Title

Ernest Blythe 1889-1932

A Political Study

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ABSTRACT

Ernest Blythe was a central figure in the Irish revolution, playing a major role in the consolidation and settlement of the Irish Free State. He was a leading organiser and recruitment officer for the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Irish Volunteers before and after the Rising of 1916. Following the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, Blythe served in a variety of governmental posts in the Cumann na nGhaedheal party from 1922-1932. He was elected to the position of Vice-President of the Executive following the assassination of Kevin O'Higgins in July 1927.

Blythe's allegiance to Irish nationalism ran counter to his Ulster Unionist upbringing. He was considered a major threat to British interests in Ireland during the revolutionary period. He was a devotee of the Irish language believing strongly that Ireland would lose its individuality as a nation if the language died out. His views on partition were regarded as highly controversial when he stated that England was not to blame for partition but Ireland herself.

This is the first Doctor of Philosophy treatment of Ernest Blythe which offers a broad, in-depth investigation as to why he chose to follow Irish nationalism. Blythe, not as popular as some of his revolutionary comrades of the period, but nevertheless, a stalwart in terms of his contribution to Irish independence, has been marginalised by historians except for a few journal articles and a recent publication by D. Fitzpatrick. He has also been the subject of much criticism resulting from his more controversial policies when he was in government.

The rehabilitation of Ernest Blythe is long overdue. Blythe was a man of substance, who believed absolutely in Ireland's right to nationhood, who remained true to his youthful vow of Rachainn leis na Fíníní [I would go with the Fenians], and who worked tirelessly to achieve his objectives.

List of Abbreviations

AOH……Ancient Order of Hibernians

BCPC…….....Belfast Catholic Protection Committee

BMH……...Bureau of Military History

DCWTCC……..Dublin Centre Wolf Tone Clubs Committee

DORA…….....Defence of the Realm Act

DRR……..Defence of Realm Regulations

DTC……...Department of Trade and Commerce

GAA…….....Gaelic Athletic Association

GL…….....Gaelic League

IOTC……Irish Overseas and Trading Company

IRA……Irish Republican Army

IRB…….....Irish Republican Brotherhood

IV……...Irish Volunteers

NAUK…….....National Archives of the United Kingdom

NUI…….....National University of Ireland

NEAC…….....North-East Advisory Committee

OO…….....Orange Order

PR…….Proportional Representation

RIC…….....Royal Irish Constabulary

SF……..Sinn Féin

UCD……..University College Dublin

Contents

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Finally, and with much honour, I dedicate this work to the memory of Earnán de Blaghd, 1889-1975, a man of substance, who, during his lifetime gave much for his love of Ireland and its cause. It has been my privilege to carry out this study and I hope that it opens up a new understanding of this Protestant Ulsterman who went 'over to the other side' during a period of great Irish national upheaval in the early 20th century and fought for Ireland's right to nationhood and freedom. Fear iontach thú!

Ernest Blythe: 1889-1932

A Political Study

Introduction, Historiography, Structure and Hypotheses

The death of Eamon de Valera, the best-known Irishman of the twentieth century on 29 August 1975 has probably tended to overshadow the departure on 23 February 1975 of one of the other great characters of the Irish national revolution, Ernest Blythe[1]. It is remarkable that no in-depth study has been carried out on the life and career of Blythe who was one of the principal players in the formation, consolidation and settlement of the Irish Free State. Blythe has been described as 'an Ulster moulder of the southern State who embraced cultural and political nationalism in its entirety'[2].

Raised in a Protestant, Unionist farming environment in Magheragall, County Antrim, Blythe's involvement in a revolution against crown and country and his subsequent career in the new Free State were greatly at odds with his upbringing. Blythe's *curriculum vitae* provides the reader with a glimpse of the phenomenal scope of this Ulsterman's cultural and political career on behalf of Irish nationalism, described by Coakley as 'a rare example, by the early twentieth century, of an Ulster Protestant embracing cultural and political nationalism'[3].

Amongst his many activities on behalf of Irish freedom, Blythe joined the IRB at eighteen years of age; was co-organiser of the Dungannon Clubs; the Freedom Clubs; member of the Gaelic League (GL) and Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA); prisoner, deportee and hunger-striker and was elected Sinn Féin M.P (SF) for North Monaghan in the 1918 General Election. Blythe played a major role in the recruitment and mobilization of the Irish Volunteers (IV's) in the years leading up to the Easter Rising of 1916 and beyond, delivering a heavy blow to British recruitment in Ireland.

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[1] N. Ó Gadhra, "Appreciation- Earnán de Blaghd, 1880-1975," *Eire-Ireland*, Vol. 11, 1976, 93.
[2] "Obituary of Ernest Blythe," *Irish Times*, 24 February 1975.
[3] J. Coakley, 'Ernest Blythe,' *Oxford Companion to Irish History* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998), 52.

In 1919, on the invitation of Eamon de Valera, Blythe took up a post in Trade and Commerce in the first republican Dáil. Described as a 'big, lanky, soft spoken Ulsterman from Lisburn, his department achieved little'[4].
From 1922-1923 he was Minister for Local Government. As Minister for Finance 1923-1932, and mindful that Cosgrave's Cumann na nGaedheal party stood for a balanced budget, Blythe achieved notoriety when he reduced the old age pensions by one shilling[5].

Blythe was elected as Minister for Posts and Telegraphs 1927-1932 and following the assassination of Kevin O'Higgins in 1927 he became Vice-President of the Executive Council from 1927-1932. With the election to power of Fianna Fáil, Blythe lost his parliamentary seat. Elected to the senate in 1934, he remained there until the abolition of the institution in 1936.

A staunch supporter of the Arts, Blythe was responsible for the re-building of the Abbey Theatre and the establishment of the Irish language theatre, An Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe. (Irish Language Theatre, Galway) He was also instrumental in setting up the Irish language publishing company, An Gúm. Blythe pushed forward the Shannon Electrification Scheme and helped set-up the Gaeltacht Commission. His views on Irish partition have been described as, 'revisionist, pioneering and influential'[6]. 'He strongly believed that his native touch with the North helped him to see partition from both nationalist and Unionist perspectives'[7].

Blythe was a student and passionate promoter of the Irish language, being convinced that if Irish independence was to have any real meaning it was vital that the language should be restored to general use.

A strong supporter of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty following the Sinn Féin split on the Treaty in 1922, Blythe supported Collins. Journalism was his main career choice, a splendid medium for promoting his political ideas and opinions, producing articles until just before his death.

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[4] A. Mitchell, *Revolutionary Government in Ireland, Dáil Éireann 1919-22* (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin), 162.
[5] "Blythe reduced the Pension," *Irish Times*, 19 September, 2004.
[6] D. Ó Corráin, "Ireland in his heart north and south-the contribution of Ernest Blythe to the partition question," *I.H.S.* Vol. XXXV, No 137, 2006, 61.
[7] Ibid., 71.

That such a major player in the construction of the modern Irish state has received so little attention begs the question, 'why?' In the pantheon of celebrated twentieth-century figureheads, Michael Collins attracted the lion's share of biographical attention. Celebrated 1916 leaders, Padraig Pearse and James Connolly have attracted far fewer biographers than Collins. J.J. Lee, in '*The Challenge of a Collins Biography'* states that, 'despite long records of public service to the State, personalities as prominent as Desmond Fitzgerald, Ernest Blythe, Fionan Lynch *et al* still await a biographer'[8]. As Laffan puts it, 'In Ireland it was useful to die a violent death, as less attention has been given to those who die in their beds'[9]. According to Ó Gadhra:

> Ernest Blythe was not the only person from such a background to throw in his lot behind the Irish national struggle but he was perhaps the most important, if only because he brought the zeal of the convert to his newly-found dedication and because he pursued the path he set himself at the beginning of the twentieth century right to the end[10].

It is for these reasons that I believe Ernest Blythe to be worthy of academic study.

Theses

Ernest Blythe's desire for an Irish-Ireland manifested itself in the main through his interest in the Irish language. Throughout his life the language is a consistent theme. The question of whether this interest served as the springboard for his future revolutionary and political career is of interest. Civil servants were prominent in the GL and these cultural movements were the initial introduction to Irish-Ireland ideas which then led to the more advanced separatist politics of the IV, IRB and Sinn Fein (SF). 'The civil service, by separating them from home and community gave them independence and a cosmopolitan and critical outlook on Irish life'[11]. Was Blythe's discovery of the Irish language and his determination to learn it

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[8] G. Doherty and D. Keogh, *Michael Collins and the making of the Irish State* (Mercier Press, Dublin, 1998), 19.
[9] M. Laffin, '*Illustrous corpses: nationalist funerals in independent Ireland'* Unpublished conference paper, '*The politics of dead bodies'* conference, University College Dublin, 10 March 2006.
[10] Ó Gadhra, "Appreciation-Earnán de Blaghd, 1889-1975," *Eire-Ireland*, Vol. X1, 1976, 93.
[11] M. Maguire, *The Civil Service and the Revolution in Ireland, 1912-38, Shaking the blood-stained hand of Mr. Collins* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2008), 30.

viva voce the decisive element in his future career in Irish nationalism? Was Blythe's radicalism a process of graduation from cultural nationalism to separatist violence making him 'one of the most vocal proponents of the Gaelic state ideal to emerge in the Treaty debates'[12]?

This study will seek to refute two of Regan's theories. For instance, that Blythe professed to be a spokesman for his northern co-religionists but was probably more misleading than enlightening to his audience who were largely ignorant of the Ulster Protestant foibles. Regan further claims that Blythe went out of his way to prove himself to be a dedicated nationalist as if he were trying to compensate for being an outsider. Whyte informs us that 'as a veteran nationalist, Blythe's voice carried weight because, while his own nationalist credentials were undeniable, he had been twice imprisoned by the British and a minister in the first government of the Irish Free State - he was of northern Protestant stock'[13].

That Blythe was a principal player and activist in the formation of the Irish Volunteers during the period from 1913-19 is evidenced by the copious British documents relating to his unceasing revolutionary activities which had a detrimental effect on British occupation in Ireland.

The 1919 Dáil Éireann was both illegal and clandestine requiring men of the calibre of Blythe dedicated to the establishment of an Irish Ireland. Research will show that Blythe had a formative impact on and was a major player in the birth and consolidation of the new Irish state and beyond. His various roles within government, especially as Minister for Finance, indicate to us that Blythe did not shirk from his responsibilities to keep the new state intact. Was he a 'dead loss as a finance minister'[14] or simply adhering to Cosgrave's finance policy of 'fiscal equilibrium'[15]

On the issue of partition, Blythe has been described 'as a revisionist and his contribution pioneering, believing that being a northerner, 'his native touch with the north'[16] enabled him to see both Unionist and Nationalist

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[12] J. M. Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution, 1921-1936: Treatyite Politics and Settlement in Independent Ireland* (Gill & MacMillan, Dublin, 1999), 92.
[13] J. Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990), 119.
[14] R. Fanning. *The Irish Department of Finance-1922-58* (The Institute of Public Administration, Dublin, 1978), 189.
[15] M. Cronin and J.M Regan, *Ireland-The Politics of Independence, 1922-1949*, 49.
[16] Ibid., 71.

perspectives in relation to partition. Blythe's opening comment in *Briseadh na Teorann*', 'Partition exists because the Protestants of the country demanded it, especially the Protestants of the north'[17] highlights his understanding of the Ulster people from his vantage point of being an Ulsterman. It can also be argued that his 'peace and goodwill' approach in later life, 'was far removed from the aims and ambitions of the IRB organiser of the early years of the century'[18].

How much of the northerner came to the fore in Blythe's attitude to partition? Although a veteran nationalist, did he secretly harbour loyalty to Ulster, the land of his birth? For example, his mixed response to the Belfast Boycott in 1920, a measure which Sinn Féin believed would help 'smash Belfast in a month'[19].

Severing his ties culturally and politically with his Ulster homeland, Blythe broke the mould of what is popularly perceived to be a 'loyal son of Ulster'. In his autobiography *Trasna na Boinne* (Across the Boyne) Blythe highlights this with his account of how an old, neighbour Orangeman bluntly informed him, 'I hear you have joined the Fenian Brotherhood'[20]. Was Blythe, the Ulster Protestant, having turned his back on his homeland of loyalist Ulster, fully assimilated and accepted within his adopted homeland in the nationalist Free State?

Historiography

The earliest scholarly treatment on Ernest Blythe is an article by Ó Gadhra entitled *'Appreciation - Earnán de Blaghd, 1880-1975'*, written in 1976. This article sheds light on Blythe's life and career and is valuable in that it provides an overview of the many and varied enterprises that exercised his vigorous mind and pen. Ó Gadhra covers Blythe's origins in County Antrim, his love of the Irish language; his conversion to militant nationalism and subsequent part played in the IRB and IV; his various ministerial offices in the new Free State government; his use of a career in journalism and on

[17] Ibid., 67.
[18] Ó Gadhra, "Appreciation Earnán de Blaghd, 1880-1975," 103
[19] Mitchell, *Revolutionary Government in Ireland, Dáil Éireann 1919-22*, 169.
[20] de Blaghd, *Trasna na Boinne*, 156.

Radio Éireann to preach and promote his doctrine of Irish-Ireland. Whether writing in Irish or English, Ó Gadhra states that 'Blythe was a man with a cause, who was never afraid to state his own viewpoint boldly, even antagonizingly'[21].

Ó Gadhra examines Blythe's political stance claiming that his nationalism was hard to define and that his speeches, writings and political attitudes have not always been consistent. Blythe had however adhered to the broad SF tradition of Arthur Griffith and was not a doctrinaire republican, taking the Free State side in the Civil War (1922-23). Blythe's controversial views on partition are outlined in some detail with Ó Gadhra claiming that Blythe's *Briseadh na Teorann* published in 1955, 'was an amazing document, by any standards, considering the 'hardline' mid-Fifties in Irish politics, insofar as partition was concerned'[22].

Three decades later in 2006, Ó Corráin wrote an article for *Irish Historical Studies* (IHS*)* entitled, 'Ireland in his heart north and south: the contribution of Ernest Blythe to the partition question'[23]. Ó Corráin claims to provide a more balanced reading of Blythe's 'significant contribution towards a deeper understanding of the nature of partition'[24]. Ó Corráin states that during the 1950's there were four major assessments on the partition question; Frank Gallaher's classic anti-partitionist work *'The Indivisable Island'* 1957; Michael Sheehy's revisionist work '*Divided we Stand'* 1955 and further revisionist Donal Barrington published his 'Uniting Ireland' in *Studies* 1957.

The third revisionist was Blythe who, in contrast to Gallaher, Sheehy and Barrington, who each made only one foray into the partition question, Blythe was a prolific commentator on partition producing five major memoranda and one book *Briseadh naTeorann,* published in 1955. According to Ó Corráin, although neither Sheehy nor Barrington referenced Blythe, there was little in their assessments which had not previously been discussed by him. In this light Ó Corráin states that Blythe's contribution

[21] Ó Gadhra, "Appreciation Earnán de Blaghd, 1880-1975," 93.
[22] Ibid., 102.
[23] Ó Corráin, "Ireland in his heart north and south: the contribution of Ernest Blythe to the partition question," 61.
[24] Ibid., 61.

must be regarded as both pioneering and influential'[25]. According to Ó Corráin, 'Blythe's analysis long predates those of Sheehy and Barrington as his ideas had been in gestation for over three decades'[26].

Ó Corráin warns of the danger, when discussing partition, 'of retrospective reasoning and consequently invalidating Blythe's contribution'[27]. 'Although axiomatically assumed today, it is important to realise how strange an internal-conflict paradigm on the idea of a 'divided society' would have appeared over sixty years ago, an interpretation not common currency before the outbreak of the Northern Ireland Troubles in 1969'[28]. Ó Corráin states that partition was a symptom of northern Protestant opposition to a united Ireland rather than its cause *per se,* hence Blythe's opening sentence in *Briseadh na Teorann,* 'partition exists because the Protestants of the country demanded it, particularly the Protestants of the north'[29].

Ó Corráin discusses Blythe's major memoranda on partition in depth, stating, that by questioning the provenance of partition, 'Blythe attempted to break the fixation that partition was solely England's crime, which had hypnotised nationalists since the 1920's'[30].

In 1999, J.M. Regan published his *Irish Counter-Revolution 1921-1936-Treatyite Politics and Settlement in Independent Ireland* described by Ronan Fanning, 'as the most original and stimulating interpretation of the politics of the Irish Free State to be published in decades'[31]. Regan devotes one paragraph to Blythe briefly covering his life and political career. Regan points to Blythe, 'rejoicing in vitriol throughout his life'[32]. Regan is somewhat economical with the facts in his statement, 'that Blythe, during the Treaty debates, advocated almost alone, Sinn Fein's right to coerce the northern majority into a unitary state'[33].

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[25] Ibid., 62.
[26] Ibid., 63.
[27] Ibid., 63.
[28] Ibid., 63.
[29] de Blaghd, *Briseadh na Teorann*, 7.
[30] Ó Corráin, "Ireland in his heart north and south: the contribution of Ernest Blythe to the partition question," 61.
[31] Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution 1921-1936* (back cover)
[32] Ibid., 92.
[33] Ibid., 92

Ó Corráin states that Regan misread Blythe's comment during the Treaty Debate in January 1922, 'that the Provisional Government had a theoretical right to use coercion to achieve a United Ireland; that this was not tantamount to advocating such coercion'[34]. Blythe immediately qualified this remark by adding, 'as we pledged ourselves not to coerce them, it is as well that they should not have a threat of coercion over them all the time'[35].

Regan further claims, 'Blythe professed to be a spokesman for his northern co-religionists, he was probably more misleading than enlightening to an audience largely ignorant, save Blythe's exposure of Ulster Protestantism'[36]. It would have been helpful to the reader to have examples of Blythe's misleading advice on Ulster Protestants given that Blythe was a Church of Ireland communicant throughout his long life. Indeed, McColgan states that, 'Blythe was a Gaelic enthusiast and activist in the forefront of the separatist movement since 1906, was also an Ulster Protestant and probably the only member of the provisional government who had a realistic insight into how the Ulster Protestant mind worked'[37]. Regan, not content with this onslaught on Blythe's Protestant credentials further attacks his credibility by claiming that, 'Blythe adopted extreme positions, as if, in his mind at least, he was trying to compensate for being an outsider'[38]. Even the most cursory investigation of Blythe's revolutionary and political career points to a man who never shied away from controversy or public disapproval least of all ingratiating himself on anyone. Whyte informs us that, 'as a veteran nationalist, Blythe voice carried weight because, while his own nationalist credentials were undeniable, he had been imprisoned by the British, and was subsequently a minister in the first government of the Irish Free State - he was of northern Protestant stock'[39].

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[34] Ó Corráin, "Ireland in his heart north and south: The contribution of Ernest Blythe to the partition question," 63.
[35] Dáil Éireann debates iii, 194, 3 January 1922.
[36] Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution, 1921-1936*, 92.
[37] J. McColgan, *British Policy and the British Administration 1920-22* (Allen and Unwin, London, 1983), 121.
[38] Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution, 1921-1936*, 92.
[39] Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland*, 119.

Structure

This first in-depth examination of Blythe's political biography will be structured as follows. Chapter one will examine Blythe's formative years in Magheragall, County Antrim; the five years he spent in Dublin as a junior civil servant and his entry into the revolutionary movements forming at the turn of the twentieth century. The second chapter explores Blythe's period in the north as a journalist for the pro-Unionist *North-Down Herald and Bangor Gazette*, as an 'undercover' IRB agent whose remit was to turn Ulster to the nationalist cause and his short-lived dalliance with the Orange Order [OO]. Chapter three focuses on Blythe's year spent in the Kerry Gaeltacht where he went to improve on his knowledge of Irish. The fourth chapter investigates his role as an organiser for the IVs and the IRB. Blythe was a highly placed member of the IVs who was very successful in recruiting members for the organisation both north and south; he also was involved in a campaign to invigorate the lack-lustre northern IRB. He was arrested, endured numerous imprisonments in England and Ireland; took part in hunger strikes and, was banished from Ireland under the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA).

Chapter five deals with Blythe's role in the clandestine first Dáil, incorporating his time spent as Director of Trade, Commerce and Local Government from 1919-1923; his role in the RIC Boycott; his role in the Belfast Trade Boycott and his role and pronouncements on the executions of the Anti-Treatyites. It also examines his role as Minister for Finance from 1922-1923 when stringent economic measures were required to consolidate and maintain the new State. Chapter six examines Irish partition and Blythe's decades' long campaign to seek a solution to it. This chapter explores the many writings by Blythe on partition and will illustrate the accuracy of his predictions as evidenced by the existence of the border in this the 21st century. Finally, chapter seven concentrates on the Irish language and explores Blythe's role in its survival. The Irish language was the catalyst for all of Blythe's future roles as an Irish separatist and government minister; indeed, it is what defines him as a true Irish-Irelander.

He applied himself heart and soul to the revival of the language believing that Irish independence was meaningless without it.

Ernest Blythe's memoirs *Trasna na Boinne* [Across the Boyne], *Slán le hUltaibh* [Goodbye to the Ulstermen], *Gael á Muscailt* [The Irish Awake] and *Briseadh na Teorainn* [Smashing the Border], will provide a comprehensive background to this study, and, which have been translated from the Irish language into English.

Chapter One

From Magheragall to Baile Átha Cliath: A journey of discovery 1889-1909

1.1 Introduction

The period 1889-1909 is crucial to obtaining an understanding of how Ernest Blythe severed his Ulster Unionist roots to become a life-long adherent of Irish nationalism. It is also important for assessing the source of his passion for an independent, Gaelic speaking, Irish nation, Gaeilge agus Saoirse na Tire. [Irish and freedom in the land] Research on Blythe's formative years may hold clues as to why he pinned his colours to the mast of Irish nationalism as opposed to remaining within the fold of Ulster Unionism.

Were there any early signs to suggest that this young Ulster Protestant could do the unthinkable from an Ulster loyalist perspective and take up arms against England? What particular ideologies or events moulded his early consciousness which motivated him to adopt his later political creed of Irish nationalism? Who or what, inspired him to enter the fray on the side of Irish freedom? What drove Blythe to pursue the fraught path of an Irish revolutionary when he could have had a life of security and comfort within the prosperous, Unionist farming community into which he was born? What compelled him to devote almost fifteen years of his youth and early manhood to the struggle for Irish independence; a period which involved great personal sacrifice, physical and mental hardship leading to a life-long breech from the political tenets of his native Ulster?

Blythe's memoirs of this period particularly *Trasna na Boinne* [Across the Boyne] which in 1957, was awarded the Douglas Hyde Literary Award[1] provide an excellent source of information on his formative years and, it is

[1]"Literary Award for Former Local Journalist," *County Down Spectator*, 29 August 1958, 5.

expected that they will reveal any early indications regarding his future political choices.

1.2 The seed is sown: the influence of family, friends and schooling on Ernest Blythe

> I was born and raised in the townland of Magheraliskmisk along with my younger brother Séamus and my sisters Josephine and Helen, close to the old school of Mhullach Ceártan in the parish of Magheragall, in County Antrim. It was two miles from the river Lagan in a place on the border between Co. Antrim and Co. Down. Our house was three miles from the village of Mhá Rátha, five miles from Lisnagarvey and twelve miles from Belfast[2].

Born on 13 April 1889, Ernest Blythe was the first child and eldest son of James and Agnes Blythe, farmers in Magheragall, County Antrim. On his paternal side his roots can be traced back to William Blyth of Lambeg, whose eldest daughter was baptized in Lisburn Cathedral 17 July 1665. Another daughter Mary was also baptized there on 23 February 1667 and a son James on 24 July, 1671[3].

In his up-bringing Blythe was from a Church of Ireland, Unionist background, although the influence of his Presbyterian mother is of interest. He was educated at the local national schools of Maghaberry and Ballycarrickmaddy. Being the eldest son, there would have been an assumption that he would succeed his father and spend his life working on the family farm. 'Ernest failed to satisfy that assumption and many other conventional assumptions during his long life'[4].

This young lad was not cut out for a life on the land; instead he was destined for a career greatly at odds with his rearing. He would become linked to the cause of Irish freedom, becoming one of the principal protagonists in that arena. During his evolution through the various stages of becoming an Irish revolutionary, Blythe would show a side to his character which would have horrified his friends and neighbours in Magheragall; his ruthlessness, determination and dedication to the nationalist cause was

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[2] E. de Blaghd, *Trasna na Boinne* (Sáirséal agus Dill, Baile Átha Cliath, 1957), 11.
[3] "Ernest Blythe - The Man from Magheragall," *Lisburn Historical Society* Vol X1, part 4 (Dec. 1979) no page number.
[4] P. Buckley, 'Blythe, Ernest (de Blaghd, Earnán) (1889-1975),' *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (DIB), Vol. 1, Royal Irish Academy, Cambridge Press, 616.

extreme for someone brought up in the God-fearing Unionist household of James and Agnes Blythe.

Blythe recalls his earliest memories of his home, his old crippled grand-father and his first introduction to Irish politics when he overheard his grandfather discussing the Home Rule Bill then going through parliament in the '1890's:

> When I was growing up at the beginning of the 90's, my grand-father was crippled with rheumatism and could only walk with the aid of walking sticks. He used to spend the day sitting in the corner looking at us children and speaking to my mother as she worked in the kitchen. My earliest memory is of my grandfather telling one of the neighbours that the Lords had kicked out the Home Rule bill the night before. I had no idea what that was, but I imagined a group of bearded men wearing cloaks kicking a cloth doll down stairs and out onto the dung pile outside - like the dung pile that was outside our house. I enjoyed that image so much that every time I think of Home Rule that is the image I have[5].

Grandfather Blythe had also been influential in the early schooling of Ernest who learned his letters from a big board in the kitchen on which his grandfather had painted the alphabet. This early introduction to education produced a love of reading which Blythe admits put him on a different road from his neighbours. 'If it hadn't been for my love of reading, I may have gone the same direction as my neighbours'[6].

By the age of ten Ernest had read all the books in the house. He enjoyed Waverly and its tales of the Highland Scottish Gaels. He read Scott, *The Legend of Montrose, Children of the Mist*, Thackery's *Irish Sketch Book*, and *Fairy Tales* by Carleton. His father bought *Old Moore's Almanac* and reading the poetry contained within awakened in him thoughts of Ireland. From time to time there would be a copy of the *Nation* newspaper lying in the stable brought there by the Catholic farm workers. These newspapers which contained poems of Ireland, Irish history and stories were a source of inspiration and became the medium through which Ernest acquired his early knowledge of Ireland's troubled history thereby aiding the development of an Irish nationalist mindset[7].

Within the Blythe household two different political viewpoints simmered. Blythe states that the political opinions of his grandfather and the views of his mother were very different. His grandfather was proud that his

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[5] de Blaghd, *Trasna na Boinne*, 11.
[6] Ibid., 18.
[7] Ibid.,19

uncle or great-uncle was a member of the Marcúdaigh [Yeomen] and he would boast that an old rusty sword hanging in the kitchen was a Marcúdaigh sword. He held Queen Victoria in high regard and referred to the soldiers or armed police as the 'Foireann na Banríona'[8]. [The Queen's Men] His mother who had been raised as a Cruifearach [Presbyterian] was a secret supporter of the United Irishmen, a fact which she only disclosed after the demise of the old grandfather. She said that her ancestors had some connection with William Orr and, she was very proud of that. She considered William Orr, 'a martyr and a sample of nobility and honour[9].

In 1791, a handful of public-spirited merchants and tradesmen formed the first Society of the United Irishmen in Belfast. These Belfast radicals were all Presbyterian; their working manual was Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man* although Wolfe Tone gave the movement its name 'The United Irishmen'. The society was initially open and constitutional, agitating for a reform of the Irish parliament and the removal of the Penal Laws against Catholics. Famous 'United Irishmen' included Samuel Neilson, Dr William Drennan, William Orr (the aforementioned relation of Ernest Blythe who was arrested on 15 September 1794 and executed on 14 October 1797, becoming the first Presbyterian martyr), Henry Joy McCracken and Thomas Russell. On 6 June 1798, a shaky coalition of Catholics and Presbyterians from Counties Antrim and Down raised a rebellion to wrest power from the Ascendency in the cause of the Rights of Man and the independence of Ireland. The rebellion lasted seven days before it was brought to an end[10]. The leaders were arrested and hanged. Two years later the 1800 Act of Union was brought into operation to quell further Irish unrest.

Following the grandfather's death Blythe's mother told him her tales of the United Irishmen which she had earlier been unable to divulge. Agnes Blythe would have had no idea that her stories of the United Irishmen would have a profound effect on her son. Although Blythe would later point out that it was the Irish language which propelled him towards Irish nationalism, it can be argued that his mother also helped fan the early flame

[8] Ibid.,12
[9] Ibid.,13.
[10] A. T. Q. Stewart, *The Summer Soldiers: The 1798 Rebellion in Antrim and Down* (The Blackstaff Press, Belfast, 1995), 9, 10, 11, 45 and, back cover.

of patriotism in her son, supporting the argument that the Irish dimension was apparent from childhood. Ernest was very impressed with one story of the old Presbyterian minister whose church was invaded by the Marcúdaigh during the service. They demanded that the minister offer up a prayer for the king. He refused, but when held at gunpoint he implored God, 'Ó, a Dhia, más féidir leat é, dean trócaire ar an Rí'[11]. [Oh God, if you can, have mercy on the King]

What influence his grandfather would have had on Ernest, had he lived longer, is something that we will never have a definite answer to. However, it can be argued that he would have rejected his grandfather's viewpoint, given his extremely close bond with his mother and the influencing effect she had on him with her stories of the United Irishmen.

It can also be argued that, had his father been an influential role model as opposed to the authoritarian, 'live by the good-book' type man, Ernest would not have embarked on the nationalist path. Research indicates that Agnes Blythe was Ernest's parental role model. It was she who was instrumental in teaching him the ideology of the United Irishmen; Blythe's father is seldom mentioned in his memoirs.

Ernest's relationship with his father was typical of the era. Protestant farmers' sons especially were, in the main, worked hard by their elders and taught to honour their parents according to the Ten Commandments. According to Hart, young men in early twentieth century Irish society were in strict subordination to fathers and employers and fathers exercised this almost total control from a great emotional and social distance. Close bonds between fathers and sons were rare. Children were reared almost solely by their mothers, in a domestic culture in which father's rarely participated. 'In-so-far as children learned their nationalism at home, it was their mothers who taught it to them'[12].

Blythe states that although he did his fair share of working on the family farm his interest lay in the Irish language and a free Ireland:

> Murach mo shuim sa Ghaeilge agus i saoirse na tíre agus an mífhonn a bhí orm maireachtaint a bhfad faoi smacht m'athar, d'fhéadfainn sásamh a bhaint as beith ag

[11] de Blaghd, *Trasna na Boinne*, 14.
[12] P. Hart, *Revolution? Ireland 1917-1923*, Essay, *Youth Culture and the I.R.A* (Trinity History Workshop, Dublin, 1990), 13.

> gabháil don talmhaíocht[13]. [It wasn't that I hated farming or country life. If it wasn't for my interest in Irish and in freedom in the country and, my displeasure of living under my father's control, I could have been happy farming]

Here is evidence which shows that Blythe's later decision to become involved in Ireland's liberation was in gestation during his early years. He also admits that he wanted to escape from his controlling father. However this reason is secondary to his ambition to learn Irish. If learning Irish was an excuse and nothing more, Blythe would have abandoned the language as soon as possible. He followed his early inclinations, becoming an ardent nationalist and an accomplished exponent of the Irish language. One of the main points of this study is the Irish language and its importance in Blythe turning to Irish nationalism. Blythe reveals the answer in the following statement:

> It wasn't the United Irishmen who sent me on this path, but my interest in Irish which was awoke in me by the three maids from the Newry area that we hired every year in May or November in Newry. Máire Ní Annluain stayed with us for a year and a half[14].

Máire regaled young Ernest with stories of Finn MacCumhaill and his men coming one day to free Ireland, causing him to believe that he needed Irish to speak to them. She claimed to be related to Réamonn Ó hAnluain [Redmond O'Hanlon] and the fact that his mother spoke of O'Hanlon as though he were a Robin Hood like character, further stimulated young Ernest's already vivid imagination. Blythe's mother was interested in Irish also and told him that when she was a young girl, 'Céad Míle Fáilte' [A hundred, thousand welcomes] was said at the beginning of services in the Presbyterian church. She also had a relative who lived at the beginning of the 19th century who spoke queer English because he was used to speaking only Irish. He was also a Presbyterian.

Following the departure of Máire another servant named Máire de Faoite arrived at the farm. She only had a smattering of Irish but managed to teach Ernest his numbers in Irish and a few blessings and curses like, 'go dtachtaí an diabhal thú'[15][May the devil choke you]. Another maid who had a profound impact on Ernest was Bríd Nugent whose father had taught Irish in a branch of Conradh na Gaeilge in Dundalk. Bríd bought him his first

[13] de Blaghd, *Trasna na Boinne*, 45.
[14] de Blaghd, *Trasna na Boinne*, 15.
[15] Ibid., 17.

learner's book in Irish, a series written by *Cumann Buan-Choimeádta na Gaeilge.* This book proved too difficult for the ten-year old Ernest and he was unable to progress further. However, Ernest had encountered the Irish language, which impressed him so much, he pledged to go to Newry where he believed there was lots of Irish to be had. It could be argued that this desire was no more than a passing fancy and would later be forgotten. In Blythe's case it was not a teenage whim but became the primary motivator for his later move to the Kerry Gaeltacht to learn the language from the native speakers. The arrival of these Irish-speaking maids to the Blythe household was the key to Ernest learning about the Irish language and, crucial to his later following the path of Irish nationalism. Reflecting back on his schooldays, Blythe points of the number of scholars with Scots-Gadhlaig surnames and others who were Irish Gaels, proving that they came from Irish speakers. 'There were twenty-three with Gaelic surnames who were my class-mates. This fact influenced my mind and I never cared for people claiming that we were from a foreign progeny'[16].

Down through the years Agnes Blythe kept a secret of how her great, great grandfather had been a Catholic from County Cavan, who turned to Protestantism towards the end of his life and got a farm in County Down in return. According to Blythe, 'The thing that vexed my mother the most that she was so closely related to a Catholic, and that anyone related to a Catholic later than John Knox lacked credibility. It made me certain that I would treat both the same'[17]. Once more his mother's influence is apparent.

Ernest's early relationships with Roman Catholics began at school where he formed a close friendship with a Catholic boy Tomás Ó Mealláin. Together they played pretend games of Boers vs English. Blythe and his Catholic friend were Boers and because they were big and strong they always won. 'Blythe states that this may be influenced his thinking later'[18]. Throughout his childhood he would also inter-mingle with Roman Catholic's on the farm as he describes how each year at the Newry hiring fair his father would hire one or two men as labourers and they were always

[16] Ibid., 61.
[17] Ibid., 22.
[18] Ibid., 20/21.

Roman Catholics[19]. According to Blythe, his mother would encourage the Catholic maids to go to Mass and attend to their religious duties as she believed this would keep them on the straight and narrow. However, she often believed the stories about the Catholic clergy circulating the Protestant communities[20].

Blythe's father was anti-Catholic although he kept his thoughts on the matter well disguised, his actions neutral, and his opinions never shown to Catholics. Blythe, in fairness to his father, states that despite his father's ambivalence towards Catholicism, he often had a lot of respect for any Catholics he knew and dealt with[21]. Due to the small number of Catholics in the area they were not considered a threat. Blythe describes with some humour that during 12 July celebrations the usual Protestant rituals were carried out, with 'Níl aon Phápa anseo' [No Pope Here] written on walls and children chanting, 'Sleeter Slaughter Holy Water'. Occasionally the Catholic children would reply with their own chant, 'Proddy-Woddy Green Guts'[22].

This early contact with followers of the Roman Catholic faith prevented Ernest developing the ingrained, bigoted and sectarian attitude towards those not of the Protestant persuasion. Although Blythe held political views at odds with the northern Protestants, he endeavoured to keep his friendships free from the rancour of bitterness which pervaded Ulster society. How was Blythe and his later Fenian attachments viewed by the inhabitants of loyalist Magheragall and district? He would have been viewed by many as a turn-coat and shunned at the very least. The following account testifies to the fact that, regardless of his political affiliations with the hated Catholic nationalists, Blythe still attracted support even amongst those who should have been his bitterest enemies:

> I was always happy that I didn't fall out with anyone over politics, be it relations or old school friends or neighbours, insofar as, if our attitudes and aims would be contrasted, we could talk sociably and friendly when we would meet. After Easter week, something happened in Lisnagarvey which really excited me when I heard about it later. A crowd of people were talking on the street about the Rising and my name was brought up as having a connection with the Volunteers. Two or three said I should be sent over to

[19] Ibid., 22.
[20] Ibid., 28.
[21] Ibid., 29.
[22] Ibid., 23/24.

> England and shot too. An Orange woman was present who used to work for us on the farm when I was a boy; a woman whose relations were always strong Orange. She interrupted the talking and gave dog's abuse to those who wanted to see my demise. Because my relations with my neighbours had never been destroyed, my memories of my young life remain 'rose-coloured' than they would have if anyone of them had become hostile to me or unfriendly as was going on in the country[23].

As Ernest progressed through childhood, signs of a rebellious streak began to emerge. His insubordination at Maghaberry school resulted in his being transferred to the neighbouring national school at Ballycarrickmaddy. This move proved providential in terms of a turnaround both in Ernest's behaviour and, by giving him the opportunity to prove that he could with the right guidance turn out to be a success.

At Ballycarrrickmaddy Ernest was taught by a teacher named Jacob Begley who had a different approach to teaching young headstrong boys, and he also had a special interest in preparing boys for the Civil Service. It was Master Begley who prepared Blythe for his future post with the Ministry of Agriculture and Technical Instruction in Dublin. Due to Begley's influence Blythe settled down and enjoyed his final four years of schooling. 'From the beginning I respected my teacher and from being an example of bold behaviour and bad manners in the first school, I turned my behaviour around so much in the second school I became the teacher's pet in the end'[24]. The first signs of Blythe's penchant for journalism appeared at this when he began to write essays which earned him praise from Master Begley, with the added compliment that 'they were as good as a main paragraph in the Lisburn Herald'[25].

Blythe's schooling was coming to an end. He had achieved the academic standards necessary to apply for a post in the civil service. The application was made and in August 1904 he sat the entrance exams for the civil service. 'It was the month of August 1904 when we sat the exams in the Queen's College, Belfast and we had to attend for three days to do the papers. Around the middle of March 1905, I got a letter from the civil service in London informing me to go to the office of the Department of

[23] Ibid., 46.
[24] Ibid., 60.
[25] Ibid., 61.

Agriculture and Technical Instruction in Dublin at ten o'clock on the coming Monday morning'[26].

According to Ó Gadhra, the turning point of Blythe's early life was his decision not to enter the British civil service in London[27]. What would be the consequences for Blythe going to work in London apart from having to pay extra rent money? Had he chosen to work in London the course of his life would have been very different. For instance he would have been removed from the influences of the Irish revolutionary movements which he had not as yet encountered. However the return of the native to defend his country in its hour of need in not a new phenomenon, Michael Collins being the most lauded for his exploits during Ireland's revolutionary period; Collins had been working also as a civil service postal clerk in London.

It is probable that Blythe would have responded in a similar manner; the British civil service contained many of those who believed that Ireland should be free from British rule. Blythe would have been close to those people involved in the GL and the GAA, organisations very much in vogue with the Irish immigrants of the period. There he could carry on his interest in learning the Irish language and forming alliances with those of a separatist persuasion.

Ernest Blythe was about to embark on his life-changing journey to the other end of Ireland. There he would begin to fulfil his childhood ambitions leading in time to his becoming a hardened Irish revolutionary and the first and only Ulster Protestant, nationalist politician to be elected to an Irish parliament in 1918. On the journey to the train station James Blythe (father) used the opportunity to give his son a final lecture on how he should conduct himself in Dublin. 'He first gave me a lesson on religion; I was to say my prayers every night, attend church on Sunday and read my Bible often'[28].

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[26] Ibid., 71.
[27] Ó Gadhra, "Appreciation-Earnán de Blaghd 1889-1975," 94-95.
[28] de Blaghd, *Trasna na Boinne*, 71.

1.3 Down among the rebels 1905-1909: Blythe on the road to perdition

The foregoing section examined the first fifteen years of Blythe's life in the staunchly Unionist area of Magheragall, Co. Antrim. It investigated the main factors which inspired him to support Irish nationalism. The following section will focus on the period following Blythe's arrival in Dublin from 1905-1909. It will highlight his continuing interest in the Irish language and will show that this interest became the precursor to his joining the GL, the GAA and the IRB.

When Blythe finally arrived in Dublin, he took up lodgings in the house of the Presbyterian Commonwealth; the rent was fourteen shillings a week which suited his budget. He recovered his trunk from the train station and in his own words: 'Chuas amach ag amharc ar Bhlea Cliath'[29] [I went out to look at Dublin].

'I had always wanted to learn Irish'[30]. Thus began Blythe's statement to the Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 (BMH). This statement identifies Ernest Blythe as 'an Organiser on the staff of the Volunteer Executive; Organiser for the I.R.B, and Director of Trade and Commerce 1918-1922. The subject or contents of the document are listed as (a) National activities, 1905-1923; (b) Organisation of Irish Volunteers and I.R.B, 1913-; (no closing date given) (c) Dail Éireann, 1919-[31] (no closing date given).

> I came to Dublin as a boy-clerk in the Department of Agriculture, in March 1905, a week or two before I was sixteen. Within about an hour of coming to town I heard three people speaking Irish outside the Gaelic League book-shop. Having stood looking at the books in the window and listening to the Irish-speaking group as long as they talked, I went in and bought the first book of O' Growney's Easy Lessons, which I began studying that night in the Queen's Theatre during the interval of a melodrama called 'The Lights of London' the first play I had ever seen. When the first break came I sat by myself on a long bench, took my book from my pocket and set myself to learning Irish.'[32].

Ernest had heard the Irish language used in conversation for the first time and he had found O'Growneys, the holy grail for all prospective students of the Irish language in vogue at that time. Described as 'Gaelic in

[29] Ibid., 75.
[30] Bureau of Military History (BMH) 1913-1921, Document No. WS 939, 1.
[31] Ibid., 1.
[32] Ibid., 1.

homoepathic doses'[33] O'Growneys 'was the door-way through which most League members and hangers-on came into contact with the Irish Language'[34]. In the foreword to part one of *Simple Lessons in Irish*, O'Growney states that, 'the following course of lessons in Irish have been drawn up chiefly for the use of those who wish to learn the old language of Ireland'[35].

The fifteen-year old Blythe, who had led an insulated childhood in Magheragall displays a great degree of self-sufficiency and confidence as shown by his ability to dis-engage from the crowds and do his own thing. Later on as an IV organiser, he would demonstrate this ability to a greater degree. It is probable also that he came to the notice of the revolutionary head-hunters at this time. According to Sean T. O'Kelly, 'the IRB was most assiduous in urging support of organisations like the Abbey Theatre and there would seldom be night of the Abbey Theatre when many members of the IRB were not present'[36]. Blythe would have been conspicuous as he sat immersed in an Irish language text-book in the Dublin theatre. The Irish language and the Abbey Theatre would later become the focus of Blythe's energy and driving ambition, reviving the language and keeping the Abbey afloat for a period of thirty years as its managing director.

Moving to the southern metropolis appears to have held no fear for young Ernest. It was possibly a great adventure for him getting away from the mundane and uneventful farming life in Magheragall and importantly for him, out from under his father's controlling ways. He lost no time in becoming familiar with his new surroundings as evidenced by his visit to the theatre on his first night away from home. His acquisition of O'Growneys indicated his desire to brush up his limited knowledge of Irish, the medium through which he would move into the cultural and political circles emerging in Dublin at the turn of the twentieth century.

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[33] Rev. E. O' Growney, *Revised Simple Lessons in Irish* (The Gael Publishing Co, Dublin, 1902), 87.
[34] T. G. McMahon, *Grand Opportunity-The Gaelic Revival and Irish Society, 1893-1910* (Syracuse University Press, New York, 2008), 10.
[35] O' Growney, *Revised Simple Lessons in Irish*, v-vi.
[36] BMH, Document No. WS 1765, Witness, Sean T. O'Kelly, 6.

In his statement to the BMH he admits that initially he was apprehensive about joining the GL on account of his being a Protestant and consequently being rejected. It was very important for Blythe to be accepted as a member of the GL. This organisation was for him the conduit to learning Irish and he was also 'feeling bogged down for want of a teacher'[37]. According to Ó Broin 'the GL was, from the viewpoint of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), a dangerous element in society and a vehicle through which those with an extremist mind-set, could implant their subversive ideas into the minds of the young and impressionable'[38]. According to Garvin:

> The Gaelic League was a forcing-school for future nationalist leaders and activists producing a group of young people who were to be at the centre of every advanced nationalist organisation during the following twenty years. They were to be involved in the Dungannon Clubs, the IRB, Irish Volunteers, the 1916 Rising, the IRA and the Dáil government of 1919. It has been calculated that about half of those who served as government ministers or as senior civil servants in the fifty years after independence had been members of the Gaelic League in their youth. In effect it educated an entire political class[39].

Maguire claims:

> That civil servants were prominent in the Gaelic League and that these cultural movements were the initial introduction to Irish-Ireland ideas which then led to the more advanced separatist politics of the Irish Volunteers, the IRB and Sinn Féin; take out the civil servants and the separatist movements look a lot less formidable: Michael Collins, Richard Mulcahy, Ernest Blythe, Liam Archer, Eamon Broy, Alf Cotton, Con Collins, Patrick J. Daly, Hugo Flinn, Diarmuid Lynch, Dr. Conn Murphy, Joe Reilly and Diarmuid O'Hegarty. The civil service by separating them from home and community gave them independence and a cosmopolitan and critical outlook on Irish life[40].

The break-through came during a conversation Blythe had with a fellow-leaguer, another Protestant called George Irvine. As a result, Blythe became aware of Arthur Griffiths Sinn Féin on the night he read his first copy of the *United Irishman*. Several months elapsed after his arrival in Dublin before Blythe finally approached the GL, became a member of Central Branch, with the added pleasure of having Sinéad Ni Fhlannagáin (future wife of Eamon de Valera) as his teacher[41].

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[37] BMH, Document No. WS. 939, 1

[38] L. Ó Broin, *Revolutionary Underground-The story of the Irish Republican Brotherhood 1858-1924* (Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1976), 122.

[39] T. Garvin, *The Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics* (Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1981), 102.

[40] M. Maguire, *The Civil Service and the Revolution in Ireland, 1912-28, Shaking the blood-stained hand of Mr. Collins* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2008), 30.

[41] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 1.

Blythe had taken the first major step of his career in cultural nationalism, a manly decision at his young age and a significant gesture of his new-found independence. Given the fact that he was not the product of a nationalist background it was entirely natural for him to have concerns about being considered an interloper. Joining the GL is evidence of Blythe putting his nationalist ideals into practice which was a pre-requisite to donning the mantle of an Irish-Irelander. Although not an organisation or a national movement, Irish-Ireland, as described by Tierney:

> It was a stimulating doctrine which attempted to reveal the hidden sources from which the life-force of true Irish nationality should spring. This new mode of thought exalted the concept of a free and honourable Gaelic nation in which Gaelic culture and civilisation would flourish and in which the rights and dignity of its members would be upheld[42].

This philosophy was in keeping with Blythe's own ideals of Gaeilge agus Saoirse and in that respect, he would have felt some sense of belonging in his new domicile.

Was this young uncultured Protestant an unwitting on-looker to the death throes of the battle for supremacy, 'between Eoin MacNeill and his clerical allies projection of Ireland as a rural religious co-operative, radically distinct from the political culture of England and deeply influenced by the peasant traditions of the seventeenth century'[43], and 'W. B. Yeats synthetic Anglo-Irish nation which would provide Ireland with a cultural mission within the world English language civilization now emerging, which could be explained largely in terms of the Protestant settler identity formed in the seventeenth century'[44]? According to Hutchinson:

> As the native currents became stronger, so by 1905 (the year Blythe came to Dublin) most Protestants were driven from the League, and by 1914 it increasingly became like the Gaelic Athletic Association, a recruiting base for the underground revolutionary movement, which it was to use as a cover during the war of independence against Britain after the Easter Rising[45].

Hart states that for most young IRB men joining this movement in its early days required little deliberate choice or effort. If the young men had the right connections, or belonged to a particular family or a circle of friends, he

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[42] M. Tierney, *Modern Ireland since 1850* (Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1972), 88.
[43] J. Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State* (Allen and Unwin, London, 1987), 214.
[44] Ibid., 215.
[45] Ibid., 218.

probably became a Volunteer along with the rest of his crowd[46]. The role of youth-group loyalties, according to Hart, played a dominant role in local political decision making, and gave the organisation a cohesion that its elaborate official structure and amateur drilling could never produce. The Volunteers radicalised the symbols and rituals of usually benign events and practices such as the GL festivals, dances, and bands which were particularly important rallying points for the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and these events became part of the political struggle. This youth 'sub-culture' provided the political and social space within which the IRA was mostly organised allowing the organisation to cut across many class and status barriers[47]. English states that, 'although self-determination appealed to the IRA, so too could the excitement of glamorous, clandestine adventure and the release from quotidian dullness'[48].

Hutchinson's thesis was soon proved correct as shortly afterwards young Blythe joined the Central Branch hurling club where he became friendly with future playwright, Sean O'Casey. O'Casey was nine years Blythe's senior and a member of the Church of Ireland. O'Casey had joined the GL in 1906, later becoming a member of the IRB. Both young men Gaelicised their names to Seán Ó Cathasiadh and Earnán de Blaghd. O'Casey differed from Blythe in one important aspect. O'Casey would follow many paths until he found that none led to where he wanted to go. His involvement with a particular cause would reach a pitch of intensity before he began to see flaws in it. Blythe on the other hand knew from his beginnings in Magheragall the path he would take and the cause which he would doggedly pursue in his sacred mission to achieve a free, Gaelic Ireland.

During this initial period of male bonding, Blythe was unaware that O'Casey had ulterior motives and was acting as a free-lance recruiting officer for the IRB, as evidenced by Frank Henderson's account. Henderson, who was a member of a prominent hurling club at the time was also approached by O'Casey about joining the IRB in 1909. Henderson

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[46] P. Hart, *Revolution Ireland 1917-1923*, Essay, *Youth Culture and the I.R.A*. in Trinity History Workshop, Dublin, 1990, 19.
[47] Ibid., 19-21.
[48] R. English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the I.R.A* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005), 28.

refused on the grounds that IRB membership was prohibited by the Roman Catholic church, and 'the whole question caused me intense anxiety for a long time; seeing that there was no turning back for me once I had taken the step; there was also a policy of enticement employed by the organisations involved'[49]. After a few months O'Casey finally showed his hand when, on a Saturday evening coming home from Pheonix Park, he engaged Blythe in a discussion about the Fenians. O'Casey posited his belief that, 'it was a great pity the Fenian movement had not survived'[50].

This statement by O'Casey could be viewed as a ploy to determine Blythe's political and national allegiances. The response would be life-changing for the young northern Protestant. Blythe answered in the affirmative. The older and more experienced O'Casey, sensing he might have found a new recruit for the Fenians in this young, unsophisticated Ulster youth, lost no time in pushing forward his intended mission. Informing Blythe that the Fenian movement was still in existence and recruiting young men for service, he pointedly asked Blythe if he wanted to join. Blythe's lack of knowledge regarding Irish revolutionary movements is evident by his response. 'Having read about the Invincibles, I informed him that I did not favour assassination and would have nothing to do with an organisation which countenanced it'[51]. O'Casey hastened to reassure his potential recruit that the Fenians were completely against assassination; that their policy was to prepare to make open war against England'[52].

