

DUBLIN IN WAR TIME

JOHN WENDELL HOLMES

FROM half-past five, when I left Euston, until midnight when I reached Holyhead, I sat on my slowly collapsing Gladstone in a train densely overcrowded with Irish men, women, and babies. The trip was carried out in total darkness, not only of the train but of the entire countryside; but not one Irish baby set up a keening, and the youth of Ireland snuggled up happily in pairs in the corridors and refused to be disturbed even by the troop movements which passed over them while we waited at Crewe. Ever since discovering Yeats and O'Casey I had planned to go to Ireland, but I had seen the Tottenham Court Road Tube Station last winter shortly after it had been sacrificed in the cause of a united Ireland, and I had wondered about Dublin's hospitality. It was cold and miserable all night on the third-class deck of the Mail Boat, but at dawn most of the passengers were still singing—not the *Rose of Tralee*, but the *Beer Barrel Polka*. Such further reason for faith in the Irish temperament was almost shattered by the sight of Dun Laoghaire—which is pronounced Dun Leary, and used to be known as Kingstown. Here was my first indication of the fact that it is the school-children who are the true martyrs of the new nationalism. Dun Laoghaire looked bleak, and the rain began to fall. An Irish breakfast lay thick and soggy within me, as I arrived in Dublin to find six taxi-cabs for six hundred people with trunks, prams, babies, and gas-masks. I asked a porter how to get to Harcourt Street on foot.

"Harcourt Street," says he. "Sure and that's aisy. If ye go right at the corner and keep on wokkin', why there ye are in Grafton Street."

In the face of such friendliness, it seemed rude to explain that it was *Harcourt Street* I wanted; so I walked a block and asked a Civic Guard—Republican heir of the Royal Irish Constabulary. The Guard sent me off in a different direction, pointing out that if I followed his instructions, why there I would be in Stephen's Green. Remembering Provost Mahaffy's definition of an Irish bull as a sort of confusion of thought often found among the English, but with this difference, that the Irish bull is always pregnant, I realized that Grafton Street had not yet cast off the whimsical English custom of changing

its name at every other public-house, and that it ran alongside the Green and then became Harcourt Street. It was all well intentioned. There was no sign of the hostility I had feared, except for a daft old man who went down the street muttering something menacing about the Tommies' War. Grafton Street brought a new aspect towards things, for it was filled with Dubliners, and they were all walking cheerfully about their business, as if the sun were out and the land of saints and scholars ten thousand miles away from Poland. The posters told me that the Dail was discussing the extended teaching of Irish in the schools, and the political agitators seemed to have spent their energy scrawling ominously on old walls: "Release Frank Ryan—or else." The gangsters' innuendo was aimed, I discovered, not at Mr. Chamberlain or Lord Craigavon, but at General Franco, who had had Irishmen fighting both for and against him.

Eiré had declared its neutrality, and I soon discovered that almost everyone agreed that this was the only possible position to take—except those descendants of the older order who continue to play the rôle of White Irishmen for whom the Green Government of An Taoiseach and Dail Eireann have no existence. Most of the Anglo-Irish have, of course, loyally accepted the new status of the country, maintaining a constitutional opposition. Their mouthpiece is the *Irish Times*, which stood for neutrality rather than civil war, although it made little secret of its sympathy for the allied cause. The *Irish Independent* could not restrain a Catholic sympathy for Poland and a Catholic horror of Russia and her new ally. Mr. De Valera's own organ, the *Irish Press*, being still greener, found the way of neutrality in pointing out how well the Irish know how to sympathize with victims of aggression. There are several journals published by the Ultras, one of which paraded a bulletin announcing editorial comment on the subject: "British Bounders at War". Some few extremists still believe that the sole joy of an Irishman should be to watch the teeth decay in the mouth of the British lion, but most people feel that they would just as soon have a sharp set of jaws between them and Hitler. There is really little in common between National Socialism and the Nationalism of Fianna Fail. Both feed on ancient wrongs, and seek a revival of a somewhat legendary national spirit, although Ireland dreams of a dim past when she preserved Christian civilization for Europe, and Germany dreams of a dim future when she will perform the reverse function. Both

pursue somewhat doubtful economic policies of national self-sufficiency, but the totalitarian spirit cannot attract a people with such a wholesome suspicion of discipline, and a sense of humour which allows them to refer to their great national epic not as a *Resorgimento* or a *Kulturkrieg*, but just as "the Troubles".

