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‘All Changed, Changed Utterly’: Easter 1916 and America

Historically, politically, and symbolically, the Easter Rising is Ireland’s answer to America’s Fourth of July. In both cases, independence from Great Britain took several years to achieve, required bloody warfare, and tested people’s allegiances. But the Rising and July 4th mark moments of no return, tipping points creating new realities, defining departures from the past.

The enduring line of W.B. Yeats—‘All changed, changed utterly’—would not be read by the general public for over four years (his poem, ‘Easter, 1916’, was published simultaneously in England and America in 1920). However, those words and his haunting refrain—‘A terrible beauty is born’—were actually written right after the Rising and the subsequent executions.

Yeats knew the significance of what had just happened, but neither Yeats nor many of his contemporaries would have realized then what we understand in retrospect: that the roots of the Rising grew to a large extent in American soil, with America’s reaction crucial to determining the consequences of the Rising. That’s why our subtitle is ‘Easter 1916 and America.’

To be even more precise, though, a sub-subtitle for this historical disquisition might be: ‘The Plotter, The Poet, and The President’, because our principal focus will be on three figures with Irish and American backgrounds who played distinct and significant roles in 1916 and what followed. From them, an observer, nearly a century later, can see the extent and diversity of the American connection.

The trinity for our scrutiny features: as plotter, John Devoy, an exile from Ireland, who became a naturalized American citizen in 1895 and combined a public career in journalism with clandestine activity to bring about an Irish republic; as poet, Joyce Kilmer, a popular American writer early in the 20th century, who composed both verse and prose celebrating the Rising—before achieving secular sainthood through his death, at age 31, fighting for a related cause; as president, Woodrow Wilson of northern Irish stock, who weighed every word and gesture on a geopolitical scales, as he faced his own re-election campaign in 1916 and America’s involvement in the Great War then being fought in Europe.

Before we consider Devoy, Kilmer, and Wilson, a story that was told on the floor of the House of Commons at Westminster in 1848 bears repeating and provides context. Henry Grattan, Jr., a member of Parliament from Co. Meath, recalled a conversation he conducted at an Irish seaport the year before, one of the worst during the Great Famine, with a man preparing to emigrate to the U.S. Grattan said: ‘I advised him to remain at home. ‘No, Sir’, said he, ‘I will go to the
land of liberty.’ ‘But consider your sons’, was my reply. ‘Oh! They will come back’, was the response, ‘and when they do come back it will be with rifles on their shoulders.”¹

John Devoy was born in Co. Kildare a few years prior to this exchange—and he began working for an independent Ireland before reaching the age of twenty. Exiled to America in 1871, Devoy and Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa were part of the ‘Cuba Five’, Irish rebels who came to America on a ship called the Cuba and received a welcome for heroes in both New York City and Washington, D.C. including time with President U.S. Grant.²

Though living and working on the U.S. side of the Atlantic, Devoy’s American dream was for a free Ireland, and he was largely responsible for putting the aforementioned rifles on the shoulders and in the hands of the rebels who fought during the Easter Rising. It is estimated that Clan na Gael, which Devoy led, contributed $100,000 for weaponry and other costs associated with the Rising. That amounts to nearly $2.5 million in today’s money. As Kevin Kenny argues in The American Irish, ‘It was largely through Devoy’s fund-raising and organizational efforts in the United States that the Easter rebellion of 1916 became possible’.³

P.H. Pearse, the leader of the Rising as President of the Provisional Republic and commander-in-chief, called Devoy ‘the greatest of the Fenians.’⁴ Historian Roy Foster characterizes Devoy as ‘the Lenin of the movement’ for a free Ireland.⁵ The Times of London, in its 1928 obituary about Devoy, judged him ‘the most bitter and persistent, as well as the most dangerous, enemy of this country which Ireland has produced since Wolfe Tone.’⁶ (Tone, of course, was the leader of the United Irish movement at the end of the 18th century.)

Devoy’s memoirs, Recollections of an Irish Rebel, conclude with his detailed account of 1916. Though he lived twelve more years and his Recollections didn’t appear until a year after his death, the Rising proved to be the peak experience of his 86-year life. Devoy might have resided in America for nearly six decades, but his heart and soul never followed him across the Atlantic—and he always harbored hope that his homeland would be free.

