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Mary Pierson

Dissonant, dissident and detached: Irish voices in 1914-18.

While remembrance of events uncovers truths, it also skews vision, and buries realities. Its intrinsic selectivity would seem to be predictable. In the cause of rendering a digestible account that would serve political exigencies of the present, and salve human wounds from the past, discrimination and choice appear inevitable. The resultant confusions and over-simplifications will linger and then fade until subsequent commemoration and historical scrutiny engender an analogous replay, with some variations on the themes dear to one side or many. Absent from the headlines in the current wave of commemorations are some of the views of Irish writers in the years 1914-18 and they make for interesting and often surprising reading. Adding in the opinions of those men and women of letters should expand comprehension of the era and contribute towards thwarting naïve summary of time, place and author alike - a result that should be the optimal aim of historical recovery if any lesson is ever to be learned from massacre and cataclysm.

War had hardly begun when Francis Sheehy Skeffington (1878-1916) reminded readers of *The Irish Citizen*¹ that it was “forty-four years since the last great European war, and sixty since the last European war in which Great Britain was involved” and he identified the Boer War as a “mere flicker of a match compared to this conflagration”. He laments that the “delicate network of civilisation, of human brotherhood and international amity [. . .] has been swept aside at one blow at the command of the unreasoning blood-lust and thirst for domination”. He sees “War and anti-feminism are branches of the same tree - disregard of true life-values.” His question is: “Is it fair that women who have to fight the battle should have no word in deciding for what cause and at what time the battle should be waged?” He was of the opinion too that since war had come, “revolution, at least in the countries which suffer most heavily, cannot be long delayed”. A few weeks later, Sheehy Skeffington continued his arguments, attacking the “systematic upholders of war as a beneficent factor in human affairs” because they see it as reducing the surplus population and ensuring “the survival and dominance of the ‘fittest’ race”. Even at this relatively early point, Sheehy Skeffington was scathing concerning “a new cant preached by Mr H.G. Wells and others of his

¹ 8 August 1914, p. 92.

school- that this war will make an end of war.” He is definite that “War can breed nothing but a fresh crop of wars.”²

While the pacifist messages of *The Irish Citizen* did not furnish a uniform solution to war, a glimpse may be obtained of prevailing opinions and current conflicts through the statements and arguments of their various contributors. Barrister Marion Duggan adverts briefly and critically to certain political party persons in Ireland who, in promoting recruitment to the British army, spoke of “noble boys playing the great game of war” but she finds fault equally with what she calls the “Irish Press”, which in its anxiety to be anti-English, became pro-Kaiser, critical of Allied diplomacy, and utterly forgot to criticise war itself. Perceptively, she says that its defeat will leave Germany thirsting for revenge and thus ensure yet another later war.³ In two successive issues of *The Irish Citizen* in 1915,⁴ Margaret McCoubrey’s address to the Ulster Socialist Party in Belfast was reproduced in full and from it, it is obvious she is utterly convinced that “War Lords are not all in Germany”, that atrocities are perpetrated on all sides. Nearer to home and away from foreign battlefields, she is outraged that “Since the outbreak of war many of our magistrates have been so chivalrous [to men] that they have acquitted perpetrators of shameful assaults on little girls, on the grounds that the man had joined, or would join, the Army.” In reporting on her work in connection with the “vice trade” in O’Connell Street (one well supported by soldiers), Constance Markievicz remarked how easy it was during war to get women volunteers who “are dying to make munitions, wait on the wounded soldiers, drive motors etc.” and asked why some women would not volunteer instead to support the young women trapped in prostitution, to “help to cure the open sore”.⁵ Markievicz’s primary focus is on social deprivation but the reader is also reminded of the political divisions existing between both sides concerning the British war effort.

It was almost a year into hostilities when, in a 1915 letter to his American patron John Quinn, W.B. Yeats called the war “the most expensive outbreak of insolence and stupidity the world has ever seen, and I give it as little of my thought as I can.”⁶ This was not in the context of battle impact on political developments in Ireland but rather seemed to relate more to the inconvenience of Zeppelin raids in London where WBY then lived and from where he fled to the relative peace of Stone Cottage in Sussex. His more public contemporary stance was “I think it better that at times like these/We

² *Irish Citizen*, 15 September 1914, p. 133.

³ *Irish Citizen*, 12 December 1914, p. 235.

