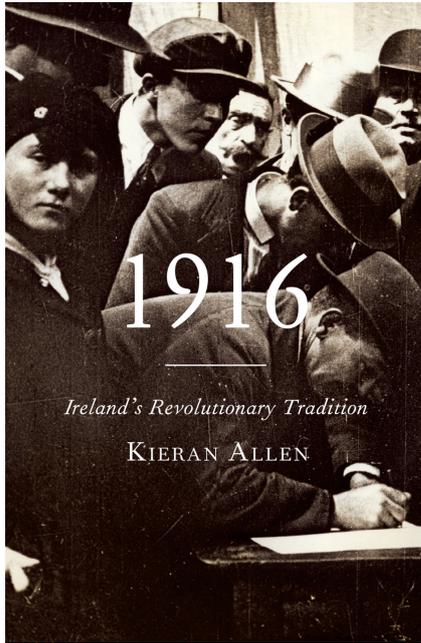


# Review: Kieran Allen, *1916 - Ireland's Revolutionary Tradition*

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Kieran Allen, *1916 - Ireland's Revolutionary Tradition*, Pluto Press, 2016. £12.99

## Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ireland

They say that nostalgia is a treacherous emotion, yet in spite of that stark admonition, a warm feeling always courses through my veins whenever I hear the strains of the 'Internationale' being sung and when I find myself in the depths of despair stirring passages from the *Communist Manifesto* inevitably revive my flagging spirits.

all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face, with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

Certainly, in this centenary year, as we become engulfed by a plethora of publications dealing with the Easter rising we would be well advised to pay close attention to the opening lines of the first chapter of that famous tome by Marx and Engels; 'the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles'.

Unfortunately, an initial inspection of the many volumes at our disposal would indicate that most authors paid scant attention to that clear assertion and instead have given us books that tell us about the children who died, books that remind us of the songs of the period, books that detail the military actions of Easter week and so on, but, inexcusably, few books that explain the social and cultural forces that lead to the Rising.

After all, the men and women of 1916 were not merely rebels, they were revolutionaries! They did not take on the might of the British Empire with the modest goal of superficial change, like the right to paint over the imperial red post boxes, emblazoned with the crests of Victoria Regina and Edwardus Rex, with Hibernian green. What they wanted was a complete transformation of Irish society and the blueprint for that transformation was set out in the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, first declaimed by Patrick Pearse on April 24, 1916.

Thankfully, *1916, Ireland's Revolutionary Tradition* by Kieran Allen not only recognises that reality but also looks at how the 1916 Rising led to a revolutionary tradition that still 'haunts the Irish political establishment'.

In the first chapter Kieran Allen provides us with a welcome demolition of the ahistorical bullshit being promulgated by those, like John Bruton, who argues that his hero John Redmond was literally on the verge of winning democracy for Ireland only for the unfortunate intervention of the 'unnecessary orgy of violence' of the Easter Rising.

Usefully, Kieran Allen draws our attention to the affinity of social class between Bruton and Redmond. Both came from 'respectable farming stock, both were Clongowes boys and both lived lives of immense privilege', consequently, neither were remotely interested in improving the living conditions of ordinary people.

To underscore Redmond's innate conservatism, it's worth recalling that he both spoke against and voted against women's suffrage in the Westminster Parliament.

Redmond, in his time, was quite content with Ireland gaining Home Rule within the British Empire as long as his political caste remained in charge, whereas, in our time, as his reward for being a faithful servant of corporate capital, John Bruton became EU Ambassador to the U.S. before taking up a post as paid lobbyist for Ireland's financial industry.

In the chapter, '1916, armed insurrection', Kieran Allen makes a valuable contribution by challenging the 'blood sacrifice' myth of the Rising. He insists that those who fought in 1916 did not set out to die, after all, if all they sought was martyrdom, why did they bother with the extensive military preparations for the Rising? Without question they planned to succeed, but, as we know, circumstances prevailed against them.

The 'blood sacrifice' myth serves the interests of those conservatives who wish to bathe in the reflected glory of 1916 but who, on the other hand, spare no efforts in occluding the radical nature of the Rising.

Kieran Allen completes this chapter with analytical portraits of both Patrick Pearse and James Connolly where he not only sets out their radical intentions but also draws attention to what he sees as their failings.

Pearse thought that 'the people had to be awakened by the military action of the few'. 'It never dawned on him that there could be a mass revolution that combined demands for national and social freedom'.

Connolly's problem was that his desire for revolution was not matched by a capacity to bring it about. This frustration led him towards an alliance with conspiratorial republicans. Nevertheless, in spite of such ambiguities, both men were 'principled anti-imperialists'.

Kieran Allen reminds us that from 1918 to 1923 Ireland was in the throes of revolution yet official historians always refer to this period as the 'War of Independence', or the 'Anglo-Irish war'. These designations are employed because conservatives have no desire to draw attention to the potential of a

risen people, to 'strikes, land seizures, soviet or mass boycotts', instead they choose to focus on the role of the 'great leader', an individual like Michael Collins who led a successful guerrilla campaign and where the people simply played a supporting role.

Kieran Allen warns that 'the omission of mass action from historical memory is profoundly political'.