Blythe, like Henderson, had doubts on the moral issues involved in joining the IRB. He had the good sense not to give his answer immediately but assured O'Casey that he would have his decision within the week. This decision was not taken lightly by Blythe who had been brought up in a devoutly Protestant environment where attendance at both Church and Sunday school was obligatory. The Blythes were devout worshippers and their children were trained to keep the holy Sabbath day. Blythe's typical Sabbath was filled with attendance at Sunday school in the morning and

[49] M. Hopkinson, *Frank Henderson's Easter Rising* (Cork University Press, Cork, 1998), 26-27.
[50] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 2
[51] Ibid., 2.
[52] Ibid., 2.

evening with the customary service at mid-day. In the evenings the family gathered together to hear their father reading long tracts from the Bible. 'We didn't go to sleep until we said our night prayers. Wet day or dry, father sent us to Sunday school'[53]. With this level of saturation in the teachings of the Bible, it is highly improbable that Blythe would not have had some reservations regarding O'Casey's proposal:

> I didn't go out after my tea that night. I was very excited by the story I had heard, but I was only seventeen and a half years of age. I spent the night reflecting and praying. I went to communion the following day at the Black Church at the bottom of Fontenoy Street. But I had already made my mind up-I would go with the Fenians[54].

Was young Blythe having a crisis of conscience regarding the taking of life which would happen in a war situation? He obviously was experiencing some inner conflict regarding the breaking of the Ten Commandments. Did he rationalize the situation in terms of the waging of war against England as a 'just war' as opposed to 'assassination' which he may have rationalized as murder? He may or may not have been aware of the treatment given by Augustine of Hippo (354-430) to war and justice in which Augustine believed that a 'just war' might be preferable to an 'unjust peace.' St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century (1225-74) significantly contributed to the development of a 'just war' theory in his '*Summa Theologica'*. Aquinas formalized three criteria for a just war – 'right authority' (a sovereign government rather than individuals), 'just cause' (to avenge wrongs or to restore what was unjustly seized) and 'right intention' (the advancement of good or the avoidance of evil). In modern times 'just war' principles have been encoded in international laws governing conflict, such as the Geneva Conventions'.[55] The 'just war' theory would have been, in the minds of all Irish revolutionaries, the reason for their proposed course of action against England.

How aware was Blythe about the possible repercussions of O'Casey's request? Was he in a position at that moment in time to make an informed decision regarding membership of an illegal organisation given that he was

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[53] de Blaghd, *Trasna na Boinne*, 43-44.
[54] Ibid., 106-107.
[55] The Pew Forum on "Religion and Public Life" https://www.uchicago.edu/research/center/pew_forum_ on_religion_and_public_life/ (accessed April 13, 2018).

still in his later teenage years? Had it ever occurred to him that his membership of the GL could place him in danger of being regarded as a soft target for recruitment to the Fenian movement, or any other illegal Irish revolutionary organization? Was he in awe of the older, more sophisticated O'Casey? Did his own and O'Casey's shared religious beliefs give Blythe a false sense of security against the implication's and dangers of giving his consent? Whatever his underlying thoughts and feelings were on the issue, within two days he had arrived at a clear conscience and answered in the affirmative. Blythe had demonstrated by his decision to join the Fenian movement that he was eager and willing to become involved with those seeking to wage war on England, a treasonable offence in the eyes of the majority of his Ulster Protestant kinsmen whom he had left behind in the north.

Several months passed before Blythe was informed that he could be sworn into the IRB. He was now at the more mature age of 18 years; he had had ample time to reflect on his decision to join the Fenian movement and could have reneged at this point. However, the Irish nation had bagged yet another Protestant nationalist to its cause. The swearing-in took place in a house on the Western side of Parnell Square, Dublin:

> I was taken into a back room where Micheál Mac Amhlaidh administered the oath to me. Afterwards I went into the front room which was packed. I should say that there were over a hundred people in it. When at one point in the proceedings, new members were asked to stand up and let themselves be seen by the meeting, four or five of us rose[56].

Blythe was now a sworn member of the IRB, part of a Circle which operated under the pseudonym of the Bartholomew Teeling Literary and Debating Society. According to Bulmer Hobson, a future revolutionary ally of Blythe's, the Bartholomew Teeling Branch was 'the largest and about the intellectually toughest circle in Dublin and included many members of the Gaelic League'[57]. According to Ó Broin, 'membership of the IRB was confined to persons whose character for sobriety, truth, valour and obedience to authority could bear scrutiny and, who could be relied on to

[56] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 3.
[57] M. Hay, *Bulmer Hobson and the Nationalist Movement in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2009), 101.

keep their mouths shut about what they learned from the Brotherhood'[58]. Sean T. O'Kelly in his statement to the BMH stated that, 'the proposed member would have to be known as a person who held strong national views and who was trustworthy, steady and reliable; they were encouraged to join the GL and the GAA'[59]. Blythe had yet to be tested as to his suitability for the role of an Irish revolutionary. He fulfilled the requirement for sobriety but, at eighteen years of age it would have been impossible to speculate as to his ability to endure under the pressure of conflict and the high possibility of arrest and imprisonment.

The Oath of the Irish Republican Brotherhood

> I (name) do solemnly swear, in the presence of Almighty God, that I will do my utmost, at every risk, while life lasts, to make Ireland an Independent Democratic Republic; that I will yield implicit obedience in all things not contrary to the law of God, to the commands of my superior officers and that I will preserve inviolable secrecy regarding all transactions of this secret society that may be confided in me. So help me God! Amen.

This IRB oath which Blythe had sworn to uphold was formulated by Thomas Luby and James Stephens, Protestants and founders of the IRB. If Blythe had any apprehensions regarding the serious nature of what he was swearing to, they are not apparent in his statement to the BMH other than that already alluded to. He could have abandoned the mission at this juncture. Was he strengthened in his resolve that he was not the only Protestant to join the IRB? Was he emboldened by the nature of the oath itself, or did he take comfort from the fact that its composers were both Protestant? We could posit the argument that young Blythe was caught up in the excitement and camaraderie of the movement and joined for the hell of it or, that by this stage 'he was in over his head'.

This study is based on the argument that Blythe was fully aware of the nature of his actions. After all he had of his own admission, become a convert of SF; he was a member of the GL; he was learning the Irish language and participating in the national sports of Ireland. Ernest Blythe had crossed the Rubicon. He had now entered wholeheartedly into the arena of Irish republicanism, a move which would bring him into direct and

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[58] Ó Broin, *Revolutionary Underground-the story of the Irish Republican Brotherhood 1858-1924*, 7.
[59] BMH, Doc. No. WS. 1765, Witness, Sean T. O'Kelly, 6.

violent conflict with the political ideals held sacrosanct in Ulster, namely the Union with Great Britain and loyalty to King and country. Ó Gadhra states that, 'when Blythe became committed to working within the IRB he set about it with the same logic and dedicated effort he retained from his Ulster Protestant roots'[60].

Throughout Ernest Blythe's life the Irish language is a consistent theme. The question of whether this language interest served as a springboard for his revolutionary and political career is one of the questions to be answered in this study. Was Blythe's discovery of the Irish language the deciding factor for his future career on behalf of Irish Nationalism? Was Blythe's radicalism a process of graduation from cultural nationalism to separatist violence making him, 'one of the most vocal proponents of the Gaelic state ideal to emerge in the Treaty debates?'[61]

Ernest Blythe laid the foundations of his political and revolutionary career through membership of the GL, the GAA, the IV, the IRB, the Dungannon Clubs, and the Freedom Clubs. Although it can be argued that he was not the only Ulster Protestant to become involved in the fight for Ireland's cause down through the centuries, the political and revolutionary credentials he accrued were considerable.

Blythe's time working in Dublin was coming to an end. In anticipation of this Blythe decided to try his hand at journalism. This was the beginning of a life-long career, enduring beyond his retirement from politics. He got a post as a junior newspaper reporter with *The North-Down Herald and Bangor Gazette* based in Bangor. Blythe's work on behalf of Irish nationalism/republicanism was now moving in a more serious direction. Blythe had been instructed to make contact with IRB man Denis McCullough when he arrived back in the North, McCullough having been made aware of Blythe's homecoming.

Denis McCullough, who was born into a strongly nationalist family in Belfast in 1883, had been sworn into the IRB when he was seventeen years of age. Together with Bulmer Hobson, another Ulster Protestant and co-

[60] Ó Gadhra, "Appreciation - Earnán de Blaghd, 1889-1975," 95-96.
[61] J.M. Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution, 1921-1936 - Treatyite Politics and Settlement in Independent Ireland* (Gill and Macmillan Ltd, Dublin, 1999), 92.

founder of the IVs, 'who by the age of eighteen years was a committed separatist'[62] they set about reviving the IRB in the north. The Dungannon Clubs, touted as being a non-sectarian, republican, separatist organisation were founded by McCullough and Hobson as a front for IRB recruitment.

Hobson and McCullough, in collusion with their new recruit, Ernest Blythe, formed a triumvirate of revolutionaries whose task it was to re-ignite nationalist sentiment in the north and to convert Ulster loyalists to Irish nationalism, an enterprise which failed despite their combined efforts.

[62] Hay, *Bulmer Hobson and the Nationalist Movement in Twentieth-Century Ireland*, 15.

Chapter Two

Ernest Blythe back north: a foot in both camps, 1909-13

2.1 Introduction

When Ernest Blythe arrived in Dublin in 1905, he was a juvenile of fifteen years. In 1909 a very different young man came back north. Blythe had matured into a young man with the convictions and political aspirations of an Irish separatist. Believing that Ireland's liberation could only come about through a process of revolution, Blythe began working for the IRB in the north and soon thrust, 'into an environment completely at odds with his burgeoning ideal of separatism'[1].

Chapter Two will examine this critical period of Blythe's separatist career as he worked to spread nationalist ideology in loyalist Ulster prior to the Home Rule crisis. What precautions, if any, would Blythe take to maintain his cover as an IRB agent whilst going about his legitimate business as a journalist in County Down? Would his convictions for a free, Gaelic Ireland be neutralised by the strength of Ulster loyalism, as feelings ran high to fend off Home Rule? Or was Blythe after all at heart a loyalist, one who had been led astray during his time in Dublin when he was still a gullible youth?

2.2 Saol dubailte: double life in Newtownards

Blythe left Dublin on 18 March 1909 returning north to Bangor where he had a new job awaiting him with the pro-Unionist *North-Down Herald and Bangor Gazette*. Although Blythe would have been aware of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) and their possible interest in his movements, he was surprised to learn that he had to attend the RIC barracks daily to obtain anything deemed newsworthy:

> I knew of course that when I would be reporting I would meet the police now and again in the courts and other places, I didn't have an appointment however to be required to

[1] P. Buckley, 'Blythe, Ernest (de Blaghd, Earnán) (1889-1975),' *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (DIB) 1, Cambridge University Press, 617.

> go into the barracks and spend ten or so minutes each time talking socially and friendly and, even cajolingly with whoever constable would be on duty in the day room. But when the editor told me there was many a thing I wouldn't hear about if I wasn't 'great' with the police, I recognized there was nothing to be done except be a professional news-man and not let any political feeling prevent me from the duties I had undertaken to effectively fulfil[2].

For Blythe the die was cast. If he lost his nerve at this stage his job as an IRB agent and spokesman for Irish nationalism would be ended prematurely. Would he exhibit any signs of nervousness that could be picked up by a vigilant RIC man? Blythe did not know if the RIC had been onto him during his time in Dublin. Was he walking into a trap? Blythe describes his feelings surrounding this unwelcome necessity as he prepares to enter the barracks for the first time:

> I reached the barracks expecting as a diver would be, about to go into water on a cold day at the start of the season, or as a child about to take medicine from his mother's spoon. I told my name and my business to the two constables who were in the day room and asked if they had any new news, which they hadn't. It was easy for them to notice that I was not at ease and I thought that they would think I was likely shy. Because I seriously loathed speaking to them about myself, and because I was hostile to them in my heart of hearts, I gave more information to them about myself than I would if I had been trying to befriend them, to conceal my disposition. I told them where I was from and where I had been working before that; where I learned shorthand and such like. I never mentioned Conradh na Gaeilge of course, or SF. That was the ice broke for me; I never found it difficult after that to speak mannerly to the Members of the Royal Constabulary[3].

Mindful that Irish turncoats and spies operated in the shadows[4], Blythe's modus operandi was to remain hidden in plain sight. According to McMahon, twentieth century Irish rebels, aware that informers in cahoots with British spies had been the bane of Irish revolutionary endeavours in the past, paid greater heed to protecting their revolutionary plans[5]. Research carried out on the *North-Down Herald and Bangor Gazette* over the four years that Blythe was a reporter, has revealed that at no time was his name attributed to any of the news-paper articles, 'although he penned some of the main news items'[6]. Blythe was employed as a junior newspaper reporter which could be one reason why his name was not attributed to any of the articles. Another reason could be that his role was to write the articles which

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[2] E. de Blaghd, *Trasna na Boinne* (Sáirséal agus Dill, Baile átha Cliath, 1957), 161.
[3] Ibid., 162.
[4] P. McMahon, *British Spies & Irish Rebels: British Intelligence and Ireland 1916-1945* (Boydell and Brewer, Suffolk, 2008), 8.
[5] Ibid., 8.
[6] Buckley, DIB, Blythe, Ernest (de Blaghd, Earnán),' 616-624.

would then be scrutinized by the editor and published using a pseudonym; Blythe mentions using a 'pen-name' which is alluded to further on in this study. Employing this measure would protect his identity.

Blythe's reporting job varied to cover court hearings, daily affairs in the locality and it also brought him into contact with loyalists/Unionists at Orange gatherings such as the unfurling of an Orange banner or the Twelfth celebrations. From his experience in north County Down in 1909, Blythe's opinion was that the spirit for a United Ireland had died out. The ordinary people were not too concerned about Home Rule as they had heard the story for so long, they thought they were safe until the 'House of Lords' were no longer able to protect them against it. Blythe, taking advantage of the political calm before the storm, was in an excellant position to spread his message without fear of retribution, as he explains:

> Of course, I was just a young stranger with an unimportant job; no one cared for my opinions or leanings in my head. Those who noticed that I had a heretical outlook regarding politics, I suppose they thought I was a bit light in the head that an ordinary Protestant from the North would be siding with Catholics or even Nationalists and if it would be worth them examining the issue, I suppose they would say it was a whim of the time[7].

2.3 Ernest Blythe: Republican or Loyalist?

In May/June 2017 *History Ireland* published an article entitled 'Ernest Blythe - Orangeman and Fenian'. This article by Professor David Fitzpatrick, Trinity College, Dublin stated, 'A startling discovery about Ernest Blythe (1889-1975) a central figure in the Irish revolution and early Free State, on the 26th September 1910, was sworn into Newtownards Volunteers Lodge 1501 and resigned from the Orange Order (OO) eighteen months later, on the fourteenth February 1912'[8]. What was going on? Three years earlier Blythe had sworn by almighty God to do his utmost to establish the national independence of Ireland, bear true allegiance to the brotherhood and the governent of the Republic.

Why was Blythe semingly going over to the other side? The principles of the OO which Blythe swore to uphold were poles apart, politically and religiously, from those of the IRB. For example, the OO was resolved and

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[7] de Blaghd, *Trasna na Boinne*, 180-1.

[8] D. Fitzpatrick, *History Ireland*, May/June 2017, Vol. 25 No 3, "Ernest Blythe-Orangeman and Fenian," 35.

united to the utmost of their power to support and defend the rightful sovereign, the Protestant religion, laws of the realm and the succession of the House of Windsor. For his initiation, Blythe would have to satisfy the OO that:

> He is not, never was and will not become a member of any society or body who are enemies of the lawful sovereign or, the Glorious Constitution of the Realm as established 1688 and, that he never took and never will take any oath of obedience to any treasonable society, and that he would never marry a Roman Catholic.

Clearly Blythe had perjured himself on both these oaths. As a sworn IRB man why did Blythe now feel it was necessary to join the OO? What were his motives for such a seeming act of treachery? According to Fitzpatrick:

> Any further assessment of Blythe's subsequent career must take into account the astonishing duplicity of his conduct as a young republican and, had that fact become widely known, Blythe's revolutionary and political ambitions would have been immediately and permanently dashed[9].

Furthermore, Fitzpatrick claims:

> That nowhere in his writings did Blythe allude to this episode though he indicated his need to lead a double life whilst working in North Down and simultaneously organising republican bodies in Bangor. By this he meant that he concealed his republican sympathies in Bangor and Newtownards while reassuring his Belfast comrades that his work on a unionist newspaper was a matter of money rather than conviction[10].

This study will investigate Fitzpatrick's claims in respect of Blythe's astonishing duplicity and his alleged double-dealing in respect of the IRB with whom, according to Fitzpatrick, Blythe was less than transparent. In part one of his memoirs, *Trasna na Boinne*, he states clearly that:

> When I was a reporter, I never tried to hide my political opinions although I would avoid arguments on national issues with people I would upset or whom I couldn't move, in the same way I would avoid arguments, as I always do about religious issues. I would get my nationals; *Sinn Féin*, the *Peasant*, *An Claidheamh Solais* and the *Irish Homestead* at the news-stand in the station in Bangor where I had ordered them and, where a Protestant and Unionist girl was selling them. When I had read them, I left them in the sitting room in my lodgings so other lodgers and the landlady would see them. Anyone who would have opinions that wasn't orthodox according to the OO, I would state my own opinions, or as much as I could without making him angry or disgusted. From time to time I put my own name in Irish, to the bottom of the articles in *Irish Freedom*. Therefore, anyone who was inquisitive or in any doubt could recognise that I was a Sinn Féiner but, it often appeared to me that the majority of people I would meet thought I was a normal Unionist. I never informed anyone who was of that opinion that he was wrong, except on one or two occasions when I could prevaricate, that I would say that I didn't hold the same[11].

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[9] Ibid., 34.
[10] Ibid., 34.
[11] de Blaghd, *Trasna na Boinne*, 180,

The surprising thing about Blythe's revelations was not so much his alleged deception, but his openness regarding his political leanings which he broadcast willy-nilly in a staunchly Protestant/Unionist area. That he felt comfortable to speak freely about Irish nationalism and not see that he could be viewed as a threat to realm, would suggest that Blythe felt safe among people who knew him or, as he had earlier surmised, that they would probably think he was soft in the head.

However, as Blythe's IRB mission was to convert Unionists to nationalism, he would have made little impact on the natives of County Down if he didn't speak according to his lights. Neither does Blythe hide the fact that he was leading a double life in Co. Down, rather the opposite:

> Whatever sense of the story in the neighbour's minds, as you would say, I was leading a double life in North County Down in that time, without hiding any of it, apart from biting my tongue somewhat. In my mind and in my room reading or writing and in the company of small number of people in Newtownards whom I was well acquainted with, I was strongly against the connection with England. In Belfast I was a declared Sinn Féiner and speaking in that sense with my co-Shinners and attending meetings. And as far as I was aware, so much a Sinn Féiner I was writing a great deal of pro-Sinn Féin instruction. Out among the reporter community however, I was a reporter who was friendly with everyone and no great distinction with any Protestant in the place and, without hiding any part of me that would say I was interested in nothing other than collecting news. As a sign of that I was invited to join the Orange Order and the Masons. I would not sign the Ulster Covenant. It must be remembered that at the time there was no shooting[12].

This statement by Blythe is the only evidence in his memoirs or any other record where he mentions the OO. The fact that he would refuse to sign the Ulster Covenant is a telling statement pointing to Blythe's lack of loyalist bonhomie. How could a true Orangeman not sign the Covenant, a transparent declaration of his loyalty both to the monarchy and Ulster? Blythe states that he never met hostility or cold shoulder among the people in the area where he was working. He qualifies this camaderie to the fact that there was no shooting at that time.

If there had been shooting what would have been Blythe's response? Would he have been so open about his Nationalist leanings? If this was an IRB sanctioned affair Blythe would certainly have been under their orders, probably told to keep shtum, and a quick getaway would have been organised. He states catagorically that he is strongly against the connection with Britain, that he is strong SF and, a SF propagandist. Is it possible that

[12] Ibid., 181.

Blythe was carrying out IRB orders to infiltrate the loyalist/Unionist camps with a view to gathering information on their plans to defeat Home Rule? If that was the case, then betrayal to the cause would not be a problem. However, the Home Rule issue only became problematic in April 1912 and Blythe had already left the OO at that point.

According to Fitzpatrick, Blythe was not fully cognisant of the complete IRB constitution at the time of his swearing-in which he learned of at a later meeting. Contained within the constitution is a strongly worded warning that breaking the oath of fidelity in peacetime was regarded as grave misconduct while, in the theatre of war such acts were considered treasonable with the ultimate punishment being execution[13]. Fitzpatrick concludes that the threat of punishment from the IRB forever sealed Blythe's lips as to his involvement with the OO; apart from his mention of being invited to join the Brethren and Masons when he was working as a journalist in County Down[14].

Fitzpatrick's opinion is that Blythe high-tailed it out of both organisations to escape both the wrath of the Orangemen and the IRB. If Blythe was running scared of the IRB, why did he take so long to leave it? - a period of at least six years had passed since he was in County Down nor, was Blythe the only separatist to leave the IRB. In 1919, leading members of the IRB resigned from the organisation, including Eamon de Valera, Sean T. O'Kelly, Ernest Blythe and Desmond Fitzgerald, who believed that such secret organisations were redundant in the new prevailing political climate. Also, if there were to be any likely repercussions from the OO, Blythe foolishly stayed around for another thirteen months after leaving it to find out.

Another point which needs to be addressed is that whilst in Belfast, Blythe had a full republican agenda. He was actively engaged in setting up Dungannon Clubs, the Freedom Clubs and helping build up the Fianna. He organised public activities such as Irish language classes, dances and weekly lectures. He was involved in a propaganda campaign to convert Loyalists to Irish Nationalism such as publishing pamphlets and postcards featuring

[13] *History Ireland,* May/June 2017, "Ernest Blythe- Orangeman and Fenian," 36.
[14] Ibid., 36.

political cartoons or scenes from the United Irishmen era which hopefully might make a connection with the Presbyterians. Blythe could not have carried out these sorts of activities without his cover being blown. How far is it from Belfast to Bangor? Similarily, how far is it from the Falls Road to the Newtownards Road, Belfast, the site of Lodge 1501? The distance between these places is too small for the public not to have heard of Blythe's activities. This study argues that Fitzpatrick's claim that Blythe hid his republican sympathies in Bangor and Newtownards is just not credible. Neither is leading a double life necessarily coterminous with leading a secret life.

2.4 Ernest Blythe: a loyal Orangeman?

Fitzpatrick posits some speculative questions as to why Blythe joined the OO. He suggests that as a junior reporter, Blythe may have felt that it was part of his remit to infiltrate Newtownards society by joining Lodge 1501; or, that perhaps he was someone who was drawn to secret oath-bound organisations regardless of their political persuasions; was he working as a double agent during this period or possibly an agent provocateur? Did the Belfast IRB infiltrate Lodge 1501 to gather information on Ulster's plans to fight Home Rule? Was Blythe's role to lure individuals with latent progressive views into the IRB? Had he up to that point been unsure of his own political aspirations and was still searching for the Eureka moment? Was Blythe role to spread nationalism amongst the Orangemen[15]?

One question of importance which Fitzpatrick fails to address is why Blythe had taken so long to join the OO following his arrival in the north in March 1909? He does not join the OO until 26 September 1910, one and a half years later. He leaves the OO on 14 February 1912 after a period of one and a half years. He does not return south again until April 1913, fourteen months after leaving the OO. The time frame does not make sense. If Blythe was acting on his own initiative, which seems to be the essence of Fitzpatrick's argument, why did he not join the OO as soon as he arrived back north? The same argument applies if he had experienced a change of heart and now desired to become an Orangeman, surely, he would have

[15] Ibid., 36.

contacted the OO as soon as possible on his arrival back in the north. If Blythe had been on a spying mission it would have made more sense to have infiltrated the OO at the earliest possible moment as there was no way to determine how long he would be able to remain in the north. After a lapse of eighteen months, his mission, if he had one, would have suffered and any benefit to be gained would have been minimal. His father and brother were Orangemen, so he would have had no difficulty getting acceptance. As far as getting good intelligence about Ulster's plans for Home Rule, there wasn't much going down in 1910. Also, there was no pressing need for Blythe to join the OO to convert wavering Orangemen to Irish nationalism; Blythe was already spreading the news in public. Is it not more probable that the Orange Brethern, knowing Blythe's predilection for Irish nationalism were trying to get him back into the fold and make an honest Orangeman out of him which would have been a major coup for the OO-a self-confessed republican joining their ranks.

Fitzpatrick's claims that Blythe concealed from the IRB, not only his Orange links but reassured them that his work on a unionist newspaper was a matter of money rather than conviction are not proven. Blythe was an IRB man to the core. He obeyed IRB orders to the letter. He would have referred this problem to his Circle, explained the Orange pressure on him to join and sought IRB guidance. One example of Blythe's adherence to the IRB code of conduct was at the time when the First World War had become likely. The Irish Volunteer, 'the O'Rahilly, summoned Blythe to a meeting where he laid a wad of notes on the table and instructed Blythe to proceed to Germany immediately. There he was to present himself to the German government as the representative of the leading members of the Volunteer Executive and to ask for arms and for the formulation of a joint plan of action. According to Blythe:

> Now I knew that O'Rahilly was not in the IRB and would not have been aware of what that organisation was arranging. I felt sure that the matter of contact with Germany was being attended to and, I also realised that I could not undertake a mission of the kind suggested without the consent and direction of the IRB. I told O'Rahilly there were people in Dublin I would have to consult before I would go to Germany and could not set off instantly. O'Rahilly was furious and declared me a coward and held to that opinion until some years later when he heard that I was in prison[16].

[16] *Bureau of Military History* (BMH), 1913-21, Document No WS 939, 11.

In example two, Irish Volunteer Desmond Fitzgerald supports Blythe's rock-solid adherence to IRB rules. According to Fitzgerald, Blythe had been empowered by the IRB to receive suitable recruits for the organisation[17]. Prior to Fitzgerald's own swearing-in and even with this degree of empowerment, Blythe still sought approval from another IRB member (this man was Alf Cotton who had been a member of the Circle with him in Belfast and who was now a Volunteer instructor in Tralee)[18]. Therefore, in view of this information, it is dangerous to view Blythe as a lone maverick who interpreted the rules to suit himself. It also needs to be emphasised that Blythe was paid by the IRB for his work on their behalf and therefore would not have been short of money at the time in question:

> In 1914 I spent a few months in Belfast with Dennis McCullough working on spreading propaganda against partition. I stayed some of the time in my father's house in Magheragall and some of the time with Dennis's parents in the city. Dennis paid my travel costs etc. out of the money from the IRB[19].

A statement contradictory to Fitzpatrick's claims, appeared in the *Bangor Spectator* in August 1915. Blythe's former contemporaries commented on his honesty and personal integrity:

> Mr Blythe was well-known in Bangor and his intellectual endowments and kindly personality won him the friendship of numerous people in the locality, even those whose political ideas and aspirations differed from his own. A keen student, a widely read and cultured young man and a writer of vigorous simplicity, he followed unhesitatingly the course of life adopted by his judgement. He is a Gaelic student of eminence and a well know writer in the Irish Language. Three years ago he sacrificed a promising journalistic career to live amongst the Irish-speaking people of Co. Kerry as a farm labourer. Whatever his political views were, he was essentially honest and, free from materialistic considerations[20].

Other possible reasons for Blythe's behaviour are that he was a person who disliked causing offence which would be an innocent explanation for his accepting the invitation to join the OO and the Masons? Maybe there was nothing at all sinister in his becoming an Orangeman. Or, had Blythe reached a point where it lay in his best interests to accept the Orange invitation; eyebrows may have been raised and questions asked if he continued refusing to join? Blythe leaves no further clues as to why he

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[17] D. Fitzgerald, *Desmond's Rising, Memoirs 1913 to Easter 1916* (Liberties Press, Dublin, 1968), 40.
[18] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 14.
[19] E. de Blaghd, *Slán le hUltaibh* (Sáirséal agus Dill, Baile átha Cliath, 1970), 64
[20] "Former Journalist ordered to leave Ireland," *Bangor Spectator*, 6 August 1915.

joined the OO other than the one he alluded to in *Trasna na Boinne;* that he had been invited to join. Whilst taking all the above arguments into account, this study argues that Blythe, having been invited to join the OO simply accepted the the invitation to avoid giving offense. He may have used the opportunity to clarify once and for all, his own political standpoint - was he loyalist or republican? If Blythe was unsure about his political choices as suggested by Fitzpatrick (surely Blythe's revolutionary CV puts paid to that idea) he would have the opportunity to observe at close hand the internal workings of this religious/political institution; their attitude towards Roman Catholics, for instance and, their unbreakable connection to England; insights he would not have been privy to as an outsider. His experiences within the republican organisations which he had joined and now their opposite, the OO, provided Blythe with the opportunity, if he ever needed one, to make an informed decision about the course of his future in the affairs of Ireland. Blythe stuck to his earlier vow to go with the Fenians, 'Rachainn leis na Fíníní'. Although Blythe makes no reference to the OO again it is difficult to detect Blythe's astonishing duplicity as suggested by Fitzpatrick.

Finally, Blythe's depth of fidelity towards the OO was later revealed when, in 1919, he married a Roman Catholic lady called Annie McHugh; Annie McHugh was a member of Cumann na mBan and was close friends with Louise Gavan-Duffy; together they opened the Irish language Scoil Bríde. This act, in conjunction with his Irish revolutionary career, indicates that Blythe's loyalty lay with Irish nationalism.

In November 2018 Fitzpatrick published his book entitled *Ernest Blythe in Ulster-The Making of a Double Agent*? This book is a follow-up of Fitzpatrick's paper in *History Ireland* (May/June 2017) edition entitled, 'Ernest Blythe-Orangeman and Fenian' which has been alluded to above. This dissertation began in February 2014 five years previously and the work had already been completed. Never-the-less it is worthwhile examining '*Blythe in Ulster'* to ascertain if Fitzpatrick has found new incontrovertible evidence to prove that Blythe was a dubious character. Having spent much time sensationalising the illicit sexual behaviour prevalent in Magheragall

where 'fornication was commonplace'[21] Fitzpatrick regales the reader with a Sunday tabloid-style coverage of Blythe's promiscuous ancestors. A snippet on page eighteen informs the reader that, 'Three years after his election as church warden, Thomas (Blythe) the elder had fathered a child out of wedlock emulating his uncles Mark and William, both publicans in Hillsborough, who each fathered an illegitimate child. As we shall show the Blythe tradition for promiscuity was maintained in Ernest's branch of the family'[22]. Then in the same vein the reader is warned that, 'historical fossicking reveals rakish aspects of his Grandfather Robert and an Uncle Robert, leading us into a chamber of family horrors of which Enest must have been somewhat aware'[23]. There then follows more salacious details of the male Blythe penchant for promiscuity which becomes distasteful, and does not relate to Ernest Blythe being a double-agent.

Having satisfied himself that Blythe's role as a journalist shed little light on his hidden desire to become a double-agent, 'Yet his work as a provincial reporter offers little insight into his political preoccupations whether as a republican, a liberal or an Orangeman'[24], Fitzpatrick concluded similarily that 'although Blythe was clearly intimate with many policemen and their families and was repeatedly embarrassed by such connections yet there is no compelling reason to infer that Blythe acted as a police informer or agent provocateur'[25].

Finally Fitzpatrick, determined to win his own argument states that, 'the possibility remains that Blythe was at least briefly a double-agent, who exploited the knowledge and trust that he accumulated in both camps (loyalist/republican) to try to mitigate the mutual misconceptions of loyalists and republicans. There is no direct evidence to suggest that he betrayed the secrets of the IRB to the Orange Order, or indeed the reverse. But it seems likely that he used his dual membership to try to spread national sentiments among Orangemen and to persuade his republican brethren of the

[21] D. Fitzpatrick, *Ernest Blythe in Ulster – The Making of a Double Agent*? (Cork University Press, Cork, 2018), 17.
[22] Ibid., 18.
[23] Ibid., 20.
[24] Ibid., 78.
[25] Ibid., 148.

earnestness and revolutionary potential of Orangemen'[26]. That is far cry from being a double-agent which the *Cambridge English Dictionary* defines as 'a person employed by a government to discover secret information about enemy countries but who is really working for one of these enemy countries'. *Ernest Blythe in Ulster-The Making of a Double-Agent* is, with the exception of the Blythe family morals, a regurgitation of Fitzpatrick's 2017 article 'Ernest Blythe – Orangeman and Fenian' and provides no corroborating evidence that Blythe was a double-agent.

2.5 A coming to terms for Blythe: storm clouds gather over Ulster

Blythe was now being faced with the realities of an Ulster which was in the throes of significant political change. Would his resolve for a free, Gaelic Ireland weaken in the face of loyalist intransigency? Or would he be true to the legacy of his ancestor, William Orr, and hold to the principles of the United Irishmen which had inspired him during his childhood?

Through his observance of the prevailing Unionist mindset and his interaction with fellow Ulstermen, Blythe perceived the difficulty that beset the Unionists at getting serious reaction regarding Home Rule from amongst the loyalist people. When the Liberal party introduced their 1912 Home Rule Bill the people of Ulster finally came to believe that Home Rule was a very clear and present danger. Realizing that their place within the British Empire was precarious, loyalist attitudes changed perceptibly. The well-known Ulster traits for obstinacy and resistance came to the fore as they let their position be known with the Ulsterman's mantra, 'Not an Inch'. Blythe, as a journey-man reporter, was able to gauge this level of opposition to Home Rule throughout the area where he was working:

> I had a great way of seeing the development of the military anti-Home Rule movement. It started with the founding of the Unionist Clubs. It was easy to get them running in the big towns of Bangor and Newtownards. But it was hard to set them up in the villages and, with members of the countryside who had no village to speak of. I remember the night that the Unionist Club was set up in a place called Clandeboye, a couple of miles outside Bangor. The room was full, with half a dozen speakers. There were rounds of applause and lots of signs to be seen and heard that showed a stranger that it was an exciting meeting. It was reported accordingly, and space was given that would allow the gullible reader to see that it was a great club that was founded in Clandeboye. But it was difficult for me during the meeting to examine the vigour carefully. I was able to work

[26] Ibid., 149.

> out that there was only a dozen or so of the Clandeboye people at the meeting and the rest were all from Bangor. It seems that the leaders of the club in the hometown got their fellow members to walk out to Clandeboye in order to awaken and encourage their local people[27].

As a result, Blythe became convinced that the kind of Ulster he believed in which had existed since the days of Grattan and Tone was well and truly dead[28].

Blythe's eye-witness testimony of the surge in Loyalist opposition to the 1912 Home Rule bill was something not appreciated by his future political contemporaries in the Saorstat. As an Ulster Protestant, Blythe's singular knowledge of the situation and his grasp of the intransigent loyalist mindset helped mould much of his political views over the years, especially on the border issue and the resuscitation of the Irish language[29].

2.6 Irish nationalism: Ernest Blythe's true allegiance

The IRB had Blythe assigned to work in Belfast and 'in common with his fellow Ulster protestant nationalist, Bulmer Hobson, he became involved in drumming up support for nationalism in Ulster through his involvement with the Dungannon Clubs, na Fíanna Éireann and the Freedom clubs'[30]. According to Hay, 'language, sport, theatre and poetry were all ways to educate Ulster people about their Irish heritage and had the potential to spark support for cultural nationalism, at the very least, and political nationalism, at the most'[31].

According to Ó Broin the IRB acted as an agent provocateur in Irish nationalist circles, by arousing, galvanising and overseeing all nationalist activities, it worked diligently to promote a separatist agenda[32]. The IRB insidiously infiltrated the GAA and the GL, placing their members in danger of enticement and political brainwashing by its more dedicated elements. The IRB had come to the attention of the RIC as early as 1905 (shortly after Blythe arrived in Dublin) placing all associated with it in jeopardy and was

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[27] de Blaghd, *Trasna na Boinne*, 190.
[28] L. Ó Broin, *Protestant Nationalism in Revolutionary Ireland-The Stopford Connection* (Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1985), 40.
[29] Buckley, 'Blythe, Ernest, (de Blaghd, Earnán),' DIB, 617.
[30] M. Hay, *Bulmer Hobson and the Nationalist Movement in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2009), 2
[31] Ibid., 37.
[32] L. Ó Broin, *Revolutionary Underground: The Story of the Irish Republican Brotherhood 1858-1924* (Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1976), preface, 1.

being carefully watched with a view to securing legal evidence against the guilty parties. It was plain to see that the extreme nationalists within the GL were using the organisation as a cover through which its members distributed propaganda leaflets at GL social events[33]. Blythe may not have been aware that he was on dangerously thin ice. He may have had a cavalier attitude born of a young man's arrogance and belief in his own invincibility, or, that he was protected by a cloak of invisibility courtesy of the *North-Down Herald* and good family background. He exhibited no signs of fear as he gaily combined his daily visits to the RIC barracks with frequent trips to SF meetings and nationalist related activities on the Falls Road, Belfast.

According to Blythe, after he had settled in Bangor and was sure of his job as a reporter with the *North-Down Herald* for a decent length of time, he met with Denis McCullough about linking with a circle of the IRB. McCullough had been notified of Blythe being in the north and that he would be in contact[34]. Blythe relates the situation as he found it on his arrival in Belfast in 1909:

> I became a member of the Belfast Circle, which had about fifteen members. We met in the workshop of McCullough's premises (McCullough was a piano tuner by trade). I was elected Centre of that Circle which I held for a couple of years. In addition to McCullough, Bulmer Hobson was the other leading member of the Circle. I introduced Sean Lester, who afterwards became Secretary of the League of Nations. Other members included Alf Cotton who was at one time a Volunteer organiser for Co. Kerry, Cathal O'Shannon, Archie Heron, Dan Turley, who later was shot as a spy by the IRA around 1922-23, Harry Shields and Frank Wilson[35].

The activities of the IRB in Belfast were involved mainly with recruiting, a situation which Blythe states, 'proceeded slowly enough. A small arms fund was set up, the proceeds of which was destined to purchase weapons for the recruits'[36]. The public face of the Belfast IRB was the running of the Dungannon Clubs which were expected to encourage a sense of nationalism and would be controlled locally in Belfast[37]. Their manifesto pledged that the clubs would work together with all persons who had the best interests of the country at heart irrespective of class or creed, believing that Ireland's

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[33] Ibid., 129.
[34] de Blaghd, *Trasna na Boinne*, 173.
[35] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 4.
[36] Ibid., 4.
[37] Hay, *Bulmer Hobson and the Nationalist Movement in Twentieth-Century Ireland*, 46.

destiny was paramount[38]. Hobson, McCullough and Blythe hoped to see a revival of the sentiments of 1798[39]. To that end Blythe assisted in publishing a paper entitled the '*Republic*' which he later described as 'a vigorous weekly organ which made a stirring appeal to young Sinn Féiners'[40]. The Dungannon Club 1905 Manifesto and Constitution to which Blythe wholeheartedly gave his support, had committed the organisation to 'the up-building of Ireland, intellectually, materially and physically, and to the regaining of the political independence of Ireland'[41]. Accordingly, Blythe's former oath of allegiance to the OO was now dead in the water. Blythe describes the club's activities, 'as in a state of suspended animation, meeting weekly in the back of McCullough's workshop, sitting on benches and on dismantled pianos and paying a shilling each week towards liquidating the debt'[42]. Blythe states, 'that caught between Joe Devlin and his Hibernians on one side and the Orange mob on the other, it was not possible to do much against their combined influences'[43]. According to Hay, Hobson and McCullough distributed the Dungannon Manifesto to all the press offices in Belfast and, to leading people of all shades of opinion in Ulster. McCullough's dreams of causing a furore and getting off to a flying start were quickly dashed when it was ignored by everyone[44]. This flurry of propaganda spreading also brought them to the attention of the RIC who became very interested in the club's pamphlets, 'describing the first two publications, an anti-military enlistment pamphlet and the Manifesto, as seditious'[45].

Blythe continued to keep faith with his chosen path. He launched himself wholeheartedly into a propaganda campaign to convert loyalists to Irish nationalism and gather in those nationalists who dithered about joining. He contributed to the club's activities, attended weekly lectures and debates, engaged in the publication of pamphlets and postcards featuring political

[38] National Library of Ireland (NLI), *Bulmer Hobson Papers*, MS 13166 (4).
[39] Hay, *Bulmer Hobson and the Nationalist Movement in Twentieth- Century Ireland*, 47.
[40] Ibid., 54.
[41] NLI, *Bulmer Hobson Papers*, MS 13166 (4)
[42] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 5.
[43] Ibid., 5.
[44] Hay, *Bulmer Hobson and the Nationalist Movement in Twentieth-Century Ireland*, 48.
[45] Ibid., 48.

cartoons or scenes from the era of the United Irishmen, produced with a view to promoting the need for Protestant and Catholic to work together, and contributing to a weekly newspaper entitled the *Republic* which died a death through a lack of interested readers. Following the demise of the *Republic*, Hobson and Blythe launched another paper 'to give them a voice in the continuing struggle for Irish freedom'[46]. 'This new monthly paper '*Irish Freedom'* was the first project of the Dublin Central Wolfe Tone Club's Committee (DCWTCC) which was established as a front for IRB activities and which purported to propagate the principles of the United Irishmen; when it first made its news-stand debut in 1910, it was openly separatist and republican, with Blythe being one of the contributors along with fellow revolutionaries Patrick Pearse, Thomas MacSwiney and Piaras Béaslaí'[47].

In 1912, Hobson encouraged readers of *Irish Freedom* to inaugurate Freedom Clubs in order to disseminate the ideals for which the paper stood. This appears to have been a do or die attempt to gather together the dispersed nationalists who were not quite ready to submit finally to English rule[48]. These clubs were the outlet for republican propaganda and were controlled by the IRB. The first club was inaugurated on 7 June 1912 in the Fianna Hall, Belfast, at which Blythe played a major role; his name was included on the minutes of the launch meeting[49].

Hay states that, although by 1913 Hobson was arguably the most powerful person in the republican movement in Ireland, his nationalist projects which started with great fanfare seemed to fade away[50]. Such was the fate of the Freedom Clubs. In October 1913 the Belfast Club's younger members declared it not sufficiently active and transferred their allegiance to the Young Republican Party which was a coalition of the GL, the Fianna and the Belfast working-class organisations aimed at propagating nationalism and republicanism amongst the young. However, all these fluctuations within the northern revolutionary organisations would soon to

[46] Ibid., 96.
[47] Ibid., 97.
[48] Ibid., 103.
[49] Ibid., 103.
[50] Ibid., 103.

be of little consequence for Blythe. In *Slán le hUltaibh*, he records his momentous decision to leave the north and migrate to the West Kerry:

> In the month of April 1913, after thinking about it for six months, I decided to travel across Ireland from County Down to West Kerry, from the true English-speaking district to the true Irish-speaking district, exchanging journalism for a farm labouring job[51].

2.7 We are the Billy boys: Royalist Ulster reigns supreme

Ernest Blythe had returned home at a period where growing unrest in Ulster regarding the possible imposition of Home Rule was beginning to be manifest. Aware that the proprietors of the *North-Down Herald* were pro-Union, Blythe would have known that any political articles produced by the paper would be strongly anti-Home Rule in flavour. Therefore, in January 7, 1910, when an article was published entitled, 'The 'Nation Makers' it is most likely that Blythe was aware of its message. The article, a diatribe against Redmond, Healy, O'Brien and Joseph Devlin, claimed that:

> These are the people and the leaders into whose hands it is proposed that the province of Ulster is to be delivered, bound and fettered if Home Rule passes. The settled and industrious province of Ulster which rejoices and prospers under the direct authority of the Parliament of the greatest Empire in the world, to be handed over to the rule of a petty provincial Council composed of Ultramontanes and common boycotters! The idea is unthinkable. To such an indignity Ulster will never submit. Ulstermen know by looking at the conduct of the various Nationalist factions what she might expect if placed at their mercy. It is no exaggeration to say that if Home Rule were to become a reality, Ulster would refuse to submit to such abominable conditions as the new order would speedily create in the country. Ulster will not have Home Rule. Her voice is decisive and, come what may her will on this great controversy, will determine the ultimate event[52].

How did Blythe keep a cool head in the face of such propoganda? How did he detach himself mentally to work on these loyalist articles which were at such variance with his own political ideals? Did the intensity of the Ulster Protestant response to Home Rule ever cause him to falter in his own separatist beliefs? Did Blythe indicate at any time that he was having second thoughts now that he was deep within the enemy camp? Research finds no evidence of Blythe having second thoughts or that he was afraid for his personal safety. He had the perfect cover in which to carry out his IRB work and good family credentials to fall back on. He was well known and liked by the public of Bangor and surrounding districts. If any Unionists were aware of his political sympathies, they may not have thought that he

[51] de Blaghd, *Slán le hUltaibh*, 7.
[52] "The Nation Makers," *North-Down Herald*, 7 January 1910.

represented any great danger to Ulster or, they may have given him, as Blythe hoped, a fool's pardon.

After the editorship of the *North-Down Herald* passed to a Harry Gaw Blythe was often asked to write the main articles. According to Blythe at the time, he was writing under a penname for the *Peasant, Irish Freedom* and the liberal *Ulster Guardian*. 'Ag an am sin bhínn ag scríobh - faoi ainm pinn uaireanta - don *Peasant* agus do *Irish Freedom* agus fós don *Ulster Guardian*'[53] [At the time I would be writing under a penname for the *Peasant, Irish Freedom* and the *Ulster Guardian*]. He states that he spent a lot of time writing the articles for the *Guardian* as he wanted to convey the truth. When writing the main Unionist articles, he never stressed himself in the slightest. In fact, he appears disdainful of the Unionists 'I didn't care what I would say in them except to avoid something that would anger the Unionists. I was able to sit down without any contemplation beforehand and have a main-piece ready for the printer in half an hour'[54]. According to Blythe:

> Gradually the ordinary Protestant community was starting to take seriously the thought that maybe, if it was God's will that they might have to fight by hand despite the English government, to save themselves from being put under the control of a Catholic parliament in Dublin. It was easy enough to form the opinion that they could fight against the English government without fighting against England itself. There wasn't an Orangeman in the country that didn't have the one fact in his mind, namely, that they put King James off the throne of England and, they had brought King Billy west from Holland to take his place for the good of Protestantism. With regard to the Orangemen, they were declaring their loyalty to England and their affection for England and, they took it that they were part of the British blood-related family and, that it would be a scandalous injustice for them to change any status that would put on them, against their will, an injustice that was their good right to fight against[55].

This statement supports Blythe's later counsel to the southerners on the border issue; that terror of Roman Catholicism was at the core of Protestant fears regarding the imposition of Home Rule.

For Blythe, the tenor of these speeches must now have caused him to question the wisdom of trying to convert Orangemen to Irish nationalism in this most loyal corner of the British Empire. Blythe would have recognised the doggedness of the Ulstermen at the heart of these objections and the accompanying mantra 'No Surrender'. Would Blythe continue to risk his

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[53] de Blaghd, *Trasna na Boinne*, 168.
[54]Ibid., 168
[55] Ibid., 213-214

liberty on a lost cause? Blythe expresses his disappointment at the lack of nationalist fervour in Ulster and his decision to move on to greener pastures. 'During the four years I spent in the north, the majority of the local population arose against Home Rule. It was no good working among the Protestants - there was no seed of nationalism among them. That left me with no choice but to go to some other part of Ireland'[56].

Blythe now turned his attention to perfecting his knowledge of Irish. He resigned from his job at the *North-Down Herald* and travelled to Kerry where he would earn his living working as a farm labourer.

2.8 Slán le hUltaibh: goodbye to the Ulstermen

Blythe's decision to go to Kerry was also prompted by a deepening sense that time was running out for him if he was to make any progress learning Irish and he was further disillusioned with his lack of success in the greening of Orange Ulster:

> As my interest in politics was decreasing my interest in Irish was strengthening again. I was sure that I wouldn't succeed in learning it well or even middling well unless I could be among people who had perfect and fluent Irish; because I understood at last that I had no aptitude to learn a language. I had read somewhere that even the best person couldn't master a language that he hadn't learnt well until he had arrived at twenty-five years. Therefore, I began thinking about getting a job in a big town in another county where there would be a lot of Irish spoken and full of fluent Irish speakers to be had[57].

Blythe had not given much thought to the practicalities of such a move; he had no job or accommodation in Kerry, for example. He had ideas of finding work as a roving reporter in Tralee until his friend Tomás Ó Súilleabhán informed him that he would be better off staying in Newtownards as Tralee was the biggest English-speaking area in Ireland[58]. Blythe was not put off by his friend's opinions. Head-strong and displaying the stubbornness which was a characteristic of his personality, he allowed his imagination free rein while conjuring up job opportunities in Kerry. Blythe was so desperate to get work that he considered working for the gombeenmen in a shop somewhere. Was he deluding himself with such schemes? Would all his plans come to nothing in the end?

> One night when I was cycling uphill from Newtownards on my way to Donaghadee, my mind was working about the question of the Gaeltacht and how long I would get to

[56] de Blaghd, *Slán le hUltaibh*, 7.
[57] Ibid., *Trasna na Boinne*, 209.
[58] Ibid., 208.

> spend there. Suddenly it occurred to me that I could get a job as a farm labourer. I did every kind of farm work during my youth and if I re-started then it wouldn't be long until I hardened my muscles again. It would be advantageous to get work on the land in order to learn Irish and read, and in the future, understand the language. I would change from an office man to a field man. My health would improve and, my limbs would strengthen. It would leave me able to stand the weather and the walking. In a year as a farm labourer I would be in fighting form to endure if I was called on to be a soldier for Ireland[59].

This evidence shows that Blythe was still contemplating continuing his mission as an Irish separatist at some stage in the future. 'Coming to the end of my four years in Newtownards I wrote to Peadar Ó hAnnracháin that I was thinking of going south in a couple of weeks and if he knew where I could get a farm where there was food and lodgings. I got a letter from Peadar with information that I should stay with the Seabhac in Killarney on my way to Dingle'[60].

Before leaving Ulster, Blythe said goodbye to his work colleagues and immediate family. He recalls his feelings on leaving the Doggart family of Bangor with whom he had lodged for over two years. 'When I had put my trunk in the car to take it to the station and I was saying goodbye to the six of them, it was hard for me not to show my tender feelings'[61]. At this late stage does Blythe express any doubts about his decision? Would he renege on his plans to go south? Is he fully aware that he has made a decision that could change the course of his life forever? That he may not be again welcome in the land of his birth and that his family and friends might forsake him.

> When I was on the train going to Belfast, I was fairly worried by the thought that I would hardly see those people again who, had been my close friends for a time. I was on my own in the carriage and it didn't matter to me when some tears escaped my eyes. I felt that a break was happening in my life and that I wouldn't have heart-friendship links again with any one of my Unionist friends[62].

In a poignant statement in *Trasna na Boinne* Blythe bares his soul. It is a rare glimpse into a soft, sentimental side of his character which was seldom exposed throughout his long life. Blythe takes up the story of his final hours in his native Ulster. In the solitude of the old family parlour he reflects on his decision:

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[59] Ibid., 211.
[60] Ibid., 220-221.
[61] Ibid., 222.
[62] Ibid., 222.

I spent a few days in my father's house before I left for the south. I didn't enlighten my father what I was going to do but I didn't withhold anything from the rest of the household. My sister Helen asked if I had everything I needed. I said I did. She asked me how many shirts I had. I said I had two shirts, the one I was wearing and another in the trunk. Helen went straight with me to Lisnagarvey and bought two more shirts for me. The last night that I was at home, I sat in the old parlour after everyone else had gone to bed. I had no inclination to read. I was looking into the fire and thinking of the companions that I was about to turn my back on and on the course ahead of me. A kind of stage-fright hit me, a bit like that which hit me when I was waiting to go on stage the first night that we presented The Drone. Then it occurred to me that maybe I wouldn't get work in the Gaeltacht. That maybe it was completely foolish this scheme that I had and that I was making a right fool of myself. The mood soon passed. Then I said to myself that I wouldn't leave Kerry until I had learned a good bit of Irish even if I had to go into the poorhouse in Dingle as a tramp and stay there a few months[63].

