The Irish revival, elite competition and the First World War

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The study of nationalist movements has been largely the analysis of elites and counter-elites and their ideological struggles to win a popular following. This is but a partial perspective and one now rightly under challenge. But it shaped the framework of my book on Irish nationalism, *The dynamics of cultural nationalism: the Gaelic Revival and the creation of the Irish nation-state*, now twenty five years old. The editor of this collection has asked to me review its claims in the light of recent scholarship on Irish history and also to discuss how elites are being analysed in the broader scholarship on nationalism. I will first explain the aims and arguments of my study, situating it within the nationalism scholarship of the time. I will then examine more recent Irish historical studies, notably those of Senia Pašeta and Fergus Campbell. Finally, in the light of my current research, I will briefly argue for the neglected centrality of war for understanding crucial developments in Irish nationalist politics.

**AIMS OF THE DYNAMICS OF CULTURAL NATIONALISM**

My book is a work of historical sociology. After finishing an undergraduate degree in history, I had become interested in the origins and social significance of Irish cultural revival of the late nineteenth century, but felt I lacked the conceptual tools with which to tackle the topic. When reading in the then undeveloped field of nationalism research, I came across *Theories of nationalism* by the sociologist Anthony D. Smith. I was impressed by his final chapter, where Smith put forward a set of hypotheses about the origins of nationalist movements which I thought offered a promising avenue for historical research. I applied to do a PhD under his supervision in the sociology department at the London School of Economics, and out of this came my book.

Although my specific topic was the role of cultural nationalist movements in modern Ireland, I was also attempting to make a general contribution to the schol-
arship on nationalism, in which nationalism is usually conceived of as a state-oriented political project. There was and still is much less scholarly focus on nationalists whose primary aim is the formation of national communities. In my book, I argued that we need to give more attention to cultural nationalist movements that precede or accompany state-oriented nationalisms. These movements might arise from small circles of intellectuals, but they could develop (as in early twentieth-century Ireland) into large-scale ethno-cultural projects promoting new historical mythologies, a redefinition of homeland (including in the Irish case a revalorizing of the west), a language and cultural revival, and an idea of nation as a network of activated self-help communities. Such activities had generally been dismissed, by scholars of nationalism, as a surrogate politics, as backward-looking and reactionary, and as transient phenomena that would fade as societies modernized. I argued that their goal was not so much political as the formation of a moral solidarity created through education into national values and promoted through the idiom of regeneration. Moreover, these movements were socially innovative, could become a platform for revolutionary action, and recurred periodically even after independence had been achieved, seeking to redefine the identity of political communities. My two central questions were:

1. How do we explain the origins of such movements?
2. What are circumstances under which they become politically salient?

In addressing the first question, I drew on Anthony Smith’s dual legitimation thesis (first developed in Theories of nationalism), in which he argues that nationalism arises from the impact of secular modernizing states on societies regulated by religious norms and institutions. Such states, promising by the application of scientific principles and modes of organization to emancipate human beings from nature, threaten the authority of religious organizations that claim to offer transcendental solutions to the problem of evil and suffering in the world. This creates what Smith calls ‘a crisis of dual authority’ in which first intellectuals and then, as modernization intensifies, more extensive educated strata are forced to choose between science and the idea of progress and the sense of meaning and enchantment offered by traditional religion. There are three logical solutions to this dilemma: modernist, reformist/revivalist and neo-traditionalist – each of which tends to generate nationalism.

Modernists reject religion outright and aspire to a cosmopolitan polity, but become disillusioned when they discover that their universalist dreams are culture-bound and can be achieved only within a limited territorial state. Neo-traditionalists reject outright the secular state but learn that they can combat it only by adopting modern techniques of political mobilization, and in doing so they have to appeal to mass ethnic sentiments. Reformists see no clash between science and revelation, but in order to undermine, traditionalists have to find a concrete example in the past.

6 Ibid., ch. 10.
where secular progress and the spiritual flowering of the people have been combined. This golden past gradually becomes the touchstone by which contemporary religion is judged and the project of the reformist becomes one of historical revival as a means to remake a ‘fallen’ present. My focus was on the third group, which included modern romantic intellectuals as well as reform-minded clergy and heterodox mystics (for example, theosophists), who created new historical and cultural visions of the nation, and to a lesser extent the disillusioned modernists who transformed these visions into socio-political programmes. Needless to say, these characterizations were ideal types. Real human beings would switch between the three positions or even combine them pragmatically in their response to problems.

