

The Sinn Féin Árd-Fheis of 1917: a North Tipperary priest's account

By Fr. Patrick Gaynor

Editorial Introduction

*The author of this article was on the Executive Council of Sinn Féin for five years from 1917. A native of Ballygraique, Nenagh, he was educated at C.B.S., Nenagh, St. Flannan's, Ennis and St. Patrick's, Maynooth, being ordained to the priesthood in 1911. He ministered first in Scotland, returning to become diocesan inspector for Killaloe diocese, and was P.P. of Kilmihill at his death aged 63 in 1949. A keen historian and archaeologist, he spent most of 1921 (both before and after the Truce) in Limerick jail for his political activities. The editor of the **Tipperary Historical Journal** is grateful to Fr. Gaynor's nephew, Mr. Eamonn Gaynor, for permission to publish this memoir. It is hoped to publish a further memoir by Fr. Gaynor, dealing with the conscription Crisis and the General Election of 1918, in next year's Journal.*

De Valera's victory in East Clare gave impetus to the Sinn Féin movement. Clubs were founded in nearly all the parishes in Ireland and in October 1917 the time was ripe to hold a national convention in Dublin. We deliberated for two days and adopted the constitution which de Valera and some of the leaders had devised beforehand.

Arthur Griffith, President of the original Sinn Féin organisation, and a man free of vanity, stood aside and accepted de Valera as President. Also, Griffith's milder concept of "a national assembly" gave place to a formal Republican Government of Ireland at the insistence of Cathal Brugha and other 1916 men. We were obliged to stand unequivocally for an Irish Republic, because the term "national parliament" might be interpreted to mean a mere measure of Home Rule.

I knew right well that we had little chance of winning a Republic for all Ireland in the face of British and Orange opposition, but I did not foresee that any section of the Volunteers would revolt against any lesser offer as "a betrayal of the Irish Republic". In any event, we had no choice except to proclaim that an Irish Republic was our goal, in unison with the Proclamation of 1916.

There were over 2,000 delegates at the convention, every district in Ireland being represented, and we were desperately in earnest. Cathal Brugha, ever stubborn in maintaining his opinions, wearied us with requests for verbal amendments on minor points in the proposed Constitution, and other delegates saw a chance to make speeches. But de Valera dominated the convention; he was impetuous then, and was on his feet at every turn to justify and insist on his own formula, and he had his way.

I liked a leader who knew his own mind and was firm in upholding decisions which he had taken in advance on consultation with the ablest men in the movement. He explained why he used the uncompromising word "republic", but added that the Irish people would be allowed to choose their own form of government when we had achieved "the right of self-determination". That was the current phrase of the day, invented by President Wilson when he joined forces with the champion of "small nationalities".

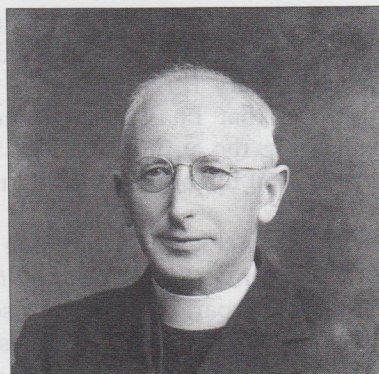
Note "Dev's" little trick. When he made a remark to please the moderates, he added a further remark which pleased the extremists. De Valera said that if the people wanted to have a

Kingdom instead of a republic, our king "would not be of the House of Windsor": the statement was cheered to the echo. He was later forced to accept 'the House of Windsor' in his alternative proposals for a Treaty with Britain (Document No. 2) and during his term of office (1932/48).

One cannot well expect a leader to be a prophet. We ought to have given more thought to the hard realities of the situation, and especially to the problem of the North-Eastern counties. Instead, we assumed that a republic for all Ireland might be achieved by stark determination. We imagined too that President Wilson's high-sounding "principles" would operate in our favour at the Peace Conference after the War.

