

ARTHUR GRIFFITH'S LAST STATEMENT

From Michael Collins' Own Story by the American journalist Hayden Talbot, originally published in 1923. The interview was conducted in late June 1922.

Q: Tell your story of winning your countrymen to the Sinn Féin policy of "ourselves alone."

SINN FÉIN was not my exclusive creation. It is unfair to the memory of a great Irishman that this false impression should be allowed to exist. Sinn Féin was conceived by two of us – and the other man was William Rooney.

The Sinn Féin movement was both economic and national. Rooney's idea – and mine – was to make Sinn Féin in this way meet the two evils produced by the Union. Primarily Ireland's need was education. Sinn Féin grew to wield enormous educational power. More than that, we saw the fruits of our labours in the growth of spiritual power among those who came into the ranks of Sinn Féin.

Unquestionably the organisation went far in unifying Ireland. The people had been waiting for an 'Irish Ireland' policy. Sinn Féin promoted that policy. Everywhere we preached the recreation of Ireland built upon the Gael. We penetrated into Belfast and North-East Ulster, where encouraging educational work was making the national revival a living reality. And then the world war broke out.

I do not indulge in prophecies, but the facts make clear that if Sinn Féin's work in Ulster had not been interrupted in 1914 – if that work could have been completed – the freedom which the Treaty gives us would have been complete freedom. We who went to London as the nation's plenipotentiaries did not go as representatives of a united Ireland – as we should have been had our work in Ulster gone on even a short time longer. And until Ireland can speak as a united people we shall not earn and we shall not get that full freedom deserved and possessed by nations that *are* nations.

Too much stress has been laid on two phases of Sinn Féin – neither of which was its chief characteristic. It has been repeatedly said that the Sinn Féin movement was not militant, and that I was wedded to the theory of non-resistance. I have no excuses nor apologies to make for my support of the abstention policy. For Irish representatives to sit in the Westminster Parliament had been abundantly proved to be the worst thing that could happen to Ireland. But Sinn Féin was not pacifistic. The militant movement existed within it, and by its side. Those who have a mere smattering of knowledge of Irish events of the past few years must realise that this is so when they learn that two of Sinn Féin's most ardent advocates were Tom Clarke and Sean McDermott! No one will call these two mighty figures of Easter Week pacifists! Moreover, within the organisation the two movements worked in perfect harmony.

The second over-stressed feature of Sinn Féin has been that it is a purely political machine – with the accompanying suggestion of belittlement that this charge for some inexplicable reason seems to carry. The admittedly large majority in the Ard Fheis against the Treaty was instanced as a proof of this – the fact being used to show that Sinn Féin was as narrowly partisan as the ordinary party machine – and as little concerned with the actual welfare of the nation. This is a gross libel.

It is a fact that Rooney had little use for formulae. He preached language and liberty. But he also inspired all whom he met with national pride and courage. 'Tell the world bravely what we seek!' he said. 'We must be men if we mean to win.' He believed that liberty could not be won unless we were fit and willing to win it – ready to suffer and die for it. He interpreted the national ideal as 'an Irish State governed by Irishmen for the benefit of the Irish people.' He sought to impregnate the whole people with 'a Gaelic-speaking nationality.' 'Only then,' he pleaded, 'could we win freedom and be worthy of it – freedom – individual and national freedom of the fullest and broadest character – freedom to think and act as it best beseems – national freedom to stand equally with the rest of the world.'

He aimed at weaving Gaelicism into the whole fabric of our national life. He wished to have Gaelic songs sung by the children in

the schools. He advocated the boycotting of English goods, always with an eye to the spiritual effect. 'We shall need,' he said, 'to turn our towns into something more than mere huxters' shops, and, as a natural consequence, wells of anglicisation poisoning every section of our people.'

Such was our policy. It differed not at all from that policy enunciated during the world war by many publicists in America. Just as it was urged there that Americans should be neither pro-British nor anti-British, but, on the contrary, should concentrate on being pro-American – so Sinn Féin aimed at making Irishmen pro-Irish. Only by developing our own resources, by linking up our life with the past and adopting the civilisation which was stopped by the Union could we become Gaels again and help win our nation back. As long as we were Gaels we knew the influence of the foreigner was negligible. Unless we were Gaels we had no claim to occupy a definite and distinct place in the world's life.

'We most decidedly do believe,' said Rooney, 'that this nation has a right to direct its own destinies. We do most heartily concede that men bred and native of the soil are the best judges of what is good for this land. We are believers in an Irish nation using its own tongue, flying its own flag, defending its own coasts, and using its own discretion when dealing with the outside world. But this we most certainly believe can never come as the gift of any parliament, British or otherwise. It can only be won by the strong right arm and grim resolve of men. Neglect no weapon which the necessities and difficulties of the enemy force him to abandon to us, and make each concession a stepping-stone to further things.'

