Torture, Murder & Exclusion

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Ireland's first 10 years of Independence

The 1916 proclamation, the manifesto of the 1916 rebels, states: *"The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past."*

These noble aspirations would become almost a bible of Irish Republican ideals and within six years, after the end of the War of Independence in 1922, a section of that movement had a chance to implement these ideals. However the society established after the war of independence "The Irish Free State" was a pale shadow of even the most modest interpretation of this document. Civil liberties were almost non existent, citizens were not equal, with women becoming second class while the poor were plunged further into destitution.

The early story of the Irish Free State is one of a dark authoritarian regime based on repression, discrimination and censorship where the elite of nationalist Ireland re-established control over a society that had teetered on the verge of revolution for years. Their deeply authoritarian attitude to politics was underscored by severe catholic morality which stifled culture and allowed no political debate or opposition of any kind. By 1937 the "The Irish Free State" had created a society that had betrayed the ideals of what many had set out to achieve two decades earlier.

Over two articles Fin Dwyer will examine the path which saw revolutionary Ireland descend into conservative authoritarianism, first looking at the establishment of the state through the civil war and its aftermath and then, in the next issue, looking at its social programme in the later 20's and 1930's.

War of Independence and Revolution

Within a few years of the 1916 rebellion the Irish Republican movement found itself transformed from a relatively marginal group to being one of the key political forces in early 20th century Ireland. In 1917 when the British Army faced a manpower crisis in World War I conscription was threatened in Ireland. This was deeply unpopular and the Republican movement grew quickly as they had consistently and militantly opposed World War I since its outbreak in 1914.

The movement grew from strength to strength and by 1919 a full-scale war of Independence was under way. Over the following two years the basis of British power in Ireland collapsed and groups traditionally frozen out of society began to assert their power, most notably women and workers.

In the decade before independence women had made great strides in their struggle for equality. After years of struggle, albeit with opposition, women were forcing their way into politics best symbolised by the republican socialist Constance Markievicz, who was the first woman elected to the house of Commons in the 1918 election. Markievicz's formal role as a military leader during the 1916 rebellion would have been unthinkable in the previous century. This surge of activity from women was reflected through the ranks of the republican movement with women's organisations like Cumann na mBan and Inghinidhe na hÉireann.

Cumann na mBan

Although not feminist in any sense of the word their very existence showed a marked change from the last period of radicalism in Ireland in the 1880′s when women had struggled to get any acknowledgement for their participation in the Land War of 1879 -1882. The Ladies Land League was castigated by nearly all sections of society and only received limited acknowledgement when the Land League itself was proscribed. While women's liberation had a long way to go through the second decade of the 20th century, change seemed imminent. This mood was reflected by the fact that equality of the sexes was enshrined in both the 1919 democratic programme of the first Dáil and the 1922 constitution.

The other group in society to surge forward was Ireland's organised Labour Movement. Although resoundingly defeated in 1913 during the Dublin Lock Out, by 1919 the Trade Union movement in Ireland had been reorganised and was immensely powerful. Aside from IRA activity, organised labour had played a prominent role during the war of Independence. Along with numerous general strikes including one in support of IRA hunger strikes in 1920, there were 233 other strikes that same year and even the establishment of an albeit brief workers' soviet in Limerick in 1919. They also played a crucial role in the war itself when transport unions refused to transport war supplies or soldiers for the British Army.

The Birth of The Free State

After years of conflict, strikes and assassinations a temporary truce was called in 1921 between the IRA and the British Government. This was followed by negotiations which produced the famous Anglo Irish Treaty. It clearly fell short of the aims of the Republican movement. The six counties that today form Northern Ireland were to remain part of the United Kingdom while Ireland was not to become a Republic but a"Free State" within the British Empire.

When the document was debated in Ireland it created huge division. The Dáil (the Irish Parliament) eventually narrowly passed the treaty 56–48.

Post Independence Hopes

After independence both women and workers had high hopes that the society being forged in Ireland would protect their new found power but over the following decade these groups were harshly suppressed by the new Irish government. Ireland's new political elite would effectively hope to turn the clock back and enforce the status quo that had existed in Ireland years if not decades before the war of Independence.

However, first to learn the authoritarian nature of the new state were the former comrades of the new government who opposed the treaty. A few months after Independence a civil war broke out between the pro and anti-treaty sides which the new government fought in the most ferocious manner. Often seen as an internal fight within the Republican Movement the civil war had immense ramifications for the wider society. The basic attitudes of how the new Irish elite would rule the Irish Free State were laid bare in what was a brutal struggle.

The build up to civil war

As soon as the Dáil ratified the treaty the President Eamon de Valera resigned and walked out uttering the words "I am not going to connive at setting up in Ireland another Government for England". He was soon joined by many other republican TDs who opposed the Treaty including Harry Boland, Constance Markievicz and Cathal Brugha. In their absence those republicans who supported the treaty set about establishing a government. Among the key figures were WT Cosgrave, Kevin O Higgins, Richard Mulcahy, Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins.

