

# **Easter Rising Dublin 1916: Learning the Legacy of a Revolutionary Moment as a Subjugated Discourse in Scotland**

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*All changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born. (WB Yeats 1921)*

## **Introductory remarks**

This paper is the start of a larger work in progress, and is based on personal experience, professional experience as an adult educator, and ongoing investigative research. It argues that the historic events in Ireland in Easter 1916 were overtly and covertly subjugated as a discourse in Scotland; brought under the yoke and made subservient to dominant discourses of the British State. With the linguistics of the actual 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic in mind, I place emphasis on a key and insightful definition of discourse by Edwards & Usher (1994: 08): ‘discourse defines what can be said, which is based on what cannot be said, on what is marginalised and repressed.’ The paper, then, is the result of semi-structured interviews<sup>1</sup> and recordings of lectures that dealt with, in the main, the relationship between Scotland, the Irish in Scotland and the Rising in Dublin in 1916.

## **The educational context**

My proposition is that sections of the Scottish Community were aware of the event of the Easter Rising 24<sup>th</sup> April 1916 but ‘dare not utter’. In fact, discourses around this event were subjugated. Further, other sections have been unaware, disinterested or actively antagonistic, merging into a culture of silence. The unveiling of the activities of John Cormack and the Protestant Action Society by historians (Devine 2000;

Ritchie 2012), and in Edinburgh by the Adult Learning Project (ALP) and the National Portrait Gallery in 'Fine Line' (2007) reinforce my own personal experience of a subjugation of knowledge and discourse in family, school and community. These experiences have been very much constrained by the notion of "*what can and should be said*" (Pecheux 1982: 111, original italics).

The 'Fine Line' educational project enabled ALP to explore themes of sectarianism and the related issues of identity, nation and territorialism. With the help of Craig MacLean, ALP investigated Edinburgh's skyline and chose buildings which had meaning to both the learner/teachers and to the city's past. This discursive practice of repression and subjugation in regard to 1916 in Scotland, in particular and the effects of the Irish Diaspora in general were unveiled to us as teacher/learners and learner/teachers through a critical adult education course in 2001/2 at ALP Adult Learning Project (ALP) called the 'Irish in the Lothians' led, in the most part, by the late Joe McAvenue. This culminated in a study trip to Belfast, Derry and Donegal, charting the migration route/diaspora after the Irish Famine/Genocide. The final class, December 2002, ended with an input by the then Labour Party Councillor, Brian Cavanagh on the Life and Times of James Connolly in Edinburgh. To the dismay of Joe McAvenue, Councillor Cavanagh failed to mention Dublin Easter 1916 and the role James Connolly played in it, providing a personal impetus to explore the notion of a subjugated discourse/culture of silence.

### **Conditions of discourse practice**

The Irish Ambassador in London came to Edinburgh Central Library on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2016 to mark the centenary of the Dublin 1916 Easter Rising. Mulhall (2016) argued that Ireland was transformed by the events of 1916 and their aftermath, ensuring that the politics of Britain were fundamentally reshaped. The Rising, and the struggle for independence that followed it, had a profound impact on Scotland with its substantial Irish community. There is a special Edinburgh dimension, stemming from the fact that one of the Rising's leaders, James Connolly was born in Edinburgh with his contested and, in my view, strategically discerning legacy. The legacy of Connolly has of course been both celebrated and contested by commentators (eg O'Callaghan 2015).

**Easter 1916, a discursive event**

The Rising began on Easter Monday 1916. The insurgents, members of the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, took over a number of major buildings in Dublin, issued the Proclamation of Irish Independence, and fought for six days before surrendering in the face of the overwhelming military force ranged against them. O'Connor (2007: 11) stresses the historical significance of the 1916 Proclamation, arguing that it contains the first formal assertion of the Irish Republic as a sovereign independent state. O'Connor (2007) further maintains that, as well as being a proclamation of independence, it was a declaration of rights.

Militarily however, it was, according to Mulhall (2016: 01), a reckless endeavour, undertaken without any prospect of success, at least when a shipment of guns from Germany was intercepted by the British navy during the week before the Rising. Mulhall (2016) points out that 1,500 insurgents took part in the Rising and there were 450 deaths during the hostilities. Prominent participants in the Rising were court-martialled, many were sentenced to death and some of the death sentences were commuted to terms of imprisonment. Fourteen executions were carried out in Dublin and one in Cork. These executions, it is commonly accepted (see O'Connor 2007; Devine 2016) were the catalyst sparking a chain reaction to the War of Irish Independence and the establishment of the Irish Free State.