⁴ *Irish Citizen*, 27 February 1915, p. 317; 6 March 1915, p. 325.

⁵ *Irish Citizen*, 23 October 1915, p. 137.

⁶ In a letter to John Quinn on 24 June 1915. The letter is now in the New York Public Library.

poets keep our mouths shut”⁷ although, as is well-known, his judgments and pronouncements would evolve. Nonetheless and even in 1917, Augusta Gregory saw him, amongst all the people she knew, as the person least affected by the war.⁸ Lady Gregory’s own views would also mutate, from anti-Sinn Féin to being on their side in the Anglo Irish war, and her judgements were nuanced. From the outset of the conflict, she felt that war desensitised people to art and made them belligerent, and she refused to make flannel jackets for the wounded.⁹ In April 1916 (and prior to the Easter Rising), she was still expressing distaste for, and absenting herself from, the gatherings of society ladies and their charitable activities for those affected by war.¹⁰ However, eleven of her nephews joined up and, in autumn 1915, her son Robert wanted a commission in the army and she set about helping him despite her unhappiness: “I am not very light-hearted, for Robert is carrying out his desire of this time last year, and is going to the war.” To write such a letter to George Bernard Shaw might seem, at very least, ironic and perhaps counterproductive.¹¹

Shaw’s own opposition to the war had been made extremely clear in his 1914 pamphlet *Common Sense about the War* where the opening sentence did not presage even an equivocal jingoism: “The time has now come to pluck up courage and begin to talk and write soberly about the war.”¹² What followed would ensure Shaw’s ostracism in Britain:

I see both nations duped, but alas! not quite unwillingly duped, by their Junkers and Militarists into wreaking on one another the wrath they should have spent in destroying Junkerism and Militarism in their own country. And I see the Junkers and Militarists of England and Germany jumping at the chance they have longed for in vain for many years of smashing one another and establishing their own oligarchy as the dominant military power in the world. No doubt the heroic remedy for this tragic misunderstanding is that both armies should shoot their officers and go home to gather in their harvests in the villages and make a revolution in the towns; and though this is

⁷ For the versions and publications of this poem see R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life, II: The Arch-Poet 1915-1939*, (Oxford: OUP, 2003), p. 676, n.5 & n.6.

⁸ She expressed the opinion in letters to Wilfred Blunt. See Judith Hill *Lady Gregory: An Irish Life* (Cork: Collins Press, 2011), p. 438.

⁹ See Judith Hill, *Lady Gregory: An Irish Life* (Cork: Collins Press, 2011), pp. 406-407.

¹⁰ See R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life, II: The Arch-Poet 1915-1939* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), p. 40; 681, n.111.

¹¹ See Judith Hill *Lady Gregory: An Irish Life* (Cork: Collins Press, 2011), pp. 407-408; p. 418. Gregory’s unhappiness was expressed in a letter to George Bernard Shaw and Robert believed for a long time that it was Shaw who had engineered his commission (Hill, op.cit., p. 576, n.43.).

¹² *New York Times*, Current History, Vol 1, Issue 1. A Monthly magazine. The European War. From the Beginning to March, 1915. With Index. The New York Times Company, 1915. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13635/13635-h/13635-h.htm#page11>. (Accessed 24 October 2014).

not at present a practicable solution, it must be frankly mentioned, because it or something like it is always a possibility in a defeated conscript army if its commanders push it beyond human endurance when its eyes are opening to the fact that in murdering its neighbours it is biting off its nose to vex its face, besides riveting the intolerable yoke of Militarism and Junkerism more tightly than ever on its own neck. But there is no chance—or, as our Junkers would put it, no danger—of our soldiers yielding to such an ecstasy of common sense.¹³

With typical Shavian disregard for populist beliefs, he continued: “abusing the Kaiser or Keir Hardie or me will not hurt the Germans, whereas a clearer view of the political situation will certainly help us.” Fearlessly, one section of the pamphlet was headed “Six of One: Half-a-Dozen of The Other.” In paragraph after unrelenting paragraph, Shaw continued to challenge common belief and political propaganda: “War, after all, is simply a letting loose of organized murder, theft, and piracy on a foe.”¹⁴ The combination of anti-war sentiment with his socialist interpretation of society could fairly be considered a red rag to John Bull:

Will you now at last believe, O stupid British, German, and French patriots, what the Socialists have been telling you for so many years: that your Union Jacks and tricolours and Imperial Eagles (“where the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered”) are only toys to keep you amused, and that there are only two real flags in the world henceforth: the red flag of Democratic Socialism and the black flag of Capitalism, the flag of God and the flag of Mammon?¹⁵

Unsurprisingly, such overt challenges would prove neither popular nor profitable for the writer.

