

The Politics of a Cultural Journal: George Russell and *The Irish Statesman*

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Abstract

George Russell edited the *Irish Statesman* from 1923 to 1930. Russell was a poet, prose writer and polemicist, but is not now widely read, despite his long association with Yeats and Shaw. The subject of this paper is Russell's involvement as an editor and journalist in post-Independence Ireland. Specifically, it argues that Russell used the *Irish Statesman* to promote his individual vision of modern Irish culture, politics and history in the period. This paper first examines the *Irish Statesman*'s early issues to suggest what Russell's intentions were for the journal and to outline the nature of his post-Civil War doctrine. It further investigates Russell's publication of other Irish writers in support of this Free State project. It concludes with a reading of Russell's contributions to the *Irish Statesman* in the context of European political change in the decade after the First World War. The *Irish Statesman* is then compelling evidence of Russell's central involvement in the Free State's founding literary and political controversies.

George Russell edited the *Irish Statesman* from 1923 until 1930. It incorporated the *Irish Homestead*, a journal that Russell edited from 1905, to create a new publication intent to exert influence on the Free State. The *Irish Statesman* was for seven years the instrument of the highest, most consistent, political and cultural expression of a significant proportion of the Free State's literary community, with contributions from Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, James Stephens, F. R. Higgins, Sean O'Faolain, Frank O'Connor, Daniel Corkery and Lennox Robinson. The purpose of this paper is to examine how Russell used the journal to advertise his own particular version of Irish cultural authenticity.

The practice of politics in the *Irish Statesman* was a very public attempt by an internationally recognised literary élite to petition the newly elected Free State government. Post-Revival Irish writers' transnational status afforded them a degree of influence with an immature democracy not perhaps enjoyed since. In this context the *Irish Statesman*'s European political perspective is crucial. Much has been made of Yeats's potential attraction to autocracy in the nineteen twenties, but little, if anything, has been remarked of Russell's interest in Italian Fascism in the same decade.¹ This paper will suggest that Italy under Mussolini was to Russell the dominant symbol of a post-Versailles Europe of which the Free State was an

integral part.

The first issue of the second edition of the *Irish Statesman* was published on 15 September 1923. Russell's two assistant editors were Susan Mitchell and James Good, both respected and independently published authors.² The journal was funded by a group of "Americans of Irish blood" (Russell 1923a, 6) sympathetic to Horace Plunkett, many of whom were members of the American political and legal élite. Plunkett himself entertained two American Senators at his residence at Kilteragh in the summer of 1922 and persuaded one of them, a J. S. Cullinan, to contribute \$50,000 to the *Irish Statesman*. Cullinan then organised an American fundraising committee for the project, to be chaired by a Judge Campbell.³ The success of Plunkett's efforts can be read in the *Freeman's Journal's* review of the *Irish Statesman's* first issue. The paper noted of the *Irish Statesman* that "The format and price are altogether attractive" and that the price of "3d weekly...seems but little short of philanthropy" (Anon. 1923b, 7). If true charity is given without thought, one is entitled to ask questions as to its real nature when money is directed towards the publication of a political review. This point was not lost upon the Republican press. *Éire* remarked caustically that "The *Irish Statesman* has been raised from the dead by the sort of miracle which British Imperialists can always work. It's done with money" (Anon. 1923c, 2).

As *Éire* suspected, Plunkett's miracle was a worldly one. The first issue of the *Irish Statesman* appeared on 15 September, just three weeks after a Free State general election and four days before a new *Dáil* commenced sitting. The journal's first publication was in effect an opening gambit. Russell pitched the *Irish Statesman* towards an educated readership that might in turn act upon the new Deputies in the *Dáil*, fresh as the large majority of them were to the practice of elected representation. The *Irish Statesman* was to be the forum for political and cultural guidance to Deputies and the educated classes of Ireland and abroad. Russell's intention in this respect can be gauged, as we have seen, from the powerful group assembled to write for the journal. The relative influence of these institutional literary figures was strengthened by *Cumann na nGaedheal's* disappointment at the August polls, the party taking only an extra five seats in a *Dáil* enlarged by 25 seats to 153. Disquietingly for supporters of the Treaty, *Sinn Féin*, the Republican Party, took 44 seats when predicted to take only 30. With the pro-Treaty Labour Party taking 15 seats it was true that *Sinn Féin* could not disrupt the business of the *Dáil*, not least because its Deputies refused to take their seats. But the close result did mean that *Cumann na nGaedheal* was vulnerable to the demands of even sympathetic pressure groups.

