

## **The Easter Rising in Australian History and Memory**

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# THE EASTER RISING IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY AND MEMORY<sup>1</sup>

Mark Finnane

ABSTRACT: Famously Prime Minister Billy Hughes blamed the Irish Catholic vote and the influence of Archbishop Mannix for the defeat of his first conscription referendum in 1916. Australian historians since the 1960s have cast doubt on this claim. A more subtle effect of the tumultuous events in Dublin at Easter 1916 was suggested by Patrick O'Farrell: the Easter Rising brought to an end the Irish Home Rule movement in Australia, to be replaced not by republicanism but 'by nothing'. What then might remain of the Easter Rising in Australian history and memory? At the very least, it is suggested here, a long-term effect was its impact in driving Hughes to create new security legislation and a Commonwealth police. Alongside the work of tracing this legacy of the Rising in Australian institutions of law and security, this lecture traces also some contours of its effects in politics and memory.

When he arrived in Sydney at the end of May 1948, the first place visited by Éamon de Valera was Waverley Cemetery. There he paid tribute at the memorial erected half a century before, a place sacralised by the reinterment of the bones of 1798 transported rebel Michael Dwyer and his wife Mary. Dev's visit was the occasion for adding to the memorial the names of the executed men of 1916. Like other visitors before and since he marvelled at the memorial's Celtic revival edifice. He told reporters that the memorial 'surpassed anything erected in Dublin itself to the men of Easter Week'.<sup>2</sup>

As in Ireland, however, the immediate response in Australia to the news of rebellion in Dublin at Easter 1916 was a mixture of dismay and disavowal. The politics of war, and the presence of Daniel Mannix, helped change Australian responses, softening some into sympathy, hardening others into angry condemnation. In these antipodean circumstances miniscule Irish republican support was amplified by Prime Minister

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W.M. Hughes into a national security threat. Intensified surveillance, internment and post-war sedition laws were the consequence. Long after sectarian divisions faded, that proved an enduring legacy.

This however is only to recall the political consequences of the Easter Rising. There is another story to be told, the story of the meaning of 1916 for those in a place just about as distant as it was possible to be from Dublin. These meanings changed over time. The work of recalling them shifted, from being primarily the task of Irish Australians in their various associations, to becoming the work of memory and reflection done by writers, some of them historians.

Chief among them was of course Patrick O'Farrell. His first visit to Ireland around the time of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Rising stimulated a lifelong engagement with the history of the Irish Australians. O'Farrell's histories represent the most sustained and singular interpretation of any of Australia's immigrant peoples: a collective biography, lovingly crafted, published over a number of volumes, distinguished by a persistent reflection on the psycho-historical constitution of communities and identity formation.<sup>3</sup> Through him we came to know better the range and influence of the Irish contribution—but also the factors that shaped attrition of culture in a new land. His comment in *Vanished Kingdoms* on a photograph of a Masonic funeral at Gundagai, New South Wales, might sum up his view of a world the Irish immigrants lost when they moved across the seas: 'Ritual dispersed, swallowed up, made empty by distance and the land's expanse'.<sup>4</sup>

About the role of Easter week in Australian history, O'Farrell was clear: what mattered to Australia's Irish communities were Australian questions and Australian futures, not Irish ones. So 1916 turned out to be important, not for what it started, but for what it finished:

The collapse of the Home Rule movement in Australia was to be followed not by the rise of republicanism, but by nothing. Or rather, by a period of intense turmoil in which the name of Ireland was much bandied about, and then by nothing. With Home Rule the relevance of Ireland to Australia comes to an end.<sup>5</sup>

If there is little prospect of shaking that dose of historical realism, there remains nevertheless another kind of question—not about Irish Australians but about Australia itself. I will propose that the significance of the events of Easter week is found not only in the re-shaping of political alignments with very long-term consequences, but also in their institutional impacts on law and security that we live with still.