For the second question, explaining why and when such visions became politically resonant, I turned to what might be dubbed the ‘blocked mobility’ hypothesis. This proposes that innovative ideas have the potential to be politically salient when an emerging educated stratum, imbued with expectations of advancement found itself arbitrarily (in its own estimation) excluded by existing power-holders. They then may take up these ideas to find a vocation as leaders of a counter-system movement. The task was to identify whether such an aggrieved stratum existed in Ireland and if so, explain why the revivalist vision resonated with this group.

**Intellectual Origins of the Irish Revival**

The central themes of my study were then questions of identity change, elite competition and problems of legitimacy. What was their application to modern Ireland? In Smith’s initial model, the revivalist intellectuals had a key role, but only at the beginning when they joined with the modernists, who used their vision of a golden age to organize and inspire political campaigns with the aim of achieving an independent state. In later writings, he argued that each of the three routes could independently produce nationalism, but at first he assumed that the revivalists would fade in significance once a political nationalism got going.

I found this had to be modified. First, in the Irish case, there were three, not one, significant cultural nationalist revivals – the late eighteenth-century antiquarian revival of Charles O’Conor and Sylvester O’Halloran that founded the Royal Irish Academy; the early to mid-nineteenth-century archaeological and philological revival associated with figures such as George Petrie, John O’Donovan and Eugene O’Curry; and the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Anglo-Irish literary revival of W.B. Yeats and the Gaelic Revival of Douglas Hyde and Eoin MacNeill. Each gathered adherents across the sectarian divide and had a following among reform-minded clergy, the third, in particular, among Catholic lower clergy.

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7 This takes various forms, having its origins in Max Weber’s work, but for the purposes of nationalist movements, the best formulation is in A.D. Smith, *The ethnic revival* (Cambridge, 1981), pp 116–20.
Second, there appeared to be a recurring and contrapuntal relationship between the cultural nationalists with their communitarian conception of the nation and the political nationalisms whose primary focus was political independence or autonomy for the nation. Indeed, cultural nationalist emerged alongside political nationalist movements, sometimes as allies, sometimes as rivals, and were transformed from coteries of intellectuals into a broader socio-political projects at points of crisis for the larger political movements. In short, I found that there was a long-running concern with national identity and cultural regeneration that surfaced episodically in the three national revivals, each of which emerged at a time of growing political nationalism in the form of state-seeking movements and shared the latter's hostility to the intervention of a centralizing state in Irish life. Each revival had three phases. There was gestation led by historicist intellectuals, scholars and artists, often allied with religious reform movements. In phase two, these coteries crystallized into cultural institutions at times of internal conflict, arising from the failures of political nationalism, to propound a new historico-cultural conception of the nation (against what was seen as a divisive, exclusive and political conception) based on a mythical golden age of harmony and progress. Finally, socio-political articulation occurred when more modernizing intellectuals (often journalists) translated into concrete socio-political programmes (some of) the communitarian themes of the revival, appealing to a disaffected rising educated generation that felt excluded from power. In this third phase, revivalism could develop a broader-based movement, offering an alternative grass-roots politics to that of established statist organizations. By the late nineteenth century, a neo-traditionalist vision was gaining resonance, represented by sections of the Catholic clergy that promoted a rural patriarchal vision of Ireland.

The picture of cultural nationalism is of a different kind of nationalist project, forming individuals disaffected with existing leaders and institutions into a counter-elite and appealing to a range of disaffected groups outside established organizations. Each of the Irish revivals ended in revolt, but in the case of the third revival (the Easter rebellion) with long-term success.

In short then, cultural nationalism is a complex and dynamic phenomenon that has the following characteristics. First, it has a distinct conception of the nation, which is located in its history, culture and people, above all in its golden age, and it pursues grass-roots communitarian strategies rather than the mass organizational modes of political nationalism. In Ernest Renan’s terms, the nation is a daily plebiscite defined not in constitutions or state orders but in the formation and reformation of a distinctive way of life. Cultural nationalism originated in each case from individuals who are plunged into an identity crisis, often drawn to a pantheism and then to the living community of the nation, exemplified in its folklore, language and literature. They saw themselves as outsiders (even if in the case of Hyde and to a lesser extent Davis and Petrie, they could be classed as part of the dominant community) who wished to be a new cultural elite. The goal of their historical, philological and artistic endeavours was to create a vision of integration founded on an alleged golden past in which the energies of traditionalists and modernists then in conflict...
could be redirected, so that they would then cooperate on a grass-roots reformation of a broken society.

