

Anarchism, anti-imperialism and “The Doctrine of Dynamite”

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2010

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Abstract

During the late Victorian period, British anarchist writers commented on Irish political affairs while the celebrated Irish author Oscar Wilde offered moral and practical support to them. Wilde's position was especially radical, since anarchism was associated in the popular imagination with the phenomenon of "propaganda by deed"—the subversive political violence that broke out in the United States and Continental Europe throughout the 1880s and 1890s. However, British anarchists regarded colonial violence in Ireland as the pressing issue of the day and explored it in their political journals, pamphlets and novels. Such texts reflected these authors' preoccupation with the Irish crisis and also warned contemporary readers that the counter-insurgency methods being applied in Ireland could be put to use on English soil. Drawing on a range of literary and political sources, this essay examines the British anarchists' interest in the Irish anti-colonial struggle by focusing on their criticism of British imperial rule, which they regarded as "foreign dictatorship."

Introduction

Our position is somewhat akin to that of the Irishman, who, when asked his political opinions, said he was "ag'in the government." ("News at Home and Abroad" 17)

Contrary to the claims, violent images and political scare stories fostered in many late 19th-century popular novels, it was printed propaganda, rather than dynamite, that was the chosen medium of British anarchists during the 1880s and 1890s.¹ Stressing the continuum between anarchist words and deeds (particularly those carried out in Continental Europe), the radical journals, pamphlets and, sometimes, even fiction written and published by revolutionaries based in London seemed to articulate Joseph Pierre Proudhon's claim of 1840 that "equality failed to conquer by the sword only that it might conquer by the pen" (Proudhon 34).² But, as well as dealing with the more exciting events occurring in Europe, along with more mundane domestic issues affecting Britain, where there was little, if any, violent anarchist activity, some of these anarchist publications also offered their readers close analyses, along with severe criticism, of British imperialism in Ireland. By drawing attention to what they considered the natural ideological links that connected their own cause to the very practical and even "heroic" efforts of the Irish, they argued that the ongoing anti-colonial resistance in Britain's closest colony could serve as a model for rebellion against the state in England, Scotland and Wales ("The Struggle for Freedom" 4). In his study of the ideological and intellectual Spanish anarchism and Filipino anti-imperialism, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-colonial Imagination*, Benedict Anderson has shown how late 19th-century European anarchism had a global perspective and remained in a constant state of dialogue with anti-colonial movements throughout this period.

¹ For an assessment of anarchism in the popular imagination at the end of the 19th century, see Haia Shpayer-Makov. Many popular novels written during this period equated anarchism with violence. These included Grant Allen's *For Maimie's Sake: A Tale of Love and Dynamite* (1886), Richard Henry Savage's *The Anarchist: A Story of To-Day* (1892), E. Douglas Fawcett's *Hartmann the Anarchist* (1893), George Griffith's *The Angel of the Revolution: A Tale of the Coming Terror* (1894) and H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* (1897).

² For a fictionalized discussion of revolutionary politics by an anarchist movement, see Sergei Stepniak's *The Career of a Nihilist* (1889).

Both ideologies were not exclusive but were, as Anderson argues, far more interactive than has traditionally been acknowledged. Like the Spanish and French imperialism that Anderson describes as receiving criticism, and as even coming under attack from anarchists in Barcelona and Paris, the excesses and injustices of British colonial policy in Ireland also ignited sympathy for the Irish nationalist cause in radical circles in London. But as well as generating genuine sympathy for the colonized, the often graphic descriptions of colonial violence that appeared in radical journals like *Freedom* were used to warn British readers that the apparatus of imperial repression could also have domestic applications: coercive legislation designed for the control of the Irish population could, some anarchists argued, provide governments with models for domestic repression.³ And while anarchism was notorious for the occasional shock value of its *attentats* (its victims included heads of state like the French President Sadi Carnot, Empress Elizabeth of Austria, and President McKinley of the United States along with innocent café patrons in Paris and theatre-goers in Barcelona), the atrocities committed by the European powers' imperial armies left a resounding impact in their respective capitals, where metropolitan revolutionaries sought common cause with resisters like the "untameable Kelts" in Ireland ("Law and Order in Ireland" 4). Irish revolutionary activity was seen as a blueprint for possible radical action in Britain, where anarchists studied the "offensive and defensive" tactics of their "Irish brothers in misfortune" ("Leeds and London" 1; "Notes" 2), whom they admired for holding out against the forces of landlordism and empire. The Irish were regarded by these British radicals as natural propagandists by deed and while some London-based anarchist writers, who were more impressed by the desperate actions of their Continental comrades, called for "War to the Knife" against the middle classes, their impulsive declarations lacked the forensic thrust of those articles that sought more concrete examples of effective resistance in Ireland, where anarchists had not far to look to find colonialism being met with determined and popular opposition.