Perhaps that is a sufficient answer to the charge that Sinn Féin was a pacifist organisation!

Rooney spoke as a prophet. He prepared the way and foresaw the victory, and he helped his nation to rise and, by developing its soul, to get ready for victory.

Q: And you feel that the Treaty is, then, such a victory?

Yes, it is just that. Ireland's victory is a fact! In spite of Englishmen and sons of Englishmen – men who dare to pose as

Irishmen and leaders of Irishmen – the Irish people are at last masters in their own house. And they will know how to deal with Erskine Childers and the others of his ilk.

But let me attempt to state the bare facts of the case.

Dáil Éireann sent us to London to make a bargain with England. We made a bargain. We brought it back. The Irish people accepted it. Those are the indisputable facts.

Our job in London was to ‘reconcile Irish national aspirations with the association of Ireland with the community of nations known as the British Empire.’ That job was as hard a one as was ever placed on the shoulders of men. We did not seek the job. When other men refused to go – we went. And our critics should remember that the very fact of our going was acknowledgment in itself that we were prepared to accept less than the complete independence of an isolated Republic. None better than De Valera knew that this was the fact.

I signed the Treaty – not as an ideal thing – but fully believing what I believe now; that it safeguards the interests of Ireland and is everlasting proof of our right to recognition as a distinct nationality. By that Treaty I am going to stand, and every man with a scrap of honour who signed it will do the same. The suggestion that patriotism justifies or excuses a man in putting his signature to a bond of this kind – with his tongue in his cheek – is abominable. If any of the signatories to the Treaty adopts such a course he will write himself down a blackguard. The Irish people have declared emphatically that the Treaty is good enough for them, and the Irish people are our masters and not our slaves as some think. We are not dictators of the Irish people, but their representatives, and if we misrepresent them our moral authority and the strength behind us are gone, and gone for ever.

Now as to the efforts that have been made to show that certain men have stood uncompromisingly on the rock of the Republic and nothing but the Republic – the time has not yet arrived to prove that such statements are downright lies, but the time may not be far distant when the facts of the matter may safely be told. The men who have tried to make the Irish people believe this lie are the same men who have done their utmost to vilify the one man who made the

negotiations possible – the one man who won the war – Michael Collins. They have charged him with having compromised Ireland's rights. That is a lie.

Every one of these detractors of Michael Collins – De Valera, Stack, Brugha, Childers – they deserve to be named – knows that Ireland's rights have never been in better hands in all Irish history. They know that in the letters that preceded the negotiations not once was a demand made for recognition of the Irish Republic. They know that if such a demand had been made there would have been no negotiations! And that is not all.

While the negotiations were in progress – during one of the many adjournments, while we were temporarily in Dublin – De Valera begged me to devise a way to get him out of the republican strait jacket. I use his words.

He was in an uncomfortable position. Nominally the leader of that section of the Dáil styling themselves 'uncompromising Republicans,' he was actually the last radical of them all. Brugha and Stack – not to mention the women members of Dáil Éireann – were determined that we should obtain nothing less than recognition of the Republic, even though the two men named well knew that it needed only the making of the demand for the negotiations to end abruptly. As President of the Republic De Valera felt he could not show less zeal than that of his followers. And yet he was faced with the fact that the course was worse than futile. He wanted to extricate himself from his predicament. He tried to do so – with the mysterious Document No. 2.

That document was not written by De Valera; it was the product of Erskine Childers' brain. Three times this man who has spent most of the years of his life in the employ of his native country, England, drafted and redrafted Document No. 2. Three times we submitted it to Lloyd George. Three times he turned it down. There was nothing of a Republic in that document; it included an oath of allegiance to King George; it was not altogether unnatural in view of its authorship that it was decidedly more English than the Treaty itself! But let it not be forgotten that the man who now poses as an uncompromising Republican did everything in his power to saddle Ireland with an

obligation very much more difficult to have met than is contained in the Treaty.

For the same reasons that at this time I cannot allow these facts to be made public, and while they must not be made public so long as there is a chance of our settling our differences, I permitted my hands to be tied in the Dáil. There I called the differences between Document No. 2 and the Treaty a quibble of words. For the purpose of the point I want to make it is enough to repeat this statement. Over this quibble of words De Valera and his followers are preparing to force the Irish people to go back to war with England. So far as my power can accomplish it, not one Irish life shall be lost over such a quibble.

They put us in the dock - these uncompromising Republicans of the Dáil. They tried us and found us guilty of treason to the Republic - The Republic which their president himself had secretly abandoned! The day will come when we shall be put on trial by the Irish people. It will be their verdict that will matter.