### *The Reception*

All Australian newspapers carried cable news of the early days of the Easter rebellion, with the first reports appearing on Wednesday, 26 April, two days after the initial

outbreak.<sup>6</sup> And initial responses were united in support for constitutional nationalism and opposition to the rebels. A hastily-convened meeting of the United Irish League (UIL) in Melbourne on Wednesday evening of Easter week resulted in a cable to John Redmond—‘the accredited leader of the Irish race’, as one Melbourne newspaper described him—condemning the rebels as criminals and ‘wreckers of Ireland’s future’.<sup>7</sup>

Over succeeding days, others followed the Melbourne lead in sending cables to Redmond: the New South Wales Home Rulers were disgusted at the ‘sectional pro-German rising’; the Queensland Irish Association deplored the disturbances and praised the valour and devotion of Irish soldiers in their loyalty to the empire; in Perth ‘a meeting of prominent men from the Emerald Isle’ convened at the Celtic Club to affirm their loyalty and their support for Redmond; while in Hobart the local branch of the UIL joined in the condemnation.<sup>8</sup> All were acting largely in the dark as regards the details of what had happened in Dublin. Some, though, as in local Irishman Michael Quinlan’s comments reported at length in Perth on 27 April, sought to explain the larger context of the array of forces contesting Ireland’s future, with Sir Roger Casement, German support and Sinn Féin opposition to Redmond’s Home Rule direction figuring prominently.<sup>9</sup> Clerics too appeared quick to condemn. Archbishop Carr in Melbourne on the Thursday regarded the ‘disturbance as an outburst of madness, an anachronism, and a crime’; it was the work of a small faction of ‘irreconcilables’ whose target was possibly as much ‘the Irish parliamentarians as the authority of the Crown’; he also hinted at German intrigue.<sup>10</sup>

These comments however already alluded to a wider context and so signalled an element of equivocation. This reservation is also expressed in the Victorian bishops’ rejection of a request coming from Archbishop Kelly of Sydney for a joint cable to Redmond. Carr told Kelly that: ‘it might be regarded as slaying the slain to express united condemnation of the action of the insurgents’.<sup>11</sup> Just a few days later, on 3 May, addressing the annual convention of the Hibernian Benefit Society, Kelly also appeared equivocal. He hoped that this would be ‘the last rebellion in Ireland’, recalled the broken heart of Daniel O’Connell who had despaired of such rebellions—which he suggested were ‘the outcome of hotheadedness’—affirmed the achievement of Irish parliamentary representation through the secret ballot and warned that there should be ‘no vindictiveness’ on the part of government. ‘It would be wrong in a case like this to be hard on anyone’, he told the convention. ‘There was the English government, the Ulsterites and the Sinn Feiners. The Ulsterites were the first offenders, and until the Ulsterites were punished the Sinn Feiners have a precedent. They were only following in the footsteps of the Ulsterites’.<sup>12</sup> These comments were delivered before news of the first executions in Dublin. They signalled a shift from a position just three days before in which Kelly had spoken of Sinn Féin as a political disease.<sup>13</sup>

Such a response also echoed the even more exculpatory comments of Dr Mannix in Melbourne. At the opening of a garden fête on the weekend after the Rising, Mannix blamed the Carsonites for legitimating rebellion: ‘Their leader, instead of being sent to prison, was taken into the British Cabinet.’ Mannix said that the British government,

‘by its failure to deal with the Carsonites, and by its shifty policy in regard to Home Rule had—unwittingly he supposed—led up to the revolt, which they must all deplore’. Characteristically and presciently, Mannix also warned against vindictiveness, but in a way that spoke of a political obligation. Those who were already calling out for executions should ‘first pause and try to fix responsibility for the outbreak before condemning the misguided leaders of the movement to be shot. They should remember that the leaders of another movement were taken into the British Cabinet’.<sup>14</sup>

These were already provocative interpretations. But they were tempered by their lack of direct implication for Australian political interests. The fact that they were advanced by the country’s leading Catholic clerics was a portent of things to come—in a place where clerical authority played a major role in shaping and articulating Irish Catholic opinion. These responses also prepared the way for greater criticism of British policy in Ireland when news of the executions came through.

### *The Evolving Response*

We might tell the story of 1916-17 in Australia by focusing on two figures alone: Prime Minister Billy Hughes and Archbishop Daniel Mannix. In a way their complete dominance of post-Easter politics in Australia was surprising. For one thing, both were Home Rulers—a fact easily forgotten in respect of Hughes, who prided himself as a champion of the under-dog and a defender of small nations.<sup>15</sup> Mannix too was no rebel before 1916, his role as president of Maynooth having included a welcome to royal visitors and opposition to nationalist sympathisers.<sup>16</sup>

Both remain enigmatic figures in Australian history. Mannix is the subject of at least a dozen biographies—a remarkable record for someone who left no personal papers. His biographers remain divided as to his qualities and achievements, but none can deny his influence on Australian history.<sup>17</sup> Hughes was his equal—he has fewer biographies, though he has an authoritative two-volume one. Each of them played a disruptive role on the world stage: Hughes spoiled Woodrow Wilson’s internationalism at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919; Mannix famously forced the British navy to prevent his landing in Ireland in August 1920. The progress of events in Ireland and Australia after Easter 1916 drove these two into ever greater combat.

