

FACULTY RESEARCH APPOINTMENT APPLICATION PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Enemies Within and Without: Cumann na nGaedheal Under Siege, 1922-1932

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Abstract

This book-length project aims to revise the current literature on Cumann na nGaedheal, the political party in power during the first decade of Irish independence after 1922. Historians' focus on the party's obvious conservatism has generally led to the post-independence decade being characterized as static, uninspiring and counter-revolutionary. My project seeks to overturn this consensus, arguing that both wings of the revolutionary movement shared a basic socioeconomic conservatism, but that this did not necessarily equate to being stagnant or counter-revolutionary. Instead, I argue that Cumann na nGaedheal pursued a number of active and revolutionary policies, but failed to sell these to the electorate because of its inability to assemble them into a coherent program, and its inordinate fixation on potential enemies.

Project Description and Scholarly Significance

This book will analyze the political culture of Ireland's post-revolutionary years, focusing on the process of state-building launched by Cumann na nGaedheal in the wake of the Irish revolution and civil war. In short, I want to reestablish the connection between Cumann na nGaedheal—commonly seen as a party that betrayed the revolution—and the Irish revolution, arguing that the party tried to build on revolutionary ideals, but ultimately failed to convince the electorate of the validity and vitality of its project. Most importantly, the party attempted to shift Irish political culture dramatically from a colonial to a post-colonial ethos, primarily by cultivating civic virtue and a respect for law, while destroying the suspicion and delegitimization of governmental institutions fostered by generations of colonial rule.

The 1920s remain relatively uncharted territory for Irish historians, far more work having been done on the Irish revolution and civil war than on the immediate post-war decade. John

McCarthy recently published a biography of Cumann na nGaedheal politician Kevin O'Higgins, and there have been a variety of specialized works on the land issue (Terence Dooley's *The Land for the People: The Land Question in Independent Ireland*), the Northern crisis (Kevin Matthews' *Fatal Influence: The Impact of Ireland on British Politics, 1920-25*), commemoration (Anne Dolan's *Commemorating the Irish Civil War: History and Memory 1923-2000*) and women (my own *Women of the Dáil: Gender, Republicanism and the Anglo-Irish Treaty*). However, few works have looked at the party's record as a whole. The most important recent exception to this is John Regan's sprawling *The Irish Counter-Revolution*. In this book, Regan argues that these first post-independence years were in fact a counter-revolutionary era. According to this argument, Cumann na nGaedheal dedicated itself to consolidating a conservative order in Ireland through the abandonment of and opposition to revolutionary ideals. Although other scholars avoid the loaded term "counter-revolution," the image of Cumann na nGaedheal as a conservative and even inertial party remains constant in the literature.

I hope this book alters that paradigm, as seeing the 1920s through the lens of counter-revolution fundamentally misunderstands the decade. First, there are difficulties with the concept of counter-revolution itself in the Irish context, mostly because of the stubborn refusal of Irish politics to fall into tidy left-right divisions. In addition, Regan defines "counter-revolution" very loosely, ultimately identifying both major wings of the Irish revolutionary movement as counter-revolutionary. As a result, his concept of counter-revolution appears too broad to be analytically useful in the Irish context.

In addition, the concept of counter-revolution masks the positive program that Cumann na nGaedheal promoted during its early years in power. First and foremost, Cumann na nGaedheal stood over the Anglo-Irish Treaty, the controversial 1921 document that created an

Irish Free State with limited independence from Britain. Unlike their political opponents (generally called republicans) who desired a wholly independent Irish Republic, Cumann na nGaedheal believed the Treaty to be an honorable agreement and a genuine pathway to full sovereignty, and the government devoted itself to working the Treaty to the benefit of the Irish people. Second, the Free State government retained the revolutionary commitment to “Gaelicizing” (i.e. de-Anglicizing) the nation, a commitment which has been underemphasized both at the time and by subsequent historians. Third, Cumann na nGaedheal attempted to revive revolutionary-era anti-imperialism, despite the fact that the Treaty placed the Free State within the British Commonwealth. This connection with the former colonial power was deeply unpopular in Ireland, but Cumann na nGaedheal struggled to convince the electorate that membership in the Commonwealth actually prevented the British from re-establishing colonial bonds. Rather than emphasizing the shared cultural, racial or economic ties within the Commonwealth—as was common in the other white-ruled Dominions—Cumann na nGaedheal statesmen claimed that the Commonwealth could be used against Britain, instead of as a vehicle for the transmission of British values. They argued that the other Dominions would actually protect Ireland from British interference, as any attack on the sovereignty of one Dominion was an ominous portent for the rest. Finally, Cumann na nGaedheal tried to usher in a massive shift in Irish political culture. Its leaders, primarily Kevin O’Higgins, identified suspicion of government and lack of civic virtue as the major legacies of colonialism. As a result, Cumann na nGaedheal promoted a shift in Irish political culture from a colonial to a post-colonial ethos. O’Higgins wanted to create civic virtue—by which he meant a popular sense of responsibility for the affairs of state—and a true civic space. In order to further promote the electorate’s trust in government, the Free State government attempted to distance itself from the political party

created to support it. Members of the government constantly claimed to be above politics, and to represent all of Ireland, not just a certain fragment of the population. This avoidance of sectional politics was ultimately unsuccessful, but Cumann na nGaedheal leaders felt that this would keep the unified spirit of the revolution alive after independence and increase popular faith in the institutions of government.

