

Revolution and nationalism in Treatyite political thought, 1891–1924

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ABSTRACT. *The last fifty years have witnessed the production of a large body of scholarship exploring the political and social history of the Irish Civil War and its aftermath. Debate has focused principally on the administrative abilities and democratic credentials of the Free State government and the extent to which revolutionary ideals were expressed institutionally following the ratification of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921. However, there has been strikingly little attempt to contextualise, rather than appraise, the lineage of the moral and ideological assumptions embedded in the executive council's public professions of political conviction, or to understand Treatyite policy-making on its own terms. In particular, historians have tended to weigh and measure the performance of the Cumann na nGaedheal government against anachronistic and moralising definitions of what the Irish revolution stood for at the expense of any systematic attempt to reconstruct the manner in which relevant historical actors understood this relationship. Focusing on the heterodox intellectual firmament of the Irish-Ireland movement, this paper demonstrates that the Cumann na nGaedheal government never abandoned the political languages of the revolution; rather, they constructed an ideology to support the new state rooted in their own interpretation of what they considered revolutionary ideals of Irish-Ireland nationalism.*

On 31 October 1924 Kevin O'Higgins, justice minister of the nascent Irish Free State, travelled to London to address the Irish Society at the University of Oxford. The speech was delivered during a crucial phase in the Cumann na nGaedheal government's attempt to stabilise the state in the aftermath of a brutal civil war arising from the split in Sinn Féin over the terms of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty. His address provides a fascinating insight into the Free State government's understanding of what the Irish revolution stood for and the kinds of social, political and economic developments considered necessary to, in O'Higgins's words, 'justify ourselves for the struggle we made for liberation against the British'.¹

Drawing from the influential Catholic intellectual Hilaire Belloc's account of the life of the French revolutionary, Georges Danton, O'Higgins characterised revolution as 'essentially a reversion to the normal — a sudden and violent return to those conditions which are the necessary bases of health in any political community'.²

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¹ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, ii, no. 18 (17 Jan. 1923).

² Hilaire Belloc, *Danton: a study by Hilaire Belloc* (New York, 1899), p. 1.

and avowed that ‘two conditions ... attach to a people’s right to the fullest self-government — a desire on their part to undertake their government and a fitness for that responsibility.’³ O’Higgins was emphatic in articulating the historic ‘desire’ of the Irish nation for sovereignty. Depicting the period 1800 to 1921 as one of ‘unceasing protest’ against an alien ascendancy, he declared that ‘whether voiced by O’Connell, the Young Irelanders, Fenianism, Butt, Parnell, Redmond or Sinn Féin’, Ireland’s ‘claim’ to ‘Government of the people, by the people, for the people’ was ‘raised consistently throughout that century and a quarter’.⁴ However, the justice minister’s strident tone grew conspicuously circumspect when he reflected upon the Irish public’s ‘fitness’ for self-government. A people’s maturity in this regard, he argued, can only be discerned ‘after the right [to sovereignty] has been conceded and the responsibilities assumed’. The ‘weird composite of idealism, neurosis, megalomania and criminality’, that was ‘thrown to the surface’ of Irish public life during the Civil War did little to alleviate traditional, racialised perceptions of Ireland’s Catholic majority as congenitally prone to ‘an ebullition of the savage, primitive passion to wreck and loot and level when an opportunity seemed to offer to do so with impunity’.⁵

Nevertheless, O’Higgins professed an enduring faith that, given time, the Irish people would ‘emerge satisfactorily ... from the test of the capacity of her people for self-government’. He cited his administration’s accomplishments in establishing an unarmed police force, reforming the judiciary, financing land purchases and developing the rail infrastructure as evidence that the Free State was on course to emulate the ‘long tradition of sober responsible citizenship’ embodied by the older, settled self-governing nations of France, Italy, America and, most significantly, England.⁶ Clearly underlying O’Higgins’s address is a firm conviction that revulsion at the perceived political and economic inequity of the Anglo-Irish relationship as governed by the terms the Act of Union was not in itself sufficient grounds for the deployment of revolutionary violence against the British state. Such radical methods could, ultimately, only be vindicated fully when the Irish public demonstrated themselves capable of exercising their newly acquired liberty in a mature, civic manner, a development that would ensure Irish political life ‘reverted to the normal’, the condition that O’Higgins, following Belloc, avowed as the ultimate end of revolution. ‘The impression I would wish to convey’, O’Higgins concluded, ‘is that of a country which has no problems confronting it equal to the problems it has already surmounted, a country which has diagnosed and is treating its social and economic ailments, a country facing the future with a quiet confidence that it can and will justify and vindicate its age-long struggle for mastery of its own house’.⁷

This sense that the Irish Free State was obliged to ‘justify’ the nation’s historic claim to sovereignty, and that the revolutionary methods adopted by Sinn Féin and the I.R.A. between 1916–21 could be ‘vindicated’ most effectively through the restoration of social and political ‘normality’, was echoed widely among O’Higgins’s cabinet colleagues. President of the executive council,

³ Kevin O’Higgins, *Three years hard labour: an address delivered to the Irish Society of Oxford University on the 31st of October, 1924* (Dublin, 1924), p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 5–7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

W. T. Cosgrave, for instance, professed a desire ‘to forget that there has been any interruption of the normal condition of our lives, and to get back to work, and to do things sensibly’.⁸ Pro-Treaty propaganda documents similarly promoted a ‘Return to Normality’⁹ as the optimal outcome of the Civil War and regularly advised citizens on ‘What we must do to settle down’.¹⁰ It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that almost four decades after Fianna Fáil’s victory in the 1932 general election, the former Free State finance minister, Ernest Blythe, would insist that his administration’s greatest achievement had been ‘to bring the country round to the position where the government could be changed without bloodshed.’¹¹ Such statements suggest that, by the time the Civil War had ended, senior ministers had come increasingly to define the revolution in terms of the attainment of stable self-government, with the guiding ambition of Treatyite politics being to ‘justify and vindicate’ the nation’s historic claim to sovereignty on the world stage.

Of course, this preoccupation with stabilising the institutional architecture of the fledgling state has been noted widely by historians. The Treatyites’ favoured self-image as cool-headed, patient, pragmatic ‘builders’ of the Irish State has since been echoed regularly in sympathetic accounts of their period in office.¹² However, strikingly little attention has been devoted to the intellectual impulses underlying Treatyite conservatism or to understanding the origins of the moral and ideological assumptions embedded in the Cosgrave government’s use of hegemonic concepts such as ‘normality’, ‘stability’ and ‘common sense’. The historiography of the Irish revolution has focused overwhelmingly on the social background of its participants and most analyses proceed from the (usually tacit) assumption that political ideas simply reflect material conditions created by underlying social and economic structures.¹³ Tom Garvin suggested that ‘the ideological shapelessness of the separatist tradition’ is such as to oblige scholars to focus on ‘the social origins’ and resultant ‘mentality’ of political actors at the expense of any serious attempt to ‘write an intellectual history of Irish separatist political thought’.¹⁴ Michael Laffan argued similarly that people ‘joined Sinn Féin in their tens of thousands, not because they believed in its ideology’ but ‘because their Anglophobia surfaced after the Easter Rising and during the conscription crisis’, giving rise to an ebullience of ‘xenophobia, resentment and greed’.¹⁵ In this approach, languages of politics are

⁸ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, i, no. 25 (25 Oct. 1922).

⁹ U.C.D.A., Desmond and Mabel FitzGerald papers, P80/318 (4).

¹⁰ *An Saorstát*, 7 Oct. 1922.

¹¹ Quoted in Diarmaid Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland: 1900–2000* (London, 2004), p. 297.

¹² See, for example, Joseph Curran, *The birth of the Irish Free State* (Tuscaloosa, 1980); Jeffrey Prager, *Building democracy in Ireland: political order and cultural integration in a newly independent nation* (Cambridge, 1986); Tom Garvin, *1922: the birth of Irish democracy* (Dublin, 1996); John P. McCarthy, *Kevin O’Higgins: builder of the Irish state* (Dublin, 2006); Michael Laffan, *Judging W. T. Cosgrave: the foundation of the Irish state* (Dublin, 2014).