We did not foresee, as we should have done, that Wilson's religious bigotry, which went deeper than his "principles", would operate against any Catholic nation and would find support in the bigotry of Lloyd George and Clemenceau. That fact explains why the Catholic Empire of Austria was broken into shreds at the "peace" conference – with results which we know – while the German Empire was preserved in its integrity.

We were very innocent, and yet I fail to see what we could have done except to stand boldly for a republic. I myself did not begin to reflect seriously on our position until I was thrown into jail (in May 1921) and had time to study the implications of Britain's countermove in setting-up a separate parliament under the 1920 [Government of Ireland] Act for the six northern counties. It should have been clear then, even to a simpleton, that we no longer had a chance – and shall never have a chance – to achieve a united Ireland, except by a reconquest in arms of the alienated portion of our country, or else by frank acceptance of "the House of Windsor". But that day is past.



Dermot Gleeson

The Executive Council

Under our new constitution, the Ard-Fheis was the supreme authority; but, apart from emergency, power was vested in the Supreme Executive Council, the members of which were to be elected at the Ard-Fheis by ballot. Each delegate received a form on which he inscribed the names of prominent persons, in the order of his choice, whom he deemed suitable for the Executive Council. De Valera's name was given first mention by all the delegates for the Presidency; other recognised leaders' names were then set-down on each ballot paper.

Griffith received second mention almost unanimously; next I think, came Fr. O'Flanagan and Eoin MacNeill. Those three ranked as vice-presidents, and there was a fourth vice-president whose name I forget. George Nesbit, a fine man, and Mrs. Wyse Power – I think – were chosen as honorary treasurers, and Harry Boland, whom I greatly liked, and Alderman Cole were chosen as honorary secretaries.

I cannot recall the names of the members of the Executive Council except Michael Collins, Cathal Brugha, George Murnaghan, Pierce Beaslai and Mrs. Sheehy-Skeffington. The delegates were able to fill in eight or ten names of the sixteen on their ballot papers with ease, but they had difficulty in completing the list, with the result that anyone whose name was fairly well known stood a good chance of election. To my surprise I came about tenth on the list, with nearly 600 votes, and served as a member of the Executive down to the last meeting in February, 1922.

Probably I owed my election to the widely read pamphlet on *The Faith and Morals of Sinn Féin*. I was more amused than pleased, for it was no easy matter to attend meetings in Dublin on the meagre salary (£120 per year), of a Diocesan Inspector. I did not develop a swollen head, knowing that I had been elected more or less by chance, but I became very resolute in upholding the authority of the Sinn Féin organisation, and still more resolute in making the writ of Dáil Éireann run within my sphere of influence, after the victory in the General Election of 1918.

As a member of the Supreme Executive, I had the right to be present at any meeting of the local executive (*comhairle ceanntair*) in North Tipperary, East Clare or West Clare, and at a meeting of a parish *cumann*. I also had the right to place a resolution on the agenda for the Árd-Fheis. I made use of that right, as we shall see, on two occasions.

The constitution provided for an *Árd Chomhairle*, comprised of members of the Supreme Executive and of delegates from the *Comhairle Ceanntair* in each constituency. But the *Ard Chomhairle* was convened only once, I think – and to no great purpose – during the Black and Tan regime.

The Conscription Menace

Lloyd George, perhaps at a hint from Redmond, conceived the idea of introducing a Bill in the British House of Commons to impose conscription on Ireland. He thought that he might benefit his friends in the Irish Party by rounding-up young Irishmen, who were mostly Sinn Féiners, and by sending them to die in Flanders. Moreover, the Irish members might regain some of their prestige by verbal opposition to the proposal. In actual fact, Lloyd George ruined the Irish Party.

People in Ireland – especially followers of Redmond, whose sons were in danger of being sent like sheep to the slaughter – soon perceived that Irish eloquence in Westminster, even if sincere (which I doubt), was utterly futile. Tim Healy merely succeeded in having priests excluded from the scope of the Bill, and that amendment was in Britain's interest, rather than in ours, because it made the Bill seem less odious and, as well, might lessen the opposition of the Irish Church to the measure.