The militant language found in the most extreme anarchist writing of this period was influenced by Johann Most's uncompromising journal *Freiheit*, which was printed and circulated in England from 1878. Although it was published in German, *Freiheit* influenced subsequent radical journals like *The Torch*, *Freedom*, *Anarchy*, *The Anarchist* and *The Commonwealth*. Most's repeated calls for armed struggle (including defences of assassination) had already earned him jail terms in Austria, England and would later lead to his incarceration in the United States. Described by his biographer as a committed "propagandist-of-the-word" (Trautmann xxi), he personified the ideological connection that bound anarchist literature to revolutionary action. Most had come to London after the suppression of his *Freie Presse* in Germany in 1878 and immediately began to test the boundaries of British tolerance with *Freiheit*. In 1881 he was imprisoned for 16 months for publishing the infamous issue of 19 March that celebrated the assassination of Tsar Alexander II as "Sterling propaganda-by-the-deed!" It declared: "Let more monarchs be killed!" and a column, framed in red and headed "AT LAST," "Triumph!, Triumph!," announced: "One of the vilest tyrants corroded through and through by corruption, is no more" (ctd in Oliver 18). However, the sentence failed to control Most's rhetoric and, in May 1882, he launched a direct attack on British imperialism by applauding the double killing of Frederick Cavendish, the coercionist Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and his Chief Under Secretary, Thomas Burke, who were stabbed

³ Anderson has also shown that this discussion operated in both directions. For example, Jean Grave's anarchist journal *La Révolte* had a print run of 7000 by the time of its suppression in 1894, by which time it had an impressive list of subscribers, including interested radicals all over Europe, as well as in colonial and recently occupied territories including India, Guatemala, Egypt, Brazil, Chile and Argentina. See Anderson.

to death in Dublin's Phoenix Park. *Freiheit* praised the attack, carried out by a Fenian offshoot, known as the Invincibles, as an "admirable deed" and as a "heroically bold act of popular justice" that "splendidly annihilated the evil representatives of a malignant government" (ctd in Trautmann 70). Most admired the unpredictability and shocking nature of the violence employed by the splinter group, which had broken away from the highly centralized Irish republican movement (the pair were stabbed to death in a daylight attack in front of the vice-regal lodge). The Invincibles, he believed, had struck a direct and spectacular blow against British imperialism by employing the kind of tactical militancy that he preferred and would go on to publicize in the United States.

In America, Most turned his hand to more practical affairs, publishing an instructional manual for the "layman" revolutionary entitled *Science of Revolutionary Warfare*, in 1885. Providing instruction on how to cause havoc "without help from very specialized people" (Most 30), the pamphlet suggested that urban terrorism was both an "extremely easy [...] and very inexpensive" enterprise, if conducted properly (50). Containing instructions on the making and planting of bombs, arson, poisoning, and stabbing, it also discussed the psychological impact of political violence on the imagination of the capitalist, or "Property-Monster" (47). Inspired by the impact made by the Invincibles, he stressed the potential of political violence to "inflict surprise, confusion and panic on the enemy" (11). Most suggested that only a tightly knit cell, or small "operational team" (57) of anarchists could function in any way without being captured and he argued that the first step in becoming an effective revolutionary was to conceal one's political opinions. He also criticized risky and unsuccessful efforts like "stabblings that did not penetrate deeply enough, shots that merely grazed" and "blows that missed altogether" (58). Instead, he stressed the far more practical character of a successful terrorist: "Many simple-minded people talk glibly about revolutionaries not needing to do more than [*sic*] be courageous and risk their lives. This is utter nonsense: the real plan is for others to lose their lives" (62).