A focus on their personalities and motivations would mislead us by ignoring the context in which they worked. Hughes was the leader of a war-time government, with onerous responsibilities for continuing the war effort; Mannix, still a second-rank archbishop, was also responding to voices within his constituency, as were other bishops within theirs. What were those voices saying?

In one of his earliest papers dealing explicitly with Irish Australia, Patrick O’Farrell read into the historical record the letters to Sydney’s Archbishop Kelly written by increasingly disconsolate supporters of Ireland’s cause against English misrule. These are voices otherwise too little known in the record of a public debate that is dominated

by Mannix and Hughes. Popular challenge to Archbishop Kelly's criticism of the rebels was a symptom of the profoundly disturbing impact of news from Ireland. Initially Kelly rebuffed approaches from the fledgling Irish National Association when it sought his sponsorship of a relief fund: 'I am sure the public sentiment here and in Ireland will be with the constitutional party'.<sup>18</sup> But the volume of correspondence pouring into Kelly's office was pressing him towards another stance. Over the next nine months Kelly had to acknowledge the depth of feeling among 'a bitter Irish Catholic proletariat'—as O'Farrell described the correspondents—that rejected the Home Rule constitutionalism espoused by the local Catholic and pro-conscription élite. He was even forced there by some clerical opinion. One priest told Kelly already in June 1916 that the dead of 1916 'ought to be revered not condemned'.<sup>19</sup>

Letters from the laity pointed to the dangers of bishops becoming out of touch with their congregations. Kelly had been warned that those sympathetic to the rebel cause included Catholics 'assiduous in the practice of religion ... because although being mainly in the working class and not much in the councils of the great, they are Irish, and have no ambition to be anything better'. After a particularly disruptive St Patrick's Day in 1917, one layman told Kelly that 'the only fault we find in you is when you get a committee together you run it on the Czar's line, all the nobility and none of the peasants and the Catholic men we have in high places are no credit to us'.<sup>20</sup> This was fiery talk in the wake of the February revolution in Russia. Not surprising then to find clerics trying to bring the laity back into line. But one of them urged Kelly in November 1916 that 'the story of the brave deeds of the Sinn Feiners, and especially of their exemplary deaths as told in the "Catholic Press" would do much good throughout Australia'.<sup>21</sup>

Maintaining clerical authority in a volatile political environment after Easter 1916 may also have driven others to ever more radical positions. Shocking news of the executions rapidly eroded the appeal of the war effort in these distant parts of the empire after May 1916. Even a conservative bishop like Duhig in Brisbane was driven within a few months of Easter to add his voice to those condemning English misgovernment.<sup>22</sup> The difficulty of interpreting Mannix's disposition has been compounded by the absence of private papers: the archive of those who would have been writing to him, as they were to Kelly in Sydney. In the absence of such a record, the historian Val Noone has speculated that what motivated Mannix was his exposure to the currents of thought in the working-class parishes of inner Melbourne, in which he resided during the few years before he succeeded Carr as archbishop in 1917.<sup>23</sup> And an earlier study by Michael McKernan insisted that Mannix was pre-eminent in re-building relations with the laity, after 'the bishops fell out of step with their followers in 1916'.<sup>24</sup>

Another kind of evidence sustains the view that opinion was being driven possibly more from the base than the top. In the first and still most comprehensive study of the immediate impact of 1916 on Australian politics, Alan Gilbert in 1969 analysed closely the changing mood in the mainly Catholic press. The liveliness of the Irish Catholic community, particularly in Sydney and Melbourne, was product and generator of a great variety of Catholic newspapers. Gilbert showed that even the most conservative of these

papers, originally imperialist, pro-war and even pro-conscription, were driven within quite a short period of time to anti-conscription. They did so, he inferred, because they ‘faced serious competition for the patronage of the Irish-Catholic reading public’.<sup>25</sup> There was little doubting where the sympathies of Irish Catholic Labor voters lay, but this move on the part of non-Labor Catholics is a signal of the mood among Australian Irish Catholics more generally by October 1916 on the eve of the first conscription referendum.