Second, it crystallized as a serious cultural project at times of perceived crises when it offered new maps of identity and meaning. For this reason, I describe cultural nationalists as *moral innovators*. Through a vision of the golden age (the early medieval age of ‘saints and scholars’) traditionalists were to be persuaded that the past legitimized secular achievement and lay initiatives not resistance to change. Modernists, on the other hand, were to be persuaded that it was a mistake to look to British models of progress and to decry Irish culture, because Ireland had once been in the vanguard of European civilization when Britain was in darkness. The task was to build a modern Ireland on Irish lines, and to select those foreign models that could be adapted to Irish circumstances. In the cultural sphere, Yeats looked to the Norwegian drama and to Wagner's Bayreuth Theatre, while D.P. Moran extolled Catholic Belgium’s successful industrialization and Arthur Griffith Hungarian examples of political self-help.

Third, although cultural nationalists proposed models of integration, the project itself was unstable, since the intellectual groupings had themselves different goals. The revivalist intellectuals’ primary concern was with cultural achievement and identity, but by drawing modernists and also traditionalists into their movement they imported conflicting objectives that threatened to marginalize them. Over the modern period then, the picture was of competing conceptions of the nation interacting in complex ways with each other, and gaining or losing popularity at points of crisis that gave space for the rise of new sets of meanings.

In exploring these developments, I focused on the third and formative revival of modern Ireland, which, to add to the complexity, broke into rival wings – the more Protestant Anglo-Irish literary wing and the much more significant Catholic-dominated Gaelic Revival. Yeats’ hope was to create (through the medium of English) an Irish literature and culture of European significance that would transform the moral consciousness of the Irish people, just as Hyde and MacNeill defined their primary goal as the revival of an Irish language civilization. Both saw the newly rediscovered Irish-speaking peasantry of the west as a yet unpolluted reservoir of national myths, legends and social practices that could be used to redeem the fallen urban anglicized Ireland. In contrast, the more political journalists such as Arthur Griffith and D.P. Moran viewed culture in more instrumental terms as a means by which to mobilize the Irish to civil disobedience or individual and collective self-help. Over time, the original cultural mission became appropriated for the political campaigns of the latter, which attracted educated middle and lower middle classes aggrieved at their exclusion from status, occupational advancement and political power. Neo-traditionalists, such as Fathers O’Leary and Dinneen on the other hand, conceived the Irish language as a means to protect religion from the onslaught of

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British secular ideas and values, and rejected ideas of subordinating the Church to lay nationalist activism, notably in the field of university education. They gained force from 1907 onwards as fears mounted that traditional Ireland was disintegrating, indicated by a rapid exodus from the land and by labour militancy in Dublin, which seemed to suggest that the threat to the Church from British atheistic socialist ideas was now at an acute stage. This is very much in accordance with Tom Garvin’s depiction of the Gaelic Revival shortly before the First World War, in which he argued an ethnocentric mood in the countryside and small towns of the west and centre had infected the Gaelic Revival.9

SOCIO-POLITICAL RESONANCE: TESTING THE ‘BLOCKED MOBILITY THESIS’

Taking the third revival as my main subject, my second task was to examine how far one could explain the take-off of Irish Ireland as a significant social movement by reference to a problem of ‘blocked social mobility’ among young Catholics.

In my book I was able to marshal evidence of a considerable expansion between 1861 and 1911 in the number of primary, secondary and tertiary educational institutions catering to the Catholic middle and upper middle classes, as well as to an emerging lower middle class. Although there were also occupational advances, particularly in the lower ranks of the civil service, there was also evidence of a relative shortage of positions in the higher professions and upper echelons of the civil service to qualified Catholics. There was ample evidence of ‘over-competition’ of young Catholics for even more junior positions.10 However, the ‘blocked mobility thesis’ was never simply about an oversupply of the qualified relative to suitable positions. It was as much about expectations and a sense of entitlement (occupational and vocational) that was generated by the educational process itself, including ideas of a career open to the talents, of equality and democracy, and the bitterness that arose as a result of the frustration of these expectations. Among these grievances was the reservation of first-class positions in the public administration to Protestants, with the result that Catholics were forced into subordinate positions. There was resentment at policies of ethnic discrimination in the form of the manipulation of examination content with the aim of disadvantaging Catholics. A third grievance was at measures that restricted Catholics playing a decision-making role in public affairs (for example, the bar on political involvement placed on civil servants).11