The first major challenge of the new government was how they would deal with opponents of the Treaty. These opponents, while in a minority, significantly had a majority of support within the army – the IRA. When senior anti-treaty members of the IRA called a convention on March 26th 1922, in spite of a government ban, 52 out of 73 brigades attended and rejected the Treaty, proclaiming the parliament had betrayed the republican ideal by ratifying the treaty.

Over the next few months the Free State reacted by establishing a new army – the National Army — to break its dependence on an organisation who it could not control and which clearly did not support it. In June an election was held in which the anti treaty side received 21% while the pro treaty side received almost 40% of the vote. While this was interpreted as a mandate by those in favour of the treaty, those opposed to the treaty were unmoved. Liam Mellows, an opponent of the treaty, remarked it was not the "will of the people" but "the fear of the people" in reference to the British threat to wreak a terrible war if the treaty was rejected.

For reasons beyond the scope of this article, which are highly debated among historians, the opposing sides ended up in conflict within a few days of the election, precipitated by the Free State's "National Army" shelling a 3 month IRA occupation of the Four courts on June 26th 1922. This was after 3 months of effort by groups within both camps to avoid conflict. Understanding the nature of this conflict is key to understanding the origins of the nature of Authoritarianism in Ireland after Independence.

The Civil War

It became evident very quickly that the Pro Treaty forces were going to emerge victorious. The Anti Treaty IRA's sole point of unity was that they opposed the Treaty. Identifying other goals which unified them is impossible as they encompassed republicans of both the left and right. This lack of unity hamstrung their ability to act. While the pro-Treaty side were also politically very diverse they had unity originating not the least from the fact that they could claim a mandate from the 1922 election.

Within a few weeks the I.R.A. forces were decisively defeated in Dublin and Cork city was captured on August 10th. By early August the overall threat being posed by the Anti-Treaty I.R.A. was diminishing given they had already lost every urban area and Liam Lynch the Chief of Staff of the IRA gave the order to resort to guerilla warfare on August 10th.

A few days later, Michael Collins, the key figure in the Free State Government, now a general in the National Army, was killed in an ambush in West Cork at Béal na mBláth on August 22nd 1922. His death unleashed and unmasked the true authoritarianism that lay behind the Free State government. Instead of trying to de-escalate a conflict they were clearly winning the authoritarianism of the government politicians demanded an absolute annihilation of the I.R.A.

Following Collins' death nearly a year of terrifying brutality saw the Free State National Army breach several articles of The Hague convention of 1907, the era's equivalent of the Geneva Convention. Far from the lofty heights of ensuring civil liberties for the people of Ireland they engaged in a campaign of brutal repression.

At Oriel house in Dublin, the Free State set up the Criminal Investigation Department where ex IRA members waged a campaign of torture and killings against anti-treaty republicans. After the killing of Collins they killed four republicans in Dublin and dumped their bodies. This would result in 21 deaths in Dublin alone by the end of the war. These activities were not just those of a few men who had gone off the edge, but that of a 250 strong force operating in Dublin city centre.

During the second half of 1922 the National Army made several naval landings into Munster where the IRA remained strongest. In a ruthless campaign prisoners were frequently executed. Again this cannot be explained away as just the activities of soldiers hardened by war, indeed far from it. By September 18th 1922 reports of the executions of prisoners were forwarded to cabinet but nothing was done save Richard Mulcahy agreeing to help remove soldiers who had a problem with such activity. The activity was in effect condoned by Patrick Hogan Minister for Land and Agriculture when he said that the "national army are a little too ready to take prisoners".

Further to this the government itself passed legislation which effectively legalised similar executions. On 28th September the sitting members of the Dáil had overwhelming (48–18) endorsed legislation that removed jury trials for numerous activities and allowed military courts to try civilians with death sentences being handed down to those carrying weapons. On October 3rd they offered an amnesty lasting only two weeks before the military courts began a killing spree endorsed by cabinet which saw dozens of people executed.

Erskine Childers

On November 10th Erskine Childers, who had signed the treaty but opposed its recommendations, was arrested, tried and executed for being in possession of an ornamental gun given to him as a wedding present by Michael Collins himself. Worse was yet to come. The IRA responded in kind and on November 27th Liam Lynch issued an order that any TD who voted for this legislation, which was dubbed the "Murder Bill", was to be executed on sight. Two weeks later two government T.D.'s Sean Hales and Padraig O Máille were shot. Hales died of his wounds.

In response the government decided to execute four prominent republicans being held in Mountjoy jail in Dublin– Liam Mellows (IRA quarter master), Joe McKelvey (former IRA Chief of Staff) , Rory O'Connor (IRA director of Engineering) and Dick Barrett. The sentiment behind the government policy was outlined by WT Cosgrave in the statement "Terror will be met with Terror". Indeed nothing else could explain killing four men who could not possibly have had any involvement given they were in prison since the first weeks of the war. It has been argued that the time provoked desperate measures but even contemporaries thought it was unjustifiable. Thomas Johnson, leader of the Labour Party which was neutral in the civil war, described the enormity of what had happened:

"Murder most foul as in the best it is — but this most foul, bloody and unnatural. The four men in Mountjoy have been in your charge for five months…….. the Government of this country—the Government of Saorstát Eireann, announces apparently with pride that they have taken out four men, who were in their charge as prisoners, and as a reprisal for that assassination murdered

them……I wonder whether any member of the Government who has any regard for the honour of Ireland, or has any regard for the good name of the State, or has any regard for the safety of the State, will stand over an act of this kind."