[63] Ibid., 223.

Chapter Three

Ar lorg na Gaeilge: seeking the Irish language 1913-14

3.1 Introduction

Chapter Two focused on Ernest Blythe's revolutionary career in Ulster and his job with the *North-Down Herald and Bangor Gazette.* At the end of this period Blythe realised that in the north both Irish nationalism and the Irish language were beyond redemption. Blythe returned south to immerse himself in learning Irish; his destination, west Kerry. Chapter Three will examine his time in Kerry where he had high hopes of learning plenty of Irish and observing his activities in an area where daily life and culture were in complete contrast to that of the affluence of Magheragall. Would Blythe's dream of adding to his 'giota beag Gaeilge' [little bit of Irish] be realised?

Chapter Three will also seek to identify if Blythe was involved in any underground activitiy vis à vis the revolutionary movements whilst in Kerry. Excerpts from Blythe's *Slán le hUltaibh,* published in 1970, will be used to reflect different periods of his time in Kerry.

3. 2 Blythe ag dul ó dheas: Blythe going south.

> In the month of April 1913, around six months thinking on it for the first time, I was ready to transfer across Ireland from east County Down in the north of Ireland, to west Kerry, from the true English-speaking district, to the true Irish-speaking district, hoping to exchange journalism for a labouring job in agriculture. The 1911 census figures showed the Irish wasn't in safekeeping so, I thought that there was nothing wrong in spending some time in the Gaeltacht. Moreover, if I was to get a reasonable grasp of the language, it was time for me to hurry or I would be too old. Because of that I said goodbye to my Unionist friends in Newtownards and set my face towards Kerry[1].

Blythe was dissatisfied with the low level of profiency he attained with the GL and so this was the more logical step. He interrupted his journey to Kerry to rendezvous with some of his separatist friends in Dublin:

[11] E. de Blaghd, *Slán le hUltaibh* (Sáirséal agus Dill, Baile átha Cliath, 1970), 7.

> When I arrived in Dublin on my way south, I spent a couple days with Bulmer Hobson before going to the office of the *Irish Freedom* newspaper. I resumed my acquaintance with Sean MacDiarmada who was the manager of the paper. I hadn't been to Dublin for four years and I wanted to meet with my old friends. Along with Bulmer, I went to see Sinéad ní Fhlannagáin. It was the first time I met Eamon de Valera. Myself, and Hobson visited St. Enda's school where I spoke with Patrick Pearse for the first time. That night Bulmer and I went to the house of the Countess Markievicz who lived on Leinster Road. There were around a dozen others in the sitting room[2].

There is no evidence to suggest that this visit was organised beforehand. However, it raises questions as to why Blythe visited his revolutionary colleagues first before going further south. Blythe's friends were all highly placed persons within the emerging separatist movement and would become prominent participants in the future rebellion of 1916. Was his leaving the north part of an elaborate ruse by the IRB to move key men into positions in the south for forth-coming military purposes? It would be unlikely that the political situation was not discussed at these gatherings and any plans for future insurrection discussed; Blythe had already hinted of his future involvement in the revolutionary struggle. It is worth noting that Blythe would be on a casual basis in Kerry and would be more readily available at a moment's notice if required by the IRB to move to another area.

Blythe was now a 'made man' within the separatist elite. He does not appear to have had any friends or interests outside of Irish language circles and the nationalist movement at that time. Whilst in Dublin he had strengthened his ties with the men and women who would be his comrades if he resumed the freedom struggle. Blythe's world would revolve around this cadre of intimates with whom he would later share the hardships of imprisonment and deportation; the hunger strikes; the loss of comrades during the 1916 Rising, the War of Independence and the Civil War, with the bitter knowledge, that despite all his efforts, Ireland was partitioned, not free and Gaelic as he had desired.

3.3 Fear ó íochtar na hEireann: a man from the north of Ireland

Blythe finally arrived in Kerry and as he was acquainting himself with the area, he learned quickly that he could not remain incognito for long, especially being a stranger with a strong northern brogue. On a visit to a

[2] de Blaghd, *Slán le hUltaibh*, 9.

neighbouring house, Blythe came under scrutiny from the inquisitive women-folk of the area:

> An Irish speaking, middle-aged neighbour woman came in and asked who the stranger was. I was then introduced by the daughter of McGearailt as a man from the north of Ireland and that I was looking for her brother. I tried to have a conversation with the old woman but I had so little Irish on my tongue that I had to give up. After a while another old woman came in and she asked the first woman questions about me. She narrated the story and it was clear that she had contempt for my Irish and that I didn't understand her. The new neighbour then asked if I had Gaelic. 'No', said the first woman, 'he has only a bit of broken Irish[3].

Later this tongue-tied, would-be Gaelgoir, became the most dedicated promoter of an Irish language regeneration campaign in the twentieth century. Blythe became a powerful advocate for the renewal of the Gaeltacht regions. According to Blythe's secretary, Leon ÓBróin:

> There was no Minister for Irish nor a Minister for the Gaeltacht but in a sense, Blythe discharged both roles. He had a Gaeltacht map on the wall facing his desk and often on late evenings I stood there with him talking about the problems of the language. He knew the Kerry Gaeltacht himself, having worked there as a labourer and as an organiser for the IRB and the Volunteers; he was in regular touch with a Josie Mongan about the position in Connemara, and no doubt had contacts as well with other places where Irish was hanging on[4].

This second incident with the neighbour women, also highlighted another danger for Blythe; that posed by the inquisitive nature of the locals. As arranged beforehand Blythe was met by a gentleman whose nom-de plume was 'the Seabhac', a 'Mr. P. Sugrue'[5] who arranged a night's lodgings for him, providing letters of introduction to people in Ventry, Dingle and Dunquin. The following morning as Blythe was resuming his journey, he heard for the first time the speech of the Gaeltacht. 'As I was walking down the street next morning with the Seabhac, the weather was wet with a heavy drizzle. I heard an Irish speaker from the country who blessed me, saying that it was a fine, soft day, and I sensed that I was on the edge of the Gaeltacht'[6].

3.4 Blythe meets a kindred spirit: two swallows who made a summer

[3] Ibid., 13.
[4] L. Ó Broin, *Just like Yesterday* (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1986), 85-86.
[5] "On the "Seachran," *Evening Herald*, 8 April 1926, 1
[6] de Blaghd, *Slán le hUltaibh*, 9.

Blythe was not the only Irish language student in Kerry at the time. The Ó Rahilly was also deeply involved with the GL, contributing greatly to the Irish revival and a supporter also of SF[7]. According to Blythe, at around the same time he was greeted by a man with an English accent. That man was Desmond Fitzgerald who had come to live in Ballintaggart, a mile outside Dingle. 'Fitzgerald and his wife Mabel Fitzgerald (nee McConnell) had returned to Ireland from Brittany ostensibly to improve their Irish'[8].

Mabel Fitzgerald had also been born into a staunchly Unionist Presbyterian family in Belfast in 1884 having a lot in common with Ernest Blythe. During her student years at Queens University Belfast, Mabel became radicalized, developing her stance on Irish republicanism, woman's rights and socialist politics, the Irish language, becoming a member of SF and the GL. She eloped to marry Catholic poet, Desmond Fitzgerald. During the 1916 Rising, Mabel was present in the GPO alongside her husband Desmond. Patrick Pearse objected on the grounds that two parents of young children should not be fighting so Mabel had to leave. Mabel adopted the anti-Treaty stance in contrast to her husband Desmond. (Mabel was the more political of the two) This led to friction within their marriage but not divorce. Following the assassination of Kevin O'Higgins, Mabel moved closer to her husband's position. She converted to Catholicism in 1943[9].

According to Blythe, 'Fitzgerald's wife came from Donaghadee, where as a reporter at the Petty Sessions, I had often met her father who was an exceedingly cranky magistrate. I was with the Fitzgerald's practically every Sunday during the period I remained in Kerry'[10]. Three prominent figures of the revolutionary movement were now in Corca Duibhne, all within walking distance of each other, all seemingly focused on learning the Irish Language and all deeply embued with the spirit of Irish separatism. This may have been sheer coincidence but there was now even greater potential for the

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[7] A. O'Rahilly, *Winding the Clock Ó Rahilly and the 1916 Rising* (The Lilliput Press, Dublin, 1991), 69.
[8] J. M. Regan, *The Irish-Counter Revolution 1921-1936*: *Treatyite Politics and Settlement in Independent Ireland* (Gill & Macmillan Ltd, Dublin, 1999), 90.
[9] Conor Morrisey, *"Much the more political of the two": Mabel Fitzgerald and the Irish Revolution* www.tandfoline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09670882.2016.1195472
[10] Bureau of Military History 1913-1921 (BMH) Document No. WS 939, 6.

discussion of nationalistic ideology and the planning of future warfare. Blythe considered himself fortunate that the Fitzgerald's had moved to Corca Duibhne at the same time as himself. 'If it wasn't for them and the pleasure and encouragement they gave me on the Sundays I spent in their company, I couldn't have been as happy with everyday life in the Gaeltacht the rest of the week'[11]. Fitzgerald records how he came to meet Blythe:

> My intuitive conviction that we were on the eve of a national revival, found something to feed upon. One morning I called into a shop in Dingle where the owner said to me that she had just been talking about me and that there was another man here on the same mission as your-self. Indeed he's worse than you are. He wants a job as a farm labourer with an Irish-speaking farmer. He's ready to work without pay so that he can stay here for two years. I was told the stranger was looking for lodgings and that he had just left. I asked his name and was told that 'it was the funniest name you ever heard of, for a Gael, 'Blight'. She wrote it down and I saw the name was Ernest Blythe. Nobody in Kerry ever pronounced it other than 'Blight'. Indeed they translated it into Irish as 'Blaisd' which means 'the blight on the potatoes'. I found Blythe at the lodging house and invited him home with me. Blythe was as astounded at my presence as I was with his[12].

This encounter marked the beginning of a lasting friendship, throughout which both men worked towards an Irish language revival, both becoming deeply involved in the IRB, the IV and the preparations for the 1916 rising. Both men had been affected by the 1911 census returns showing the decay of Irish and both believed that unless a revival took place, the last generation speaking Irish was the generation already alive. Fitzgerald corroborates Blythe's statement:

> Blythe stated that for him time was passing and where he was (in the north) he was never likely to get any real grasp of the language, never likely to speak it and read it with any ease and there was only one way to learn Irish, and that was to go and live where it was the natural language of the people. Blythe believed that at the end of two years he should have a command of the language that would put him in a position to work for the language thereafter. At the same time, he wanted to work for a general national resurgence. But about that he was as vague as I was[13].

Was this remark of a general national resurgence a hint to Blythe's future revolutionary intentions? In 1914, Fitzgerald was the organiser of a group of Volunteers in Kerry. It could now be construed that Blythe was on IRB business in Kerry, ostensibly under the guise of learning Irish and that the weekly Sunday meetings with the Fitzgerald's were also occasions where

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[11] de Blaghd, *Slán le hUltaibh*, 17.
[12] D. Fitzgerald, *Desmond's Rising –Memoirs 1913 to Easter 1916* (Liberties Press, Dublin, 1968/2006), 31-32.
[13] Ibid., 33.

revolution was discussed. Fitzgerald states that in 1913 he and Blythe had confided to each other that they were on the eve of a period of more intense nationalism in Ireland:

> We had not been able to point to any premonitory symptoms of such a revival, but by April 1914 we considered that the feeling in our bones had already proved to be prophetic[14]. All the discouragement that I had experienced amounted to nothing when I found that the dreams that had germinated in my own mind had also germinated in Blythe's. That seemed a clear proof that we were both right. We both convinced each other, or rather convinced ourselves, that that dream was also germinating in thousands of minds. That a sudden change was about to come over the country. That we were two swallows who made a summer[15].

3.5 Ag cuardach oibre i Daingean: looking for work in Dingle

Furnished with letters of introduction Blythe went on his journey around Dingle looking for farm work. He was received with politeness but no enthusiasm. 'People obviously thought I was a queer bird'[16]. One day Blythe's bicycle developed a puncture and he was without patching solution. Blythe describes his predicament. 'After a couple of hundred yards the tube blew on my bike. I hadn't any rubber solution to fix it. I went into a house and asked if anyone of the people in the house had a bicycle or, if any of the neighbours had one, and that I was hoping to find a drop of solution'[17]. He was informed by the locals that the only place he could get patching solution was at the RIC barracks. Blythe was now faced with no other option but go in search of the RIC barracks. He was fortunate on this occasion that the police appeared not to know of his reputation and didn't press him for further information; they also provided him with a new tube.

His major problem now was finding work, especially farm work, was looking grim. He was unprepared for the news he received:

> At last MacGearalt came back and I gave him the Seabhac's letter. He spoke well-mannerly to me but he was sorry to say that he would have no business for the likes of me. I explained to him that I was raised on a farm and that I experience of every aspect of farm work and, even though I was working in an office this last while, that I was healthy, strong and there was nothing to prevent me from using a spade or a shovel as well as the next man. I asked him if he knew of anyone else who would take on my likes. He didn't think there was anyone in Ceann Trá that would be worth his while trying for me. But maybe I would get a place in another parish. Although MacGearalt was polite, he laid it clear to me that it would not be easy for me to find a farmer who would take me. That was a thought that startled me[18].

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[14] Fitzgerald, *Desmond's Rising-Memoirs 1913-Easter 1916*, 52.
[15] Ibid., 33.
[16] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 7.
[17] Ibid., 15.
[18] de Blaghd, *Slan le hUltaibh*, 14.

Blythe then approached the local school master in Dún Chaoin for help:

> I found Master Ó Dalaigh and gave him my letter. After he had read it, he said to me that there wasn't, in his opinion, anyone who would take me, and to be truthful he wouldn't ask anyone here to take me either, because that would be like buying a pig in a poke. Never was a common noun more smoothly applied to me as was Gearaltach Ceann Trá[19].

Blythe despaired that there was not one farmer that would even give him a try. The fault lay entirely with Blythe himself. He had failed to carry out any poper investigation of farming conditions in the Kerry Gaeltacht and he now faced the sobering reality that most of the farms and houses were a lot smaller than he had first imagined; it was becoming clear that it would not be easy to find a farmer who could hire him. He was right in his estimation. The economy of Corca Dhuibhne was very reliant on agriculture in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The 1926 Census points to eighty percent of men aged twelve years and over working in agriculture. Small farms were the norm which were typically owned and worked by the farmer and his family; very little outside labour was employed. It was a hand-to-mouth existence, with produce being grown for home consumption and not for the market. 'The pervasive poverty which this economic structure generated, combined with relatively high birth-rates and very limited employment opportunities either in agriculture or outside it, gave rise to substantial levels of emigration'[20].

The Fitzgerald's continued to offer their hospitality while Blythe continued looking for work. He thought he might have to go back north if a job didn't materialize quickly. Blythe was so keen to succeed in his mission that he made up his mind he wouldn't leave Coirce Duibhne until he had learned more Irish. 'If I had to, I would sell everything I had, bicycle, trunk, bag and spare clothes and in order to live among the Gaeilgeoirí, I would live in the poorhouse - this is as I had promised myself before I would go back north'[21]. Just when his hopes were at their lowest, he received a letter

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[19] Ibid., 14.
[20] P. Ó'Riagáin, *Language Maintenance and Language Shift as Strategies of Social Reproduction-Irish in the Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht 1926-86* (Institiuid Teangeolaiochta Éireann, Baile átha Cliath, 1992), 25.
[21] de Blaghd, *Slán le hUltaibh*, 17.

from Sean McDermott with the promise of work on the farm of Thomas Ashe. Fitzgerald describes Blythe's determination to find work:

> After a few days spent on his bicycle riding all day around the country in pouring rain without success, Blythe got a letter from Dublin telling him to go to see people who lived on a small farm at Kinnard, east of Dingle, but in a little spot where Irish was general. He went off there and came back as usual drenched to the skin but with the news that he was now taken on as a labourer for his keep[22].

The revolutionary clique looked out for each other in times of pressing need. Without their assistance, Blythe would not have had the chance that he so desperately wanted to learn Irish. In the short space of time from Blythe's arrival in Kerry, he had been furnished with accommodation and work. Blythe was delighted to have found work:

> I was overjoyed to get this letter. Eilís de Barra told me where Kinnard was and I went east on my bicycle towards Ballintaggart without wasting time calling with the Mhic Gearailt family to share my news. The Ashe family were awaiting my arrival and were a little inquisitive but polite to me. I settled for food and bed in return for working for them and I would start work on the following day. Off I went in the direction of Dingle without delay and on my way west I visited the Mhic Gearailt family. The following morning, I paid for my lodgings and went east on the train to Lispole station. I left my truck at the station and went up to Kinnard with my bicycle and my small bag[23].

3.6 Gaeilge go leor: plenty of Irish

Ernest Blythe arrived at the Ashe farm in April 1913 and was now facing the prospect of living in the impoverished Corca Dhuibhne. How would he fare when confronted with the hardships on the Ashe's hard scrabble farm? Would his desire to learn Irish overcome the deprivations and hard work that awaited him? He had grown soft during his years as a newspaper reporter and unaccustomed to hard manual labour. Blythe admits that he was starting a life that was nothing like he had expected. He records his initial impressions of the farm and the surrounding area:

> I was starting a life that was nothing like the things that I was expecting. The farming of the south was backward compared to my experience - and it's even backward compared to life now. Irish was being abandoned in the area and there weren't many farmers who employed a man and the odd man who did need someone, didn't speak Irish. The strength of English in the area disappointed me and it was a pity that I didn't stick to the advice of the Seabhac and stay west of Dingle[24].

Desmond Fitzgerald also found evidence of the decline in spoken Irish giving weight to Blythe's impressions:

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[22] Fitzgerald, *Desmond's Rising, Memoirs 1913 to Easter 1916*, 33.
[23] de Blaghd, *Slán le hUltaibh*, 17
[24] Ibid., 17-19

> In the Irish speaking district, one could, as it were, watch the progressive death of the language. Not only was there a difference between the language of the old men from pre-famine days and that of the middle-aged men, but also between that of the middle-aged men and the younger generation. The old men spoke Irish all the time, even when they went in to Dingle; the middle-aged men spoke Irish at home in the village, but English when they went to town. And often even in Ballyferriter one would hear the younger men speaking English together[25].

Blythe may have been initially lured to Kerry based on the high praise given to it by those who had experienced the richness of its culture. 'For a number of reasons Munster was a favourite with many converts to the language revival movement at that time; the Irish patois which is the foundation of modern literary Irish; the wealth of the area which had helped to sustain Irish extensively through to the 19th century and also to maintain a literati whose task it would be to produce literature for the future literary revivalists to reclaim'[26]. According to Hindley, 'this same relative wealth had a negative effect, providing more impetus to English on the petering-out of the Penal Laws and by 1926, the Gaeltacht Commission could find only small areas in which Irish was at all secure; Munster's rate of decline was the most advanced'[27]. One district which featured in Blythe's travel itinerary was Ceann Trá [Ventry] which had been fostering the use of English prior to 1914[28]. Similarly, the inclusion of the town of Dingle in the official Gaeltacht in 1926 was unjustified through its lack of spoken Irish in the area. It did however reveal a wish to retrieve the number one spot for the language[29]. Based on these findings, Blythe's journey to Kerry seemed to be a waste of time. However, every cloud has a silver lining, as Blythe was to find out:

> For that, I was lucky in some respects that I could not have imagined beforehand. If I could weigh up the story before I left Newtownards, I would say that I would be unhappy to put up with an area where Irish was being abandoned at speed. But against that, I got insight in Kinnard of the state of the language and the way it was declining. That was something I wouldn't get in an area where Irish was safe and strong and being spoken by young and old. I was lucky that I was to stay with the Ashe family while I was in the Gaeltacht. Above all else I was lucky to be living with Gregory Ashe. Not only was he a proper gentleman by nature, but he had a fluency and a purity of Irish and a store of songs and stories[30].

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[25] Fitzgerald, *Desmond's Rising Memoirs, 1913 to Easter 1916*, 28.
[26] R. Hindley, *The Death of the Irish Language (Routledge*, Oxon, 1991), 108.
[27] Ibid., 108
[28] Ibid., 110.
[29] Ibid., 110.
[30] de Blaghd, *Slán le hUltaibh*, 19.

It hadn't been in vain that Blythe had chosen Kerry after all; with the Ashe family he had now every opportunity to learn plenty of Irish:

> Gregory was also interested in Irish questions and was able to correct me regarding sounds and grammer without lowering my spirits or being rude. He knew Ossianic poems like the Hill of the Slaughter and the poetry of Piaras Feiritéir of by heart and a whole lot of songs. I had a great respect for him from the start and it wasn't long until I knew that I would not meet anyone with a mastery of the language like Gregory had. He made me very proud when he told me after a while that my own Irish was improving. I was all the more proud when he admitted at the same time that he was afraid at the beginning that my language was so hung that I would never be able to speak Irish[31].

If Blythe had known in advance of the backward life-style in that part of Kerry would he have still gone there? Had he chosen another less backward area however, he would not have encountered the Fitzgeralds or the Ashe family. It was providential that he chose Kerry; in this area he could experience the life and culture of the Gaeltacht natives and see at first hand the disappearance of Irish, an experience which would later help influence his decision making to effect change in the gaeltacht regions.

3.7 Obair chrua ar an talamh: hard work on the land

> Although I was brought up on a farm, I had not done any manual work for some years and found it exceedingly hard at first. Not only did my hands blister and give me trouble, but I was so sleepy at night that when I was listening to people speaking Irish that I could not keep awake[32].

Had Blythe any idea what he was getting into when he chose Kerry? He had been a boy when he had last worked on a farm. Was his ambition to learn Irish so strong that he was prepared to slave from dawn until dusk among the rocks and bogs of Kerry to fulfil this ambition? His childhood fantasies of Gaeilge agus Saoirse had obviously not faded with the passage of time, with regard to the Irish language at least. Blythe's memorable description of gathering stones off the fields, planting potatoes, lopping turnips, gathering potatoes, cutting turf and hay, are glimpses of farming life in a community before the introduction of modern agricultural machinery and where a livelihood was earned by the sweat of the brow:

> That wasn't the only thing that gave me the thought that farming in Lios Póil was backward. Because the holdings in the south were smaller than they were in the area I was raised, it wasn't worth the regular farmer in Kinnard buying specialist equipment that would spare the work unless he was able to do it together with two or three of his

[31] Ibid., 19.
[32] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 7.

> neighbours. No one in Kinnard had a roller to push the stones down into the soil when the seed oats and grass seed was planted. Because of this, and so that the scythe wouldn't cause damage when the corn would be cut, long hours were spent preparing for the harvest by walking the ground with a bucket picking up the stones that would be dangerous for the cutting equipment and threw behind the fence[33].

As was to be expected the farm work finally began to have its effect on Blythe. 'In the beginning the skin on my hands was sore from handling the spade, or the fork or shovel and I would get tired and drowsy when I sat down beside the fire at night attempting to get sense from the outpouring of Irish from Gregory and Matti Ashe who visited almost every evening'[34].

Blythe was now aware of his lack of Irish and had noticed people growing impatient with his stammering. He vowed on the first evening he was in Kinnard that he would speak no English whilst there. He found this resolution difficult, having to wait three or four weeks before he got the Irish to say something he wanted to say, but quickly he began to understand what was being said to him. He kept his resolution so well that Maireád Ashe, a cousin of Tom Ashe, meeting him in 1922 in Dublin said, that that was the first time she had ever heard him speak English[35]. Blythe's perseverance paid off as his blisters healed and his limbs grew stronger:

> My hands stopped getting sore and my limbs grew more energetic. Soon I was able to endure the cold and wet. Before, if I got wet, I would have a cold. But after a time working out-doors I noticed that if I would get wet, I could sit beside the fire until my clothes were dry and not get a cold. Moreover, as the strength returned to my muscles and, as I grew more experienced with the manual work, the tiredness lessened so that I was able to stay awake beside the hearth when the conversations were going on[36].

Blythe soon discovered that getting to speak Irish depended on who were the most dedicated Irish speakers, as some visitors spoke English:

> It was clear to me that I would get little Irish except from the old people. The young people and the middle-aged for whom it was usual to speak English together, preferred to speak to me in English. Because my Irish was so weak, scant and lisping, it was a kind of punishment for other people to converse in that language with me. It wasn't just that I didn't speak English to anyone in Kinnard but, I wouldn't pay heed to anything they would say to me in English. If someone spoke to me in English, I would let on that I was completely deaf; when they turned to Irish, I would answer them. When they would tell a joke or funny story in English when I was with them and, if I didn't let on that I had heard or understood what they were saying, often they would translate the full thing in Irish so that I could do my own share of laughing[37].

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[33] de Blaghd, *Slán le hUltaibh*, 34.
[34] Ibid., 34.
[35] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 8.
[36] de Blaghd, *Slán le hUltaibh*, 34-35.
[37] Ibid., 34-35.

Desmond Fitzgerald states that both he and Blythe were making progress speaking Irish:

> He more than I, for he spoke nothing else from weekend to weekend. We had practically no communication with the outside world of nationalist Ireland, or with any organised body. But we felt that if we could win that little corner of west Kerry that the rest of the country would follow naturally. Blythe had imposed a sort of vow upon himself never to read or speak a word that was not Irish on his working days. I had a library of books which Blythe would read when he was with us at weekends, but he never took back any book which wasn't written in Irish[38].

Blythe states that French books appealed to him having learned French at school and still retained most of it. Therefore, he decided that if he was living in Dublin or any other place where there were French books to be had, he wouldn't read in the language of the enemies, but only books about Irish affairs. Provided the subject was relevant, he would read only those in Irish or French:

> From the time I thought of that plan I never read any of the English books that Deasún had. After leaving Kerry, I was for years in places where there were no French books to be had. I forgot for a long time the thought that Irish nationalists should avoid English as much as possible. By the time I had remembered again, I had changed my mind about it and, I thought it was acting strange to be abstaining from ordinary English books. It was clear to me, if I was to influence people, I couldn't avoid the wild dens in intellectual and communication affairs[39].

It could be said that Blythe was taking his Irish-Ireland ideals to an absurd level but as a disciple, he would have felt this was the appropriate thing to do. With both the Irish language and Irish nationalism, Blythe was a zealot. He had a strong conviction that Ireland without its native language was a country without a soul: 'tír gan teanga, tír gan anam'. Blythe's ability to absorb the language was improving. He had read *Séadna* and a small amount of other Irish books; he had a smattering of words and was able to recognize the sounds and understand them in speech. One major problem which bededvilled all students of Irish was grammer. 'Another thing that left me lisping in broken Irish was that I couldn't learn the rules of grammer at all, and in my first attempts to discuss questions in Irish I broke every rule there ever was. And of course, when I needed to discuss modern affairs, a big obstacle for me was the lack of technical terms, most of which are now available'[40]. Blythe was at this stage becoming absorbed into the culture of

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[38] Fitzgerald, *Desmond's Rising-Memoirs 1913 to Easter 1916*, 34.
[39] de Blaghd, *Slán le hUltaibh*, 44.
[40] Ibid., 36-37.

the Kerry Gaeltacht. He appears happy and relaxed in his new environment and his writing conveys a sense that he had found his spiritual home there.

At Christmas 1913, Blythe returned to Belfast for three weeks during which time he spoke at meetings of the Dungannon Club[41]. On his return journey to Kerry he stopped off in Dublin where he attended Volunteer drill meetings to learn the mystery of forming fours[42]. Not even the holy period of Christmas could deter Blythe from his nationalist business. These two events are corroborating evidence that Blythe had an ongoing connection still with the IRB and that as he worked and learned Irish, he was kept abreast by the revolutionary organisations of their activities.

Further evidence of Blythe's ongoing separatist commitments came in the form of a summons from Seán McDermott of the IRB in March 1914 to return to Belfast to work on an anti-partition campaign. Blythe was to write, speak, and generally organise the affair[43]. Meetings were held on the Falls Road where a coal lorry was used as a platform. According to Blythe:

> A very big crowd came to listen to us. We attacked partition strongly without saying anything against Joe Devlin and got a very good reception. After a period of two months it became clear that we could not alter the complexion of political affairs in Belfast and that there was nothing more to be done at this juncture. Meantime, I had been at some drills run by the Fianna and the Volunteers. I then went back to Kerry[44].

3.8 Slán go dtí na Gaeltachtí: goodbye to the Gaeltachts

Blythe's time in the Kerry gaeltacht was coming to an end. When he returned it would be in the capacity of an IV organiser, laying the foundations for the anticipated revolution. Reflecting on his time in Kerry and what he had gained in terms of learning Irish including his impressions of the area, Blythe heaps praise on the Ashe family and the people of Kinnard; of how their input helped fulfil his dream of learning Irish. He was kept abreast of political matters via the newspapers and journals which were sent by his friends:

> I got enjoyment from the life in Kinnard. I enjoyed the people. I enjoyed the outdoor work. I got to speak a lot of Irish. I got some grammar. I didn't read much English during that time. The *Sunday Independent* and the *Kerryman* were in the house every

[41] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 8.
[42] Ibid., 8.
[43] Ibid., 8.
[44] Ibid., 9.

> week. Séan Mac an Leastair sent me *The New Age* through the post. I got the *Irish Homestead* and *Irish Freedom* through the post for myself. In Kinnard, aside from these, I read little except the Irish books I'd brought from the north[45].

Blythe had also developed his own unique method of learning Irish whilst working in fields. He describes how he memorised Irish words by rote so that he would be able to write articles for the nationalist newspapers:

> When I would be doing manual work or hand work that kept me doing the same thing over and over again without much responsibility, spreading manure or loping turnips for example, I was able to ponder for the day whatever topic that I chose. I put word after word and sentence after sentence into my mind until I had the whole thing and, until I had it jotted down on paper. I didn't loose one bit of what I had composed in my mind. Because of that, it was easy for me to sit down with a pen in the kitchen in the evening. The noise and talk going on around me never annoyed me. In Newtownards I could write a main article on Unionism (that I didn't believe a word of) quickly. In Kinnard, I could write the articles for *Irish Freedom* quicker again, even though I was very particular about them[46].

According to Blythe the people of Kinnard were better off than the people of western Kinnard and so there was less Irish spoken within his area and that it was the young girls who were taken with the English language. He ascribes this to the girls working in the houses who were sticking to English for the good of the children. The young men had better and more abundant Irish than the young women, them being out with the old people in the fishing boats or in the fields, with communication between them being in Irish:

> In the parish of Lispole from a language perspective, it was the fashion to go with the English language and turn your back on the Irish. Another thing, often, the house would be filled with the whole of the Ashe family and the neighbours going over events of the day or farming affairs or country affairs in Irish, when a Gaeilgeoir would come in with the *Kerryman.* As soon as a piece or even a headline in English was read from that newspaper, whether it was because of Kerry footballer or English tyranny or, the chance of Ireland having self-rule, they would start talking in English, and surprisingly, I couldn't get the company to turn back to the Gaeilge[47].

Ernest Blythe must have been a most unwelcome guest at any gathering where the people of Lispole wished to converse in English. His enthuasism for putting Irish back on the tongues of the people was not endorsed by everyone:

> Without doubt Irish was spoken more often in the house when I was lodged there than they would speak in my absence. They were regularly speaking Irish when I was in their company, especially if there were only a few people in, because they stayed in the one group of conversation. But in spite of me succeeding in getting Irish spoken on many occasions or keeping it going when English was going on if I didn't put my foot down, I

[45] de Blaghd, *Slán le hUltaibh*, 41.
[46] Ibid., 43.
[47] Ibid., 39.

> recognised that I wouldn't have a constant influence at all on the opinion or practice of those people that I was living with. Any time that I was in the company of young people and middle-aged people who were numerous enough to separate into conversation groups of two or three, the only group that continued in Irish was the group where I was[48].

According to Blythe, the Irish in Kinnard was being chased out some sixty to one hundred years before he arrived there. Gregory Ashe, who was sixty years of age had wonderful Irish although he was brought up in English in Kinnard. When he was a young boy, he was forbidden to speak Irish at home in any circumstances. He wasn't allowed to speak it at home in the presence of his father until the year before he got married. He learned Irish from the neighbours who regularly came to the house and spoke only Irish and he couldn't go outside the door just so he wouldn't hear it. Because of that Gregory couldn't remember a time that Irish wasn't as prompt as English to him. The rest of the Ashe family were good Irish speakers and, by the time Sean Ashe's family came along and their parents only speaking English to them, spoken Irish was so scanty around Kinnard that there wouldn't be any Irish worth mentioning if it wasn't for two language programmes going on in the school in Lispole. Blythe's acute insight into what was happening around him ascribes this practice to peer-pressure and of the long-held habit of avoiding Irish when it was easier to speak in English:

> The grip of experience, or practice, or habit is great on people and I realised for the first time that it would be slow, boring work to put Irish back on course in place of English and, that it couldn't be done inside the era of one generation or two. That old practice and family habits put up against every attempt to turn a part-Gaeltacht back to being a Gaeltacht. And it was clear to me also the harm that one anti-Gaeilge person could do, unless there were strong forces working for Irish against it. Between April 1913 when I first went there and September 1914 when I left the road from Kinnard I was around tweleve months there, I did, I think, as much as I could do during that time to press upon the neighbours that it was their duty as nationalist Irish people, to stick to the Irish. I think I had a special regard, even if they didn't understand me. They must of course, or a lot of them thought that I was a little out of my mind and I'm certain that certain other people thought that I was trying to pick up Irish so that I could get a job as a teacher or something for myself [49].

Blythe reflects on his contribution to not only keeping alive the Irish language in the area but also to awakening in the people a sense of their

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[48] Ibid., 39.
[49] Ibid., 38.

Irishness. He was aware also that most of what he had said and done would be remembered by some and forgotten by the majority:

> Even with all that, everyone was friendly to me and a lot of them were willing, after a while, to take guidance from me in political affairs. I think, because of that that any other ordinary person could do more inside the same period of time than I did to drive home the basic gospel of true nationalism to people. And I'm sure that I wasn't gone a week before the state of Irish returned to as it was as if I had never been except perhaps that it was a little more fluent among those I compelled to practise it[50].

Blythe's Irish language and nationalist indoctrination scheme had fallen on deaf ears in the north and probably had little chance of having any lasting effect in Dingle at the time. People could not be forced to speak Irish, the language that they had been forcibly made to forget a generation or two previously, and that full-freedom, with a national government, was necessary in order to protect it:

> What I had learned about the state of Irish in Lispole left me full certain that you couldn't save the Irish language without having our own government to give ultra-strong support to it. Because of that, I was full willing, when the First World War started, to leave the Gaeltacht to go into national military service and, to neglect for a while, every aspect of the work of the language even in any attempt to extra improve my own knowledge of it. It was clear to me that we must achieve, above all else, freedom or a big share of freedom for the country, that, or Irish would die[51].

[50] Ibid., 40.
[51] Ibid., 41.

Chapter Four

Onward march to freedom: following MacNéill 1914-1919

4.1 Introduction

Chapter Three focused on Ernest Blythe's year spent in Kerry where he had gone to improve his Irish. He decided to put aside the language in the short term in favour of revolution and the achievement of national freedom. Questions were asked in Chapter Three if Blythe had been in Kerry to learn Irish solely or if he was part of the IRB secret military planning. The events of 1914 tend to support the argument that, in 1913 Blythe was still linked-in to the revolutionary IRB. Chapter Four will follow Blythe as he ratchets up his desire for Irish independence in his capacity as a Volunteer recruitment officer. The IRB was preparing for an all-out strike against England and Blythe would be in the vanguard of the new force, colloquially referred to as the Sinn Féin Volunteers. If the war plans of the IRB became a reality and if Blythe maintained his desire for a free Ireland, he would be jeopardizing his freedom and possibly his life. Would he succumb under pressure if and when the stakes were raised? Or would he remain steadfast to his principles and fight to the bitter end? The un-folding drama would be a test not only of Blythe's character but of his adherence to Irish nationalism. What price, if any, would Blythe pay for his political convictions?

4.2 Óglaigh na hÉireann: The Irish Volunteers

Following Asquith's appeasement of Ulster in relation to Home Rule, a loose association of extreme national thinkers who had gravitated round Arthur Griffith's Sinn Féin (SF) were now becoming increasingly restless as the prospect of Home Rule began to ebb away, leading to a situation which, for the first time in over three decades, gave those groupings on the fringes of extreme nationalism an entry to and significant contact with the bulk of

Irish opinion[1]. As Irishmen grew sceptical of Redmond's 'Trust the Old Party and Home Rule next year' a new movement was underway to oust him. Without his consent a new military organisation, the Irish Volunteers (IV), came into being on 25 November 1913. According to Ó Cuív:

> The founding of the Irish Volunteers, one hundred years ago, in 1913, was one of the most important events in the achievement of Irish independence. Secret military organisations had existed throughout the previous century but they differed in character significantly from the open military organisation of the Volunteers that laid down the template for our present-day army in so many respects[2].

Following the outbreak of the First World War Redmond proposed that the Volunteers should be prepared to fight as members of the British Army. A small contingent of IRB, SF and other fervent nationalists objected on the traditionally held grounds that England's disadvantage was Ireland's opportunity. According to Bulmer Hobson the time for a parting of the ways had arrived:

> On the 25 September 1914, a majority of the original members of the provisional committee brought their connection with Redmond to an end. Although I knew that the number of men that would adhere to us would be relatively small, I knew that we should hold the men throughout the country who were in earnest about maintaining an Irish Volunteer force and, I was confident that we were strong enough to survive and, its growth was rapid and continuous[3].

It was from this small often ignored, but otherwise significant group of men, where the bulk of political prisoners between the summer of 1915 and Easter 1916 could be found, as their activities brought them to the eyes and ears of the State[4].

> There were those who believed that the occasion should be seized to establish a disciplined armed force that would be ready at any favourable moment to strike another blow for Ireland's freedom. This group, though probably not the largest section of the early recruits, were, all now know, the most earnest and persevering. And it is to their devotion and sacrifice that we are most indebted for that freedom which we here enjoy today[5].

This group of dedicated men included the Ulster Protestant nationalist, Ernest Blythe. Blythe, who had passed through a process of radicalisation via SF and the IRB, becoming a person of great importance to the

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[1] R. Kee, *The Green Flag, A History of Irish Nationalism* (Penguin Books, London, 1972), 497.
[2] F. X Martin, *The Irish Volunteers 1913-1915 Recollections & Documents* (James Duffy & Co, Dublin, 1963), 7.
[3] Ibid., 62.
[4] W. Murphy, *Political Imprisonment and the Irish 1912-1921*(Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014), 34.
[5] Martin, *The Irish Volunteers 1913-1915- Recollections and Documents* 9-10.

recruitment and organisation of An tÓglaigh na hÉireann. Following the 'Split' Blythe became a full-time IV organiser working in counties as far apart as Clare and Londonderry[6].

> Ernest Blythe, considered one of the most active organisers in Ireland, first came under notice in 1909 attending Sinn Féin meetings at 11, Lower Sackville Street and 41, Rutland Square, Dublin; and in Co. Kerry in 1914 where he was studying the Irish Language, and where he delivered very Anti-English and Anti-Recruiting speeches. In March 1909 he went to Bangor, Co. Down and obtained an appointment as a reporter on the *North-Down Herald* occasionally visiting Dublin and attending Sinn Féin meetings and associated with extremists. He joined the Irish Volunteers at their formation and was appointed one of their organisers for the Counties of Kerry, Limerick and Clare in the early part of 1915[7].

4.3 Blowing the whistle: Blythe's early days with the Volunteers

During the Christmas period of 1913, Blythe went to Belfast where he spoke at a meeting of the Dungannon Club and attended drilling sessions organised by the Na Fíanna Éireann (Irish Boy Scouts) and the Volunteers. Returning south he stopped in Dublin where he attended Volunteer drilling sessions. 'When I got back to Kerry, I found that although Volunteer companies were being formed throughout the country, it was hard to get much done in the Dingle neighbourhood'[8]. A company had been started in Lispole which he joined. They drilled on Sundays after Mass, their instructor, an ex-militia man with basic training skills. Blythe was given the opportunity to test his organisational skills during an embarrassing mix-up 'forming fours' which had brought shrieks of laughter from a crowd of female on-lookers:

> I was smitten with a sudden rage and did what a local man could not have done. I left my place in the ranks, ordered the militia man to step into the vacant space, and proceeded to carry on the drill. From that moment, and without further formality, I was captain of the Lispole Company[9].

As well as the simple drills perfected on country lanes, Blythe organised collections to buy cartridge belts. He was under no illusion however regarding the country's lack of military armaments:

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[6] P. Buckley, 'Blythe, Ernest (de Blaghd, Earnán) (1889-1975),' Dictionary of Irish Biography, DIB, Vol. 1, 616-624.
[7] National Archives of the United Kingdom (NAUK), Easter Rising & Ireland under Martial Law 1916-1922, WO35/206 Dublin Castle File No. 74, '*Ernest Blythe*,' (B.5).
[8] Bureau of Military History (BMH) 1913-1921, Document No. WS 939, 8.
[9] Ibid.,10.

> I knew that there was nothing in it only pretending, because we had no rifles not to mention ammunition. We were only imitating what Óglaigh were doing all around Ireland and, it was clear to me that the people of Lispole wouldn't be happy unless we were doing the same as in other places. There were upwards of four score of boys in the troop every Sunday[10].

These were early days for Blythe struggling to keep the Lispole company together. Events such as the shooting at Bachelors' Walk on 26 July 1914, which followed the IVs successful gun-running at Howth had a detrimental effect on recruitment. This incident occurred when a regiment of the King's own Scottish Borderers were returning to their barracks. They were pursued by a hostile crowd of civilians who had gathered to witness the arrival if the IVs. A riot broke out with the soldiers being pelted them with stones and subjected to verbal abuse. They opened fire on the civilians killing three and seriously wounding around thirty others, some as a result of bayonets.

Young men were advised by their elders to keep away from the movement as it appeared to be more dangerous that at first thought. According to Blythe, for some weeks after he had become captain of the Lispole company around seventy to ninety men generally fell-in on a Sunday when he blew the whistle after Mass. These numbers dropped significantly following the Bachelors' Walk incident; not more than forty men took their places in the ranks[11]. This fall in numbers was also due to the influence of the old people who remembered the Land War, evictions, burning of houses, clearances of ancestral land and they implored the young men not to bring the likes of that upon them again. Blythe's solution to this problem was to lecture the men under his command on Irish history, which he was astute enough to do away from the ears and eyes of the locals:

> So I kept my band of Óglaigh marching up and down, doing left and right turns and double time until everyone else bar my group had gone home. I formed the men into two rows on each side of the road and spent twenty minutes telling them the history of the country and what was ahead of her, urging them not to ever surrender or to think of escape. The forty young men were listening happily enough to my talk, and I am sure and, I was right that they would persuade some of their friends back to the company in spite of the old folk[12].

Why did Blythe choose to recruit outside the chapels following Sunday Mass? Blythe knew that there was always a large turn-out of worshippers at

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[10] E. de Blaghd, *Slán le hUltaibh* (Sáirséal agus Dill, Baile átha Cliath, 1970), 73-74.
[11] Ibid., 73-74.
[12] Ibid., 74.

Sunday Mass. He had a captive audience to whom he could lecture regarding their moral and patriotic duty to Ireland and his propaganda would have been aimed at stirring up nationalist sentiments amongst his listeners. Blythe may have been happy to have found a way to prevent the Lispole inhabitants from depriving him of Óglaigh but did he ever question how his presence and his mission were viewed by the Lispole community. Here was a stranger from the north inciting their young men to rebellion against England, on whom they depended largely for their livelihood. He had no experience of their past suffering; he eagerly spoke of rebellion and freedom but without money in their pockets and a roof over their heads, Blythe's idea of freedom was a step too far for them.

Blythe now turned his attention to writing propaganda articles for the *Irish Freedom* newspaper. Arming the Volunteers was proving difficult following the proclamation of 4 December 1913, prohibiting the importation of military arms and ammunition into Ireland. For Blythe, arms and men were an urgent necessity. If propaganda is the tool used by all regimes to get their message to the people, then Ireland was no exception. From 1914-18 propagandists like Blythe utilized the country's increasing sense of annoyance towards the war through a build-up of anti-British feelings which touched a nerve of nationalism in both sexes[13]. The following article, 'Arms and Drill' appeals to those nationalistic instincts which Blythe hoped lay dormant in the hearts of all Irishmen and women:

> There is no power in politics like the armed man. He is the final arbiter. The man with the bayonet shall make the law. There is no freedom or security, save for those who have arms in their hands or at their call. For a nation which has been conquered, the one way to regain freedom is to organize and increase its fighting power. The only thing that will loosen a conquerors grip is the force or fear of the sword's edge. It is thus doubly incumbent upon every Irish nationalist to arm and drill, to buy a gun and to learn the use of it. It is his duty, as a citizen of a country struggling for freedom and urgently in need of fighting men. Whatever comes, Ireland wants soldiers, and none is worthy of the name of nationalist or citizen or man, but the soldier. To become soldiers, it is needful for each of us to do three things; first, to get guns; second, to learn to shoot with them; and third, to have confidence in ourselves and in our comrades. It is clearly the duty of all who can to volunteer[14].

[13] J. Augusteijn, *The Irish Revolution, 1913-1923* (Palgrave, Hampshire, 2002), 34.
[14] "Arms and Drill," *Irish Freedom*, December 1913, 3.

What did Blythe hope to achieve by writing this article? Would the message reach those for whom it was intended? Would Blythe's rallying cry of 'Guns and Drill' fill the ranks of the Volunteers with men eager to fight for the cause? Had Blythe gone too far with this piece of war-mongering propaganda? How successful would he be in raising the nationalist consciousness of the people and turn their allegiances towards the Irish homeland.

Blythe aimed to re-awaken the long-held desire to rid Ireland of the English. He touches a nerve when he says that only those men who are soldiers are worthy to be called Irishmen - he is shaming them into joining the fight. He is aiming to interest the younger generation who might be attracted to the idea of owning and using guns. Blythe was using the medium of the separatist newssheets to get the message broadcast. These newssheets would be passed among the people in the fields, pubs and homes, hopefully leading to a renewal of nationalistic fervour. According to Major Ivon Price, 'in the case of one paper *"Nationality"* which was supposed to have a circulation of 4,500, I found the circulation actually in excess of 8,000 and that paper would go from hand to hand'[15].

The success of Blythe's propaganda campaign would become apparent after the Rising of 1916 when Price lamented to the Royal Commission on the Easter Rebellion that SF propagandists had lost the British Army 50,000 new recruits during the period 1914 and 1916[16]. Further anonymous articles were written for *The Irish Volunteer* which carry
the hallmark of Blythe's hectoring propagandist writing style:

> We must have rifles. All the rest, uniform, equipment, standards, could be dispensed with, but the rifle is the soldier's arm[17]. It is true, lamentably true, that the number of rifles in the country is scandalously inadequate to the number of men qualified to use them. We must have more rifles[18]. We have again and again preached the necessity of arms, appealing to the men of Ireland to get a rifle by any means in their power[19]. It should be drill and drill and drill until every man in the battalion is fully qualified to take his place in a first-class national army. The nation has gone into the soldiering business with a thoroughness that has scarcely ever been manifest in a patriotic

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[15] *Rebellion Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland,* 'The Minutes of Evidence,' Dublin, 1916, 118.
[16] Augusteijn, *The Irish Revolution, 1913-1923*, 38.
[17] F.X. Martin, *The Howth Gun-Running and the Kilcoole Gun-running 1914* (Browne & Nolan Ltd, Dublin, 1964), 12.
[18] Ibid., 12.
[19] Ibid., 13.

> movement in the past and the ultimate result can only be freedom, permanent and complete[20]. It is up to the time when more attention should be devoted to the rifle. A good service rifle should be kept at the drill hall of every corps and explained to the recruits who should be trained to handle it. When this is done, as it will be done, the demand for rifles will be so overwhelming that nothing can resist it. The fighting blood and the fighting instinct is in every Irishman and, it only needs a little to arouse all the latent enthusiasm of our soldier race for weapons with which freedom is won and kept[21].

4.4 'You and Mr Blight are quite mad': native responses to Blythe's Volunteer recruitment campaign

Desmond Fitzgerald refers to the conditions facing the likes of Blythe trying to whip up nationalist fervour in an area on the edge of Europe, following leaders who were remote and unknown to the people with the added isolation of the area of which he was in charge. He and Blythe had chosen the far-flung west because it represented a more traditional, Irish speaking way of life. 'The world was quite unaware of our existence. We were drilling country boys and village boys at the end of a most westerly peninsula, and we were making speeches to country people in whom a very noble traditional patriotism had in no way diminished a highly developed sense of humour and of the ridiculous. A woman serving me across the counter in a shop would say quite simply Yerra, we all know that you and Mr. Blight are quite mad, but ye mean well according to ye're lights'[22].

Blythe's worth as a leader was recognized following a parade of the Lispole and Cahirciveen companies in Dingle. He was becoming a confident military instructor and fearless in voicing his pro-German sentiments. Ó Broin states that from September 1914 onwards there was a marked increase in propaganda supporting the Germans; a swell in the recruitment of Volunteers and defensive action to prevent the recruitment of Irishmen for the British army[23]. Blythe was asked to say a few words of welcome to the Iveragh men:

> I had no experience of open-air speaking at the time and had no opportunity to collect my thoughts. As I climbed up onto a heap of stones to address the crowd, I was conscious that a great opportunity had been offered to me that my knees were shaking

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[20] Ibid., 13.
[21] Ibid., 12-13.
[22] D. Fitzgerald, *Memoirs of Desmond Fitzgerald 1913-1916* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1968), 43.
[23] L. Ó Broin, *Revolutionary Underground- The story of the Irish Republican Brotherhood 1858-1924* (Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1976), 160.

> with excitement. The next moment I heard myself saying that if the Germans came as enemies, we would do our best to resist them but, if they came to help us throw off the English yoke we would flock to their standards. After a few other remarks, I called on the All-Merciful God to crown the German eagles with victory. The substance of my speech got considerable publicity and, I believe that it was it which caused Seán McDermott a few weeks later to send for me to take up the post of organiser for the IRB[24].

Already a network of IRB circles and sworn men were evolving in the Lispole and Dingle area with Blythe being the prominent IRB figure. At a meeting held in a field on a commandeered jaunting car, Blythe administered the United Irishmen's Oath to all in the crowd who were willing to put up their hands and take it[25]. Fitzgerald, who accompanied Blythe states:

> We denounced England as the only enemy Ireland had had since the Vikings, hailing Germany as the friend for whom Ireland had sought for so long. After we had unburdened our national soul to the crowd, Blythe was so impressed by the way they received our doctrine that he called upon them to raise their hands and declare their allegiance to the independent Irish State. They obeyed without demur[26].

Blythe's dedication to the cause could not be questioned. He never stinted himself in terms of time or energy. He believed that those men in a position to do so should be as committed to the cause as he. The farm-work had toughened his body which would be advantageous as his future IRB and Volunteer recruitment work would involve arduous travelling from one end of Ireland to the other on a bicycle. Blythe states, 'At that time it was impossible to do anything with the Volunteers because of the split caused by Redmond; the Belfast Volunteers had fallen away and no one would remain in the Volunteers unless he held officer rank. Clearly any work that could be done at that time in October in the north would have to be done underground and with very small numbers'[27]. As a result, Blythe was instructed by Seán McDermott to go back north taking the Counties Antrim, Derry, Donegal and Tyrone to contact old IRB members and to increase recruitment to form new Circles

What was Blythe's experience in Ulster? Would he be able to carry-off this kind of activity knowing that he could be recognized? Aware that his

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[24] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 13-14.
[25] Ibid., 15.
[26] D. Fitzgerald, *Fitzgerald's Rising, Memoirs, 1913-Easter 1916* (Liberties Press, Dublin, 1968), 60-61.
[27] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 15.

previous period in the north had failed to ignite nationalistic enthusiasm amongst the inhabitants, what would Blythe's experience now be in recruiting Ulster men? He had little information on local nationalists and without their input it would be very difficult to move forward.