As I argued, this did not explain why aggrieved young Catholics were attracted to the Irish revival rather than the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) in the early years of the twentieth century. There was the overhang of disillusionment with nationalist politics after the internecine conflicts between Parnellites, clerical supporters and

proponents of the Liberal alliance after the fall of Parnell. But the key factors were the poor prospects of Home Rule following the Conservative victory in the general election of 1900, the combination of factionalism and oligarchic tendencies in the party, which created entry problems for new aspirants, the perceptions that the leadership of the party was anglicized, and evidence of corruption as Home Rule politicians took power in local government. By contrast, the Irish Ireland ideals of the Gaelic Revival offered a positive vision of a regenerated Ireland based on a rediscovery of a western Irish-speaking and spiritual heartland and outlets for the vocational and leadership generation of a younger generation, better educated than their fathers and frustrated at the cul-de-sac of Irish parliamentary nationalism. Hence the born-again quality of many Irish Ireland supporters who spoke of being rescued from a despondency, personal and collective, by their membership of the revival and their discovery of a mission to convert their society from its thrall to English materialism. Moreover, the message of building an Ireland from within appealed to those who could see that even if Home Rule was soon achieved, the main sectors of Irish society – its public administration, major professions and business, dominated by a Protestant elite governed by British norms – still had to be reclaimed for the Irish nation (in practice identified with Catholics).

At the same time, I stressed that supporters of Irish Ireland were not attracted to the radical nationalism of Sinn Féin. Most combined a commitment to the Irish revival and to Home Rule. Indeed, as the strategies of the Gaelic League and its affiliated groups to recreate a viable Irish-speaking Ireland were seen to founder from 1907 onwards and as prospects for Home Rule revived from 1910 onwards, even D.P. Moran embraced the IPP, arguing that, without an independent Irish parliament, the revival itself would falter.

I argued that the real political significance of the Irish revival was the creation of a cohesive counter-cultural community, whose values and concept of legitimacy were radically distinct from those of the state and dominant institutions of Ireland, including the IPP, which remained committed to British constitutional norms. The primary allegiance of the leadership and cadres of the Irish revival was to a culturally distinctive and autonomous Irish nation. Support for the IPP and constitutional modes of politics was pragmatic rather than ideological. For this reason, I argued that they were able to give legitimacy to independent and, if necessary, revolutionary action at times of crisis for the nation, when constitutional nationalism was perceived to fail. This occurred at several junctures – the establishment of the Irish Volunteers in 1913–14 and the Easter Rising of 1916.

12 Ibid., pp 280–5.
The framework of the book was Weberian in arguing that new concepts of national identity arise when existing meaning systems are under threat, and ideological innovators are often social outsiders who may view themselves in messianic terms. Without a social constituency, these elite messages are empty, but, should there be such a constituency, the new ideas can act as ‘switchmen’ of interests, for example by orienting an emerging Catholic middle class to a communitarian rather than a state-oriented politics.

My focus was on elites, or more accurately counter-elites, but, as I have mentioned, these were of different kinds – revivalist intellectuals and more political thinkers and campaigners. When writing my study, there was a variety of interpretations of the relationships between nationalist elites and ordinary people. At one extreme, some like Ernest Gellner viewed nationalist intellectuals as symptoms rather than creators of social change (that is, national formation). But what was notable was that revivalist intellectual circles preceded the social movements: indeed, I argued that the new ideas of the nation, when given political translation by figures like Moran, formed individuals who might feel isolated and alienated into a cohesive and militant community. Hans Kohn and, in a very different way, Miroslav Hroch considered the historical and artistic revivalists as crucial only in the earliest phases of nationalism, having their role as identity formers, after which they retire as significant agents to be replaced by political actors and class interests. As I already observed, however, this is too static a picture, for there were three Irish revivals in which intellectuals played a leading role. Defining the nation is a recurring process as a result of internal changes of the given populations, shifting relations of a given population with its neighbours (as Britain transformed in the nineteenth century into the world’s industrial power), and new political contexts.