Besides helping to bankroll the Rising and despite his exile in New York, Devoy was a central figure in planning the insurrection. Coded messages arrived and were dispatched via various means, and he even worked surreptitiously with the German government—at war with Great Britain since 1914—in seeking support.

An abiding principle of the republican movement was: ‘England’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity’. Irish rebels—such as Devoy—saw England’s preoccupation with the war in Europe as the opportune time to mount a revolt. For our purposes, I propose a corollary to ‘England’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity.’ You might say: ‘America’s neutrality became Ireland’s opportunity’.

Woodrow Wilson’s re-election slogan in 1916 was ‘He kept us out of war’. In the spring of that year and throughout the fall campaign season, Wilson and his administration sought to maintain the perception of neutrality while proposing initiatives for peace. It’s important to remember that at the time U.S. opinion was sharply divided. Some Americans supported the British and their allies; others
favored the German side, including many Irish Americans, and a sizable percentage was, indeed, neutral.

Devoy exploited this situation and provided the money for Roger Casement to travel from the U.S. to Germany, so Casement could try to persuade the Germans to become more involved in helping the cause of Irish independence. A complicated figure in the extreme, Casement was born near Dublin, became a British foreign service officer, and was subsequently knighted for his humanitarian work. In 1913, then in his late forties, he retired from his governmental duties and became a fervent Irish nationalist. Just before the Rising, he was captured in Ireland, as he returned from his mission to Germany. Then, on August 3, 1916, he was hanged in London for treason, producing seismic reverberations in Washington and across the United States, where he was well known.

Besides Casement, five of the seven signatories of the Proclamation spent time in America—a striking fact in itself—and John Devoy knew four of them well. Tom Clarke, himself a naturalized U.S. citizen and the first person to sign the Proclamation, spent five years helping Devoy with Clan na Gael business and publishing *The Gaelic American*, a weekly newspaper Devoy founded in 1903.

In addition, Pearse came to the U.S. for three months in 1914 to raise funds for his school in Dublin, and Devoy energetically promoted that tour. One of Pearse’s biographers points to that trip as the time the future Provisional President found his voice: ‘He had learned to communicate powerfully with mass audiences, and he had discovered a natural aptitude for extreme rhetoric.’

The ‘land of liberty’ provided that influence, and Devoy encouraged such talk. In September of 1915—eight months before the Rising—Joseph Mary Plunkett, another signatory, arrived in New York to meet with Devoy and personally inform him about the plans for the spring uprising.

Devoy’s involvement was both central and critical, with *The Gaelic American* and its circulation of 28,000 an unwavering advocate for the rebel cause. The Proclamation, declaring ‘The Provisional Government of the Irish Republic’, that Pearse read on the steps of the General Post Office (the GPO) in Dublin on April 24, 1916 includes the phrase ‘supported by her exiled children in America’. Devoy, above all, was responsible for those words in the Proclamation.

To study John Devoy’s life is to learn about single-mindedness in its most rarefied and tenacious form. Friendship after friendship—even with O’Donovan Rossa and Eamon de Valera—ended bitterly, if Devoy held a contrary viewpoint on a subject.

He died in New York—but, fittingly, Devoy is buried in Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin. Under his name, there is one word ‘Fenian’. On another side of the headstone is the word ‘Rebel’. On the other is ‘Patriot’. That ‘greatest of … Fenians’ was a singular man—relentlessly driven by the dream of Irish freedom.

Our second figure is quite different from the first in terms of background and experience. Joyce Kilmer claimed he was ‘half Irish’, but his literary executor and friend, Robert Cortes Holliday, cautioned that Kilmer’s genetic make-up ‘was not exactly eloquent of this fact.’ Precision as to percentage notwithstanding, Holliday went on to observe that the poet and writer was ‘a much more ardent
Irishman than many an Irishman born—that is, in the sense of keenly savouring those things which are fine in the Irish character, and with characteristic gusto feeling within himself an affinity with them.  