Blythe had great difficulty in coaxing Ulster's ex-IRB men to re-engage with the fight for freedom. His work began at Aughagallon on the shores of Lough Neagh, close to where he was brought up and where he was reminded that old animosities die slowly in the north. He had encountered opposition from two or three men who represented the old IRB. 'My name was not a recommendation there, as an uncle of mine who was known to be a Unionist had lived near the place and I saw that I was not fully accepted because of that'[28]. In Toomebridge he met Mick Lennon who had been a member of the original Fenian movement, who gave Blythe all the information he had about IRB members in the area. Blythe discovered that those people were now armchair republicans and it would be impossible to get them active again. 'The problem in County Derry since Fenian times was that any young men with a nationalist outlook had been sworn into the IRB and when they got married, they left it. The only thing that the IRB did there was to keep alive a feeling of dislike and distrust of the Hibernians and of the Parliamentary movement, and to cause a few young people to read *Sinn Féin* or *Irish Freedom*[29].

Blythe was to find this pattern of inertia everywhere he went. Toomebridge was the only area in County Antrim where there were IRB men; it was a little more widespread in south Derry but with the same sort of people in it. In Magherafelt, Blythe had been promised by older IRB members and a few younger men to try and build up the organisation in the area. In Derry city he found a company of Volunteers, but the situation there was similar to Belfast - members were deserting or joining the British Army[30]. In Newbridge, Blythe found a group of eager young men around a Hugh Gribben, an active local IRB Centre, and it was this group which provided the officers and active Volunteers around that area. Near Maghera,

[28] Ibid., 16.
[29] Ibid., 17.
[30] Ibid., 18.

County Derry, a meeting was arranged in Gulladuff bog in the dead of night where around forty or fifty attended. Discussed were plans to come out in the open and form a Volunteer Company. A Company was started which focused on getting activity going in the neighbouring areas through military displays. 'These units formed by Blythe in 1915 became the backbone of Volunteer activity in south Derry during the War of Independence'[31].

Moving across to County Donegal where in Cashelnagore, Gortahork and Gweedore the situation was grim, with Blythe being advised to get out on the first train:

> I found it impossible to do anything at all in that area and left after a week. Hibernianism was rampant and practically all the people were following the old Irish Party. One day I walked from Creeslough to Glen, and there I met a shopkeeper called McFadden who was nationally minded but, told me the whole opinion of the place was such that nothing could be done. It was while I was in Creeslough that the police, who had been looking for me since I left Kerry, caught up with me. As I passed the barracks in Creeslough, the sergeant and a constable came out and asked me my name and other particulars. From that time onwards, I was seldom without a police trailer[32].

Blythe travelled to the Stranorlar-Ballybofey area where he swore in some men, leaving the nucleus of three small Circles in that area. He visited old moribund Fenian circles in Donegal town, Inver and Mountcharles, Strabane and Sion Mills but again was left with the impression that nothing could be done there. Blythe, summing up his experience said: 'On the whole, the period I spent as an IRB organiser was not very fruitful, although I think some good came of it afterwards. I was very glad when I got a letter from Bulmer Hobson saying that the Volunteer Executive had appointed me as organiser for the Volunteers and requesting me to go to Dublin to meet the staff before proceeding to the south'[33].

Dated 9 October 1914, the letter stated:

> Dear Sir,
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> I beg to inform you of your appointment as Organiser on behalf of the Provisional Committee of the Irish Volunteers. I trust that you will lose no time in getting as many companies as possible in Ulster affiliated with this committee. Bulmer Hobson, Hon. Sec.[34].

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[31] J. Augusteijn, *From Public Defiance to Guerrilla Warfare-The Experience of Ordinary Volunteers in the Irish War of Independence 1916-1921* (Irish Academic Press, Dublin, 1996), 46-47.
[32] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 19.
[33] Ibid., 22.
[34] UCDA, P24/1002, 'Letter from Bulmer Hobson to Ernest Blythe appointing Blythe to the Irish Volunteers,' 9 October 1914'.

According to Fitzgerald, Blythe had told him that although he was officially employed by the Volunteer organisation, it was really being arranged by the IRB. Blythe was to organise Volunteers certainly however, in the background, he was also to recruit for the IRB:

> We knew that the Central Council of the IRB had decided that there was to be a Rising during the war, but this news that Blythe had gave a greater reality to that decision. It meant that they had not merely passed a sort of pious resolution but were already taking steps to put that resolution into effect. Originally Blythe had intended to stay for at least two years labouring on a farm and absorbing some knowledge of Irish. But at that time no one had foreseen the rapid developments that had subsequently taken place. He was now off to Dublin and from there to various parts of the country. There was a great thrill in his news but, it also brought a sense of desolation. We had worked together all that time. We were entirely at one. Now he was going away and, I was left to carry on alone. Even the implication that his appointment meant that what we had been doing had not passed unnoticed and unappreciated by the leaders of the movement in Dublin could not obliterate the sense of impotent loneliness that his departure also brought[35].

Although grieving the loss of his friend, Fitzgerald's statement is corroborating evidence that Blythe had been still attached to the separatist movements whilst in Kerry and that he could be called up at a moment's notice.

4.5 The Irish Volunteers: a formidable revolutionary movement

Blythe's work as an Irish Volunteer and IRB organiser was of necessity secret and at the time in question, largely unrecorded. That he played a significant part can be deduced from his numerous jail sentences and expulsions from Ireland under the new Defence of the Realm (DORA) scheme:

> The authorities viewed Blythe as a very dangerous man because he made no secret of the fact that he was very pro-German and wanted 'England beaten in the war'. At a meeting in Dublin Castle senior members of the Irish Administration concluded that he was more dangerous than Tom Clarke, an outspoken proponent of armed revolution[36].

Sir Matthew Nathan, Under-Secretary for Ireland, kept a record of all known dissenters including Blythe who appeared to have been of some significance. Nathan had placed a number in red after his name which, according to Leon Ó Broin, Blythe's personal secretary, suggests that Blythe had a special file[37]. Ó Broin was correct. A Royal Irish Constabulary

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[35] Fitzgerald, *Desmond's Rising, Memoirs 1913 to Easter 1916*, 73.
[36] G. Lucy, *The 1916 Rising-Ulster Connections* (Publishing Books, Ulster, 2016), 38.
[37] L. Ó Broin, *Dublin Castle & the 1916 Rising* (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1966, London), 25.

Office File, Dublin Castle, File Number, 115/943, 9, inscribed 'Ernest Blythe' contains top secret information on Blythe's activities, and which contains a mark (B. 5) written in red ink on the cover[38].

Was Blythe aware of the growing attention being paid to his movements and behaviour? He was now prominent on England's 'most wanted' list of felons and had an unpleasant future ahead if caught. He was aware that the RIC were tailing him on a constant basis although he did not let this inconvenience interfere with his mission; he appears to have obtained a perverse pleasure from trying to avoid their attentions. Blythe was also involved in the writing of seditious literature for revolutionary newssheets such as *The Irish Volunteer* which, Walter Long alleged, was printing grossly seditious articles that called for punitive action. 'I think it very strong that the time has come when everybody has to be taught that no treasonable language, no attempt to interfere with recruiting, no language hostile to the cause of the Empire, will be tolerated and let these traitors know that their evil practices will be suppressed'[39].

Blythe was by now a dedicated, fervent nationalist and given his strong character, his obvious disregard for his own safety, an inbuilt capacity to rough it, toughened by his time on the Ashe farm together with his long standing, sincere desire for a free and Gaelic Ireland, there was no chance that British threats would make him abandon the cause whatever the outcome or punishment. Blythe behaved with the fervour of the crusader for the cause. According to Fitzgerald, he and Blythe were both rigidly puritanical:

> We took it for granted that the service of Ireland imposed asceticism upon all. In fact, just before the Volunteer movement had been launched, Blythe had elaborated a scheme for a sort of monastic institution to which men should dedicate themselves for the purpose of promoting the Irish language. They were to undertake that they would not get married for five years (it was to be celibate organisation) and they were not to drink. They were to support themselves by their own communal labours and, devote the remainder of their time to teaching the language and working on its behalf[40].

Now a full-time volunteer organiser/instructor active in counties Kerry, Cork, Limerick and Clare, Blythe was one of the few organisers sent out

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[38] NAUK, WO35/2026, Easter Rising & Ireland under Martial Law 1916-1922 "Sinn Féin Activists", 115/943, 9, (B.5), Royal Irish Constabulary Office, Dublin Castle, 11-3-1920
[39] Ibid., 44.
[40] Fitzgerald, *Desmond's Rising Memoirs 1913 to Easter 1916*, 48.

with little qualification, being largely self-taught. Supplies of weapons were scarce. The IRB general headquarters was loath to commit scant resources and Blythe was expected to drill and train his men while, at the same time, avoiding arrest[41]. His difficulties were compounded by the fact that many companies founded were in name only and there was no consistency in organisation and performance throughout the country[42]. However, in Blythe's opinion, the Volunteer companies being formed would perform a great function in the future:

> Whether the Home Rule Bill passes or peters out, National Volunteer companies formed now will prove of great utility in the future. If Home Rule falls through, the members of the Volunteers will have had a training which will enable a formidable revolutionary movement to be set on foot. Those of us who were somewhat carried away with the 'Sinn Fein' policy when it was first expounded have had time to realise that it must be valueless except as the complement of military organization[43].

Blythe's first duty in his official capacity as Volunteer Organiser was to attend a Volunteer meeting in Cork where he was introduced as Headquarters representative. He remained around Cork for some time but the lethargy which had been extant in the north had found its way to Cork. In Mallow, Blythe found a nominal company of forty to fifty men had been set up. He also discovered there was a back way from the Volunteer hall into a local pub, and membership of the Volunteers was a means of getting drink easily after hours. The member put it frankly that 'We are only in the Volunteers to get a wet'[44]. Mitchelstown was the only company worthy of the name to be found outside Cork city. Kinsale proved so bad that Blythe gave up hope of forming a company there.

Walking from Bandon to Ballinadee in search of Tom Hales, Blythe found the Hales family were very enthusiastic, and had already begun forming a company in Ballinadee. Kanturk and Fermoy produced no results with Blythe conceding that he had not succeeded in doing anything worthwhile during the time he was in Cork and that the position in Cork was as bad as could be[45]. In Kerry, it was obvious that his earlier presence there

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[41] C. Townshend, *The Republic-The Fight for Irish Independence* (Allen Lane/Penguin Books Ltd, London, 2013), 75.
[42] Ibid., *Political Violence in Ireland-Government and Resistance since 1848* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1983), 290.
[43] *Irish Freedom*, "Arms and Drill," December 1913, 3
[44] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 24.
[45] Ibid., 26.

had been a positive one. He found strong, active companies in Dingle and Ballyferriter, with contingents coming in from the countryside. In Tralee the Volunteers had a good number of rifles and, an excellent drill hall. Although there was some hostility in the town, SF was on the rise[46].

In Castlegregory Blythe enrolled twenty-eight men, 'marching up and down the street to proclaim that a start was being made'[47]. With the help of his friend Alf Cotton, two further companies were formed in Camp and a good group in Annascaul[48]. Blythe's reputation for favouring the Germans was now being used by the RIC as propaganda against him as he was to find out whilst drilling his Annascaul Company on a Sunday morning after Mass. 'At the time I always marched behind a company of Volunteers, as that was the only sure way to prevent talk and, to prevent the occasional desertion. Two little girls in shawls were standing with their mouths open watching the men march past. As I approached, one nudged the other and said, 'That's the German now'. I found that it was being put out all over Kerry that I was a German'[49].

Once neutral, Killarney 'came out' for MacNeill. Blythe's rhetoric fell on deaf ears in Kenmare and Killorglin, where he was advised to take the first train out. In Fyries, where he had cycled to all day, he got rebuffed and told to get back on his bike and get out of the place. 'If I had not already arranged lodgings, I think that, although I was tired, I should have cycled back to Tralee'[50]. Blythe didn't throw in the towel in Fyries. He engaged with a group of fifteen young men, introducing the subject of the war, declaring himself strongly against England and that he supported the Germans. A Paddy Breen introduced himself and said that he was 'for MacNeill' and offered to find men. This was a successful encounter for Blythe who returned next day following Mass and gave his usual Sunday morning lecture. 'Having made all the usual appeals to them to join the Volunteers I finally asked those who were willing to join to fall-in and we got about thirty men. I returned several times to see the company and it held

[46] Ibid., 26.
[47] Ibid., 27.
[48] Ibid., 27.
[49] Ibid., 27.
[50] Ibid., 29.

together and flourished'[51]. In Cahirciveen Blythe found one of the best companies in the county with a good number of Volunteers and some forty rifles. The company commander owned a substantial drapery business and had assembled a hiding place for the rifles behind some well disguised shelving[52].

Blythe, in summing up the situation in Counties Cork and Kerry, stated that Kerry was altogether a more patriotic county. There were half a dozen active companies in the Dingle Peninsula; the Dingle Company alone had twenty to thirty rifles. There was battalion in Tralee with around one hundred men and they had some rifles. There was good sized company in Killarney and a very good company in Cahirciveen. There was one small company in Castleisland and in Listowel. In all cases the Kerry companies were growing and it was obvious that in a lot of places it would be possible to form new companies very soon[53].

At this point in time Blythe had covered counties Cork and Kerry searching for men and he still had Clare and Limerick to visit. The physical exertion required to cover this immense area on a bicycle would have been daunting to many another man. What drove Blythe to such measures, punishing his body and placing himself in danger of arrest? The answer lies in his desire for 'Gaeilge agus Saoirse' which seemed to outweigh all discomforts. Although Blythe was one of four men undertaking this task, it is thanks to his comprehensive records in the BMH and in particular, his memoirs written in Irish, which are like a walk through the unfolding pages of the birth of the Irish nation, that historians can assess the dogged determination to make this push for freedom a successful one and that Irish freedom was achieved in no small measure with the help of a whistle and on the saddle of a bicycle.

Blythe now focused on Counties Limerick and Clare. He found Limerick improving in terms of companies and men. The man in charge worked in the Shannon foundry and produced pikes for the men who had no firearms as well as making a type of bayonet which could be fitted on a shotgun. In

[51] Ibid., 30.
[52] Ibid., 30.
[53] Ibid., 31.

Killonan there was a very good company run by a Father Tom Wall at Drumcollogher. The clergy in Newcastle West were very friendly and anxious to get a company formed. However, not all the parishioners were sympathetic. Blythe describes a joint, Sunday march to Ardagh to stir up the area which met with ridicule. 'Only eight of the lads turned up. As I was going down the street with eight men behind me in two's and the people laughing at us, a Jack O'Mahoney stepped out from the side-path, took his place beside me and marched at the head of the lads out of the town. Although we were not able to put up a very good show in Ardagh, we nevertheless roused enough local interest to get a Company formed there'[54].

Blythe was now able to make comparisons, in terms of recruitment and nationalistic fervour, between counties and between the urban and rural areas which he had visited. He also had a fair idea of how many men could be called upon when the time came for action:

> It was noticeable at that time in Limerick and still more in Clare, that the country areas were very much better than the towns. In Newcastle West we succeeded in getting three or four companies going but in the town itself we only got a nominal company of twenty men. Abbeyfeale was similar with the rural area producing a good company of men. In Ballylanders, where a company had been going since the Split, we succeeded in bringing in new members. Similarly, in Galbally, a good company was formed. I had been working for three months for the Volunteers in the south and, it was clear to me that as I moved from county to county the atmosphere was steadily improving and, the temper of the population generally was rising. However, when I proceeded to Clare. I found I was back in a worse atmosphere than I had experienced in Cork three months earlier[55].

It was in Clare that the RIC stepped up their surveillance. This made Blythe's job doubly difficult as people kept their distance or, told him to move on. In Ennis he found the level of hostility was in relation to the police presence rather than to Blythe himself:

> When I arrived in Ennis, of course the police picked me up and followed me around the town. In the shoe-maker's shop I was asked if I thought it was fair to bring the police outside the shop in that way and I was asked to get out. Even the Sinn Féiner, Frank Barrett didn't want to be seen with me at that time. He would turn a corner if he saw me from a distance. However, I persisted in the neighbourhood riding out to see people in the country whose names had been given to me and eventually was able to form two companies, in Inch and in Quin each four miles from Ennis. Then the mood changed and, I was now asked to get out of the town. I had to leave my lodgings and everywhere I went I was refused admittance[56].

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[54] Ibid., 33.
[55] Ibid., 34.
[56] Ibid., 36.

This was to be the pattern of events in Clare with Blythe shown the door with the police hovering close to any establishment he entered:

> From the time I went south at the beginning of 1915 right through until the Rising, I was constantly shadowed by the police. The police apparently stayed day and night outside my hotel or lodging-house in which I was putting up. If I walked through the town they followed me at twenty to thirty yards distance, sometimes two. When I went out on my bicycle two policemen generally followed me. In country districts this did me no harm in fact it was a very good advertisement. It was when they cycled alongside me and tried to engage me in conversation that it became dangerous… If I was seen alongside the sergeant it would have seemed to many people as if I were in league with the police, whereas if he was behind twenty yards it would be evident that I was hostile to the government. However, it got me talked about and, also assured everybody who had any Sinn Féin leanings at all that I was on the right side and had the right gospel[57].

4.6 A new phase begins: Blythe suffers for the cause: arrest, deportation, trial and imprisonment

Immediately after the start of World War 1 the British passed the state's new legislation, Defence of the Realm Act (DORA). According to Murphy, 'in Ireland this act became the state's primary legal weapon against the activities of radicals and rebels between 1915 and 1921'[58]. According to Fitzpatrick, DORA 'was a spirited attempt to tame the small but pugnacious bands of dis-loyalists through ridicule and selective punishment'[59]. As early as 1914, the British authorities were aware that the activities of the Irish Volunteers were beginning to undermine their role in Ireland[60].

On 13 June 1915, Major General Friend wrote to the War Office outlining his concerns regarding this latest threat to British Rule:

> I submit a report of the action which I propose to take with reference to certain paid organisers who are travelling about Ireland spreading pro-German seditious ideas and anti-recruiting propaganda, inciting the peasants to arm, supplying them with rifles, ammunition and automatic pistols, and organizing armed resistance to conscription should such ever be enacted. These men, their movements and actions, have been a source of grave anxiety to me, and I have been in constant consultation with the Irish Government on the matter, and the action I suggest has the full concurrence of the Irish Government. I propose to issue orders under Regulation No. 14 of the Defence of the Realm Regulations turning the four paid principal organizers out of Ireland. These men are as follows; Herbert Pim, Denis McCullogh, Ernest Blythe and William Mellowes. There are voluminous police reports regarding the four men whom it is proposed to turn out of Ireland. Each one of them from his known attitude and openly expressed

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[57] Ibid., 43.
[58] Murphy, *Political Imprisonment and the Irish 1912-1921*, 34.
[59] Bartlett, T & Jeffrey, K, *Military History of Ireland*, D. Fitzpatrick, 'Militarism in Ireland, 1900-1922,' essay (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996), 393.
[60] Murphy, *Political Imprisonment and the Irish, 1912-1921*, 36.

> sentiments is a danger to the Defence of the Realm and would most certainly assist the enemy in any way he possibly could to cause the downfall of the British Empire[61].

On July 11, 1915, in his lodging house in Ennistymon, the tide turned for Blythe. His bed surrounded by a District Inspector, a Sergeant and two Constables, he was informed that he was to leave Ireland. 'The District Inspector came to the side of my bed and proceeded to read out an order under the Defence of the Realm Act signed by Major General Friend, ordering me to leave the following area, namely Ireland, within a fortnight'[62]. What was Blythe's reaction to this order? Now that it was no longer a game of soldiers, would Blythe's courage desert him as the gaol gates loomed supporting Regan's premise that, 'Blythe adopted extreme positions as if, in his mind at least, he was trying to compensate for being an outsider'[63].

Regan's premise that Blythe sought to ingratiate himself with the southerners by risking his freedom and livelihood cannot be borne out. Blythe had been on this course of action since he was eighteen years old when he joined the IRB. His involvement with the Freedom Clubs and the Dungannon Clubs were all in preparation for the upcoming revolution. It was Blythe's conception of what a real Irishman should be doing for Irish freedom that counted rather than the need to be as extreme as possible to be accepted by the southerners. Indeed, Blythe relished locking horns with England if that furthered Ireland's cause. Blythe's reaction to the order was one of defiance. He immediately informed Volunteer Headquarters that he would disobey the order and wait in plain sight until he was arrested.

Although his decision to disobey the order was supported at Volunteer Headquarters, Arthur Griffith's opinion was, from a propagandist point of view, Blythe should be arrested in the house of a Parish Priest. One County Monaghan PP, who was sympathetic to the cause, was a Father Ó Ciarán of Rockcorry; Blythe was to stay in the parochial house until his arrest. On July 16, a monster nationalist meeting was held in Belfast Falls Road where

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[61] NAUK, WO35/2026, Easter Rising & Ireland under Martial Law 1916-1922 *'Sinn Féin Activists*,' G/1151/i, War Office, 14 June 1915, 1-3.
[62] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 46.
[63] J. M. Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution 1921-1936: Treatyite Politics and Settlement in Independent Ireland* (Gill & Macmillan Ltd., Dublin, 1999), 92.

Blythe spoke taunting the RIC by denouncing the government and declaring to a cheering crowd that he had no intention of obeying this tyrannical and outrageous order[64]. Blythe considered the order as 'a piece of damned impertinence, whatever came of it, whether it was a firing party or whatever happened, he was not going to obey the order'[65]. He then cooled his heels in Rockcorry, of the opinion that there was no propaganda value in being arrested on the King's highway. Believing that the RIC had lost track of him, he sent out postcards to various people informing them where he was. 'Ultimately the police arrived early one morning. They were very apologetic, and the priest made the proper protest, from the propaganda point of view, about the invasion of the parochial house. I was allowed to take my breakfast and was then conveyed to the local barracks'[66].

The northern press had now been alerted to the situation and in bold print, informed their readers:

Arrested

The Fourth Man: Irish Volunteer Organiser Who refused to Leave Ireland Apprehended in a Priest's House

> Mr. Ernest Blythe, who refused to obey the order of General Friend commanding him to leave Ireland, was, up till some three years ago, the Newtownards correspondent of the *North-Down Herald*. As a journalist and writer, he showed more than ordinary promise and those who knew him will regret exceedingly if his literary career should in any way be impeded by the unfortunate circumstances in which he now finds himself. His manner was retiring almost to a fault - certainly he had none of the aggressiveness which one would naturally associate with a 'rebel' leader brought up by his alleged deeds under the ban of the law[67].

Scarcely concealing his anger at this arbitrary punishment, Blythe wrote to the press blaming his arrest on the RIC who he felt had no case against him:

> For six months past I have been constantly shadowed by the police and, for the last month four constables have had no other duty but to watch me. Two of them followed at my heels by day and, two of them watched outside my hotel by night. It would have been impossible for me to commit even the minutest offence without the police being fully aware of it and, the presumption is that if I had been detected in any illegality I should have been prosecuted. The police having failed to get any 'case' against me, I am coolly requested to convert myself into something between an exile and a ticket-of-leave man. Needless to say, I have declined to obey General Friend's order which I

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[64] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 47.
[65] UCDA, P24/1014. 'Arrested: The Fourth Man-Irish Volunteer who refused to leave Ireland apprehended in a Priest's house,' (undated)
[66] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 47.
[67] UCDA, P24/1014, 'Former "Herald" Representative Arrested for refusing to leave Ireland,' (Undated)

> regard as a sort of an impudent threatening letter. In the order itself no charge is made against me and in the House of Commons yesterday Mr. Birrell declined to make any allegation. In the circumstances I should deem myself less than a man if I did not, no matter how unpleasant or how serious might be the consequences to myself, stand up against this attempt to inflict penalties by order of a secret tribunal acting on the report of secret spies without public charge or trial[68].

4.7 Blythe treads the ground that felon's trod[69]: three months in Belfast gaol

Blythe was now an inmate of Belfast Gaol. How would he cope with this, his first incarceration in the first gaol in Ireland to operate a separate system of solitary confinement? Would this experience dampen his ardour for rebellion? Would he use his time reflecting on the path he was taking and its probable repercussions? Had he ever thought that he would be in prison so soon? Was Ireland's cause worth the punishments awaiting him if he pursued this path? Blythe recounts being placed in the semi under-ground cells used for prisoners arriving too late to go through the regular reception procedure and for all his bravado, Blythe sounds apprehensive in his new surroundings:

> Jails were very new things to me at the time, and I remember thinking when I was locked up in the cell how easy it would be forget a prisoner and leave him there until he starved. Next morning the door duly opened and, I was taken to reception where the usual procedure of the prisoner having a bath and his clothes being searched while he was actually in the bath was gone through. I noticed then a disposition on the part of the warders to give good advice and to say that it was very foolish for a young man to start on that sort of career, etc., etc., As the men were quite friendly, I took all the advice in good part and entered into no arguments with them[70].

Blythe received a three months sentence[71]. Confined to his cell twenty-two hours a day he was given a job of mat making. As he had not been given hard labour, he was allowed a hard mattress to sleep on plus an extra pint of milk per day which kept him in good health. A friendly warder brought him newspapers and copies of '*The Irish Volunteer*' enabling him to keep abreast of the political situation[72]. On October 3, 1915, with two months off for good behaviour, Blythe was released[73]. General Friend was at pains to inform him that he should be of good conduct in future. 'Mr. Blythe should

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[68] Ibid., P24/1014.
[69] A. Newman, '*What It Feels Like,*' poem attributed to H. M. Pim (Whelan & Son, Dublin, 1915), 14.
[70] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 48.
[71] NAUK, WO/35/206, Dublin Castle File No. 74, 115/143, '*Ernest Blythe,*' (B.5).
[72] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 50.
[73] NAUK, WO35/96/21, '*Letter on Blythe's release,*' G/1151/1, 16 September 1915,

be informed that if he abstains from further action prejudicial to the public safety or the Defence of the Realm he will not be interfered with, otherwise the Order will become operative again and any failure to comply with it will be followed by removal from Ireland under new provisions of No. 14 Defence of the Realm Regulations'[74].

Did Mr. Blythe learn anything from his experience in prison? Would he risk such a thing happening again? Would he now cut his connections with Irish separatism? He had been warned what would happen if he defaulted again. The experience had no effect on Blythe's enthusiasm as he carried on from where he had left off. Blythe relished trouble and appeared totally inured to punishment.

As someone who had been a detainee, he had now achieved celebrity status; the following statement shows that, like the leopard, Blythe had not changed his spots. 'I was met at the jail gates by quite a number of people, many of whom I had never seen before. I was commandeered to address a meeting in St. Mary's Hall shortly afterwards. I then went to my father's house about twelve miles outside Belfast for a couple of days and then I went to Dublin. I was given a thousand .303 cartridges weighing about three stones to take with me on my way back to Dublin and I remember they made my bag very heavy to carry[75]. Blythe now cocked a snoot at the authorities not only by carrying a large quantity of ammunition on his person but, on 31 October 1915 he attended an IV Convention at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, as a delegate representing County Monaghan[76].

During his imprisonment, recruitment work continued without Blythe; he had been replaced by Terence Mac Swiney in Counties Cork and Kerry; Blythe now confined himself to Clare, Limerick and Tipperary. He noticed that in the three to four months he was away the threat of conscription had made it easier to form companies as it had previously been difficult. He would have been encouraged by the upsurge of national feeling in the country and that his efforts were beginning to bear fruit:

> The conscription issue made people think and, flocking into the Volunteers was due to rising national spirit and not to any wish to organise for personal safety. I went over I

[74] Ibid., W035/96/21, 2401(i) '*Letter on Blythe's discharge conditions*,' 1 October 1915.
[75] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 51.
[76] NAUK, WO/35/206, 115/143, Castle File No. 74, '*Ernest Blythe*,' (B.5).

> think, every part of County Limerick between my return about November and the middle of March 1916, and while one could not say that a Volunteer Company was formed in every parish it was clear that it would not be long until that was the position[77].

Blythe was inclined to spend more time in Limerick than in Clare where he found it hard going getting companies formed. 'To the very last, however, I found it impossible to do anything at all in the town of Ennis'[78].

As Blythe continued his recruitment campaign, the authorities were hard on his heels. They made their move in Athea. He recounts how the RIC arrested him after he was asleep. On 26 March 1916, the District Inspector with four or five RIC men rushed into the room, where Blythe was informed that he was under arrest[79]. The hand of providence was on Blythe's side on that occasion; he carried .22 pistol and, in the process of searching his clothing the weapon somehow went undiscovered. He was taken by train to Dublin where he disposed of his gun, dropping it out the train window near Emly where he knew there was a Volunteer company. Dan Breen later told him that it had been found on the railway track and later handed over to him[80]. Blythe learned later that he had been one of a select few who were to be dealt with under a strengthened DORA.

4.8 A very British dilemma: what to do with a man called Blythe?

Ireland's Viceroy, Lord Wimborne had decided to clamp down on those Irishmen who were proving detrimental to conscription to his Majesty's forces; he was particularly interested in the policy of deportation. Wimborne's authority was hampered by the constraints of the law; internment in Ireland required proof of being associated with, in this instance, the German enemy and, deportation Orders could not be implemented. Therefore, the DORA regulations had to be strengthened to cover this loophole. In March 1916, General Friend got the go-ahead to clear out of Ireland those individuals who had become a nuisance. Ernest Blythe was on the list.

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[77] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 53.
[78] Ibid., 54.
[79] Ibid., 56.
[80] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 57.

An intelligence report of 2 March 1916 confirmed that Blythe's unceasing work in Kerry had paid off and he could take great credit for the increased pro-German support, the swollen ranks of IVs and the hostile tone of the area towards the British war effort:

> In Kerry the Sinn Féin movement has made great headway. There are now approximately 1300 Irish Volunteers constantly drilling, about 1000 of these being armed, the majority with serviceable rifles or revolvers. All through the people are now pro-German, many actively so, although the Inspector tells me that after the outbreak of war, they seemed favourable to our interests. He attributes the change to the unremitting propaganda organised by the Irish Volunteers, by means of press and paid agitators who come from Dublin and other parts. Only sixteen recruits were obtained in this county in January. He considers that if measures were taken to deal with this organised sedition, the Sinn Féin movement will even now become extinct. Caherciveen is a very disloyal district and the Sinn Féin party are very numerous. There are a fair number of fishing boats working off the coast with local crews which are most unreliable and would probably injure our interests if they could. All around the Sybil Head neighbourhood is very disloyal. I noticed the country people cursed us as we passed in the car. Later I visited the County Inspector who informs me the towns are drained of recruits[81].

A gloomy communication from Intelligence Officer, Captain Dickie, in his travels around Blythe's territory, highlighted what the British were up against with men like Blythe:

> Great efforts are being made to carry out Irish Volunteer propaganda in the south-west and that promoters are meeting with success in most districts. For instance, at Ballyferriter the crewmen off Sybil Head were unable to visit the village after dark as stones fly after them. Stones were thrown after my car. I talked a lot to police and civilians on the way round and, they lay all the blame as to local feeling on (1) the disloyal press, (2) Blythe & Co. (3) fear of conscription. I was glad to see the western district though it was shockingly cold weather. If the counties Cork and Kerry were made 'areas' under D.R.R 33, the *Kerryman, Hibernian & co.*, subdued or suppressed, and organisers such as Mellowes and the others (Blythe) put under restrictions as to movements, by means of D.R.R 14, we could, I think, 'kill' the Sinn Féin movement in these parts[82].

A further military communication marked **Secret and Urgent** of March 18, 1916 details how this new amendment applied to Blythe:

> With reference to the War Office letter of 1st October 1915, regarding action that should be taken in respect of the four Irish Volunteer Organizers who had refused to leave Ireland, I have the honour to report that two of these organizers - Ernest Blythe and William Mellows, have continued their activities in various counties in Ireland in open defiance of the warning given to them on their release from gaol in October last…all concur that it is highly desirable that Ernest Blythe and William Mellows should now be compelled to leave Ireland and, it is not desirable that these men should be permitted to emigrate to America. I propose to have Blythe et al arrested and conveyed to Dublin and handed over into Military custody at Arbour Hill detention Barracks. they will then be given the list of the places in England where it is permissible for such persons to reside…when they have selected their places of residence and the approval of the Competent Military Authority for that area is obtained, they will be conveyed thither

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[81] NAUK, WO35/206, Intelligence Report 1B, '*South Irish Coast Defences, Queenstown*,' 2 March 1916.

[82] Ibid., WO35/206, IC, '*Intelligence Letter to Major Price regarding Blythe's activities in Kerry*,' 4 March 1916.

> under escort. On their arrival it would be very desirable that action should be taken to confine their movements can be watched closely[83].

The 'Banishees', a term coined by Chief Secretary Birrell, was tagged to the usual suspects: Blythe, Mellowes, Monaghan, Cotton, McCullough and Pim. On March 25th the government moved against two of the 'Banishees' Blythe and Mellowes, who were arrested and taken to Arbour Hill barracks to await removal to an area in England where they 'might elect to reside'[84]. What was Blythe's reaction to this latest arrest? Reverting to his old tactic of non-compliance, he declined to elect such a place, as he put it, 'I would give them no satisfaction'.

A further lengthy report to the Home Office on 5 May 1916, highlights how much of a menace to British interests Blythe really was and how closely he was being watched:

> Ernest Blythe closely associated with Denis McCullough in Ulster during January 1915, travelling about visiting all extreme Sinn Féiners. In February he travelled south and visited Limerick travelling about organising Sinn Féin Volunteers. In March he was still in Limerick advising people 'to arm up'. He visited almost every small town and village in County Limerick during March - organising the Irish Volunteers -travelling about with an extreme Gaelic League organiser who had a motor bicycle…In April he went to Kerry and, owing to his activities there, the County Inspector considered that he (Blythe) should be ordered out of the County Kerry. While in Kerry he was involved in arming the Volunteers and, in his bag were found confidential documents connected with the organization and, the arming of the Volunteers. Blythe continued to travel throughout the whole of County Kerry organising Sinn Féin Volunteers, whom he said were formed to fight for Ireland only. In May he continued organising in Kerry and was closely associated with all the well-known extremists in the County. On May 30th Blythe attended a meeting at the "General Council of the Irish Volunteers" at 2, Dawson Street, Dublin, from 11am to 4pm and returned to Killarney. This meeting was attended by O'Neill, Ó Rahilly, Hobson, McCullough and a number of well-known suspects. In June he visited Clare and travelled around on the same business there. The report of Mr. Holmes of Blythe attending a meeting of 9th June at the house of John Daly, the old dynamitard ex-convict, who is still the head of the Irish Republican Brotherhood in Ireland, summarises the activities of Ernest Blythe. According to reliable information Blythe boasted at that meeting that he had enrolled 5,000 members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood in Ireland. The Chief Secretary for Ireland commenting on the proposal of turning Blythe out of Ireland, says: The sooner the better. These men are one thousand times more dangerous than newspapers or spouters of sedition at street corners[85].

Reports on Blythe were now flying fast and furious between Dublin and London. The following report of 5th May 1916 was required to state

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[83] Ibid., WO35/206, '*Letter from General Friend regarding Blythe's punishment*,' G/1151/1, 18 March 1916.
[84] C. M. Kennedy, *Genesis of the Rising 1912-1916, A Transformation of Nationalist Opinion* (Peter Lang Pub., New York, 2009), 267.
[85] NAUK, WO35/206, '*Further Report on Ernest Blythe highlighting his continuing rebellious behaviour*,' Home Office, 312169/19, 5 May 1916.

precisely (1) the nature of the hostile associations of this person, and (2) in what manner hostile sympathies are indicated. It was more of the same however, only this time the British were giving Blythe a back-handed compliment:

> This man, as will be seen from the accompanying report by one of our agents in Ireland, is one of the most active and able organisers of the disloyal anti-British and pro-German Sinn Féin rebel movement. In July 1915, his activities became so pronounced that an Order under DRR.14 was made requiring him to leave the Irish Command by July 17, 1915. He refused to obey the Order and he was accordingly arrested, prosecuted and sentenced to three months in respect of his refusal. While serving his sentence Regulation 14 was so amended to enable Blythe, and several other Sinn Féin leaders, should they continue to refuse to leave, to be forcibly removed from the Irish Command and, arrangements were made to ensure his departure immediately after his release from prison. Blythe surreptitiously continued his activities, and in March 1916, was bold enough to address a meeting in Ardpatrick National School, Co. Limerick, at which he produced a revolver and lectured on its use. He was heard to tell his audience that rifles were coming and that they would have them very soon. Recent developments in Ireland, which are now common knowledge have confirmed the suspicions that have long existed that the rebel Sinn Féin and Irish Volunteer organisations have been deliberately fostered and financed by Germany and it is, therefore clear that Blythe is a person of hostile associations. It is also evident that, as one of the leading members of these rebel organisations, he is a most dangerous person, who cannot be left at large, and his immediate internment is therefore recommended. It should be added that pending an order under DRR 14B, Blythe has been arrested as a dangerous suspect and is now in custody[86].

Given the above account of Blythe by the British secret service, it is surprising then to read McCourt's assessment of Blythe's revolutionary credentials as, 'though solid they were far from glittering, even compared with many of the reluctant politicians in the Dáil'[87]. McKay wonders how the British got their intelligence so wrong. Blythe was taken by boat to Holyhead where he was placed on a train, given a ticket for Abingdon, Berkshire, with a paper commanding him to remain there and to report to the police on his arrival. He was re-arrested for his failure to report to the police in Abingdon at the point of arrival.

Blythe's friend, Desmond Fitzgerald, who had visited him in Arbour Hill and who knew his friend's temperament, was not surprised that Blythe disobeyed the order. During the visit Blythe said that he would not choose any of the places suggested by the police. Fitzgerald concluded from the visit that Blythe, on being told by his solicitor that he must obey the order, had answered in such a truculent manner, 'of course I shall do no such

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[86] NAUK, WO 141/5, W 628, '*Report on Blythe's hostile status*,' 5 May 1916.
[87] Ryan McCourt, "Ernest Blythe as Minister for Finance in the Irish Free State, 1923-1932," *Parliamentary History*, Vol, 33, pt. 3 (2014): 479.

thing,' that the solicitor steered away from the subject and it was not mentioned again. The result was that Blythe was ignorant as to the course he was to follow and took the line that he and Fitzgerald had agreed the previous year was the only one compatible with dignity[88].

Blythe contacted Fitzgerald from Abingdon stating that he was in the lock-up for disobeying orders and was to be charged with the offence. Fitzgerald was now certain that the message that was sent to Blythe had not been passed on and Volunteer Headquarters were anxious to contact him. Mabel Fitzgerald, Desmond's wife, volunteered to visit Blythe and if he had not already been sentenced, he was to be told to be most obedient to his orders for a few days until the police ceased to be watchful; that during that time he should make a habit of going for walks; extending those walks from day to day and that when the police were no longer suspicious, a motor should pick him on the road, bring him to a port where arrangements should be made for him to get on a boat that would bring him to Ireland, where he could go into hiding until the Rising took place, if it were to take place[89]. Blythe was, however, transferred to Oxford Prison.

4.9 Ernest Blythe: An Irishman in an English Gulag

Described by Fitzpatrick as 'an inveterate inmate of prisons'[90], Blythe had come a long way since he first dreamed of an Ireland, free and Gaelic. He had by his actions demonstrated his commitment to that ideal. He could not be singled out as being in any way different to the other men and women taking part in the struggle because of his Ulster Protestant, Unionist pedigree. He had demonstrated the thrawn, stubborn traits that are said to be typical of an Ulsterman and he was now in the loop of arrest, trial and imprisonment for his convictions. He was also proving to be a major problem for British authorities who had been forced to alter their DORA significantly to put him and his associates out of circulation. Rather than ashamed of his Ulster origins as Regan suggests there were positives to the Ulster character.

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[88] Fitzgerald, *Desmond's Rising, Memoirs 1913 to Easter 1916*, 117.
[89] Ibid., 114-116-121-122.
[90] D. Fitzpatrick, "Ernest Blythe- Orangeman and Fenian," *History Ireland*, Vol. 25 No. 3 May/June 2017, 34.

As Blythe languished in Oxford Prison, George Gavan Duffy had been appointed as his counsel and it was at that point that Blythe states that he began to give credence to what Sean Mac Dermott had told him earlier in the year that a Rising was in the offing. Blythe was brought back to Abingdon Police Station and tried before a bench of lay magistrates. Blythe, described as a SF anti-recruiting agitator, was charged with failing to report himself to the police on arrival at Abingdon on April 10[91]. 'Duffy talked about Magna Carta, Habeas Corpus and so on. The local magistrates were over awed and took the safest course legally -they convicted me but decided that as I had already been a week in Oxford Gaol they would impose no penalty. I was discharged and told by Duffy that Art Ó Briain would be in contact the following day and, that I was to stay in Abingdon for the time being'[92].

For this incorrigible, defiant rebel, agreeing to obey a British order would have been anathema. Had Blythe been given advice at the outset from someone that he knew to be of military importance in Ireland with instructions to fall in line with Volunteer Headquarters commands, he would have done so and could have been in Ireland for the Rising. In an interview for the *Irish Times* in 1974, Blythe told journalist Michael McInerney that, 'the Rising had come as no surprise to him as MacDermott had told him of the plan to land German guns along with a small group of German artillery men. 'I knew of the weaknesses of the Volunteers and did not agree with the form the Rising took, but I suppose I would have gone along with it if I had been able to get home in time'[93]. Blythe also argued that the Rising was not a gamble. Large bodies of Volunteers deeply regretted that the split in the leadership along with orders and counter-orders had prevented them from participating. 'They were anxious for another round. No doubt however, if the British had avoided executions the stimulating effect of the Rising might have spread much less rapidly'[94].

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[91] "Arrest of Mr. Ernest Blythe in England-Proceedings in Abingdon Court-A Breach of Regulations, but not a serious offence," *Newtownards Chronicle*, 29 April 1916, 4.
[92] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 61.
[93] "Ernest Blythe-On Hunger Strike in Cork Jail," *The Irish Times*, 31 December 1974, 10,
[94] Ibid., 10.

Blythe was visited by Ó Briain on Good Friday, 1916, informing him that events were moving in Dublin. It was on the following Wednesday that he learned there had been a Rising. He was re-arrested the following day and incarcerated once again in Abingdon[95]. He was put in the 'drunk lock-up cell', his blankets were covered in stale vomit and the cell was very confined. He spent ten days in these grim conditions before being transferred to Brixton Prison where he was placed in solitary confinement for a period of two months[96].

The arrest sheet signed by C. Haynes, Brixton Prison Governor, dated 11/5/1916, states that when questioned, in typical fashion, Blythe denied any wrong-doing stating that he had nothing to do with the "Rebel" side of the Volunteer movement[97]. Blythe, who refused to be present before the Advisory Committee, had written a statement which was read out. Blythe, referred to as the petitioner, begs to submit that:

> In the districts in which he was associated with the Irish Volunteer movement (frequently called the Sinn Féin movement) it was not a rebel movement. Except for a few weeks at the end of 1914 when he was in Londonderry and Donegal, petitioner's connection with the Volunteer movement has been confined to Counties, Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Clare. In none of these counties have any disturbances taken place, although they contained considerable lodges of Volunteers in possession of arms, who, if so inclined to cause trouble, could have done so. With the Irish Volunteer movement in Dublin petitioner was not associated. He has never been present at any drill or parade in Dublin and in all has attended only two meetings there-one an Executive meeting in May 1915 at which he represented a country branch. Five members of the Irish Volunteers Executive who signed the insurgent's proclamation, namely Pearse, Plunkett, McDonagh and Kent, the petitioner had never spoken. MacDermott he met for the first time in eighteen months on March 17th just a week before petitioner's arrest. The only members of the Volunteer Executive with whom petitioner was in touch were Messrs John MacNeill, President, and Bulmer Hobson, Secretary, neither of whom took part in the recent disturbances. Petitioner submits therefore that he should not be regarded as a person of hostile associations. To describe petitioner as having been one of the leading organisers of the movement is, he submits, misleading. He had no part in the inception of the movement or in determining its policy. He never was a member of its Executive and never held an office conferring any power of control. The movement originated in November 1913 and petitioner did not even become a member until July 1914. In September 1914 the movement split into two sections, one of which retained the name "Irish Volunteers" and the other, under the leadership of Mr. John Redmond, took the name "National Volunteers". Petitioner was employed by the Executive of the Irish Volunteers as an organiser and performed the routine duties of inspecting existing barracks and assisting in the formation of new branches in various parts of the country as directed. He was of no influence or note in the movement until July 1915. In that month he was in common with a number of others served with an order directing him to leave Ireland. As no charge whatsoever had been made against him and, as he felt that to leave Ireland would amount to self-accusation and self-conviction, he did not obey

[95] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 62.
[96] Ibid., 62
[97] NAUK, WO141/5, 312.167/3, '*Report and Particulars on Reception in Brixton Prison*,' 12 May 1916.

> the order. In consequence he was arrested and sentenced to three months imprisonment. As a result of the publicity thus given, petitioners name became more prominent in the movement and his services more in demand by people who wanted to form new branches of the organisation. His position however remained that of a subordinate official who had often to work under the direction of very local leaders. His influence, because of the fact that he was a paid employee, continued to be inconsiderable. Prior to the outbreak of the disturbances in Dublin petitioner had been ordered to reside at Abingdon in Berkshire. He remained there until arrested on May 1st. and, intended to remain until permitted by the competent, military authority to return to Ireland. If released he will undertake not to take part in any political action whatsoever, either personally, or by writing until the end of the war. Signed, Ernest Blythe[98].

The Committee deliberated on Blythe's lengthy statement but were unable to believe that he had nothing to do with the rebels. His activities had become so menacing that on July 10th an order was made directing him to leave Ireland and his refusal to obey it led to his receiving 3 months imprisonment. In March 1916 he addressed a meeting at Ardpatrick National School, Limerick where he produced a revolver, lectured on its use and told the audience that rifles were coming. Bearing in mind his past history and recollecting that he refused to appear before them, the Committee have no alternative but to advise that the Order for internment be confirmed[99].

Back in Co. Down meanwhile, Blythe's contemporaries in the *North-Down Herald* were expressing their astonishment regarding Blythe's rebel activities in an article on 3 June 1916:

Former Resident of Newtownards in the Limelight: Responsible for Sinn Fein Movement in Kerry: Also organises in Clare.

> Before the Royal Commission appointed to enquire into the recent outbreak in Ireland, evidence was given on Saturday inculpating a former temporary resident in Newtownards - Ernest Blythe, whose activities in County Kerry was alleged to be responsible for the organising of the Sinn Féin movement in that county and also jointly responsible for that in County Clare. Ernest Blythe was for some years resident in Newtownards as a local representative of one of our Bangor contemporaries and, whilst here never gave any indication of the sentiments which have brought him into such prominence[100].

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[98] NAUK, WO141/5, Home Office, 312169/4, '*Representation of Ernest Blythe against the Provisions of Internment Order*,' 6 May 1916.
[99] NAUK, WO141/5, Home Office, 312169/6, '*Committee Hearing on the case of Ernest Blythe*,' 1 June 1916.
[100] "The Rebellion Commission, Former Resident of Newtownards in the Limelight, Responsible for the Sinn Féin Movement in Kerry," *North-Down Herald*, 3 June 1916.

The British were now increasing the pressure on Blythe as can be evidenced by the deterioration in his prison conditions. Frustratingly, he had had no news of how things were in Ireland:

> On my first Sunday there I was put in the front seat of the church. I tried to find out from some of the warders what was happening in Ireland, but they would tell me nothing. I had no idea then, or for a long time later, whether the Rising was finished or still going on. I received no mail from anyone and at the end of a month I was still in the dark about the situation in Ireland. I was allowed three-quarters of an hour outside for solitary exercise. I was allowed books, but these were always romance novels which I found impossible to read. I left a note on my slate one day saying, 'no more books by women please' after which I was given boys' adventure stories and detective tales. I asked the chief warder if I could get work to do, as was given to sentenced prisoners. The result was I got mail bags to sew and I would spend three or four hours per day sewing as a change from reading[101].

Blythe, who now seemed to have disappeared within the prison system, became the subject of a parliamentary debate in the House of Commons with Laurence Ginnell asking a question regarding Blythe's prison status. Through Ginnell's intervention, Blythe was now granted letters and visitors; the first to visit him was Desmond Fitzgerald's sister Kate with news for Blythe two months after the Rising[102].

Blythe was now being subjected to psychological torture designed to cause distress, uncertainty and physical discomfort. The numerous prison moves causing a sense of instability and fearfulness; being cut off from contact with other prison inmates and visitors, combined with the deterioration in prison living conditions, were all designed to break the spirit of the individual. Blythe describes being stressed and agitated for weeks as he waited for word of what had happened to his Volunteer and IRB comrades back in Ireland. He had a hint that something momentous had occurred, however his British captors kept him isolated from anyone with an Irish connection and didn't allow him to read any newspapers[103].

In July, Blythe was transferred to Reading Gaol along with around forty other prisoners, some from Frongoch and other prisons. From now on he would be in the company of Irishmen with whom he shared the same political and cultural ideals. Famous names from the period were incarcerated with Blythe; 'Arthur Griffith, P.T Daly who had been an old

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[101] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 64.
[102] Ibid., 64.
[103] http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/treíbh/remembering-not-to-remember-1,1784152, date accessed November 17, 2017.

Fenian organiser, Tomás MacCurtain, Terry MacSwiney, Seamus Robinson, Tom Craven of Liverpool, Frank Burke of Carrickmacross, Darrell Figgis, George Nicholls of Galway, Seán Milroy, Peadar Ó Hannrachan, Alderman Cole of Dublin, MacGowan, McCormack and O'Neill – Citizen Army men of Dublin, William O'Brien, Denis McCullough, Pierce McCann, Herbert Moore Pim, Eamon O'Dwyer, and Liam Langley and Alf Cotton. Others included Seán T. O'Kelly and Ginger O'Connell'[104]. The enforced close social contact was agreeable for some, but unbearably claustrophobic for others. Differences of opinion and arguments were part of the daily prison experience. Blythe's contribution to O'Connell's poetry book, 'The Book of Cells', is a tongue-in-cheek reference to how he kept relationships sweet: 'To Reading Gaol I have been sent/And must endure the punishment/That every bloke is writing rhyme/And I must praise it every time[105]. There was also a great deal of political discussion and planning about what should be done in the way of political organisation when they were released[106].

On the December 23, 1916 the prison Governor delivered the news that the prisoners were to be released. Blythe was informed that the DORA order of July 1915 forbidding him to stay in Ireland was still in force and that he would not be returning to Ireland with the rest of his comrades. According to the Governor of Reading Gaol:

> Ernest Blythe is an exceptional case inasmuch as a military order was made last year directing him to leave Ireland and that it is still in force. He should be reminded that he cannot return to Ireland and should be given a railway warrant for any destination as he may choose'[107].

True to form, he ignored this latest order, having enough money to buy a ticket to Dublin, he joined his comrades in steerage.