¹³ For more on the origins of this approach, see Richard Bourke, ‘Reflections on the political thought of the Irish revolution’ in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, xxvii (2017), pp 175–91.

¹⁴ Tom Garvin, *Nationalist revolutionaries in Ireland 1858–1928: patriots, priests and the roots of the Irish revolution* (Oxford, 1987), p. v; see also *idem*, 1922, pp 137–8.

¹⁵ Michael Laffan, *The resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Féin party, 1916–1923* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 214.

treated as epiphenomenal, dismissed as rhetorical ephemera that obscure the primal and material expression of self-interest which it is the proper role of the historian to uncover. With a few distinguished exceptions, there has been little attempt to situate the ideological leadership of Ireland's revolutionary generation in their intellectual contexts, or to excavate and examine the structure and style of argumentation deployed by political actors during the period.¹⁶

This tendency to marginalise the role of ideas as a central, causal force in shaping historical events is particularly marked in the historiography of the Civil War period and its aftermath where debate has focused overwhelmingly on the democratic credentials of the Treatyite government and the role of social class in shaping the executive council's policies.¹⁷ Clearly these questions are vital to understanding the political and economic forces that conditioned Cumann na nGaedheal's decision-making. However, a narrow focus on the administrative expertise of the Cosgrave government and its alleged indifference to revolutionary aspirations has revealed little regarding the intellectual foundations of Treatyite politics. The historiography has tended to hinge upon a moral assessment of policy outcomes: either the executive council is praised for its achievement in preventing the Free State from succumbing to authoritarianism and its social and economic conservatism is tolerated, or that same conservatism is condemned as revelatory of a reactionary or counter-revolutionary impulse expressed most fully by the Blueshirt movement after 1932.¹⁸ In the last twenty years a proliferation of scholarship has focused on analysing the extent to which political developments on the island of Ireland between 1912 and 1923 can be regarded accurately as 'revolutionary' in character.¹⁹ But, although such debates have yielded valuable comparative and taxonomic insights, there has been little attempt to understand the Cosgrave government on its own terms or to more fully contextualise the intellectual milieu that shaped the Executive Council's policymaking.²⁰ Highlighting continuities with

¹⁶ Patrick Maume, *The long gestation: Irish nationalist life, 1891–1918* (Dublin, 1999); Bryan Fanning, *The quest for modern Ireland: the battle of ideas 1912–1986* (Dublin, 2008); Senia Pašeta, *Irish nationalist women, 1900–1918* (Cambridge, 2013); eadem, 'Feminist political thought and activism in revolutionary Ireland, c.1880–1918' in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, xxvii (2017), pp 193–209; R. F. Foster, *Vivid faces: the revolutionary generation in Ireland, 1890–1923* (London, 2014); Colin W. Reid, 'Democracy, sovereignty and unionist political thought during the revolutionary period in Ireland, c.1912–1922' in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, xxvii (2017), pp 211–32.

¹⁷ For theses that frame 1922 as heralding the onset of a bourgeois counter-revolution, see, for example, Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, *Portrait of a revolutionary: General Richard Mulcahy* (Dublin, 1992); Mary Kotsounouris, *Retreat from revolution: the Dáil courts, 1920–24* (Dublin, 1994); John M. Regan, *The Irish counter-revolution, 1921–36: Treatyite politics and settlement in independent Ireland* (Dublin, 2001); Bill Kissane, *The politics of the Irish Civil War* (Oxford, 2005); Gavin M. Foster, *The Irish Civil War and society: politics, class, and conflict* (London, 2015).

¹⁸ Regan, *The Irish counter-revolution*, 341.

¹⁹ Marc Mulholland, 'How revolutionary was the "Irish Revolution"?' in *Éire–Ireland*, lvi, no. 1 & 2 (2021), pp 139–75; see also Joost Augusteijn (ed.), *The Irish Revolution, 1913–23* (London, 2002).

²⁰ On the history of the Free State as 'the history of a disappointment', see Anne Dolan, 'Politics, economy and society in the Irish Free State, 1922–1939' in Thomas Bartlett (ed.), *The Cambridge history of Ireland*, vol. iv: *1800 to the present* (Cambridge, 2018), pp 323–4.

respect to gender, racial and class prejudice in Irish nationalist discourse from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, for instance, Aidan Beatty makes the case that historians ought ‘to abandon the term “revolution” altogether’ when analysing modern Irish history,²¹ avowing that ‘historians do not have to accept that an event perceived as a revolution by nationalists should also be understood as such’.²² But in disregarding historical actors’ perception of the events through which they lived and imposing instead an anachronistic and moralising definition of the organising concepts through which they made sense of their lives, such an approach succumbs inevitably to what E. P. Thompson termed ‘the enormous condescension of posterity’.²³ As Quentin Skinner reminds us, the principal obligation of any scholar seeking to recover the principles and ideas that animated past societies must be to ‘see things’ in the manner that their subjects saw them. Historians of political thought, that is, are required to approach the past ‘with a willingness to listen’ and to attempt to understand past agents on their own terms and in their own intellectual contexts, rather than framing the ideas of the past in familiar modern, or postmodern, categories.²⁴

Drawing on the contextualist methodology developed by Skinner and the so-called ‘Cambridge school’ of intellectual historians, this article seeks to trace the discursive lineage of the Cumann na nGaedheal executive council’s understanding of revolution as a ‘reversion to the normal’.²⁵ Focusing on the heterodox intellectual firmament of the Irish-Ireland movement, it suggests that there emerged in Irish nationalist circles from the late nineteenth-century a popularly shared conviction that, with the attainment of political sovereignty, there would obtain a profound transformation in the national character. This would enable the Irish people to recover a co-constitutive sense of cultural self-confidence and political self-reliance that had been sapped during the period of British rule and thus refute decisively the then commonplace perception of the Irish nation as lacking in the moral and intellectual faculties required for self-government. This impulse to vindicate historic nationalist claims to fitness for sovereignty by projecting a positive image of the Free State internationally has been noted previously by historians.²⁶ However, the intersection of such discourses with pre-Treaty Irish-Ireland rhetoric has yet to be subject to sustained, critical examination. For example, Jason Knirck’s valuable study of Free State rhetoric in seeking to discipline ‘a postcolonial nation where disrespect for the law had become widespread’ derives exclusively from post-1921 source materials, rendering an excavation of the pre-revolutionary

²¹ Aidan Beatty ‘An Irish revolution without a revolution’ in *Journal of World-Systems Research*, xxii, no. 1 (2016), pp 54–76; also idem, *Masculinity and power in Irish nationalism, 1884–1938* (London, 2016), pp 3–4.

²² Aidan Beatty, ‘Counter-revolutionary masculinities: gender, social control and revising the chronologies of Irish nationalist politics’ in *Irish Studies Review*, xxix, no. 2 (2021), p. 10.

²³ E. P. Thompson, *The making of the English working class* (New York, 1963), p. 12.

²⁴ Quentin Skinner, *Visions of politics: vol. I, regarding method* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 6.

²⁵ For more on the origins and development of this method, see Gary Browning, *A history of modern political thought: the question of interpretation* (Oxford, 2016), chapter 4.

²⁶ Prager, *Building democracy in Ireland*, pp 27–66; Mike Cronin, ‘Projecting the nation through sport and culture: Ireland, Aonach Tailteann and the Irish Free State, 1924–32’ in *Journal of Contemporary History*, xxxviii, no.3 (July 2003), pp 395–411.

pedigree of such languages beyond the scope of his investigation.²⁷ With respect to recovering the intellectual origins of Treatyite policymaking, therefore, it is important to note how many influential nationalist publicists and thinkers conceptualised such an alteration in the national consciousness, and in the international perception of the Irish people, as a central aim of the revolution long before the ratification of the Treaty and the onset of civil war. As Sinn Féin party founder, Arthur Griffith wrote in his 1904 publication, *The resurrection of Hungary*:

forty years ago the Austrian Press and the Austrian statesmen assured the world, as the English Press and the English statesmen assure it now about Ireland, that the people of Hungary were a very interesting people, brave enough and with some rude notion of the arts, but fickle, inconstant, lacking in application in a word — devoid of the great Teutonic virtues of sobriety, patience, and industry. Hungary has shown the world how Austria lied.²⁸

The inference, was that Irish nationalists must aspire to achieve a similar feat, and although the Irish revolution produced a great many competing visions of how such a perceptual transformation might be achieved, the dominant, Treatyite conception of the revolution as a transformation in the national character and, consequently, to the way in which the Irish nation would be regarded internationally, was current in nationalist and republican thought long before 1922 and must be understood in the context of the prevailing ideological conventions and debates of interwar Europe.