Less than a year after the publication of *Science of Revolutionary Warfare*, by which point Most was exercising considerable influence over Chicago's German-speaking anarchists, some of whom carried arms under the slogan "Read Most" (Trautmann 130),⁴ the Haymarket bomb detonated in Chicago. The device, thrown when police charged a meeting demanding an eight-hour day, killed seven officers, while their panicked colleagues opened fire on demonstrators and each other, killing 20.⁵ The tragedy sent shock waves across the industrialized world. Official hysteria culminated with the hanging of the "Haymarket Martyrs," four anarchists—Albert Parsons, August Spies, George Engel and Adolph Fischer—who were convicted of writing inflammatory articles and making speeches that inspired the unknown bomber. A fifth, Louis Lingg, cheated the hangman by blowing himself up in his cell. Yet some British anarchists, who were themselves influenced by Most's earlier writing, were advocating dynamite before this disaster. While contemporary anarchist writing affirms the importance of Haymarket in the radical imagination (Goldman 6–10), it was the Fenian bombing campaign of 1881–85, during which high explosives

⁴ The political chaos gripping Chicago in May 1886 occurred against the background of a decade of relentless and unimpeded state and corporate violence against striking workers and other campaigners for labour reform. See Foner, "Editor's Introduction" in *The Autobiographies of the Haymarket Martyrs*.

⁵ As Jeffrey A. Clymer has pointed out, in contrast to the exact record of police fatalities "the actual number of casualties among the protestors, like the bomb thrower's identity, was never determined." See Clymer, esp. Chapter One, "Imagining Terrorism in America: The 1886 Chicago Haymarket Bombing" (quotation from p. 33). See also Woodcock (436–39).

were used in attacks against targets in London, Salford, Glasgow and Liverpool, that inspired what one journal called “the Doctrine of Dynamite” (“The Doctrine of Dynamite” 1). *The Anarchist* drew inspiration from ongoing Fenian bomb attacks on London as well as those carried out in St Petersburg by Russian nihilists. Praising dynamite as the “Modern Agent of Revolution” for having “shifted [...] the balance of power” and reduced the “supremacy of brute force and mere number,” it claimed that the new and revolutionary strategy of “dynamite warfare” had exposed the vulnerability of cities as “points of attack” and left Britain open to wholesale destruction:

At this moment a single wayfarer, with dynamite in his pocket, throws the cities of England in greater terror than would an army of a hundred thousand men landing at Dover [...] A handful of hunted homeless Nihilists are able to terrorize all of the Russias, forcing its Emperor to live the life of a fugitive, and making his very coronation a problem of chance. Jupiter with his lightnings was scarcely more a master of the ancient world than is the mob with its bomb of dynamite, the avenging Fate of modern monarchies. (“Dynamite” 4)

By transforming cities into sites of decentralized political conflict, Fenian and Nihilist explosions had become, for British anarchists, a symbol of unlimited agency. Just as Albert Parsons’ *Alarm* would later celebrate the “humble bomb” for turning the table of class conflict in the United States (“The Resources of Civilisation”), *The Anarchist* portrayed revolutionary crowds as mobs of potential dynamiters, collectives that were more threatening than any foreign army.⁶ This political dream of countless, unseen bombers marauding across Britain also reveals the shift in the symbolic role of the *sans-culottish* crowd. Since the 1790s, the revolutionary mob had been associated with republican revolutionary terror but, now that it could be armed with dynamite, the subversive potential of Irish nationalists and their radical counterparts, the anarchists, the subversive potential of the crowd was increased ad infinitum. Instead of throwing themselves in waves *en masse* against lines of troops or police, these subversive individuals could now throw bombs *at* them.