This self-identity became defining to Kilmer, a convert to Catholicism in 1913, the same year his most popular poem, ‘Trees’, first appeared in Poetry: A Magazine of Verse—an influential literary journal, with contributions at that time from W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams. When the Easter Rising occurred, he was a staff writer for the Sunday Magazine of The New York Times to earn a living and a well-known poet and essayist in the republic of American letters. Of pertinence to us, in responding to the Rising, Kilmer wrote both journalism and poetry. What had just happened in Ireland held considerable meaning for him.  

On May 7, 1916—in the midst of the executions of the rebels in Dublin, including all seven of the Proclamation signatories—Kilmer published a Sunday Magazine article with this headline: ‘Poets March in the Van of Irish Revolt.’ He stresses the involvement of writers in the Rising, noting at one point: ‘The leaders of the revolutionary forces were almost without exception men of literary tastes and training, who went into battle, as one of the dispatches phrased it, ‘with a revolver in one hand and a copy of Sophocles in the other’.  

Kilmer’s article is distinctive in angle and approach, but just one story among scores that appeared in American newspapers and magazines focusing on the Rising. His own paper, The New York Times, devoted front-page attention to the events in Ireland for fourteen straight days—from April 25 through May 8. On April 29—the day Pearse surrendered—The Times had eight articles on page one and eight more on page two—as well as an editorial and commentary column inside. By May 4, the word ‘martyrs’ was appearing in the coverage—a sign in the shift of public opinion.  

Kilmer contributed to the volume of dispatches, and his sympathies aren’t difficult to detect. All of this journalism had impact in America—and also in Ireland. On June 1, 1916, a Press Censor’s office was established in Dublin, and four days later the new Censor issued a formal directive, warning newspapers about the re-publication of specific items. The third one (of six) is relevant to this discussion: ‘Extracts from American newspapers or private letters sent you from individuals received from America.’  

As it turned out—and probably without his knowledge—Kilmer landed in the middle of a Censor’s Office hornet’s nest a few months later. His extended interview with a Rising survivor—‘Irish Girl Rebel Tells of Dublin Fighting’—appeared in The Times Sunday Magazine on August 20. On September 16, the Roscommon Herald in Ireland re-published the feature in full. Buried on page five under a one-column headline, ‘Tales of the Rebellion’, there’s a censor-soothing line at the beginning: ‘The New York Times, a strong pro-Ally paper, prints the following: —’  

Alas, the Censor did notice and fired off a warning that Kilmer’s article, which carries no by-line, ‘is in contravention of the Defence of the Realm regulations’ and that the Roscommon Herald is ‘liable to suppression under the Defence of the Realm Act.’ Protected by the First Amendment and with the U.S.
not yet involved in the Great War, Kilmer's journalism about the Rising is representative of the comprehensive, tell-the-whole-story approach you find in the American press at that time—and an illustration why the Censor feared its circulation in Ireland.

As you might expect, Kilmer's poetry is more personal and direct in conveying his thoughts and emotions about contemporary affairs. ‘Easter Week’—dedicated to the 'memory of Joseph Mary Plunkett'—takes on Yeats in its opening lines, quoting the refrain from ‘September 1913’ and then turning on its author:

   Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,
   It’s with O'Leary in the grave.
   Then, Yeats, what gave that Easter dawn
   A hue so radiantly brave?

The poem’s nine stanzas praise ‘Romantic Ireland’, ‘Immortal patriots newly dead’, the ‘young’ Republic, and ‘Padraic Pearse’ by name. The last quatrain returns to the beginning and evokes religious imagery of an explicitly Catholic variety to clinch his meaning:

   Romantic Ireland is not old.
   For years untold her youth will shine.
   Her heart is fed on Heavenly bread,
   The blood of martyrs is her wine.

Another poem at this time, ‘Apology’, names the three poets who helped lead the Rising and figured so prominently in his Sunday Magazine feature—Plunkett, Pearse, and Thomas MacDonagh. Near the end, Kilmer asks a question before he provides an emphatic answer:

   Is Freedom only a Will-o'-the-wisp
   To cheat a poet's eye?
   Be it phantom or fact, it's a noble cause
   In which to sing and to die!