While the contributions of scholars such as Ciara Meehan and Mel Farrell have provided a valuable corrective to the idea that Cumann na nGaedheal were content merely to discard Irish-Ireland ideals after 1922, all such analyses rest on a conception of Irish-Ireland nationalism as a straightforward rejection of Victorian British imperial culture.²⁹ The reality was far more complex and the vast wealth of source material produced during the crucial two decades that followed the Pamellite split makes clear that Irish-Ireland nationalism was a hybrid ideology composed of both assimilative and separatist traditions, one that rejected the language and symbols of Victorian England on the one hand, while emulating many of its core moral and social values on the other. There can be no doubt that revivalist institutions such as the Gaelic Athletic Association (1884), the Gaelic League (1893) and the Irish Literary Theatre (1899) were deeply concerned to emphasise Irish difference from Britain, ‘archaizing of the idea of Irish culture’ to strengthen ‘the basis of a claim to independence’.³⁰ However, the Irish-Ireland movement was equally dedicated to reforming the national character in an effort to imbue the Irish people with the moral and intellectual competencies judged to be required of a mature, stable, self-governing community. As the influential nationalist publicist and thinker, Erskine Childers, wrote by way of defining ‘the deep spiritual impulse’ underlying the desire for self-government in 1911:

²⁷ Jason Knirck, *Afterimage of the revolution: Cumann na nGaedheal and Irish politics, 1922–1932* (Madison, WI, 2014), pp 54–104.

²⁸ Arthur Griffith, *The resurrection of Hungary: a parallel for Ireland* (Dublin, 1918), pp 68–9.

²⁹ Ciara Meehan, *The Cosgrave party: a history of Cumann na nGaedheal, 1923–33* (Dublin, 2010), pp 44–7; Mel Farrell, *Party politics in a new democracy: the Irish Free State, 1922–37* (New York, 2017), pp 109–14.

³⁰ Seamus Deane, *Strange country: modernity and nationhood in Irish writing since 1790* (Oxford, 1997), pp 50–51.

A craving for self-expression, self-reliance ... Through political responsibility only can a society brace itself to organized effort, find out its own opinions on its own needs, test its own capabilities, and elicit the will, the brains, and the hands to solve its own problems.³¹

The influence of this latter strand of Irish-Ireland thought forms the focus of this article, namely, the aspiration to nurture an ethic of self-improvement and sturdy self-reliance in the Irish public and thereby vindicate the nation's historic claim to sovereignty.

I

On 25 November 1892, the poet and folklorist, Douglas Hyde, delivered a paper to the Irish National Literary Society in Dublin entitled, 'The necessity for de-anglicising Ireland'. In it, he excoriated the 'illogical position' of the Irishman who professes to 'hate the English, and at the same time continues to imitate them' and who 'continues to clamour for recognition as a distinct nationality' while 'throw[ing] away with both hands what would make it so'. He concluded by imploring the 'Irish race' to 'develop in future upon Irish lines', and to engage with the Irish language and 'Gaelic traditions', to ensure that the nation 'will ever remain Celtic to the core'.³² Hyde's address, delivered less than a year after the fall of Charles Stewart Parnell, tapped into a deep seam of disillusion with parliamentary politics, and although the detail of his revival programme was politically conservative, his invocation of a romantic, nationalist rhetoric redolent of Young Ireland marked a significant departure from the legalistic, rights-based vocabulary of the Irish Parliamentary Party. 'The necessity for de-anglicising Ireland' provided an ideological foundation for the Gaelic League, established in 1893, and so helped to form the intellectual bedrock of that broad cultural, economic, political, and social phenomenon that came to dominate Irish public life for much of the subsequent two decades — the Irish-Ireland movement.

No single label is ever adequate to account for the vast internal complexity characteristic of the loose network of formal and informal campaigns, 'sometimes dependent on one another, sometimes independent, frequently antagonistic to one another, but considerably overlapping in support', that composed Irish-Ireland.³³ One need only observe how casually the phrase is interchanged with expressions like 'Celtic Twilight' and 'Gaelic Revival' to recognise that Irish-Ireland ideas were subject to a range of interpretations and appealed to individual members of revivalist institutions in diverse ways. As D. P. Moran, the irascible journalist who coined the term in his 1905 essay collection, *The philosophy of Irish-Ireland*, observed: 'the Gaelic revival, however it may attempt to define itself on paper ... has no definite objective; it is a stirring up, portending no one knows

³¹ Erskine Childers, *The framework of home rule* (London, 1911), pp 150–51.

³² Douglas Hyde, 'The necessity for de-anglicising Ireland' in Charles Gavan Duffy (ed.), *The revival of Irish literature: addresses by Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, K.C.M.G., Dr. George Sigerson, and Dr. Douglas Hyde* (London, 1894), pp 115–61.

³³ R. Vincent Comerford, 'Nation, nationalism and the Irish language' in T. Hachey and L. J. McCaffrey (eds), *Perspectives on Irish nationalism* (Lexington, 1989), p. 29.

exactly what.³⁴ But for all the ambiguity perceived to surround the ultimate aims of the Irish-Ireland movement, Patrick Pearse and many contemporary observers were emphatic that the foundation of the Gaelic League marked ‘the beginning of the Irish Revolution’.³⁵

Scholars have struggled to account for such attributions of political import to what W. B. Yeats defined as a ‘stir of thought’ focused so heavily on questions of language and culture.³⁶ The rise of Irish-Ireland rhetoric in the period following the Parnellite split is framed commonly as a retreat from parliamentary contestation into art, a period when ‘Culture, rather the politics, became ground zero where questions about the “Irish Nation” were vigorously debated’.³⁷ However, much of the writing produced in the period after 1891 diverges from such an interpretation in that it frames the recovery of an autochthonous culture as integral to the process by which the Irish nation could rediscover the sense of cultural self-confidence and political self-reliance required to achieve and maintain successful separation from the British state. Reflecting upon the manner in which the ‘Gaelic movement’ had functioned to alter ‘the centre of gravity in Irish mental life’ in 1918, for instance, the nationalist journalist, Aodh de Blácam declared unequivocally that ‘The League’s aim is to change the course of history. This, if politics be the special province of history, is political.’³⁸ For although he recognised that, as an institution, the league was formally non-political, he judged that by vindicating the idea of ‘achievement on the basis of self-help’, the movement had fomented a political context in which Sinn Féin could call productively ‘for similar endeavour in other fields’.³⁹ ‘The Gaelic League had revived the separate sentiment of nationality’, de Blácam concluded; ‘Sinn Fein had planned out the embodiment which nationality must take.’⁴⁰

The Canadian-born Gaelic League enthusiast John Daniel Logan was similarly scathing of the perception of the Irish-Ireland movement as ‘merely a literary fad’, stressing that it was ‘precisely the actual living connection which does exist between the study of the language and literature of Ireland and its present-day social and industrial life that justifies the existence and work of the Gaelic League’.⁴¹ At a time when language was conceptualised widely as ‘a revelation’ of the collective ‘mind of the race’,⁴² or as the ‘living root from which alone organic [racial] growth is possible’,⁴³ the recovery of the national tongue was understood widely to contribute to a process of racial revitalisation. It could reverse the deracinating effects of a

³⁴ D. P. Moran, *The philosophy of Irish-Ireland* (Dublin, 1905), pp 69–70.

³⁵ Patrick Pearse, ‘The coming revolution’ in *Collected works of Pádraic H. Pearse: political writings and speeches*, vol. 5 (Dublin, 1922), p. 95.

³⁶ William B. Yeats, ‘The Irish dramatic movement’ (Nobel Lecture, 15 Dec. 1923) in idem, *Dramatis personae: autobiographies* (London, 1936), p. 177.