By March 1923 as the Free State was unquestionably on the verge of victory they began to commit atrocities on an unprecedented scale in reaction to anti-treaty assassinations and attacks on property. In Kerry at Cahirciveen, Killarney and Countess Bridge horrific massacres of IRA prisoners were committed. The most notorious atrocity was that committed at Ballyseedy, Co. Kerry where the National Army tied 9 IRA prisoners to a bridge before detonating a landmine killing all except one — Stephen Fuller — who testified to the events later.

Excusable brutality?

The Civil war drew to a close in the early summer of 1923 and it was clear the Irish Free State had fallen far short of the aims of the 1916 proclamation or even far more timid aspirations. It has been argued that exceptional times called for exceptional measures, however it is hard to see how such measures could ever be justifiable or excusable. Even if it was justifiable it is difficult to see how the IRA posed such a threat to the state after Michael Collins' death (the period that saw the worst persecution) that warranted such a brutal response.

The Anti Treaty forces had always been seriously disunited and poorly armed with an arguably non existent strategy. One of the events that heightened tensions in the run up to war illustrated this. When an IRA unit occupied the Four Courts they were so disunited that when the IRA chief of staff Liam Lynch attempted to gain entry on the 19th of June he was locked out. Although Lynch eventually was able to repair the links with the four courts garrison it was indicative of wider problems that such squabbling was ongoing within days of the civil war breaking out.

Their disunity through the following months stopped them utilising their numerical strength. This was compounded by the fact several key figures within the anti Treaty movement including Rory O Connor, Liam Mellows, Joe McKelvey, Cathal Brugha and Paddy O Brien were captured or killed within a few days of the conflict starting. In essence they were strategically reactionary. Their sole innovative move was the Four Courts occupation in Spring 1922 after which they largely reacted to Free State activity: when the war started when the Free State attacked the Four Courts garrison, they reverted to guerilla warfare only after they had lost all urban centres and logically enough in this pattern they responded to state terror with terror.

In this situation the Free State dictated the pace and course of the war. Using state terror was clearly the worst path as the I.R.A. would respond in kind, illustrated by Liam Lynch issuing assassination orders on all T.D.s who had voted for what they called "The Murder Bill" or the the ferocious brutality illustrated when the IRA killed Kevin O Higgins' elderly father on February 10th 1923 in reprisal for the execution of 33 prisoners in January.

Indeed arguably it was this repression and brutality that allowed what was a disunited factious movement hold men as disparate as the communist Peader O Donnell and the conservative catholic Liam Lynch together. Had the Free State executed the war in a less authoritarian manner they could have surely undermined the basis of the IRA leadership. Aside from two brief amnesties in late 1922 and February 1923, which seem to have been more tokenistic than a real gesture to end the war, they fought in a manner which backed the anti treaty side into a corner. The brutality if anything played into the hands of militarists like Liam Lynch who argued for carrying on the war until they were utterly annihilated.

Why did the Free State choose this strategy?

While the majority resented the civil war, the manner in which the new state had exacted the war should have alarmed people. When Thomas Johnson the Labour leader vented his fury over the execution of Mellowes, Barret, O Connor and McKelvey in December 1922, he said "I am almost forced to say you have killed the new State at its birth" but he missed the point. They had not killed the state, quite the opposite.

They knew how weak the Anti Treaty forces were, indeed the secretary of the Free State Government Diarmuid O Hegarty said "The Government was, however, satisfied, that those forces contained within themselves elements of disruption that given time would accomplish their own disintegration". Yet they still ruthlessly crushed them. The Free State were well aware of what they were doing. The next ten years would show they had successfully laid the groundwork for a deeply authoritarian state in the civil war, one they would use to break all opposition regardless of its nature.

In this light their execution of the war did not augur well for the future, far from being the concern of Anti-treaty republicans it should have alarmed wider society. Over the following ten years they would apply an equally authoritarian outlook in enforcing their view of society. Far from creating a stable society they forced well over half the population into an oppressive existence.

Free State in Power

By early 1923 victory was inevitable and the Pro Treaty forces began to look to the future. Since December the formation of a new party had been discussed and in April they reorganised themselves into a new political party – Cumann na nGaedheal. This new party was supposedly formed to transcend War of Independence politics, appealing to all sections of society including those who had been opposed to Independence. Whilst theoretically a nice idea it was in reality a rallying point for the conservative elite in Irish society who had been divided between loyalist and nationalist, now effectively a redundant divide. United in Cumann na nGaedheal they would set about re-establishing their authority after a decade of social radicalism. In office they would introduce a plethora of authoritarian reforms based on excluding various groups from society.

In May the I.R.A. all but accepted defeat when chief of staff Frank Aiken (Liam Lynch was killed in April) issued the order to dump arms on May 24th. Over the next few months state executions and torture tailed off – although Noel Lemass was executed and dumped by Free State forces in Dublin as late as the summer of 1923. Comfortable in their power, having annihilated and terrified the opposition, elections were held in August 1923.

