

1916: Dublin Youths' Sweet Revolution

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If the editors of the 4th edition of *Sociology of Ireland* (Share, Corcoran & Conway 2012) chose to illustrate their book with a colourful display of sweet treats, this was certainly no coincidence. According to Euromonitor, in 2015 Ireland ranked 3rd in the world in terms of chocolate consumption and 4th in terms of sugar consumption (Ferdman 2015). A survey conducted by Bord Bia (2014) goes some way to explaining why Irish people like to snack, especially on confectionery: they do so in part to get energy, by habit, for nourishment, but most do so out of pure indulgence. Birthday parties best exemplify this phenomenon, parents naturally want to spoil their children and friends for their special day and what better way to spoil a child than a luxurious display of colourful and tantalising sweets? Children are naturally attracted to sweet and colourful foods. Most parents could certainly testify that their little ones fell instantly in love with their strawberries and grapes, but took years to accept lettuce and cabbage. Capaldi (1993, p. 157) tells us that 'The flavour of food, that is, its taste, smell and texture, provides animals with important information as to whether a particular food item should be consumed or avoided'. In this regard, sweetness is usually considered an indication of edibility. As food anthropologist Sydney Mintz (1985, p. 16) explains in *Sweetness and Power*: '[A]ll (or at least nearly all) mammals like sweetness. That milk, including human milk, is sweet is hardly irrelevant'. For the first months of their lives, infants live exclusively on milk and thus on sweetness, thereby acquiring a clear preference for sweetness and forging a connection between sweetness and 'edibility to the testing organism' (Mintz 1985, p. 15) that will remain with them throughout their lives. Mintz rightfully points out that 'eating and nurturance are closely linked in infancy and childhood, no matter how their connection may be altered later. [...] Ingestion and tastes hence carry an enormous affective load.' This remark is all the more relevant for children suffering from undernourishment, like for the children of the slums of Dublin in 1916 who are at the centre of our attention in this paper, for whom a sweet treat was a very rare occurrence. While today sugar is often seen as a threat to our children's health (diabetes, obesity, tooth decay), a century ago, it was of pivotal importance to the survival of these children. The shop looting that happened during the Easter Insurrection of 1916 give an interesting insight into the children's priorities at the time. Anecdotal though the accounts of the looting may be, they shed some light on both the children's perception of the event and the beginning of a new era of sweet food consumption. Whilst adults were busy fighting for a free Ireland, a bunch of children were having their own revolution, a taste buds revolution.

In 1916, poverty was rampant in Dublin. It has been estimated that around 26,000 families (Ferriter 2015, p. 144), approximately a third of the population of Dublin, lived in houses that were deemed unfit for human habitation (Wright 1914, p. 30). The tenements swarmed with children who were sent outside to play and hang around their own urban jungle, not simply for lack of space at home, but also because it was somehow safer to be on the streets than to stay inside with intoxicated adults (Cooke 1914). Infant mortality was extremely high and more than sixty per cent of children in the most deprived areas would die before the age of 10 (Prunty 1999, p. 46). For these Dublin's youngsters, hunger was the norm. John Cooke, an officer with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, was an eyewitness to the terrible conditions in which these children were living at the time. According to him: 'even were [a mother] inclined to cook, little could be done with the fireplace, while the shelf, if not entirely bare, has seldom anything better than the materials for poor tea.' (Cooke, 1914).

His statement echoes the title that Paddy Crosbie chose for his biography: *Your Dinner's Poured Out!* Crosbie (2012, p. 24) who was born in 1913 in Smithfield recalls in the opening chapter that 'bread and tea was the menu for all meals.' Because of the war, the retail price of food had rocketed and food shortages meant that grocers were not resupplied daily. Some people would keep a few hens and rear and fatten pigs in their back-yards (2012, pp. 43-44), but meat was only an occasional luxury for children. As Crosbie (2012, p. 63) explains: 'The sound of something frying on the pan belonged to Sunday also. After the war years and the Treaty when life was beginning to be a little rosier, a rasher and a sausage was a great treat.' After the Provision of Meals Act was passed in 1914, following investigations on Dublin housing conditions, free meals were distributed to the most deprived children in schools all around Dublin. The Report stipulated that:

The meals which the Committee propose to provide are breakfast (when necessary) and dinner. It is intended that breakfast should consist of cocoa, with bread and jam; and that, the dinner should consist of meat stew, and (on Fridays) fish stew. The meat and fish used should be cheap in price, but in quality sound, fresh, nutritive, and readily available. The vegetables used would be chiefly potatoes, savoured in fitting proportion with onions, carrots, parsnips, etc.' (Report of the School Meals Committee, 1914).