In his memoir about Kilmer, Holliday observes: 'It is not at all improbable that had he been an Irishman born and resident in Ireland he would have been among the martyrs of Easter Week.' The Rising, with its goal of long-delayed freedom as well as its own religious significance—insurrection at the Resurrection—had a profound effect on Kilmer.

In 1917, he published Dreams and Images: An Anthology of Catholic Poets. Among the 86 poets, you find Hillaire Belloc, Gerard Manley Hopkins, John Henry Newman, Katherine Tynan, and MacDonagh, Pearse, and Plunkett. In Kilmer’s judgment, poets didn’t just march ‘in the Van of [the] Irish Revolt’; they left behind verse worthy of consideration by future generations. Subsequent editions of the collection—bearing a new title, Joyce Kilmer’s Anthology of Catholic Poets and doubling the number of contributors—retained the selections by the three leaders of the Rising.

Two propulsive forces—a commitment to freedom and intense religious fervor—animate Kilmer at this time. He enlisted in the military immediately after the U.S. declared war on Germany in the spring of 1917. Though he spent a brief
time in the National Guard of New York, he requested a transfer—appropriately enough—to the 165th Infantry, an Irish-American regiment, previously known as the Fighting Sixty-Ninth. Shipped to the front lines in France, he had little opportunity to write—yet he did produce one memorable sketch about his experience and life with his comrades. Its title is ‘Holy Ireland.’ One of the five poems he composed between battles, ‘When the Sixty-Ninth Comes Back,’ includes these two lines:

God rest our valiant leaders dead, whom we cannot forget;
They’ll see the Fighting Irish are the Fighting Irish yet.¹³

The Sixty-Ninth did, indeed, come back—but without Joyce Kilmer. He was killed in action on July 30, 1918. Tributes for the fallen poet, journalist, and devout Catholic appeared on both sides of the Atlantic, with one of the most moving statements coming from the British Ministry of Information. It, however, makes no mention of Kilmer’s Irishness or any of his compositions about the Rising.

The third character in our academic drama, Woodrow Wilson, is the most well-known and, from my perspective, the most challenging of the figures we’re considering. In his memoirs, John Devoy wrote: ‘Woodrow Wilson is the meanest and most malignant man who ever filled the office of President of the United States.’¹⁴

Why such an intemperate judgment? The ‘Irish Rebel’ had definite reasons, both personal and professional. Prior to the Rising, Devoy was under surveillance by government agents for pro-German activities on behalf of Ireland, and on January 21, 1918, the Post Office banned The Gaelic American from the mail system at a critical time for Ireland and Irish America.

When Wilson wanted to curry favor in front of an Irish-American audience, a usually reliable constituency for his own Democratic Party, he spoke proudly about his ancestry. For instance, with an eye to running for president in 1912, he told a New Jersey dinner of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick—at the time he was the state’s governor: ‘All the Irish that is in me arises to greet you. My father’s parents were born in Ireland; born farther north, perhaps, than most of you would approve of. But there was no one with more Irish in him than my father.’¹⁵ (Wilson’s grandfather, on his father’s side, came from North Tyrone and his grandmother from Co. Down.)

In discussing Kilmer, I mentioned the extensive news coverage about the Rising in the American press. By contrast—and this is incredible in itself—the first detailed report from the U.S. Consul in Dublin concerning what happened in April and May of 1916 arrived in Washington at the State Department the following December, more than six months later.¹⁶

Wilson and the people around him were not oblivious to the events in Ireland; however, in the months preceding the November election there was strategic emphasis on neutrality, seeking peace, and subordinating the suggestion of international conflict that might involve the U.S. in any way—the ‘He kept us out of war’ theme. Summarizing the 1916 campaign, one of Wilson’s
biographers remarks: ‘… he avoided every possible controversy upon foreign affairs’.17