The final portion of the book will cover the party's decline in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Many of its individual policies failed to appeal to the electorate; its most gifted orator and visionary statesman, Kevin O'Higgins, was assassinated in 1927; and the attempt to nurture civic virtue too often degenerated into castigations of Irish lawlessness. Most fatal was the inability of Cumann na nGaedheal's program to inspire the Irish electorate. Lacking a clearly defined goal, such as the moral and legal Republic promoted by Cumann na nGaedheal's opponents, the party was left with merely "constructive nationalism," a set of policies that seemed overly pragmatic and insufficiently transcendent. As the party's electoral fortunes declined in the late 1920s, its leaders retreated into the siege mentality that had served them well during the civil war of 1922-23. The party had enjoyed its greatest electoral advantage during this period, when it genuinely had been under military attack by its republican opponents. Its rhetoric during the civil war reflected this, playing up the threat posed by republicans to the infant state. The struggling party tried to re-emphasize this style of rhetoric by the late 1920s, but Ireland had clearly become more settled, and the republicans no longer seemed as fearful or destabilizing to the electorate as they had in 1922. As the party's perceived enemies became more fanciful, the electorate judged Cumann na nGaedheal on its vision for the future, not its past conduct. This is why the failures of Gaelicization, Dominion nationalism and O'Higgins' reform of civic space were so crucial: after these failed to catch fire electorally, the party instead

fell back on its old rhetorical condemnation of various internal and external enemies, which did not connect with voters in the late 1920s and early 1930s as it had during the state's war-torn early years.

Enemies Within and Without will be primarily a study of political rhetoric, and as such is similar methodologically to my previous works. I study political language—both public and private—to get a sense of what the leading revolutionaries believed themselves to be creating. This is consistent with recent trends in the study of revolutions, as evidenced by works such as Keith Michael Baker's *Inventing the French Revolution* and Richard Stites' *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*. The rhetoric of Cumann na nGaedheal, and the way that its leaders framed its ideas, had definite antecedents in the Irish revolution, and was not self-consciously counter-revolutionary. For many leading Cumann na nGaedheal politicians, the revolution was about self-determination, Gaelicization, and societal unity, and that was precisely what the party tried to present as its political program. Analyzing the 1920s in this way restores the connection between Cumann na nGaedheal and the ideals of the revolution, avoids the unhelpful use of a model of counter-revolution, and puts the time period in its proper revolutionary context.

After an introductory historiographical chapter, the chapters will proceed thematically. Chapter Two will study Cumann na nGaedheal's fixation on the Anglo-Irish Treaty and its willingness to make the Treaty a permanent fixture in Anglo-Irish relations. Chapter Three analyzes the re-creation of civic space and the ways in which the restoration of order during and after the civil war was tied to this larger purpose. Chapter Four covers the party's dogged attempt to portray the government as above politics and representative of the electorate as a whole, rather than of specific sectional interests. Chapter Five analyzes Dominion nationalism,

and the use of the Commonwealth as a weapon against continuing British interference in Irish affairs. Chapter Six studies the promotion of Gaelic culture. Chapter Seven explains why these initiatives failed, and charts the return to an emphasis on internal and external enemies, primarily in the form of republicans, communists, and, for some in the party, Jews. The final chapter will be on the electoral and organizational collapse of Cumann na nGaedheal in 1931 and 1932.

As of right now, I have three articles already drawn from this project: one was published in *Éire-Ireland* in 2003, and two will be published in *Éire-Ireland* and *Studies* in 2007. These articles will become parts of Chapters Three and Five. Since I have already written three different articles on aspects of this subject, I want to focus now on completing the entire book, rather than continuing to produce other articles. The material drawn from this research project is also incorporated into my Modern Irish history class, as well as into a new course on the Irish Revolution that I am proposing for 2007 or 2008. The historiography that I draw on in writing Chapter One of the book project will form the basis of my proposed Irish Revolution class.

Action Plan

Using a SEED grant, I researched in Dublin last summer and, after one more (hopefully) research trip in the summer of 2007, I will be ready to start writing chapter drafts. The specific plan I have for the FRA is as follows:

- August-September 2007: additional research trip to Dublin (hopefully funded by an NEH summer stipend)
- September-December 2007: draft chapters 1, 3, and 5
- November 2007: present a portion of Chapter 4 at North American Conference on British Studies in San Francisco
- December 2007: submit prospectus/chapter drafts to various scholarly presses

- by the end of the FRA, I plan to have completed drafts of three chapters (Chaps. 1, 3, and 5) and written and presented a conference paper that will later form the core of Chapter 4

Extramural Potential

Last year, I received a SEED grant for this project, which enabled me to travel to Dublin in the summer of 2006. I have already applied for a 2007 NEH Summer Stipend in conjunction with this project, with a decision expected by March 2007. I also have contacted the University of Wisconsin Press about a publishing contract. The editor has heard me present parts of this work before, and is interested in the project, but wants to see full drafts of several chapters, which I intend to have completed and ready to send by the end of the FRA period. I will also submit draft chapters to Syracuse University Press and Cambridge University Press for consideration. I am presenting a portion of Chapter Four at the American Conference for Irish Studies (ACIS) in New York in April of 2007, and hope to take a more thoroughly revised version of Chapter Four to the North American Conference for British Studies (NACBS) in San Francisco in November 2007.

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