**Subjugated historical discourse**

Devine (2016) describes how, while the Easter Rising may have had a deep effect on Scotland with its substantial Irish community and those of Irish descent here in Scotland, there is hardly any literature addressing the relationship between the Easter Rising and Scotland, and especially the relationship between the Easter Rising and the Irish Catholic community in Scotland. To address such a hiatus it is essential, according to Devine (2016), to gauge the effect of a historical trajectory on a given set of circumstances. He maintains it is vital 'to begin with the status quo, it is essential to begin with the context; vital to contextualise the situation and then to piece together

the analysis of how these historical developments affected that status quo, affected the situation in terms, if you like, of the status quo ante.’

### **Discursive effects of the historical trajectory of WW1**

Contextually, it is important to emphasise that the Easter Rising of 1916 took place to the backdrop of World War 1. Tom Devine (2016), in a recent lecture on 1916 and the Irish Scottish community, described the extraordinary bloodletting in Scotland due to World War 1. Every town and village in Scotland has a war memorial to that war. Britain lost 460,000 men, 3,500 of these Irishmen, in the battle of the Somme. A disproportionately high number of fatalities came from Scotland. The casualties on the first day of the Battle of the Somme on July 1st 1916, just weeks after the Easter Rising, rank among the most catastrophic in British military history with 20,000 British soldiers killed. Nevertheless, Allen (2016: 03) is highly critical of such dominant discourses emanating from the ideological apparatus of the British State, and concludes that the sacrifices, deaths and carnage carried out in World War One were futile and ‘pointless’.

### **Constructing and deconstructing social reality**

The key factor for Devine (2016) in transforming the implications and perceived effects of Easter 1916 into a serious threat for the British authorities was the battle of George Square (Bloody Friday) 1919. Government concerns about industrial militancy and revolutionary political activity in Glasgow, known as Red Clydeside, reached new heights after the events of 31 January 1919. Fears within government of a workers' revolution in Glasgow led to the deployment of troops and tanks in the city. I am aware that it also led the authorities to consider new forms of covert population management such as instructing the breweries to increase the amount of alcohol in the beer for workers.

One of the leaders of Red Clydeside, John MacLean, had in May 1918 been imprisoned for five years for his anti-war and revolutionary activity. Berresford Ellis (1993: 46) points out that MacLean, friend of James Connolly, ‘formed a Scottish Workers’ Republican Party in 1920, and stood as parliamentary candidate for

Gorbals, Glasgow in 1922, expressing his faith in a Scottish Workers' Republic.' The parallels to Easter 1916 are obvious but, I would argue, clearly subjugated: even those I interviewed who are sympathetic to Irish Republicanism seemed unaware of such political discourses around John MacLean. Maclean in 1920 published *The Irish Tragedy: Scotland's Disgrace* calling on a General Strike for the withdrawal of Scottish Regiments from Ireland.

The order of anti-insurgent discourse in Scotland intensified after WW1 and events in George Square, as Devine (2016) points out, when Irish Catholics in general were subject to institutional attack. In 1923, for example, the [Church of Scotland](#) produced a highly controversial report, entitled *The Menace of the Irish Race to our Scottish Nationality*, accusing the largely immigrant Roman Catholic population of subverting Presbyterian values and of causing drunkenness, crime and financial imprudence. The report further called for the ending of immigration of Irish Catholics to Scotland and the deportation of any convicted of a criminal offence or living on state benefits. Forrester (1999) draws attention to the notion that [John White](#), one of the leading figures in the Church of Scotland at the time, called for a 'racially pure' Scotland, declaring 'Today there is a movement throughout the world towards the rejection of non-native constituents and the crystallization of national life from native elements'.

### **Pilot research towards an insurrection of subjugated knowledges**

I have carried out seven interviews to date, including with the Irish Ambassador in London, the Irish Vice Consulate in Edinburgh and three activists who, for most of their lives have been very involved in Irish and Scottish politics from a Republican Socialist viewpoint. One of the interviewees, SJ, came to speak to the Adult Learning Project (ALP) on behalf of Sinn Fein in September 2002 during the course 'The Irish in the Lothians'. SJ recommended ALP to the National Galleries of Scotland's Education Department, to take part in their 'Blind Faith: Contemporary Art and Human Rights' Programme.

Two of the interviewees, SJ's and MD's, introduction into Irish politics was cemented by the death of the Hunger Striker, Francis Hughes on May 12<sup>th</sup>, 1981. Both SJ and

MD are of Irish descent, with their parents and/or grandparents originally coming either from little Ireland in the Cowgate in Edinburgh or Gorbals area in Glasgow. The Hunger Strike had an immediate effect on his sense of outrage, anger, social connection and Irish identity. Both were to become unequivocal supporters of the Republican Movement, reinforced through the readings of James Connolly, Bobby Sands, and Tim Pat Coogan and, especially for MD, the humour involved in the struggle and the poetry of Padraig Pearse in particular.