4.10 The red triangle or America: is Ernest Blythe finally brought to heel?

Blythe had survived a trying time in prison although it wasn't enough to deter him in the slightest. He was still true to his separatist ideals and had suffered with the best of them. He once again defied the authorities. Within

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[104] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 65.
[105] Murphy, *Political Imprisonment and the Irish*, 67.
[106] Ibid, 66-69.
[107] NAUK, WO141/5, W 628, '*Letter confirming Blythe still a detainee*,' 23 December 1916.

a week of arriving in Dublin he was back in Magheragall; falsely, he believed the police had lost track of him. Slipping up to Belfast to find Sean Lester, he was spotted passing through Lisburn. The arrest came quickly with Blythe finding himself back in Arbour Hill. Placing a map in front of Blythe, the now exasperated General Friend explained the old order expelling him from Ireland was still in force but, that they were giving give him a choice. A small red triangle had been drawn on the map and Blythe was told he could either undertake to reside within the red triangle which was an area of five-mile radius around the Blythe farm, or alternatively he could have a one-way ticket to America. The Order was very specific as reported by Newtownards Chronicle:

The Southern Star dated 16 February 1918 contains the following which will be read with interest as Mr. Blythe was a well-known journalist in this district. The Order of Friday 8 April 1918 stated:

> Whereas Ernest Blythe is suspected of having acted in a manner prejudicial to the Public Safety and the Defence of the Realm, it is desirable that the said Ernest Blythe should be prohibited from residing in or entering the area specified in this order, to wit, the Provinces of Munster, Leinster and Connaught, and that Ernest Blythe leave the said area within 48 hours after service of this Order upon him. The said Ernest Blythe to comply with the following conditions as to residence in Ireland, namely, that he shall reside in the following area viz: The area forming a triangle bounded on the northern side by the Great Northern Railway, Belfast and Antrim Branch; on the southern side by the Great Northern Railway between Knockmore Junction and Moira Station, and on the western side by Moira-Ballinderry Station Road.
> Given under my hand this 5th day of February 1918. (Signed) B. Mahon, Lieut-General, Competent Military Authority[108].

Blythe's feelings about this order restricting free movement within Ireland were, for a change, quite philosophical; if he behaved to form however, he would already be planning his next move out of Magheragall. 'I was quite anxious to go to America especially under those circumstances but, I had seen nobody in touch with affairs since I got home and, my own people knew nothing about how matters stood. I had no idea what had happened to the Volunteer organisation, of what was being done or what was being planned and I decided in the circumstances I should stay in Ireland. Accordingly, I signed the undertaking put before me by the British Commander'[109].

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[108] "The Banishment of Mr. Ernest Blythe-A Former Newtownards Representative of the Bangor Journal," *Newtownards Chronicle*, February 23, 1918.
[109] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 72.

Blythe would have resented signing the undertaking, but, knowing for now the British had him between a rock and a hard place, he chose to take the line of least resistance by opting to stay in Magheragall where he could, in a limited way, keep up with revolutionary events and at some time in the future resume his activities. For a driven man like Blythe, the six months he spent in Magheragall were mind-numbing. He visited a couple of Catholic and nationalist houses near the farm; he spent all the remaining money he possessed buying books in Irish and he used some of the time writing articles in Irish for the *Claidheamh Soluis* which earned him a few pounds[110]. When all the penal servitude prisoners were released and the East Clare election began, Blythe had had enough:

> I wrote a letter to the British Commander in Dublin withdrawing my undertaking to remain in the limited area and sent it off by registered post. I made for Dublin, but lest I should be arrested at Lisburn or Lurgan or any of the stations close at hand, I cycled to Scarva, going through Hillsborough and Banbridge, boarding the train at Scarva. I travelled back to Dublin where I received the news that the order to leave Ireland had been suspended and that for the present I could go where I liked[111]

Released from the immediate threat of arrest, Blythe went to Limerick. He found that relations between the officers of the Volunteers had deteriorated as had been the case before the Rising, with many people finding fault with their attitude and action at that time. It was impossible to move the officers into action, although as a result of the Clare election and the release of the prisoners, a great deal of activity was beginning all over the country. With much cajoling Blythe was able to get four companies going. 'I remember that in each case it proved difficult to fix a suitable drill night, especially so in the third company which we formed in the quarry. Between Sodalities and Confraternities there was not so much as one night in the week when everyone was free. I do not suppose there is any city in Ireland which has so many religious societies as Limerick has'[112].

Blythe was now low in funds and looking for work. The GL offered him a job in Cork to cover the area Denis Mulcahy had covered before the Rising. He set up his headquarters in Bantry where, for four months, he religiously visited all the schools in the area, speaking to teachers and

[110] Ibid., 72.
[111] Ibid., 73.
[112] Ibid., 75.

children. He was unable to form League branches as the people who wanted activity wanted Volunteer and Cumann ma mBan companies. Although paid by the League, Blythe devoted much of his time to the Volunteers and Cumann na mBan in the evenings, where through his efforts he succeeded in forming a great number of small and large Volunteer units[113]. He succeeded in starting two Irish language classes in Bantry, a dramatic society which arranged to do a play in Irish, and a large number of Volunteer units.

Another opportunity came his way when the local Sinn Féin purchased '*The Southern Star'* based in Skibbereen. Blythe was offered the post of editor. His editorship was short lived. Six weeks later he was arrested in early March 1918 for once again breeching the expulsion order. Extracting all the publicity he could from the situation, Blythe played to the crowd that had gathered:

> Large crowds gathered at the station when news got out that I was being arrested. I played up the situation to maximum effect by refusing to walk to the carriage unless I was taken by the arms. I did not resist, but the sight of me being, as it were, forcibly brought across the platform aroused the crowd. As the train departed, stone throwing began, with one of the stones coming through the window and flew past me[114].

4.11 The end game: hunger strike in Cork Gaol, Dundalk Gaol and back again to Belfast Gaol

I have watched the rise and fall of every political party in Ireland for the last forty years, and I think that the present movement is much the most difficult and dangerous of any the government had to deal with and for this reason. Their leaders are brave and fanatical and do not fear imprisonment or death; they are not influenced by private negotiations with bishops or priests, or captured by getting patronage of appointments, which has been the favourite instrument of the Irish government [British administration in Ireland] since 1905. Neither do they care a straw for the press. It is a fair and square fight between the Irish government and Sinn Féin as to who is going to govern the country[115].

Day by day the strength of the Irish Volunteers increased…recruiting in Ireland for the British forces, never successful, now entirely ceased…the anti-recruiting movement has become nation-wide…the arrests of men who were leading it spurred others to take up the work…the suppressed papers reappeared again, changed only in name…when one was taken away twenty more appeared[116].

One of those brave and fanatical men was Ernest Blythe who was now facing another spell of incarceration, this time in Cork Gaol. In support of his comrades who were on hunger-strike in Mountjoy for prisoner-of-

[113] Ibid., 77.
[114] Ibid., 82.
[115] J. A. Gaughan, Walter H. Long (Secretary of State for the colonies), 31 December 1918, quoted in *Austin Stack: Portrait of a Separatist* (Kingdom Books, Dublin, 1977), 1.
[116] Kennedy, *Genesis of the Rising 1912-1916*, 263-4

war/political status, Blythe immediately determined to join them in Cork. Totally ignorant of hunger strike techniques, Blythe refused both food and water. Soon he was transferred to a hospital cell where he was given a spring mattress and because he was feeling the cold, some extra blankets[117]:

> Once I was moved to the sick cell I did not get out of bed as I felt the cold pretty severely. The effects of the thirst strike began to be felt very soon. I found the skin coming off my lips and, on one occasion towards the end I woke up and had to put my finger in my mouth to take my tongue off my palate. During the last day or so I slept a great deal and although I never even tasted stout in my life, I dreamed, every time I dozed off, of a huge tankard of stout with an enormous head on it. An attempt was made to conduct a Military Court- Martial in my cell. However, the Army doctor found that, after four days of food and water I was in an unsatisfactory state for this. I was given a newspaper by a friendly warder and I saw that the Mountjoy men were taking water. I continued the hunger strike for four or five more days after that[118].

A newspaper article reported that, 'Mr. Ernest Blythe M.P. has gone on hunger strike as a protest against his sentence of twelve months imprisonment and, for not being treated as a political prisoner. Mr Blythe was sentenced by court-martial for having in his possession a document advocating the boycotting of police'[119]. This article was followed by a news bulletin which stated that, 'Mr. Ernest Blythe, Sinn Féin M.P who has been on hunger strike in Mountjoy Prison for some time past, was conveyed to the Mater Hospital on Friday. Although he is weak, his condition is said to be not too serious'[120].

Blythe would turn completely against hunger-strikes when he was Minister for Home Affairs. He had had a difference of opinion with Austin Stack in Belfast Gaol over a hunger strike 'to the death' ordered by Stack. Blythe's response was 'Excuse me, Austin, but if I feel that I am going to die, then I will take food'. Blythe had discovered that a mass hunger strike would have been a fake. 'Most participants would take a little food quietly so that some other fellow would die and perhaps win them some concessions'[121]. In what McInerney describes as the sharp contrast of patriots in their different roles as rebels and as rulers, Blythe, as Home Affairs Minister, took a merciless attitude to hunger strikers. Before the start of the Civil War he received a

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[117] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 83.
[118] Ibid., 83.
[119] *"Hunger Strike in Mountjoy Prison*,"
www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/archive/1919/1101 (accessed November 1919).
[120] Ibid.,
[121] "On Hunger Strike in Cork Jail," *Irish Times*, 31 December 1974, 11.

medical report that two prisoners convicted of a criminal offence were in danger of dying. Blythe, departing from practice, directed that the prisoners should not be released and ordered that the following statement be read to them. 'On no account will anyone be released while on hunger strike. If a prisoner dies on hunger strike, he will be buried in an unmarked grave in the prison grounds. No intimations of his death will be sent to his relatives and censorship will be used to stop any newspaper reporting his death'[122]. The hunger strike was abandoned almost immediately. These ruthless measures were also enacted by the de Valera government during 1940-1946.

Blythe held out until the Mountjoy men called their strike off. He was immediately court-martialled and charged with being in Skibbereen contrary to the existing DORA order. He was sentenced to another year imprisonment and transferred to Dundalk Gaol[123]. A large number of arrests had been carried out, with all Sinn Féiners being sent to Dundalk from where Blythe was transferred in July 1918 to serve out his sentence in Belfast Gaol; there were around two hundred SF prisoners in Belfast at the time[124]. Prior to Blythe's arrival, tension had arisen in Belfast in the early summer over prison conditions which escalated into rioting. Political status privileges were again removed and until the middle of July, the prisoners kept the prison in a state of sporadic turmoil[125].

On July 20, Austin Stack was elected prison commandant with Blythe elected vice-commandant. Blythe would soon make his presence felt when he led the prisoners in a hunger strike for re-instatement of political status, which was achieved after a short time. Then circumstances changed dramatically when the influenza pandemic of 1918 swept through the prison. Just as it had in England, the influenza exacerbated the prison difficulties during the winter and spring of 1918/1919. Those not in the prison hospital, were left in their cells[126]. According to Blythe all prison regulations had broken down:

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[122] Ibid., 10.
[123] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 85.
[124] Gaughan, *Austin Stack, Portrait of a Separatist*, 89.
[125] Ibid., 86-87.
[126] Ibid., 89.

> Previous to the 'flu' we had been locked in our cells at night from seven o'clock onwards. When a lot of the men fell sick we raised a great row about the possibility of people dying in the night without getting attention. Out of two hundred prisoners barely thirty were on their feet. The Governor allowed the cells to be open so that orderlies could make their rounds. Stack fell ill early. I visited every cell each day and was fortunate that I didn't fall ill. A lot of the men were pretty bad with a great deal of bleeding from the nose. Two men went off their heads and had to be moved to a mental institution. We had no deaths which may have been a result of the liberal amount of brandy issued by the prison authorities[127].

Prior to the flu epidemic, the selection of candidates for 1918 general election had been canvassed in the prison. Blythe was nominated for north Monaghan because of in-fighting between Seán MacEntee and a Dr. Ward. According to Blythe, 'The affair became so bitter that in order to win the election in a constituency with a substantial Unionist vote and, a strong Hibernian organisation, it was necessary to bring in a stranger to whom there was no local objection. The short visit I had in Rockcorry with Fr. Ó Ciarán, as things were at the time, sufficed to get me selected'[128].

Blythe's election Manifesto entitled '**The Man for North Monaghan'** was a comprehensive account of his contribution to the cause of Irish Liberty:

'The Man for North Monaghan'

For the past two hundred years the British Government has made every effort to make the Protestants of the north loyal to the Empire, but, not with-standing this, some of the greatest workers in the cause of Irish Independence sprung from this class. Amongst the names most cherished in Irish history are Mitchell and Martin of the '48 Movement, and Orr, Russell and McCracken of '98 Movement, and today **- Ernest Blythe** - the man in whom the people of North Monaghan are asked to repose their trust - is a worthy follower in their footsteps. From his earliest years his mind was filled with Irish Republican principles. His quota of punishments for the cause is:

DORA Orders and Warnings…….6

Arrests…….6

Prisons…….8

Hunger-Strike ……7 days

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[127] BMH, Document No. WS 936, 96.
[128] Ibid., 95.

Confined to Area……6 months

Imprisonment…….21 months

Total time confined since the start of the War…….27 months

Mr Blythe is still confined in Belfast Gaol.

Mr Blythe is the Vice-Commandant of the prisoners acting under Commandant Austin Stack. He is the most popular prisoner in the jail earning himself the respect and confidence of his fellow prisoners. This is the creditable and noble part which the SF Candidate for north Monaghan has taken in the Sacred Cause of Irish Freedom from his early teens and, this is the man who asks for your support on the 14th December. Had Ireland ever a man more worthy of it[129]?

SF Election posters also hailed candidate Blythe: 'Vote for Blythe and an Irish Ireland'[130]; 'The Conscription Law was not enforced. Why? Think over the reason yourself. Don't allow anyone to influence your thinking and you will arrive at the explanation and, then you will vote for SF and Blythe''[131]; Ireland is your Country, be a man for Ireland's sake, Vote Right, vote for Blythe and save your children from Shame!'[132].

4.12 The final showdown for Blythe

Vice-Commandant Blythe would leave for posterity his imprint and his name on the honours list in Belfast Gaol one final time[133]. With the prisoners eager for a fight with the authorities, Blythe, along with ninety other prisoners, took part in the infamous 'Belfast Prison Siege' from 22 December 1918 until 1 January 1919, resulting in the near, total destruction of 'B' wing. When the warders finally smashed down the cell doors, Blythe describes what happened to him, and his painful punishment:

> I was jumped by a couple of constables who handcuffed me with my hands behind me, took me to an empty cell, threw my mattress and clothes on the floor and locked me up. We all were handcuffed with our hands behind our backs. After a few hours it produced a rather severe pain at the points of the shoulders and down the shoulder blades. We were kept like that for several days the only relaxation was when the cuffs were put in front for meals and during the night; although the cuffs were still on in front it made undressing and taking off footwear very difficult. Due to the damage done to the cells we were moved to other cells which had only a mattress on the floor. It was very cold and though the handcuffs were in front, it was difficult getting covered with the blanket.

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[129] UCDA, P24/1017(1) Leaflet, '*Career of Ernest Blythe-Candidate for North Monaghan*'.
[130] Ibid., P24/1017 (6).
[131] Ibid., P24/1017 (4).
[132] Ibid., P24/1017 (2).
[133] Gaughan, *Austin Stack, Portrait of a Separatist*, 287.

> I was given a small candle for nigh-time and when I asked why, the warden said it was to prevent me falling down in the night if I needed to empty my bladder…We were allowed to exercise only if we agreed to walk around the exercise yard slowly and silently with five yards between us. We completely rejected that offer as it was only a plan to make us behave like ordinary criminals. After the handcuffing ceased, I was kept in lock-up until I was released[134].

Ernest Blythe had paid a heavy price for his nationalist convictions in terms of imprisonments and deportations. The ultimate price paid however would be his final estrangement from his homeland of Ulster. Blythe had touched on this 'heart-separation' from his Unionist friends just before leaving Ulster to go to Kerry. According to O'Halpin:

Ulster says go: the forgotten exodus of northern nationalists

> The experience of thousands of northern activists who fled Ulster because they faced arbitrary detention and continuous persecution at the time of the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty has largely been forgotten. Forgotten too has been this group's significant contribution to the Irish Revolution. This group included northerners Ernest Blythe, Denis McCullough, Alf Monaghan and the eccentric Herbert Pim figured prominently in the police records of subversive activity the year before the Rising. They, like many northern activists, ultimately made their lives outside of Ulster[135].

Blythe could however take comfort from knowing that his dedication to the cause had reaped dividends. A statement of offences against DDR, week ending Sunday 25th November 1917 showed that:

> The number of persons "on parade" on 25th inst. was over 12,500, whilst the ringleaders named in police reports number over 100. The number of men identified and reported for wearing full uniform on 25th inst. is over one hundred. In addition, a very large number wore part-uniform or equipment[136].

A further report on 26th January 1918 entitled "Crime Special" showed that the totals of illegal drilling from eleven counties since 25th September 1917 to 26th January 1918 was as follows:

Munster 894. (Blythe's Command)

Connaught 96.

Leinster 90.

Ulster 11.

Blythe, in common with his IRB comrades, looked to the past for inspiration and many of its members gloried in the idea of self-sacrifice. Blythe claimed that:

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[134] Ibid., 108.

[135] Eunan O' Halpin, "Ulster says go: the forgotten exodus of northern nationalists," www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/ (date accessed), 6 April 2018.

[136] NAUK, WO35/206, Secret, No. 1527(c), '*Statement of Illegal Drilling*,' 29-11-1917.

> If the succession of martyrs fail while the nation is enslaved she shall yield up her soul to the conqueror…As in the national language is all sanity and strength, so in the fresh blood of the martyrs is all hope and pride and courage…Let the little-hearted talk of living for Ireland, but be well assured that it is a finer thing to die for Ireland and more profitable than to win great victories[137].

Ernest Blythe was finally released from prison at the end of February 1919. The 1918 general election had seen him officially elected SF M.P for north Monaghan. There is no doubt that Blythe had acquitted himself admirably as an Irish revolutionary and that he had made a major contribution to Ireland's fight for freedom. In the process he helped disable Britain's war effort through his unrelenting campaign against British conscription of Irishmen. Blythe believed that they should be fighting instead for the rights of their own small nation. This 'hard-bitten realism to violence'[138] confirmed that the severing of Ernest Blythe's Ulster Unionist roots was now complete. The question now was, would he be able to make the adjustments necessary for the onerous task of taking the country and its inhabitants forward through another phase of nation building?

[137] M. Laffan, *The Resurrection of Ireland: The Sinn Féin Party 1916-1923* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999), 216.
[138] Ibid., 320.

Chapter Five

Ernest Blythe in government: 1919-1932

5.1 Introduction

To date this study has focused on Blythe's formative years in County Antrim and his adolescent years in Dublin; his initiation into the cultural and nationalistic organisations emerging at the time in Dublin; his mission to Kerry to learn the Irish language; his time as an Irish Volunteer and organiser for the IRB and his contribution to the fight for Irish independence.

Chapter Five will now focus on Blythe's period in government where he occupied various posts during the period 1919-1932. For instance, in the first Republican Dáil 1919-1922 he was Minister for Trade and Commerce. From 1922-1923 he was Minister for Local Government. From 1927-1932 he was Minister for Posts and Telegraphs. From 1923-1932 Blythe was Minister for Finance. Following the assassination of Kevin O'Higgins in 1927 he was raised to the position of Vice-President of the Executive Council.

Rather than carry out a general survey of the years 1919-32, specific events which arose during that period will be addressed. These events have been selected in order to highlight the divergent and dangerous roles that Blythe played in the formative and consolidative years of the new Free State whilst trying to fulfil his government responsibilities. Blythe was expected to juggle his ministerial role with that of an active revolutionary, a task requiring nerves of steel and determination. For instance, his attempts to set up a clandestine Trade and Commerce department prior to the Anglo-Irish Treaty whilst on the run, and his arrest and imprisonment during the War of Independence in connection with Michael Collins' RIC boycott.

Partition was anathema for Blythe. This led to his supporting the Belfast Trade Boycott which he believed would 'knock the bottom out of Belfast', causing the collapse of the six-counties. Was Blythe serious or was this an

act of bravado? Would he shy away in the end from the destruction of his homeland? Was there any loyalty left in Blythe for Ulster?

The anarchy which arose during the Civil War placed Blythe and his fellow ministers in an invidious position. Unpleasant decisions had to be made as to how the government dealt with the trouble-makers. How would Blythe respond to the demands for exemplary punishment?

Blythe's tenure as Minister for Finance will be examined from a different perspective than usual. This study will investigate the Department of Finance, the extent of its influence on William Cosgrave's Cumann na nGaedheal government and Blythe as its Finance Minister. Blythe had superiors, senior civil servants who directed financial affairs and on whom the government relied for fiscal advice. How influential were these civil servants and what influence, if any, did Blythe ultimately have on their decision making?

The question posed in the conclusion of Chapter Four was, could Blythe rise to the challenge of government minister and help lead the new Free State forward following almost ten years as an Irish revolutionary? Blythe, who was in prison when he had been put forward as north Monaghan candidate in the 1918 election had been elected by default. He was not overly enthusiastic having wanted to pursue his chosen career in journalism. Time would tell whether he would stay the course.

5.2 One phase ends another begins: Blythe in an unfamiliar role as a government minister, 1919-1922

Following Sinn Féin's success in the 1918 general election those elected assembled on 21 January 1919 in Dublin's Mansion House to establish An Dáil Éireann:

> When the roll of the Dáil was called 'fé ghlas ag Gallaibh' [imprisoned by the foreign enemy] was the answer given to name after name. Of the seventy-three republicans elected thirty-six were in jail[1].

One of those still 'fé ghlas' was Ernest Blythe who had been elected to represent north Monaghan. Blythe was serving out his sentence in Belfast Gaol. When released he had plans to return to Skibbereen and his editorial job with the *Southern Star:*

[1] D. MacArdle, *The Irish Republic* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1965), 272.

> After I was released from Belfast Gaol I came without delay to Dublin. A meeting of the Dáil was in progress and I met various people. De Valera asked me to go to lunch with him, and after talking a while about his plans for working the Dáil he asked me would I join the government as Director of Trade and Commerce. I had been intending at this point to go back to Skibbereen but, Michael Collins had said to me that I ought to stay in Dublin and had in fact told me the day before that he and others would look out to see if they could get me a job in Dublin. Consequently, I accepted de Valera's offer and my appointment as Director for Trade and Commerce was confirmed by the Dáil a day or two afterwards[2].

In consequence Blythe became the sole Ulster representative in that administration. Blythe's work experiences had consisted of recruiting and preparing men for the IRB and the IV. Prior to that he had been a newspaper reporter. He had no experience in government on which he could draw in his new role as Director for Trade and Commerce. It came as no surprise then that he found himself at a loss when he started work in his new job in cramped office conditions in Harcourt St., Dublin:

> For a time after my appointment as Director of Trade and Commerce my office consisted of part of a table in No. 6 Harcourt Street. I had at first no idea of what activities I should undertake. Eoin MacNeill was Minister for Industry and, it might have been hard to say where Industry ended and, Trade and Commerce began. It soon became apparent that MacNeill had no intention of functioning. He not only did not attempt to create a department, but he practically never attended a meeting of the Ministry. My range therefore was in practice, Industry and Commerce in so far as it was anything[3].

Blythe's first assignment was the idea of a Wexford businessman who suggested An Dáil should consider setting up a Farmers Co-operative Society to inaugurate a dressed meat trade like the one carried out between Aberdeen and London[4]. He had no sooner selected his desk when a military raid was carried out at No. 6 and he was arrested. The British authorities had on 12 September 1919:

> Proclaimed Dáil Éireann an illegal and suppressed 'organisation' having earlier proclaimed Sinn Féin, the Irish Volunteers and other revolutionary nationalist organisations. The military raided the Sinn Féin offices at 6 Harcourt Street from where Michael Collins ran his Department of Finance business. Collins escaped by clambering through a skylight. A future Minister for Finance under the Free State government, Ernest Blythe, was not so lucky and was arrested. The next night, on Collins' orders, one of the raiding party, Detective Hoey was shot dead outside police headquarters in Brunswick Street[5].

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[2] Bureau of Military History (BMH), 1913-1921, Document No. WS 939, 108.
[3] Ibid., 111.
[4] Ibid., 114.
[5] R. Fanning, *The Irish Department of Finance 1922-58* (Institute of Public Administration, Dublin, 1978), 17.

Blythe would be imprisoned several times from September 1919 to July 1921, and therefore his achievements were few and far between[6]. Following up on the Wexford meat factory idea, Blythe and Barton approached the Irish Overseas and Trading Company (IOTC) who were keen to have an agricultural industry on a co-operative basis established. After the Moore-McCormack shipping line established direct shipping from Ireland to America in 1919, Blythe's department had created the IOTC to generate Irish exports to the US market. Trade and Commerce also explored the practicality of starting up an import/export firm providing storage in Ireland; the creation of an investment company and various other schemes, all of which came to nothing. Mitchell ascribes this to 1920 being a prosperous year and there was no sense of urgency[7].

During its first year Blythe's department was swamped with requests for loans for industrial capital. According to Blythe, 'many of the projects came under my notice through promoters with proposals that the Dáil should lend or give them sums ranging downwards from £3,000,000 asked for by a gentleman who previously held a fairly important position in Belfast shipyard and who submitted elaborate plans for the development of a great dockyard in the Alexandra Basin'[8].

Eventually Blythe decided against granting further loans simply because he couldn't discriminate amongst the numerous applicants without offending many good republicans. Blythe believed that people were reluctant to invest in home enterprises. The National Land Bank then proposed the creation of a state-financed Industrial Loan Guarantee Fund which would provide security to economic development loans made by the bank; the scheme was given Blythe's blessing. This was put on hold until the bank had enough capital and since this did not materialise, Blythe's efforts at state stimulation for industrial development came to an end[9].

According to Mitchell, Blythe was all in favour of co-operatives as the only feasible way of combating foreign trusts and combines. He advised

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[6] P. Buckley, 'Blythe, Ernest (de Blaghd, Earnán) (1889-1975),' *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (DIB), Vol 1, Royal Irish Academy, Cambridge University Press, 618.
[7] A. Mitchell, *Revolutionary Government in Ireland: Dáil Éireann 1919-22* (Gill & MacMillan Ltd, Dublin, 1995), 162.
[8] Ibid., 163.
[9] Ibid., 163.

caution when setting up these co-operatives however, 'so as not to endanger the unity of the people and to retain the support of the Labour Movement'[10]. A meeting was arranged for Waterford City with circulars sent out signed by Blythe and Barton. Another raid was carried out with Barton imprisoned and Blythe had gone underground again[11]. According to Blythe, Sir John B. Keane, 5th Baronet, Cappoquin, Co Waterford and a prominent member of the Farmer's Union who had been elected to the committee, made some very testy remarks about the absence of the two men, Blythe and Barton, who had called the meeting[12]. Within a year, Blythe's representative, Joe Dillon, had scoured the country, collecting subscriptions and encouraging individuals to buy shares. The money for the project was collected and the factory built which operated under the name of Clover Meats. Blythe's department also gave assistance, including a staff member, for the formation of a co-operative in Waterford to produce butter and cheese. Although £200,000 was raised the construction of the plant was postponed until the country was more settled[13].

The first indications of protectionism are to be found in Blythe's next venture. The idea of a boycott being applied to certain classes of British goods was floated and inquiries made to see if Irish manufacturers could meet the country's needs in certain articles. Orders were issued that, whether biscuits or boot polish, British goods of that kind were not to be sold in Ireland.

> We ordered a boycott of British biscuits and Volunteers in various places took action to prevent shops selling them. Jacob's were not troubled by the small imports of British biscuits but, were afraid that our action might prejudice their sales abroad. I was approached by the head of the firm to call off the boycott. I told him that the boycott was imposed as an act of economic warfare and that nothing could be done about it[14].

Jacob's Biscuits thought they were included in the 'blanket ban' on British biscuits and they were afraid for their reputation abroad and asked for the ban to be lifted. However, that was not the case. The firm action taken in this instance by Blythe suggests he had no difficulty transferring his revolutionary skills of organiser and decision maker to the level of

[10] Ibid., 47.
[11] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 114.
[12] Ibid., 114.
[13] Mitchell, *Revolutionary Government in Ireland, Dáil Éireann 1919-22*, 162.
[14] Ibid., 115-116.

government official. He was finding opportunities for making money, protecting Irish trade, creating jobs, whilst attempting to place Ireland on an international trade footing.

Did Blythe believe in tariff protection as an economic strategy or was it just politics? A tariff is a tax added to the cost of imported goods commonly used to protect infant industries, developing economics and for protecting domestic employment[15]. According to Buckley, the limits of economic policy during Blythe's term in finance were created and controlled by commissions of experts most notably, the 1923 Fiscal Enquiry Committee and the 1924 Commission on Agriculture[16]. Daly states that:

> The broad sweep of economic policy was determined not by the government but by commissions of experts, the Commission on Agriculture, 1924, the Fiscal Enquiry Committee 1923 and, the Banking Commission, 1927. The experts favoured the status quo. Ireland would maintain parity and financial links with sterling, produce food for Britain, and remain a free-trade industrial sector[17].

These experts favoured a free-trade economic policy widely different from Arthur Griffith's and pre-treaty Sinn Féin protectionist policies:

> Blythe's fiscal policy was based on the core assumption that the well-being of Irish economy was, in the main, dependent on agriculture and that the best prospects for agriculture, were through increased agricultural exports to Britain. The means to achieve that goal included reducing tariff duties on manufactured goods to curtail cost increases for farmers'[18].

Agriculture Minister Patrick Hogan stated in 1924 that, 'national development in Ireland, in our generation at least, is practically synonymous with agricultural development'[19].

> Hogan's approach was accepted by his colleagues in government and in opting for export-led agriculture, Cumann na nGaedheal accepted the supremacy of market pressures and the need to maintain competitiveness. Hogan urged curbs on local government spending to reduce taxes on farmers, advocated cutting the wages of local authority road workers to prevent pressure on farm labourer's wages, pressed for lower tax levels to increase competitiveness and, urged that farmers be compensated for cost increases consequent on protection. Large farmers were favoured at the expense of smallholders and increased spending on unemployment, housing, or industrial development was ruled out[20].

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[15] B. Radcliffe, "The Basics of Tariffs and Trade Barriers," https://www.investopedia.com/economics/08/tariff-trade-barrier-basics.asp, date accessed, 8 November 2018.
[16] Buckley, 'Blythe**,** Ernest (de Blaghd, Earnán),' DIB, Vol. 1, 619.
[17] M. E. Daly, *Industrial Development and Irish National Identity 1922-1939* (Gill and Macmillan Ltd, Dublin, 1992), 16.
[18] Buckley, 'Blythe, Ernest (de Blaghd, Earnán),' DIB, Vol. 1, 619.
[19] Daly, *Industrial Development and Irish National Identity, 1922-1939*, 16.
[20] Ibid., 16-17.

In 1923, Minister for Industry and Commerce, Joseph McGrath wanted limited protection that would not injure agriculture with the emphasis on products with a large domestic market and ruling out any prospect of a fiscal revolution. McGrath's policy was given the thumbs up by the cabinet, but not by finance civil servant, Blythe's nemesis, J.J. McElligott who, in a memo to Blythe, argued that, 'protection once given could never be reversed inevitably leading to further protection. McElligott suggested that the government concentrate on reducing wages'[21]. Reductions in the old-age pensions was only a matter of time.

Would Blythe's soft tariffs be effective? For three successive budgets 1924-6 he imposed tariffs which had marginal impact, doing little to satisfy Irish manufactures who wanted a stiffer policy[22]. Would Blythe be forced to alter his minimalist tactics? Only with the onset of the world slump from 1929, increasing pressure from Fianna Fáil combined with demands from Irish manufacturers calling for tariffs on imported goods, did Blythe finally amend his fiscal policies, a measure which Buckley describes 'as reactive'[23].

The protectionist, national British government of 1931 who were committed to protecting British agriculture, particularly, livestock and dairy products which were an Irish speciality, did little to help Blythe. What with the international economic recession and emigration virtually at a standstill Blythe's policies became politically unsustainable. Nine months before the up-coming election, Cumann na nGaedheal introduced legislation almost identical with Britain which gave the executive power for a nine-month period to impose 'such duties as were deemed immediately necessary to prevent an expected dumping of goods or other threatened industrial injury'[24].

From the information alluded to above Blythe favoured tariff protection as an economic strategy. However, he was hesitant in applying stiffer tariffs in order to curtail cost increases for Irish farmers. Finally, Blythe and his government colleagues saw the reality of the Fianna Fáil pro-tariff

[21] Ibid., 23.
[22] Buckley, 'Blythe, Ernest (de Blaghd, Earnán),' DIB, Vol. 1, 619.
[23] Ibid., 620.
[24] Daly, *Industrial Development and Irish National Identity*, 47.

protectionist policies and in the knee-jerk reaction alluded to above, sought to ward off the inevitability of a Fianna Fáil triumph in the next election. According to Buckley, 'insofar as that action had any political effect, it probably confirmed the perception of many voters that Blythe and his colleagues had belatedly come to accept the validity of Fianna Fáil's strongly pro-tariff protectionist policies'[25].

Blythe later admitted that the Department of Trade and Commerce (DTC) was mostly pretence existing only for propaganda purposes. Business reports were routine and because the Ministers' activities were mostly semi-fictional, there was little to discuss or comment on. Blythe's achievements didn't add to much apart from the establishment of a commission to study the country's resources which painstakingly produced eight reports. Inaugurated on 18 June 1919, this commission was to research the resources and industries of the country with a view to how they could be developed[26]. Darrell Figgis exclaimed that it would be the first constructive work done by the new government which could be carried out immediately, while the country was being cleared of all traces of the RIC[27]. The commission investigated food, power, textiles and minerals, followed by dairying, fisheries and meat supply; the power sub-committee investigated coal, peat, waterpower and industrial alcohol. Much dragging of feet and bickering ensued with only one report being produced by 1920. Collins frustrated by lack of progress, transferred the responsibility for the commission's work to Blythe's Department of Trade and Commerce[28].

Minister Blythe informed the Dáil that the commission's remit was too broad, a mistake in his view, and it was under-staffed. The commission members had worked hard gathering a lot of valuable data all at their own expense. Finally, eight reports were published in 1922: on dairying, coal, industrial alcohol, milk production, peat, fisheries, stock breeding and water power. According to Mitchell, while the members of the underground government were being hunted, the commissioners proceeded with what seemed to be an air of scholarly detachment. Everyone however got a pat on

[25] Buckley, 'Blythe, Ernest (de Blaghd, Earnán),' DIB, Vol. 1, 620.
[26] Mitchell, *Revolutionary Government in Ireland: Dáil Éireann 1919-1922*, 80.
[27] Ibid., 80.
[28] Ibid., 82.

the back when Warre B. Wells, writer and journalist for the *Irish Statesman* declared:

> The enquiry was an enterprise of a kind hitherto almost completely neglected in Ireland and planned on a scale which few other countries have yet rivalled. In the process of nation-building under the first Dáil, perhaps the most important part of this work was that undertaken by the National Commission on the Resources and Industries of Ireland[29].

5. 3 Blythe and his role during the RIC Boycott, 1919-1921

According to Mitchell, the part played by the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) in the general clean-up following the 1916 rebellion had placed it in the role of the most active and despicable of the forces of repression. The government turned on the RIC with a campaign designed to isolate and make it ineffective[30]. The boycott decreed by An Dáil on April 10, 1919 was initially intended to be a peaceful one. The RIC were to be treated as people guilty of treason and not worthy of the privileges which come from having a good working relationship with the public[31].

The incident involving Blythe occurred on May 25, 1919 at a SF meeting at Inchavalla, County. Tipperary where he was a speaker. At that meeting, 'Blythe was arrested and during a body search, an envelope containing an inflammatory document was found in his coat pocket containing instructions as to methods to be adopted in carrying out a boycott of the police and injuring their morale'[32]. The following is the verbatim document found, according to RIC Inspector Hunt, on the person of Ernest Blythe:

'The First Warning'

> The police rule Ireland for England. They do so because they know the people and because they are trained to 'draw' the people. A policeman never talks to a man but he is trying to get something out of him…We are out against the police and all who mix with them. We will not tolerate informers nor allow honest, but ignorant people to be familiar with police because such people, without knowing it, are very useful to the police…Those who henceforth will associate with them will be treated as enemies of the Irish nation and enemies of the Irish people. The police are most uneasy lately. They deliberately stop men to talk about nothing in particular so as to create an impression that there is no boycott of them. They are very funky since Knocklong! They will not be so openly disdainful of the people henceforth. They are useless only for the assistance given them, knowingly by rogues, unknowingly by fools. It is easy to choke off the latter by frightening them. An energetic 'bad lad' of a peeler can be made quiet if it is discovered where he is from and word to be sent to the Volunteers or Sinn Fein of his

[29] Ibid., 85.
[30] Ibid., 68-69.
[31] Ibid., 69.
[32] National Archives of the United Kingdom, London (NAUK), CO904/193/14a, 'Ernest Blythe,' 4.

> native place as to his official character. The local comrades to circulate this with a view to making things unpleasant for his people who will not fail to inform him of how they suffer for his activity. This to my mind would be very great assistance to the work of making the job unpleasant not alone for themselves but, all belonging to them. Many a devil in his station is a careless and gay fellow, at home A Sinn Féiner too, but of course can't talk[33].

When Collins launched a war of attacks on British forces, the British Army controlled the cities while the RIC bore the brunt of these assaults in the provinces. In January 1920 the IRA unleased a campaign against the RIC so devastating that it was forced to withdraw from six hundred small barracks and small huts, with the countryside given over to the guerrillas[34]. To prevent further recruitment another proclamation was issued warning prospective recruits that they joined at their peril. The threats extended to those doing business with suppliers of the RIC; pressure was applied to the families of constables with one elderly couple made to swear that they would withdraw their son from the force[35]. Therefore, the document found on Blythe was the forerunner to this later one threatening war to the hilt on the RIC.

> After a day or two in the Bridewell, we were taken to Mountjoy where we were kept for a month or two before being tried. Collins had sent a message that he was going to arrange my rescue. I had been in possession of a letter for Dick Mulcahy when I was arrested and, I did not know its contents. I elected to be court-martialled. When I was brought up for a preliminary hearing, I learned the contents of the letter for the first time. It advocated a system of attacks on the parents and relatives of RIC men which was something of which I completely disapproved. I told the court-martial that I had no knowledge of the contents of the letter and I disagreed with everything in it. I was sentenced to one year's imprisonment and immediately went on hunger-strike. After four or five days I was released and transferred to the Mater Hospital[36].

Blythe's trial was held at Ship Street Barracks, Dublin, on 17 October 1919. He was charged with having documents in his possession at Inchavalla, Co. Tipperary on 25 May 1919, documents containing statements likely to prejudice the discipline of the RIC. Lieutenant-Col. Booth DSO, Gordon Highlanders and Captain O. B. Wallace prosecuted. Blythe stated he had no objection to being tried by the court but when asked how he would plead he declined, to which the president of the court said that it was a plea of not guilty. Wallis said the documents advocated the petty persecution of the

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[33] NAUK, C0904/193/14a, 'Sinn Féin Hostility to the Police,' 12.
[34] P. J Cottrell, *The Anglo-Irish War: The Troubles of 1913-1922* (Osprey Publishing, Oxford, 2006), 20-52.
[35] Mitchell, *Revolutionary Government in Ireland: Dáil Éireann 1919-22*, 147.
[36] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 112.

relatives of members of the force and sought to undermine the discipline of the members by playing on their natural feelings.

At the SF meeting of several hundred persons, the platform had been cleared by a small force of police and troops with fixed swords. Inspector Hunt himself had searched the accused (Blythe) and had taken from his pocket some papers and small articles which were handed over to a Sergeant Martin. One paper which he handed over to District-Inspector Dudgeon was the document in question[37].

Blythe pleaded ignorance of the document and its contents. Having heard the police evidence, Blythe believed the document in question may have been found in his pocket, but he was in no way responsible for it; he did not write it, he did not even see it until it was shown to him in Mountjoy Prison. At the time the document was in his possession he had no knowledge of its nature or contents and, that he was entirely opposed to the whole course of action suggested in it. There was not a single proposal in it which he did not regard as thoroughly objectionable, especially the suggestion of persecuting the relatives of police was an abominable one. As perhaps the document would be published, he wished his friends and constituents to know at once his position regarding it. The prosecution pointed out that the accused was guilty of an offence unless it was proved that he had no knowledge of the nature of the document in his possession. Accused had called no witnesses for the defence and his statement could not affect the finding of the Court, though it might have the effect of mitigating the punishment. The prosecution when questioned about the character of the defendant, produced a copy of proceedings against Blythe for two offences against DORA[38]. On 17 October 1919 Blythe was sentenced to one year without hard labour and removed to Mountjoy Gaol. Obviously, Blythe's account was not believed.

A communication dated October 1919 confirmed what Blythe had feared. The British believing that at last they had the opportunity to expose a highly placed member of the revolutionary movement as a turn-coat, causing untold damage to the credibility of the separatist movement and

[37] "Trial of M.P. Mr Blythe-On Persecution of Relatives of Police: Abominable suggestion," *Freeman's Journal*, 18 October 1919.
[38] "Trial of M.P.- Mr Blythe on Persecution of relatives of Police-"Abominable Suggestion," *Freeman's Journal,* 18 October 1919.

Blythe's reputation within the wider community, were publishing his repudiation of the document contents as can be observed from the following communication:

> Your Excellency, I noticed last week a prosecution before Court Martial of some man named Blythe - a Sinn Féin MP - for having in his possession a seditious document of a very offensive character. His defence was a very striking repudiation of the anti-police propaganda contained in the document and, a protest that he did not know the contents of the envelope that enclosed it. This latter statement may be true or false. I assume he will be convicted. In my humble opinion this man should be at once let out, and his denunciation of the proposals to boycott the police should be placarded in all the disturbed districts. The crying shame at present is the absence of all repudiation of crime by these fellows. When one of them redeems himself whether through honesty or fear it would be of enormous service in pacifying the country - to liberate him and placard his speech. The odds are that he would then be attacked by the blackguards - so much the better - it would split up Sinn Féin. Your Obedient Servant, A.M Sullivan[39].

Following his sentence Blythe immediately went on hunger strike. On 5 November 2019 he was released from Mountjoy under Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health) Act 1913:

> On Thursday November 5, 1919, the *Irish Bulletin*, the official newspaper of Dáil Éireann reported that Mr. Ernest Blythe, Member of the Irish Parliament for north Monaghan was released from Mountjoy Jail, in broken health. He had served but a small part of his twelve-month sentence for possessing seditious literature[40].

'Blythe was due to return to prison on 16 December but failed to do so and has since evaded arrest. His description has been circulated in the police gazette, *Hue & Cry*'[41]. 'Ernest Blythe (MP) (Dublin City) age 34, height 5 foot 8 inches, grey eyes, broad nose, medium make, dark hair (brown) clean shaven. Marks: wart on right cheek, half-inch from ear lobe'[42].

The British treatment for hunger-strikers was the psychological game known as the Cat and Mouse Act (originally used against the Suffragettes) which was confirmed to be the case, as 'Blythe was conditionally released yesterday under the Cat and Mouse Act and is now in the Mater Hospital'[43].

Described 'as an exceptional case'[44] Blythe's document proved to be a hot potato for the British who now it seemed, did not want to act rashly. On

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[39] NAUK, C0/904/193/149, Letter from A.M. Sullivan to His Excellency, '*Blythe*: *Placard his Speech*,' October 1919, 26.
[40] Aubane Historical Society, "Release of Blythe from Mountjoy Jail," *Irish Bulletin*, November 5, 1919, Volume 1, 80.
[41] "Ernest Blythe," *Freemans Journal*, 18 October 1919.
[42] "Wanted: Ernest Blythe," *Hue & Cry, Police Gazette*, 24, December 1920.
[43] NAUK, CO 904/193/14A, 'Telegram received in the Irish Office re. Blythe's release on medical grounds,' 5 November 1919, Doolin to Watt, 18.
[44] NAUK, C0 904/193/14A, General Prisons Board for Ireland, 26734, (Secret) 1 November 1919, 11.

31 October, a memo from the Chief Secretary's Office inquired 'The Chief Secretary having directed that the statement made by Ernest Blythe should be published in the form of a placard, I request if Blythe is correctly reported in the *Freeman's Journal* of the 18th inst'[45]. A memo of 1 November to the Chief-Secretary, further highlighted British qualms. 'It will I fear be inconsistent for us to publish Blythe's disavowal on the assumption of its sincerity, and yet to retain him in prison for possessing the document the contents of which he disclaims and repudiates'[46].

Yet another memo dated 6 November points to a U turn by the British. 'The C.S (Chief Secretary) thinks it would be better for the present not to publish Blythe's disavowal, as you suggest'[47]. The British appeared to have shot themselves in the foot by sentencing Blythe, not on his proven knowledge of the document's contents but, on his past behaviour as a SF Volunteer. In March 1920, a letter to the Lord Lieutenant entitled 'Ernest Blythe' appears to be the British final word on this embarrassing and controversial episode for both Britain and Blythe:

> Sullivan has come to see me about this man. He was arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to 12 months. He was released on hunger-strike before Christmas. He has not been re-arrested. You may remember that he denounced the murder of police from the dock. Sullivan wished his speech to be placarded all over the disturbed areas. He thinks that it would be a good thing if the text of Blythe's sentence were now omitted and a notice to that effect published in the Gazette. In all the circumstances, I think that this would be a very good thing to do[48].

Important questions arise regarding Blythe's part in this affair. Had he been wrongly convicted? He certainly had earned himself a reputation as a danger to British interests in Ireland. Had he been judged on his past exploits and that on this occasion he was innocent? His statement to the BMH certainly points to him being innocent, but was he?

> The document was given to me by a James Kennedy of Nenagh, for the attention of Richard Mulcahy. I did not know what was in the letter, or what propagandist use might be made of it, I said that I preferred to be court-martialled. When I was brought up for preliminary hearing, I learned the contents of the letter for the first time, something of

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[45] NAUK, C0 904/193/14A, Chief Secretary's Office, Ireland, Administrative Division, 26697/S, 31/10/1919, 21.
[46] NAUK, C0 904/193/14A, General Prisons Board for Ireland, 26734 (Secret), 'British Difficulty with legality of Blythe's imprisonment,' 1 Nov 1919, 11.
[47] NAUK, C0/904/193/149, Memo, 26697 (Secret), 'British considering retraction of placarding Blythe's disavowal of document contents,' 6/11/1919, 10.
[48] NAUK, C0/904/193/149, Dublin Castle File 115/943, 'Confidential Letter to Lord Lieutenant re British capitulation on placarding letter found on Blythe,' March 1920 11/3/1919, 5-6.

> which I completely disapproved. I said at the court-martial that I had no knowledge of the contents of the letter until it was read for me at the preliminary hearing[49].

Firstly, Blythe claims that he preferred to be court-martialled. Did he have a choice in the matter? Ireland was under martial law at the time so trial by the civil courts was not an option for a suspected traitor. Can his testimony be relied on? If the British considered the tone of the document/s to be prejudicial to British interests as it certainly was, it had to come from the pen of a rebel. Was that rebel Ernest Blythe?

This seditious material was found on the person of a man 'considered as one of the most active organisers in Ireland'[50]. It is beyond belief that Blythe was unaware of the contents. This study also argues that Blythe wrote, 'The First Warning'. Having read Blythe's propaganda articles for this study, the aggressive style is typical of Blythe who was also writing similar fiery propaganda for revolutionary newspapers such as *Irish Freedom* and *An tÓglagh*. In Blythe's Dublin Castle 'curriculum vitae' he is described as 'a journalist for advanced nationalist papers and writes articles for *The Free State*'[51].

Why was Collins so anxious to spring Blythe from prison? This incident occurred shortly after the initiation of the boycott in April 1919, following which three policemen were shot dead in Tipperary[52]. The document found on Blythe was proof-positive of Collins plans for the RIC. In prison detainees might talk if they were subjected to the Cat and Mouse scheme. Liam Tobin, Intelligence Squad Trainer for Collins, states that, 'constant danger of capture, torture or execution meant these men lived precariously. He ordered captured men to feign innocence and to co-operate with the prison authorities to secure release, even if it meant signing a promise of good behaviour'[53]. Therefore, denials were par for the course and Blythe

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[49] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 'Blythe's denial of knowledge of document's contents,' 112-3.
[50] NAUK, WO/35/206, Dublin Castle File, No. 74, 115/143 (In red ink B.5) 9, 'Report on Earmon de Blaghdie, Magheragall, Lisburn, Co. Antrim and Trade Depot 22, Mary Street, Dublin,'.
[51] NAUK, W0/35/206, Dublin Castle File, No. 74, 115/143, (In red ink B.5) 9, 'Report on Earmon de Blaghdie, Magheragall, Lisburn, Co. Antrim and Trade Depot 22, Mary St. Dublin,'.
[52] M. T. Foy, *Michael Collins Intelligence War, The Struggle between the British and the IRA 1919-1921* (Sutton Publishing, Stroud, Gloucestershire, 2006), 26.
[53] Ibid., 45.

was acting on Collins' instructions when he denied knowledge of the 'First Warning'. However, Blythe didn't hang around; he went on the run. His actions indicate that he was highly involved in the boycott and he was not risking a re-interrogation by the British.

This study argues that details of Collins' plans would have been known to Blythe. To ask a man of Blythe's stature to address a SF meeting during the RIC Boycott with a seditious document in his possession and for him not to have been aware of its contents does not stand up to scrutiny and suggests that Blythe was guilty as charged. He was still very much involved in the fight for freedom. Why otherwise was he addressing a SF meeting in Tipperary?

Blythe knew that the continuing presence of the RIC would damage IRA activity in the provinces and measures needed to be taken to undermine their influence. Blythe played the role of the innocent as instructed by Collins, absconded from prison and went on the run. Interestingly there is no further mention of James Kennedy of Nenagh! This is proof that Blythe had a great deal to hide, that he was cognisant of Collin's war plans, and the British knew they had their man, for a short while at least.

A chilling end which highlighted the deadly seriousness of Collins RIC boycott and the importance of Blythe to the revolutionary movement, was the murder of Inspector Hunt, Blythe's arresting officer, one month after the date of that meeting in Inchavalla and his arrest[54].

5.4 Blythe and the Belfast Trade Boycott: opponent or supporter?

Blythe's ability to look at political problems and give an independent minded opinion was developing at this stage[55]. His behaviour during the Belfast Trade Boycott however was puzzling. The sectarian violence of mid-1920 led to the imposition of the economic boycott of Belfast and other northern towns. Officially instigated by Dáil Éireann in August 1920, the Belfast Boycott, as it was generally called, was not formally ended until early 1922 and continued unofficially beyond that. Dáil Éireann's move, in

[54] "Trial of M.P. Mr. Blythe on Persecution of Relatives of Police "Abominable Suggestion," *Freeman's Journal*, 18 October 1919.
[55] Buckley, 'Blythe, Ernest (de Blaghd, Earnán),' DIB, Vol. 1, 618.

August 1920, was specifically a counter-measure to the exclusion of Catholic workers from employment in Belfast and other northern towns in July and August. A religious and political test had been imposed on northern Catholics as a condition of industrial employment; those unwilling to take the test were either sacked or refused employment. The test was applied to ascertain if the Catholic workers were loyal to the crown, or not. In August 1920 a Belfast Boycott Committee was launched to petition Dáil Éireann (who gave financial support to the committee) to institute a vigorous boycott of Belfast goods and Belfast orientated banks throughout Ireland, in retaliation for the sectarianism employed against Catholics[56]. The boycott would also be used to demonstrate it could damage Belfast businesses and make partition impossible; it would not be removed until these wrongs had been put right:

> Until this tyranny ceases and the expelled workers are restored, goods manufactured or distributed from Belfast must not be purchased or received elsewhere. Business must also be suspended with the Belfast, Northern and Ulster Banks which banks chiefly finance the firms who are thus treating a section of their employees. No further deposits must be made with these banks pending the unconditional restoration of the employees, and accounts must be transferred[57].