We did our best for Ireland. If the Irish people had said having got everything else but the name Republic - they would fight to get the name, I should have told them that they were fools - and then joined their ranks. But the Irish people did not do that. The Irish people are not fools!

If a misguided, unrepresentative minority can stigmatise a whole people, if these uncompromising Republicans whose actual and brainiest leader, Erskine Childers, is a renegade Englishman - can make it appear that the Irish people sponsor and share their madness, the world will not be fooled for long. The Irish people want peace. They want peace even to the extent of accepting alliance with England. For they see that in such an alliance Ireland can develop her own life, carry out her own way of existence, and rebuild her Gaelic civilisation. They want to end the bitter conflict of centuries - to end it for ever. If they wanted anything else they would be fools.

Cathal Brugha said I might be immortalised by dishonouring my signature by repudiating the Treaty. Whether I become an immortal or not is of no concern to me, and certainly to no one else. But no man who signed that Treaty could dishonour his signature without dishonouring the Irish nation. And that is a vital concern.

Cathal Brugha also attempted to belittle Michael Collins - as a subordinate of no importance who had used the newspapers to make himself a national hero. I have gone on record that Michael Collins won the war. I said it in the Dáil and I say it again. He is the man - and no one knows it better than I do - whose matchless energy and indomitable will carried Ireland through the years of the terror. If I had any ambition as a politician, if I would have immortal fame, if I longed to have my name go down in history, I should choose to have my name associated with the name of Michael Collins. Michael Collins beat the Black and Tan terror until England was forced to offer terms of peace.

If I seem to dwell too long on the methods used by our opponents, it seems to me the facts justify me. During the long sessions of the Dáil I wondered often at my very small imagination that had never visualised the heights of my own villainy. The abuse we listened to there had had no parallel since the days of Biddy Moriarity. They told us we were guilty of treason against the Republic. De Valera allowed that charge to be made without protest.

Yet he knew, as I knew, that in one of his letters to Lloyd George he wrote this sentence:

“We have no conditions to impose and no claim to advance but one, that we be free from aggression.”

He knew - because Lloyd George told him so at their meeting in July - that there would have been no negotiations had we insisted as a condition of the bargaining that England recognise the Republic. And still he made no move to stem the flood of abuse to which we were subjected by his followers.

As for the attacks made upon me because of my attitude towards the Southern Unionists and the anti-Nationalists of Ulster, I hold that they are all my countrymen, and that if we are to have an Irish nation there must be fair play for all sections, and understanding between all sections. I met the Southern Unionists and promised them fair play. So far as I can control it, they shall have fair play. I hope to live to meet the Ulster Unionists upon the same basis. They are all members

of the Irish nation, and their lives and fortunes are as much at stake as our own.

The man who thinks we can build an Irish nation and make it function successfully with 800,000 of our countrymen in the north-east against us, and 400,000 of our countrymen in the south opposed to us, is living in a fool's paradise.

I live in a world of realities, but that does not mean I have no dreams. I have dreamed. And I should like to make my dreams come true. But I have to face facts, and one fact is that Ireland is not equal in physical strength to England. The Treaty makes Ireland a sovereign State co-equal with the other States of the British Commonwealth. It gives Ireland essential unity because it recognises Ireland as a unit. It is for us to make that unity a fact!

When I was a boy I was taught that the aim of Irish Nationalists was to get the British forces out of Ireland, to restore the Parliament of Ireland, and to make the Irish people sovereign in their own country. Under the Treaty these three aims have become accomplished facts. But here to-day a minority comprising Englishmen and sons of Englishmen tells the Irish people that the evacuation of Ireland by British troops is an injury to their soul, and the best way to save the soul of Ireland is to lacerate its body! That doctrine has been preached in Ireland before. I remember when I was young often hearing foolish people saying that the poorer the Irish people were the better their national spirit would be. If this were true - and De Valera has his way - we should be approaching the zenith of national spirit. But it is an absolute fallacy. In Ireland - as in any other land - the poorer the people are, the more dispirited they become.

The men who in the name of idealism are doing their best to ruin their own country insist that we who signed the Treaty set a boundary to the march of our nation. That is a lie. By the Treaty we ended armed conflict between Ireland and England and made it possible to dwell beside her in peace and amity. As years pass it may be that changes in the relationship will come, but the Treaty ensures that such changes will come by friendly agreement and not by force. No man can answer for the next generation. Meantime, we who accept the Treaty will work it honourably.

And now one final fact: let no Irishman doubt for a moment that in signing the Treaty every one of the plenipotentiaries knew that we had got the last ounce it was possible to get out of England.