At such a time, the *Irish Statesman* promised to reach a crucial, educated audience in the Free State with a guaranteed circulation of 10,000 copies for at least the first six issues. The journal appealed to an "interested clientele, including the wealthiest and most influential Irish

citizens—farmers, merchants, professional men, clergy, civil-servants—co-operative officials supplying farm and household requirements to over 150,000 homesteads”.⁴ This last group is especially interesting as their mention illustrates how the management of the *Irish Homestead* were prepared to hand over its readership in the co-operative movement to a journal that actively supported the Treaty. The co-operative movement was itself non-political and had protested its innocence from intrigue throughout the previous five years of unrest.⁵ That the *Irish Statesman* could now openly pledge its co-operative readers to the support of the Treaty illustrates the degree to which the journal’s management shifted their independence towards *Cumann na nGaedheal*. This in turn promised a potentially huge inroad into the rural communities for the supporters of the Treaty, communities from which Republicans more often took encouragement. Again the Republican paper *Éire* reacted angrily to this development: it felt that the “members of the co-operative societies throughout Ireland have grave cause to quarrel with Plunkett House if it allows its purely non-political organ to be merged in a Free State Imperial propaganda weekly” (Anon. 1923c, 2).⁶ *Éire*’s attempt to create dissent within the co-operative movement failed, but its editor was right to point out the inconsistency of its antagonist’s independent position.

Russell’s first editorial in the *Irish Statesman* was entitled “A Confession of Faith”. Its three pages detail Russell’s hopes for and demands of the Free State. His first main point is to reassert the value to his contemporary Ireland of the movements with which he was involved in the period before the First World War. In doing so, Russell sets the intellectual and geographical bounds of the *Irish Statesman*. For:

Up to 1914 ... In Europe and America a fresh interest had been quickened with regard to the country because of its literary movements, its poetry and drama, the renaissance of the Gaelic mind, the organisation of its agriculture and industry, and the increasing hope of a national government under which unhampered by any external power, these cultural and economic forces might have full play. (Russell 1923a, 3)

Russell repackages Irish history to make his point. In the first place, 1914 and not 1916 is the crucial year in the foundation of the Irish State. Russell does this to avoid conflict over the true nature of the revolutionary tradition, a conflict still current from the Civil War with both pro and anti-Treaty forces claiming in their propaganda that each represented the true genius of revolutionists like Pearse.⁷ Russell also sublimates conflict over the nature of a distinctly Irish identity into broader questions of European association. The First World War was symbolic to Russell of a rupture in the growth of European thought.⁸ It was the impetus to a growth of what he described as

militarism, a state of mind that prevailed not only in Ireland but also in Germany, Russia and Italy. Russell's insistence on the value of the Literary Revival and the co-operative movement is made therefore to stress their distance from such problems and highlight their potentially remedial use in the Free State.

The cover of the first *Irish Statesman* advertised two articles other than the editor's "A Confession of Faith". These were George Bernard Shaw's "On Throwing Out Dirty Water" and the Senator James Douglas's letter, "The Executive Council and the Dail". Shaw's essay is a supplement to Russell's criticism of the post 1916 revolutionary tradition of Irish nationalism in his editorial. Shaw believed that the war for independence had fostered:

... a common opinion in Ireland that the Cabinet in London, untroubled by English problems, and indifferent to the adventures of M. Poincaré, Signor Mussolini, and the fall of the mark, occupies itself solely with sending orders to President Cosgrave to arrest and torture that devoted local patriot, Padraig (ci devant Patrick) Soandso, of Ballysuchandsuch. (1923, 8)

Shaw's parody is sharp. By reducing the heroes of Irish revolutionary nationalism to figures of stereotype he attempts to minimise their general importance to the practice of European politics as a whole. Yet Shaw's attack on Irish nationalism is not indiscriminate. President Cosgrave had arrived in Dublin from Switzerland only the day previous to this article's publication, to great applause from the *Freeman's Journal*. The paper noted that "Dublin witnessed one of the greatest demonstrations in its history in the reception given to President Cosgrave on his return to Ireland from Geneva, where he gained the Irish Free State entry into the League of Nations" (Anon. 1923a, 5). By its support of Cosgrave in a broadly European context, Shaw's polemic is guided at Republicans who criticised the validity of the Free State's entry into the League.⁹ The Free State did not, in their view, have the independence of action necessary to make international alliance worthwhile. Shaw's argument therefore that "Nationalism must now be added to the refuse pile of superstitions" (1923, 9) is tactical and aimed at one specific instance of Irish nationalist thought in 1923.