An alternative perspective was Eric Hobsbawm’s characterization of nationalists as ‘inventors of tradition’, which considered nationalist ideas, rituals and symbols as novel means by which emerging groups sought to displace established interests in the struggle for power in the modern world. Paul Brass had a more refined formulation that recognizes the role of external differentiation, arguing that ‘the study of nationality was in large part the process by which elites and counter-elites select aspects of a group’s culture and attach new values and meanings to them and use them as symbols to mobilize the group, defend its interests and compete with other groups’. The problem with both formulations was an instrumentalist conception of

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elite actions that failed to account for the popular resonance of nationalist ideas. The term ‘invention’ underestimated the difficulty of changing the existing meanings of the past in a country in which, to quote William Faulkner, ‘the past isn’t dead and buried. In fact, it isn’t even past’. It viewed nationalist leaders as ‘above’ or even ‘outside’ their society, manipulating it in terms of pure power interests, whereas they were very much social products like their followers. Later, Hobsbawm admitted that, though created from above, nations cannot be understood unless analysed from below, in terms of the assumptions of ordinary people, but he did not explore this.17

For this reason, I described the revivalist intellectuals not as inventors but as ‘moral innovators’ who employed ideas of a golden age and comparisons with other countries to show how a reverence for the past could inspire a modernization of Irish society. In doing so, they sought to unite the urban middle classes with the clergy and their supporters under the revivalist umbrella. But I argued that there were real difficulties in doing this, especially when powerful institutions and social groups validated themselves by reference to the past. It was successful only up to a point, and the result was that original conceptions of the early revivalists were transformed as social groups read their own meanings into the ideas, myths and symbols articulated by the intellectuals.

We see the limitations of elite aspirations in the establishing of the Gaelic League, when both Douglas Hyde and Eoin MacNeill invoked the model of the Land League, as a populist project that led to the transformation of rural Ireland. Their aspirations were for a cultivated Irish-speaking, rural, democratic and non-sectarian nation, that, inspired by its eighth-century glories, would be a spiritual beacon in a materialized world. The restoration of a Gaelic social order, however, meant something quite different to the descendants of Land League veterans – to the educated peasantry and lower middle classes of the small towns of Munster. To these individuals, imbued with a xenophobic hatred of an English culture that was steadily penetrating into the rural interior, an Irish Ireland entailed an overturning of the Protestant ascendency that still dominated Irish social and economic life. The profound dislocations and crises of the First World War, the Easter Rising and the War of Independence brought representatives of these social strata to leadership positions in post-independence Ireland. The Irish Ireland they brought into being was far removed in its puritanism, insularity and anti-intellectualism from the vision of the early revivalists.

These remarks indicate some of the limitations of my study. I had attempted to avoid a static perspective from above by exploring the competition between elite projects (Home Rule political nationalisms v. cultural nationalisms), and the shifting struggles for dominance within revivalist nationalism. The individuals I studied were often from humble backgrounds with aspirations to speak for emerging groups and to become a counter-elite. I also mentioned that cultural revivalists adopted often ‘grass-roots’ or populist strategies, and suggested that their constituencies translated

their programmes in ways the founders had not anticipated. Nevertheless, my study was by no means a study of nationalism from below. A full study of the different strata involved in Irish nationalist movements and how they relate to each other is still to be written. Also lacking is an analysis of banal nationalism in Ireland: how national sentiments connect with the concerns and practices of everyday life, and how this banal nationalism articulates with the ‘hot’ nationalism of ideological movements.

**ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS**

One study that went some of the way towards a more extensive analysis of the social bases of radical Gaelic nationalism was Tom Garvin’s *Nationalist revolutionaries, 1858–1928*, published in the same year as my monograph. He viewed the Gaelic Revival as a vehicle for the ambitions of a newly educated cohort of Catholics entering an urban world in Ireland or Britain but of farming and peasant origins, ‘deeply sensitive to its political subordination, to the inadequacies of its own culture and education, and to the aloofness of the ascendancy’. The roots of this cohort, disproportionately centred in Munster, were traced back to the Fenian traditions that had passed into the Land League, and their frustrations exploded under the pressures of European war into revolution. Garvin’s was a penetrating study of mindset of Irish revolutionary elites and their legacy in post-independence Ireland. His study was sensitive to synchronic developments in Europe in his references to European radical leaderships of the twentieth century.