Specifically about Ireland, the public, concerned Wilson and the private, calculating Wilson create dissonance, even duplicity, when viewed from the vantage point of history. On the record, he’s one person; in reality, he’s another. When the Knights of St. Patrick from San Francisco asked Wilson to contact the British government about clemency for Irish prisoners arrested during and after the Rising, he responded: ‘I have done everything, so far as representations go, to provide for their humane and just treatment. … My natural sympathies are with men struggling for freedom …’.18

As pressure on the White House, especially from Congress, intensified to save Casement from execution, the president’s private secretary, Joseph P. Tumulty, himself an Irish-American Catholic, drafted this ‘form reply’ on July 3, 1916: “The President wishes to acknowledge receipt [of] your telegram in the case of Sir Roger Casement and requests me to say that he will seek the earliest opportunity to discuss this matter with the Secretary of State. Of course he will give the suggestion you make the consideration which its great importance merits.”19

But, on July 20, when an American attorney working on Casement’s appeal to commute the death sentence asked Tumulty for Wilson to intervene, the president fired back: ‘It would be inexcusable for me to touch this. It would involve serious international embarrassment.’20

The president’s ducking and dodging that you find in 1916 became a pattern, and the contortions are particularly apparent in his overall handling of what he called (in one exchange with Tumulty) ‘the so-called Irish question.’ Pressed by a Catholic bishop to push the British for Home Rule in Ireland, Wilson responded: ‘The difficulties and delicacy of the task are very great, and I cannot confidently forecast what I can do’.21 Reading his papers is an exercise in deliberate conflict avoidance. A refrain emerges: Not now. Not appropriate. Not in our interests.

To Wilson’s credit, as America entered the Great War in April of 1917, he wrote Secretary of State Robert Lansing:

If the people of the United States could feel that there was an early prospect of the establishment for Ireland of substantial self-government a very great element of satisfaction and enthusiasm would be added to the cooperation now about to be organized between this country and Great Britain. Convey this information unofficially of course but as having no little significance. Successful action now would absolutely divorce our citizens of Irish birth and sympathy from the German sympathizers here with whom many of them have been inclined to make common cause.22

Wilson understood that delaying Home Rule in Ireland—passed in Westminster in 1914 but postponed because of the war—was costly both there and here, and he also, with sophisticated shrewdness, wanted to divide domestic ethnic alliances at a critical time.

In general, though, whatever occurred in Ireland was a secondary or tertiary concern for the president, then preoccupied with making the world safe
for democracy, winning the war ‘to end all wars’, and planning the League of Nations. Grand, global goals danced in his head rather than what he considered a domestic matter for internal resolution by Britain.

After the Armistice, the Irish Question became a recurring bedevilment for Wilson at the Versailles Peace Conference. As Margaret Macmillan reports in her book *Paris 1919*: ‘When a delegation of nationalist Irish asked him for support, he felt . . . like telling them to go to hell. His view was that the Irish lived in a democratic country and they could sort it out through democratic means.’

To be sure, geopolitical considerations played a part in Wilson’s reaction to the handling of Ireland. His mantra of small-country self-determination didn’t apply, because—in true Ulster fashion—he didn’t question the official title for the British Isles that existed then: ‘the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland’.

In addition—and this is worth stressing—he strongly opposed ‘hyphenism’, if it diluted or took precedence over a more inclusive ‘Americanism.’ Irish-American groups might gather for political rallies where he spoke and sought votes, but that didn’t mean he embraced their agenda for an independent Ireland. Indeed, in 1916, ‘anti-hyphenism’ was a plank in his re-election platform, continuing a viewpoint Wilson forcefully expressed at the unveiling of the statue honoring Commodore John Barry in 1914. At that occasion in Washington, the president said: ‘Some Americans need hyphens in their names, because only part of them has come over; but when the whole man has come over, heart and thought and all, the hyphen drops of its own weight out of his name. This man [Commodore Barry] was not an Irish-American; he was an Irishman who became an American.’

Finally, to engage for a moment in amateur psychoanalysis, Wilson wasn’t exactly inclined to go out too far on any limb for a place he didn’t much like. In the book *Woodrow Wilson: A Psychological Study*, Sigmund Freud and William C. Bullitt (a member of the American delegation at the Paris Peace Conference and a friend of the president) write: ‘Four times after ‘breakdowns’ he attempted to overcome his habitual symptoms by visits to the British Isles. His experience in Ireland [in 1899] was confined to a few days of contempt; but Scotland he loved, the English universities moved him to ecstasy and the English Lake District became the home of his heart.’