For his part, Æ (George Russell) wished sadly that the war was over: “Ireland is quivering like a disturbed jellyfish and cannot act from its own will and its own centre. I wonder will any thing short of a German invasion or an earthquake rouse our sleepy folk to think for themselves.”¹⁶ Writing to James Stephens, he says “there is nothing to talk about. If one man was killed we would talk about it. But when a million are killed we cannot think at all.”¹⁷ His poetry of that year castigated clergy for blessing departing troops, “the devil’s blessing from their hands”, and envisages no happy ending:

¹³ *Common Sense about the War*, pp. 13-14.

¹⁴ Shaw, p. 40.

¹⁵ Shaw, p. 46.

¹⁶ Letter to Charles Weekes, c.14 April 1915. Alan Denson (ed.), *Letters to Æ* (London: Abelard-Schumann, 1961), pp. 104-105.

¹⁷ Letter to James Stephens, c.24 May 1915. *Letters to Æ*, p. 106.

“Never for all the blood was shed/Shall life return to it as home.”¹⁸ James Joyce, forced by war to flee from Trieste to Zurich, seems to have said little about the fighting on all sides. Since he was without pay in Trieste from outbreak of war, and then without private students as conscription was enforced, it could be deduced that between the difficulties of earning money and of escaping with Nora and two small children, a hierarchy of human needs asserted themselves. Richard Ellman writes that Joyce “was supremely indifferent to the result and, so long as gunfire could not be heard, to the conflict itself.” Once safely in the quieter atmosphere of neutral Switzerland and absorbed in his ongoing struggle with composition of *Ulysses*, Joyce’s focus was tightly circumscribed. The letters and comments of George Moore also appear to indicate an overwhelming preoccupation with writing and the associated chores of dealing with publishers and secretaries. However, here and there a few memorable opinions are voiced and, in a letter in October 1914,¹⁹ he wrote what is possibly his longest and most explicit judgment on war:

Your letter about the war reached me the day before yesterday, and I am answering it at once, for it leaves me in no doubt whatever that you are much perturbed; and in the hopes of soothing your heated imagination I will remind you that there have always been storms in this world, that every winter the wind howls in the forest, boughs are torn down, the rain pours, pleasant lanes become marshes. In these times of stress the wise man does not rage at the thunder-bolt or curse the rain that drenches him. He creeps into a quiet cave and reads the newspapers amused that they all say the same thing. The same outrages are printed in English papers, Russian papers, German papers, Belgian and French papers: everyone is accused of using dum dum bullets and gouging [*sic*] out each others eyes and of raping women. [. . .] we believe what it pleases us to believe.

A month earlier, when Henry Tonks had sought to impress on him the dangers and problems of war, Tonks reported that Moore seemed much reassured by the knowledge that the Navy was commanded by Admiral Jellicoe, “a splendid name”.²⁰ Moore would continue to work on *The*

¹⁸ The poem “Apocalyptic” was the final poem in his collection *The Gods of War with other Poems* (Dublin: Sackville Press, 1915).

¹⁹ The letter of 27 October 1914 was to Emily Lorenz Meyer. Cf. Helmut E. Gerber (ed.), *George Moore on Parnassus* (Newark; London: University of Delaware Press; Associated University Presses, 1988), pp. 292-293. Moore had moved from Dublin to London early in 1911.

²⁰ Joseph Hone, *The Life of George Moore* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1936), p. 319.

Brook Kerith, *Lewis Seymour and Some Women*, *A Storyteller's Holiday* and *Muslin*, all of which were published in the war period.