According to Under-Secretary Clark, 'the boycott does not affect trade in Ulster where Unionist shopkeepers continue to carry on their trade and buy from people they think fit. Whether or not the boycott was a retaliation for the 'pogrom' it has hit manufacturers and merchants who were in no way responsible for the expulsions. It has reacted on workers in the northern area whether they are Unionist, Nationalist or Sinn Féiners'[58].

Moves to thwart the boycotters came by way of a counter-boycott from the loyalists. As the Dáil had extended the boycott to Britain, the West Belfast Unionist Club encouraged loyalists throughout the UK to buy goods made within the UK. Some initiatives, including locally organised counter-boycotts and lobbying from trade associations, prepared the ground for a formal response which came from the Ulster Trades Defence Association in the spring of 1922[59]. The Ulster Branch of the British Empire Union and

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[56] D. Kennedy, *The Widening Gulf: Northern attitudes to the independent Irish state 1919-49* (Blackstaff Press, Belfast, 1988), 47.
[57] National Library of Ireland (NLI) 'Belfast Boycott Leaflet,' ILB 300, 5 [Item 38].
[58] PRONI, FIN/8/1/102, 'Belfast Boycott,' 3.
[59] Ibid., 220-221.

National Citizens Union stressed the obligation of the government in London to, 'protect our traders who are British subjects, and who have not, in dealing with Southern Ireland, even the same rights as they enjoy in dealing with civilised nations[60].

Eventually the boycott was lifted as the provisional government became more pre-occupied with the civil war. Not only did the boycott impact on north-south trade it increased community tensions at a critical time leaving in its wake, 'a trail of broken businesses, fractured communities and embittered people'[61].

What was Blythe's reaction to the boycott? Did he give his sanction to what would in effect become a focused campaign of economic destruction to bring down the six-counties both politically and economically? Would Blythe, as an anti-partitionist, see this as an opportunity to remove the border? Had he removed himself sufficiently from his northern roots for this to be accomplished? In his statement to the BMH, Blythe initially ridiculed the idea:

> I thought it was a most ridiculous and short-sighted proposal, and although there was nobody else on the Cabinet opposed to it, I had the advantage of having some knowledge of the north which none of my colleagues had and, was firm in my opposition. I argued so loudly and strongly against the scheme that it was decided to take no action by way of ministerial decision but to refer the matter to a forthcoming meeting of Dáil Eireann[62].

According to Buckley, Blythe argued that an economic boycott of Belfast goods 'would destroy forever the possibility of any north-south reunion. Instead Blythe proposed a boycott confined to specific northern individuals and firms who could be demonstrably linked to sectarian attacks on Catholics'[63].

In March 1921 the Dáil added British goods such as agricultural implements, biscuits, boot polish, soap and margarine to be black-listed. An interesting notice on behalf of Dáil Éireann Trade Department to that end, was issued on 5 May 1921, prohibition order No. 3, signed by none other than *Earnán de Blaghd,* Ernest Blythe, indicating that he had performed a volte-face since his earlier denunciation of the boycott:

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[60] Ibid., 222.
[61] Ibid., 223.
[62] BMH, Document No. WS 939, 119-120.
[63] Buckley, 'Blythe, Ernest (de Blaghd, Earnán),' DIB, Vol, 1. 618.

Importation and Sale of British Goods Prohibition Order No. 3

In accordance with the powers conferred on the Ministry by Dáil Éireann at its Session in March 1921, it is hereby ordered that on and after May 26th 1921 the importation and sale of **BRITISH-MADE MARGARINE** is prohibited. **Every loyal citizen of the Republic is expected to give active support to the Government in making this Order absolute.** Previous **Orders No 1** Prohibits the importation of British-made Binders, Ploughs, Harrows, Mowing Machines, Swathe Turners, Corn Drills, Horse Rakes, Hay Trolleys (Rick Shifters) and Root Cutters. **Order No 2** prohibits the importation and sale of British Biscuits, Boot Polishes and Soap from May 14 1921[64]. **Signed Earnán de Blaghd, Ministry of Trade.**

On 25 September 1921 Blythe delivered a speech in Belfast in the same vein. Blythe's ambiguity is astonishing as he encouraged Catholics to stand their ground while he anticipated a northern collapse:

> Before the agricultural south suffered much the bottom would be knocked out of Belfast. Only a beginning had yet been made with the Belfast Boycott. There were whole divisions of activity in that regard which has not been touched yet and, if it was necessary, they would be carried out as thoroughly as possible. He advised the Catholics of Belfast to stick right here. Whatever they might have to suffer, let them suffer it for Ireland's sake and refuse to be kicked or driven out and whatever means necessary to protect themselves let them use it. The nationalists of the remainder of Ireland would not desert them[65].

According to Ollerenshaw, the Dáil publicity campaign to support the boycott was not couched in the language of a one nation island as the notice in the *Freeman's Journal* of February 1921 highlighted:

> Are you a BIGOT? Then trade with Belfast. Are you a PARTITIONIST? Then buy from Belfast. Are you in favour of THE BURNING OF CATHOLIC HOMES? Then buy from Belfast. Are you Irish? If so, remember that every penny given to Belfast in the purchase of goods, and every lodgement with their banks, means strengthening the war chest to continue the pogrom[66].

What was Blythe up to? What lay behind his on again, off again support for the boycott? It is the opinion of this study that he was hedging his bets. Blythe was keen to see the border removed and this boycott, initially for the protection of Belfast Catholics, could be used to that end. The economic destruction of the six-counties would fulfil the earlier prophecies that they would be unable to survive without the assistance of the Free State. Increasing the pressure might just be enough to topple Craig's regime. But was it strong enough and devastating enough to send the Northern Ireland

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[64] PRONI, 126/1/67A, 'Importation and Sale of British Goods Prohibition Order No. 3,' 5 May 1921.
[65] "Mr. Ernest Blythe, T. D in Belfast: The position in Ulster," *Irish Independen*t, 25 October 1921.
[66] Ollerenshaw, *Industry, Trade and People in Ireland 1650-1950*, Essay, 'Business Boycotts and the partition of Ireland,'207.

government into capitulation? Blythe also knew that the threat of a counter-boycott by the northern loyalists would, with Britain's help, ruin the fragile southern economy.

Had the Civil War not intervened would Blythe have continued to push the boycott if it had half a chance of toppling Stormont? Probably not given that he knew Britain would align with Ulster eventually, and, he was correct in his assessment. He did see however, another way that the twenty-six counties could benefit from the boycott. In 1921 he proposed transforming it into a general campaign to secure the Irish market for Irish producers[67].

Blythe's statements do not convey a man conflicted between the interests of Ulster, his birth-place and allegiance towards his new domicile, the twenty-six counties. Blythe wanted rid of the border by any means necessary. Speaking at a meeting in St Mary's Hall, Belfast in October 1921, he made his feelings known as he rubbished the northern regime in the following statement:

> Sir James Craig and his followers were wholly unfit to run a government, for they had made no stand against sectarian rancour. He understood quite well that Craig and colleagues had not got a bed of roses, but he had no hesitation in saying that if they did not attempt to restore decency and order and end all the murders and outrages and burnings that had taken place then they were not fit to carry on any form of government[68].

In the end however Blythe was forced to face facts and accept the inevitable as indicated by the following statement containing a broad hint to the use of the boycott (in this instance) ending partition:

> Economic pressure against the North-East gives no greater promise of satisfactory results than military action. Nothing we can do by way of a boycott - the economic weapon heretofore in use - will bring the orange party to reason. A boycott cannot hit agriculturalists who in the six-counties, as in the twenty-six counties, represent the most important economic interest. Their market is not in our territory. No boycott that we impose can hit the Belfast shipbuilding industry. We control no orders for ships. Our boycott would threaten the northern ship-building industry no more than a summer shower would threaten Cave Hill[69].

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[67] B. Garvin, *Between Two Worlds: Politics and Economy in Independent Ireland* (Gill and Macmillan Ltd, Dublin, 1989), 12.
[68] "Ernest Blythe T. D in Belfast, the Position in Ulster," *Irish Independent*, 25 October 1921.
[69] N. Cunningham, "The Social Geography of Violence during the Belfast Trouble, 1920-22," Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change, Working Paper Series No 122 (University of Manchester, March 2013), 8.

5.5 Military executions during 1922: what was Blythe's stance?

The Cumann na nGaedheal party was regarded as the party of law-and-order. With the outbreak of the civil war in 1922, the government, in danger and panic, felt it had no alternative but to close the Sinn Féin courts as they were largely presided over by anti-Treaty judges. There was a residue of pending cases to be heard and a judicial commission was set up to deal with them. It also introduced the more extreme step of symbolic executions[70]. According to Regan, from September 1922 the government viewed the war against the IRA as a battle against time for the survival of the state and began to rely heavily on extreme measures as its army seemed incapable of beating the IRA:

> Unwilling and unable to stem the atrocities of the war, the government followed a policy of accommodation by institutionalising the execution of prisoners of war through the Special Powers Act which was introduced in September 1922. Under the Act military courts were established to try cases involving attacks on Treatyite forces, offences against property, looting, possession of arms, ammunition or explosive materials, or breach of any regulations made by the military authorities. Importantly the courts could pass sentences of death, penal servitude, imprisonment, deportation, internment or a fine of money[71].

Blythe's opinion was that, 'Now we realised that the only thing was to go hell for leather to beat the Irregulars down. Unless we did, there would be an indefinite prolongation of the guerrilla action and the country would never get on its feet'[72].

The first executions were carried out on 17 November against four young men caught in possession of revolvers. There followed a Dáil debate on the same evening to discuss the situation. Tom Johnston, Labour, expressed his shock on reading in the evening paper about the executions of four men:

> The offence as recorded in the announcement was the possession without proper authority of a revolver in one case and indeed, I think it is the same in each case. I say that it is with something of a shock that one reads such an announcement, and I am raising the question now in the hope that we shall have some more satisfactory explanation as to why four men should have forfeited their lives, or have their lives taken by the military authorities for the offence of having a revolver. Were these men represented by any legal aid, were they offered the opportunity to have legal assistance, and were entitled to or did they call any witnesses? That is the bald way the

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[70] C. Meehan, *The Cosgrave Party, A History of Cumann na nGaedheal, 1923-1933* (Prism, Dublin, 2010), 35-36.
[71] J. M. Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution 1921-1936* (Gill & Macmillan Ltd, Dublin, 1999), 103-104-108-109.
[72] "Civil War and Executions," *Irish Times*, 31 December 1974.

> announcement was given to the people and, unless there is some much fuller explanation and justification for the executions, I prophesy a deep revulsion of feeling against the army and the Government[73].

President Cosgrave replied that the steps taken were not pleasurable, however, they were taken in the best interests of the country. The government meant to restore order at whatever cost and every sensible person in the country must admit, if the country is to succeed, there must be ordered government[74]. 'Although I have always objected to a death penalty, there is no other way I know of in which ordered conditions can be restored, or any security obtained for our troops, or to give our troops any confidence in us as a government. We must accept the responsibility'[75].

What was Blythe's reaction to the executions? Was he shocked by such a barbaric act? Did he concur with his President's opinion that it was a necessity? Blythe himself had been a revolutionary pre-1921. Did he show empathy with the executed men? Blythe pulled no punches in his reply to the chamber:

> He assured Mr Johnstone that the executed had had a full opportunity of getting legal aid and, calling witnesses. That every person will have the opportunity for conducting his defence, and I can safely say that no person will be executed except the person who deserves to meet his doom. It is necessary to take all the measures that may be necessary to bring the situation which exists in the country to the speediest possible close. We will not prevent bloodshed by shirking stern measures now[76].

Then he defined what he believed to be the roots of the unrest. There was, he said:

> So much terrorism in the country that there is no such thing as a republican movement. Those people who were committing these crimes under the cloak of republicanism were mostly criminals. People who are out to enforce their will upon the majority, heedless of the rights of their neighbours. It was simply a conspiracy of anarchy that can only be put down as such conspiracies are put down in other countries, by taking the necessary measures, however stern they maybe, to put it down[77].

Blythe made no apologies for his support of the executions nor did he show empathy for the executed men. He was open and direct, giving no one the chance to accuse him of political weakness. And, for Blythe, it also had to

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[73] Dail Éireann debate, Friday, 17, November 1922, 'Military Executions,' 1-2.
[74] Ibid., 26-27.
[75] B. T. Murphy, 'The government executions policy during the Irish civil war 1922-1923,' Phd. Dept. of History, NUI, Maynooth, 2010, 74-75.
[76] Dáil Éireann debate, 'Military Executions,' 17 November 1922, 13-14.
[77] Ibid., 14.

be done to secure the Treaty which he believed was the way forward for Ireland.

> The members of the government take, I as a member of the Government take, the fullest responsibility for putting these men to death. I take for myself, as others will take for themselves, as complete responsibility as if I had passed the sentence myself. I am convinced it was a just sentence and that it was a just measure. We should and, we must pass the stage when we are going to be guided in our conduct of affairs by any kind of sloppy sentiment. The whole point of the matter was put very clearly by the Minister for Home Affairs regarding the object of this stern measure taken today and will, I am afraid, have to be taken again because at this stage I do not think that the execution of four would suffice. This nation is now suffering from the effects of a deadly cancer. We must use the knife to cut it out and, it would have been better for us never to have begun asserting the will of the majority of the Irish people if we were not prepared to go through with it, and to see the fruits of our struggle, both against the alien enemy and against the domestic enemy, are garnered[78].

Erskine Childers was next on the list for execution for unlawfully being in possession of a small automatic pistol. Asked why such a well-known man had to be executed Blythe said simply that:

> Childers was a very leading man, one whose words could have caused many young men to take up arms against the state. His speech against the Treaty undoubtedly affected the attitudes and actions of many, who thought he knew the mind and motives of English politicians better than anyone else. It was also believed that he had great influence on de Valera and might have been partly responsible for his unfortunate attitude on the Treaty. How could we let the well-off Englishman escape when three ill-informed young fellows, perhaps influenced by his writing, had been executed the previous day[79].

At the same time executions of Irregulars by the Army, were being carried out in the provinces. According to Blythe, the Commander in County Kerry was refusing to carry out executions on those Irregulars who came within the Regulations. This led to soldiers taking the law into their own hands with quite a few of Irregulars put to death in a criminal and unjustifiable way. Blythe's feelings on these murders indicate a man who was not only pragmatic about the unpleasant actions necessary in a theatre of war, but could also distance himself emotionally:

> Personally, I was never as excited about these crimes as Kevin (O'Higgins), Paddy Hogan and Desmond Fitzgerald were. I felt that, however wrong, such things were inevitable in war, and that if those who were irregularly put to death were not, by any chance, innocent persons, the performance was no worse than happens in every such contest[80].

On 7 December, the day after the Free State came into existence, Dáil deputies, Seán Hales and Pádraic Ó Máille were shot by an IRA raiding-party in which Hales died and Ó Máille injured. This incident would be the

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[78] Ibid., 13-14.
[79] "Civil War and Executions," *Irish Times*, 31 December 1974.
[80] BMH, Document No. WS. 939, 181.

catalyst which changed affairs by forcing the government to take firm action if the country was to be saved from anarchy. Blythe was present at a meeting in the College of Science on the evening of the shootings. 'We agreed among ourselves that such an attack on the Dáil had to be met by dramatic measures and that they should be taken at once. One of them said to me, that it would be no use acting next week. Whatever is going to be done must be done tomorrow'[81]. It was then that Blythe personally took it into his head that the lives of the men who had been arrested in the Four Courts and not yet brought to trial, were forfeit:

> I took the view that the lives of the men who had been in the Four Courts were forfeit as rebels and that although we had not brought them to trial after the Four Courts surrender nor in the interval, it was still open to us to have them tried by the equivalent of a drumhead court-martial. What I had, therefore, in mind was that a special court or committee of officers should be set up forthwith and, that some leaders of the Four Courts garrison should be brought before it charged with rebellion, and executed if found guilty, as they doubtless would be[82].

A meeting of the Executive Council took place and the decisions arrived at are explained in Blythe's testimony to the BMH. According to Blythe, he and Joe McGrath had arrived slightly late for the meeting, but were on time to hear the names Mellows, Barrett, O'Connor, and McKelvey being read out from a list. It had been decided that they were to be executed in the morning without any form of trial:

> It instantly struck me that the terror-striking effect of this would be greater than that of the measure which I myself had thought of proposing. Consequently, I did not put my own suggestion forward, but mentally accepted the suggestion which was being made. Mr Cosgrave put the question to the table for voting. I agreed with the proposal as did Fitzgerald. O'Higgins hesitated about assenting to the summary executions, asked if any other measure would not suffice, thinking on it for a few minutes. The rest of us waited in silence watching him and he finally said, 'take them out and shoot them'. The remaining cabinet members then agreed to the executions[83].

Blythe states that his type of trial would have been farcical since the conclusion would have been forgone and, would have been viewed as an attempt by the government to shuffle out of the responsibility. The names of the executed men were selected by Army officers as men whose execution would be most calculated to have the maximum warning effect on members of the Irregular forces in all parts of the country[84].

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[81] Ibid., 190.
[82] Ibid., 190.
[83] IBID.,191.
[84] Ibid., 191.

Now that the deed was done, did Blythe express regret for his support of an act that many have classed as murder? How did he justify the cold-blooded killing of men without due process and with whom he had once shared a common aim, Irish freedom?

> Personal feelings did not come into the matter at all. I was always on the best of terms with Liam Mellows. Likewise, Kevin O'Higgins had been an intimate friend of Rory O'Connor. We should not, however, in a situation like that have thought of begging that a personal friend should have been favoured at the expense of someone whom we happened not to know or to care about personally. I am sure, despite some sentimental rubbish which has been published, that no one would have thought for a moment of mentioning the name of an individual either for execution or to be spared. We were dealing with something much more important than personalities and we felt that what we were doing was to direct and authorise the Army to carry out a measure which would be effective in checking terrorism. I frankly regarded it as an act of counter-terror, not of vengeance, and though just, not primarily an act of justice but, an extreme act of war[85].

Regan states that the men had been executed as a reprisal for the murders of Hales and Ó Máille; 'it was a brutal and utterly ruthless act without the pretence of legality'[86]. However, as the government were stymied by their commitment to the establishment of the Free State, they could see no other alternative.

Blythe was aware that the British establishment was hovering, waiting for an excuse to end the dream of Irish independence. The following statement made during the Four Courts incident indicates the British continuing sceptical attitude towards the Irish and their ability to govern themselves and why it was crucial that the state of anarchy should be brought to a swift end.

> Can the Irish be induced to accept and obey any government? They never accepted or obeyed British rule, and they may be so out of hand and demoralized as to be incapable yet a while of settling down under any system of authority, even a system of their own choosing. That doubt has to be resolved, and it can only be resolved if the Free State leaders nerve themselves to act throughout Ireland as they have acted tardily in Dublin. Strength and determination always win in the long run, and nowhere is their victory apt to be so complete as among a people with the leader-following instincts of the Irish[87].

Mrs Ernest Blythe, in support of her husband and his colleagues, stated that, 'it would be more merciful to do something drastic like that as a deterrent and it would save lives in the long run. The government could not protect

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[85] BMH, Document No. WS, 939, 192.
[86] Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution 1921-1936*, 116.
[87] M. Fewer, *The Battle of the Four Courts: The First Three Days of the Irish Civil War* (Head of Zeus Ltd, London, 2018), 262.

every Dáil member and the Irregulars would make the running of government impossible through its policy of shooting deputies[88].

In the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution, 1959, revolutionary leader Che Guevarra recounted having been faced with problems like those facing the Free State government in 1922 and which were resolved in a similar manner:

> We had not organised a system of government strong or rigorous enough to impede the free action of groups of men, who under the pretext of revolutionary activity, dedicated themselves to looting, banditry and a host of other offences. Symbolic executions were carried out on men who had once been revolutionary friends. In retrospect, this method might seem barbaric. At the time however, no other form of punishment for these men was possible. The moment demanded a strong hand. We were obliged to inflict exemplary punishment to curb violations of discipline and to eliminate the seeds of anarchy[89].

5.6 Minister for Finance: A decade-long penance for Ernest Blythe

The first three years of the Free State's existence were amongst the most crucial in independent Ireland's history. Cosgrave's Cumann na nGaedheal party put down internal revolt, overcame an acute scarcity of money, enacted a constitution and defined how the state would be governed. The government's policy was to balance the budget, maximize revenue collection, reduce expenditure and minimize borrowing. Its economic policy concentrated on increasing agricultural exports. It favoured free trade and opposed tariffs, fearing British retaliation might make exports less competitive[90].

According to Garvin, 'the difficulties facing Cumann na nGaedheal were immense. At the socio-economic level the new state was one of the least developed regions in Europe; pre-1914 it was one of a relatively advanced economy'[91]. Partition had had a major financial influence on the emerging state. According to Buckley, 'the Free State had a weak industrial sector, exacerbated by partition, which removed from its political control the most

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[88] Regan, *The Irish Counter-revolution 1921-1936*, 116.
[89] C. E. Guevarra, *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War* (Harper Perennial, London, 2006), 169, 172, 174, 175.
[90] D. Corcoran, "Public Policy in an Emerging State: The Irish Free State 1922-25," *Irish Journal of Public Policy*, Vol. 1, Issue 1 (December 2009).
[91] Garvin, *Between Two Worlds, Politics and Economy in Independent Ireland*, 14.

prosperous region and two-thirds of the industrial work-force'[92]. It is little wonder then that Blythe was so keen to end partition.

Given the portfolio of Finance on 30 September 1923, Blythe, within one month of taking control of Finance, endorsed the recommendations of his department to cut government spending by measures that would prove to be highly unpopular. For example, expenditure fell dramatically from £28.7 million in 1923/4 to £18.9 million in 1927/8[93]. Endorsing the recommendations of his department's civil servants led to Blythe shouldering the blame for the tough budgetary choices that he would have to announce to the country during his term in Finance.

Eoin MacNeill was the first Minister for Finance, followed by Collins, Cosgrave and then Blythe. Collins had been the one member of the pro-Treaty side who had armed himself with at least a certain financial expertise and his death left a gap which was never filled[94]. According to Regan the financial orthodoxies of the British Treasury had been inherited by the Irish Department of Finance along with a handful of first-division civil servants who for the most part steered fiscal policy independent of their political masters during the period 1922-4. 'Exempting the army estimates, finance was not discussed in Cabinet and in this crucial sphere the government was forced to rely on the advice of its senior civil servants. Consequently, and with no apparent objection, the practice of balanced budgets became the Cumann na nGaedheal orthodoxy too'[95].

Crucial appointments to the finance department in 1922 were senior civil-servants, Joseph Brennan and J.J. McElligott. McElligott described as the 'Dr. No' of Irish economic policy and his steady ally Joseph Brennan[96] would direct the fiscal affairs of the embryo state during the years of Cumann na nGaedlheal government. 'The close alliance and co-operation

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[92] Buckley, 'Blythe, Ernest (de Blaghd, Earnán),' DIB, Vol 1, 618.
[93] Ibid., 619.
[94] R. Fanning, *The Irish Department of Finance, 1922-58* (Institute of Public Finance, Dublin, 1978), 59-60.
[95] Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution 1921-1936*, 146-147.
[96] C. Ó Grádá, *A Rocky Road-The Irish Economy since the 1920's* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1977), 227.

between the two men was of crucial and continuing importance in the direction of the department's affairs'[97]. Regan also states that:

> Finance had a profound influence on governmental policy and, it was instrumental in widening the cleavage that opened between the elite and a party which still possessed much revolutionary idealism with little appreciation of the constraints financial orthodoxy placed on the Government it supported[98].

Brennan's was a key appointment. A former Dublin Castle civil servant and acting Comptroller and Auditor General, he made it clear that Finance took charge of the public service. He was a strong proponent of fiscal rectitude and determined how much could be spent having regard to the State's revenue and credit rating[99]. His technical knowledge was greater than any of his colleagues in the department under the provisional government and he was to play a major role in laying down the guidelines of proper financial and accounting procedures in 1922-23.

This study is also about the relationship which existed between Brennan and Blythe, the two main protagonists in the Finance department at the time; the strained relationship which existed between an Irish civil servant educated in the ways of the British civil service and a stubborn Ulsterman, who had been melded in the crucible of revolution, keen to get the Free State up and running and who had no working knowledge whatsoever of the world of finance.

Cosgrave and Brennan had a good working relationship, both being cautiously conservative in their approach to spending public money[100]:

> That Brennan and McElligott's minister (Cosgrave) was the head of government cannot but have been of cardinal importance in enabling them to carry out their policies. The mantle of authority worn by the senior officials of the Department of Finance, upon whose advice the government depended in these matters, was shown too, by their occasional presence at Executive Council meetings when such issues were being discussed, a privilege which, although rare and abolished in 1924, was bestowed upon the officials of no other government department[101].

For example, a directive from Cosgrave to Brennan gives some indication of the fiscal direction Cosgrave's government would follow:

> As we are now entering on the borrowing stage, I think it necessary to write to each ministry pointing out that every possible economy must be effected, and, that in

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[97] Fanning, *The Irish Department of Finance, 1922-58,* 60.
[98] Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution 1921-1936*, 147.
[99] Corcoran, "Public Policy in an Emerging State: The Irish Free State 1922-25," *Irish Journal of Public Policy*, Vol. 1, Issue 1 (December 2009).
[100] Ó Broin *No Man's Man: A Biographical Memoir of Joseph Brennan*, 119.
[101] Fanning, *Department of Finance 1922-58*, 100.

> consequence, it will be the duty of the Finance Minister to more closely scrutinise every avenue of expenditure[102].

The responsibility of the Minister for Finance was the keeper of the public purse and the controller of expenditure from that purse. Following the revolution, people had hopes of a better life in Ireland. With no money available once Britain had closed off her financial help there would be debts to pay and sacrifices to make that would cause the Irish people to rage against Blythe when he had the unenviable task as Finance Minister of implementing swingeing cuts to the Irish budget.

5.7 'The pruning hook': Blythe's or Brennan's?

The first cracks in the relationship between Brennan and Blythe began to appear in mid-1925, described by Ó Broin as 'a very tense situation'[103]. Sarsfield Hogan believed the trouble could be traced to a 'state of the nation' report that Brennan issued to Blythe on his arrival in the department and which Blythe used subsequently in promoting a National Loan:

> Blythe explained to the Dublin Chamber of Commerce (23 November 1923), that the £10 million sought was required to meet the heavy cost of the army raised to defeat the Irregulars and, to pay compensation for the damage done to persons and property. He gave an undertaking the government would not borrow for recurrent charges; and as the country could not afford the existing level of expenditure, nor the high rates of income tax which were driving people and capital out of the country, the pruning hook would have to be diligently applied and burdens reduced[104].

The Loan was a success, but in pursuing the promised economies, the Army was reduced by 20,000 men thereby adding greatly to the numbers of the unemployed; old age pensions and teachers' salaries were cut and, the working hours of civil servants were increased to reduce the numbers of temporary workers. Brennan explained that, 'our system was modelled after the British system - a very excellent system, and if adopted, would give the best results, a statement implying that expenditure and taxation would always have to be curbed'[105].

One of Brennan's economy measures stipulated that, 'it should be possible to run the new state at a cost of not more than £20 million a year; this estimate hung round Blythe's neck like an albatross for many a long

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[102] Ó Broin, *No Man's Man: A Biographical Memoir of Joseph Brennan*, 119-120.
[103] Ibid., 125.
[104] Ibid., 125.
[105] Ibid., 125.

year'[106]. This study argues that Blythe's future tendency towards parsimony had its genesis in this piece of fiscal advice from Brennan.

The Shannon Electrification Scheme raised the hackles of both men. Brennan insisted on Finance's right to examine the scheme's financial structure while Blythe appeared to ride rough-shod over Brennan's request. Brennan felt that the scheme should be put out for private tender while Blythe insisted that it should be a state enterprise. Paddy McGilligan, Ministry for Industry and Commerce, told the Dáil that the scheme would be run as a government scheme and the government would take in hand the financing of it. Brennan was displeased. The financial clause of the Bill annoyed him. It had been framed without any reference to Finance, neither did he know how far, if at all, it represented Blythe's intentions. Blythe's response to Brennan was emphatic. 'No proposal to hand over a scheme like the Shannon to a private firm would have any chance of acceptance by the Oireachtas'[107].

Further exchanges between the two ended in Brennan recognising that the government had committed itself to financing the scheme and the alternative of private finance was out. On the same day that Blythe told him this, the government finally considered and approved the Bill. Brennan was extremely hurt and his relationship with his Minister was noticeably affected as can be seen from a communication he had with his father in July 1925:

> Difficulties with Blythe have been getting rather acute of late, and I find it hard to make up my mind what line to take with him. If it were not for the £1700 a year that I get I would have little hesitation in deciding what to do. I fear the sort of Ministers we are likely to have here will never treat the Civil Service as the British Ministers do[108].

Blythe's behaviour on this occasion was discourteous and disrespectful by making such a decision behind Brennan's back but, Blythe was not a man to tug his forelock to anybody. His behaviour can be interpreted as the impatience of a man keen to get the new state on its feet, quickly. Blythe had waited a long time for Ireland to be in a position to run her own affairs and civil servants were proving to be a hindrance. It is also indicative of

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[106] Ibid., 125.
[107] Fanning, *The Irish Department of Finance 1922-58*, 84-85.
[108] Ó Broin, *No Mans's Man: A Biographical Memoir of Joseph Brennan*, 126.

Blythe attempting to wrest power from Brennan by making himself the go-to person in Finance.

The decision made by Blythe and his colleagues to overrule Brennan on the Shannon Scheme, places the foregoing inference that Finance had over-all authority and that Blythe et al were constantly under the thumb of civil servants in a new light. It is the first instance of the Executive going over the heads of its bureaucrats and establishing their own power base. According to Fanning, the lack of Finance's role in launching the Shannon Scheme is significant:

> The Minister and Secretaries Act, the regulations governing the submission of draft Bills to the Executive Council and all the other machinery of financial control notwithstanding, the decision to proceed with the Scheme, probably the major economic decision of the decade, necessitating as it did, such a degree of state intervention in the economy, was effectively taken without reference to the Department of Finance. That Brennan was fully aware that such an issue was at stake, is beyond doubt; equally certain, given the attitude of his minister, is Brennan's impotence to affect the issue. To say that Finance officials' capacity to influence or to resist a government's major innovatory decisions is in direct proportion to the degree of support accorded them by their own minister is a truism. The successful implementation of Finance principles is in practice always dependent upon a certain irreducible minimum of political support on the part of ministers. Occasionally Finance principles will clash with a government's political principles. Political principles will then triumph, provided, and *only* provided that the political will of ministers if unyielding[109].

5.8 The proposal for retrenchment: Blythe's or Brennan's?

According to Daly, the Cumann na nGaedheal government that took office in January 1923 was without any policy other than to ensure the state would not founder[110]. With Finance having tightened its control over expenditure, it now insisted upon the necessity of the most rigid economy and retrenchment as a circular from Brennan on 14 March 1923 (at the express wish of Cosgrave) was sent to all heads of departments revealed:

> The condition of the public finances of Saorstát Éireann is a matter of very serious concern in view of the present circumstances of the country. According to the best estimate which can be formed the revenue paid into the Exchequer for the current financial year will fall short of expenditure by about £2,750,000 and this deficit should be increased by a further sum of £1,750.000. To deal with this deficit two courses open are either to impose an increased taxation or to adopt a determined policy of cutting down expenditure. The country is in no position to stand increased taxation. The second alternative of strict economy therefore becomes imperative. Much more definitive recognition than heretofore must be given to the fact that our resources are strictly limited and, we must aim to living within them. No real benefit to the country can result from the extension of public expenditure without regard to the means available for

[109] Ibid., 185-186.
[110] Daly, *Industrial Development and Irish National Identity*, 14.

> meeting it but, the ultimate economic effects of oppressive taxation or continued inflation[111].

The idea of the new state living beyond its means was alien to Brennan and indicative of his approach to public financing. His success in persuading his political masters of the rightness of his opinions was remarkable[112]. According to Fanning there was no evidence that Brennan's strictures provoked resentment or resistance. While Cosgrave's unswerving support for the head of his department was doubtless decisive on this and on many other occasions, it is nevertheless noteworthy that little or no discussion let alone criticism of Brennan's viewpoint occurred. Former Finance Minister Eoin MacNeill also appeared to have come under Brennan's spell by giving him the 'thumbs-up':

> The solution to the financial problem can be made the chief aim of the public as well as government. The financial policy of the government should consist of two items; 1. Controlled expenditure, full revenue, a clear account with the balance on the right side. 2. The nation to be its own creditors. We must take the high line and the public line on this matter. The success of the Saorstát depends on it. We must make it a big and universal public interest. If we do, I am confident of success. If we don't, I see nothing for it but a poor face all the time and pulling the devil by the tail[113].

Given that the country was now returning to a semblance of normality with the ending of the Civil War, the government could have loosened the purse strings. 'But, given the early and persistent warning note sounded by Finance, there was little prospect of the government succumbing to such temptation'[114]. 'The economic cost of the civil war alone almost left the fledgling state bankrupt, with an estimated £30,000,000 in national damage plus, a further £17,000,000 to finance the war'[115].

Drastic economy or, retrenchment was the government's pruning hook for curtailing expenditure. One example of the pruning hook in action was the reduction in old age pensions. The social legislation of the former Liberal government added considerably to the volume of public expenditure. There was a proportionately larger Irish elderly population therefore the old-age pension's burden was exceptionally heavier. In the

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[111] Fanning, *The Irish Department of Finance 1922-58*, 105-106-107.
[112] Ibid., 107.
[113] Ibid., 108-109.
[114] Ibid., 109.
[115] B. T. Murphy, 'The Government Executions Policy during the Civil War, 1922-1923,' Phd. Department of History, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2010, 63.

early years, pensions were one of the largest single items of state expenditure, £3.3 million out of £20 million in 1922-23[116]. They were now a clear target for retrenchment; the pensions were to be reduced from ten shillings to nine, subject to the agreement of government departments, causing an uproar that still echoes. Did Blythe have any scruples about reducing the income of Ireland's elderly citizens? How did he justify his department's policy in what became an outstanding political liability for himself and his party for many years?

Described by Ó Grádá as 'mean-minded and regressive, but an understandable ploy'[117], Blythe's public defence of the cuts was that the cost of living had fallen significantly since the rate of weekly pension payment had been fixed at ten shilling. Comparative research indicated that the Irish pension was at the time one of the most generous in Europe. This arose because the pension rate was set at the UK rate before the Free State's inception, despite the generally lower standard of living in Ireland[118]. The government was convinced that normal public services must be financed out of revenue. Pensions fell into this category and the government's conviction seems to have been sufficiently resolute to prevent heart-searching or delay about the proposal. The annual savings for the State was £600,000[119]. Was Blythe a scapegoat for the introduction of these tough fiscal measures now being employed by the state? Did he have a say in the matter? The evidence points to Blythe being in this instance, in agreement with Brennan and McElligott. It was they who had the expertise on how to get the country on its feet. Without their knowledge and guidance, the new state would sink financially and be reclaimed by the British. It was incumbent upon the government to prevent this and Blythe would make terms with Satan himself to prevent this happening.

Blythe has been described by Buckley as 'not being an innovative minister for finance and not temperamentally disposed to exercise what scope he had'[120]. This is understandable. Blythe fought and suffered for the

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[116] Ibid., 110.
[117] Ó Grádá, *A Rocky Road-The Irish Economy since the 1920's*, 67.
[118] Buckley, 'Ernest Blythe (de Blaghd, Earnán),' DIB, Vol. 1, 619.
[119] Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution 1921-1936*, 158.
[120] Buckley, (Blythe, Ernest (de Blaghd, Earnán),' DIB, Vol. 1, 619.

new freedoms which Irish men and women now had. To play fast and loose with the means of survival, money, would have been anathema to him. Freedom had been extracted from the British at a heavy price; Blythe expected the country to suffer a little inconvenience in return.

Blythe's strict Protestant upbringing must also be taken into consideration when examining his conservative attitude to finance. The virtues of the Protestant work-ethic of self-reliance would have been imprinted on his psyche by his church-going parents which, in all probability became the source of his mantra, 'if the people will not help themselves, no government can effectively help them'[121]. According to McCourt, 'from an early age the virtues of philanthropy (as opposed to welfarism) and self-reliance would have been extolled to him'[122].

Fanning points out that although Blythe was not dogmatic about finance, he felt Brennan's restricting views sometimes got him into hot water; for example, the storm that engulfed him over the old age pensions. To be taken into consideration also, was Blythe's early training in the Arthur Griffith's Sinn Féin tradition of economics which jarred with the conservative orthodoxy of the finance division of Dublin Castle in which Brennan was trained[123].

Blythe's bias for Irish Language funding has been alluded to in Chapter 6. This was probably the most annoying element of Blythe's behaviour in Finance for Brennan. Not so for Blythe who saw the language as the hallmark of Irish identity and Irish freedom without it was a farce. His reply to a letter from the Rev. Brennan of Elphin, Roscommon on 8 January 1925 sums up Blythe's position succinctly:

> With regard to the Old Age Pensions, as has been pointed out it is impossible to pay a permanent charge of this kind by borrowing or otherwise than out of revenue without serious damage to the national credit and consequent damage to the people and especially the poorer class. The restoration of pensions to the war time scale would necessitate in increasing the burden of taxation, which every interest in the country is anxious to have reduced. The present state of economic depression would not be relieved by increase of pensions but rather the contrary as money so spent must diminish the funds available for economic relief and development. Those who say that the reduced pensions afford a reason for withdrawing support from the government and thereby strengthening those whose policy is to break the Treaty should be asked to say

[121] UCDA, P24/252, 'Budget and Finance Bills,' 99-100.
[122] Ryan McCourt, "Ernest Blythe as Minister for Finance in the Free State Government 1923-32," *Parliamentary History,* Vol. 33, part 3 (2014): 483.
[123] Fanning, *The Irish Department of Finance 1922-58*, 191.

> what prospect the pensioners would have if the Treaty were broken. The party which supplied itself with funds by taking the pension money from post offices and mail bags will no doubt have their answer ready. On the question of general government policy, I can only state that the government will endeavour to place the country in a sound position economically and that it does not believe that this involves any sacrifice of national ideals[124].

Blythe's name has been variously described as 'synonymous with meanness and, a fascinating and loathed character'[125]. Is this a fair assessment of the man, on whose shoulders was placed the responsibility for fulfilling the expansive expectations of the Irish revolution? Blythe, as Minister for Finance, has been consistently type-cast in the role of villain as is the case for all Finance ministers; some winner's others, losers, when budgets are planned. Blythe job was unique in that he had the unenviable task of getting a new country up and running financially with scant resources to aid his work. He was responsible to the Finance department's civil servants who, in the main, called the shots as to how they wanted money distributed. He had, like most of his government colleagues, no previous experience in finance to call upon. He was conditioned from childhood to appreciate the virtue of 'God help's those who help themselves', a belief system which would have eased his conscience when reducing the old-age pensions. He was no worse than his leader William Cosgrave, who, from the beginning, gave carte blanche to the Finance civil servants, using their knowledge and expertise in order to prevent the new state from floundering. Cosgrave, when giving Blythe the responsibility for Finance, knew the calibre of the man he had selected. Blythe was immune to criticism, would not roll over under attack and he could be relied upon to push forward the government's policies regardless of the public out-cry. Blythe was not in the business of winning the popularity vote. Therefore, Blythe's role as Minister for Finance during the consolidation period of the new Free State was unique and challenging in the extreme. Any criticisms of Blythe's behaviour must, of necessity, be set against the special circumstances pertaining in Ireland at the time in question.

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[124] UCDA, P24/197 (2) Letter from E. Blythe to Rev. M. Brennan, CC, 'Reductions in the Old Age Pensions,' 8 January 1925.
[125] McCourt, "Ernest Blythe as Minister for Finance in the Free State Government 1923-32," *Parliamentary History*, Vol. 33, part 3 (2014): 479.

In 1932, Ernest Blythe's ten years as a government minister ended after Fianna Fáil took over from Cumann na nGaedheal. Blythe served as a Senator for the Labour panel in the Seanad form 1934-1936. He then began his life-long profession in journalism, using the opportunity to write profusely on the subjects that taxed him in government, namely, partition and the Irish language. In the early 1930's, Blythe controversially became a leading member of the quasi-Fascist movement, the Blue-Shirts. On the invitation of poet, William Butler Yeats, he became managing director of the Abbey Theatre between 1941 and 1969. He was also an active member of the Television Authority.

Chapter 6

Críochdheighilt na hÉireann: The Partition of Ireland

6.1 Introduction

Ernest Blythe was renowned for his efforts to find a solution to partition. This chapter will examine what he perceived to be the true reason for partition and his controversial solutions to ending it. Blythe had a heretical viewpoint on partition[1]. He argued that blaming Britain for instigating partition was unjustified. He saw partition as symptomatic of northern-Protestant opposition to a thirty-two county Catholic Ireland and enslavement by the Roman Catholic Church. Critical of southern attitudes, Blythe directed the bulk of his criticism onto the nationalists and their futile political behaviour.

The questions to be addressed in this chapter are; was Blythe's campaign on partition and his seemingly protective stance towards his homeland of Ulster prompted by loyalty towards the north? Was Blythe's stance based on an in-built understanding of the Ulster Protestant psyche which expressed itself in sectarianism and bigotry towards Roman Catholics? Blythe's reassessment of the partition issue has been described as 'progressive, realistic and challenging'[2]. How progressive, realistic and challenging was Blythe's remedy for partition? What were the implications of Blythe's policies for the northern nationalists? In 1922 Blythe laid out a new approach to dealing with the 'un-amenable reality'[3] of partition, an approach that would challenge nationalism's 'dominant and rigid ideology'[4] which had traditionally laid the blame on England.

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[1] D. Ó Corráin, 'Ireland in his heart north and south: the contribution of Ernest Blythe to the partition question,' *Irish Historical Studies* (IHS) No. 35 (2006-07), 68.
[2] Ibid., 63.
[3] C. O'Halloran, *Partition and the Limits of Irish Nationalism* (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1987), X11.
[4] Ibid., X11.

Blythe's stance has been described as 'intransigent and unpopular, far-sighted and acute'[5]. How feasible were Blythe's recommendations for ending partition and how realistic for the northern nationalists on whose shoulders Blythe laid not only the blame for its continuance, but also the responsibility for bringing it to an end? To what extent were these northern nationalists influenced by their religious leaders in adopting their stance of non-cooperation with the Stormont Government? Was Blythe genuinely concerned for the welfare of northern nationalists? Was Blythe the only commentator on partition who held such a radical viewpoint? How much did the Anglo-Irish Treaty influence Blythe's stance on partition? How did Blythe's thinking on partition evolve over almost fifty years following its implementation and how accurate were his predictions? 'Blythe's unique insight into the whole northern problem, symbolized by the partition of the country, became a topic on which he was to write and lecture widely, in what was, for the period in question, a most unorthodox fashion'[6].

6.2 Two Irish Peoples[7]

By 1911 no Irish person could have foreseen the severing of their country into two separate autonomous states a decade later. It would have been alien to them to have imagined their country dismembered for the purposes of drawing a line through the nine-county province of Ulster to satisfy the demands of a section of Irish people, the Protestant Ulster Unionists. British Prime Minister, W.E. Gladstone in 1886 first introduced the idea of Home Rule. A quarter century later opposition to Home rule had intensified and better organised under the leadership of Edward Carson. Fearing that Home Rule would become Rome rule, Carson announced that Unionists should, in the event of Home Rule becoming law, take over the government and responsibility of running the Protestant province of Ulster. In February 1920, British Prime-minister Lloyd George officially gave the Unionists

[5] T. Neill, "Ernest Blythe-The Man from Magheragall," *Lisburn Historical Society*, Vol 2, part 4, (December 1979).
[6] N. Ó Gadhra, "Appreciation-Earnán de Blaghd, 1889-1975," *Éire- Ireland*, no. 11 (1976): 93-94.
[7] M. Laffin, *The Partition of Ireland 1911-25* (Dublin Historical Association, Dundalgan Press, Dundalk, 1983), 1.

what they wanted, via the 1920 Government of Ireland Act: a northern state of six-counties[8].

This decision to accommodate the Unionist demand for a Protestant six-county Ulster containing within its jurisdiction a large proportion of Catholic nationalists vehemently opposed to the arrangement, set in motion the longest running, most challenging and complex political issue in modern Ireland. According to Mansergh, the 1920 Government of Ireland Act defined the partition of Ireland by imposing firstly, the principle of partition, and secondly, by using a line of demarcation it established the importance of territory. These six-counties became known as Northern Ireland; becoming a Unionist fortress that Unionists would fight to maintain and for the Catholic nationalists, a lost territory which they would grieve over and fight to reclaim in perpetuity[9].

Partition was not up for negotiation during the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty debates. A Protestant government waiting in the wings to take over the administration of the six-counties was a prerequisite of the British government before any Treaty discussions with SF could even be considered[10]. Irish nationalism as practiced by SF was viewed as extremely dangerous, a threat to the Empire and the United Kingdom and had to be taken seriously. The claim to national self-determination in the atmosphere of 1919 was potentially a most- powerful one. The initial Unionist response inherited from earlier all-Ireland Unionist opposition to Home Rule was that no Irish nation existed. 'We deny the claim of nationality; Ireland never was a nation. We object to partition because we object to being divorced from full representation in the Imperial Parliament, not just for ourselves alone, but for our country'[11].

There was also the accompanying 'two nations' theory doing the rounds which gave added support to Unionist ideology:

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[8] "Two Parliaments are imposed on Ireland-The Partition Act of 1920," *The Revolution Papers 1916-1923*, 21 June 2016.

[9] N. Mansergh, *Nationalism and Independence, Selected Irish Papers* (Cork University Press, Cork, 1997), xiv.

[10] Ibid., xv.

[11] D. Kennedy, *The Widening Gulf: Northern attitudes to the independent Irish state 1919-49* (The Blackstaff Press, Belfast, 1988), 36.

> Ireland is inhabited by two distinct nations, or at least nationalities. The larger is composed of Celts, whether by race or assimilation. The other of Saxon descent. The ethnic character of the two races is as violently opposed as is well-nigh conceivable. They are not less widely separated in their religion. No attempt to deal with the Irish problem can succeed which does not start by recognising this fundamental fact[12].

The inbuilt weakness therefore of the 1920 Act was the establishment of an apartheid system of governing, leading to the segregated nationalist minority screaming intolerance and oppression and the Ulster Unionists, fixated on opposing Home Rule, had given little thought to how they would govern a state containing a large proportion of Catholics viscerally opposed to it[13]. And although the border agreement of 1925 was formally acknowledged by the Free State government southern Irishmen never renounced their claims on the north.

6.3 Blythe debates the origins of partition

According to Blythe, who realised that from the night on which the rifles for the Ulster Volunteers were landed at Larne and Bangor partition became unavoidable unless the Union of 1800 was to be maintained in its entirety[14]. He placed the origins of partition to the nineteenth century and Daniel O'Connell's emancipation campaign. According to Foster, 'Irish politics after emancipation would set hard into a sectarian mould although O'Connell tried hard to deny the process'[15]. Believing that the roots of partition needed to be identified before any attempt could be made to deal with it, Blythe stated that:

> It is necessary to consider 19th century trends because the roots of partition must be identified before we can profitably consider how to deal with it. And we shall get enlightenment by studying the fundamental factors which produced a situation positively inviting the division of Ireland, not by concentrating, as has been the fashion, on the fanciful interpretation of trivial details surrounding the shaping of partition in the years 1913 to 1917 when, in its present form it became a certainty[16].

In Blythe's opinion, 'O'Connell had spurned cultural Irish traditions when he joined hands with Cardinal Cullen, who saw Catholicism and Irish-ness as being one and the same'[17]. Blythe then introduced his thesis that it was

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[12] Ibid., 36.
[13] Ibid., 5-7.
[14] UCDA, P24/1874a, E. Blythe, 'Unity within the Framework of Partition,' 6-7.
[15] R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972* (Penguin Books, London, 1988), 306.
[16] UCDA, P24/1775, E. Blythe, 'Appeal to leaders of Nationalist opinion in the North,' 18.
[17] R. Blaney, *Presbyterians and the Irish Language* (Ulster Historical Foundation, Belfast, 1996), 208.

religious difference that underpinned partition. O'Connell had disillusioned northern Protestants who saw no purpose in having a separate Irish parliament in Dublin except to endorse a Catholic majority[18]. It was Blythe's view that Irish culture should be the bedrock of Irish nationalism and, 'the shape which the political future of the country will ultimately take must depend entirely on the extent to which cultural nationality is safeguarded and strengthened'[19].

Not everyone agreed with Blythe. T.W Moody, writing to Blythe in 1955, praised Blythe's 'common-sense approach, together with his frank speaking on an issue clouded by nonsense, neurosis and self-delusion. I know you are right, although in my own experience of tales of Ireland's past history I disagree with your argument connecting the decline of Gaelic in the 19th century to the retreat of Irish Protestants from nationalism'[20]. Owen Sheehy-Skeffington stated that, 'he was in general agreement with Blythe, differing strongly only on the point of nationality deficiency and cultural apostacy which did not sound to him sound or important'[21].

Blythe admitted that:

> Not realising at first that irreconcilable Irish differences had compelled England to resort to partition, I never believed that partition was wantonly forced upon Ireland by a wicked British government. I never failed to see the decisive importance of the fact that as an alternative to having the whole of Ireland ruled by an overwhelmingly Catholic parliament in Dublin, there was practically unanimous support for partition amongst the northern Protestants; there were as many Protestants willing to fight for partition as there were in the South who were willing to fight for a Republic[22].

According to Kennedy, 'the open and quite general Catholic identification with the Provisional Government in Dublin and parallel rejection of the new institutions in Belfast, reinforced the view of many Unionists that northern Catholics, as a community, were part of the onslaught on Ulster - if not actually involved in IRA violence, then supporting the systemic SF attempt to make impossible the functioning of Northern Ireland'[23].

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[18] Ó Gadhra, Appreciation: Earnán de Blaghd, 102.
[19] UCDA, P24/1874(a), E. Blythe, 'Unity within the framework of partition,' 12.
[20] UCDA, P24/1377, 'Letter from T.W. Moody to Ernest Blythe,' 31 January 1955.
[21] UCDA, P24/1391, 'Letter from O. Sheehy-Skeffington to Ernest Blythe,' 13 February 1955.
[22] UCDA, P24/1874 (a), 'Unity within the framework of partition,' 5-6.
[23] Kennedy, *The Widening Gulf: Northern attitudes to the independent Irish state 1919-49,* 105.

At a sub-committee meeting of the North-East Advisory Committee (NEAC) on 15 May 1922, Cahir Healy proposed a policy of obstruction against the six-counties. A formal recommendation stated that, 'an active destructive policy inside the six-county area apart from the border; the destruction of roads, bridges etc., and all other ways in which we can make the government impossible in the six-county area'[24]. At the same meeting, unadulterated force to bring the northern Unionists to heel was recommended by a Frank Crommie whose opinion was that there were two ways of dealing with these people in Belfast, 'one way is to hope they will come in later and the other way is to kick and trample on them. I am very much inclined to the second method'[25]. The provisional government wasn't over the moon about the 'very exquisite resolutions sent in by the NEAC none of which were at all practical'[26]. The resolutions were returned to the NEAC with instructions requesting a more general plan for finishing off the northern government[27]. Michael Collins' method was more incisive as he informed IRA leaders in 1922 that, although the Treaty appeared to be on the side of partition, the government had plans whereby they would render it impossible and that partition would never be recognised even though the end result might have to be the destruction of the Treaty[28].

Northern Unionists were painfully aware of these nationalist sentiments and, the fierce determination of those nationalists to terminate the Unionist State of Northern Ireland. The by now usual response was direct and brutal action against the beleaguered Catholics[29].