### *W.M. Hughes*

The ripple effect of the Easter Rising was most visible in its provocation of the country’s prime minister. Or rather we should say that this effect was mediated by the loss of the first conscription referendum for which Hughes famously blamed the Irish Catholic vote. He was not the only one who attributed such influence. Frank Anstey, English-born Labor parliamentarian and former Hughes’ ally, later told a colleague that ‘if there had been no Easter Week in Ireland in 1916 ... there would have been no hope of defeating conscription in Australia. Before that date the Irish were as War mad as the English but Easter week stirred the Paddy’.<sup>26</sup>

Irish Catholic support for the war effort had been evident in their rates of enlistment in the armed forces; in this respect the pre-Easter position mirrored that in Ireland itself. Significant elements of the Irish Catholic élite were among those counted as pro-war and, when the question was raised, pro-conscription. This accommodation was shaken in the months after the executions of May 1916. The response of the prime minister seemed calculated not to bring in his putative enemies, but to push them away for ever.

While the evidence for Irish Catholic influence over the outcome of the first referendum is equivocal, Hughes recognised no such subtle reasoning in blaming his reversal on what he was soon calling ‘the Sinn Feiners’. The governing Labor party split. Hughes was left facing former colleagues in a parliamentary opposition that was more Catholic, more Irish, in background, and anti-conscription. After October 1916 the Sinn Féiners were added to the prime minister’s list of enemies of the war effort. In public and private he pursued the Irish. ‘The Irish question is at the bottom of all our difficulties’, he told British Prime Minister Lloyd George in August 1917. They had captured Labor, ‘assisted by the syndicalists and the IWW [International Workers of the World] people’. The Catholic Church was ‘secretly against recruiting’ and Mannix ‘is a Sinn Feiner ... I am trying to make up my mind whether I should prosecute him for statements hindering recruiting or deport him’.<sup>27</sup> The result of this mind-set was an architecture of security legislation and institutions of lasting consequence.

### *Legislation*

The Great War was a great time for regulation, surveillance and control. The War

Precautions Act of 1914 established the conditions for comprehensive population control. Its effects were soon seen in the internment of aliens. This regulatory apparatus expanded its reach as the war progressed. After Easter 1916 and the defeat in October of the first conscription referendum, no extension of executive power in Australia was free of association with the need to control Sinn Féiners, along with other enemies of the war effort. The Unlawful Associations Act of December 1916 and its amendment in July the following year to control processions and flag-waving; the deployment of powers under the War Precautions Act to intern Irish republican sympathisers in 1918; the amendment of the Immigration Act in 1919 to facilitate deportation of troublemakers; and the introduction to the Crimes Act in 1920 of a new charge of conducting a seditious enterprise—all these were signs of a government increasingly concerned to shore up domestic defence against subversion coming from a number of quarters.<sup>28</sup> While the threat of syndicalism, anarchism and Bolshevism informed much of the urgency, Sinn Féinism became part of the mix.

Supporters of the government warned in January 1918 that failure to support the extension of unlawful associations provisions would, as Prime Minister Hughes had put it, ‘hand over the reins of government to extremists, the Industrial Workers of the World and the Sinn Fein’.<sup>29</sup> In response, the Labor opposition taunted Hughes. The prime minister, said lawyer and politician Frank Brennan, ‘referred to three things more frequently than to anything else, namely, Sinn Fein, Industrial Workers of the World, and a certain ecclesiastic, who got on his nerves, and apparently afterwards got on his chest. His greatest trouble was the question of Sinn Fein’.<sup>30</sup>

There were few real tests of the threat of Sinn Féin—and the response of the authorities served only to inflame opposition. The internment in 1918 of a few members of a local branch of the Irish Republican Brotherhood was in danger of creating martyrs of people who posed little threat.<sup>31</sup> In an official inquiry into their continuing internment, Frank Brennan, who was defending counsel for one, described seventy-two-year-old Maurice Dalton as ‘a mixture of Dan O’Connell, Don Quixote and Deadwood Dick’.<sup>32</sup>