The Conscription Bill was defeated, not in the British House of Commons, but in Ireland. The Irish bishops, at their meeting in Maynooth (which de Valera was permitted to address), issued a proclamation denying the right of the British Government to impose conscription on Ireland and calling on the people to unite in resistance to the attempt.

I used to insist afterwards that the Bishops' proclamation implied denial, as well, of Britain's right to govern Ireland and was a clear assertion of our distinct nationhood, and consequently, of our moral right to set up an Irish Government by the will of the people. My inference appears to have been logical; but the bishops may not have adverted, or intended, that their pronouncement on the conscription issue should be so interpreted.

Meetings of protest were at once organised all over Ireland and were attended by men of every party, except of course, the Unionist faction, and renegades who drew their pay from Dublin Castle. The resistance fund – amounting to thousands of pounds – was entrusted to priests for safekeeping.

Later, Dr. Coholan, bishop of Cork – to our disgust – tried to get hold of the fund in his diocese, for some Church purpose. His action, if it had succeeded, would have prevented the entrusting of public money ever again to priests in Ireland. Dr. Coholan played a curious part at the time. He wrote an article in the Jesuit magazine *The Irish Month*, the purpose of which

was to cut the ground, morally, from under our feet by asserting that the British king, having been designated and accepted as their ruler in times past, by sending our members to Westminster, could not be deprived of his authority over Ireland.

His article may have been a veiled attack on my little pamphlet, *The Faith and Morals of Sinn Féin*. I had stated our moral claim briefly in popular terms: "We recognise and believe that God is the fount and source of authority in Church and State. In the Church, authority resides in the Pope and Bishops, being divinely imparted to the Apostles and to their successors. In the State, authority resides in the people – "*Vox populi, vox Dei* . . ." The fount and source therefore, of lawful authority in Ireland is, under God, the Irish people's will."

Dr. Coholan pointed out, correctly, that the people have only the right to designate the ruler who, being duly designated, derives his authority from God. That is the position in the Church: the College of Cardinals do not impart authority to the Pope; they designate the person who is to hold that sacred office. Thus far, Dr. Coholan's line of argument is sound; but he went too far in claiming that the King could not be deprived of his authority. Later, the British Parliament removed King Edward VIII from the throne and gave royal authority instead to his brother, King George VI.

Dr. Coholan in 1921, when Cork city was burned by some Orange fanatics from the North and by the Black and Tans (in reprisal, perhaps, for our rather foolish boycott of Belfast, for we boycotted only those who had an interest in preserving Irish unity), very absurdly pronounced sentence of excommunication on the Irish volunteers. One would think that he ought to have pronounced censure instead – if he did not wisely keep silence – on any Catholics among the criminals who burned his city.

Later on, when the British were forced to offer a truce, Dr. Coholan posed as a good Sinn Féiner and – if my memory is accurate – claimed credit for having discouraged the burning of nationalist houses by a warning that the policy would provoke the burning of loyalist houses in reprisal. His general behaviour at the time compares very unfavourably with that of Dr. Fogarty [bishop of Killaloe], who declared that he "would not cast the first stone" if some Volunteers were driven to violent action under the Black and Tan regime.

Dr. Foley of Kildare also made some adverse comment on *The Faith and Morals of Sinn Féin*; but when I had not incurred Dr. Fogarty's censure I felt happy. Big Fr. Tim Donohue (a most amiable priest but fiercely opposed to Sinn Féin) denounced me from the altar of Nenagh Church for a letter to the *Nenagh Guardian* in which I warned the loyalists to exercise caution, if they would not take sides with the Irish nation on the conscription issue. Probably Fr. Tim did not know that I was the author of the letter; my name was signed in the Gaelic form!