6.4 The legacy of partition - a Hibernia Irredenta

In August 1922, Blythe was given the task of re-framing the Free State's northern policy. Critical of that policy, Blythe went out on a limb by arguing that a policy based on the recognition of Northern Ireland should be adopted. Fanning states that,

> Blythe's quickly produced a remarkable memorandum, a document of the first historical importance in understanding the shift which was about to take place in the Dublin

[24] Ibid., 107.
[25] Ibid., 107.
[26] Ibid., 107.
[27] Ibid., 107.
[28] Ibid., 108.
[29] Ibid., 109.

> government's northern policy. Although Michael Collins received no mention in Blythe's eight-page memorandum, every line contained sharp criticism of his northern policy with Blythe asserting that the provisional government's policy had been dictated by the republicans[30].

Blythe's recommendations would either be viewed as deserving of the firing squad or that within his memorandum lay the solution to a perilous situation which could no longer be allowed to continue:

> There is no prospect of bringing about the unification of Ireland within any reasonable period of time by attacking the North-East. Military operations on regular lines are out of the question because of the certainty of active British support. Guerrilla operations within the six-counties can have none of the success which attended our operations against the British. The fact that the Protestant population (in most places the majority) will everywhere be actively on the side of the government makes that impossible. The continuance of guerrilla warfare on any considerable scale can only mean within a couple of years the total extirpation of the Catholic population of the North-East. The events of the past few months make that evident. As soon as possible all military operations on the part of our supporters in or against the north should be brought to an end[31].

Blythe viewed the application of economic pressure on secessionist Ulster as futile; a boycott would have no effect on agricultural, shipbuilding or linen businesses; if the south maintained a state of turmoil, the British will certainly step in and provide the northern government with enough support to enable it to remain in power. In his 'Memorandum with Regard to policy on north-east Ulster', Blythe states, 'That given peaceful conditions there is no reason why the six-county government should not swallow its pride, economise and live within its means. There are many governments controlling less territory and ruling fewer people'[32].

Blythe advocated a policy of amicable relations between the two governments, so that in time, 'the reunification of the country would come to be regarded as a sensible and prudent move by the majority in the six-counties'[33]. Blythe referred to the Treaty and its obligations on the south as the only way forward:

> The one logical and defensible line is full acceptance of the Treaty. This undoubtedly means recognition of the northern government and implies that we shall influence all those within the six-counties who look to us for guidance, to acknowledge its authority and refrain from any attempt to prevent it working. Pending the boundary arbitration, the northern government is entitled to claim obedience in the whole six-

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[30] R. Fanning, *Independent Ireland, Civil War and Partition* (Helicon, Dublin, 1983), 34.
[31] Ibid., 34.
[32] Ó Corráin, 'Ireland in his heart north and south: the contribution of Ernest Blythe to the partition question,' 64,
[33] Ibid., 64.

> counties and, we are bound by the Treaty not to encourage any unconstitutional attacks upon it[34].

Blythe's statement marked the end of Collins' northern policy. Accordingly Collins' approved payments of northern teachers were to be stopped; relations with public bodies who refused to recognize the northern government should be stopped; Catholic members of the northern parliament who had no objection to the oath of allegiance should be urged to take their seats and employ a unity propaganda; border raids and offenders caught by the south should be handed over to the northern authorities (provided flogging was stopped) and northern Catholics should be urged to dis-arm and prisoners should recognise the courts. 'There is of course the risk that the peaceful policy will not succeed. But it has a chance where the other has no chance. The unity of Ireland is of sufficient importance for us to take a chance in the hope of gaining it. The first move lies with us. There is no urgent desire for unity in the North-East and it would be stupid obstinacy for us to wait till the Belfast attitude improved'[35].

Blythe's recommendations were accepted by the government on 19 August 1922. Blythe, therefore, was instrumental in moving forward a policy of non-aggression by the Free State towards the Protestant six-counties. Collins himself was very aware of the longer lasting effects of partition, correctly stating:

> The legacy of partition would be a Hibernia Irredenta agitating future generations of nationalists, leading in turn to a heightening of fervent hatred amongst the northern non-conformist population directed against the rest of Ireland. Even if these decisions conceded to us our ultimate claim and though the territory of the Saorstát might be broadened, the gulf between the Saorstát and these populations would also be broadened[36].

Partition, therefore, had a prejudicial effect of any prospect of developing a sense of Irishness between the two communities. A shared cultural identity was for Blythe, an ingredient essential to repairing the political and religious divisions before partition could be ended.

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[34] Fanning, *Independent Ireland-Civil War and Partition*, 35.
[35] Ibid., 35-36.
[36] "Boundary Commission", https://www.generalmichaelcollins.com/life-times/boundarycommission/(assessed January 5, 2019).

6.5 The Boundary Commission: A disappointment for Blythe

When Collins' plans of non-recognition of the northern state, his support of the northern IRA, and whatever other ideas he had had in mind early in 1922 failed to overthrow Craig's Unionist administration, there remained a glimmer of hope, the Boundary Commission[37]. The 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty provided for such a body to examine the status of the Irish border and to determine a more equitable division between north and south. Southern nationalists understood this to mean that those areas of Ulster adjacent to the border having a nationalist majority would be transferred to the Free State. Collins had supported the idea believing that the commission would only have one outcome: the north losing so much territory that it would be no longer viable.

The expectation was that the commission would be set up quickly and, without a shadow of doubt, its recommendations would not favour the Unionists who were expected to suffer such a loss of territory that partition would not survive[38]. The pro-Treaty side in 1922 were still committed to achieving Irish unity by ending partition and dismantling Northern Ireland, rather than accepting one and working with the other.

Blythe, commenting in Waterford on de Valera's 'existing Republic' in March 1922, stated that, 'they had heard a lot of talk of 'the existing Republic' but to his mind there had not been, and is not, a Republic. There had been certain Republican machinery established, but the Republic which meant the complete independence of Ireland they had not yet got. They accepted the Treaty because it carried them along the road to freedom and a great deal nearer to it than the thing that had been called 'an existing Republic'[39].

In October 1922, the Free State government, having effectively disinherited the northern nationalists, who were by now firmly

[37] Kennedy, *The Widening Gulf: Northern Attitudes to the Independent Irish State 1919-1949*, 108.
[38] Ibid., 108.
[39] "Speeches on ratification by E. Blythe," *Irish Independent*, 27 March 1922.

established in Unionist eyes, 'as those we now call our enemies'[40] turned to the Boundary Commission which was taken to be a guarantee that partition would not last. Kevin O'Shiel assembled a bureau to investigate the boundary question. 'It examined a wide range of European precedents, compiled maps and statistics and organised publicity'[41]. With the hard-line Bonar Law replacing Lloyd George, O'Shiel warned that with such a hostile administration in London, a verdict in the Free State's favour was highly unlikely. 'He warned that no award would come from the British until we could show that we were in control of our own territory'[42].

In July 1923, W.T. Cosgrave proposed that a boundary commission be set in motion, although it was almost three years after the original Treaty had been signed that the commission began its investigations. Eoin MacNeill, who would later resign from the Commission, represented the Free State, hard-liner J.R. Fisher represented the north, with South African judge Richard Feetham deciding what territory and, boundary changes, would or would not be made[43].

Throughout 1925 the commission deliberated on the border taking statements from interested parties in the border area with a view to redrawing it in accordance with Article 12 of the Treaty. Feetham's views coincided more closely with Belfast than Dublin so it was no surprise that his recommendation was that Northern Ireland should remain the same political entity, capable of maintaining a parliament and government. The absence of any provision for a plebiscite in the Treaty influenced Feetham's policy of rejecting European precedents and, generally working on the basis of what they found in 1924-5 rather than returning to the spirit of 1921. The draft award according to Blythe had been prepared and if it were to become a signed award, it would be the greatest travesty of justice. Blythe then spelled out the core ingredients of the award:

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[40] Kennedy, *The Widening Gulf: Northern attitudes to the independent Irish state 1919-1949*, 109.
[41] Laffan, *The Partition of Ireland, 1911-25*, 99.
[42] Ibid., 99.
[43] Ibid., 100.

> It was an award that left the great solid nationalist population of South-Down still under the six-counties government; which left most of the nationalists of South Armagh still under the six-counties government; which took a portion of County Monaghan and transferred it to the six-county government; which gave the Free State a small portion of the poorest part of South Fermanagh, a small poor part of West Tyrone; and took from the Free State the rich and valuable portion of East Donegal. They knew enough of the feelings and wishes of the inhabitants of those areas to realise that such a line was one which could have no justification whatever[44].

Blythe believed that the methods prescribed in the Treaty had broken down and it would be for the governments of the Free State and Britain to consider how otherwise the intentions of the Treaty could be carried out. Blythe advice was:

> To let things stand as they are, even than to have a worse line, a more unjust line drawn. If there is going to be justice done, let there be justice; but let us not have anything that pretends to be justice and that is only the increasing of injustice[45].

The border was now a *fait accompli.* The Free State government had pursued all avenues, legal, political, historic and demographic to bolster their case.

Not all of Cosgrave's party were happy with the outcome. Deputy Richard O'Connell forwarded a motion that the Cumann na nGaedhal executive should refuse consent to the severing of the six-counties and that attacks be launched from Donegal on the B Specials. Blythe concerned about his budgets as Finance Minister commented that, 'it was codology and codology and codology to think that we can fight the British Empire. Our savings certificates would fall and, we would be on our knees within six months'[46].

The Free State settled for a twenty-six counties, 92% Catholic Free State, which would be easier to manage than a larger area containing a minority of disgruntled and disagreeable Unionists[47]. The six-counties now became a stronghold of sectarianism. Protestants turned against Catholics with a vengeance. Whilst Protestant attention was focused on holding the pass for the English establishment against the papacy,

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[44] "Mr. Ernest Blythe Discloses Draft Award," *Newtownards Chronicle*, 28 November 1925, 6.
[45] Ibid., 28 November 1925, 6.
[46] J.M. Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution 1921-1936* (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1999), 256.
[47] Laffan, *The Partition of Ireland*, 102.

Unionist politicians could feel secure in office; for almost fifty years this sectarian hatred of northern nationalists kept them in power:

> The final settlement confirmed the 1921 border unchanged, wasted no more time on the commission's report, absolved the Free State of any monetary obligations under the treaty and finally, abolishing the Council of Ireland whose powers were now assigned to the Belfast and Dublin governments[48].

The Free State, unable to win any significant improvements in the conditions of northern nationalists turned to its second preference, securing benefits for the Free State and Cosgrave played a leading role in the quest for financial concessions[49]. Cosgrave informed the Dáil after the deal was done, 'was that he had got from the British what he wanted, a huge 'O'[50]. Was Cosgrave happy with such a settlement? His response appears mercenary to say the least. He would have been aware that such a deal would be at the expense of the northern Catholics. The financial settlement may have been a fiscal success for the Free State but the nationalists of Tyrone, Fermanagh, Derry, South Down, and South Armagh could be forgiven in thinking they had been sold down the river. Eoin MacNeill wondered later why the ministers who went to London in 1925 were unable to obtain greater concessions from Baldwin's conservative government: 'gerrymandering, discrimination and the excesses of the 'B Specials' were all issues worthy of redress by Craig's government in 1925'[51].

That such concessions were envisaged by the Cumann na nGaedheal ministers before they departed for London is clear, as Fr. Thomas Bradley from Plumbridge reminded them in a letter to McGilligan that, 'they were going to (London) to extract financial concessions and, to obtain for the Catholics living in the six-counties, measures which would bring relief from the sectarianism practiced against them'[52]. According to Regan, 'the most striking elision in terms of the London settlement was the failure to obtain from the northern government concessions regarding the nationalist minority in the north. Northern nationalist interests were,

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[48] Ibid., 105.
[49] M. Laffan, *Judging W. T. Cosgrave* (Prism, Dublin, 2014), 206.
[50] R. Kee, *The Green Flag, A History of Irish Nationalism* (Penguin Books, London, 1972), 747.
[51] Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution 1921-1936*, 253.
[52] Ibid., 253.

fundamentally negated by the policy of reconciliation in London[53]. Why had the Cumann na nGaedheal party not come home with a better deal? The nationalist community in the north, 'who had been gagged and gerrymandered writhing under the heel of an odious tyranny[54], had been pawns in a game of power politics. Their rights had been subjugated for the benefit of a better deal between London, Dublin and the northern Parliament, and the promise of a 'new Entente Cordiale'[55] in north-south relations. The deal hinged on the promulgation, or not, of the Boundary Commissioners report. If the report had been promulgated and passed into law Northern Ireland might have been the benefactors and would not in any event have suffered a great loss in territory. On 3 December 1925, to prevent the report being promulgated, the Free State ministers gave their consent to a tri-partite agreement; to amend the Treaty in respect of Article X11 and Article 5 which held the Free State liable to pay for an uncertified portion of Britain's debt and, paying of some war pensions. The reality of the agreement was that the border between north and south remained intact; the Free State were exempt from their financial obligations under Article 5 (as was Northern Ireland) and politically, the powers of the Council of Ireland in relation to Northern Ireland (under the Government of Ireland Act 1920) were to be assigned to the Stormont Government[56]. Kee states that, 'All-Ireland unity had been relinquished with more permanency than in any compact Redmond had ever considered'[57].

6.6 Blythe makes his opinions clear: The border exists because the northern Protestants wanted it

> Tá an Chríchdheighilt ann toisc gur éiligh Prodastúnaigh na tire í, go mórmhór Prodastúnaigh an Tuaiscirt. Go brách, ní imreoidh Sasana nó aon chumhacht eile éigníocht ar Aondachtóirí na Sé gContae d'fhonn a thabhairt orthu ceangal, dá n-ainneoin, leis an Phoblacht. Muran féidir a áiteamh ar chúpla céad mile Prodastúnach sa Tuaisceart go mba choir dhóibh vótáil ar son athaonú na hEireann, ní cuirfear deireadh leis an Teorainn go deo'[58]. [The border exists because the Protestants of the north want it. Neither England not any other power or compulsion on the Unionists, will make

[53] Ibid., 253.
[54] Ibid., 254.
[55] Ibid., 254.
[56] F.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine* (Fontana Press, London, 1963), 492.
[57] Kee, *The Green Flag, A History of Irish Nationalism*, 747.
[58] E. de Blaghd, *Briseadh na Teorann* (Sáirséal agus Dill, Baile átha Cliath, 1955), 7.

> them join with the Republic. If it is not possible to persuade a couple of hundred thousand northern Protestants to vote for a united Ireland, there will be no putting an end to the border at all]

This statement underpinned Blythe's belief that northern Protestants would not be bullied into a united Ireland. Dáil Éireann's response to the 1949 Ireland Act, for instance confirmed their fears. 'It rejected the claim of the British parliament to pass legislation involving Ireland's territory, invokes the British government and people to bring to an end her present occupation of Ireland's six north-eastern counties, thereby enabling the reunification of Ireland and, bringing to an end the legacy of dissention that exists between the two nations'[59].

Blythe's argument that the continuing southern irredentist claims to the six-counties underpinned the Unionist argument that the south still had her sights set on re-claiming the north-eastern territory:

> The single greatest obstacle, however, was religious bigotry based on the twin fears of loss and of general persecution. Such mis-apprehension was the product of ignorance due to long continued mischievous propaganda with the result that the suspicious northern bigot looks upon the considerations extended to the Saorstát Protestants merely as tempting bait on the unity hook and, he only becomes more determined not to be trapped or deceived. Because of this attitude it is necessary that public men in the Saorstát should make it clear beyond any shadow of doubt that they do not wish to have the six-counties brought into the Saorstát except on the basis of free consent registered by a substantial majority vote[60].

In 1949 an All-Ireland Anti-Partition conference was inaugurated to discuss the validity of partition, emphasising the incontestable fact that Ireland as a national unit was never questioned, 'until a British Government, for its own purposes, decided to cut the country into two parts, five-sixths and one-sixth'[61]. This conference was held in response to Britain's introduction of the 'Ireland Act' (1949) into which was inserted a clause declaring that, 'in no event will Northern Ireland or any part thereof cease to be a part of His Majesty's Dominions and of the United Kingdom without the consent of the Parliament of Northern Ireland'[62]. Ignoring the fact that the northern Protestants had threatened revolt against Britain if it imposed Home Rule on Ulster, aggrieved southerners issued the following statement: 'The

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[59] Dáil Éireann debate, cxv, 785-6, May 1949.
[60] Ó Corráin, 'Ireland in his heart north and south: the contribution of Ernest Blythe to the partition question,' 65.
[61] "*Ireland's Right to Unity-The case stated by the All-Party Anti-Partition Conference, Mansion House, Dublin, Ireland,"* second edition (Cahill & Co., Ltd, Dublin), 4.
[62] Ibid., 9.

dismemberment of Ireland is an example of an imperial power using its strength to defy a people's will and maintain by force, a system which denies to them the very essence of democracy'[63].

When Blythe, unable to restrain himself in the face of what he saw as utter nonsense regarding the origins of partition, launched his own campaign of opposition to the Anti-Partition Campaign, the mid-1950s were 'hard-line' days in Irish politics in-so-far as partition was concerned. According to Buckley, 'Blythe was the only dissenter amongst Irish nationalists who challenged the reasoning which formed the basis for nationalist unanimity against partition'[64]. Blythe's book, *Briseadh na Teorann* (Smashing the Border) published in 1955, was described by Ó Gadhra 'as an amazing document greatly at variance with his fellow Irish nationalists'[65]. 'Blythe did not confine himself to philosophical generalities but advised the northern nationalists regarding the proper manner to be adopted when toasting Queen Elizabeth; congratulating the royal family and, the flying of the tri-colour and union jack'[66]. Ó Corráin states, given the political climate of the time, Blythe's ideas were often deeply unpopular:

> The danger to be avoided when discussing partition, in this period, is that of slipping into retrospective reasoning and, consequently invalidating Blythe's contribution. Although almost axiomatically assumed today, it is important to realise how strange an internal-conflict paradigm on the idea of a divided society would have appeared over sixty years ago - an interpretation not common currency before the outbreak of the Northern Troubles in 1969[67].

Blythe's campaign was 'a serious and honest attempt to discuss the realities of a problem which in public discussion, is hopelessly smeared over with misrepresentation and hypocrisy'[68].

In 1949 Blythe wrote, 'Towards a six-county dominion' in response to the Anti-Partition Campaign, followed in 1954 by 'The problem of partition-suggestions for a commission of inquiry or a consultative Council'. In 1956 he issued, 'A new departure on northern policy-appeal to the leaders

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[63] Ibid., 14.
[64] P. Buckley, 'Blythe, Ernest (de Blaghd, Earnán),' Dictionary of Irish Biography (DIB) Royal Irish Academy, Cambridge University Press, Vol. 1, 623.
[65] Ó Gadhra, 'Appreciation-Earnán de Blaghd, 1889-1975,' 102.
[66] Buckley, 'Blythe, Ernest (de Blaghd, Earnán),' DIB, Vol. 1, 623.
[67] Ó Corráin, 'Ireland in his heart North and South-The contribution of Ernest Blythe to the partition question,' 63.
[68] Ibid., 65.

of national opinion', laying out his arguments for the rejection of physical force. In 1957 he framed a new policy for re-union on a federal basis in 'Half-way through no-man's Land'. He published a further fifteen articles in *The Leader* journal throughout 1951. The *Irish Times* praised his Golden Jubilee article in *The Leader* as 'one of the pitifully few constructive contributions to the partition problem that have been made in the past thirty years'[69].

Blythe, with characteristic bluntness, addressed the Irish Association in 1959 suggesting that, 'it was time to give up the witless notion that Irish unity could be brought about by coercion of any kind'[70]. Ó Corráin states that 'by the end of the 1950's Blythe was recognized as a controversial commentator on the partition question. While never endorsed *in toto*, by the mid 1960's his ideas had gained greater prevalence'[71].

The content of these memoranda high-light Blythe's intimate knowledge of Ulster's Protestants, a people who wanted no truck with the Catholic Free State. Regan takes Blythe to task for, 'professing to be a spokesman for his northern co-religionists, he was probably more misleading than enlightening to an audience largely ignorant, save Blythe's exposure of Ulster Protestantism'[72]. Blythe's blunt retort dispels any misunderstanding of his competence to give an opinion on Ulster Protestant thinking:

> I do not profess any special ability to draw correct conclusions from the facts of the situation in the north, but I think that I may fairly claim to be in a rather better position than most people to get at the facts themselves as they affect both sides. I was brought up in a Unionist household in, as already indicated, a strongly Orange area. I was in the north on the staff of a Unionist country paper from early 1909 till 1913 and saw at close quarters the preliminary stages of what is loosely called the Carson campaign and, of the development of the Ulster Volunteers[73].

McColgan endorsed Blythe's grass roots knowledge. 'Blythe had been a Gaelic enthusiast and actively involved at the head of the separatist movement since 1906. As an Ulster Protestant, Blythe would undoubtedly

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[69] "Golden Jubilee," Editorial, *Irish Times*, 28 October 1950.
[70] Ó Corráin, 'Ireland in his Heart north and south-The contribution of Ernest Blythe to the partition question,' 67.
[71] Ibid., 67.
[72] Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution, 1921-1936*, 92.
[73] UCDA. P24/1838 (a) 'Blythe's thoughts on how Britain should have dealt with Ulster,' 1. (no title)

have been the sole member of the Free State government who had a working knowledge of how the Ulster Protestant mind worked'[74].

Blythe used his innate knowledge of Ulster's Protestants to warn southerners that the old loyalist slogan 'No Pope Here' still applied in the north. What did the Union with Britain mean to the Ulster Protestants? According to Lyons different individuals would have different views which could be short-listed into religious, economic and political categories. Religion was not the least of these factors; Home Rule meant Rome Rule for the Ulster Protestants. By virtue of their being numerically smaller in numbers against the Catholics across the whole island, they did have the monopoly of numbers in the north-east. Either way the Protestants had to deal with a large Catholic population but, more importantly the Catholic Church loomed large in nationalist politics and could become more powerful still[75].

> Where they were in a minority, fear counselled caution but, where they predominated their hatred readily vented itself in the aggressive intolerance which characterised the extremer forms of Ulster Protestantism for most of the nineteenth century and, which to this day embitters the political, as well as the religious life of the province. At the present moment, with the entrails of Ulster bigotry laid bare to the world as never before, it is perhaps easier to understand the reality of this religious tension even though it is still difficult to explain it[76].

However, the loyalists of Ulster had no need for Blythe to proclaim their religious and political sentiments - it was there for everyone to see; on gable walls, streets, roadways, loyal demonstrations, King William and the Boyne; Blythe was only endorsing the obvious. In later life Blythe conceded that, had the circumstances been right, he would have approved of the use of arms to preserve national integrity. 'He would not have objected to acting rigorously against Ulster loyalists, but only on the condition that it could have been carried out swiftly with sufficient military power to affect the desired outcome'[77]. In fact, Blythe believed that Britain lost the initiative in 1912 and 1913:

> When partition openly took shape and, when the matter at issue was one of obedience, or non- obedience to a subordinate Irish parliament, there might have been a possibility of the British being gingered up to coerce the north-east, if only they could have been

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[74] J. McColgan, *British Policy and the British Administration 1920-22* (Allen & Unwin, London, 1958), 121.
[75] Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine*, 288.
[76] Ibid., 288.
[77] E. de Blaghd, *Gaeil á Múscailt* (Sáirséal agus Dill, Baile átha Cliath, 1973), 201.

> convinced that a comparatively brief struggle involving a little bloodshed would settle the business[78].

According to Blythe:

> If anything useful was to be done about ending partition, the first necessity is to realise clearly that, politically and constitutionally, Ireland has, in fact, been effectually divided and requires to be re-united, and to act accordingly, appreciating above all that the establishment of a democratic parliament and government with considerable powers, in the six-counties created a situation, which, in relation to the use of military methods, to civil resistance, to mass agitation, and even to parliamentary action, is quite unlike anything ever known before in Irish history[79]
> .

In his August 1922 'Memorandum with regard to policy on north-east Ulster', described by Ó Corráin as, 'a document noteworthy for its clarity and forthright arguments'[80], Blythe expressed his desire for the re-unification of Ireland. However, he was strongly of the opinion that any blackmailing, coercion, or use of force against the northern government would have the opposite effect, in particular with regard to the use of force where Britain would come to the aid of its supporters. In a more than likely backlash, the Stormont regime would apply even more punitive measures against the northern Catholics[81].

Blythe censured the physical force elements within Irish nationalism on their contribution to the maintaining of partition:

> Practitioners of violence do more to keep partition in being than is done by the most extreme section of Orangemen. When our militarists carry out their operations in the six-counties, what they accomplish is to disgust and anger the ordinary Protestant, by making him more resolved than ever to oppose the aims behind such witless and reckless deeds. The outrages can only be taken as an attempt at crude terrorist coercion which evokes deeper feelings of repulsion amongst the Protestant population than would mere stupid lawlessness[82].

Blythe directs his frustration at nationalists who don't' see any reason to change their tactics:

> The overwhelming majority of six-counties Catholics still cling obstinately or desperately or perhaps despairingly to the notion that it is by coercion and only by coercion that Irish reunion can be achieved and that it is crying to the moon to talk of changing the opinion of any appreciable percentage of northern Unionists. As long as this politically faint-hearted and defeatist attitude is maintained, or is permitted to survive, matters must go on as they have been going for the past thirty-five years with

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[78] UCDA, P24/1838(a), 'Blythe's thoughts on how Britain should have dealt with Ulster,' 9-10. (no title

[79] UCDA, P24/1775, E. Blythe, 'Appeal to Leaders of Nationalist opinion in the North,' c. 1960, 10

[80] Ó Corráin, 'Ireland in his heart, north and south-the contribution of Ernest Blythe to the partition question,' 63.

[81] Ibid., 63.

[82] Ibid., 64.

> the prospect of national re-union in freedom steadily fading into the further distance; because no campaign of persuasion can effectively begin let alone succeed, without the participation of the northern Catholics[83]

6.7 A new approach: Blythe advocates a policy of persuasion as the only way to end partition

Persuasion was now Blythe's formula for eventually ending partition, echoing Lord Carson's speech in the House of Commons that 'Ulster might be wooed by sympathetic understanding, but she can never be coerced'[84]. Blythe's message to the nationalists contained the following heartfelt, though reproachful plea:

> I make my plea for a courageous study of the idea of persuasion, primarily to those leaders of northern nationalist opinion who most urgently want to abolish the border and who are not even intermittently content to carry on mechanically as anti-partitionist spokesmen getting psychological satisfaction out of attacking the other side and enjoying a certain personal popularity and status but, achieving nothing except a further under-pinning of partition. Persuasion ought not to be forever ruled out because it was not tried at the beginning, nor because it is positively repulsive to the numerous pseudo-nationalists to whom the re-union of Ireland without a triumph over the Orangemen would seem a poor thing[85].

Blythe now placed the onus for ending partition with the nationalist minority:

> All political parties in the Saorstát stand for the reunion of Ireland and it is desired by every section of the people. Unfortunately, little thought has been yet given to the question of ways and means, so that reunion remains a high aspiration, the realization of which is liable to be indefinitely postponed by the heedless policies of those who desire it. Nobody who will seriously consider the situation in the north and, open his eyes to the obstacles to be overcome, can deny that the achievement of national re-union will be a task of supreme difficulty[86].

Blythe believed there were many reasons why the six-county Protestants should favour re-union, or at least should have no objection to it[87]. He cited the commonality of 'identity of race, geographical unity, common history and a certain dislike of the English being potential reasons why northern Protestants should favour re-union'[88]. He lists the excuses used by the Free State to avoid the obvious course of action necessary to achieve re-unification; 'the pointless use of military force; the fanciful belief that an

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[83] Blythe, 'Appeal to Leaders of Nationalist Opinion in the North,' 8.
[84] "Lord. Carson's speech in House of Commons of February 1914," *Irish Times*, 28 January 1922 as discussed in Bew, 1994:103.
[85] Blythe, 'Appeal to leaders of nationalist opinion in the North,' 8.
[86] UCDA, P24/1261b, E. Blythe, 'Stalemate in the North,' 1.
[87] Ibid., 2.
[88] Ibid., 2.

alteration of the boundary to reduce the size of Northern Ireland as to make it too small to survive; economic pressure would not work and, the ludicrous idea that Catholics would eventually out-number the Protestants'[89].

What then was Blythe's solution to the problem? Firstly, it must be taken into consideration that in the 1950s, an examination of partition was virgin territory. Blythe was the first person to address properly the partition question from the perspective of the six-counties being a divided society; therefore, expecting him to arrive immediately at the perfect solution was unrealistic. Blythe's theory was based on the premise that in the six-counties there was more to unite than to divide so everyone should work together for the benefit of the country. However, that would not be a sufficiently strong motivating factor for the nationalists to jettison their argument that partition was unlawful and that their actions and attitudes were perfectly natural given the situation in which they found themselves.

What was the reasoning behind Blythe's numerous appeals to ending partition? In his appeals, Blythe was probing for a solution that would break down the long-standing barriers to progress which prevented peace and reconciliation. Blythe's view was that if the nationalists had problems living in the Unionist six-counties then they had to find a more original way of dealing with them than they had previously.

Was Blythe being unfair to the nationalists by laying the onus for change solely with them? Yes and No. Yes, because a large measure of change in attitude to the nationalists should also be required of the Unionists. No, because the Unionist issue was fundamentally one of trust. So, the nationalists had to earn that trust by showing Unionists that they had moved away from their old policy of irredentism. Was Blythe naïve in thinking that the nationalists could or would accept his seemingly far-fetched proposals at will? He was after all, regardless of his earlier efforts to obtain Irish freedom, still an Ulster Protestant.

The nationalists had not yet arrived at a point where they were willing to throw away their heritage. They still had grievances and scores to settle with their Unionist taskmasters. The Unionists were unassailable in their domain,

[89] Ibid., 1.

content in the knowledge that England would support them in extremity. In Unionist thinking the nationalists had a choice; if they didn't like the situation they could go south. It would take a sea-change in nationalist ideology to make even a chink in the Unionist stronghold.

The northern nationalists had to all intents and purposes been hung out to dry by the Free State, so they either accepted their status as second-class citizens or, made major efforts to come up with a solution which would change they fortunes for the better, no matter how unpalatable. As James Craig so eloquently stated, 'there can be no such thing as equality, for if you are not top-dog she will be'[90].

Blythe at the time was asking the nationalists to make the greater sacrifice and the playing field was certainly not level from their perspective. The irresistible force of Irish nationalism and the immovable object of Protestant Unionism would not yield to Blythe's pleadings for the foreseeable future. Although Blythe never alluded to it in his writings, the Catholic church played a major role in influencing nationalist voters. Was this something that Blythe had taken into consideration when propounding his views? Did he fully understand that Catholics might have difficulty disobeying the church's special advice on dealing with partition? The following statement, issued by the church, claimed that, 'Special government has been given to one section of the Irish people remarkable for intolerance. Until repression ceases and the right of Ireland to choose her own form of government has been recognised there is no prospect of peace in Ireland'[91]. By refusing to take their seats in the new parliament, nationalist MP's signified their contempt for its existence. From an Ulster Unionist viewpoint, 'these gestures were viewed as provocative and dangerous moves on the part of the Catholic community - ineffectual stabs at the new state's jugular that made the majority defensive and vicious'[92].

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[90] D. Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (Profile Books Ltd, London, 2004), 120.
[91] M. O'Callaghan, 'Language and Religion-the quest for identity in the Irish Free State 1922-32,' Master of Arts Thesis, University College Dublin, September 1981, 11.
[92] Ibid., 21.

On April 4, 1921 a six-county conference was convened to decide on policy for elections to the new northern parliament. A resolution proposed by Canon Crolly was read to the audience commending:

> That we enter our solemn protest against the imposition on any part of Ireland of a constitution conceived by a foreign legislature for British political purposes…believing this so-called northern parliament is a danger to our liberties and a barrier to the permanent solution of the Irish problem we can neither give it recognition nor lend it support, and we call on all who are opposed to the partition of Ireland to support at the forthcoming elections for the north-east Ulster parliament mainly candidates who will unreservedly pledge themselves neither to recognize nor enter it[93].

If Blythe was aware of the existence of this conference and its agenda, he makes no mention of the fact. Did he deliberately choose to ignore the power of the church to influence its followers, believing that the nationalists could eventually be won over to his ideas? During the period in question adherence to the rule of the Catholic church was not questioned by the laity and hierarchy support for abstention from Stormont would have had an influential effect on Catholic voters. Therefore, Blythe's task in winning over even a handful of nationalist supporters to his cause was a Sisyphean exercise, as neither camp, Unionist nor Nationalist, signalled any interest in finding a way through their mutual antagonisms which were doing neither of them any good.

When, in 1922, Blythe stated that the northern Catholics would be exterminated within two years he was attempting to enlighten the southerners of the loyalists' deep-seated antagonism towards Catholics. 'Northern Catholics were victimised in the area in which they were most vulnerable; housing, jobs and money, in retaliation for the rhetoric and nationalist aspirations of their leaders'[94]. An attempt was made by the Belfast Catholic Protection Committee (BCPC) to bring to the attention of Churchill and Chamberlain the dire situation of the northern Catholics:

> That the Catholics of Belfast were being subjected to a policy of gradual extermination by murder, assault and starvation. Arsonists burn their homes; they are the targets of street snipers; their life is unbearable. They have no support from the Army and they also have to endure the hostility of the B Specials[95].

So desperate was their situation that General Eoin O'Duffy in response to the suggestion that since the state of Northern Ireland appeared to be at least

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[93] Ibid., 23.
[94] Ibid., 29.
[95] Ibid., 29.

a temporary reality, 'advised Catholics to join the 'B' Specials to protect themselves from the danger of a purely Protestant force. The very best of the IRA, the cream of the flying columns should join for the purpose'[96].

Eventually the church subordinated their immediate concern for their flock in the north for the wider consideration of the maintenance of the first independent State. According to Kenny, 'The twenty-six counties were effectively becoming 'Catholic Ireland', the Catholic Church, willy-nilly was taking over from the Crown in ceremonial and rite. As Éire was born, Catholic Ireland identified with it intensely and saw here a challenge to build a state on Catholic ideals'[97]. According to O'Callaghan, 'By committing themselves so intensely to the new Provisional Government and the Treaty, the Catholic hierarchy had compromised their unequivocal verbal rejection of the state of Northern Ireland[98]. Therefore, the church demonstrated by their acknowledgement of, and involvement with the Free State their acceptance of partition, a situation which they had previously so vehemently condemned and in which they had been so influential in motivating the nationalist voters towards abstention from the northern parliament. From this evidence it can be stated that from the beginning, the northern Catholics were influenced greatly in their decision making by their church, which eventually left them to stew in a situation which may have had a different outcome but for the influence of the Catholic prelates.

Did Blythe take this into consideration when he mooted his solutions to partition? He was very aware of the great body of followers in Devlin's Catholic AOH. It would have been courteous at least to have paid lip-service to this factor, rather than trouncing the Catholics with his dogmatic views. Blythe was now up against the most powerful religious institution in Ireland; only the bravest of Catholics would follow Blythe's model, especially against the powerful combination of the religious AOH and the Catholic Church.

Blythe's proposed political U-turn by the northern nationalists would, he believed, result in a gradual softening of Protestant attitudes. Blythe

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[96] Ibid., 29.
[97] M. Kenny, *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland* (Sinclair-Stevenson, London, 1997), 104-105.
[98] O'Callaghan, 'Language and Religion, The Quest for Identity in the Irish Free State, 1922-1932,' 37.

believed that great changes could be obtained by personal influence if only northern Catholics could get rid of the strange mixture of arrogance and defeatism in politics which the coercionist doctrine has imposed on them. It was also a pre-requisite of any progress that they should cease to maintain a political ghetto for themselves, and that they should develop, in regard to national affairs, a missionary spirit and technique.

For the northern nationalists Blythe's remedy was tough love for a people who had been obliged to live in a state to which they had given neither their consent nor their allegiance. What was their response to partition? Their response was that of non-participation in the Stormont government and non-involvement in the civic life of the province. The nationalists would have viewed themselves as displaced persons within their own, now divided country and, like all displaced peoples they banded together with their own people for support and to preserve a connection with their national and cultural roots[99].

The abolition of proportional representation (PR) in 1929 for example, confirmed nationalists in their belief that ever since the establishment of Northern Ireland the Unionist government had been trying to crush the Roman Catholics and deprive them of their rights. Buckland, concurring with Blythe's thesis that nationalists had contributed greatly to their situation, states that, 'Indeed, with the abolition of PR in parliamentary elections some nationalist and labour MP's began to wonder whether it was worth-while treading a constitutional path. It was a legitimate grievance and despite the nationalist's responsibility for their own plight by boycotting the state in the early years, it is difficult to deny that the abolition of PR was a major act of misgovernment'[100].

Under the circumstances, it must have appeared to the northern nationalists that Blythe was demanding the impossible from them. Blythe knew however that repugnant as these demands of his were to the nationalists, their position as underlings in the six-counties would remain

[99] S. Farren, *The SDLP, The Struggle for agreement in Northern Ireland-1970-2000* (Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2010), 16.
[100] P. Buckland, *The Factory of Grievances*: *Devolved Government in Northern Ireland, 1921-39* (Gill & Macmillan, London, 1979), 228.

unchanged until they faced-down the Ulster Unionists and changed their *modus operandi.*

6.8 Blythe discusses the reasons for Protestant bigotry and why it keeps partition in place

Ernest Blythe claimed that in conjunction with nationalist behaviour, 'the other major and serious obstacle to reunion is to be found in the religious bigotry of the majority of the six-county Protestants'[101]. In *Orange Terror - The Partition of Ireland,* Blythe disagreed with the view of Protestant bigotry as 'something for which the northern government was responsible'[102]. Blythe pointed out that:

> If it wasn't for the deep-seated bigotry of the Protestant population towards Catholics, the Stormont government would not have come into existence. Although this bigotry is inflexible, it is not a persecuting bigotry. It is connected with a certain amount of greed, ill-will and the need to dominate, but it is at heart, bigotry of mistrust and fear. I am satisfied that bigotry being an intrinsically Protestant trait, becomes capable of unremitting violence when aroused by political aggravation[103].

For Blythe, this political aggravation was the presence of the IRA operating both north and south. According to Kennedy, by 1922 the level of escalating violence in Belfast was unprecedented, with sniping, bombing and assassination adding new dimensions to sectarian strife, with more than fifty per cent of that violence directed against Catholics.

Unionist thinking was that Sinn Féin-IRA activity was the root cause of the strife in Belfast; reprisals were deplorable but would not have happened had it not been for IRA activity. Not all IRA activity was in defence of the Catholic community - bombing of crowded tram cars, incendiarism and assassinations, for instance, confirmed the Unionist view that an evil conspiracy was at work:

> It was in the working-class areas of the city that Orangeism, strongly flavoured with anti-Catholic bigotry, was already rife. The urban terror carried out by IRA, an organisation controlled and armed by the self-proclaimed Irish nationalist state, greatly inflamed this bigotry. Belfast Catholics - though not all of them-professed allegiance to that state and in many cases were enrolled in the IRA. The Orange mob had long identified its Catholic neighbour as a potential opponent and despised rival - after 1922 he was a mortal enemy[104].

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[101] UCDA, P/24/1261b, 'Stalemate in the North,' 2.
[102] *Ultach*, 'Orange Terror: The Partition of Ireland,' Dublin, 1943, 55.
[103] Ibid., 55.
[104] Kennedy, *The Widening Gulf: Northern Attitudes to the independent Irish state 1919-49*, 223-224.

Blythe believed that with Catholic opposition to the existence of the six-counties being the party-line, and, when an underground military organisation is in operation to overthrow the said territory, it is only fit that the forces of law and order should be suspicious of any Catholic[105]. Blythe then apportioned the blame with the northern nationalists and the southern government for the discrimination and bigotry directed against themselves:

> Which was in the main the result of political dogma, with the blame for at least two-thirds of it attributable to the northern Catholics themselves and, to we southerners who have implicitly backed the idea of driving the northern Protestants to accept the authority of the Free State through the use of armed violence, or, economic compulsion, against their manifest wishes and better judgements[106].

Kennedy posits that the events of 1919-22 in Ulster were extraordinarily dramatic. A new boundary had emerged, new political institutions had been set up; Ulster's next-door neighbour was now a newly emerging Irish state, accompanied with an intense communal violence and terrorism. The source of this immense upheaval was blamed on Irish nationalism which in turn influenced future Unionist attitudes towards both the new nationalist state and critically, towards their nationalist neighbours, the northern Catholics[107].

Blythe believed that if this threat was removed and if there was no longer any compelling political need to inhibit the power of Catholics in their role as pro-coercionists, the ordinary Protestants would have less inclination to approve punitive measures against them. Bigotry would evaporate quickly and the potency of the small percentage of dyed-in-the-wool bigots within in the Protestant community would soon become of little importance[108]. Finally, Blythe optimistically states that, 'the six-county Protestants would develop a different attitude once they felt they were no longer under threat of coercion which in the past has compelled them to snuggle up with Britain'[109].

Therefore, southern irredentism was largely responsible for the siege mentality that had been the characteristic of the Ulster Unionists; people

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[105] Blythe, 'Appeal to leaders of nationalist opinion in the North,' 22.
[106] Ibid., 22.
[107] Kennedy, *The Widening Gulf: Northern Attitudes to the independent Irish state 1919-49,* 224.
[108] Blythe, 'Appeal to leaders of nationalist opinion in the North,' 23.
[109] Ibid., 25.

who were petrified of being absorbed within the Free State and, doubtful of British will-power to resist the southern dissidents.

6.9 Blythe 'reframes' the problem of partition

In 'Appeal to the Leaders of nationalist opinion in the North', Blythe acknowledges that:

> Thirty-five years ago the idea of using armed force or economic pressure to compel the Protestants of the six-counties to submit, against their will, to the authority of Dáil Éireann was to a greater or lesser extent accepted by almost all Irish nationalists, and that was the source of innumerable blunders[110].

He was sympathetic to the reasons why this impolitic mind-set was favoured by most of the population who, being unable to grasp fully that partition was a *fait accompli*, resulted in their inability to accept the inevitability of the constitutional and political fall-out of partition:

> At the beginning, many people were unable fully to realise that partition had actually become an accomplished fact, and were, therefore unwilling to accept the inevitable constitutional and other consequences of partition. So little was it realised that the border was at last established, and firmly established, that the even more foolish notion that the six-counties government might be eliminated or effectively thwarted by civil resistance; that partition represented a new crime against Ireland by the British authorities and, that it might be undone quickly and by force[111].

For example, Blythe castigated nationalist claims that the 1937 Constitution was an all-Ireland constitution and capable of making the tri-colour an all-Ireland flag:

> The indefensible contention that the tri-colour is already an All-Ireland flag, has led to its being flaunted by six-counties nationalists on their own side of the border in a way only calculated to make it a bone of contention, and hateful to many, and possible to cause the northern majority of a future day to argue, when negotiations for national re-union ultimately take place that a new non-contentious national flag ought to be chosen for the new All-Ireland State[112].

Instead, Blythe's advice to the northern nationalists would surely have been a bridge too far when he advocated that they 'toast the Queen and not feel provoked by the Union Jack'[113]. Following on from a partition debate in Armagh, *c* February 1954, Mr. J. Slevin, although concurring with Blythe's sentiments on partition in general, had this to say regarding Blythe's scheme:

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[110] Ibid., 9.
[111] Ibid., 9.
[112] Ibid., 10.
[113] Ó Corráin, 'Ireland in his heart north and south: the contribution of Ernest Blythe to the partition question,' 74.

> It is madness I agree to push the tri-colour here as is provocatively done. I am prepared to allow the Unionists their flags and sashes for as long as they want to wear them. But I disagree profoundly with your suggestion that I should take a willing, even if a coldly reserved part in saluting the Union Jack or the national anthem. You have a great advantage over us in this matter. You know and understand and, I think probably sympathize with your Protestant countrymen of the north. I believe you love them, and, you have also so steeped yourself in our way of life that you are completely one of us. See us as we are and try to modify at least this suggested approach. In the meantime, I hope you will continue your campaign for a different approach. In general, you are right and, your influence in the north will grow if you actively pursue this purpose[114].

Blythe, in his reply, stated he was not attaching overwhelming importance to the business of sharing the feelings of Unionists in connection with the Union Jack or toasts to British royalty:

> The points about which I have written are only minor matters of tactics and perhaps a good deal of the effect which I am anxious to get could be obtained in other ways. The only thing that I would now add is that I am dealing only with one side of the matter when I say that I think it important, as long as the politico-religious dividing line is almost complete, that Catholics should be able to act, on all mixed bodies and in all mixed companies, in such a way as to be indistinguishable from their Protestant colleagues except when it becomes a matter of parting company to attend different churches or when some problem directly posing a religious question arises such as the schools problem[115].

It was in Blythe's opinion vital:

> That those Protestants who were deliberating about joining the nationalist camp should see nationalist good-will in action and, most importantly, it must be understood that men can be virtuous nationalists even when in an overwhelmingly Protestant, Unionist company, they rise courteously on the playing of 'God Save the King' or, when drinking a toast to the monarchy. If we continue to insist that men are lesser nationalists if they make these gestures, we are obstructing the Protestant who is motivated to change course, by the ridiculous belief that you can't be an Irish nationalist unless you are prepared to wear a saffron kilt on St. Patrick's Day[116].

Blythe was consistent in his argument that partition owed its complicated and stubborn character to religious difference and leaders of nationalist opinion should recognize this fundamental point when laying down re-union policy:

> Leaders of nationalist opinion in the north all know that the problem of ending partition owes its complicated and stubborn character to religious difference. I urge them to put their knowledge of this crucial fact to practical use and to hasten the substitution of a realistic and consistent policy of national re-union for the ill-advised and un-coordinated activities which have been pursued for so long without the slightest indication of any prospect of success policies and which, indeed as is now clearer than ever, promise only the indefinite maintenance of a vicious circle of misrepresentation, futility, violence and repression[117].

Blythe admitted that from the start that:

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[114] UCDA, P24/1330 (1) 'Letter from J. Slevin to E. Blythe,' February 1954.
[115] UCDA, P24/1330 (4) 'Letter from E. Blythe to J. Slevin,' 24 February 1954, 1.
[116] Ibid., 2-3.
[117] Blythe, 'Appeal to leaders of Nationalist opinion in the North,' 1.

> The wrong policy was adopted by the south, and because we had had no subsequent stocktaking, almost everything we have done since 1921 in our efforts to abolish the border has actually been calculated to perpetuate it. Partition remains unmodified and unshaken after the vicissitudes of thirty-five years because politico-religious segregation continues as clear-cut as ever. As long as, practically speaking, all Protestants in the six counties are convinced and determined partitionists, the present position will remain unaltered and unalterable[118].

Blythe censures these nationalists who:

> In the northern parliament their habit of sneering and jeering and, their too-often factious opposition to the Stormont government, which is democratically based on a strong local majority, only help to strengthen Protestant support of the Unionist ministers. Their principal object is to carry on a conventional and rather cynical party game, as if there were no special problem to be solved in the six-counties and, no chronic breach to be healed[119].

6.10 Blythe's counsel of perfection: A bridge too far for some nationalists?

Ernest Blythe suggested that, 'there should be no anti-partition party at Stormont until there can be established a national or re-union party of which a third would be Protestants; a party which will draw at least a third of its electoral support from Protestant voters - for Protestant members of parliament elected entirely by Catholics could be of no use in relation to partition'[120]. Blythe, re-enforcing his argument, issued the following advice to the nationalist leaders. 'Until the arrival of such a situation where there is a religiously-combined party elected, Catholic voters who wish to see an end to futile policies, should either abstain from voting or, give their vote to the labour candidates; for the farmers party or, for some other mildly Protestant political groupings without having them favour any opinion, good or bad, towards partition'[121].

Blythe believed that this approach, 'by spreading the Catholics among varying parties, not strongly catholic, will the northern Protestants split up, form naturalized political groupings which will in time, begin to solicit the support of the wider electorate wherever it can be got'[122]. Blythe then proposed that, 'Henceforward as far as possible, Catholics who are elected

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[118] Ibid., 1.
[119] Ibid., 3.
[120] Ibid., 3.
[121] Ibid., 4.
[122] Ibid., 4.

to local boards should be elected not a Catholics nor, for the present, even as anti-partitionists, in which capacity, whether they wished it or not they would be instrumental in prolonging politico-religious segregation. Instead, they should be elected as Trade Unionists or ratepayers or farmers or even progressive or rate-saving Independents'[123].

Cahir Healy, Nationalist M.P for Fermanagh at Stormont in 1925, was not in favour of Blythe's scheme which he criticised in an article entitled 'Mr Blyth and Partition'. Healy reminded Blythe that:

> He had been a long time out of the Six-Counties. Had Blythe forgotten that at one time he was prepared to let 'oceans of blood flow, sooner than that partition should continue for one hour'. I think, somehow, as one who has always lived in the north, that Mr. Blyth had a keener appreciation of the realities than he has now, with so many years residence in and so many interests on the other side of the Border. Mr Blyth forgets, conveniently, that the abstention policy which he now suggests as a panacea, can be completely upset by eight voters in any constituency. Upon a foundation so flimsy as this is the new policy laid. And then, after perhaps an interval of fifty years, when they are no longer in a majority anywhere, the Catholics might return to the Northern Parliament in the guise of 'Labour Members or Members of the Farmers Party[124].

In 1957, Healy is still remonstrating with Blythe on this issue:

> My difficulty is in accepting your theory as to the transference of a nationalist representation at Stormont into a labour one, is that I believe the Unionists would prefer the first state to the second. Stormont began with a fair representation of labour. It has entirely vanished. You can guess why. Farmers are in the majority here and I can never see them, Catholic or Protestant, voting for labour. I agree with you that the partition problem had best be soft pedalled for a considerable time. If it ceased to be a political issue the present tension would cease and, our people would fare better in housing and employment up here. But surely this will inevitably give rise to the growth of a republican party in the twenty-six counties which would attract youth both here and there. The Irish in the USA are running balls, dances, and collections to aid the IRA incursions. I agree with you that partition is not now a concern of England, if it ever was. The real opposition to a united Ireland is in the six-counties. If a majority here wanted a united Ireland, England would not stand in the way. Her liberal grants however today, makes partition work[125].

Blythe now ordered those nationalists who were prepared to work honestly to bring an end to partition as opposed to simply obstructing the Unionists, 'should shift their nationalist desire and determination from the political to the cultural arena and work there with greater industry for basic Irish nationality, the lack of which is the cause of our political weakness'[126].

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[123] Ibid., 24.
[124] Public Records of Northern Ireland (PRONI) D2991/B/50/2, Article by Cahir Healy entitled 'Mr. Blyth and Partition,' October 1938, 1-2.
[125] PRONI, D2991/B/50/6, Letter from Cahir Healy to Ernest Blythe re 'Appeal to Nationalist Leaders in the North,' 7 June 1957.
[126] Blythe, 'Appeal to Leaders of Nationalist Opinion in the North,' 4-5.

Blythe's controversial proposals were based on the knowledge that the existing nationalist party had failed, politically, economically and socially. Although always at a disadvantage as a minority at Stormont, they had failed to stand up to the Unionist party, for example, on issues of housing, employment and the gerrymandering of electoral boundaries. 'Ultimately committed, at least in theory, to the achievement of an autonomous united Ireland, they refused to act as an official opposition and in the 1930's periodically withdrew from the house. When in Parliament, most nationalists contented themselves with denunciations of government and with moving either the rejection of government measures or wrecking amendments cutting across the principle of such measures'[127]. This behaviour appears to stem from the nationalist's experience during the 1921 partition election. Senator Joe Connolly states:

> For us Catholics who experienced that particular six-county election campaign, it will remain in our minds forever. The combined force of police, Orange hooligans and all those involved in the election campaign was put into action to make it well nigh impossible for Sinn Féiners or nationalists to vote; the non-Unionist voter risked life and limb if he or she tried to get to the polling booth[128].