³⁷ Brian Ó Conchubhair, ‘The culture war: the Gaelic League and Irish Ireland’ in Bartlett (ed.), *Cambridge history of Ireland*, iv, p. 196.

³⁸ Aodh de Blácam, ‘The Gaelic League yesterday and today’ in *Irish Monthly*, xlvi, no. 546 (1918), pp 680, 682.

³⁹ Aodh de Blácam, *What Sinn Fein stands for: the Irish republican movement; its history, aims and ideals, examined as to their significance to the world* (Dublin, 1921), p. 45.

⁴⁰ De Blácam, *What Sinn Fein stands for*, p. 61.

⁴¹ John Daniel Logan, *The making of the new Ireland* (Toronto, 1909), pp 9–10.

⁴² Patrick Pearse, ‘Murder machine’ in *Collected works of Pádraic H. Pearse*, p. 20.

⁴³ Report of commission on the Gaeltacht, 1925 (U.C.D.A., Ernest Blythe papers, P24/529).

perceived overdependency on British culture and British politics and provide the Irish public with the psychological resources required to achieve and sustain sovereignty.⁴⁴ As Richard Bourke notes, the reorientation in Irish thought from the 1890s ‘involved a rejection less of politics than of parliamentarism specifically ... The ambition still remained one of political transformation — or, at least, of moral rebirth with vaguely projected political consequences.’⁴⁵ A detailed excavation of such images of ‘moral rebirth’ is essential to enabling us to discern the relation that contemporaries perceived between Irish-Ireland cultural nationalism and political revolution. This can help reveal the intellectual lineage underlying the Cumann na nGaedheal executive council’s interpretation of the material and intellectual transformations the revolution had been intended to achieve. Clearly, in the eyes of several of the most influential publicists and thinkers of Ireland’s revolutionary generation, the remedies to Ireland’s problems, cultural and economic, lay dormant in the untapped intellectual and material resources of the nation. It was only when their countrymen renounced an indolent dependence on the British parliament and cultivated a meaningful level of self-reliance and self-belief that they could realise and vindicate the nation’s long-standing aspiration to sovereignty.

D. P. Moran, for instance, lamented an historic ‘cringe’ in the national psyche, an internalised inferiority complex which persuades Irishmen, ‘like the children that we have allowed ourselves to become’, to ‘look nervously to our masters to find out how much good we may believe of ourselves’ and to contemplate obsequiously ‘the well-dressed English speaker as a black contemplates a white man’.⁴⁶ This, he diagnosed, was the root cause of a chronic lack of national self-belief that it was the ‘primary office’ of the Gaelic League to expunge.⁴⁷ Moran wrote: ‘[N]ational character, as much as individual character, can, by conscious effort, be moulded and changed ... I see in the Gaelic revival a means to effect such a change’.⁴⁸ He was emphatic that because the Land League was ‘in its essence, only a material movement’, any attribution to it of national or revolutionary import was ‘an utter delusion’ because, in focusing strictly on the land question, it had allowed ‘the real national life’ to ‘sleep’ and ‘glide away’.⁴⁹ This perspective is at odds with subsequent arguments that the absence of meaningful material redistribution following the formation of the Free State derived from the fact that the real or material revolution had already been completed following the passage through the House of Commons of the Wyndham Land Act in 1903.⁵⁰ In Moran’s analysis, the aim of the revolution in Ireland was not concerned principally with the redistribution of material wealth, but with the organisation of political representation and the

⁴⁴ For more on how late Victorian theories of primitivism, degeneration and racial decline shaped Irish nationalist thought, see Sinéad Garrigan Mattar, *Primitivism, science, and the Irish revival* (Oxford, 2004); Brian Ó Conchubhair, *Fin de siècle na Gaeilge: Darwin, an athbheochan agus smaointeoireacht na hEorpa* (Galway, 2009).

⁴⁵ Richard Bourke, ‘Revolution and political ideas in Ireland, 1890–1922’ in Richard Bourke and Niamh Gallagher (eds), *The political thought of the Irish revolution* (Cambridge, 2022), p. xvii.

⁴⁶ Moran, *The philosophy of Irish-Ireland*, pp 38, 46, 74.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 68–9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 6–7.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Patrick Lynch, ‘The social revolution that never was’ in Desmond Williams (ed.), *The Irish struggle 1916–1926* (London, 1966), pp 41–54; Bill Kissane, ‘The not-so-amazing case of Irish democracy’ in *Irish Political Studies*, x (1995), pp 43–68.

cultivation of the sense of cultural self-respect required to uphold a self-governing nation. This was a critical distinction between the broad-based Irish-Ireland movement and more radical fringe organisations, such as James Connolly's Irish Citizen Army.⁵¹ By 'turning the mind of Ireland on to Ireland'⁵² and encouraging the public to cease looking to Westminster for solutions to social and economic problems, Moran held that the Gaelic revival would facilitate the cultivation of the indigenous material and intellectual resources required for sovereignty — a development he considered revolutionary in character.

Hyde similarly characterised the Irish as a deeply culturally uncertain people 'anxious to assert themselves and to escape from that sense of inferiority which the imitator always feels ... [when] trying to avoid servility'. He warned starkly that a failure to revive the native tongue would result in the nation 'mimicking like a slave the worst traits of her master', rendering 'her a despised parasite and dependent'.⁵³ Hyde, who shared with Moran a preoccupation with *fin de siècle* theories of racial decline, was convinced that a failure to revive the native tongue would result in Ireland being rendered a 'nation of imitators, the Japanese of Western Europe'.⁵⁴ Michael Collins, too, was consistently scathing of the tendency he observed in many Irish people to engage in 'Shoneenism' or 'West Britonism', terms denoting an inferiority complex marked by an antinational outlook in politics, a docile admiration for the people and culture of upper-class England, and a corresponding disregard for native Irish customs and traditions. Writing shortly before his death in 1922, he remarked acridly that under the Union 'We became the degraded and feeble imitators of our tyrants', and rued how the 'outward sign of a rise in the social scale became the extent to which we cast off everything which distinguished us as Irish and the success with which we imitated the enemy who despised us'.⁵⁵ Collins shared with Moran a belief that British concessions to Irish nationalism in the nineteenth-century, notably the passage of 'Catholic Emancipation, Land Acts, [and] Local Government', had the effect of expediting 'the denationalisation process' precisely because their attainment relied on lobbying at Westminster and thus stripped the Irish nation of its capacity to shape its own destiny:

These things undoubtedly brought ameliorative changes, but the people got into the habit of looking to a foreign authority, and they inevitably came to lose their self-respect, their self-reliance, and their national strength. The system made them forget to look to themselves, and taught them to turn their backs upon their own country. We became the beggars of the rich neighbors who had robbed us. We lost reverence for our own nation, and we came very near to losing our national identity.⁵⁶

The primary value of the 'Gaelic revival and the learning of our national tongue', therefore, was the cultivation of 'a new national self-respect'.⁵⁷ A like-minded commentator reflected in the Sinn Féin organ, *Nationality*, in 1915, 'If I were to explain

⁵¹ See, for example, James Connolly, *Labour, nationality and religion* (Dublin, 1910).

⁵² Moran, *The philosophy of Irish-Ireland*, p. 84.

⁵³ Douglas Hyde, *The Irish language movement and the Gaelic League* (Dublin, 1912), p. 9.

⁵⁴ Hyde, 'The necessity for de-anglicising Ireland', p. 122.