Nenagh Sinn Féiners used to say that Fr. Tim had invested all his money in British securities and was an imperialist for that reason. I think he was simply a loyal supporter – like many other priests – of the Irish Party, for old times' sake. Venerable Archdeacon Ryan (afterwards Dean of the Diocese) presided at the anti-conscription meeting in Birr. His appearance on a public platform (the first and last in his life) shows the intensity of feeling which Lloyd George's Bill had aroused in Ireland.

Anti-conscription Meetings

Monsignor McMahon presided at the meeting in Nenagh, and nearly every priest in the deanery was on the platform. The speeches were eloquently in favour of passive resistance, which did not please the Volunteers. Near the end, Willie Hoolan sought me out among the crowd and said: "If you do not go up on that platform and give straight talk, I shall go up

myself". I had not gone to the platform, being unsure of my welcome from the senior brethren and having neither the wish to speak nor any great belief in oratory. But at Willie Hoolan's request on behalf of the Volunteers, I marched up and Mgr. McMahon lacked the courage to make me march down again.

It was a "spur of the moment" speech and was probably a poor effort. I remember only the general line of argument. I began by saying that the Irish people had made a mistake at the time of the Great Famine: they had let Dan O'Connell and their local leaders and the comfortable folk persuade them to die of hunger, rather than cause trouble in the country (and inconvenience to those who were in no danger of death), by seizing the harvest and by fighting for their lives.

"We have a similar crisis now", I said, "and again, those who are in no danger, those who have no sons of military age, will preach peace and passive resistance. But we, Sinn Féiners and Volunteers, will not repeat the mistake which the starving people made in the Famine time". I went on to explain that passive resistance and verbal protest would not meet the case; that the British would break the spirit of any young man whom they could seize, and would force him to drill by sheer torture and would drive him into the trenches with machine-guns.

I ended up with a sentence which is still quoted against me: "In all the world we have but one enemy, England. No other nation has ever done us wrong. Remember therefore, if an attempt is made to conscript us – if guns are forced into our hands – the fit resting-place for an Irish bullet is in an English heart".

I am sure the senior clergy and the pacifists were very annoyed, and I do not blame them. Fr. Pat O'Meara tried to undo the effects of the speech, but with little success. Everyone knew that I had told the truth – that the Irish Volunteers would meet the menace of conscription with weapons of some kind in their hands. The measure was not enforced; but the threat had given immense strength to Sinn Féin all over Ireland.

In Ennis, at a meeting of the Sinn Féin Club at which Fr. O'Kennedy presided, the question [arose] of food supply for the town (and of conserving food in the country), if an attempt were made to enforce conscription, through the Sinn Féin clubs, to keep reserves of food for the people of Ennis, apparently free of charge. Being a farmer's son, I did not like the idea: a farmer has to pay his way by selling his produce at the right time. I suggested that we should open a Sinn Féin market at once, in Ennis, to be ready for the emergency; that we should ask each Sinn Féin club to send produce in turn, paying the market price, and that we should sell the produce to the people at a nominal profit.

Fr. O'Kennedy, a great organiser, took up the idea with enthusiasm and, with help from some of our rural supporters, ran the Sinn Féin market with great success, until the crisis was at an end. This incursion into the economic field had a disconcerting result. The low charge in the Sinn Féin market brought prices down in the shops and a few staunch Sinn Féiners who depended chiefly on the sale of farm produce were made bankrupt and had to be subsidised for a time out of funds.

In 1918 Fr. Charlie Culligan, C.C., Silvermines, was transferred to Kilmihil. He had been chairman of the North Tipperary Sinn Féin Comhairle Ceanntair, and on his departure, I was asked to become chairman in his stead.

The European War ended on November 11, 1918, and soon afterwards, Lloyd George and his coalition Government decided to hold a general election on a "hang the Kaiser" catch-cry, and on a promise of "homes fit for heroes to live in". Meanwhile, John Redmond had gone to his eternal reward and "honest" John Dillon had been chosen as leader of the Irish Party. The general election gave Sinn Féin a chance to remove the Dillon faction from public life. This election brought Dáil Éireann into existence.