Shaw ends his essay with a parody of Thomas Moore's "Let Erin Remember the Days of Old".¹⁰ Shaw uses Moore's romanticism to criticise the apparent unreality of Irish Republican politics. The solution for Ireland's problems is to "Let the fisherman who strays on Lough Neagh's bank when the clear cold eve's declining be thrown into it. And then Ireland will have a chance at last" (Shaw 1923, 9). The image of the fisherman locks into notions of the West of Ireland and the islands off its coast, a landscape of which Shaw is contemptuously aware as he writes. He offers the idea that

any "man who divides the race into elect Irishmen and reprobate foreign devils (especially Englishmen) had better live on the Blaskets, where he can admire himself without much disturbance" (1923, 9). Again the stereotypical fisherman brings to mind literary representations of isolation and, by implication, separation.

Such symbolic separation is directly analogous to *Sinn Féin's* popular appeal to the Irish electorate that the Free State withdraw from the League of Nations, the Imperial Conference and the British Commonwealth. In contrast, all of these international bodies were significant to supporters of the Treaty such as Shaw and Russell of the place to which Ireland could aspire if its international obligations were met. As Russell remarked, "When we think of the great figures" (1923a, 5) of Irish history, we think of those who "have affected powerfully the thought of the world, from the remote missionaries who from Ireland invaded Europe with the Gospel of Christ, down to the era of Swift, Berkeley, Goldsmith, Sheridan and Burke" (1923a, 5). At points like this it is easy to see how Russell's support of the Free State and his interpretation (and indeed creation) of Irish history are co-dependant. The Free State's international obligations, with its accession to the League of Nations and its participation in the Imperial Conference at the end of 1923 become bound in Russell's rhetoric to cultural imperatives that are held to have existed from pre-Norman times. Since the Normans were typically held to be the first invaders of native Ireland, an appeal to the missionaries' faith lays a forcefully indigenous claim to all subsequent cultural activity. This means that once again the divisions of religion and culture that are usually bound to have affected the course (if one can accept that there is such a thing) of Irish history are marginalised by Russell's invocation of a very specific past that perfectly suits his political present.

Russell was obsessed by 1923 with the creation of a stable Irish State. Crucially in this context, the Irish Civil War was symbolic to him of a democratic failure that resulted in Fascism in Italy. Thus the meaning for Russell of the apparent paradox that "Dictatorships spring up all over Europe as the direct consequence of a war to make the world safe for democracy; in Italy, Spain, Germany, Russia and in other countries" (Russell 1923b, 163). The relevance of this to the Free State's experience is that "The muddle in political and economic affairs in Ireland if continued lends itself to the creation of a mood in which dictatorships become possible" (Russell 1923b, 163). At a time when the Free State had just joined the League of Nations, Russell uses the very idea of Europe as a warning to the Government. Political unrest on the continent is described in terms of contagion, the palliative offered being the influence of the cultured classes:

No doubt there are injustices and wrongs at the root of the conflict between labour and capital. But if reason does not supersede passion in these conflicts the tendency in Ireland will be towards a Fascism

which may not be as intellectual as the Italian, and may be much more reactionary. (Russell 1923b, 163)

That Russell can “utter this warning in the interests of Irish democracy” (1923b, 163–64) suggests the extent to which he has realised the need for authority to be instilled in his own political program. Russell’s creation of a Fascist threat is opportunistic and made to satisfy the *Irish Statesman*’s establishment of its own authoritative voice. It seems perverse, but Russell’s use of a Fascist motif is equally a sign of his support of the Treaty, as his intellectual access to the movements and effects of European politics shadows the Free State’s entry into the League of Nations. Russell asserts his independence from the Government by reference to Italy, while simultaneously suggesting his support for it by accepting as valid the international framework into which the Free State entered. Thus he can state some six issues later that Ireland is “becoming Fascist. We are one of the least sentimental of people ... We are democrats when democracy works. If democracy does not work efficiently, the Irish will give bureaucracy or autocracy its chance” (1923c, 356).