The Irish sense of humour, it must be admitted, is somewhat out of favour in the new régime. Pat and Mike, who gave Ireland such a derogatory name abroad, have become Padraic and Micheál (pronounced Mee-hawl), and Dublin has become Baile Atha Cliath. We should all be extremely grateful that a culture and a literature so fine as that of the Irish Celts is being restored and revived, but it would be unfortunate if it were felt necessary to sacrifice the distinctive culture of Dublin in the process. Irish, as St. John Gogarty has pointed out, is nobody's mother tongue in Dublin, nor has it ever been in this Danish, Norman, and Anglo-Irish city, except for a month or two when the town was taken and the Danes driven out by Brian Boru. There are people who walk about the town with little pins in their lapels announcing that they have mastered the Gaelic speech, and that if anyone with a similar pin should come along he must chat in the "native" tongue. I never happened along when two of these pins met, but I suspect that the conversation would have been the native equivalent of "*Wie geht es Ihnen?*" and "*Vous avez la plume de ma tante*". Out round Dublin Bay it is possible to induce a mood in which one hears the harp of Tara and the voice of Kathleen na Houlihan, but inside the city one can find only the *Book of Kells* in a glass case at Trinity, and new Irish street signs announcing "Keep to the Left" and "Gentlemen" to the stray visitor from the Gaeltacht of Connaught. As it is now necessary to be a part-time Irish speaker to hold a civil service post, the capital has been flooded with inhabitants of the less anglicized regions. (Hence Jimmy O'Dea's famous remark that Dublin Castle is now stone outside and Cork inside.) These new rulers of the country have brought about a social revolution. Mr. Cosgrave set out to make Ireland as independent of Britain as possible; Mr. De Valera set out also to make it as democratic as possible. Eiré is very sober and earnest, and it has no patience with fuss, feathers, and sophistication. Its democracy does not emphasize individual freedom like that of England, but resembles more the continental liberal movements which emphasized equality and nationalism. It is a strongly Catholic democracy, empha-

sizing the common humanity of all in the sight of God, but looking askance at heresy of all kinds. Censorship rages as it does in Irish Boston. I looked in vain for the complete works of Joyce or O'Casey, or even of a good Gael like Sean O'Faolain, in the excellent book-shops of Nassau Street. Consequently the inheritors of the Dublin tradition, like Gogarty, find the new Ireland very stuffy, and many of them are running away.

Gogarty may no longer be a representative Dubliner, but he is what I imagined a Dubliner should be, remembering an old Irish song which began:

O you lads that are witty, from famed Dublin City,
And you that in pastime take any delight...

The tradition of Dublin wit seems to have its roots in the days of the Georges, and with the aid of a full moon and the partial black-out I found it easy to saunter down O'Connell (late Sackville) Street and reconstruct the great days when Dublin had a parliament and was the second city of the realm; for Dublin, more so than London or Edinburgh or Brighton, and almost as much as Bath, is still an architectural vestige of the Georgian Age. Farquhar, Steele, Swift, Berkeley, Goldsmith, Sheridan and Burke were born in Dublin or passed through Trinity College. Peg Woffington adorned the Dublin stage; Handel "world-premiered" the *Messiah* at the assembly room in Fishamble Street; Laurence Sterne at least managed to be born at Clonmel, which isn't far away, and Maria Edgeworth came to live in County Longford. Dublin lent most of the sparkle to a brilliant age, but only Swift stayed at home and fought for Ireland. These gentlemen did not call themselves Sean and Seumas, but Oliver and Jonathan. They were neither Catholics nor Druids, but Protestants. They are all part of the Anglo-Irish baggage which some elements in the new Ireland want to cast out. Yet their imprint remains, like the ruin on the hill behind Rathfarnham which was once the Hell-Fire Club, where the dandies of the age repaired to prepare themselves for a picturesque old age of gout and bankruptcy. And the wit of Goldsmith and Sheridan, with the testiness of Burke and Swift, has reappeared in the writing of later Dubliners like George Moore, Oscar Fingal O'Flaherty Wilde, and George Bernard Shaw (although, in places like the last act of *Geneva*, Shaw is more reminiscent of political controversy in Mooney's Bar).

It must, of course, be admitted that the literary movement which accompanied the Gaelic Revival of the late nineteenth

