard words for Kevin O'Higgins, the minister of the interior, for 'taking a hard line and refusing any compromise. His attitude shows lack of prudence and good taste' (28 March, 1923).

Volume 9 of this series is devoted to army and navy affairs, and contains some interesting letters from General Foch, General de la Panouse (French military attaché to London) and General J.J. O'Connell, second-in-command of the Irish Free State army. There was some question of sending Irish officers (trainees) to France to attend a French military academy in January, 1922. And when the civil war broke out, the Irish Free State army, through General J.J. O'Connell, was trying to pick the brains of the French army experts, for help to defeat the anti-treaty forces. However, the French were reluctant to send any such information until after December 1922, by which time the last of the British forces had left the twenty-six counties.

There is considerable documentation relating to the Boundary Commission, to the Imperial Conferences, to the assassination of Kevin O'Higgins, and to all the important political incidents of the nineteen-twenties. On the religious side, the French consul comments on the mission of Mgr Luzio to Ireland (March, 1923): 'Luzio left Ireland on 5 May, 1923, with very mixed feelings towards the first Catholic government Ireland has had since the Reformation.' Blanche also covers the mission of Cardinal Van Rossum to Ireland in 1928, as part of a projected diplomatic link-up between Dublin and the Vatican. When eventually Mgr. Paschal Robinson was appointed in November, 1929, Blanche reported to Paris that 'Dublin is delighted to get a nuncio, especially after the disappointment of not getting a cardinal. Mgr. Robinson is an excellent choice' (28 November, 1929)

(Reprinted from the *Irish-French Connection* 1578/1978, edited by Liam Swords, the Irish College, Paris, 1978).