Irish democracy did, of course, survive, despite the late arrival of Eoin O’Duffy’s Blueshirts into Irish politics in the next decade. The *Irish Statesman* continued to petition the government until its demise in 1930, the journal’s most famous contribution to the politics of the first decade of independence now remembered to be its ferocious, and partially successful, opposition to the Censorship Bill.¹¹ But often the fate of political visionaries is to be misled. The revolution that did occur in Ireland was not one that Russell expected. *Fianna Fáil*, under the leadership of De Valera, entered the *Dáil* in 1927. In doing so, the Republican Party changed the dynamic of Free State politics, in turn altering the nature of the *Irish Statesman*’s relationship with the *Cumann na nGaedheal* government. This change marks the end of the first distinct phase of the *Irish Statesman*’s development from a European, political and cultural review into a more controversial, domestically bound journal.

NOTES

¹ Two obvious sources for a study of Yeats’s interest in non-democratic political systems are Cullingford (1981) and Freyer (1981). The main study of Russell, Summerfield’s (1975), ignores the issue completely.

² Mitchell was a poet but is perhaps best remembered for her wit. Her study *George Moore* (1916) was well regarded in Dublin as the perfect response to the declamations that comprise *Hail and Farewell* (1911–1914). Mitchell’s association with Russell dated back to at least 1904, with her inclusion in Russell’s publication of the Irish verse anthology *New Songs: A*

Lyric Selection (1904). Good was an internationally respected journalist and friend of H. W. Nevinnson, war correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*, and Robert Lynd, columnist for the *New Statesman*, the journal upon which the *Irish Statesman* was partially modelled. His *Irish Unionism* (1920) is an authoritative survey of the subject.

³ Campbell met Russell and Plunkett in his administration of White Cross relief to Ireland in 1920 and 1921. He remained a friend to Russell and broadcast a eulogy for the Irish writer in the USA in 1935. Cullinan's stay with Plunkett in 1922 is recorded in Digby (1949, 261).

⁴ This claim was made for the *Irish Statesman* in an advert placed in the *Freeman's Journal* on 11 September, 1923.

⁵ The necessity for the co-operative movement to keep itself at least nominally independent from politics was illustrated in the Anglo-Irish War when several of its installations were destroyed by the British Army in the latter half of 1920. Although no actual evidence of revolutionary activity was ever offered, Russell's cultivation of James Connolly and, latterly, Cathal O'Shannon in the *Irish Homestead* did associate co-operation with the revolutionary strand of the Irish labour movement.

⁶ *Eire* further re-christened Russell's journal the "Free Statesman" (Anon. 1923c, 2).

⁷ By 1923, Republican propaganda on 1916 was generally emotive: "The Stupid British. If the British Government had the sense to give Cosgrave and Mulcahy the job in 1916. What short work they would have made of Padraig Pearse and the other irregulars" (n.p., n.d.). Free State propaganda took the form of rebuttal: "MEANS TO AN END! The Anti-Treatyites are fond of voting the dead who died for Ireland! And invariably they vote them against the Treaty! If Collins, Mulcahy, etc., had died they would be voted 'Anti' also!! Listen to Padraig Pearse himself ... 'Home Rule to US would have been a means to an end'. ('The Spiritual Nation'- P. H. Pearse). VOTE FOR THE TREATY!" (n.p., n.d.). Cited from Pamphlet no. 26, O'Brien Collection. National Library of Ireland, LOP117.

⁸ To Russell "What took place here was an infection from the high fever in which Europe existed, that our militarism was as definitely of epidemic character as that black influenza which a couple of years before swept the world" (1923d, 454).

⁹ A Republican booklet of 1928 expresses the emotion behind this antagonism to international association: "In a moment of weakness, war-weary leaders yielded to the enemy. The nation for whose honour men had given their blood and gladly died ... was again betrayed to her despoiler The dishonour to cleanse which Irishmen had poured out their blood from 1916 to 1923, still stains the fair fame of Ireland. Twelve years after Easter Week Ireland remains, unfree and unredeemed, still bound to the British Empire" (Anon. 1928, 11).

¹⁰ Shaw refers specifically to the second and third verses of Moore's poem: "On Lough Neagh's bank, as the fisher-/ man strays,/ When the clear cold eve's declining,/ He sees the round towers of other days/ In the wave beneath him shining; Thus shall memory often, in dreams/ sublime, Catch a glimpse of the days that are over;/ Thus sighing look through the waves of time/ For the long faded glories they cover" (Moore 1915, 187-88).

¹¹ Russell, Shaw and Yeats opposed the Censorship Bill in the *Irish Statesman* in a media campaign that started in September 1928 and continued into the next year. This period of the journal's history is the subject of the final chapter of my thesis, *Political Visions: George Russell, 1913-1930*.

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