century marks the high point of Irish letters; but in spite of the fact that its headquarters were in Dublin, it seems to belong more to the Far-off Hills. The Abbey Theatre, which has survived much brawling, was by no means daunted when war appeared in Europe and the lights in Lower Abbey Street were turned out. In this dingy little barn, once used as a morgue, one still gets the most consistently good drama to be found anywhere in the English-speaking world—unless possibly at the Gate Theatre in Parnell Square. The first play I saw at the Abbey was O'Casey's *Shadow of a Gunman*, which I fortunately knew well, as the rest of the audience knew it much better, so that they anticipated every speech of Seumas Shields with a bellow. Then came the premiere of a new play by Paul Vincent Carroll, attended by enthusiastic representatives of the Irish democracy and about half a dozen lonely and self-conscious stuffed shirts. Even the Abbey has changed since the days when George Moore saw Yeats at one of his own plays in a cloak and flowing tie, and called him a poseur. It was good to see the citizens of Dublin heartily enjoying the Abbey, when one thinks of all the Little Theatre groups which have suffered in the cause of high art by moaning *Riders to the Sea*. They should see Jimmy O'Dea at the Gaiety give his version of a scene in a pub as presented by J. M. Synge at the Abbey: "Is it a long and a cold and a wet drink of Guinness you would be afther givin' a poor man, Mrs. O'Toole?" Yeats and Synge and Lady Gregory are dead, but the Abbey Theatre is not. O'Casey is living in Devonshire, but Lennox Robinson is still active, and new playwrights are always arriving. The first rapture of the Gaelic League has subsided, but today there are men like Sean O'Faolain and Francis Stuart and Liam O'Flaherty, the best novelist Ireland has yet produced. Stuart lives at Glendalough, O'Flaherty has retreated to the Glen of the Downs, and O'Faolain too lives in County Dublin where the air is more Celtic. They are heirs of the Gaelic Revival rather than of the Dublin tradition of Sheridan and Wilde. But life cannot seem the same to a citizen of the democratic Free State of Ireland as it did to a fortunate Protestant of eighteenth century Dublin, living like an old Georgia planter at the top of a pyramidal society.

Eiré is not the poverty-stricken land of famine days, but it is not a country of great wealth and large fortunes. Just now hard times are expected. There should be no worries about food—I might say after bitter experience that I don't think the Dubliner ever has cared enough about food to bother cooking

it—but for most other things the Irish will have to take what Britain can spare, for even the new factories need raw materials. Petrol is rationed, sugar threatened, and in many homes tea is no longer served oftener than six times a day. Many manufactured articles are disappearing from the stores, newly developed industries like automobile assembling are feeling desperate, the great Sweepstakes industry is on the point of collapse, and there is a horrible fear that the price of a Guinness may go up. Economic nationalism has been costly, and there are signs of realization that for good or evil this little bit of heaven fell from out the sky one day right smack off the British coast, and that if its inhabitants want to live they must trade freely with their neighbours. Ireland is uneasy for many reasons. Rumours which never get into print circulate alarmingly, rumours of mutiny at the Curragh, rumours of the arrest of the Lord Mayor—a lady whose chief political enterprise seems to have been the removal of all pictures of Queen Victoria and a fine pair of lions and unicorns from the Customs House—rumours of arms arriving and being handed over without a struggle to the I.R.A. One Saturday everybody began to talk specifically about next day's revolution, and the I.R.A. lent authentically to the rumours by plastering College Green with posters announcing a Republican rally after mass. Discretion and my friends who knew about "Troubles" suggested a week-end in the Wicklow Mountains, but I hung back, tempted by the prospect of seeing the neighbourhood looking like the third act of an O'Casey play. As is always the trouble with civil wars, one never knows where to find them. While I waited for the barricades to go up as usual in St. Stephen's Green, the new Irish Rebellion was fizzling out hilariously in O'Connell Street, where hundreds roared while the Civic Guards chased the ringleader up the statue of Daniel O'Connell with a hose.

The Irish had little hope at first of maintaining neutrality, although they are somewhat more sanguine now. Germany, they feel, will not hesitate to attack them if she can, in order to cut off a valuable source of Britain's food supply. Of the fact that they do not trust the Germans I had good opportunity to become aware when I returned to Liverpool in a boat which flew the Irish tricolour as an assertion of neutrality, but, unlike the neutral boats of other nations, was thoroughly blacked out. Unfortunately for our peace of mind there was a full moon, and the *Munster*, being a fine new ship, had sides of an almost phosphorescent whiteness. We managed to speed past anything

sinister which might have been lurking in the Irish Sea, but some time later the *Munster* hit a mine and she now lies at the bottom of Liverpool Bay, Eiré's only major shipping loss of the War. Whether the Eiré Irish can maintain neutrality or not, their desire for peace deserves somewhat more respect and understanding than it is often given. It is a desire based on the grim exigencies of a very difficult internal situation, for which a great deal of history is to blame, and it is a desire which is expressed without the pharisaism which characterizes the neutrality of certain other states. Furthermore, it should be remembered that both Mr. De Valera and the great majority of the Irish people have denounced the attempts of fanatics to unite Ireland with fireworks. One does not live in Dublin long before realizing that the people of that city share with the citizens of Madrid and Warsaw the knowledge of what modern warfare can be like when it gets into one's own streets.