The results were only mediocre for Cumann na nGaedhael. Given that many Anti Treaty republican candidates were in prison, on the run or, in the case of Eamon de Valera, arrested when trying to electioneer, the fact that Cumann na nGaedhael only returned with 39% was a poor showing. Lacking a majority they could only rule because the Anti-Treaty republicans refused to sit in the parliament they saw as lacking legitimacy.

Cumann na nGaedheal in Government

Although the president of the administration was W.T. Cosgrave, the Cumann na nGaedheal government was increasingly under the influence of the highly conservative faction centred around

the authoritarian Kevin O Higgins who famously quipped that Cumann na nGaedheal were the "most conservative-minded revolutionaries that ever put through a successful revolution". If anyone had any hope they would fulfil the 1916 ideal to "pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts" they were about to be sorely disappointed. The authoritarianism that governed their policy in the Civil War was now to be turned on society at large.

Mary McSwiney Demonstration

Their willingness to use authoritarian measures on the civilian population had been displayed as early as November 1922. When the anti-treaty activist Mary McSwiney was interned this caused public anger. The 50 year old McSwiney, was one of the most famous female republican activists hailing from the same family as the republican martyr, former Lord Mayor of Cork Terence McSwiney, who had died on hunger strike during the war of Independence in 1920. When McSwiney went on hunger strike in prison on November 4th, a demonstration was called to protest against her incarceration. On November 9th a large demonstration of women gathered in Dublin city centre. With no apparent provocation the National Army arrived and fired shots at the demonstration. Although no one was killed, 14 were injured in the ensuing stampede.

Post office strike

The state's use of authoritarian measures was increasingly evident not just through its prosecution of the civil war but also the way it dealt with internal dissent. In September 1922 , 10,000 postal workers went on strike provoked by a government wage cut. The reaction of the government was all too predictable as the army were sent in to break the strike, with armed guards threatening strikers on picket lines.

The rural poor were also an early victim of Cumann na nGaedhael in power. Hoping to cultivate a support base with larger farmers in Ireland, they supported these farmers in their ongoing attempts to drive down the wages of landless agricultural labourers. These labourers formed around 23% of the rural workforce. As a class they had been the big losers during the land war of the 1880′s as they could not benefit from reforms that allowed farmers buy land given they had none. Their attempts to gain a stake in Irish rural society through organising themselves in the ITGWU (The Irish Transport and General Workers Union) in the early 20th century was fiercely resisted by farmers.

In 1923 farmers, emboldened by the knowledge that the Free State would support them, locked out thousands of unionised labourers in attempts to drive down wages. In Athy, Co. Kildare when farmers locked out 350 labourers the National Army arrested the ITGWU branch secretary in the area. When a farmer was attacked and a threshing machine damaged 8 trade unionists were arrested and held for 3 months without trial or charge.

Waterford Lockout

Later in the year when 1500 labourers were locked out in Waterford the response was similar. The state sent in 600 Soldiers and the entire of East Waterford was put under a curfew between 11p.m. and 5:30 am. Meanwhile nothing was done to stop vigilantes organised by farmers called "White Guards" attacking union organisers across the county. The Farmers, backed by the state, emerged victorious and crushed the union.

This, accompanied by high unemployment, broke the power of organised rural labour. The ITGWU's membership halved in the following three years. This was reflected by the fact that within 5 years days lost to strike action were reduced by 95%. In the absence of Unions, the government clearly had no interest in their welfare and the labourers had no one to argue their corner. This saw their living standards plummet. There was a 10% fall in agricultural labourers' wages between 1922 and 1926 and a further 10% in the following 5 years. These policies saw a whole section of the rural population – the labourers — disappear through emigration, little wonder given their income had fallen by 20% between 1923 and 31.

The Urban Poor

If their despicable attitude toward the rural poor was devastating their ambivalence to the urban poor proved fatal. The desperate living standards of the urban poor was the greatest single social issue facing "The Free State" in 1923. The tenement population in Dublin lived in crushing poverty. However instead of helping the poorest of the poor the government focused on building houses for the middle classes, which saw the expansion of the suburbs on the fringes of Dublin. Little was done to alleviate the conditions among the urban poor in Dublin. Housing construction was largely privatised and thus little was done to alleviate the desperate squalor in which people lived as they could never afford housing.

Shockingly Dublin Corporation only built an average of 483 houses a year between 1923 and 1933. This led to the deterioration of housing conditions. In 1926, when a census was conducted, over a third of the population of Dublin lived in housing conditions with an average of 4 people per room. This disregard for overcrowding was worsened by their tax approach. Appealing to the rich in society the Free State, short of money, unbelievably reduced income tax from what was 27% to 15% and instead turned to levying finances indirectly, which had a greater impact on the poor. The outcome of theses policies was revealed in 1926 when the shocking statistic of an infant mortality rate of 12% among children younger than one in urban areas was revealed. The authoritarian, callous attitude of Free State politicians and their indifference would allow this to continue unaddressed with its devastating consequences.