Among the generative themes emerging from initial transcripts of these interviews are the subjugation of discourses and the Irish struggle amongst those active in left-wing politics in Scotland and the UK. They collectively felt they had been denied knowledge about Edinburgh-born James Connolly, with one arguing ‘I have no recollection of ever being told about the role of James Connolly and the Irish Citizen Army, despite being keen on history.’ A theme that arose was the willingness of the Left to support Cuba, Palestine, Viet Cong, Chile and so on, but not to back what MD and SJ saw as the ‘revolution on our doorstep’. None of the interviewees were unaware of the civilian deaths caused by IRA attacks in Birmingham and others in the 1970s and later, nor did they condone them but stressed that it was a war situation.

The interviewees were also aware that sectarians in Scotland or those suffering poor mental health, addictions and health inequalities were attracted to republican organisations. SJ, in particular, argued that those individuals did not hang around long once they realised how seriously the republicans took their politics. A seriousness that involved selling *An Phoblacht*, which supported the campaign of the Republican Movement’s military wing and published a weekly column titled "War News", which outlined IRA actions and conflict with the British Army, on Princes Street in Edinburgh in the 1980s. This attracted, unsurprisingly, increasing surveillance from the authorities and actual conflict on the streets, leading to criticisms of a very masculine form of politics.

Social inequality – poverty amongst those of Irish ethnicity in Scotland – is another generative theme, amongst both the political activists and Sister Aelred from St

Catherine's Convent of Mercy, which was expanded to set up an initiative in Edinburgh's 'Little Ireland' in the Cowgate in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. This ghettoising of the Irish in Scotland was, arguably, partly the result of sectarianism and anti-Irish Racism but also the outcome of a process of social engineering which lasted into the 1970s (see Goodwin 15<sup>th</sup> May 2016 *The Herald*).

That Catholics in Scotland suffered prejudice and discrimination in the past and were socio-economically disadvantaged is generally not disputed by the Irish Ambassador in London and the Vice Consulate in Edinburgh. These themes of disadvantage and prejudice also relate to ongoing public health investigations, exploring the Irish Catholic health disadvantage in Scotland, and the effects of sectarian behaviour.

### **By way of conclusion/beginning**

The roots of British racism lie in the Irish situation and as MacLean (1920) argued, historically, *The Irish Tragedy is Scotland's Disgrace*. The Irish have been treated vilely in Scotland, particularly with respect to employment discrimination (Devine 2016). For me personally, as the son of an Irish Catholic mother, I was subject truly to the delight of her Irish activist connections, in particular, my uncle Matt O'Brien who was the youngest volunteer to take over the GPO, O'Connell Street in Dublin. He was also the leader of a Flying Column and was one of the activists who assassinated members of the Cairo Gang on 21<sup>st</sup> November 1920. The Cairo Gang was a group of British intelligence agents who were sent to Dublin during the Irish War of Independence to conduct intelligence operations against prominent members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) – according to Irish intelligence, with the intention of assassinating them. Twelve men including British Army officers, Royal Irish Constabulary officers and a civilian informant were killed on the morning of 21 November 1920 by the Irish Republican Army in a planned series of simultaneous early-morning strikes engineered by Michael Collins. My mother's delight, however, was surpassed by her silence and, indeed, palpable fear. I am in many ways a product of the 'subjugated discourses' alluded to above. These discourses have been unveiled for me through the privilege of working with the Adult Learning Project (ALP),

which afforded me the space and encouragement to be teacher/learner on the ‘Irish in the Lothians’, and subsequent projects that emerged from that.



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**<sup>i</sup> The legacy/impact/consequences/effect of Easter 1916 on the Irish Community in Scotland**

Semi-structured questions:

- Can you recall when and how you first heard about the 24<sup>th</sup> April Easter Rising 1916?
- Was 1916 /memory of 1916 a significant event in the way of life (culture) of your family, school, church, community, hobbies and passions (football etc.), workplace, older peoples utterances, songs etc.?
- Did your family and peers ever feel unable to discuss, talk about, or celebrate this event?

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- When discussed did these discourses/ statements surrounding the event of 1916 invoke/ create romantic; melancholy; proud; whiskey soaked; nationalistic; sectarian; exclusive; unrealistic; defeatist; embarrassing memories or associations?
  - Are you currently involved in dialogues, reflections, discussions about Easter 1916?
  - Have you any comments/reflections/opinions about Easter 1916 you would like to share?