My study was diachronic in exploring the long-range patterns of Irish revivalism, which, like cultural nationalist movements elsewhere, could take different forms – liberal, populist, socialist or traditionalist – depending on social and political contexts. In other words, the fact that early twentieth-century revivalism took anti-modernist forms was historically contingent. There was nothing intrinsically traditionalist about Irish cultural nationalism as the earlier revivals had shown. Given the disparity in resources and cultural self-assurance between Britain, then the great imperial power possessing a global vernacular culture and an advanced industrial base, and the smaller, more rural Ireland, poorly educated, and religious with a small secular laity, it is not surprising that a cultural nationalism ultimately took such defensive neo-traditionalist forms. In spite of this, the new governing class that arose out the Gaelic Revival, although facing the huge challenges of the years after independence, including a civil war and economic depression, remained committed to an Irish democracy.

In contrast to Garvin, Senia Pašeta has argued that to privilege growing ethnocentric and separatist currents before the First World War is to adopt a winner’s historical perspective. Irish Irelanders, she claims, were an unrepresentative minority who glorified an exalted past out of ‘a fear of embracing modernity’. Edwardian

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Ireland was rather a period of Catholic middle-class advance, notable for the rise of women’s movements, an expansion of professional opportunities and a commitment to Home Rule politics. If there was evidence of a crisis of vocation among sections of a new educated Catholic stratum, this was due more to perception of Protestant dominance than a dearth of employment opportunities. The Easter Rising was an ‘aberrant’ event and it was only ‘the intervention’ of the First World War that disrupted Ireland’s steady progress within the British Empire and that cast a young generation of constitutionalist nationalists into oblivion.  

There is much of value in Pašeta’s analysis. There were potent anglicizing or assimilating trends within Irish society – as I acknowledged in my study. However, this picture rather detracts from what was central to my framework, namely the dynamic interplay between the different options presented to the Irish people that continued throughout this period. Indeed, without the sense of ‘anglicization’, it would be impossible to explain the fervour and, as time went on, the desperation of Irish-Ireland advocates, such as Pearse, who knew all too well that they were a declining minority. I will take up Pašeta’s challenge and make three further observations.

First, there was indeed an apocalyptic tone to some of the pronouncements of revivalists in the early twentieth century, but this was not unique to Irish nationalists. The accelerating arms race between the great powers, explosive urbanization and rural decline, intense class conflict and (in Britain) constitutional crisis induced expressions of panic across the political spectrum in many European countries. All of these could be regarded as aspects of modernity, which one could appreciate Irish revivalists being reluctant to ‘embrace’. But, of course, there is no such thing as ‘modernity’ as such: there are multiple modernities that are always culturally framed. Irish cultural nationalists like Griffith and Moran did not reject modernity as such: they rejected a modernity equated with British secular industrial models. Understandably, they feared that a small Irish rural society in demographic decline and with many of its ablest young looking to emigrate might well be swallowed by the industrial Goliath to which it was yoked. They wished a modernity based on Irish values, promoting Irish industries, supported educational advance and the development of a lay Catholic culture. Many young women graduates were prominent revivalists and active in women’s suffrage organizations. Some revivalists (George Russell and later Patrick Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh) could see in Denmark an alternative model of successful modernity – of a small progressive and prosperous

21 Ibid., ‘Epilogue’. 22 In my understanding of the crosscurrents in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Irish nationalism, I was influenced by several important studies: Alan O’Day, *The English face of Irish nationalism* (Dublin, 1977), which demonstrated the strong assimilation of the Irish political elite at Westminster into British radicalism, even as Patrick O’Farrell, *Ireland’s English question* (London, 1971) was sketching the rising Catholic neo-traditionalist revulsion in the countryside and small towns against English currents in the same period. Another significant influence was Tom Garvin, *The evolution of Irish nationalist politics* (Dublin, 1981).
peasant democracy. Certainly, one can find in their writings and those of their contemporaries a horror at aspects of popular culture and exaggerated notions of traditional virtues, but in that they were in no way different to their English or European equivalents.

Second, Pašeta’s depiction of limited professional advances for Catholics does not affect my argument about ‘blocked mobility’. I expressly noted such advances as well as the growing sway of English values and fashions in the early twentieth century. Moreover, ‘blocked mobility’ referred not just to career openings but also to a sense of being deprived of playing a significant role in the public life of their country. I cited the frustration of a tertiary educated Catholics, like Arthur Clery, one of the Clongowes cohort, European in their horizons, who wrote for Moran’s Leader. Clery, among many others, complained of Catholics who should expect to take prestigious positions at the bar or to become cabinet ministers in a future Home Rule parliament, but were compelled to take ‘menial’ positions in the civil service and teaching. Moreover, such ‘menial’ positions debarred them from taking an overt part in politics. This frustration was directed also against the corruption and toadying to English ways of members of the older nationalist political elite who were assuming power in local government.

