

## Political identities and stereotypes in Irish-American networks of 1916-1922: the Friends of Irish Freedom and the American Catholic Church

The Letters 1916-1923 project is Ireland's first public humanities project and has collected public and private correspondence since 2013. Initially focussing on the year of the Easter Rising in 1916, the project now sources letters written during the War of Irish Independence and the Irish Civil War as well. Since autumn 2017, we have added several important collections from archives in Ireland and abroad. Including letters from the United States or continental Europe into our collection, we acknowledge that migration strongly shaped Irish identities and politics, and that overseas cities with large Irish diaspora communities evolved as important centres of "long-distance nationalism"<sup>i</sup>. Particularly generous contributions relating to Irish-American politics in the era of the Irish Revolution have come from the New York Public Library and the American Irish Historical Society, both of which specialise in Irish-republican material. This paper will focus on recently-digitised letters written by the Friends of Irish Freedom -- an Irish-American organisation which flourished after 1916 and declined in 1920 when two of its leaders opposed de Valera and other Irish-republican organisations successfully rivalled for members. I will briefly outline how the Friends of Irish Freedom became the most influential Irish-American organisation after the Easter Rising, and describe their complex relationship with the American-Catholic Church as an example of their internal rift and increasing isolation after November 1919.

A digital humanities approach to the large corpora of FOIF correspondence can draw our attention to seemingly secondary players or themes which hardly ever engross an entire letter but consistently recur across the correspondence. Although sometimes only a few lines in a multi-page letter refer to the FOIF's attempts to use the personal networks and infrastructure of the Catholic Church for their political aims, reading those letters in contexts uncovers the deep conflict in which both secular Irish-Americans and Catholic Americans found themselves in the early twentieth century.

According to Michael Doorley, the 'revolutionary Irish-American nationalism was a dormant and divided force'<sup>iii</sup> before the Friends of Irish Freedom were founded in the aftermath of the Irish Race Convention of 1916. Strategically directed by New York State Supreme Court Judge Daniel Cohalan, the FOIF successfully united the Irish republican interest in America and recruited 100,000 regular members as well as 175,000 associated members in only three years.<sup>iii</sup> Another prominent founding member of the FOIF was John Devoy, an Irish journalist and Fenian exile who presided over the secret revolutionary society *Clan na Gael*.<sup>iv</sup>

Building on this expertise, the "Friends of Irish Freedom" (FOIF) established an impressive informational infrastructure which permitted them to mobilise large crowds. Drastically exploiting reports of Irish misery, the Friends of Irish Freedom's accounts of Irish affairs were often sensationalist but by no means based on rumours. On the contrary, the FOIF relied on first-hand testimonies by disaffected immigrants from Ireland. Besides, John Devoy and Daniel Cohalan entertained a sophisticated network of correspondents in the United Kingdom. For several years, the Friends of Irish Freedom effectively disseminated periodicals and topical publications to communicate a republican message to the United States government and the US population. One important tool of agitation was the newspaper *Gaelic American*, which John Devoy had first launched in 1903.<sup>v</sup> Pro-English politics were not merely denounced as false politics, but completely de-politicized and attributed to inferior motives. Some members of the FOIF also supported military confrontation with Britain and attempted to purchase arms, but the situation in the US would not permit the shipping of weapons overseas.<sup>vi</sup> In 1918, the official FOIF stance was temporarily in line with Wilson's ideas of international cooperation and self-determination.

This period from the end of the Great War till winter 1919 was the period of the greatest public acceptance for the FOIF.<sup>vii</sup>

Daniel Cohalan was convinced that political success depended upon firm organisational structures, a centralised administration, and a strong national leadership, which very much established the FOIF as an Irish republican party abroad.<sup>viii</sup> The self-confidence with which the FOIF sought to represent a global Irish interest was reflected in the elaborate structure of society offices. The Friends of Irish Freedom were led by a "national president", a "national treasurer", a "national secretary" and several "national vice-presidents" who represented different regions of the United States. Furthermore, the FOIF appointed national trustees, a chairman of the national executive (Robert E. Ford, New York) and a Vice-Chairman of the National Executive (John Carrell, New York). A circular letter published in 1919 hinted to an 'enclosed leaflet'<sup>ix</sup> (no. 47), which was meant to 'instruct [the readers] how to co-operate with [the Friends of Irish Freedom] in an organized manner.'<sup>x</sup> In these guidelines for the establishment of new branches, the FOIF leadership requested that the headquarters' 'instructions be followed in every detail.'<sup>xi</sup>

With the outbreak of the Irish War of Independence, the Friends of Irish Freedom began to circulate a weekly newsletter and issued propaganda pamphlets with drastic headlines such as 'English Atrocities in Ireland'.<sup>xii</sup> This brought them into conflict with President Wilson, who was personally hostile to Cohalan and did not want to alienate Britain. Furthermore, tensions within the Irish-American community rose when Eamon de Valera toured the country in 1919. Although his rallies in several American cities were generously funded by the FOIF Victory Fund, Cohalan and Devoy had personal differences with de Valera and disagreed with him over the prospective League of Nations.