Anarchism and the Irish Question

While the topic of dynamite might have been irresistibly sensational for Johann Most’s British followers, others preferred to trade in information rather than shocks. The most sustained declarations of solidarity that were offered to the Irish cause came in the form of a series of articles written by Charlotte M. Wilson for the journal *Freedom*, which she edited and published from 1886 to 1895. Wilson wrote most of the paper’s copy during these years but, rather than focus on one-off sensational events like the Phoenix Park killings or fantasize about bombing London with high explosives, she concentrated on informing readers about the ongoing Land War in Ireland. By publishing regular updates on conditions in the country, including a series of historical essays on the colonization of Ireland that ran for ten issues, Wilson facilitated understanding of what she described as “the long and unended course of woe which Ireland has suffered and is still

⁶ Contemporary paranoia over the possibility of an attack on Britain by rival European powers fuelled the popular literary genre of the invasion narrative, which originated with George Tomkyns Chesney’s anti-Prussian fantasy of 1871, *The Battle of Dorking* and culminated in 1898 with the publication of H.G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds*.

suffering at the hands of the English Government” (“Law and Order in Ireland” 4). Her radical views included equating colonial repression in Ireland with class conflict in England, opposing Home Rule because of the limitations that it would place on full independence for Ireland and criticizing Charles Stewart Parnell’s 1886 Land Bill for “not going far enough” (“Notes” 2). Wilson also stressed that imperial rule in Ireland would have dire consequences for the British, warning that the 1887 Coercion Act would ultimately be used against English workers as its terms could be transplanted directly into the British domestic sphere (“Law and Order in Ireland” 3–4). Her writings, with their stress on the political causes, effects and consequences of colonial policy, are much less hyperbolic than the material published in *The Anarchist*, which called for the application of revolutionary theory “to the open street” (“The Doctrine of Dynamite” 1). However, she did stress to her readers how the “heroic resistance” of the Irish was establishing standards for British anarchists by “setting at nought that bogey of law which is the formulated injustice of society” (“The Struggle for Freedom” 4). She urged her readers to “boldly recognise, with Michael Davitt, that it is only by direct revolutionary action that the despoiled can meet the violence, masked and unmasked, of the monopolists,” and argued that British rule in Ireland was no more than “foreign dictatorship” (“The Land War,” *Freedom* 1.2, 1). As well as offering regular and detailed commentaries on Irish events, *Freedom* also expressed its hope that the Irish would achieve full independence in the coming decades, when, as Wilson hoped, the country would break away from the British Empire to become “a nation—a ‘United Ireland’, governing herself and working out her own salvation” (“Coercion and Revolt in Ireland” 3; “Home Rule and After” 3).

Wilson’s close attention to Irish revolutionary politics was not matched by other radical journals but a decade later *The Torch*, which was published from 1891 until 1897 by Helen and Olivia Rossetti, focused on the fate of England’s most famous Irishman, Oscar Wilde. Daughters of William Michael Rossetti, nieces of the painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the poet Christina Rossetti, and granddaughters of Ford Madox Brown, the Rossetti sisters began publishing *The Torch* when Helen was aged only 13 and Olivia 16. The journal, which continued until their abrupt departure from the anarchist scene, began in a short-lived tone of moderation that quickly evaporated as the editors assimilated the opinions of militant Continental anarchists, with contributors including Émile Henry, Kropotkin (who unsuccessfully tried to persuade the Rossettis along a more theoretical path) and Louise Michel.⁷ In an opening “Statement of Principles,” *The Torch* advocated “International Revolutionary Socialism” and condemned the division of society into “rich & poor, oppressors & oppressed” for creating “every evil under which we now labour.” Criticizing attempts at reform from above, it advocated political “propaganda,” or “education,” as the means of bringing its readers to an “understanding of their wrongs, their duties and their rights.” This, the Rossettis planned, would be accomplished through the dissemination of literature “of every description, journals, pamphlets, the translation of foreign works which have been written in favour of socialism, lectures ...” (“Statement of Principles” 1). Copying the methods of Christian pamphleteers, distributors left copies in public spaces such as railway carriages, waiting rooms, tramcars and cafés, a practice that, given some of its more shocking content, amounted to a form of literary terrorism. While Olive Garnett, who helped with the journal’s production, admired the young editors for “inking their fingers in the cause of freedom” (“Statement of Principles” 5), she disapproved of its increasingly violent tone which, she believed, was the result of the influence of more hardened French anarchists. Nevertheless, like Kropotkin, she continued to help with

⁷ See Garnett, Saturday, February 25th, 1893 (155).

its printing and distribution, even while Olivia Rossetti wrote pamphlets defending the use of bombs (Garnett 209).