By the mid 20's Cumann na nGaedheal had eliminated all organised political opposition. This had begun in their vicious conflict with their former comrades in the republican movement but was expanded to wider opposition once torture and repression had broken the Anti-treatyites. The labour movement had next faced similar annihilation by ferocious attacks which in turn exposed the entire working class to direct attack. Satisfied at having suppressed all economic radicalism, from the mid 1920's they would increasingly focus on social issues and far from resting on their laurels the Cumann na nGaedhael Government would go on to enforce its narrow catholic doctrines on women in a conflict that would have some of the furthest reaching consequences for Irish society. This will be covered in the next issue of IAR…

Authoritarianism and the early Irish State

Fin Dwyer looks at the latter years of Ireland's first post independence government, which having successfully suppressed political opposition and the workers' movement, went on to "attack women and enforce their moral and ethical values on wider society". From the clearing of prostitutes from the Monto and the filling of the Magdalene

laundries to the institutionalisation of child abuse, he describes how the state's close association with the Catholic Church played a decisive role in forming attitudes to women and sex that have had a devastating effect on Irish society that can still be felt today.

In the first part of this article, carried in the the previous edition of IAR, Fin Dwyer looked at the foundation of the Free State, the suppression of political opposition and the workers movement. In this article, he looks at the period of Ireland's first post-independence government, Cumann na nGaedhael, as state and church moved on to attack and discipline women and any other groups seen to deviate from their vision of Catholic-Irish morality.

In the mid 1920's, the Minister for External Affairs, Kevin O'Higgins, had become the Cumann na nGaedhael government's key political influence. At the time, the Catholic Church effectively formed the social policy of the Free State.

This had little to do specifically with Cumann na nGaedhael and more to do with the fact that the Catholic Church was arguably the most powerful institution in Ireland in 1923, even more powerful than the state itself. Cumann na nGaedhael were in no position to stand up to the church, but had little inclination to do so either. Indeed, the Catholic Church had been the key influence on Irish society since before the famine and the entire nationalist movement of all sides had been inculcated with its moral and cultural attitudes, as were large sections of the population.

In this context, the social values of the church were effectively the values of Cumann na nGaedhael, highlighted best by W.T. Cosgrave, the president, who suggested that the upper house in the Free State could be a "theological board which would decide whether any enactments of the Dáil were contrary to [Roman Catholic] faith and morals or not" Indeed, Kevin O'Higgins himself had failed in an attempt to become a priest. Rather than one influencing the other, both church and state became almost inseparable and at times indistinguishable on social policy.

Once in power, Cumann na nGaedhael soon set about trying to implement as policy what were Catholic social values. There was no debate on these issues, they were enforced regardless of their impact. This was to have disastrous consequences particularly for women as, when fused with Cumann na nGaedhael's authoritarianism, Catholic views of women would see them slowly but surely excluded and denuded of power. Usually this was due to legislative change, but also on some occasions more forceful methods were used when they deemed it neccessary.

Attitudes towards Women

The Catholic Church had a deeply sexist view of women in society. As the sociologist Tom Inglis (1998) points out, they portrayed women as "fragile, weak beings" and "for women to attain and maintain moral power it was necessary that they retain their virtue and chastity." In order to enforce these attitudes, the church portrayed sex as unclean and immoral and ultimately, women's bodies were something to be ashamed of.

This helped generate a deep embarrassment and guilt over sex. Where the church had substantial influence they could effectively control women's knowledge of sex, as the only place they could talk about it was in confession, where they were berated over the topic by their priest. Outside of this, the Catholic point of view on women's role in society was that they were to rear children, take care of the family and do little else.

The Nationalist movement in Ireland had been heavily influenced by these ideas and attitudes, and its formula of an ideal Irish woman was almost identical. Arthur Griffith, who had died in 1922, had stated that in any Irish house, "you will meet the ideal mother, modest, hospitable, religious, absorbed in her children and motherly duties," clearly reflecting the ethos of the church.

The reality of 1920′s Ireland

In spite of the significant influence of the church, the reality of life in Ireland in 1922 was quite different. Prior to independence, the church had used its not inconsiderable social and cultural weight to enforce these ideas. However, Ireland like many countries across Europe in the period between 1914–23, witnessed great social change, which undermined the church's control and authority. While women were by no means equal citizens, significant progress had been made.

However, after independence, the church did not only have to rely on its moral, social and cultural influence. Now, in unison with the authoritarian Cumann na nGaedhael government, it could use the apparatus of state to enforce its authority over women, particularly when it came to sex.

Sex

It was around the issue of sex that the church were most vocal and outraged. They viewed sex as a dirty subject and a sphere where women were largely a corrupting influence. However, in relation to sex, by 1923, Irish women may not have been as ashamed and prudish as the church believed they should have been (or as many today assume them to have been).

In 1924, an Inter-Departmental Committee of Inquiry regarding Venereal Disease was tasked to 'make inquiries as to the steps necessary, if any, which are desirable to secure that the extent of venereal disease may be diminished'. In its unpublished report, they concluded that 'venereal disease was widespread throughout the country, and that it was disseminated largely by a class of girl who could not be regarded as a prostitute." The report also illustrated that the spread of disease was relatively evenly distributed across the country, and not limited, as anticipated, to former garrison towns and cities.