Referring to the labouring class of England at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, Mintz (1985, p. 130) suggests that 'wives and children were systematically undernourished because of a culturally conventionalized stress upon adequate food for the 'breadwinner'. This theory might explain why amongst the poorest, women and children had a stronger liking for sugar at the time. Deprived of the calories the men would get from potatoes and meat, women and children would usually drink more tea with added sugar to boost their energy. Sugar had the ability to satisfy hunger in place of more nutritious foods (1985, 134). And at the time it was also still considered as a medicine. It retained a symbolical and quasi-magical aura, especially because it had been for so long the preserve of the well-off. As Mintz (1985, p. 148) summarizes: 'A rarity in 1650, a luxury in 1750, sugar had been transformed into a virtual necessity by 1850'.

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, thanks to the advance of sugar beet production, sugar had become a basic consumption good largely accessible to even the poorest. With tea, in biscuits, cakes, porridge, sweets, or fruit preserves, sugar was an essential component of the diet of the children living in Dublin in 1916. Crosbie tells us that it was even sometimes spread on a slice of bread on its own, and if a boy, coming out of his house, was caught eating this delicacy, the others would chant: 'Sugar babby, Sugar babby, one, two, three!' (2012, p. 52). Usually, the children of the slums ate the plainest form of sugar, jam and cocoa which were mainly distributed in schools and quality sweets remained out of reach for most of them. However, this period coincided with the advent of print advertising in Ireland and though they had probably never tasted sweets, Dublin's youths were certainly aware of them. As Corless (2011, p. 14) explains:

The main streets [of Dublin] were dotted with beguiling sweetshops, each with elaborate window displays showcasing the latest chocolates, toffees, sugared fruits and other mouth-watering lines from Britain and the continent. With advertising in its infancy, this dazzling window displays were an entertainment in themselves, lighting up the dab streets, and there were regular competitions to name the best in the capital.

These children must have been confronted daily not merely by tantalizing window displays, but also by posters on the street and on trams representing happy, chubby children rejoicing in the consumption of sweet foods. We can imagine the impression these posters must have made on famished children and their mothers. Such symbolic and powerful representations of healthy children wearing fashionable clothes gave a real sense of idealized happiness. Hence, the print ads created a new desire for sweet products, a desire which was reinforced by the idea that sugar had an essential role to play in becoming strong and staying in good health.

In addition to its calorific properties, another reason why sugar was so coveted at the time is the fact that Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Antrim had recently become home to biscuit and confectionery factories employing mainly women and teenagers from the age of 14. These employees were working all day long on production lines to make the delicacies which would be sold in grocers' all around Ireland and abroad. The Census of 1911 reveals that the biscuit factory workers were mainly Catholic women in their twenties or thirties. As an occupation, most women and teenagers indicated 'Biscuit Packer', 'Biscuit Operative' or 'Biscuit Maker' and older men sometimes wrote 'biscuit machinist', or 'biscuit baker'. Other indicated 'Biscuit Manufacturer', they were the members of the Jacob, Purdy, Mains and Bewley families (*Census 1911*). According to an *Irish Times* article of 1913, the Jacob factory itself employed around 2,000 women and girls working fifty hours a week (*Irish Times* Nov.1913, p. XII). Yet, this article looks rather suspicious and might have been written to give a brighter image of the working conditions in factories at the time. Written just after the Dublin Lock-Out and workers' strikes, it was subjectively entitled by its anonymous author, probably commissioned himself by the Jacobs: 'Jacob & Co.'s Biscuit Factory: a hive of work and happiness, an ideal factory in Dublin, biscuits and benefits, free doctor, dentist, games and swimming bath described by a visitor' (*Irish Times* Nov.1913). An account of the strikes in 1913 portrays a quite different situation in the Savoy Confectionery factory where between 60 and 70 people used to work at the time:

A strike occurred in April. It was caused by a girl refusing to cover sachets which were smaller than those previously given to her. They were cheaper goods, and she could do more work in an hour than with ordinary chocolate. She was paid by piece work. [...] A short time afterwards there was another strike because they were paid a weekly wage instead of by piece-work. Allegations were made that the factory was not fit for human habitation. (*Irish Times* Oct.1913, p. 8)

The booming confectionery businesses at the time encompassed different kinds of professions: shop keepers, commercial travelers, sugar boilers, chocolate moulders. Other workers were employed packing and wrapping sweets and chocolate in factories such as Black and Sons in Portrush (chocolates), Musgrave Brothers in Cork (sweets), Cleeve Brothers in Limerick (Condensed Milk and Toffees) and in Dublin Savoy Confectioner's Company (Cocoa), Williams and Woods (confectionery), Gordon Stewart and Co or Maxwell Lemon and Co (sweets). The confectionery trade was a relatively recent development that had kicked off around the end of the nineteenth century. As far as chocolate is concerned, the industrial revolution had changed chocolate from a costly drink only available to wealthy families to a cheap food available to

the masses (Coe & Coe 2003, p. 235). Cocoa, a powdered chocolate with a very low fat content, had only been patented by Dutch chemist Coenraad Johannes Van Houten in 1828. Its large-scale industrialization enabled the production of cheap chocolate in both powdered and solid form (Coe & Coe 2003, p. 241). In 1847, following Van Houten's discovery, the British chocolate maker Joseph Fry had an idea that revolutionized the chocolate trade. He decided to mix cocoa powder and sugar with melted cocoa butter and obtained as a consequence a chocolate paste that was mouldable. In 1868 John Cadbury produced his first chocolate box decorated with a painting of his daughter cuddling a kitten. In 1879, Swiss Rudolph Lindt invented the 'fondant' and twenty years later Jean Tobler created what was to become to world famous Toblerone bars. At the same period, between 1850 and 1914, London was one of the major trading centres of the sugar world (Fine, Heasman and Wright 1996, p. 95). The parliamentary debates of the time show that sugar beet cultivation was strongly encouraged and sugar was the first foodstuff to receive direct government intervention through a Sugar Commission appointed with power to purchase, sell and regulate sugar supplies on behalf of government (*Hansard archives*). 'The first World war therefore marks the 'take-off' of British sugar refining' (Fine, Heasman and Wright 1996, p. 96). And we can only imagine all the possibilities that opened up for confectioners. However, the war also meant that huge quantities of sugar were reserved for the troops in action. Peter Dewey (1989, p. 31) remarks that: 'Imports of sugar had fallen substantially from their pre-war level [...]. In 1909-1913 the average import of refined and unrefined sugar (cane and beet) had been on average 36.3 million hundred weight; in 1915 it had fallen to 29.9 million. [...] The shortage of sugar was of particular importance in view of its prewar contribution to the national supply of energy.'

Having this context in mind, it is easier to understand the reasons behind some of the lootings that happened on Easter Monday 1916 in Dublin. Take famished children, women and teenagers some of them exploited in confectionery and biscuit factories, put them in front of new tantalizing sweet products lavishly displayed on shop windows, just after an extremely strict period of fasting of roughly 40 days, and we have a clearer ideas of their motivation. Observance of Lent was still extremely severe at the time and food represented a powerful lure as a consequence. Only a year later reforms would allow people to eat eggs and milk every day during Lent. But in 1916, just before the Rising, we have to bear in mind that people between 14 and 60 years of age had been abstaining from meat, eggs, sugar and dairy products for 6 weeks. And even in the poorest areas, the laws of fasting and abstinence were strictly adhered to. However, if in the countryside people would not use sugar during Lent (NFC UCD Vol.1371, p. 240), it is unlikely that city dwellers could do without it.