Articles calling on the poor to “sack” shops and “take back some of the food, clothing and other necessaries of life” (“A Debate” 7–8) were accompanied by statements encouraging German workers to “polish off” the Kaiser (Rossetti 7), along with eulogies for the French terrorist Ravachol (“1892, A Retrospect” 2). (The Rossettis also condemned the extradition to France of Jean-Pierre François, who retaliated for Ravachol’s execution by blowing up the Café Very in Paris; he was arrested in London and deported, the paper complained, for merely “speaking in a way that had become so common at public meetings” (“Notes on News” 10–11).) *The Torch* also published Émile Henry’s notorious speech from the dock under the title “Propaganda By Deed,” stating: “we are happy to vindicate any energetic act of revolt against the Bourgeois society, for we do not lose sight of the fact that the Revolution can only result from the individual acts of rebellion all together” (Henry 5). Unlike Charlotte Wilson, who championed the collective efforts of the rebel “Keltic populations” in *Freedom* (“Notes” 2), *The Torch* focused solely on individual acts of resistance. The Rossettis read such desperate and individualistic activity as symbolizing the political intensity of their cause but, according to their autobiographical and ultimately conservative novel of 1903, *A Girl among the Anarchists*, similar declarations were also uttered by Irish anarchists. With the exception of Joseph Conrad, whose 1907 novel *The Secret Agent* grafts an anarchist plot onto historical events surrounding Fenian activity during the 1860s and 1880s (these campaigns are as important to the novel as its more obvious central event, the Greenwich Park explosion), fiction published during the late Victorian and Edwardian periods tended to stress the incompatibility of anarchism and Irish nationalism.⁸ Featuring the Irish anarchist M’Dermott, who serves the movement with his literary ability and “artist’s soul,” the Rossettis’ novel also defies this trend. When their heroine, Isabel Meredith, finally resigns from her position as editor of the journal *Tocsin*, after a Spanish comrade attempts to assassinate the Spanish prime minister in Barcelona, she regards her decision as marking the “destined” and unavoidable end of her role as an “active revolutionary.” Describing her abandonment of the cause, she rationalizes her surrender: “I had changed,” she recalls, and asks “Why not let the dead bury the dead?” But despite the setbacks and disappointments that they have experienced along with her, the rest of Meredith’s comrades refuse to give in and, as she leaves her office to rejoin the bourgeois world, she hears the imaginative, if “bloodthirsty,” M’Dermott threatening to begin killing police “by our insidious means, and then go in for wholesale assassination!” (Meredith 86, 298–99). Whereas Meredith leaves the movement to return to bourgeois normality, it is the Irish revolutionary who remains to lead the anarchists into their next bout of propaganda.

In the aftermath of Oscar Wilde’s conviction for gross indecency, a number of articles that were published in *The Torch*, the journal upon which the fictional newspaper *Tocsin* is based, explored the links between anarchism, art and Irish revolutionary politics that were represented by the fictional character of M’Dermott. One piece, written by Alexander Cohen, the Dutch anarchist and friend of Émile Henry who lived in exile in London after his deportation from France in

⁸ For a discussion of the influence of Irish political history on *The Secret Agent*, see my “Conrad, the Stevensons and the Imagination of Urban Chaos.” Maintaining the distinction between anarchists and Irish revolutionaries, Richard Henry Savage’s potboiler *The Anarchist: A Story of To-Day* distinguishes between “loyal” Irish workers and completely untrustworthy European anarchists. Coulson Kernahan’s eccentric yarn *The Red Peril* also stresses the supposed ideological gulf separating Irish nationalists from Continental radicals, its cast of characters including a former Fenian who joins the hunt for German and “Asiatic” anarchists hiding out in England. See Savage; Kernahan.