Minimal alteration in attitude is apparent by July 1915 when, in a letter on literary matters, Moore told Ernest Boyd:

The war goes on as you know and everyone is much depressed. We read with some faint satisfaction that 10,000 Turks have been killed and when some 10,000 of our side have been killed the Germans read with some satisfaction, and we are all asking how long this folly will go on.²¹

By August 1916, it is surely in despondent mood that he writes: "Paris is over and done; there is no literature or art in Paris now."²² Despite his considerable literary output at the time, Moore opined to Boyd just a week or so later: "I'm afraid there will be very little book writing done now until the end of the war and God only knows when that will befall us. It seems to me now as if the war were going to go on for ever."²³ But still, Moore engaged daily in creative writing (starting on *Héloïse and Abélard*, planning *Avowals* and *Daphnis and Chloe*) and in voluminous business correspondence, some connected with potential law suits against him, for one of which (a charge of blasphemy in *The Brook Kerith*) he wrote a clever and detailed defence for his legal representatives. While Moore's view of war was hardly enthusiastic, that of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington in 1915 evinced a firmly pacifist approach. In a letter to Thomas Haslam, she urged him to:

[...] remember that every war is regarded by each country engaged in it as a sacred and holy war. It is always the other side that is the aggressor. We are always fighting for religion and freedom; the enemy (the ally of yesterday, the friend of tomorrow) is always the foul foe of civilisation and progress. Women must rid their minds of such cant by cultivating a necessary detachment which will regard war in itself as a crime and a horror unspeakable.²⁴

That view would have met with the approval of Æ. In his book *The National Being* (1916), he calls the war the "great tragedy of Europe" and blames countries not their leaders: "These men may have been agents, but their action would have been impossible if they did not realize that there is a vast

²¹ The letter was dated 23 July 1915. In Gerber, *George Moore on Parnassus*, p. 299. Boyd was author of *Irish Literary Renaissance* (1916).

²² Gerber, *George Moore on Parnassus*, p. 328.

²³ Gerber, *George Moore on Parnassus*, p. 330.

²⁴ The open letter was printed in *Irish Citizen* on 10 April 1915, and quoted in Rosemary Cullen Owens, *Louie Bennett* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001), p. 36.

body of national feeling behind them that is not opposed to war.”²⁵ Æ’s concern is with the future of mankind rather than with any one nationality as he claims the war is “wrecking our civilizations, is destroying the body of European nationalities”.²⁶ He continued to harbour some hope for the future, based on a blend of religion, cooperation, practical economics and belief in worldly cyclical progression, but the desire that ruins might become “some yet more lovely masterpiece” lacks strong conviction of its immediate possibility.²⁷

The rhetorical question “But who can judge him, you or I?” in “The Deserter” by Winifred Letts (1917) highlights the human cost of war and sows seeds of doubt concerning the truth and sincerity of condolences letters from company commanders: “His mother thinks he fought and fell/ A hero, foremost in the strife.” Letts, a hospital worker in Britain during the war, turned an equally sharp eye on Dublin which was her mother’s home and where she herself was educated. Poverty, tenements and slums predated the war period in Dublin but it is indisputable that internal and external strife exacerbated the appalling conditions. In Letts’s “Home”, also published in 1917, she delivers a realistic depiction of child labour and destitution in the city:

I gave her bread and bid her lead me home,
For kilt she was with standing in the cold,
An’ she, the creature, not turned eight years old.
She went before me on her small bare feet,
Clutching some papers not yet sold,
[. . .]
A hundred years of grime
Clung to the walls, and time
Had worked its will. Tenants the like o’these
The landlords don’t be planning how they’ll please.
A smell was in it made you hold your breath:

²⁵ George Russell, *The National Being, Some Thoughts on an Irish Polity* (Dublin: Maunsel, 1916), pp. 152-154.

²⁶ *The National Being*, p. 129.

²⁷ From his poem ‘Continuity’ in *The Gods of War with other poems* (Dublin: Sackville Press, 1915).

These dirty houses pay the tax to death

In babies' lives.²⁸

Letts's lines make visible the yawning chasm between slum existence and more privileged lifestyles, and they deliver the portrayal to an audience which, from a volume entitled *The Spires of Oxford and Other Poems*, surely expected poetic rhapsody rather than difficult social reportage.