⁵⁵ Michael Collins, *The path to freedom* (Dublin, 1922), p. 28.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

the act of Irish Volunteering, Language Restoration and Gaelic League activity in general, I should say that the object of such activity was the restoration of our native dignity'.⁵⁸ Indeed, a central ambition of the voluminous historiography on medieval Ireland produced in the thirty years preceding the establishment of the Free State was to challenge the idea that the history of Ireland was 'one of dishonour and rebuke',⁵⁹ the story of an 'uncivilised ... race unable to advance beyond political infancy',⁶⁰ and analogous, therefore, with 'the head-hunters of New Guinea' and 'the Hottentot'.⁶¹ As Roger Casement remarked bitterly in 1914, it 'has been a staple of England's diplomatic trade since modern diplomacy began' to represent Ireland as 'a poverty stricken land inhabited by a turbulent and ignorant race whom she has with unrewarded solicitude sought to civilize, uplift and educate'.⁶² Thomas Kettle judged it 'the duty of every good citizen' to disabuse his fellow countrymen of the notion that 'they belong to a barbarous people which has never ceased from barbarism, and that they are not fit to govern themselves'.⁶³ The Boston-based nationalist publicist P. J. Daly worried similarly that 'Irishmen and women today' impelled by 'the slanders and misrepresentations of the Irish race' observable in the popular British press, might lose 'the self-respect and independence which characterized their race in times gone by'.⁶⁴ He consequently determined that 'it will take an organized effort to supplant' such misrepresentations 'with the truth', and shared with thinkers such as Pearse and Collins a perception of the language movement as a means of restoring to the 'Irish race' the cultural self-confidence required to achieve and maintain political independence from the British state. Pearse expressed this ambition in revealingly gendered terms in 1916: 'A new education system in Ireland has to do more than restore a national culture. It has to restore manhood to a race that has been deprived of it'.⁶⁵

Griffith articulated a comparable desire to purge Ireland of 'the slave mind', a metaphor for the enervating culture of political, economic and social dependency he perceived to have infiltrated the national psyche. 'This slave mind has been the bane of Ireland, for it is the very root of the lack of self-reliance which has reduced the stateliest race in Europe — the Gaels — to what they are today', Griffith declared. 'It has destroyed our moral courage and made us shifty, mean, evasive in speech and argument ... we must get rid of it before we can become a nation of men.'⁶⁶ The Sinn Féin movement, he concluded, aimed to cleanse Ireland of

⁵⁸ *Nationality*, 24 July 1915. 'A. Newman' was the adopted pseudonym of Herbert Moore Pim.

⁵⁹ Alice Stopford Green, *The making of Ireland and its undoing, 1200–1600* (London, 1909), p. ix.

⁶⁰ Alice Stopford Green, *Irish nationality* (New York, 1911), p. 13.

⁶¹ Eóin MacNeill, *Phases of Irish history* (Dublin, 1920), p. 240; see also P. S. O'Hegarty, *The indestructible nation; a survey of Irish history from the invasion. The first phase: the overthrow of the clans* (Dublin, 1918), p. xii.

⁶² Roger Casement, *The crime against Ireland and how the war may right it* (New York, 1914), p. 16.

⁶³ Thomas Kettle, *The open secret of Ireland* (London, 1912), p. xiii.

⁶⁴ P. J. Daly, *The Irish vindicator both of race and language: an appeal to the Irish race to save the Irish language* (Boston, 1911), pp 4, 8, 16.

⁶⁵ Pearse, 'Murder machine' in *Collected works of Pádraic H. Pearse*, p. 41.

⁶⁶ Arthur Griffith, *How Ireland has "prospered" under English rule and the slave mind* (New York, n.d. [c.1914–15]), p. 15. References to the First World War suggest this work was published in 1914 or 1915.

that ‘mental and moral obliquity’ which surrenders the nation to ‘the menace of English authority’, a politics marked by ‘a tacit denial that the Irish are the peers of other white men — a tacit admission that England is right in her treatment of us’.⁶⁷ Though unconnected to the Sinn Féin party, Horace Plunkett, founder of the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (I.A.O.S.), anticipated this perspective in his influential 1904 publication, *Ireland in the new century*. In Plunkett’s analysis, Ireland’s ‘backwardness’ was a direct consequence of the lack of ‘moral courage, initiative, independence and self-reliance’ manifest in the ‘national character’.⁶⁸ ‘We have too long been prey to that deep delusion which because the ills of the country we love were in the past days largely caused from without, bids us look to the same source for the cure,’ Plunkett declared. ‘The true remedies are to be sought elsewhere; for, however disastrous may have been the past, the injury was moral rather than material, and the opportunity has now arrived for the patient building up again of the Irish character in those qualities which win in the modern struggle for existence.’⁶⁹ Significantly, Childers cited the I.A.O.S. as proof of Ireland’s readiness for sovereignty, observing that ‘you will come away [from Plunkett House] with a sense of the absurdity ... of saying that a country which can produce and conduct fine movements like this is *unfit* for self-government’.⁷⁰

A similar focus on the ideals of self-help and individual responsibility pervades, for instance, the rhetoric surrounding the ‘buy Irish’ campaign, the agitation for industrial regeneration, and the temperance crusade.⁷¹ The aim was to transform Ireland from ‘a weak, backboneless imitation of England’ into a sovereign, self-sufficing state guided by ‘Irish ideals’, a metamorphosis that could only be brought about from within.⁷² The Irish-Ireland movement consequently strove to ‘inculcate self-reliance as the primal need’ of the nation, and to ‘discourage that fatal Irish habit ... of looking for and leaning upon assistance from without’.⁷³ ‘The degradation of Ireland to the position of one of the immersed nations is but the outward expression of the bondage of the national mind; its lack of self-reliance and self-assertion; its lack of determination to be the sole arbiter of its own destinies’, the I.R.B. volunteer and future Free State civil servant, Bulmer Hobson, wrote in a 1907 pamphlet titled, ‘The mind of the Irish nation’. ‘The battle,’ he concluded:

is not with England but with the people of Ireland — it is the battle of self-respect, self-reliance and courage against the moral cowardice, the slavishness, the veneration for any authority however and by whoever assumed — that have marked the people of this country for generations. A revolution has already begun, not merely a revolution that will achieve a political independence, but a revolution in the mind of the nation.⁷⁴

⁶⁷ Griffith, *How Ireland has “prospered”*, p. 16.

⁶⁸ Sir Horace Plunkett, *Ireland in the new century* (London, 1904), p. 11.

⁶⁹ Plunkett, *Ireland in the new century*, p. 291.

⁷⁰ Childers, *The framework of home rule*, p. 164 (emphasis in original).

⁷¹ See, for example, Timothy G. McMahon, *Grand opportunity: the Gaelic revival and Irish society, 1893–1910* (Syracuse, NY, 2008); P. J. Matthews, *Revival: the Abbey Theatre, Sinn Féin, the Gaelic League, and the Co-operative Movement* (Cork, 2003).

⁷² Gaelic League, *The Irish language movement and the Gaelic League* (Dublin, 1912), p. 11.

⁷³ Sydney Brooks, *The new Ireland* (Dublin, 1907), p. 2.

⁷⁴ Bulmer Hobson, *The creed of the republic* (Belfast, 1907), pp 9–10.

To pro-Treaty Irish-Ireland thinkers like Moran, Griffith, Collins and Hobson, therefore, the agitation for self-determination was as much a psychological struggle as it was a political one. It was a project aimed at cleansing the nation of a mindset unable to ‘conceive Ireland as anything but ... a dependent on some strong Power’.⁷⁵ This would promote a sense of belief in the capacity of individual citizens to improve the moral and material conditions of their lives, and the life of the nation, without the help of Westminster, through a combination of hard work and steely self-discipline. Griffith gave vivid expression to this narrowly nationalist focus in 1913:

The right of the Irish to political independence never was, is not, and never can be dependent upon the admission of equal right in all other peoples. It is based on no theory of, and dependable in nowise for its existence or justification on the “Rights of Man”, it is independent of theories of government and doctrines of philanthropy and Universalism.⁷⁶

All these ideas remained current in Treatyite rhetoric after 1922 and exerted a profound influence over the subsequent development of the Free State. Reducing the old age pension by ten per cent in 1924, admitting that ‘people may have to die in this country and may have to die through starvation’, believing that ‘it is no function of government to provide work for anybody’,⁷⁷ Cumann na nGaedheal are judged frequently to have discarded the progressive social values of the revolution in order to revive a Victorian politics thought to have been bypassed during the First World War.⁷⁸ Bill Kissane, for instance, depicts the Treatyites’ ‘complete and unswerving ... fidelity to the values of Victorian Britain’ as evidence of their detachment from ‘the revolutionary events between 1916 and 1921’.⁷⁹ Such judgements overlook the primacy attached to principles of self-help and individual responsibility in the writings of a number of senior Sinn Féin and Irish-Ireland intellectuals prior to 1922 — commitments that, significantly, transcended the subsequent Treaty division. Of course, it was by no means inevitable that these attitudes would translate into such a severe social policy: indeed, mechanisms for poor relief were improved following Fianna Fáil’s accession to power in 1932.⁸⁰ However, it is important to recognise that the Irish-Ireland movement contained an influential strain of social and economic conservatism, perspectives that are not expressed in documents like the Democratic Programme.⁸¹

Ultimately, it was a small step from the valorisation of principles of industry, thrift and self-reliance at a national level to the endorsement of similar values when conceptualising the relation and obligations of the state to private citizens.