A bitter civil war, which followed the truce and then the Treaty between the opposing Irish and British forces, exposed the many fault lines in Irish politics. Even though the Treaty of 1921 compromised on the aspirations of 1916 the prosperous elements in Irish society and the Catholic hierarchy immediately backed the negotiated agreement and when conflict broke out the pro-treaty forces were supported and supplied with arms by their former imperialist foes. On the opposing side the anti-treatyites were weakened by internal divisions.

Kieran Allen is critical of their leadership, mostly physical force republicans, who 'presented themselves as living for a higher moral ideal and saw no link between rejecting the treaty and improving the lives of the poor', who made 'no effort to relate to a wave of workers strikes and land occupations'. He concludes that 'this disastrous approach meant that republicans fought on a purely military basis against far superior forces'. The final victory by the pro-Treaty Free State forces 'heralded a counter-revolution where the ideals of the Irish revolution were destroyed'.

James Connolly's accurate prophecy that the partition of Ireland would herald 'a carnival of reaction' prompts Kieran Allen to deliver a detailed analysis of the two resultant states that, in the main, have failed the majority of their citizens.

The new southern state was dominated by a resurgent conservative catholic middle class in alliance with the powerful institution of the roman Catholic church. As Terence Brown remarked, in his book 'Ireland, a social and cultural history', 'it was a social order largely composed of persons disinclined to contemplate any change other than the political change that independence rep-

resented’.

The poet W. B. Yeats so feared this political development that he re-employed lines from his poem ‘September 1913’ to speculate that the new state would become a ‘huckstering nation forever fumbling in the greasy till’.

Clear evidence of this unfortunate predicament is to be found in the many shameful episodes in the recent past that could only have happened with the connivance or collusion of that retrograde state apparatus.

The abdication of responsibility for the care of the poor, vulnerable and marginalised children through their consignment to institutions run by the Catholic church where distressing levels of mental, physical and sexual abuse took place. The complete dominance of one particular religious ethos, obsessed with the imposition of sexual continence, which condemned half the Irish population, namely the women, to second class status. The outrageous levels of corruption that were exposed in the various tribunals which precipitated a complete loss of public confidence in Ireland’s political structures, the rule of law and governance in general. Finally, the recent economic collapse that brought the state to its knees and unjustly placed on the shoulders of its citizens an unsustainable debt, run up by the gambling of an unaccountable golden circle, which will condemn Irish citizens, their children and their grandchildren to economic bondage in perpetuity.

So it does not seem to be overstating the case that the Southern State that was established in the aftermath of the revolutionary years has hardly proved to be an unqualified success.

The northern political entity that was contrived through partition was an artificial sectarian construct designed to bring about a protestant state by only including those six of the nine counties of Ulster that had protestant majorities. It was controlled by the Unionist party and the Orange order and ‘Westminster turned a blind eye to how the Unionist party ran its state’. It was ‘maintained by constant propaganda about protestants being under siege from a hos-

tile southern state and the need for vigilance against disloyal Catholics’.

In this scheme of things, the Catholic minority found themselves discriminated against in the key areas like employment, housing, welfare and voting rights. It was only a matter of time before this sectarian time-bomb exploded. In 1967, prompted by the Civil rights movement in the United States, a group of individuals, mostly from the left, established the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, which made fairly modest demands only to be violently rebuffed by the full force of a sectarian state. ‘Civil Rights marchers were brutally attacked by Orange mobs, the RUC and the B Specials.... A virtual pogrom occurred in Belfast as protestant mobs laid siege to Catholic housing estates in the Falls and Ardoyne. Afterwards eight people lay dead, 750 people were injured and 1,800 had to flee their homes. Westminster responded by deploying the British army, ‘which, after initially providing some welcome respite for besieged nationalists ultimately reverted to the role of propping up the corrupt northern statelet.’

After the Falls Road curfew when 3,000 British soldiers ransacked houses in this compact area, many nationalists began to look to the IRA as the defenders of Catholic ghettos and ‘support for the Provos escalated after the introduction of internment in 1971 which was directed exclusively against the Catholic population’.

With recruitment soaring and support from the nationalist community growing the provisional IRA moved slowly from being mostly a defensive force to developing an armed opposition to British rule in Ireland.

Kieran Allen, while recognising the anti-imperialist nature of the struggle argues that ‘the ideology of the Provos was that of a highly traditional organisation’ and ‘one result was that they adopted a purely military strategy that played down mass mobilisation. After internment tens of thousands took part in a rent and rates strike and 8,000 people in Derry took part in a one-day strike, but the main republican response was to engage in a bombing campaign. This, it was believed, would make the north ungovern-

able and force the British to leave’.

The armed struggle continued undefeated for almost thirty years but failed in its main objective of dislodging British rule in Ireland. So when it ended with the first ceasefire in 1994, ‘it proved to be overwhelmingly popular with an exhausted population however, according to Kieran Allen, this development represented a fundamental break with republicanism. It ceased to be a ‘revolutionary force and became a conventional political party’.

Even though James Connolly’s rueful prophecy about ‘a carnival of reaction north and south’ has been largely realised, Kieran Allen, in the concluding chapters, gives us some hope by suggesting that the revolutionary tradition of 1916 has been reclaimed by the resistance to austerity and in particular by the mass mobilisations against water charges. He finishes this well written and well-argued book by recommending that ‘the best way to commemorate the 1916 Rising would be a new revolt to change Ireland’.