Third, there is ample evidence of the reality of exclusion operating at the higher levels of almost all spheres of Irish society. In my book, I referred to census data which showed the proportions of Catholics in the major professions almost static, while the numbers of those qualified had substantially increased, and I cited figures of ‘over-competition’ of lower-middle-class Catholics seeking junior civil servant positions, which forced them into employment as postal clerks in the cities of Britain, from where they attempted to return to Ireland. Exposure to an alien secular urban world either in Britain or in Dublin, dominated by English Protestant values, intensified the appeal of a radical Gaelic populism to socially insecure young Catholics.

Support for my analysis has recently come from Fergus Campbell’s The Irish establishment, which can be seen as an extension as well as a critique of Lawrence McBride’s The greening of Dublin Castle (1991). Although one might cavil at the idea of a single establishment operating in Ireland, he provides comprehensive data demonstrating that while Catholics were advancing in the lower and middle sections of the civil service, local government, the less prestigious professions and small business, Protestants retained their grip in higher levels of the Irish administration, business, the major professions and the army and police. He argues there was an increasing contrast between the political emancipation of Catholics and their persisting social subordination and the perception of them as second-class citizens. This socio-economic division was sustained by powerful Protestant loyalist upper-class networks centred on the vice-regal lodge and associations such as the Kildare Street Club that bound together a declining landlord class with a rising Protestant business elite. These networks were strengthening during the early twentieth century.

23 Hutchinson, The dynamics, pp 259–65. 24 Ibid., p. 271. 25 Ibid., p. 300n44.
in response to the Protestant perceptions of a tilt of the British state to the Irish nationalist interests. The Catholics who greened Dublin Castle were incorporated into the Protestant establishment. It is this contrast between political emancipation and social inferiority, underpinned by ascendancy cultural connections, that I argue gave momentum to the projects of cultural rather than political nationalism. For the focus of the former was making Irish values hegemonic and on nationalizing the dominant institutions of Irish society rather than achieving a Home Rule parliament.

Campbell rejects Pašeta’s fortuitous interpretation of the political success of the Irish revival. In doing so, he states that my analysis suggests a logical line between frustrated career and vocational aspirations and attraction to cultural nationalism and finally to a Sinn Féin revolution. In fact, I don’t make such a direct connection. As I have already stated, whatever their leaders might say, most Irish Irelanders saw no contradiction between a support for the revival and for the Home Rule movement. I argued rather that once the revival became institutionalized, it could become a platform for revolutionary action at times of a crisis of the state (for example in war) when the official organizations Irish nationalism (the IPP) had also begun to lose legitimacy. He can be forgiven for reading that into my interpretation, however, since I spend so little time discussing how it was that the revival became radicalized in this manner. Central to this was, of course, the outbreak of the First World War, and this raises the question of whether we, like Pašeta, view the war as an intervention that changed the direction of Irish political development.


There are two reasons for disputing the view of the First World War as an anomaly. First, to consider war as an intervention is to normalize peace and economic and social developments as the forces that shape national trajectories. If one takes the perspective of Charles Tilly seriously (‘war makes the state and the state makes war’), the reverse is true. Without swallowing the full Tilly line, one could make a case that (in the jargon of social science) wars can act as ‘critical junctures’ that frame new paths of social and political development. Irish–British history has been profoundly shaped by a series of European-wide conflicts that resulted in ethno-political structures that patterned later inter-national relations. Out of the religio-dynastic wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries came the conquest, the land settlements and the establishment of the Ulster plantation. From the wars of the French revolutionary and Napoleonic era crystallized modern Irish Catholic nationalist identities, arising from the 1798 Rising, the Act of Union and the broken promise of Catholic

Emancipation and, in their wake, the rise of O’Connellite mass popular politics. This last phenomenon, formally constitutionalist but yoked to rural millenarian sentiments, created the template for later parliamentary agitations.