⁷⁵ Griffith, *How Ireland has “prospered”*, p. 24.

⁷⁶ Arthur Griffith, ‘Preface’ in John Mitchel, *Jail journal* (new ed., Dublin, 1913), p. xiv. Mitchel, as is well known, was an impassioned defender of the institution of slavery in the southern United States.

⁷⁷ Patrick McGilligan, *Dáil Éireann deb.*, ix, no. 6 (30 Oct. 1924).

⁷⁸ See, for example, Mel Cousins, *The birth of social welfare in Ireland 1922–1952* (Dublin, 2003), p. 55.

⁷⁹ Kissane, *Irish Civil War*, p. 151.

⁸⁰ Lindsey Earner-Byrne, *Letters of the Catholic poor: poverty in independent Ireland, 1920–1940* (Cambridge, 2017), pp 20–58.

⁸¹ Regan, *The Irish counter-revolution*, pp 137–8.

Cumann na nGaedheal's notoriously austere attitude to the provision of social welfare must, therefore, be assessed in the broader context of a pre-Treaty nationalist tradition that placed a heavy emphasis on principles of self-reliance and personal responsibility as central to individual and, by extension, national moral and material improvement. As O'Higgins reflected of the connection between individual and national well-being in a 1923 Dáil debate, 'The nation, after all, is simply a collection of homes. The home is the unit of the nation.'⁸² Such beliefs, shaped critically by a deep engagement with contemporary Catholic social teaching, cannot be isolated convincingly from the heterogeneous intellectual firmament of pre-Treaty Sinn Féin and designated the preserve of the Irish Party.⁸³

Many aspects of the Cumann na nGaedheal executive council's social and economic policies were articulated in a language consistent with ideals espoused by the revolutionary nationalist leadership. Addressing a party conference in 1927, Cosgrave characterised Cumann na nGaedheal's approach to economics as 'frankly a protectionist policy', one that introduced tariffs to aid 'those industries to which protection is necessary', while ensuring 'that undue hardship is not inflicted on the consumer'.⁸⁴ Likewise, Blythe's assessment of taxation as a social 'evil' that 'discourages thrift, retards industry, and increases unemployment' echoed traditional nationalist claims that Irish development had been stymied by over-taxation. His determination to avoid rendering the Free State 'subservient to any external interests' through excessive borrowing, meanwhile, was couched in a Griffithite rhetoric of self-sufficiency and self-reliance.⁸⁵ Similar ideals were invoked to justify the investment of over £5 million (around a fifth of the government's revenue budget) in a state-of-the-art hydroelectric scheme on the River Shannon in 1925, a project aimed at lessening the Free State's dependency on agricultural trade with Britain while developing its economy to a 'position comparable in every respect with those other countries that flourished through manufacturing'.⁸⁶ The Irish-Ireland movement aimed principally to refute contemporary perceptions of the Irish as a racially deficient people by developing the cultural and economic resources of the country to a level befitting a civilised, white European nation, one equipped to 'influence the cultivation and progress of less advanced nations and to form colonies of its own'.⁸⁷ This aspiration 'to bring Ireland out of the corner' and 'assert her existence in the world', establishing her in 'in the front rank of European States',⁸⁸ remained at the ideological core of Treatyite politics throughout their

⁸² *Dáil Éireann deb.*, iii, no. 35 (2 July 1923).

⁸³ Hilaire Belloc, whom O'Higgins cited in his 1924 address at Oxford, was the most influential populariser of distributist principles in the anglophone world during the interwar period: see Jay P. Corrin, *Catholic intellectuals and the challenge of democracy* (South Bend, IN, 2002), p. 15.

⁸⁴ W. T. Cosgrave, *Policy of the Cumann na nGaedheal party* (Dublin, 1927), p. 6.

⁸⁵ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, v, no. 10 (2 Nov. 1923). For examples of pre-Treaty assertions about taxation, see, for example, Darrell Figgis, *The economic case for Irish independence* (Dublin, 1920); Arthur Griffith, *How Ireland is taxed* (Dublin, 1907); Eóin MacNeill, 'How Ireland is plundered', *Nationality*, 7 August 1915.

⁸⁶ J. J. Walsh, quoted in *Cumann na nGaedheal: annual convention; May 13 & 14, 1925; Mansion House, Dublin* (Athlone, 1925), p. 3.

⁸⁷ Griffith, *The resurrection of Hungary*, p. 144. On the importance of whiteness in shaping Irish nationalism, see Bruce Nelson, *Irish nationalists and the making of the Irish race* (Princeton, NJ, 2012).

⁸⁸ Griffith, *The resurrection of Hungary*, pp. xvii, 162.

period in office and goes some way towards explaining why the Cosgrave government was always more concerned to alter how the Irish nation or ‘race’ was viewed from outside the Free State than at reforming the balance of social and economic power within it.

II

Irish-Ireland concepts of moral and psychological reform were intrinsic to the Treatyite political project and such ideas formed a cornerstone of the arguments proffered in favour of ratifying the settlement in the Dáil in 1921. Contradicting Mary MacSwiney’s assertion that the decision to compromise with Westminster manifested ‘the slave mind’ drilled into the Irish psyche over ‘one-hundred years’,⁸⁹ pro-Treaty speakers claimed frequently that those who rejected the settlement lacked faith in the nation’s capacity for sovereignty and tacitly endorsed traditional, unionist representations of the Irish people as incapable of self-government. Collins contended that a vote in favour of the Treaty was a demonstration of ‘belief in our future civilisation’ and, echoing Griffith’s earlier pamphlet, claimed that those who quoted London’s view of the settlement as a triumph of empire belied an internalised sense of inferiority:

I believe in my own interpretation against the interpretation of any Englishman. Lloyd George and Churchill have been quoted here against us. I say the quotation of those people is what marks the slave mind. There are people in this assembly who will take their words before they will take my words. That is the slave mind.⁹⁰

To the Treatyites, therefore, acceptance of a compromise form of circumscribed sovereignty was a declaration of faith in the nation’s capacity for self-government and proof that, in Collins’s words, the Irish are not ‘simply going to go on keeping ourselves in slavery and subjection, forever keeping on an impossible fight’ but will instead ‘stand on our own feet’.⁹¹ Acceptance of the Treaty, in other words, was advocated as a means of demonstrating the readiness of the Irish people to take their ‘rightful place amongst the nations of the earth’, re-establishing Ireland, a phrase invoked consistently by both sides in a wholly partitionist sense, as a culturally distinct, self-governing, white, European nation.⁹² Such rhetoric might also be seen to buttress the Treatyite contention that dominion status would provide the prospective Free State with both parity of security and esteem alongside the other white, self-governing states comprising the newly reconfigured ‘British Commonwealth of Nations’ — an institution presented as constitutionally and conceptually distinct from the British Empire.⁹³

⁸⁹ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, T, no. 2 (14 Dec. 1921). George Nicolls echoed this point in *Dáil Éireann deb.*, T, no. 10 (3 Jan. 1922).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, T, no. 6 (19 Dec. 1921).

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Seán Hales in *ibid.*, T, no. 5 (17 Dec. 1921).