1893 but spent his time in England writing for the anarchist press, focused on Wilde's plight in some detail (Sante xvi–xvii). Cohen's writing on the Irish aesthete underlined the warnings of the conservative French journalist Félix Dubois that anarchist rebels and creative communities shared a common "revolutionary attitude on purely artistic questions" (Dubois 124). Cohen also linked art with politics in *The Torch*, and his writing on Oscar Wilde was the kind of left-wing material that fuelled contemporary speculation over the "anthropological family" of political degenerates that included anarchist revolutionaries alongside the decadent literary writers of the *fin de siècle* (Nordau vii). Cohen interpreted Wilde's trial as a direct attack on the Irish writer's anti-authoritarian beliefs, which were no secret by the time he took his stand in the dock. His decadent views on the pleasures of excess had a radical edge and blended anarchist politics with aesthetic ideas, Lord Henry Wotton's discussion of the moral necessity of resisting authority in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* serving as a case in point: "Discord is to be forced to be in harmony with others [...] for any man of culture to accept the standard of his age is a form of the grossest immorality" (Wilde 77).⁹

During the trial Cohen criticized reports written by sensationalist "press-jackals" for: draining hard cash out of this case by means of the artificially increased sale of their prostituted papers, rejoicing themselves in Wilde's pain and distress, and every day giving a detailed account of every wrinkle in his face.

At bottom they had never really forgiven this man his talent, his dramatic and literary success, a success which was due to writings the spirit of which was quite at variance with the accepted moralities and the base hypocrisies of the Philistines. Hence the savagery of their joy [...] Wilde's sentence was a monstrosity engendered by mere hypocrisy. (Cohen 6)

Driven by their own indecent motives, and by the commercialization of their trade, these writers, Cohen warned, had punished Wilde for his celebrity and anarchic literary and political "spirit." Unlike propagandists by deed like Henry, who would always be outsiders, Wilde was embedded within the artistic and social elite. His position as a revolutionary who enjoyed popular celebrity meant that he posed a greater threat to the establishment by criticizing it from within and, according to Cohen, his enemies in the mainstream press were patiently waiting for an opportunity to punish him for his public successes. International socialism and anti-imperialist nationalism were, Cohen believed, the radical political beliefs that the trial was really attacking, albeit indirectly, by persecuting Wilde for carrying out his private sexual affairs. The radical beliefs that underwrote Wilde's literary creativity were, of course, the product of his Irish nationalist background and upbringing, factors that left him willing to support revolutionary causes. His mother, Jane Francesca Wilde, famously wrote nationalist poems and articles in Thomas Davis's Young Ireland newspaper the *Nation*, under the pseudonym "Speranza" and, in May 1882, during his lecture tour of the United States, Wilde himself justified the Phoenix Park killings by describing them as "the fruit of seven centuries of injustice." For Wilde, the colonization of his country had massive implications for the Irish who, he believed, could never engage in genuine creativity under British rule: only weeks before the Invincibles struck in Dublin, he informed an audience

⁹ For an overview of the public furore that erupted after the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* see Mason's *Oscar Wilde*, which reproduces the letters attacking the novel along with Wilde's replies to them.

in San Francisco that “[s]ince the English occupation we have had no national art in Ireland” (Wilde, ctd in Kiberd 46).

As well as Irish revolutionaries such as John Boyle O’Reilly, whom he met in Boston, and Mary Kelly, who accompanied him during part of his 1882 stay in California, Wilde was also personally acquainted with anarchist revolutionaries in Britain. In 1892 he paid £100 bail for the anarchist poet John Evelyn Barlas, who fired shots at the Speaker’s residence in Westminster, and his response to Barlas’s letter of thanks acknowledges the link between the pair’s political and literary idealism: “Whatever I did was merely what you would have done for me or for any friend of yours whom you admired and appreciated. We poets and dreamers are all brothers.” A month later he followed up the favour by sponsoring Barlas’s application for a reader’s ticket to the Reading Room of the British Museum (Wilde, *Complete Letters* 511, 512). Conservative commentators like Dubois feared this atmosphere of literary-political “innovation” as it threatened to fuse aesthetic and revolutionary views into a coherent and more persuasive position. The anarchists, he suggested, had the potential to attract talented writers to their cause, which would blur even further the already undifferentiated boundary between art and politics by creating a new generation of avant-garde subversives who were capable of infiltrating the literary and political mainstreams by producing work with a broader appeal than straightforwardly polemical writing. Believing that a movement as culturally “pronounced” as anarchism would never remain confined to any purely political sphere, he warned that its subversion of the world of art was only a matter of time. Given the existing tendencies of anarchist and decadent writers to promote the “shadier” elements of contemporary society, Dubois pointed out that the convergence of their common literary and political “delineations” was inevitable.¹⁰ Cohen also recognized that aestheticism and anarchism were natural allies and, with his defence of Oscar Wilde, attempted to broaden his movement’s political thrust by associating the Irish decadent’s downfall with its aims. He regarded Wilde’s prosecution as an anarchist cause célèbre:

In Wilde’s case [...] there is no question of violence done to anybody. There was neither violation nor even seduction. Subject to a passion, which it is not my place or anybody else’s to judge of, Wilde sought to satisfy this passion, with the free consent of the creatures who so vilely turned round and gave evidence against him.

These individuals having all, long since, reached the age of discretion, and having all prostituted themselves before they made Wilde’s acquaintance, I fail to see the harm done to society, and consequently the right of society to claim redress, *ie.*, to punish.

And, again, I ask in the name of what principle, whether “sacred” or not, Wilde was interfered with?

Wilde’s case shed light on a number of issues. To begin with he had corrupted no one but only followed his sexual preference, or “passion,” which, Cohen argued, was the business of none to make judgement upon as he had solicited with consenting men who were sex workers before he had ever encountered them. Cohen’s main point, however, lies in his questioning of the real motivation that lay behind Wilde’s prosecution and public humiliation by the “prostitutes” of the press, all of which, to him, suggested that the trial was politically motivated. Wilde’s imprisonment for his sexual and political choices allowed *The Torch* to draw attention to his status as an

¹⁰ Dubois cited the example of Octave Mirbeau, whose eulogy for the terrorist Ravachol appeared in the literary periodical *Entretiens*, which also published the chemical formula for dynamite. See Dubois (124, 126–27).

Irishman and gave the journal an opportunity to compare its anti-authoritarian position to the anti-imperial stance of the rebellious Irish; a fortnight after it published Cohen's condemnation of the Wilde trial it praised subversive Irishness in an article that provides an interesting sequel to its expression of sympathy for the aesthete's underground sexuality:

Our position is somewhat akin to that of the Irishman, who, when asked his political opinions, said he was "ag'in the government." We are forever "ag'in the government" no matter whether it be Tory or Liberal, Monarchy, Autocracy, or Democracy, convinced that only in the overthrow of government in all its forms and the recognition of individual liberty, is it possible for humanity to lead a pure, free, and natural life. ("News at Home and Abroad" 17)

The connection is made indirectly here, as was Cohen's suggestion that Wilde was subjected to a political show-trial, but it is clear that his persecution was interpreted by anarchists as an example of vengeful state oppression. *The Torch* also read Wilde's pursuit of personal and sexual freedom as a manifestation of Irish resistance to British imperialism and, in Cohen's estimation, he was doubly punished: first, for his homosexuality and, then, for his literary talent. In this subsequent article, the journal clearly announced its support for Irish nationalism, and the relationship between anarchist ideology and anti-colonial resistance is highlighted by these declarations of support, made first for Wilde, the political and sexual "deviant," and then for the Irish cause in general. As an Irishman whose sexual practice equalled subversion in the eyes of the moral establishment, Wilde's doubly rebellious individualism was also read by anarchists as a model for their own anti-authoritarianism, as his plight in court seemed to mirror their own political struggle.¹¹

Anarchist words and Irish deeds

When coupled with deeds, the anarchists believed, revolutionary language and literature could transform subjective consciousness and produce social change. *The Commonweal*, which by the early 1890s had fallen under the influence of the well-heeled agitator David J. Nicoll, and his anarchist circle within William Morris's Socialist League, provided another platform for these militant views.¹² Nicoll's imprisonment for incitement to murder in 1892—he was jailed along with the paper's publisher, C.W. Mowbray, for publishing an editorial in April 1892 that recommended assassination—proved that radical writing was a form of subversion in its own right. Controversially, he also published *An Anarchist Feast at the Opera*—a violently worded pamphlet produced in evidence at the trial of the Walsall anarchists in 1892—even though many anarchists regarded the document as a police forgery ("The Speeches of Our Comrades"). The controversial editorial that landed him in prison consisted of a speech that Nicoll gave in Hyde Park advising anarchists to "act [...] alone and unaided" against undercover policemen, the "monster" Secretary of

¹¹ Cohen was not the only anarchist to appreciate the connection between Wilde's political and sexual identities. Emma Goldman also defended Wilde in her autobiography, explaining that she had no difficulty with "sexual variation" (269). Goldman had a very broad view of anarchism, which she viewed as a movement of "intellectuals" (436) that linked "the world of labor, art and letters." See Goldman (269, 436, 482).