The internees’ lawyers did their best to keep their clients from making any statements. Their meetings were described by another defence counsel as ‘childishly open’, the attempts to cover their tracks ‘ludicrous in the extreme. To use invisible ink and Gaelic writing was worthy of the doings of Huckleberry Finn’.<sup>33</sup> He painted them as simple-minded idealists, more engaged in talk than action, and having no aspirations to lead a rebellion. But when he described their activities as ‘mere tongue war’, the judge was acute in his response: ‘Unfortunately this sort of thing led to the Easter week rebellion of 1916. The men concerned in the rebellion were of good character’.<sup>34</sup> This decisive interchange was distinguished by O’Farrell in his own account of the internments and the subsequent inquiry: the judge’s comments having a ‘devastating percipience’.<sup>35</sup> They drew attention to the links between speech and action, between words and rebellion, in ways that have been explored from W.B. Yeats onwards.<sup>36</sup> This was the atmosphere in which seditious speech and seditious



signs, such as flags and emblems, became dangerous and the object of legislation that would have a long life.

### *Institutions*

There was another enduring outcome of Hughes' conflict with the Sinn Féiners. In Queensland—for him, the red centre of the North—he saw a Labor government embarked on a campaign to defeat his attempts to persuade the nation of the need for conscription.

By virtue of a heavy inflow of sponsored immigration in the 1880s, Queensland by 1901 was the country's most Irish state: nearly 8 per cent of its population Irish-born at that year's census, compared with 5 per cent in Victoria and 4.5 per cent in New South Wales. The temper of Irish-Australian politics in Queensland was nevertheless moderate, and its Catholic clerical leadership was conservative.<sup>37</sup> War changed all that. From 1915 the state Labor government led by T.J. Ryan, son of post-Famine immigrants, was engaged in practical socialist experiments, like the establishment of state butcher shops to defeat the beef producers' cartel. Ryan supported the war effort but opposed conscription, as did most of his government.<sup>38</sup>

In the Queensland government and its Sinn Féin sympathetic ministers and police force, the prime minister faced frustrating opposition. The outbreak of an idiosyncratic 'ism' was symptomatic of the atmosphere. Fihellyism was identified with anti-conscription and attacks on English oppression in Ireland. Fihellyism drew its name from the invective of Jack Fihelly, Ryan's minister for railways, who was born in Timoleague, Co. Cork, but immigrated with his parents as an infant in the 1880s.<sup>39</sup> The flavour of Fihellyism can be captured in the barbs of its opponents: one of them blamed 'rowdyism' at a political meeting on what he denounced as 'sectarianism, Fihellyism, Germanism and hooliganism'.<sup>40</sup>

It was in this state that an egg thrown at Hughes, during a visit to a small Queensland town, proved to be the origins of a new direction in domestic security. In November 1917 the prime minister was visiting Brisbane as part of a tour to gather support for a new conscription plebiscite. While there, he inflamed relations with the Queensland government over its opposition to his plans. Travelling by train from Brisbane back to NSW, Hughes said he would speak briefly from the platform at the provincial town of Warwick. His attempt to speak was undone by a crowd of opponents, some of them armed with eggs and fruit. In the midst of the *mêlée* Hughes' hat was knocked off his head by a well-aimed egg. The prime minister lost his temper, launching himself into the crowd and directing—as he thought he had the power to do—a local policeman to arrest the egg-thrower. Although a man was subsequently arrested—one of two brothers, Pat and Bart Brosnan, whose Irish names added to the sense of siege—the incensed Hughes subsequently wrote to the Queensland premier. He accused the police officer of ignoring his orders and undermining Commonwealth law. Hughes turned the

assault by egg into yet another attack on his domestic enemies, chief among them, Sinn Féiners.<sup>41</sup>

What was the egg-throwing about? An unreferenced footnote by Hughes' biographer suggests a context of wider significance:

According to a local tradition gathered orally in Warwick by Dr E. MacWhite, then Irish Ambassador to Australia, in 1966, some of the Irish Catholics of the town had conspired to pelt Hughes with eggs as soon as he named 'that man Mannix'.<sup>42</sup>

For Patrick O'Farrell, Dr Mannix's 'extraordinary popular support' related 'less to the Irishness that Mannix espoused than to his social role as a hero'.<sup>43</sup> '[T]hat man Mannix', as the Warwick locals remembered half a century later, was capable of inspiring action—even in his absence. He had become a product of the crowd, an emblem with which to identify, in opposition to the Hughes who wanted to force conscription on a country which already believed it had done enough.