Aside from the blatant sexism of the report, which attributed the spread of venereal disease to women, it clearly indicated a higher level of sexual activity at the time than is often imagined. For the state and its moral watchdog, the Catholic Church, this was seen as a great danger to the church's authority and control, and to the nationalist vision of what womanhood was, i.e., a home-maker.

To combat this, the authoritarianism of the state went into overdrive to suppress sexual activity. In 1923, strict censorship in film was introduced and films which were deemed 'indecent, obscene or blasphemous or contrary to … or subversive of public morality' were banned. 1924 saw the restrictions placed on the sale of alcohol, not least as it was seen as one of the causes of slipping morality.

By 1929, censorship bills enabled the government to ban even the dissemination of material on birth control. Aside from their moral view on birth control, it was clearly something that allowed women to gain greater control over sex, while society in general would have a greater understanding of the sexual process. This was anathema to the Catholic Church's teaching and practice. The attitude toward contraception articulated just how domineering the Free State was

– even discussion on the topic was not going to be tolerated. The Minister for Justice, James FitzGerald-Kenney (Kevin O'Higgins was assassinated in 1927), stated in 1928, when the censorship bill was debated in the Dáil:
"In our [the government's] views on [contraception] we are perfectly clear and perfectly definite. We will not allow … the free discussion of this question … We have made up our minds that it is wrong. That conclusion is for us unalterable … We consider it to be a matter of grave importance. We have decided, call it dogmatically if you like — and I believe almost all persons in this country are in agreement with us — that that question shall not be freely and openly discussed. That question shall not be advocated in any book or in any periodical which circulates in this country."

This attitude towards sex and the setting of unattainable standards for women was also to lead to horrific abuse of women on a level that is only becoming really understood in the last decade. This culture allowed women who had children outside of marriage, who were raped and spoke of their experience, or even just assertive women, to be committed into what were effectively prisons run by Catholic nuns. These were the brutal Magdalene Laundries. The state's attitude to this was more than supportive. In 1927, The State Commission on the Destitute Poor referred to women who had children outside of marriage as either "first time offenders" or those "who had fallen more than once." For single mothers who managed to hold on to their children (often they were forced to give them up for adoption), they mostly did so under conditions of exclusion and impoverishment. This lead to a shameful infant mortality rate of 33% for children of single mothers.

Prostitution

Perhaps the most direct attack on women over the issue of sex came in 1925, when the state cracked down on prostitution. The prostitute embodied the polar opposite to both the Catholic Church's and the nationalist view of women. Before independence, Dublin had had a world famous red light district in the North Inner city, known as the "Monto", based around Montgomery street. Although it went into decline after the withdrawal of the British Army, hundreds of women still worked as prostitutes. Everything about the Monto horrified the church, not only was it "immoral" but they had little or no control over the sex lives of the women working there.

Prostitutes in the Monto

The Monto was also to a certain extent outside the patriarchal structure of Irish society, given many of the brothels were run by women. Nonetheless, for the women working there, it was a very tough life, where they were controlled by madams or pimps. Unfortunately, when the church and state attacked the area in the 1920′s, they did not have these women's interests at heart. They were concerned with ridding Dublin of a moral scourge as they saw it, rather than helping people who were being exploited.

Campaigning against the Monto had begun in the early 1920′s, firstly by church organisations. Lead by a group who would form the Legion of Mary in 1925, Catholic activists targeted the area, attempting to literally force the prostitutes to convert from prostitution to home-makers. They operated hostels where former prostitutes could stay, although they were operated under strict moral guidelines, including the issue that "every entrant is made the object of a special and

individual attention, directed in the first place to the creation of moral fibre." Once a brothel was closed, they moved a family into the building, effectively ensuring that the prostitutes would be made homeless unless they stayed with the church-run hostels.
It was clear that the interests of these women were not being taken into account, but rather more abstract notions of Catholic moral fibre. Frank Duff, who was most synonymous with this campaign against prostitution, and is often lauded as a great social reformer, illustrated the thinking behind this deeply sexist "moral fibre". For Duff, "the only cause of Syphilis ... is the prostitute lying in wait in cities to tempt men." In light of the findings of the 1926 Committee of Inquiry regarding Venereal Disease Ireland, such statements were completely unfounded, but were indicative of Duff's prejudices and disregard for these women.

To "save" these women, they were inculcated with the state and church's idea of what they should be – essentially wives and mothers. The move from prostitution gave these women no more power, as it was a simple process of replacing the brothel madam with a husband; through the hostels, the Catholic activists married off the women off as quickly as possible. Between 1922–23, sixty-one women were married off.

This campaign, where these supposedly "saved" women were bystanders in their "liberation" from prostitution, was heavily supported by the state. The first hostel was opened at 76 Harcourt Street, a building given to them in 1922 by future president and then Minister for Local Government, W.T. Cosgrave.