Bread and sugar were their staple food, at certain times, they had nothing else.

The Insurrection broke out the morning of Easter Monday. Around three o'clock, rebels from the GPO who needed material for their barricades, broke into a bicycle shop. Later they would need bandages, food and mattresses for the siege (Duffy 2015, pp. xii-xiii). Without probably realizing it, they gave other civilians ideas. Soon after them, hordes of Dubliners, mainly women and children, raided the shops on and around Sackville Street (now O'Connell Street). Sweet shops – by far the favourite – toy shops, haberdashers, shoe shops, grocers, no shops resisted the frenzied attacks of a mob driven by sapping hunger, survival, but also a desire for fun and mischief. During the whole week of the Rising, the panic and confusion which reigned in the streets created a perfect opportunity for ransacking and robbing shops, and in spite of their efforts to make the looters see reason, the priests and the police could not quite control the situation. There was a joyful carnivalesque atmosphere around Sackville Street which would extend to all parts of the city along the week. It must have felt like an unforgettable moment of popular jubilation for youngsters in quest of an adventure and a bit of fun. Children were igniting fireworks stolen in toyshops under boisterous cheers. *The Irish Times* described the scene at the time: 'Rockets rushed up in the air and burst with a sound like a cannon, and all the smaller sorts of fireworks were thrown whizzing about amongst the crowd' (Irish Times 28 April 1916, p. 3) Women were putting on airs while parading with grand feathered hats. Footballs were kicked out from Elverys. An eyewitness told at the time that:

A little girl of twelve or so is tottering under the weight of a huge circular office chair. A passer-by knocks against it and is rewarded with a string of the most appalling blasphemy. A fresh-faced youth is crossing the street with an armful of boots. He is brandishing a pair of white satin shoes and shouting hysterically, 'God save Ireland' (cited in Duffy 2015, p. 68).

Another passer-by described for the *Irish Times* what he saw on the Thursday and Friday:

Thursday: The gutted condition of Knowles' shop (fruit and vegetables) explains the crowd of women and girls from Longford Street and Mercer Street and adjacent lanes, carrying home orange boxes with fruit, potatoes, bananas, apples, etc. Boys in the raided (Knowles') shop "lifting" all they can, in spite of the bullets going past, and even occasional rushes across the street with the plunder.[...] The French sweet shop next to the raided Noblett's has also been looted.

Friday: 2.30pm to Rathmines. Crowds standing about – business as usual at a standstill, but some provision shops with half open doors. *No bread, no potatoes, no butter, etc.* People carrying home what provisions they can get.[...] At Williams and Co.'s tea shop a horde of women, young fellows, and children have broken in and are looting the shop. The clamour of voices is deafening, but agreeable in note, and good-humoured (Irish Times 2 May 1916).

So it seems that along with toys, tobacco, hats and boots, foodstuffs were by far the most frequent stolen goods. Starvation was often the real motive behind all the stealing. A month later, an article dealing with charges over allegation of looting mentions for instance: 'Patrick Cregan, 7 Peterson's Lane, was sent to prison for two months, and his wife was fined 20s., for having illegally in their possession four chests of tea, two sacks of potatoes, five sacks of flour and other foods, value £18 13s. 4d' (Irish Times 18 May 1916 p. 3).

During his research on the children killed during the Easter Rising, broadcaster Joe Duffy found out that Noblett's and Lemons' sweet shops were among the first shops which were looted. (2015, p. xiii). Sugar was clearly their first target: high-class sweets, toffees, Turkish delights, marzipans, crystallised fruits, fruit pastes and unsold Easter chocolate eggs must have constituted the invaluable plunder of the young looters. As Damian Corless claims in his history of sweets in Ireland *You'll Ruin Your Dinner*, these quality sweets 'were far more glamorous and expensive than they are today' (Corless 2011, p. 14). One of the reasons probably lies within the fact that the very popular chocolate bars and most of the well-known sweet brands would only appear in the 1930s. In 1916, children from the slums rarely ever had the opportunity to taste such delicacies. For most of them sweets belonged to the imaginary world of tall tales and fairy stories. Some of them would have read or been told tales about neglected and hungry children stealing food, poaching or scavenging. They would even know about a utopian 'land of plenty' often depicted in folklore as Crosbie's little coarse rhyme, reminiscent of the medieval myth of Cockayne indicates:

Once upon a time, and a very good time,
And a very good time it was,
When dogs shit lime and a very good lime,
Yes, a very good lime it was;
And the houses were all thatched with pancakes,
And the streets paved with tu'penny loaves,
And little pigs ran round in the streets,
With knives and forks stuck in their arse,
Cryin' out: "Who'll ate me?" (Crosbie 2012, p. 58)

Indulging effortlessly in sweet foods that was usually denied to them for economic and societal reasons was at this precise moment possible. The glittering window displays

which were about to be smashed gave a real sense of magic, sophistication and extravagance to these starving children and women. They must have felt like Hansel and Gretel in front of the witch's house. The most interesting testimony of the lootings comes from Dublin author James Stephens:

Very many sweet shops were raided, and until the end of the rising sweet shops were the favourite mark of the looters. There is something comical in this looting of sweet shops – something almost innocent and child-like. Possibly most of the looters are children who are having the sole gorge of their lives. They have tasted sweetstuffs they had never toothed before, and will never taste again in this life, and until they die the insurrection of 1916 will have a sweet savour for them. (Stephens 1916, pp. 25-26).

A profusion of dainty treats usually reserved for the children of the wealthier families were now in their possession. And in spite of the danger, driven by curiosity and hunger, some of them almost risked their lives to get a chance of being part of what must have been a quite unusual adventure:

I was only eight years old when the trouble of 1916, the Rebellion, was on. Word had spread around that the IRA were after taking over the GPO and that there was lots of gunfire going on all over O'Connell Street. So I went out onto the street to have a look and I saw lots of people running down Talbot Street, carrying all sorts of things in their hands. They were after looting them from the shops in the streets. So I ran up towards O'Connell Street and on the way up I was told by someone not to go up any further as the British Army were shooting at people that were taking things out of the shop windows. I thought, Sure they won't shoot me, I am only a little boy, so up I went. I ran over to this confectioner's shop called Nobletts on O'Connell Street. There was shooting going on all around me. The British soldiers were hiding in the doorways firing at the IRA volunteers. I remember the shop window was blown in so I grabbed this wooden box from it and made a run for it. The bullets were flying all over the place but I did not care. Being only eight years old at the time, I didn't realise the danger of what I was doing. I ran down Talbot Street with the box in my hands and I ran all the way home with it. When I opened it there was nothing in it! To think, I nearly got shot for stealing nothing! (cited in Duffy 2015, p. 88).

The 1916 Rising is mostly remembered as the historical event that led Ireland on a different path, in a direction which would change the country forever in terms of politics and redistribution of power. Yet, for the poor children of central Dublin who were at the front line of all the upheaval that this conflict entailed, it meant a different

kind of revolution. In the light of the socio-economic context in which the children of the Dublin tenements found themselves, the looting of sweetshops must be considered as an indication of just how important sugar was at the time and to what extent people were allured by it. To go back to what Mintz (1985, p. 16) remarks in his introduction of *Sweetness and Power* human beings have a natural disposition for sweetness. Primarily biological, the human liking and desire for sweet food is strongly influenced and shaped by socio-cultural factors and practices. For the children of Dublin who participated in their own way in the Insurrection of Easter 1916, the opportunity for looting responded to the utopian vision which the starving population had for rich, sweet and alluring food. The craving for sugar consumption in the form of sweets and chocolate could be interpreted as a desire for social progression, but also as a transgression just after Lent as well as a will to destabilise the established hierarchical society. While breaking the monotony of everyday life, this carnivalesque mayhem allowed ephemeral equality and shared ownership as well as an inversion of social roles by the appropriation and incorporation of foodstuffs usually reserved for the elite class. There is no doubt that the Insurrection had 'a sweet savour for' the tenement children of the time, it also happened at the dawn of an era of consumption in which children would become the target consumers.

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