The Commonwealth police is said to have sprung from this incident. Police duties under federal jurisdiction had to this date been the responsibility of the various state police forces. Within a short time Hughes announced that the Commonwealth would now be forming its own police, since the one in Queensland had demonstrated its independence from Commonwealth authority. The egg incident was of course a final justification. In fact, there had been a proposal for some time to form such a body, under the pressure of wartime security needs.<sup>44</sup> It would be many decades before the Commonwealth police attained power and resources of any great substance—eventually becoming the Australian Federal Police—but its origins were ineluctably tied to the tempestuous domestic politics of a year in which the prime minister had jostled with the Wobblies, Bolsheviks and Sinn Féiners who stood in his path.

### *The Republican Envoys*

Hughes' security system—its fabric woven from immigration law, political surveillance and sedition legislation—was put to the test in 1923, by this time under another conservative government. On 10 April of that year, a Commonwealth intelligence officer reported on the events during St Patrick's Day in Melbourne a few weeks earlier. Then Dr Mannix had introduced 'two distinguished delegates sent here with credentials from De Valera to speak to the Irish people and their sympathisers in his name'.<sup>45</sup>

The delegates were well known in the republican cause, but hardliners who were more troublesome than effective. Fr Michael O'Flanagan was a one-time vice-president of Sinn Féin. He had been at Pearse's side, delivering an oration himself, during the funeral of the veteran Fenian, Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, in August 1915.

J.J. O’Kelly, Gaelic enthusiast and editor of the *Catholic Bulletin*, was another aspirant to higher things, who was education minister in de Valera’s phantom administration. Certainly they came with de Valera’s credentials, but he had decided that the antipodes was a better place for them than North America, where they had been disruptive to the republican cause.

On St Patrick’s Day in Melbourne, Fr O’Flanagan told the crowd that: ‘The Irish Republic had very good reason to be grateful to Australia, whose people were sympathetic when the banner of the Irish Republic was first lifted up in Easter week, 1916... With Mr O’Kelly he would try to convince the Australian people that the Irish Republic was right now as it was in 1916 ...’.<sup>46</sup> The envoys moved on to Sydney. On the seventh anniversary of the Easter Rising they spoke at a Sunday meeting in the Hippodrome. O’Flanagan confused his police transcriber when he spoke for several minutes in a language ‘not known to the shorthand writer—probably Erse or Gaelic’. The envoys’ attack on the new Irish Free State continued. When some questioned the violence of the republican struggle then underway in the Civil War, they made light of the casualties compared to the vastly greater losses of the Great War.<sup>47</sup>

Two days later at Marrickville in Sydney, Fr O’Flanagan told his audience about their Irish-Australian legacy:

The day I arrived here I went out to see a most splendid monument to Irish [patriots] that I have ever seen in any country in the world, the monument of Michael Dwyer. And this man, the man of ‘98 who came to Australia in its infancy, reminded me that other generations from that day down to the present [have] found patriotic men from Ireland whose footsteps have made sacred the Australian Continent, John Mitchell [sic] and William Smith O’Brien and John Boyd [sic] O’Reilly and many others ...<sup>48</sup>

Some venues cancelled their bookings. At the Sydney Communist Hall on 29 April, O’Flanagan did his best to rescue the mission, addressing his audience as ‘fellow rebels’ after they had been forced out of the Southern Cross Hall, owned by a Catholic club. A police constable scripted the moment: ‘We are in a very bad state indeed (Laughter) in a Communist Hall if you please and I suppose those Communists, those who know nothing about them, except what the English Press say, think they must be very nearly as bad as Sinn Feiners. Loud Cheers’.<sup>49</sup>

The main business of the visit, if there was one, was to raise money. The going was hard. At Marrickville there was difficulty finding anyone to start the ball rolling with ten guineas: it was down to two pounds before a donation came in, and then reduced to a bag handed around for silver coins. The three-hour meeting concluded at 11.05 pm, all singing ‘The Soldier’s Song’.<sup>50</sup>

The arrest of the envoys came a day after the Communist Hall meeting. State and Commonwealth governments worried over whether a prosecution for sedition under the Crimes Act should be attempted, with a risk of acquittal. Instead the Commonwealth

chose to test a new Immigration Act procedure by appointment of an administrative board of inquiry to consider whether the envoys should be deported.