¹² See Thompson (566–71).

State, Henry Matthews, the High Court judge Sir Henry “Hangman” Hawkins and the detective inspector William Melville, asking “Are these men *fit to live?*” (“The Walsall Anarchists”).

Nicoll’s conviction provoked sympathetic poetry from *Freedom*, which compared the surveillance of anarchists in London to the colonial policing methods of the Royal Irish Constabulary in a satirical poem entitled “Ballad of Scotland Yard”:

There’s John Sweeney, he’s an Irishman, you see,
And I call all his comrades to remark,
Right well he’s learnt the lessons of the gallant R.I.C.,
And practised them in Sundays in the Park,
For he moved inconspicuously thro’ the mob
In a close-fitting mustard-color’d coat
With a special duty truncheon in his fob
And the tablets of his memory for a “note.” (“S.O.” 53)

Again, anarchists are found comparing the Irish situation to their own, as the R.I.C.’s tactics are portrayed by *Freedom* as being put into practice by the Irish CID Chief Inspector, John Sweeney, against anarchists in London. The very person of Sweeney, himself an Irishman from County Clare, also underlines that British anarchists were conscious of the counter-insurgency methods being employed in Ireland and feared their application in Britain. Sweeney, who had spent years spying on the Fenian movement in London before transferring his skills to “Anarchist hunting” in London during the 1890s, recommended that radical publications like *Freedom* should be completely censored. In his memoir, *At Scotland Yard*, the detective argued that these publications were “incendiary” (Sweeney 36), and the work of the “human refuse” of the rest of Europe (70). Describing their content as “the astonishing stuff [...] circulated amongst revolutionaries the more thoroughly to poison their minds” (203), he warned that, if uncontained, the ideas being communicated through the pages of the anarchist press would “infect [...] the still comparatively unsmirched” (212). Demanding that possession of these documents should be treated as seriously as the possession of explosives, he called for a muzzling process that would prevent anarchists from promoting their “poisonous” and foreign ideology, and he even recommended that the government should consider imposing a ban on people declaring themselves anarchists at all (Sweeney 271, 295–96, 223–24).

While Sweeney was concerned exclusively with left-wing activity in London, he applied his earlier experience of countering Irish republican activity to the new threat of anarchist insurgency which, unlike Fenianism, had a primarily literary expression. His views on the dissemination of anarchist literature underline how propaganda by word and deed struck the popular conservative imagination of the late Victorian and Edwardian period. His views were founded upon the principles of coercion, while, at the same time, many British anarchists viewed the political efforts of Irish separatists as exemplary. They recognized that colonial practice in Ireland would have inevitable consequences for revolutionaries in Britain, praising the “heroic Kelts of Ireland” for providing inspiring deeds that they followed up with their own supportive words (“The Land War,” *Freedom* 1.2, 1). Whether this was the action of Irish peasants in resisting evictions or the political defiance and sexual risk taking of Oscar Wilde, the Irish anti-colonial cause captured the radical imagination in late 19th-century Britain and informed anarchist journalism throughout the 1880s and 1890s. While, at the same time, European capitals were experiencing

the spectacular political tactic of the *attentat*, British anarchists remained sensitive to the greater violence of imperialism, and paid special attention to the occupation of Ireland. Although conservative ideologues warned that “there is no crime, however horrible, which is not gathered under the aegis of Anarchism,” time and again the anarchists themselves condemned imperialism as the greatest crime against human progress (Latouche 143).

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Deaglán Ó Donghaile
Anarchism, anti-imperialism and “The Doctrine of Dynamite”
2010

Journal of Postcolonial Writing, Volume 46, 2010 – Issue 3–4: Migration and Terrorism. DOI:
10.1080/17449855.2010.482380

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