Devoy and Cohalan vehemently opposed Wilson's idea to establish a League of Nations and were disappointed when de Valera supported it, hoping that Ireland could play its part. By 1920, the *Gaelic American* and the FOIF news-letter not only attacked the British but also de Valera. As a consequence, many FOIF members did not renew their membership, wishing to keep out of [QUOTE] 'any controversies between honest ardent advocates of an Irish Republic.'<sup>xiii</sup>

Not surprisingly, these conflicts are also reflected in Devoy's and Cohalan's difficult relations with the American Catholic Church, whose strong Irish heritage and organisational strength had made them powerful allies of the Irish independence movement. Although there was a certain risk that the extensive use of church venues for their meetings and open cooperation with clergymen undermined the political nature of their organisation and invited sectarianism, the FOIF made few attempts to cooperate with Protestant ministers.<sup>xiv</sup> Instead, they won numerous Catholic priests, members of religious orders, Catholic academics and even several bishops, some of whom continued to occupy leading offices in the FOIF ranks until 1921. The side-bar used in all FOIF circulars listed the names of eight Catholic clergymen in November 1920, but especially Devoy's and Lynch's letters to Cohalan reveal that those priests had various reasons for joining and did not always act as secular FOIF leaders desired. While Thomas J. Shahan, Rector of the Catholic University of America since 1909, shared Devoy's and Cohalan's vision that Irish independence was as much a cultural as a political aim, Peter James Muldoon was primarily a social reformer.<sup>xv</sup> Furthermore, many clergymen differed with Devoy and Cohalan when it came to America's involvement in the First World War. Peter James Muldoon and Thomas J. Shahan were members of the National Catholic War Council installed by the American Bishops to prove the loyalty and patriotism of American Catholics. Irish-American Archbishop Cardinal Hayes of New York was also in favour of Irish independence but supported America's engagement in the First World War as head of the American military ordinariate. Having been on the verge of schism over differences between Irish, Italian and German Catholics in the nineteenth century,<sup>xvi</sup> large

parts of the American Catholic Church, and above all the episcopacy, were eager not to let foreign ethnic identities undermine the common American identity they were hoping to establish. Cohalan's radical anti-conscription stance was therefore a constant threat to his cooperation with the official Catholic Church, and Devoy explicitly warned Cohalan: 'I think you ought not to push Bishop Gallagher into a position he may not be able to maintain. I don't think it is necessary for him to make a declaration for the Republic. It is quite enough for him, in my opinion, to remain President.'

The limitations of the FOIF's union with Irish-Catholic forces were most obvious in their connections with Irish-born Australian Archbishop Daniel Mannix, whose campaign against British conscription influenced both Irish nationalism and the labour movement in the United States.<sup>xvii</sup> Mannix, who only became a staunch republican in the face of the executions that followed the Easter Rising,<sup>xviii</sup> travelled from Australia to Rome via the United States in 1920, and the Friends of Irish Freedom had high hopes that his addresses to the American people would benefit them. Mannix, however, famously spoke alongside de Valera in Madison Square in July 1920 and linked Ireland's cause with de Valera's name'.<sup>xix</sup> For Devoy and Cohalan, this cooperation was an obvious disappointment. They also realised that Archbishop Mannix tended to attract followers different from their own. Archbishop Mannix did not share their ethnically confined conception of Irishness and was equally concerned about the democratic rights of Australian and American citizens.<sup>xx</sup> While Mannix stayed at Archbishop Hayes's New York residence, he avoided statements about Irish politics but reserved attacks upon the British and Australian Prime Ministers to his appearances in public places.<sup>xxi</sup> Although Mannix '[kept] alive [the Irish diaspora's] interest in Irish national affairs'<sup>xxii</sup> and became the only bishop to reject the Peace Treaty with Britain,<sup>xxiii</sup> he welcomed debate and disagreement even within the Irish and Catholic communities. The majority of the FOIF publications, however, did not sufficiently address the diversity or dividedness of Irish and Catholic identities, which is why Cohalan's collaboration with American Catholics only temporarily heightened the overall appeal of the Friends of Irish Freedom. Soon after the Irish nationalists in the US split in late 1919, the Friends of Irish Freedom were banned from holding meetings in a Dominican priory after one of their gatherings had ended in violent confrontation with political opponents:

*'Last Sunday night Jerry's men and women, over 50 of them, including, as Lyons says, every "rat", male and female in the city, invaded the Clarke Branch and proceeded to interrupt the speakers. Five of our men, led by Cunningham and Barney Lyons, cleaned them out in a few minutes. Cunningham hurt some of them badly, including one of our own men whom he hit by mistake. Our women handled the other women roughly. Jerry was near at hand, but nobody saw him. Then they sent for the police and told the Prior of the Dominicans, in whose hall the meeting was held. Fathers Power and Levingstone had gone to him and told him a lot of stuff. Among the things Fr. Power said was that I am a Socialist. The old Prior said, "Cohalan and Devoy are attacking De Valera, etc." He will evict the branch from the hall. The I.W. [presumably the Irish World, an influential Irish-American newspaper] lies viciously about the meeting.'*<sup>xxiv</sup>