With exquisite irony, the envoys' legal counsel—which included two future High Court judges, H.V. Evatt and E. McTiernan—attempted to quash the proceedings on the ground that the envoys were British subjects, with passports issued before the establishment of the Irish Free State. Instead, the High Court determined that the government had power to decide who it might admit into the country. After protracted negotiations over the mode of deportation, the envoys were sent on their way in August on the merchant vessel *Mongolia*. It was the end of Australia's immediate contact with the personnel of the Irish revolution.

### *Remembering 1916*

Half a century made a greater impact on Australia than on Ireland. By 1966 Ireland was well out of the British Empire, though just as intimately bound to England economically as it had ever been. While Australia was still part of a fading empire, now become the British Commonwealth of Nations, its close ties to the United States were dragging it into another South East Asian war and reviving memories of that other battle of 1916, over conscription.<sup>51</sup>

In other ways Australia had changed very significantly. Its post-war immigration programme increased the population rapidly and diluted its 'Anglo-Celtic' character. The declining influence of Irish clerics in the Australian Catholic Church was a symptom of a more general change. Some sign of these changes would have been evident to Éamon de Valera on his visit to Australia in 1948, a few months after losing office as taoiseach in the February Irish elections, and accompanied by his political colleague, Frank Aiken.<sup>52</sup> His visit was said to be in a private capacity, as the guest of Mannix at the celebrations of the centenary of the Catholic diocese in Melbourne.

The Australian government was anxious about the visit, considering that the more likely purpose was the pursuit of de Valera's anti-partition campaign. Chaperoning de Valera was an Australian Department of External Affairs officer, who reported in detail on the Irish visitor's progress and conversations. Before he arrived in Melbourne to attend the centenary celebrations, de Valera landed in Sydney and had a meeting with the most senior cleric in the Australian Catholic hierarchy, Cardinal Norman Gilroy. The Australian-born Sydney cardinal pressed on de Valera the episcopal 'desire to show that their interest lay in Australia, and that they had little interest in the former attitude of Irish-born priests of introducing Irish politics in Australia'.<sup>53</sup>

By 1966 Mannix himself was dead. The then leader of the Australian Labor Party opposition, Arthur Calwell, had been blooded as a youth in the period after 1916. In 1918 he had obsequiously denied the extent of his commitment to the Sinn Féin cause, though in 1923 intelligence police discovered he was still busy in Melbourne publicising the visit of the republican envoys.<sup>54</sup> By 1966, Calwell was struggling

to maintain political authority within his own party and was not worrying about Ireland.

But the moment of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Easter Rising, while marked by some ceremonies at Waverley and in Melbourne,<sup>55</sup> was perhaps more significantly the occasion for a new generation of writers and historians to address what it had meant, for Ireland and for Australia. Their approaches were marked by their developing preoccupations. Two of them certainly deserve notice, for what they signal about later writing.

Feature articles on the Easter Rising were prominent in the main Australian newspapers in April 1966. The *Sun-Herald* in Sydney even published, over three weekends in March and April, a series of articles on the history of the Rising and its long aftermath. On Easter Eve, in the *Age* in Melbourne, Niall Brennan recalled ‘the Easter that Ireland bled’ in a large spread that featured two photos: one conventional, the statue of Cuchulain in the Dublin General Post Office; the other curiously a photo of labour leader Jim Larkin, rather than any of the rebels. Given the author had recently published a substantial study of Mannix, a book on which he had consulted de Valera, the article also surprised for its studious avoidance of the names of both Mannix and Hughes, while touching lightly on the sectarian ripples created by the Rising in far-off Australia.<sup>56</sup>

Mannix and Hughes and all around them featured prominently in an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* by the historian Ken Inglis. He was in no doubt of the momentous impact of the Easter Rising on Australian political life. The year before, Inglis had accompanied a party of Anzacs back to the shores of Gallipoli. So it was not surprising to see him interpreting for Australians the meaning of the Rising in that context. Thanks to General Maxwell, the Irish ‘dreamers had become martyrs’ and so ‘their legend has in it similarities with the legend of Anzac. In both cases, rhetoric dwells on the paradox of glory in defeat’. The executions of the Easter rebels, so Inglis argued, had turned the bishops and, with them, the majority of Irish Catholics. Alluding to a major theme in his later writing on Australian war memorialisation, Inglis concluded with the striking lesson of this history: ‘had it not been for the Sinn Feiners and Sir John Maxwell, Australian conscripts would have gone to France; and there would have been no tradition that we send only volunteers to distant wars’.<sup>57</sup>