Might it be posited that it was not so much a case of writing *the* war between 1914 and 1918 but rather inscribing several wars, each of which took precedence in the opinion of its writer? The relative scarcity of Irish fiction published in the period draws attention to what actually appeared in print. Religious texts gained significant attention in Irish newspapers, and in 1915 they ranged from hagiography of St Declan to Bishop Joseph MacRory's edition of *Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*. Even as a life of St Declan or any other Irish saint appealed to the religious sympathies of the Catholic constituency, it simultaneously established national difference from Ireland's larger ruling neighbour and it bolstered nationalist self-belief, whether on the Redmondite home rule side or that of more militaristic nationalists. In their own way, religious publications were weapons for the minds and hearts of a growing number, scriptures interpreted at will by readers.

There were other battles too, prominent amongst them the struggles to earn money to survive. Constrained to support a family, the prolific Katharine Tynan, author of over 100 works of fiction, several poetry collections, a few plays, some devotional publications, memoirs etc., brought out at least nine novels in the four war years, in addition to four books of poetry. Her "economic war" also encompassed a political one: having been an Irish nationalist in her youth, she became an outspoken supporter of the British war effort and such an attitude did not hinder sales of her fiction or poetry. Her two sons joined the army and her poetry was frequently cited to support soldiers and their families. *Flower of Youth* (1915) was widely distributed to bereaved mothers, used as a fund-raiser for the Red Cross, and it became favourite text for sermons in Britain:

Lest Heaven be thronged with greybeards hoary.

God who made boys for His delight

Stoops in a day of grief and glory

²⁸ Reproduced in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* v.IV (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), pp. 931-932. The poem may have been written in the couple of years prior to being published in 1917 in *The Spires of Oxford and Other Poems*.

And calls them in, in from the night.

When they come trooping from the war

Our skies have many a new young star

[. . .]

Dear boys! they shall be young forever.²⁹

While Tynan's poetry was perceived as supportive of British interests and potentially damaging to those of Ireland, the counter-weapons were to be found for example in Albert Perceval Graves's *Reciter's Treasury of Irish Verse and Prose* (1915) or in an t-Athair Padraig Breathnach's *Songs of the Gael* (first published in 1915) and *Ceol ár Sinsear* (1913). The latter two collections were re-issued several times, thus indicating not just their general social and musical popularity but also a conscious embrace of rallying songs of the Irish and of verses that recalled failed risings, the hardship of emigration and Cromwellian massacres. Their use and intention - if not quite the equivalent of the *haka* - signalled emotional arming and some seething, barely-contained bellicose intent.

In the period just before the Easter Rising of 1916, and in its immediate aftermath, writing an Irish war in verse was frequently more inflammatory than poetic as even the most unexpected people turned to doggerel and to fury. Alice Furlong, who some years previously had been involved in the scholarly work of translating *Macbeth* into Irish, now flung down the gauntlet to Britain in "To the Oppressor":

Put our Leaders in Jail! (There is room and to spare

Since your Army is over-seas!)

Do we women walk with dishevelled hair,

Head drooping, Heart ill at ease?

[. . .]

You have gold and guns. We have pride and hate,

With these we confront you still.

²⁹ Katharine Tynan, "Flower of Youth", in *Flower of Youth: Poems in War Time* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1915), p. 54.

By pride and hate, both early and late

We break the jaws that kill.³⁰

Maeve Cavanagh's "Straining at the Leash"³¹ conveys a feverish impatience in such phrases as: "We wait in vain for your command/In fierce pursuit we fain would be."; "*The day is fair* - why vacillate?"; "The robber prey is sorely pressed - /The Hounds of Justice on him gain."; "We pray you loose us - bid us go/Dost hear the thrilling 'Tally Ho'?" It is an interesting combination of cliché, biblical phraseology, and the rather archaic formulations associated with the traditional authority of poetry. The potency of that mixture for its audience in that period is heightened by the open admission of its writer's gender.

There is a whiff of fatalistic resignation in the reactions of Joyce, Yeats, Æ and Moore to ongoing conflict but Lady Gregory was, in the main, right about what war did to others: it made people more belligerent, more desperate. However, as some articulated the effects of their diverse wars in different ways, leading literary lights of Ireland detached and semi-detached themselves, both physically and artistically. The legacy of their war was not a listing of battles but they left a wealth of prose and poetry that could be said to justify their disengagement from battles near and far.

³⁰ Full text of the poem in Mary S. Pierson, (ed.), *Irish Feminisms, 1810-1930*, Vol. III (Oxford: Routledge, 2010), p. 357.

³¹ The verse was published on 22 January 1916 in *The Workers' Republic*, Vol.1, no. 35.