



Helen Litton, Irish Rebellions, 1798-1921

Olivier Coquelin

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Helen Litton, *Irish Rebellions, 1798-1921* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 2018)—Reviewed by Olivier Coquelin, Université de Caen Normandie

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In addition to working outside academic circles, Helen Litton has the particularity of being related to three figures involved in the 1916 Easter Rising – Edward Daly, Thomas Clarke and Kathleen Clarke. This, one is entitled to believe, has probably fuelled her passion for Irish history to which she has devoted ten books, including biographies of Edward Daly and Thomas Clarke for the O'Brien Press series Sixteen Lives series. Also published by the O'Brien Press, her latest work is a short depiction of the six most famous Irish rebellions in the period 1798-1921 – from the 1798 Rebellion to the 1919-21 War of Independence, leading to the eventual division of the island into two distinct entities.

Composed of six main chapters, each dedicated to a specific rebellion, the book is mostly intended for the uninitiated and, therefore, will provide nothing significant for people already familiar with modern Irish history. It is also interspersed with a wide range of written and illustrative materials (poems, song lyrics, black and white photographs, speeches, eyewitness accounts....) that make it eminently readable.

All of these rebellions, Litton points out, shared the same goal of gaining complete independence from Britain. They were thus conducted by activists embracing a revolutionary form of nationalism – as opposed to those constitutional nationalists who aimed at mere self-government by legal means, without severing ties with Britain. Another common feature lies in the fact that they were more far-reaching in their effects than their failure (or partial failure for the War of Independence, 1919-21) might imply. The 1798 Rebellion instilling forever “the dream of a republic, and of separation from Britain” [47] in Ireland; the 1803 Rebellion through Robert Emmet’s speech at the end of his trial that “kept the torch of rebellion flickering” [59] during most of the Union era; the 1848 Rebellion laying the foundation for modern Irish republicanism embodied in the Fenian movement whose leading figures in exile in the USA “had been politicised by British behaviour during the Great Famine and kept the hatred fresh for the Irish immigrants in America and their descendants” [87]; the Fenian risings of 1867 and 1916 creating martyrs that fostered, not to say inflamed national sentiment; and the 1919-21 War of Independence resulting in a civil war over the terms of the Anglo-Irish peace treaty signed in December 1921.

Furthermore, the author aptly lays emphasis on some significant, if not little-known facts. Thus, while depicting the crimes perpetrated by the British forces throughout the 1798 hostilities, she does not fail to expound some of the Irish atrocities. Often overlooked is also the short-lived provisional government that was established the same year in County Mayo, following the victory of General Humbert’s French and Irish army over General Lake’s troops. Another relevant example focuses on the fact that the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) was a mass grass-roots movement, but one lacking the necessary financial and military resources to fulfil its subversive goal; and that despite the popular support and sympathy it aroused “the people would not come out and fight with them” [104]. Other aspects mentioned here reveal Litton’s knowledge of the recent developments in Irish historiography. Not only does she supply a compelling account of the political and military events, but she also sheds light on the social and economic issues raised as part of these rebellions, not to mention the major part played by women in some of them – and more specifically in the 1916 Easter Rising and the 1919-21 War of Independence.¹

¹ On this topic, see Diarmaid Ferriter, *A Nation and not a Rabble: the Irish Revolution 1913-1923*, London: Profile Books, 2015, p. 51-85.

However, although this work is overall of genuine quality, it is not without its flaws, starting with a few factual inaccuracies such as John Mitchel's book entitled here *The Last History of Ireland* (instead of *The Last Conquest of Ireland*), James Stephens questionably described as being imbued with socialist principles (which he himself denied at least on one occasion),² and the creation of the Irish Citizen Army in 1914 (instead of November 1913, just a few weeks before the Irish Volunteers). In addition, the author does not mention the fact that the Young Irelanders eventually fought to achieve full independence, under a republican form of government. And while referring to the agrarian unrest that had swept across Ireland before the setting up of the Dáil courts in 1920, she seems to play down the spread of the industrial disputes during the War of Independence.³ Finally, one may also deplore the absence of a general conclusion and of several seminal works in the suggested reading.⁴

In sum, the aforesaid reservations notwithstanding, Helen Litton's *Irish Rebellions* represents a valuable and useful tool for any student willing to undertake the exploration of revolutionary Ireland in the long 19th century.

2 In this respect, he notably wrote: "I am no Socialist, still less am I a Communist, but my faith is that every child born in a free state should have a place on his native soil whereon to gain an independent livelihood. At the same time, I may observe that I believe in the principle of association, for to my mind it is the only one on which the regeneration of mankind can be based". Quoted in Desmond Ryan, *The Fenian Chief: A Biography of James Stephens*, Dublin: Gill and Son, 1967, p. 64.

3 In the industrial sector alone, there were 554 strikes – including 28 involving over 1,000 workers each – and more than 100 self-managed soviets as of 1920, most of which were creameries. Public Record Office London, Strikes and lockouts, 1914-21, Lab 34/14-20, Lab 34/32-39, figures cited in Emmet O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland, 1917-23*, Cork, Cork University Press, 1988, p. 25. On this topic, see also Olivier Coquelin, "Class Struggle in the 1916-23 Irish Revolution: A Reappraisal", *Études irlandaises*, n° 42-2, automne-hiver 2017, p. 23-36.

4 To give but a few examples: Marianne Elliot, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1989; Nancy J. Curtin, *The United Irishmen: Popular Politics in Ulster and Dublin, 1791-98*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994; Richard Davis, *The Young Ireland Movement*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987; Marta Ramón, *A Provisional Dictator: James Stephens and the Fenian Movement*, Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2007; McGarry, Fearghal, *The Rising: Ireland, Easter 1916*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.