After campaigning for a few years in 1925, the campaign against the prostitutes in the Monto was stepped up a notch. Several arms of the church, including the Jesuits and the Legion of Mary, worked with the police in driving prostitutes out of the Monto. After the church organisations' moderate success early in the year, the police launched a series of raids on the Monto. In March, over one hundred people were arrested and one woman was imprisoned for 6 weeks for allowing a house to be used as a brothel. Needless to say, while the church and state succeeded in closing the Monto, they did not end prostitution. This was a secondary concern; the campaign was mainly about moral aesthetics, no doubt prompted by the fact that as the Catholics left the Pro-Cathedral on Marlborough Street in Dublin, they were on the fringe of a red light district.

Child Abuse and The Carrigan Report

The long-term ramifications of authoritarian attitudes fused with the church's morality, which created an environment where sex was something unspeakable, had horrendous consequences. When a report was carried out into sexual crimes in Ireland — The Carrigan Report (1930) — it uncovered widespread sexual abuse of children.

In the report, Eoin O'Duffy, the chief of police, stated there had been thousands of cases of abuse of people under 18 (some under 11) between 1927 and 1929, for which only 15% of the cases had been prosecuted. Immediately one is reminded of the 1916 proclamation's most modest of demands of "cherishing all children of the nation equally". These notions were long dead by 1930 – the report was never published or acted upon. When it was circulated to politicians on December 2nd 1931, the Department of Justice attached a cover note arguing against publication because "it might not be wise to give currency to the damaging allegations made in Carrigan regarding the standard of morality in the country."

This policy was continued when Fianna Fail came to power the following year, and the report was buried. The long-term implications of this are really only being understood today, as the true

extent of child sex abuse emerges. As Fiona Kennedy (2000) pointed out, had this report been published it may not have stopped all sex abuse, but certainly the culture of silence that allowed perpetrators abuse children for decades would have been lessened.

Women and Wider Society

Accompanying the campaigning around the issue of sex, the church and state through the 1920's brought in several pieces of legislation designed to force women from the workplace into the home and keep them there.

In 1925, divorce — something that was already something very difficult to attain — was banned for women. Technically, it was possible for men if they moved to a country where divorce was legal, but this provision was not open to women. The only option available was legal separation, but no remarriage. When debated in the Senate, the Countess of Desart noted the implications of this bill for women, who could be legally separated but not able to remarry:
"You condemn her to a life of misery or isolation, for a woman in so false a position must be ten times more circumspect than any other, if she would safeguard her good name. If guilty, she must spend the rest of her days as an example of the wicked, flourishing like a bay tree or as an eyesore in a land hitherto famed for its high ideals of purity."

Countess Desart was right, but unfortunately this was one of the intentions of the bill; in order to preserve the family, women would be pre- vented from taking independent action in terms of divorce or separation. This legislation, reflect- ing the desire to control women as home makers, was reinforced in the provision in the bill which legally made a woman's legal residence that of her husband, even if he lived in a different continent.

Another crucial aspect of controlling women and enforcing the catholic view of the family was the exclusion of women from public life. In 1924, Kevin O'Higgins first attempted to exclude women totally from jury duty. This was clearly unconstitutional, as the 1922 constitution enshrined the idea that all citizens were equal. When it was finally brought in 1927, O'Higgins, a few months from his assassination, had found a way around equality: women would have to register for jury duty.

In the course of the debate in the Seanad, O'Higgins outlined how he saw women: "I think we take the line that it was proper to confer on women citizens all the privileges of citizenship and such of the duties of citizenship as we thought it reasonable to impose upon them." This idea, that women had limited capabilities and were unable to bear the weight of citizenship, was very much to the fore of their thinking and directed policy. This shaped the overriding aim: the removal of women from the public sphere.

Women working outside the home was something the Catholic Church loathed. In 1925, the government attempted to limit posts in the Senior Civil Service to men, but this was rejected in the Senate. A few years later, the bill was forced through, as the Senate could only reject legislation for a certain time period. Women were thus banned from progressing past a certain grade, thereby making a successful career in the civil service impossible. In time, a marraige bar would be introduced, forcing women to retire from the civil service when they married.

General Society

By the late twenties, the Catholic Church and the Free State alliance had almost total control over the social life of the vast majority of people. Any threat to this, no matter how inconsequential, was treated in the harshest of terms. The level of authoritarianism ruling Irish society was illustrated in Leitrim in the early 1930′s.

Leitrim in the early 1920′s had been like a lot of the country. It was the site of much republican activity and class struggle. In 1921, an Irish emigrant, Jimmy Gralton, returned from New York and got involved in local organising of tenants taking over landlords' farms. In the 1920′s, he was very much seen to the left of the political spectrum, making enemies amongst the establishment in the area. In 1922, Gralton lead the building of a local community Hall – the Pearse- Connolly Hall — where educational classes and dances were held. This immediately irked the local Catholic Church as Gralton was challenging their control over social activities normally held in a church-run parish hall.

Through the 1920′s, the Catholic Church vented much of its moral indignation at such dance halls and accused them of being sites of debauchery which caused alcoholism and sex outside marriage. In 1930, the local priest began a sustained campaign against Gralton's Pearse-Connolly Hall. This lead to physical attacks on the hall which was eventually burned down in December 1932 most likely by the local IRA.