Cohalan's only permanent and reliable gateway to the Catholic hierarchy were the Knights of Columbus<sup>xxv</sup>, a Catholic charitable brotherhood founded by Irish-American Father Michael J. McGivney in 1882. Judging from the FOIF letters preserved in the American Irish Historical Society archive, at least the New York branch of the Knights of Columbus continued their support for Devoy and Cohalan when the Irish-American republican movement was in crisis

in late 1919 and 1920. As more letters from the Friends of Irish Freedom collection will be transcribed for the Letters 1916-1923 project, I am hoping to get a clearer picture of these interesting and highly complex networks. Some of the questions which remain to be discussed and researched are on the final slide. At the end of the talk I would like to acknowledge that I wouldn't be able to conduct this research without my colleagues at Maynooth University and the IRC, who are generously funding the current phase of the project. THANK YOU VERY MUCH!

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<sup>i</sup> Anderson and Kligman, *Long-Distance Nationalism*.

<sup>ii</sup> Doorley, 'Friends of Irish Freedom', 2017, 505.

<sup>iii</sup> Doorley, 505.

<sup>iv</sup> Doorley, 'Friends of Irish Freedom', 2008. Diarmuid Lynch served as secretary of the Friends of Irish Freedom.

<sup>v</sup> Doorley, 'Friends of Irish Freedom', 2017, 506.

<sup>vi</sup> 'With regard to another phase of military work, say, the purchase of arms in the United States during 1918, this was then utterly impossible. In the first place, no money was available. And, even if there had been, the prevailing war conditions absolutely precluded either the purchase or transportation of arms or ammunition. Those with experience of the then situation know this to be an incontrovertible statement of fact.' Application for Military Service Pension Certificate (Diarmuid Lynch) Department of Defence Files. Lynch Archives. March 9, 1938, quoted in: Doherty, '1918'.

<sup>vii</sup> Doorley, 'Friends of Irish Freedom', 2008, 509.

<sup>viii</sup> 'The FOIF organised receptions and speaking tours by so called "emissaries" from Ireland. These included Liam Mellows, who had taken part in the Easter Rising in Galway, Nora Connolly, the daughter of the executed leader James Connolly, and republican feminist Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, the widow of murdered Dublin pacifist and journalist Francis Sheehy Skeffington. The FOIF also played a prominent role in fund raising for the "relief of suffering in Ireland", and by mid-July [1916] the fund amounted to \$ 100,000.' Doorley, 'Friends of Irish Freedom', 2017, 507.

<sup>ix</sup> Friends of Irish Freedom, National Headquarters, 'A Chara', fol. 1. Friends of Irish Freedom, National Headquarters, "A Chara," circular, type-written, May 1, 1919, fol. 1, AIHS.

<sup>x</sup> Friends of Irish Freedom, National Headquarters, fol. 1.

<sup>xi</sup> Friends of Irish Freedom, National Headquarters, 'A Chara', fol. 1.

<sup>xii</sup> Doorley, 'Friends of Irish Freedom', 2017, 512.

<sup>xiii</sup> Edward F. Dunne, "Dear Mr. Devoy (Marked Confidential)," September 7, 1920, fol. 1r, AIHS.

<sup>xiv</sup> 'A meeting was arranged by Dr. McCartan and Dr. Maloney to "congratulate the people of/re/and on the peaceful achievement of their independence" at which two Protestant ministers were to appear as principal speakers, along with Liam Mellows, Padraic Colum and the Rev. Peter Maginnis (sic) as Chairman. The meeting was announced for January 6, 1919.' Doherty, '1918'.

<sup>xv</sup> McManamin, 'Peter J. Muldoon First Bishop of Rockford, 1862-1927'.

<sup>xvi</sup> At some stage, new dioceses had to be established to please Irish-American communities.

<sup>xvii</sup> When the British government temporarily detained Mannix in August 1920, dock workers employed on British ships in Manhattan (African-Americans and Italian-Americans) included, went on strike to express solidarity with the popular clergyman. Cf. Doyle, 'Striking for Ireland', 357.

<sup>xviii</sup> There is evidence that, like most Irish-Australian clergymen at the time, Daniel Mannix did not approve of the Rising itself, describing it as 'truly deplorable': Campbell, 'Emigrant Responses', 82.

<sup>xix</sup> IRISH TIMES, cf. also Broderick, 'De Valera', 364.

<sup>xx</sup> National Library of Australia, '18 Sep 1916'. Cf. Also Warhaft, *Well May We Say*, 236. An edition of some of Mannix's speeches published by Cyril Bryan in 1918 hailed Mannix as 'the champion of Australian democracy': Bryan, *Archbishop Mannix*.

<sup>xxi</sup> NY TIMES:

<sup>xxii</sup> Mannix, *The Belligerent Prelate*, 9.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Mathews, 'Socio-Political Aspects of the Mannix Episcopate 1913-1931: Part II', 2014.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Magennis and Lynch, 'Letter about Meeting', fol. 2.

<sup>xxv</sup> Kauffman, *Faith and Fraternalism*; Kauffman, *Patriotism and Fraternalism*.