⁹³ The Treaty was the first official document in which the phrase ‘British Commonwealth of Nations’ was used: see Jason Knirck, *Imagining Ireland’s independence: the debates over the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921* (Plymouth, 2006), p 183. For additional context, see Matthew Kelly, ‘Irish nationalist opinion and the British Empire in the 1850s and 1860s’ in *Past &*

The onset of civil war fatally undermined this aspiration to vindicate the fledgling state's respectability on the international stage. And, as Gavin M. Foster has emphasised, the language invoked by Free State authorities in prosecuting the conflict bears a 'remarkable continuity' with 'earlier British perceptions of the IRA' as 'cornerboys', 'riff-raff', 'fanatical youths' and 'wastrels'. Such parallels, Foster suggests provocatively, may be understood productively to manifest 'the postcolonial dynamic whereby the attitudes of the departing colonial power are unconsciously embraced by nationalist revolutionaries who assume power'.⁹⁴ However, the heavy rhetorical emphasis placed upon virtues of industry, thrift and constant endeavour in nationalist and republican discourses from the 1890s suggests that such attitudes were embraced by many nationalist leaders long before the establishment of the Free State. Brian Hanley has elucidated the role of 'class-based discourses' in shaping 'the perceptions of both sides of the Treaty split'.⁹⁵ However, the government's prosecution of the Civil War was shaped principally by a deep-seated resentment at the manner in which the anti-Treaty insurrection compromised the settlement negotiated with Westminster and undermined its attempt to establish the Free State and, by implication, the Irish 'race', as a respectable member of the civilised, white, European world. Considerations of social class certainly mapped on to such concerns, but income levels and normative concepts of social respectability were never at the root of the conflict. As Griffith stated: 'It is the task of National Politics to ensure existence and continuance to the Nation; to make the weak strong, the half-civilised more civilised'.⁹⁶ The Civil War undermined this proviso directly and Free State authorities consequently began to conceive of the conflict as a kind of internal civilising mission in its own right, one that would safeguard the 'existence and continuance' of the Treaty settlement while helping to ensure that the state's citizenry lived up to the ideals of moral probity and orderliness embedded in Irish-Ireland ideology.

It is striking, for instance, that provisional government ministers regularly depicted the Civil War as undermining the nation's claim to whiteness. Just as O'Higgins lamented that 'we bid fair to be classed with the nigger and the Mexican as a people unable to govern themselves',⁹⁷ Collins was one of many to avow that the anti-Treaty insurrection fomented a condition of 'Mexican politics' in the Free State, rendering the Irish people a 'laughing stock' in the eyes of the world.⁹⁸ The anti-Treatyites were further feminised and infantilised in Free State rhetoric in a manner mirroring traditional unionist discourses on Ireland.⁹⁹ O'Higgins, for instance, warned of 'young men' being 'seized on by propagandists, mostly feminine propagandists', and 'inspired to commit utterly ruthless,

Present, no. 204 (2009), pp 127–54; Paul Townend, *The road to home rule: anti-imperialism and the Irish national movement* (Madison, WI, 2016).

⁹⁴ Foster, *The Irish Civil War*, p. 37.

⁹⁵ Brian Hanley, "'Merely tuppence half-penny looking down on tuppence'": Class, the second Dáil and Irish Republicanism' in Mícheál Ó Fathartaigh and Liam Weeks (eds), *The Treaty: debating and establishing Irish independence* (Dublin, 2018), pp 90–112.

⁹⁶ Griffith, *The resurrection of Hungary*, p. 143.

⁹⁷ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, ii, no. 18 (17 Jan. 1923).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, T, no. 16 (9 Jan. 1922). On invocations of Mexican politics, see Mary Harris, 'Irish images of religious conflict in Mexico in the 1920s' in Mary N. Harris (ed.), *Sights and insights: interactive images of Europe and the wider world* (Pisa, 2007), pp 205–26.

⁹⁹ The anti-Treatyites responded in kind: Kenneth L. Shonk, *Ireland's new traditionalists: Fianna Fáil, republicanism and gender, 1926–1938* (Cork, 2021), pp 156–79.

desperate, irresponsible actions'.¹⁰⁰ He condemned de Valera for having allowed himself to be 'goaded on by a lot of hysterical young women who really ought to be at their five finger exercises or helping their mothers with the brasses',¹⁰¹ and confided in Lady Hazel Lavery that although 'a few ladies are still drumming their heels on the ground ... the acoustics for that kind of thing are not as good as they used to be'.¹⁰² Cosgrave used his 1923 New Year's address to warn of 'neurotic girls' disfiguring 'the walls of Dublin with lying propaganda',¹⁰³ while P. S. O'Hegarty, in a frequently cited passage, avowed that the Civil War had rendered politically active women 'unwomanly' '... furies', 'unlovely, destructive-minded, arid begetters of violence' who existed only to corrupt impressionable male counterparts.¹⁰⁴

The anti-Treatyites, therefore, were depicted as embodying all the worst historical traits attributed to Ireland in hostile unionist commentary: not fully white, effeminate, thriftless, unfit for citizenship. The Cumann na nGaedheal leadership, in keeping with an influential strain of Irish-Ireland ideology, aspired to be seen in opposite terms, a reflex crystallised in the executive council's notorious penchant for coattails, wing-collared shirts and top-hats. Too often overlooked in depictions of the Cosgrave government's adoption of traditionally British markers of sartorial respectability as an expression of a counter-revolutionary impulse is the simple fact that they fought tooth-and-nail to claim ownership of the revolutionary legacy and never ceased to conceive of themselves as the heirs to the republican struggle.¹⁰⁵ Simply put, the Treatyites had nothing to gain by distancing themselves from the revolution in the manner that Gavin M. Foster, for instance, suggests.¹⁰⁶ While the executive council's aristocratic sartorial tastes undoubtedly alienated the government from a portion of the electorate, the claim that they emulated the dress-style of other leaders of the white, English-speaking world with the primary intention of 'distancing' themselves 'from the "riffraff" of Republicans and, for that matter, Labourites' seems reductive.¹⁰⁷ It is very tempting to view Cumann na nGaedheal's emulation of aspects of the culture of the English ruling classes as a renunciation of Irish-Ireland principles and a tacit endorsement of the racialised image of Irish inferiority, manifesting the reactionary essence of an '*arriviste petit bourgeoisie*' who 'cherish the approval of their erstwhile masters' as much as they 'despise the less materially successful elements of their own community'.¹⁰⁸ However, this perspective overlooks how many aspects of Irish-Ireland nationalism drew on the same material and intellectual influences that shaped popular British Victorian culture. This is as discernible, for instance, in the prevalence of ideals derived from the British tradition of Muscular Christianity in the formation of the G.A.A., as it is in the impact of English periodicals, like *New Age* and *New*

¹⁰⁰ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, xvii, no. 9 (15 Dec. 1926).

¹⁰¹ *Leinster Leader*, 17 Feb. 1923.

¹⁰² Quoted in Sinéad McCool, *No ordinary women: Irish female activists in the revolutionary years, 1900–1923* (Dublin, 2004), p. 130.

¹⁰³ *Freeman's Journal*, 1 Jan. 1923.

¹⁰⁴ P. S. O'Hegarty, *The victory of Sinn Féin: how it won it and how it used it* (Dublin, 1924), p. 58.

¹⁰⁵ Seán Donnelly, 'Republicanism and civic virtue in Treatyite political thought, 1921–1923' in *Historical Journal*, lxxiii, no. 5 (2020), pp 1257–80.

¹⁰⁶ Foster, *The Irish Civil War*, pp 108–13.

¹⁰⁷ Prager, *Building democracy in Ireland*, p. 192.

¹⁰⁸ J. J. Lee, *Ireland, 1912–1985: politics and society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 173.

Witness, in shaping early twentieth-century Irish Catholic thought.¹⁰⁹ More importantly, such depictions do not account for the fact that Treatyite officials never conceived of their behaviour as a repudiation of Irish-Ireland principles. To the Cosgrave government, the act of meeting with other world leaders on a basis of equality was an unequivocal refutation of traditional unionist depictions of the Irish as an off-white, effeminate people and fulfilled the central Irish-Ireland preoccupation with demonstrating the Irish nation as one ‘fit’ for sovereignty, vindicating the revolution.