Not happy with this, the church, just like in the attack on the Monto in 1925, was able to rely on the state for support, but their reaction was almost incredulous. For what was comparatively low-level activity, Jimmy Gralton, a man born in rural Leitrim, was deported to America and exiled from Ireland. There's little doubt that Gralton could have been dispensed in more brutal ways — for example in 1931 the republican James Vaugh died in very mysterious circumstances in a police cell in Ballinamore, Co. Leitrim — but there can be little doubt that the deportation of Gralton was to serve as a lesson to others.

Indeed, Gralton's case highlighted just how much control the church-state alliance had over all aspects of society, including the media. The Irish Times reporting on Gralton's extradition emphasised the fact that Gralton was an "Irish American", which he was not – he had spent some time in America as an emigrant, where he also became a US citizen. This masked the fact that the Irish State was deporting someone who was born in the state.

This lie was repeated in the several articles in the Irish Times during March, when Gralton's deportation order was delivered. Finally, in August 1933, when Gralton was deported to the USA, he was called "a returned American", and the only crime cited was that he supposedly held "extreme communistic views". No article in the Irish Times raises any issue about the right to deport him, indeed it clearly shirked from challenging the state by frequently and erroneously saying that Gralton was an Irish-American.

It reflects the authoritarian nature of the Free State which was increasingly identifying what it was to be Irish with the moral, ethical and social values of its political and religious elite. As Gralton's case illustrated, they would ruthlessly persecute anyone who questioned this.

The authoritarianism that shaped the first ten years deeply shaped Ireland far into the future. In 1932, a faction of the Republican movement defeated in the Civil War, Fianna Fail, won the election and replaced Cumann na nGaedheal as government. (5 years earlier, lead by Eamon de Valera, they had broken with the IRA and had formed a new party). The transition was largely

seamless, with Fianna Fail largely continuing in a similar vein to Cumann na nGaedhael.
It is hard to tell how much they naturally shared the authoritarian views of Cumann na nGaedhael, or whether they replicated what they saw as a successful model of taking and keeping power, but they proved more than able to build on Cumann na nGaedhael's authoritarian foundation.

Indeed, it was Fianna Fail who ensured the Carrigan report detailing child abuse was not published or acted upon. It was they who would deported Jimmy Gralton at the behest of the Catholic Church, and most all, it was they who delivered a coup de grace of 15 years of conservative laws, formally incorporating the attacks on women in a deeply chauvinistic document that was supposed to outline what it meant to be Irish – the 1937 constitution.

The culture created by the all-encompassing authoritarianism became endemic in Irish politics for decades, leading many Irish people into self-imposed exile. Publishing anything that disagreed with the Catholic Nationalist ethos was next to impossible. This produced what can only be described as a stifling monolithic culture, where nothing in any way challenging was tolerated. By 1923, after W.B. Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the award received the following stinging criticism from "The Catholic Bulletin" as "…a substantial sum provided by a deceased anti-christian manufacturer of dynamite."

It is little surprise then that the more creative- minded followed the urban and rural poor into what was often miserable emigration. This would prompt Samuel Beckett in his 1956 play, "All that Fall", to reflect: "It is suicide to be abroad but what is it to be at home? […] A lingering dissolution"

Over 40 years later, in his emigration song, "Thousands are Sailing", Philip Chevron could still write:

> "Where e'er we go, we celebrate,
> The land that makes us refugees,
> From fear of priests with empty plates,
> From guilt and weeping effigies"

Conclusion

When looking at The Free State there is little to take from its first ten years, or indeed, subsequent governments. Most praise comes when historians use "the litmus test" of "the survival of the state", as Thomas Bartlett did, as recently as 2010. While they were successful ensuring the state survived (whatever that actually means, given they simply replicated the administrative practices of the British Empire), for the vast majority – women, the rural and urban poor, and political opponents — this meant effective removal from an active role in society, a role that they had fought hard to achieve between 1913–22.

From legislation making public life for women impossible, to the deportation of Jimmy Gralton, the achievements of "The Free State" were limited to the restoration of the pre-World War I social and economic order. They succeeded in preserving a state for the rich and powerful, in a symbiotic relationship with the Catholic Church. In this context, those who laud the "achievements" of the founders of the Irish State as great men, for no obvious reason other than the preservation of this state, should reflect on the words of Mikhail Bakunin, the 19th century Russian anarchist.

> *"Thus, to offend, to oppress, to despoil, to plunder, to assassinate or enslave one's fellow man is ordinarily regarded as a crime. In public life, on the other hand, from the stand-*

point of patriotism, when these things are done for the greater glory of the State, for the preservation or the extension of its power, it is all transformed into duty and virtue. […] There is no horror, no cruelty, sacrilege, or perjury, no imposture, no infamous transaction, no cynical robbery, no bold plunder or shabby betrayal that has not been or is not daily being perpetrated by the representatives of the states, under no other pretext than those elastic words, so convenient and yet so terrible: "for reasons of state.""

Fin Dwyer
Torture, Murder & Exclusion
2012

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