Elsewhere in the volume, the authors note Wilson’s admiration for the oratory in the House of Commons, and they argue ‘that the English system of government was much more to his liking than the American system’. It doesn’t take a credentialed successor to Dr. Freud to point out that the president’s personal preferences for British life could have been factors contributing to his policy views.

Moreover, Freud and Bullitt discuss the importance of religion in Wilson’s life. As a boy, he revered his father, Joseph Ruggles Wilson, a Presbyterian minister, and they observe: ‘So completely did the child take into his heart the teachings of his father that for the remainder of his life he never doubted the exact and literal truth of Presbyterianism.’ Irish nationalism, of course, was overwhelmingly Catholic—as was Irish America. Although Wilson cleverly bobbed and weaved to win a majority of Irish Catholics in 1916, the Presbyterian
in the White House lost support among the American Irish during his second term, particularly for failing to raise Irish self-determination at the Paris conference. As a result, Irish Americans abandoned the Democrats in droves for the 1920 elections.

Looking back with the clarity of hindsight almost a century affords, one sees what was happening within Irish America at this time to be in stark contrast to the standoffish actions of Wilson and his administration. Here you might even make an explicit distinction between Americans and America. After the Rising, Irish-American groups and others committed themselves to answering the Irish Question as they saw fit and in numerous ways.

For instance, the Irish Relief Fund, created in response to the Rising, quickly raised between $100,000 and $150,000. In 1919, the Friends of Irish Freedom raised $1 million for the Irish Victory Fund to help finance the American Commission on Irish Independence. In addition, in 1919, at the same time Wilson was touring America seeking support for the League of Nations, Eamon de Valera—president of Dáil Éireann—was engaged in his own speaking campaign throughout this country to collect funds and to increase U.S. backing for an Irish Republic. The American-born de Valera even spoke at the University of Notre Dame in October of 1919 during his 18-month tour that raised over $5.7 million.28

During the War for Independence, the American Committee for Relief in Ireland collected over $5 million in humanitarian aid, principally for the Irish White Cross, and, at almost the same time, the American Commission on Conditions in Ireland started taking testimony for a thousand-page report, which had considerable resonance when it was published.29

All of this work and activity occurred outside the formal channels and conduct of American foreign policy. U.S. citizens, particularly concerned Irish Americans, took it upon themselves to provide help and to learn what was happening in a place they tended to view both realistically and romantically. A cultural footnote: One of the most popular American songs in 1916 happened to be ‘Ireland Must Be Heaven, for My Mother Came from There’, which was recorded for the first time two months after the Rising.

Although Wilson was reluctant or averse to embrace the Irish cause, a subsequent president, more sensitive to his heritage and to the tides of history, thought and felt differently. On the same day in June of 1963 when John Kennedy became the first head of state from another country to participate in a memorial ceremony at Arbour Hill in Dublin (where the leaders of the Rising are buried) he addressed the Dáil, the Irish Republic’s parliament. One sentence from his speech stands out: ‘No people ever believed more deeply in the cause of Irish freedom than the people of the United States.’30

A skeptical soul, attentive to the Blarney quotient of political communication, might dismiss that statement as the sentiment of an Irish American intent on pandering to the natives. The record, though, shows otherwise. The people of the United States came to believe in the cause of Irish freedom, and they did whatever they could to make independence a reality. The most vigorous push in that direction came with the Rising and its aftermath—
what Americans on their own accomplished as opposed to what America, under
the leadership of Woodrow Wilson, pursued governmentally.

‘All changed, changed utterly’, as Yeats wrote, but the story of that historic
change cannot be told in its entirety without considering the role Americans—a
John Devoy or a Joyce Kilmer—played. The first shots of that Easter Monday
echoed across the Atlantic—and summoned the ‘exiled children’ and likeminded
lovers of liberty to action that ultimately led to an independent Ireland.

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