A different tone was struck in the feature pages of the *Canberra Times* by the relatively unknown Patrick O’Farrell. A by-line explained that this senior lecturer in the History Department at the University of New South Wales was at this moment a visiting professor at University College, Dublin. He was also the official representative of the Irish National Association of Sydney at the 1916 commemorations in Dublin. It was the beginning of his long association with Ireland and its histories.<sup>58</sup>

In contrast to Inglis, O’Farrell proved less concerned to ponder the Australian impact of the events. He was already a sceptic of the view that the Irish Catholic vote and Mannix had been decisive in 1916.<sup>59</sup> Instead, O’Farrell insisted that the Easter Rising had a much greater global significance. In terms that looked forward to his early 1970s reflections on Irish history, he drew attention to the way in which 1916 had heralded the end of the ‘Irish Question’. ‘Ireland had been England’s first colony. Ireland’s revolt

was the first blow to that remarkable world imperialism which has vanished so rapidly since.’ Thus he placed Ireland and Easter 1916 at the centre—the ‘first case’ he said, an ‘inspiration and example’—of ‘a development which must be counted among the most important of our time—the rise of colonial peoples to independent nationhood’. Indian nationalism was one of his examples.

This was stirring stuff about a world historical event. It provides a vivid backdrop to a later O’Farrell preoccupation: understanding the attrition of attachment to Ireland that was the fate of those who had found a new home in the antipodes.

### *Conclusion*

What happened in Australia was of little consequence in Ireland, in 1916 or in 1966. For transparent reasons the relationship was asymmetric. What happened in Ireland was widely reported in Australia and for the years 1916-23 had a continuing and unsettling impact on political, institutional and emotional life. What happened in Australia, for reasons of distance and the relatively small size of the antipodean diaspora, was of less moment for Ireland.

Historians like Inglis and O’Farrell were at the outset of their major role in shaping a new historical consciousness in Australia. They were not alone of course. But the dramatic increase in Australian historical research and writing from the 1960s forward changed the context in which an Irish legacy would be perceived. The last generation has seen an enormous amount of attention paid to that legacy over more than three decades of research, conferences and writing.<sup>60</sup>

So there has been an increasing attention to this Irish legacy, but also a distancing involved. The recent history of the Waverley memorial may be an emblem of this transition. The addition of the names of those executed in 1916 was not the end of its material recording of the past. In 1983 further names were added: those of Bobby Sands and his fellow hunger strikers. Yet the memorial itself is now less a place of continuing veneration and more an object of curiosity and investigation: the subject of some illuminating accounts of its history and design, but losing its emotional significance as the generations who made it pass away.<sup>61</sup>

We cannot know how things might have turned out in Australia in the absence of the Irish rebellion. But we can be confident that when Billy Hughes constructed the Sinn Féiners as enemies of Australia, linking them with other war-time enemies, he did so with consequence. One consequence was the creation of legal instruments that have been remarkably resilient: those which proclaimed as seditious the uttering of certain words, or the display of certain flags; and those which affirmed the power of the Australian government to deport unwanted troublemakers. The other consequence was the establishment of a new police, with its new task of political surveillance—this too remains with us. And so we do well to recall how fragile those times were, as much as are our own.

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- <sup>4</sup> O’Farrell, *Vanished Kingdoms*, p. 284.
- <sup>5</sup> O’Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, p. 253.
- <sup>6</sup> More detailed accounts of the Australian response to the Easter Rising are available elsewhere. They include: Colm Kiernan, *Daniel Mannix and Ireland*, Morwell, VIC: Alella Books, 1984; Jeff Kildea, *Tearing the Fabric: Sectarianism in Australia, 1910-25*, Sydney: Citadel Books, 2002; John B. O’Brien, ‘The Irish Revolutionary Movement and W.M. Hughes, 1916-22’, in Tadhg Foley and Fiona Bateman (eds), *Irish-Australian Studies: Papers Delivered at the Ninth Irish-Australian Conference, Galway, April 1997*, Sydney: Crossing Press, 2000, pp. 138-50; Michael McKernan, *Australian Churches at War: Attitudes and Activities of the Major Churches, 1914-18*, Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1980.
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- <sup>13</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 April 1916, p. 10.
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