III

Writing to the Minister for External Affairs, Desmond FitzGerald, upon the Free State’s accession to the League of Nations in November 1923, a senior diplomat, Michael MacWhite, declared that ‘Ireland’ has ‘broken down the isolation wall which caused her to be known on the Continent as an “island beyond an island”’ and concluded triumphantly that ‘The part played by the Irish Delegates has also proved to the other nations, in a most convincing way, that the Irish people are not, as an insidious propaganda endeavours to make out, unfitted to take an intelligent part in international affairs.’¹¹⁰ MacWhite’s letter cuts to the heart of Treatyite politics as it crystallised in the crucible of the Civil War: an ideology that was always more concerned to alter how the Irish nation or ‘race’ was viewed from outside the Free State than at reforming the balance of social and economic power within it. This cannot be considered neatly as a repudiation of revolutionary values. The Irish-Ireland movement, as we have seen, was focused heavily on the revival of native language and culture, both as a shield against morally deleterious English influences, and as a symbol of the Irish claim to historic nationhood. However, the movement was also deeply concerned to refute negative, biologised perceptions of the Irish as what Griffith termed ruefully ‘a people in a low stage of mental and moral development ... incapable of any kind of ordered existence except under a strong hand’.¹¹¹ Many nationalist intellectuals consequently internalised those virtues of discipline and self-reliance believed to have rendered Britain the most powerful state on earth and sought to enshrine such values at the heart of the Irish national character.

To the provisional government, therefore, the eradication of anti-Treaty militancy was a critical step toward fulfilling the revolution; it was the principal means through which the Free State could establish the legitimacy of Ireland’s claim to self-government and enable the fledgling polity to take its place among the nations of the world. This perspective is embodied in the frequency with which former and practicing Cumann na nGaedheal cabinet ministers cited the pacification of anti-Treaty insurrection as a kind of vindication of the revolution throughout their period in office. Speaking on a tour of the United States and Canada in 1928, FitzGerald promoted the stability of the Free State as proof that ‘the Irish

¹⁰⁹ Fearghal McGarry, *Eoin O’Duffy: a self-made hero* (Oxford, 2005), pp 15–18; Conor Heffernan, *The history of physical culture in Ireland* (London, 2020), pp 17–52; Tom Villis, *Reaction and the avant-garde: the revolt against liberal democracy in early twentieth-century Britain* (London, 2006), pp 139–45.

¹¹⁰ MacWhite to FitzGerald, 7 Nov. 1923 (N.A.I., DFA 26/102).

¹¹¹ Griffith, *How Ireland has “prospered”*, p. 13.

in Ireland are not an inferior Race'.¹¹² Cosgrave avowed similarly that traditional perceptions of the Irish as 'not a peaceful people' had been demonstrated to be 'contrary to fact'.¹¹³ Former education minister, Eóin MacNeill, stated that, while he never doubted 'the capacity of the Irish people to manage their own affairs', he viewed the stabilisation of the Free State during 'a time of unexampled difficulty' as proof that 'that Ireland has come well out of the test'.¹¹⁴ John Marcus O'Sullivan, told a St Patrick's Day banquet in Liverpool that: 'By solid if somewhat prosaic work, by resolutely facing the tasks that confronted her, by establishing an efficient, clean and impartial administration, Ireland has given the lie direct to an old slander that Irishmen could not manage their own country.'¹¹⁵ The aim, as MacWhite so triumphally affirmed, was to confer on Ireland the respectability denied so long, a status intimately bound up with normative concepts of whiteness and masculinity. Indeed, O'Higgins expressed the same impulse at the conclusion of his 1924 address in Oxford. Having extolled his government's achievement in stabilising the Free State after the tumult of the Civil War, the justice minister reflected sardonically that he had 'shaken hands with four English Prime Ministers' within two years of taking office and was 'shocked' at the level of 'political instability' in Britain.¹¹⁶ His remark was clearly intended to impress upon his audience an image of the Irish nation as possessed of the same capacity for mature, stable governance as the British elite and manifested, therefore, the guiding ambition of Cumann na nGaedheal's political project.

This effort at reconstructing the Cumann na nGaedheal government's relationship to the rhetoric of the Irish-Ireland movement, it is hoped, might demonstrate the potential insights to be gleaned from a close, contextual reading of the source material produced by some of the leading publicists and thinkers of Ireland's revolutionary generation. In accounts both sympathetic and critical of their period in office, Cumann na nGaedheal tend to be presented as utilitarian pragmatists, 'not terribly committed to the values of a Gaelic Ireland' and 'more willing to mould the state in the image of British society'.¹¹⁷ Bill Kissane, for instance, critically depicts the Cosgrave administration as in thrall to the individualistic liberalism 'developed by Jeremy Bentham and James Mill in the early nineteenth century'.¹¹⁸ Tom Garvin positively framed the Irish Civil War as a proto-Cold War contest of anti-Treaty 'communalists' on the one hand (a radically egalitarian cleavage that perceived 'each human being as being of equal worth and to be rewarded equally, regardless of the effort made by the individual'), and pro-Treaty 'pragmatists' on the other (a more liberal formation that favoured 'individualism' and endorsed the 'proposition that human beings have different abilities ... and that inequality is inevitable and can be defended morally').¹¹⁹ Jeffrey Prager posited a similar dichotomy between 'Irish Enlightenment' Treatyites possessed of 'modern secular

¹¹² *With the president in America: the authorised record of the American tour* (Dublin, 1928), p. 77.

¹¹³ *With the president in America*, p. 8.

¹¹⁴ Eóin MacNeill, 'Ten years of the Irish Free State' in *Foreign Affairs*, x (1932), pp 248–9.

¹¹⁵ Speech delivered at a St Patrick's Day banquet in Liverpool, 1931 (U.C.D.A., John Marcus O'Sullivan papers, LA60/154).

¹¹⁶ O'Higgins, *Three years hard labour*, p. 12.

¹¹⁷ Valiulis, *Portrait of a revolutionary*, p. 173.

¹¹⁸ Kissane, *Irish Civil War*, p. 151; Regan, *The Irish counter-revolution*, p. 89.

¹¹⁹ Garvin, *1922*, p. 145.

aspirations for the Irish nation’, and their ‘Gaelic Romantic’ opponents, who yearned after a ‘social order ... putatively characteristic of the ancient Gaelic Ireland’.¹²⁰ The difficulty with these perspectives is that they diverge frequently from the self-understanding expressed by many members of the Cumann na nGaedheal Executive Council. O’Higgins, for instance, made his communitarian political commitments explicit in a 1923 address to the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, stating that he endorsed ‘an organic conception of society in which we are inseparable members, as truly as branches of a tree’, and stressing that, ‘When the tree withers’ through bursts of ‘individualism *in excelsis* ... the branches also die’.¹²¹

It is certainly plausible to argue that the Treatyites had more in common with ‘the mainstream brand of parliamentary nationalism’ that dominated Irish electoral politics before 1918 than did their anti-Treaty opponents.¹²² However, it cannot be overlooked that the historical actors in question made no reference to liberal theorists such as Bentham and Mill in their speeches and published work and were far more likely to characterise themselves as Catholics, nationalists or republicans than as liberals. Indeed, O’Higgins expressed open contempt for those opposition ‘Deputies who preen themselves and strut before us as liberals’,¹²³ and echoed thinkers such as Moran and Pearse in disdaining the ‘pagan’, ‘materialistic’ and ‘frankly carnal’ ‘mental and spiritual outlook’ of contemporary British liberal culture, avowing that ‘we [in Ireland] were born for higher things.’¹²⁴ Ultimately, it is only by contextualising the perspectives proffered by contemporary source materials that we can hope to recover the intellectual milieu that produced the Irish revolution and that shaped the subsequent development of the Free State. To treat ideas reductively as cover for more fundamental social or economic concerns is to prevent us from representing our subjects in a manner that they would recognise.¹²⁵

¹²⁰ Prager, *Building democracy in Ireland*, pp 16–17.

¹²¹ Kevin O’Higgins, *The Catholic layman in public life: an address to the Catholic Truth Society* (Dublin, 1923), p. 13; see similarly, W. T. Cosgrave, ‘Speech on Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins’, 1923 (U.C.D.A., W.T. Cosgrave papers, P285/311).

¹²² Kissane, *Irish Civil War*, p. 23; Meehan, *The Cosgrave party*, p. xvi.

¹²³ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, iii, no. 35 (2 July 1923).

¹²⁴ Speech at the inauguration of Irish language classes, n.d. (U.C.D.A., Kevin O’Higgins papers, P197/140).

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