Tilly acknowledges that whereas general European warfare was an almost continuous feature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the modern period it has been less frequent (if more destructive). Even so, the First World War that resulted in the destruction of the great empires in Europe was not a bolt from the blue. It was the outcome of an accelerating contest for geo-political European and global supremacy between the great powers, which was entangled with ruling-class fears either of imperial disintegration from insurgent nationalisms or of class revolution. In this context, the revolutionary establishment of an Irish nation-state, weakened by civil war and unresolved irredentist claims is very much part of the mainstream of European history.

There is a second reason for bringing war inside our analysis. My focus has been on the different conceptions of legitimacy struggling for primacy in early twentieth-century Ireland, and the rise of a conception of Ireland, given body in a sacrificial community of believers, that viewed the nation as radically distinct from that of Britain. Many have claimed that war can be seen as the ultimate test of legitimacy of a state, particularly total war that requires the mobilization for sacrifice of whole peoples. The stresses of the First World War not only occasioned the collapse of autocratic empires; it opened intense cleavages even in democratic ethnically diverse states – in Canada, where the threats to forcibly enlist French-speakers in Quebec threatened its cohesion and in Australia, where efforts to introduce conscription were defeated by opposition from Irish-Australians.

The war was, however, more of a catalyst than the cause of imperial collapse. Just as the advance of Hungarian nationalism before 1914 had all but eroded Habsburg authority, so the radicalization of Irish nationalist and Ulster unionist movements had severely undermined the legitimacy of the British state in Ireland before the war. A key criterion of authority is the ability of the state to monopolize the legitimate use of violence. By this standard, an allegiance to British constitutionalist norms was already withering, as indicated by the recourse to arms of the Ulster and Irish Volunteers (initiated by Eoin MacNeill) and by the British Army mutiny at Curragh. As in much of Europe, the outbreak of war inspired a rallying to the state, although Irish leaders such as John Redmond assumed this would provide strong support for Home Rule after the war. But, as in Europe under the adversities and sufferings of war, the solidarity of the subordinate nationalities with their imperial states snapped. The events following the Easter Rising and the inevitable British response, including attempts to impose conscription on Ireland, showed how fragile support for Britain was.

In short, the Irish revolution needs to be understood as part of a larger European and indeed global context. The First World War and its successor were crucial moments in the transformation of the world from one dominated by world empires into one of nation states. The experience of twentieth-century Ireland – its civil war,
irredentist, utopianism and insecurity – has parallels with that of other newly independent European post-colonial states. It might be asked if an independent Ireland would have occurred in the absence of the Irish Ireland movement. Counter-factuals are of themselves unanswerable. What one can do is point to the crucial role of the Irish revivalists not just in the struggle for independence but more importantly in the definition of the new Irish nation state. We can answer in similar terms a second question, whether but for the war the Irish Ireland movement would have triumphed. What is important is that an alternative conception of the Irish nation had become institutionalized and hence available as a resource for rethinking possible political futures, should the established nostrums be found wanting. The outbreak of war had only suspended the crisis in Ireland over Home Rule, with the opposing parties seemingly irreconcilable. The strains of war were to bring the crisis to a head, but it is unclear even in the absence of war whether a resolution satisfactory to nationalist Ireland could have been achieved. As the hopes of the Irish parliamentary party for a future Ireland participating amicably within a British empire receded, the rival vision of Irish Ireland culturally as well as political autonomous became increasingly credible as a blueprint for the future. The outbreak and fortunes of wars have often resulted in the fall of regimes and the unexpected catapulting of previously marginalized actors into office. The Easter Rising and the War of Independence propelled into power not just a saviour figure but an entire generational cohort, which dominated the first fifty years of the new state, and configured its institutions and ethos. It is this legacy that makes the study of Irish cultural nationalism and the figures that formed it so significant.

Some examples: Finland in 1918 combined a liberation war against Russia with a civil war between ‘Whites’ and ‘Reds’. The post-war period was dominated by irredentist dreams of regaining ‘lost’ Karelian lands. The post-World War settlements generated intense irredentist tensions in Central and Eastern Europe as well as political instabilities, leading to the rise of authoritarian regimes. The independent Hungarian state, after a socialist putsch and brief civil war, lost substantial territory and population to Czechoslovakia, Romania and what later became Yugoslavia and turned to an authoritarian right wing politics geared towards a ‘restoration’ of greater Hungary. The resurrected Polish nation-state subject to intense political fissures, defined itself in religious terms against the atheistic USSR while in dispute with Lithuania over the status of Vilnius.