Connolly voices the hopelessness of the nationalists when he says:

> For the inhabitants of Belfast and the six-counties, who believed in an un-partitioned, free Ireland, the partition election was hard to accept. We were strangers in our own land at the mercy of a narrow-minded ruling class, whose entire history was one of belligerence and sectarianism towards everything we held dear and, we would soon feel the lash[129].

Blythe was not totally insensitive to the difficulties involved in the working out of his solutions to partition for these persecuted nationalists. However, he offered them little in the way of hope for the immediate future by stating that, 'a policy of persuasion will take time to bear fruit, so northern nationalists will have to get used to the idea that the dissolution of the Stormont regime or even any reduction of their powers is pointless'[130].

Blythe, looking towards the future, pointed out that even before the Ulster Protestants could accept the authority of Dáil Éireann, 'They would need the assurance, which could only be adequately guaranteed by a new

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[127] Buckland, *The Factory of Grievances, Devolved Government in Northern Ireland 1921-39*, 35.
[128] J. Connolly, *Memoirs of Senator Joseph Connolly-A Founder of Modern Ireland* (Irish Academic Press, Dublin, 1996), 195.
[129] Ibid., 195.
[130] Blythe, 'Appeal to Leaders of Nationalist Opinion in the North,' 6.

agreed constitution, of the continuance of a local parliament and government with powers over education, marriage laws, censorship and other matters in regard to which difference of religion might make them desirous of having different legislation'[131].

6.11 Ernest Blythe's 'new departure'

Ernest Blythe's theories on partition had evolved considerably since he first spoke in the Dáil in 1919, subtly recommending the use of coercion against north-east Ulster. In an article in the *Newtownards Chronicle* of 7 January 1922, Blythe is quoted in a Dáil debate stating that he was in favour of the Treaty. Referring to Ulster he said, 'he believed they (the Free State) had the right to coerce Ulster provided they had the power to do so. But he thought they could not convert and coerce them at the same time. They should not have the threat of coercion over them all the time. He had no doubt that the terms of the Treaty would lead in a short time to Ulster joining the rest of Ireland'[132]. Blythe now proposed a 'counsel of persuasion' as the only means by which Ulster's Protestants could be won over to the idea of Irish unity. Writing in *Hibernia*, Blythe stated that the existing nationalist party:

> Was thoroughly useless, antiquated and its mere presence in the state of affairs currently abroad in Northern Ireland is questionable and, because it is a party with a sectarian basis it is therefore a champion of the divisions which created partition and, which still sustains it[133].

Blythe, writing in 'Appeal to Leaders of Nationalist Opinion in the North':

> Advised the nationalists to launch immediately an entirely 'New Departure' in the bid to end partition; reminding them that at one time large numbers of Protestants were willing to fight for Irish freedom and, that down through the generations, Irish Protestants have, in spite of nationalist coercion come to her rescue; who then will argue that the assimilation of a large number of Protestants to Irish nationalism is unnatural and therefore inconceivable[134].

Blythe did not under-estimate the difficulties which his New Departure and its accompanying change of policy would impose on northern nationalists with long and bitter experience of Unionist sectarianism. For example:

> In the summer of 1920, Belfast in particular experienced large-scale riots, where, as so often in the past, the Catholic workers in the shipyards were driven out of their jobs, and in the course of that year, 11,000 were forced to leave their jobs. Between July 1920 and

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[131] Ibid., 6.
[132] "Former Newtownards Man Supports the Treaty," *Newtownards Chronicle*, 7 January 1922, 5.
[133] "Recognizing the Northern State," *Hibernia*, October 1962, 8.
[134] Blythe, 'Appeal to Leaders of Nationalist opinion in the North,' 28-29.

> June 1922, 455 people were killed in Belfast; 58% of these were Catholics, while Catholics numbered only 24% of the city's population; these attacks on Catholics represented in part, Unionist Ulster's response to the IRA's campaign in the South[135].

Blythe's prediction that Catholics would be exterminated by a Protestant backlash was prescient and sheds light on his urgency in bringing Collins' earlier northern campaign to an end to prevent Catholic slaughter. However, he appeared to be less than sympathetic towards their predicament when he alluded to:

> The discrimination which grieves and hurts northern Catholics, a condition which they are unwilling to grasp as being the result of their own misinformed opinions and behaviour; therefore it is the understandable intention of many to continue the contest with the Orangemen along the same lines as in the past, a contest which has long since taken on the characteristics of an absurd faction-fight. It will require enthusiasm and great effort on the part of the northern nationalists to take on board a wise and realistic vision of the possible avenues to success which need to followed if they are to achieve national re-union; a course of action which can be easily adopted once they re-examine the problem[136].

Blythe suggested it might be necessary to hurry things along by persuading the leaders of the AOH that it is not in the best interests of the northern Catholics and harmful to the cause of Irish re-union to have them involved in political matters. According to Blythe, having the AOH in politics only helps maintain the vigorousness of the Orange Order (OO)[137]. William. O'Brien, writing in *An Phoblacht* supported Blythe's viewpoint:

> The Hibs added fresh fuel to the flame of Orange fanaticism by subjecting the national movement to new ascendency, that of a sham Catholic secret society, with the result of changing the tepid suspicions of the most level-headed of the Episcopalian and Presbyterian farmers and shopkeepers into sheer terror for the future of their children and themselves in an Hibernian-ridden Ireland. O'Brien quotes James Connolly who stated that were it not for the existence of the Board of Erin the Orange Society would long since have ceased to exist. To Brother Devlin, and not to Brother Carson, is mainly the due of the Covenanter movement of Ulster[138].

Blythe stated that to end coercion, 'a large proportion of northern Catholics should work to implement a policy of persuasion and to work in unison for favourable results'[139]. His view was 'those nationalists who took a prudent view of partition coupled with a reassessment of their own responsibilities, would be in a position to disable the coercionist policy by always putting forward a non-coercionist candidate of their own; by supporting a labour

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[135] M. Laffin, *The Partition of Ireland* (Dundalgan Press, Dundalk, 1983), 76.
[136] Blythe, 'Appeal to Leaders of Nationalist Opinion in the North,' 29.
[137] Ibid., 32.
[138] "Facts about the Hibs," *An Phoblacht*, 22 July 1927 (new series), Vol 2, No 12, 2.
[139] Blythe, 'To Leaders of National opinion in the North,' 33.

candidate if one could be cajoled to step-up to the plate; by voiding their votes or, simply refusing to go to the polling booths at all'[140]. Therefore, according to Blythe, by refusing to have nothing to do with voting for the coercionists or the militarists in the areas which they were guaranteed to win, the 'whole idea of coercion will be seriously punctured'[141].

Blythe's policy was that of the ballot box over the bomb, a political strategy which brought an end to the recent troubles in the north. Urging that for all those who saw, after thirty five fruitless years, the futility and folly of coercion, 'it ought not to be a matter of waiting for the crowd, but of immediate personal or minor group action, particularly in view of the circumstances, personal or minor group action can be effective and can lead on to a mass decision'[142]. To obtain the desired outcome of re-unification, Blythe advised the nationalists that all propaganda and work facilitating the removal of partition should remain on the sidelines of electioneering politics for a period of twelve years; (he gives no explanation for choosing twelve years):

> Nationalist patriotic endeavour should be aimed in its entirety to the urgent task of strengthening Irish passion and opinion in all sections of the population and, towards the enrichment of Irish culture and nationality, particularly in the six-counties. This can be done by nationalists becoming more fully involved in the Irish language, music, games and history, being aware of the fact that just as barren nationalism without a cultural base, led to modern politics, religious segregation and partition, so until such time as there is formed an adequate cultural base for a brand of Irish nationalism which appeals to both Catholics and Protestants is instigated, Irish reunion in freedom will remain for the foreseeable future an unattainable fantasy and, Protestants who believe that behind the call for Irish independence is nothing more than a move to have a Catholic parliament, will never be swayed to relinquish their support for partition[143].

Blythe's problems with nationalists accepting his solutions to partition were being compounded by the views of ultra-republican Eamon de Valera who claimed that Ireland was one nation, homogeneous Ulster did not exist and Ireland was too small to be partitioned. In complete contrast to Blythe, de Valera did not weigh religion as a factor of any significance in the political differences between Ulster unionists and Irish nationalists. According to de Valera it was 'a rack on the pegs of which England exhibits Ireland's political differences before the world. It was an insult, nonsense, an

[140] Ibid., 33.
[141] Ibid., 33.
[142] Ibid., 34.
[143] Ibid., 35.

imposition on human incredulity to so distort the facts as to charge the Irish question with being purely a religious issue'[144].

Again, in contradiction to Blythe, de Valera discounted the strength of Ulster Unionists obstinacy, believing instead in their impending conversion to his argument. 'He constantly emphasised the high proportion of nationalist leaders who had been Protestant, mentioning Robert Barton and Ernest Blythe as contemporaries of his own'[145]. However, he left Ulster Protestants in no doubt as to how he viewed their claim to self-determination:

> Self-determination, if it is not going to be reduced to an absurdity, has to be restricted to some unit and that unit chosen was the nation, and therefore it is not right to say that we are denying self-determination to the people of Northern Ireland. We give them the right to vote as citizens of the Irish nation as to how they are to be governed *but* we cannot recognize as a nation that which has not even a hypothetical existence, which changes from election to election, a block in the north-east which is not a homogenous block[146].

As a southerner, de Valera's comments illustrate how misinformed he was regarding the Ulster Protestant stance (particularly the role of religion), when compared with the insights of the home-spun Ulsterman, Blythe. In fact, Blythe had argued in favour of removing Articles 2 and 3 from de Valera's Irish Constitution which claimed de jure jurisdiction over Northern Ireland for the Dublin based government. On the Lemass All-Party Committee review of the 1937 Constitution held in 1966, Blythe felt that the committee had been too cautious with regards to Articles 2 and 3. Blythe, who knew that these articles were a *bête noire* to the Ulster Protestants and a major obstacle to the progress of meaningful dialogue between Dublin and Belfast, was vindicated when these articles were removed from the Irish constitution as a result of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

6.12 Blythe's pioneering and influential contributions to solving the partition problem

During the decades following partition, works were published on the subject by various writers. Blythe's work is original and stands out as having moved away from the traditionalist

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[144] J. Bowman. "de Valera on Ulster, 1910-20, What he told America," *Irish International Affairs*, Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1979, 8-11.
[145] Ibid., 9.
[146] Ibid., 8-11.

assessments and, for the first time, recommending a solution to the problem.

In 1936, O'Brien wrote '*Four Green Fields'* where he traced the blame for partition back to the plantation era. In 1946, O'Neill wrote '*The Partition of Ireland - How and Why it was Accomplished'*; in 1957, Gallaher wrote the anti-partitionist classic '*The Divided Island'* echoing de Valera's stance. In 1955 Sheehy produced '*Divided we stand'* followed in 1957 by Barrington's 'Uniting Ireland' in *Studies*. According to Ó Corráin, 'Although neither Sheehy nor Barrington made any references to Blythe, there was little in their assessments which had not previously been discussed or alluded to by him. In that light, Blythe's contribution must be regarded as both pioneering and influential'[147]. Blythe, in common with Sheehy and Barrington, 'sought to reconsider the underlying causes of partition, though they differed in emphasis and terminology. While still adhering to the central tenet of Irish nationalism, a united Ireland, Blythe went further by suggesting ways and means to resolving the issue; Blythe's solutions turned traditional nationalist orthodoxy on its head'[148]. These works, written in the late 1940s and 50s were at least two decades after Blythe had begun his work on the subject in 1921. In 1957/58 Blythe compiled 'Half-way through no-man's land', a highly confidential memorandum on an alternative way out of the quagmire of partition. Irritated by the simplistic notions entertained by the public about what ought to be regarded by the six-counties authorities as inducements to abandon partition, Blythe succinctly arrived at the nub of the problem by stating that:

> The main reason for our unrealistic outlook is that we generally fail to remember (if we have ever been aware) that while we in nationalist circles think of Irish reunion in terms of the six-counties joining the republic, with or without a subordinate parliament, the ordinary six-counties Protestant thinks of Irish reunion only in terms of the twenty-six counties re-joining the United Kingdom[149]

Blythe's brusque dismissal of some issues of concern to the nationalist minority attracted criticism on both sides of the border. Healy was astonished that Blythe did not condemn discrimination in the allocation of

[147] Ó Corráin, 'Ireland in his heart north and south-the contribution of Ernest Blythe to the partition question,' 62.
[148] Ibid., 62.
[149] UCDA, P24/1402 (b) E. Blythe, 'Half-Way through No Man's Land,' 1.

housing, public appointments and employment. Sean Lemass, writing to Blythe in 1962, advised him that it was:

> Too easy to find fault with the attitude of northern nationalists. It would be expecting far too much of human nature not to expect them to express their resentment of their second-class status, and their desire to end it in the only way which at present seems possible by destroying those whose policy it is to sustain it. If the northern government had ever shown any disposition to want to treat them otherwise the position might have developed differently[150].

By the early 1960s, the idea of religious fault-lines had gained greater recognition. Lemass, having had a rethink of Blythe's stance, wrote him:

> The religious basis of the division amongst our people is, I believe, being more widely understood by everyone who is giving it serious consideration, and the need, because of it, of maintaining a separate parliament in the north-east, with powers equivalent to those now exercised at Stormont, has I think been generally agreed[151].

This support from Lemass was a vindication of Blythe's tireless efforts, 'to force a reappraisal of the causes and consequences of partition'[152]. For Blythe, the importance of persuasion over coercion, the need to understand the religious and political fears of the Ulster Protestants and, the necessity to obtain their consent before altering the border, were the essential ingredients of any plans or policies if partition was to end.

Blythe's memoranda and writing's on partition overlap and are on occasion repetitive but the essence of each one is the same; that religious difference was central to the reason for partition, the non-consenting northern Protestants were the ultimate barrier to its resolution and, that both a policy of persuasion and cultural regeneration was vital if partition was ever to end. Blythe welcomed the political *détente* in north-south relations brought about through the historic meeting between Lemass and O'Neill in 1965; a meeting which Blythe hailed as 'breakthrough to commonsense'[153]. He had little to say about the Civil Rights Movement. He believed that resorting to Britain as an umpire would achieve civil rights for Catholics but at the price of reinforcing partition:

> Outside pressure upon Protestants will only increase their determination to hold on by various methods, to all that remains within their power. The present campaign in the north may obtain Catholic civil rights just as they might have been obtained fifteen

[150] UCDA P24/1421, (Letter) 'S. Lemass to E. Blythe, questioning Blythe's posture on nationalists recognizing the Stormont government,' 7 December 1962.
[151] Ibid. 7 December 1962.
[152] Ó Corráin, 'Ireland in his heart, north and south-the contribution of Ernest Blythe to the partition question,' 78.
[153] Ibid., 78.

> years ago, through a nationalist policy of non-coercion and non-segregation in politics, which would have brought about Catholic-Protestant co-operation, but, the securing of reform by enlisting British help, will probably work to maintain political-sectarian division strengthening partition for a further period[154].
>
> We should realize above all that in the stalemate position at which we have now arrived, spiritual reconciliation between the two parts of Ireland is what is really important, and that any such reconciliation must be achieved before and well before there can be any question of political or institutional change155.

The Ulster Protestant Unionists would however be a tougher nut to crack than even Blythe imagined. Metaphysical and spiritual help would have little impact on the hardened Unionist attitudes as the following statement by a member of the new northern parliament in 1921 highlights:

> It is because we know the antecedents of these men who would control an all-Ireland parliament. If our objections were strong in 1912, they are a thousand-fold stronger today. From 1916 onwards we have seen Sinn Féin in all its ugliness, and much as we disliked the old Nationalist party and the old Nationalist methods, we dislike Sinn Féin more, and we have no more intention of placing our liberties under a Dublin parliament than we have of placing them under Ali Baba and his forty thieves[156].

Mac Inerney states that:

> Blythe was known for his independent thinking about the north and, today more and more people are swinging round to his 'despised cause' of 'the inevitability of gradualness'; the winning of peace and reconciliation first, and then to allow that to evolve in its own way. If it is said that we failed to use the resources of the state in the early formative years to win friendship between communities in the north, and between the north and south, then one of the very few men who could not be criticised for failing to understand the issues in the north is Ernest Blythe[157].

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[154] UCDA, P24/1881, Blythe commenst on the repercussions of the Civil Rights campaign, 'Politicians and the Ulster Question,' (late 1960's), 10.
[155] T. Neill, "Ernest Blythe-The Man from Maghergall," *Lisburn Historical Society*, 2, part, 4, December 1979.
[156] Kennedy, *The Widening Gulf: Northern attitudes to the independent Irish state 1919-1949*, 33.
[157] M. Mac Inerney, "Ernest Blythe-A Political Profile" *Irish Times*, 30 December 1974.

Chapter 7

Ernest Blythe through the prism of the Irish language

"Beidh an lae amarach go ro-mhall - tomorrow will be too late"

7.1 Introduction

The theme of this chapter is the Irish language and Ernest Blythe, 'whose interest in the language as the vernacular, became a lifelong, passionate commitment'[1]. Blythe's personal encounter with the language began during his childhood in County Antrim, in an area where the Ulster-Scots dialect was prevalent. Blythe had no idea that another language existed. Ó Gadhra, states that, 'the most interesting thing about Blythe's youth was his amazing ignorance of the Gaelic, Catholic heritage that prevailed in his own area and the casual way in which he came to realize that Ireland had a language of its own'[2].

Blythe became a devotee of the Gaelic tongue and to witness its decline struck at the core of his being. What measures would he employ as a government minister to halt its further demise? Why was the Irish language so important to Blythe given that he had not been reared or schooled in that medium? At what point in Blythe's life would a childish interest in Irish become translated into a life-long passionate commitment? What influence did the language have on Blythe's political convictions? Could he jolt the Irish people out of their apathy and show them that the heritage of their country, the Gaelic language, was on the verge of extinction?

> A free man speaks his own language. Human, personal speech comes out of his mouth. How many can say, truthfully, "I speak my own language, not a language borrowed from the newspapers, or some academy or Talmud, but the common language of man as

[1] P. Buckley, 'Blythe, Ernest (de Blaghd, Earnán (1889-1975),' *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, Vol. 1, Royal Irish Academy, Cambridge University Press, 616.
[2] N. Ó Gadhra, 'Appreciation, Earnán de Blaghd, 1889-1975,' *Éire-Ireland*, Vol. 11, 1976, 94.

> the nobles of the race wrought it - though moulded, of course, by me in my own manner. Brothers, we must speak a language which people will cling to in their own interest - because life itself can be heard and felt in it. This is the beginning and end of our revolution[3].

7.2 The Irish language, the Gaelic League and Ernest Blythe

In 1893 the GL came into being and it was to become the most identifiable and long-standing supporter of the Irish language originating in the nineteenth century[4]. Its main objective was to keep the language spoken in Ireland; spreading countrywide the League enrolled thousands of students for its classes. Fennell states that, 'it was not against English, the noble language of Shakespeare and the King James Bible, the language of Milton and Lalor, Ruskin, Yeats and Pearse, but against the vulgar gombeen mind triumphantly incarnate in English at the end of the nineteenth century, that the Gaelic League rebelled'[5]. According to O'Callaghan,'in identifying the Irish language with Irish nationality in the popular mind, the GL had done much to strengthen that sense of nationality - it provided a psychological crutch for the culturally insecure'[6].

What was Blythe's verdict on the GL as a vehicle for Irish language rejuvenation? Blythe's view was that it was unsuccessful in making large numbers of fluent Irish speakers at its classes. He believed its success lay in convincing the Irish people, that the language ought to be preserved but, through the political organisations it influenced rather than permit the teaching of Irish for an hour a day, per week, in schools. Blythe 'demanded that the GL should be as much against English as for Irish; the country must be relieved as quickly as possible from the degradation of having a foreign tongue spoken as the vernacular on its soil'[7]. 'It gradually became apparent to the more thoughtful and earnest members of the Gaelic League that

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[3] D. Fennell, *Beyond Nationalism: The Struggle against Provinciality in the Modern World* (Ward River Press, Dublin, 1985), 79-80.
[4] Wolf, *An Irish-Speaking Island, State, Religion, Community and the Linguistic Landscape in Ireland, 1770-1870*, 8-9.
[5] Fennell, *Beyond Nationalism: The Struggle against Provinciality in the Modern World*, 80.
[6] O'Callaghan, 'Language and Religion: The quest for identity in the Irish Free State 1922-32', 155.
[7] M. Laffan, *The Resurrection of Ireland: The Sinn Féin Party 1916-1923* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999), 235.

unless Ireland speedily secured some measure of national freedom, the language could not be saved. The uncompromising Sinn Féin political movement and the military "Volunteer" movement were largely recruited from the Gaelic League and might have been described as off-shoots of it'[8].

What was Blythe's experience of the GL? Was he in a position to make a value judgement regarding its worth as a medium for the preservation of Irish? When Blythe arrived in Dublin in 1904 the GL was in its heyday with around nine hundred branches. He states that during the four years he was in Dublin he gave up all his free time to Conradh and political work. After a short period, he was promoted onto the Ard-Craobh Committee (High Branch of Conradh na Gaeilge), becoming a delegate from the Ard-Craobh on Dublin Council. He spent a short time teaching in the Bun Rang (Beginners Class) but didn't feel suitably qualified to teach Irish at the time. Blythe states that it was the tradition to put people with little knowledge of Irish to teaching those who had none.

Blythe next spent a year in the Kerry Gaeltacht experiencing at close quarters the extent to which Irish was dying out in the Gaeltacht. In summing up his view of the health of the language in Kerry, Blythe stated that the GL had failed to make an effective contribution to the survival and renewal of Irish in the Gaeltacht areas. In 1914 Blythe announced that spending one year living in the Gaeltacht had led him to the conclusion that the League had been a failure; that the typical Gaeltacht farmer or fisherman who spoke in Irish to his offspring would have done so without a language movement. He claimed that in the small percentage of homes where Irish was used with regularity because of the GL were professionals such as teachers[9].

To say that Blythe was despondent by what he had witnessed in Kerry is an understatement. Why was he so obsessed with holding on to the Irish language? What did it mean to him personally that the language should not die out? Firstly, Blythe's new cultural identity as an Irish-Irelander as

[8] UCDA, P24/1902, 'Blythe's thoughts on the Irish Language and the Gaelic League,' 5-6-7.
[9] R. Hindley, *The Death of the Irish Language-A Qualified Obituary* (Routledge, London, 1990), 28.

opposed to Unionist-Britisher had its roots in the Irish language. Secondly, he believed that because the Irish language was overtly non-political it was something that both Catholics and Protestants could share. Thirdly, Blythe's was a cultural nationalism as opposed to a Catholic nationalism which was the source of his antipathy towards O'Connell. Finally, for Blythe, the Irish language as the symbol of Irish identity was vital to resolving the religious conflict in his homeland of Ulster, where identity and religion were intertwined. 'Blythe's passionate commitment to the promotion of the Irish language was central to the nationalism which he adopted as young man and persevered with throughout his life'[10]. It was also what Laffan described as 'linguistic nationalism'. 'In so far as SF had an ideology and wished to transform Ireland and the Irish people, its ideology was linguistic nationalism. The country would manifest its independence by changing its language for a second time and by reverting to Irish as its vernacular tongue'[11].

Would Blythe with his desire for language preservation be content with what he considered the GL's obvious failure? Why had the League failed to maintain its earlier impetus? Blythe associated this failure with, 'the apparent coming of Home Rule and an Irish government between 1913-14 which had made the language work seem a less urgent obligation on the individual citizen'[12]. Knowing Blythe, he would not be happy paying mere lip-service to the Irish revival. What steps would he take to rectify the situation? Could he do any better than the GL in preserving Irish? He obviously believed so. Blythe's thoughts were now moving towards more focused action the like of which had not been contemplated before in Ireland in respect of the language. He was planning, not only the demise of the GL, but the coming into existence of his own method of language revival.

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[10] Buckley, 'Blythe, Ernest, (de Blaghd, Earnán),' DIB, Vol. 1, 616.
[11] Laffan, *The Resurrection of Ireland: The Sinn Féin Party 1916-1923*, 236.
[12] Hindley, *The Death of the Irish language*, 40.

7.3 Broken glass cannot be mended: In God's name let us off with our coats!

When Blythe was in County Kerry learning Irish, he had undergone an epiphany in which he saw himself as the founder of a new organisation which could become the salvation of the Irish language. In his nine-page treatise, Blythe denounced the GL as having failed absolutely; its results were mediocre; it had nowhere checked the spread of English or arrested the decay of Irish. There was nothing of any value to show for the work of the past twenty years. The truth was the work of the League had been purely preparatory. Having carefully observed the influences at work against the language and after a year's constant thought amid the realities of an Irish-speaking district, Blythe was convinced that the GL would never be capable of initiating and carrying on a real movement for the preservation and revival of the Irish language. He believed that although it would be difficult, a new organisation had to be established urgently:

> The language cannot wait a long time; it decays with an ever-increasing rapidity. The Gaelic League is slowly dying and if we wait many years we shall lose advantage of all its preparatory work. Even the lessons which the census returns of 1911 forced even upon many stupid and lazy brains will soon be forgotten and treated as antiquated and inapplicable. If the Irish language be lost the Irish nation is lost. Now is the time to begin to save and spread it. In God's name let us off with our coats![13]

In his 'facts to be considered-conditions to be observed' section, Blythe states that, 'The language is to be saved only in the Gaelic-speaking districts. I believe no crowd in the Gaedhealtacht will ever be properly stirred till a man arises who can truthfully say, Níor labhras aon fhocal Bearla anois le cúig bliadhna[14]. [I haven't spoken a word of English for five years]

Blythe, in laying out his vision for the future of Irish stated that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church; and the blood of Wolf Tone and his fellows had kept the hope of Irish freedom alive and powerful. There were no martyrs for the Irish language but the conduct by men who were making huge and undeniable sacrifices for the cause, would do much to

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[13] UCDA, P24/1899 (b), E. de Blaghd, '*The Salvation of the Irish Language and The Organisation and New Movement which is Necessary*,' 2-3.
[14] Ibid., 3.

supply the place of martyrs. Blythe had ideas of Irishmen willing to live a frugal and celibate life for the language when he was in Kerry:

> The people up to the present have divided and rightly divided those engaged in the language movement into two classes - those who took part in it as an intellectual hobby and pastime and, those who hoped to get fees and jobs out of it. If we make sufficient sacrifices, we will quickly convince them of our honesty and earnestness which will be a great gain. Unless we create a real public opinion in favour of preserving Irish as a living vernacular, habitually spoken language, the schools will merely preserve it as Latin was for some centuries preserved - a corpse galvanised into some activity but, still as dead as a door nail[15].

Blythe's organisation was to be inclusive of not only the Irish language, but of the political, intellectual and economic freedom of Ireland and the ideals of Tone and Swift. To carry out the work of the organisation, to maintain rigidly the necessary standard of personal qualifications and conduct and to secure ready co-operation in industrial undertakings, Blythe's formula would be difficult even to adhere to:

> The organisation must be under discipline as strict, and control as centralised, as an army of soldiers or an order of priests. Submission to discipline and obedience to control will be part of the sacrifice demanded of its members. The organisation I design shall carry on written and spoken propaganda, conduct schools and class, publish books and newspapers, run theatres and picture shows, fight elections, establish, assist and carry on industries and do all things necessary for the preservation of the Irish Language[16].

Blythe's community would be structured around members and associates for whom Blythe had drawn up different rules. Associates would financially and otherwise support the organisation, communicate in Irish only with the members of the organisation and raise their children as Irish speakers. The members had to be as fanatical about Irish revival as Blythe; by making a vow that they would not leave the organisation within the first five years except for grave, conscientious objections. They also had to swear never to speak English to fellow members of the organisation or its associates. Blythe's members:

> Were required to place all their time and money unreservedly at the disposal of the organisation with this exception that members employed outside the organisation who have relatives dependent upon them shall be permitted to withhold a sufficient portion of their own earnings to fulfil their responsibilities in this respect. No member shall have a private purse but shall apply to the treasurer or other appointed officer for money for their day to day requirements. On no account can the contributed funds of the organisation go towards the support of dependents or for any other purpose but supplying the absolute necessities of active forces of the language, save in some very exceptional circumstances there shall be no solitary or isolated members of the

[15] Ibid., 4-5.
[16] Ibid., 5-6.

> organisation, but all shall live in community. All shall conform to rule as to dietary and clothing etc. and shall abstain from intoxicating liquor[17].

Where within Ireland did Blythe hope to find such hard-core revivalists? Were there other men willing to lead a life of sacrifice and deprivation to help build Blythe's language utopia? With the economic hardships of the era there would be very few. But Blythe believed that a handful of truly dedicated followers would and could arouse the latent instincts for the Irish language within the population; it only needed a man like himself to put them on the right path.

Mindful that his men would need money, Blythe had prepared for the economic and social welfare of his commune members as part of his scheme:

> All members of the organisation who become ill or disabled, shall be supported by the organisation. No married men shall be admitted members of the organisation and, no member shall be permitted to marry for five years. At the end of five years a member engaged in any self-supporting industry or institution controlled by the organisation shall be permitted to marry and live in his own residence but, his wife must be an Irish speaker. If the earned, as apart from the contributed income of the organisation permit, the wives and children of deceased members shall be entitled to support. Except when unavoidable the organisation shall have no employees and from the first, work such as printing shall be done by members. Industries founded in the Gaedhealtacht shall be co-operative so that outsiders employed shall be partners, not servants of the organisation. Where the organisation, of necessity has employees, trade union rates will be paid[18].

No guidelines had been laid down for the selection of the head of the organisation. It is to be assumed that Blythe himself would take on that role; being the brains behind the idea he would be the obvious choice:

> The conduct of affairs of the organisation shall rest solely in the hands of the president. The president may be removed only by a two-thirds vote of the members and no member of the organisation shall be expelled by the president without the reason being stated. No associate shall have the right to interfere in the affairs of the organisation. His privileges shall be a right of audience with the resident and, a first claim on the assistance and support of the organisation in all matters coming within the scope of its work. If any of our friends desire it, I shall write in justification and explanation of any or all of the above provisions. I have given them close and constant consideration for over a year. I think they are all necessary and vital to the success of the scheme and therefore not to be altered. Good men are plentiful but sound schemes are rare. I shall not alter the scheme to please or accommodate any man…but only if I am convinced that alteration will strengthen and improve it[19].

Blythe's would announce his scheme with great fanfare as his plans for the unveiling of the organisation show. 'Although our principal work shall be done in the Gaedhealtacht our movement and organisation must be national

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[17] UCDA, P24/1899 (b), de Blaghd, '*The Salvation of the Irish language and The Organisation and New Movement which is Necessary*,' 6-7.
[18] Ibid., 7.
[19] Ibid., 7-8.

and should start in Dublin. It is to secure privately as many members as possible (it may be five or fifty) then publicly announce the formation of the organisation with a great flourish of trumpets: appeal for subscriptions and recruits and by way of starting work, print and publish a small weekly paper entirely in Irish and conduct classes, etc'[20].

Were there other examples of this type of collective movement which can be compared to Blythe's model anywhere else in the world? Yes. Blythe's new movement echoed elements of the Jewish Kibbutz system in various ways. The Kibbutz, founded in northern Israel in 1909 by a group of young Jewish immigrants was based around the Marxist principle of, 'from each according to their ability, to each according to his needs'. They dreamed of working the land and creating a new kind of community and a new kind of Jew - stronger and more rooted in the land. Instead of earning individual incomes from their labour, all money and assets on the Kibbutz were managed collectively. In keeping with the ideal of total economic equality, Kibbutz members ate together in a communal dining hall, wore the same clothes; shared child-rearing, education, cultural programmes and other social services. Also, 'they had very little discretionary spending and, made almost no personal economic choices'[21]. Did Blythe deliberately fashion his collective on the Kibbutz movement? Although research does not find any corroborating evidence to the contrary however, the similarities are very apparent:

> As soon as possible, detachments of three or four members shall be sent to suitable Irish-speaking districts where they shall in every case, build or acquire a hall of their own, give dramatic and other entertainments, hold classes, meetings and debates, sell Irish books and newspapers, and if possible engage in some industrial pursuit which will bring them into close touch with the people. In as short a time as possible members of the organisation shall be their own weavers, tailors, bootmakers, carpenters and masons. They will acquire ability to run co-operative industries which a body like the Gaelic League could only lose money on[22].

Blythe's future goal was for the organisation to eventually take over the GL which is patently obvious as he concludes his treatise with his prognosis for the League. 'The effect of the new organisation upon the Gaelic League

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[20] Ibid., 7-8.
[21] R. Gelfman Schultz, '*The Kibbutz Movement: The proud and turbulent history of Israel's experiment in communal living*,' https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-kibbutz-movement (accessed June 27, 2018).
[22] Ibid., 8-9.

may for a year or two be stimulating and beneficial, but eventually it must divert all attention from the League and leave it about as powerful and popular as the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language'[23].

Only ten copies of Blythe's treatise were printed by Foley's, Dublin. Research has not found to whom they were distributed or if anything materialised of his plans for Irish revival. His hypothetical movement appeared to remain just that, a pipe dream. Would any Gaelic enthusiast of the future come up with a plan like Blythe's? Would they be any more successful than Blythe had been in preventing the death of the native language?

In early 1969, Fennell had come up with a scheme for making south Connemara into a stable, representative Gaelic speaking community. It is interesting to note that Blythe also believed 'that the most important Gaeltacht in Ireland is Connemara'[24]. To survive as a Gaelic-speaking district, according to Fennell, it must be that. At Fennell's suggestion, Gaeilgeoirí (fluent Irish speakers) who had skills such as butchers, bakers, lawyers, engineers etc, should imitate the Jewish pioneers directly by establishing colonies in Connemara and founding a 'New Israel' there. 'A loosely structured association emerged to promote the idea of Gaeilgeorí moving from Dublin and elsewhere to the 'Gaelic frontier' in the west, to establish a 'New Israel' possibly in Kibbutz form, 'A New Israel in Iarchonnacht'[25]. Fennell hoped eventually to make the Gaeltacht area self-governing by setting out concrete proposals for its structures, units and powers. Fifty years on and, faced with problems like some of those Blythe had encountered, Fennell's 'new Iarchonnacht' flourished until 1972 when it was, according to himself overshadowed and discouraged by events in the north and the EEC Referendum. It was more likely that, as he himself admits, 'as the years passed, the movement's lack of achievement of many

[23] Ibid., 9
[24] UCDA, P24/442(1), 'Blythe and the Irish Language in Connemara,'
[25] Fennell, *Beyond Nationalism: The Struggle against Provinciality in the Modern World*, 138.

of its secondary goals, together with the rising prosperity in the Gaeltacht, lessened the numbers and enthusiasm of the activists[26].

Ernest Blythe was not a man for half-measures. He was as dedicated to language revival as he had been to the cause of freedom when he was in the IV movement. He would have been frustrated at what he perceived as the lack of energy and passion being invested in the revival. Once a project had outlived its usefulness Blythe was keen to move forward with a new idea. His zeal for language revival would not and could not be matched anywhere in the Ireland of the period; it indicates that Blythe was a visionary in terms of cutting out the dead wood of the GL and injecting the revival movement with altruistic ideas.

Were there any other dead or dying language revival movements which correlated with Blythe's ideas? Was this the first modern-day effort to rescue a language before it was too late? Research has uncovered a similar project in Israel in the early twentieth century, the brainchild of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. Blythe with his horror of Irish becoming a lost-language had much in common with Ben-Yehuda, the saviour of the Hebrew Language. Ben-Yehuda was convinced that Hebrew in a spoken form as the language of a nation was feasible and that the revival of Hebrew in Israel could unite all Jews worldwide. Blythe also believed that the Irish language could become the unifying agent to heal the sectarian divide between Catholics and Protestants in Ulster. When Yehuda came to Israel in 1881 it was believed that one of the criteria needed to define a nation worthy of national rights was its use of a common language spoken by the society and the individual. This correlates with Blythe's dictum that Irish nationality demanded the protection and dynamism provided by the native Irish language.

At the time of the Hebrew renaissance, Blythe was busy with his plans for a similar event for Gaelic but chose to put his language endeavours aside in favour of preparing for the coming revolution. The momentum was lost and, it would be an uphill struggle for Blythe to match Eliezer's accomplishments. Nevertheless, Blythe's philosophy that Irish should be taught in schools and that the family and community should be brought on

[26] Ibid., 151. [26] UCDA, P24/442(1), 'Blythe and the Irish Language in Connemara,'

board the national endeavour to save the language, was in keeping with Ben-Yehuda's work in Israel. Was Blythe aware of Ben-Yehuda's scheme and copied the Hebrew model for the Irish language? It is highly unlikely. These events took place prior to modern-day satellite communications and although they occurred within a short time-frame from each other, the physical distance and time required to get the information out of Israel to the rest of the world, including Ireland, would not have been feasible. Therefore, Blythe must be credited with being the brains behind an original Irish language revival movement which, although it did not come to fruition, is an indicator of how deeply he felt about keeping the Irish language from dying out.

7.4 Ernest Blythe in government: the task of national fence-building and the rehabilitation of the Irish language

According to O'Callaghan, the concept of Gaelicization was a revolutionary one, though it was couched in vision and images of an ideal past. For Ireland to retain its symbolic fervour, the concept of a distinctive culture unique to the island was vital:

> Gradually a group of the most conservative revolutionaries in history committed themselves to the initiation of a cultural revolution of language and sensibility. This commitment was ambiguous, uncertain, unchartered and never intellectualized. Administratively enforced as a part of the pragmatic realism of an intensely unromantic government, it was messianic, emotional and subjective in origin[27].

Ernest Blythe was the most committed Gaeilgeoir in the first cabinet of the Free State. Alongside his work in Posts and Telegraphs and his decade-long tenure as Minister for Finance, he also played an initiatory role at cabinet level in most of the original projects for the revival of the language. According to O'Callaghan, 'Blythe was not interested in the strutting posturing's of the public cult of the Gael, but in the genuine problem of trying to revivify the language and culture'[28]. To further his knowledge regarding the problems facing the state in the work to revitalize the language, Blythe maintained an on-going correspondence with various intellectuals and academics which included Daniel Binchy, Professor of

[27] O'Callaghan, '*Language and Religion: The quest for identity in the Irish Free State 1922-32*,' 125.
[28] Ibid., 166.

Roman Law and Jurisprudence in University College, Dublin, (UCD) Osborn Bergin, Professor of Early and Medieval Irish, UCD. Professors Tadgh O'Donoghue and Tómas O'Rahilly of the Irish department in University College, Cork and, Professor Liam O'Brian, University College, Galway. Blythe left no stone unturned in his quest for advice and information with which to support his language proposals in the Dáil debates.

From 1919 to 1922 the government of the Irish Republic accorded a certain position to the Irish by making it a language of ceremonial and formal procedure in Dáil Éireann. 'Haunted by the fear of Ireland being no more than a satellite of Mayfair, they sought to define their difference in a spirit of militant Gallicism'[29]. A special Ministry was set up which promoted the teaching of Irish in schools, in adult courses and by helping, through the Ministry of Local Government, to facilitate its use as far as possible both in the Irish-speaking areas and outside them[30]. Two Dáil cabinet ministers participated in this ministry; Cathal Brugha and Earnán de Blaghd were to investigate the position of the language and recommend a scheme for its preservation. Their recommendations included provisions for the advancement of teaching Irish and for co-ordinated appointments of ten district organisers assisted by parish committees; that the chairmen of the various Gaeltacht councils should be Irish speakers and that public boards elsewhere should have people who had a working knowledge of Irish on the staff so that the public might transact their business through the medium of the vernacular.

Blythe then drew the Dáil into the discussions. It would be up to the Dáil to convince the Irish speakers that in the future there would be no discrimination against them and, they would have equal opportunities with English speakers. The feelings of poverty and deprivation which dogged the use of Irish had to be removed and the best way to do that was to promote Irish speakers when jobs were available provided, they were suitable in all other areas. The Dáil needed to set a good example although it is was

[29] Ibid., 148.
[30] C. Ó Huallacháin, *The Irish Language in Society* (University of Ulster, Coleraine, 1991), 32.

realized that others, besides Irish speakers, had also given much for Irish liberty and were entitled to recognition. The Irish language could benefit through every institution, the courts and every other institution under the parliament[31].

Some of the people were not enamoured with the aims of Blythe et al. This was a discriminatory policy, according to Terence Brown, who felt that the language revival was anti Anglo-Irish and anti-Protestant. O'Callaghan argues 'that the Free State government had not conceived of the movement for Gaelicisation as a measure designed to offend the cultural sensibilities of Irishmen for whom it was not a valuable heritage'[32]. 'The new policy was particularly offensive to the members of the Church of Ireland. Many of the Church of Ireland border school schools availed of a clause in the programme of 1922, by which parents could, if a majority agreed, opt out of the necessity for compulsory Irish'[33].

The most visible symbol of being non-English was of course the Irish language and so it was high-jacked by Irish nationalism as part of Irish identity[34]. From the opening sitting of the first Dáil in 1919 eloquent lip service was paid to the language. The irony of it was that it was a language that most of its members did not speak. According to Garvin:

> Both sides on the Treaty issue were cultural revivalists, at least in rhetoric. Most leaders on both sides who knew any Irish at all possessed a 'second-hand' English-speaking knowledge of the language, often acquired after great effort. Even Patrick Pearse, half-English by parentage, learned his Irish as an adult; his native language was Dublin English. Pro-Treatyite, Eoin MacNeill knew more Irish than Eamon de Valera. Pro-Treatyites were as likely to be piously Catholic as were anti-Treatyites. Both sides were neo-Gaelic in ideology. It is true that many of the bourgeois backers of the Treaty were undoubtedly cynical about the prospects of reviving a dying culture, but it is also obvious that many Treatyites, and, pro-Treatyites knew little about the language, and used the term 'Gaelic' as a hurrah word[35].

Even W.T. Cosgrave was unable to speak Irish with any fluency. 'All cabinet minutes were kept in English only and any evidence found about the use of Irish in political administration at national level leads to the conclusion that it was minimal, apart from ceremonial, and that it depended

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[31] Ibid., 29.
[32] O'Callaghan, 'Language and Religion: the quest for identity in the Irish Free State 1922-32,' 168.
[33] Ibid., 169.
[34] R.B. Finnegan & E.T. McCarron, *Ireland: Historical Echoes, Contemporary Politics* (Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 2000), 115.
[35] T. Garvin, *1922-The Birth of Irish Democracy* (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1996), 142.

on isolated individual effort. The only exception was of course, Aireacht na Gaedhilge which was non-other than the GL under another guise'[36].

In 1923 when Professor Michael Hayes was appointed Speaker of the Dáil, William Cosgrave complimented him on his ability to conduct the business of the House in Irish. The northern newspapers were not as impressed as Cosgrave, as the *Whig* declared on 23 September 1923, 'that this was an interesting accomplishment but so far as the bulk of the members of the Dáil are concerned, Professor Hayes might make half a dozen blunders in every sentence or even discourse to the House in Armenian without any risk of being called to account'[37].

Therefore, Blythe had bragging rights over many of his government colleagues in that he had started learning Irish as a child in County Antrim, having had the Kerry Gaeltacht as his finishing school. According to Blaney:

> Having learned Irish in Dublin from Sinead Flanagan, later to marry Eamon de Valera, and from Sean O'Casey, the playwright, he (Blythe) became completely fluent in the language after a sojourn in the Kerry Gaeltacht and, he later evolved as a significant writer in Irish. The Irish language was his first love and his other activities, as an important politician, including being a cabinet minister in the Cosgrave government, and as theatre manager, were secondary. Many, especially politicians, find Irish useful for other ends but for Blythe, Irish was an end in itself[38].

An important question is, what precisely was meant by language revival? According to Ó Riagáin:

> The newly independent state in 1922 launched a broad three-pronged strategy, one element of which was to maintain Irish as a spoken language in those areas where it was still a community language. Elsewhere the objective was revival, for Irish speakers were only a tiny scattered proportion of an almost entirely English-speaking population. Accordingly, the state looked to the educational system for an increase in the numbers of Irish speakers in society. This was the 'revival' part of a strategy which contained a maintenance element as well'[39]. The difficulty of making the schools the single pillar supporting such a grand goal was lost in the dogmatic and authoritarian efforts of the language revivalists. (Enter Earnán de Blaghd) The policy ignored the lack of specialist teachers, the growth of English and the lack of reinforcement of the language at home or, in the everyday world[40].

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[36] Ó Huallacháin, *The Irish Language in Society*, 30-32.
[37] D. Kennedy, *The Widening Gulf: Northern attitudes to the independent Irish state 1919-49*, 176.
[38] R. Blaney, *Presbyterians and the Irish Language* (Ulster Historical Foundation, Belfast, 1996), 207.
[39] P. Ó Riagáin, *Language Maintenance and Language Shift as Strategies of Social Reproduction-Irish in the Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht 1926-86* (Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann, Baile átha Cliath, 1992), 3.
[40] Finnegan & McCarron, *Ireland: Historical Echoes, Contemporary Politics*, 116.

Blythe's excitement is palpable as the new government:

> Began to employ the machinery of state to reverse the process of linguistic change which went on with such rapidity throughout the nineteenth century. Irish was declared to be the national and, first official language of the State. It was decreed that Irish should be taught for at least an hour a day in all elementary schools in the country and all teachers under forty-five years of age were required to attend summer courses in Irish. And so within a month of establishment of the first regular and genuinely Irish government for centuries, a policy was inaugurated which has since been passed with gradually increasing vigour[41].

According to Blythe's one-time secretary, Leon Ó Broin, 'the principal burden for reviving the Irish language fell on education'[42]. There were enormous difficulties inherent in this scheme as outlined in 1915, by P. S. O'Hegarty:

> We were constantly told that as Irish was thrashed out of Irish children by the cane, so it can be thrashed into them. But it was not the cane, nor any sort of direct compulsion, that lost Irish. It was the fact that English had more to offer. The Irish boy in the forties was offered official life, the churches, the professions, the British Empire and America as his scope. He was offered with them one of the greatest of literatures and the key to modern civilisation and development. Irish offered him none of these things. It has practically no modern literature save school text books, it has practically no translations, its vocabulary is centuries out of date, it is not habitually used anywhere in Ireland for official, church, business or professional purposes nor, is it possible so to use it. It has no international value outside philology[43].

For language revivalists including Blythe, a policy of compulsion and imposition was used to bring about the Irish revival chiefly through the education system. The teaching establishment and the wider educational community were in no-way prepared for the job of reviving Irish[44]. Michael Hayes declared that once Irish was handed over to the Department of Education it was lost. Eoin MacNeill said that, 'you might as well be putting wooden legs on hens as trying to restore Irish through the school system'[45]. MacNeill must have experienced a sea-change as he had earlier stated that, 'the chief function of Irish educational policy is to conserve and develop Irish nationality, the core ingredient of which was the Irish language'[46]. A memorandum from MacNeill stated that the 'Ministry of Education can and

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[41] UCDA, P24/1902, 7-8, 'Blythe's comments on the measures employed by the State in relation to Irish,' (undated)
[42] L. Ó Broin, *Just Like Yesterday-An Autobiography* (Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1986), 66.
[43] Ibid., 66.
[44] Ibid., 66.
[45] Ibid., 66-67.
[46] D. H. Atkenson, *A Mirror to Kathleen's Face, Education in Independent Ireland* (McGill-Quebec University Press, Montreal & London, 1975), 39.

will Gaelicise the young people up to eighteen years, but all their efforts will be wasted if the other departments do not co-operate in keeping them Gaelicised when they leave school'[47]. Double standards and hypocrisy abounded. While the schools carried the responsibility of language revival, state leaders gave no more than lip service to the language and conducted all state business in English[48].

Blythe could not be classed a hypocrite as he was by now an Irish Gaeilgeoir, hassling all who came within his orbit to listen to his arguments, using the language at every opportunity. However, he was as insistent on thrusting Irish upon hapless Irish children, their parents and the untrained teachers as anyone else. Blythe was supported in this by fellow, T.D. Cole who said in December 1922, that, 'the situation we have today stems from the failure to educate our children in the nationalist way, and we desire to make Ireland in the future Irish speaking'[49]. According to Jones, in the early twenties, it was planned that the education system would be paramount in playing a major role in bringing about the Gaelicisation of the new state. Primary schools were crucial to this plan[50].

According to Carnie, bad policy decisions had been made however well intended. Placing the burden on the educational system rather than focusing on the Irish in everyday life was the biggest problem. Children were expected to learn Irish in school which caused resentment and a naïve attitude to language learning:

> Language is not a subject that can be taught formally in an hour as day. Rather, language learning is a subconscious cognitive system that requires maturation and constant and consistent input. We as linguists know, but the revivalists in Ireland did not, that language is acquired rather than learned. It is fairly clear, that in order to revive language, emphasis has to be placed on usage in the home and, in the general community rather than isolating it in the educational system[51].

The new government certainly appeared to leave no stone unturned with the new programme designed to enforce the use of Irish in all aspects of

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[47] Ó Huallacháin, *The Irish Language in Society*, 34.
[48] Finnegan & McCarron, *Ireland: Historical Echoes, Contemporary Politics*, 117.
[49] A. Kelly, *Compulsory Irish Language and Education in Ireland, 1870s-1970s* (Irish Academic Press, Dublin, 2002), 9.
[50] V. Jones, *A Gaelic Experiment-The Preparatory System 1926-1961 and Colaiste Mobhi* (The Woodfield Press, Dublin, 2006), xxiv.
[51] A. Carnie, *Modern Irish: A Case Study in Language Revival Failure* (University of Calgary and University of California, Santa Cruz, 1995), section 3, 12.

national life. Blythe now laid down some of the new regulations of the, who, how, where and when Irish was to be employed in the new Gaelic Ireland:

> All new entrants to the Civil Service and legal profession must now know Irish. In a third of the secondary schools Irish is the medium of instruction. In University College, Galway, Professors in Ancient Classics, Economics, Philosophy and other subjects lecture in Irish. In certain smaller government departments all the work is done in Irish. In some of the Irish-speaking districts in which the language never was lost, the police speak only Irish and, the language of the local law courts is Irish. With government assistance a small Irish-speaking theatre in which all plays are in Irish has been established in Galway. Irish is the language of instruction in the Military College at the Curragh, County Kildare at which the future officers of the Irish Army are trained[52].

Blythe was in his element. 'By August 1921 the correspondence of Ernest Blythe was now reverberating to the refrain of 'Gaelicising and nationalising the education system'[53]. He was now in a position, especially when he became Minister of Finance, to pressure the government for language funding. Come hell or high water, Blythe would carry the torch for An Teanga Gaeilge against all opposition, in the process losing supporters through his constant demands for funding from the Free State's meagre resources for his pet project.

Did Blythe receive any recognition for his diligence in trying to keep the Irish language to the fore-front of the nation minds? Was he viewed as a humbug? Did people avoid him as he pestered and prodded the Treasury for more funding for Irish? Could anyone see the value of Blythe's work on behalf of the nation's greatest treasure? According to Buckley, Blythe reaped little or no political dividend from his efforts to advance the everyday use of the language; civil servants resented the introduction of compulsory Irish exams; would-be Gaelic authors resented the emphasis by An Gúm on translating published works rather than their own creations; Blythe's support for standardised spelling and use of the 'Roman' font in Irish-language print was contested fiercely by dogmatic supporters of the traditional 'Gaelic' font. 'Also, Blythe's personal preference for speaking Munster Irish engendered paranoia on the part of many supporters of the other dialects who believed that the few opportunities for career

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[52] UCDA, P24/1902, 'Blythe lays out the plans for the Irish language to be used in the Civil Service, Universities, the Police and the Military,' 8-9.
[53] O'Callaghan, 'Language and Religion: The quest for Identity in the Irish Free State 1922-32,' 125.

advancement based on Irish-language proficiency were being monopolised by those speaking the Munster dialect'[54].

According to Ó Gadhra, Blythe's work for the Irish language while Minister for Finance from 1923 to 1932 was the single greatest monument to him, and that he defined most of the main planks of state policy for the promotion of Irish[55]. He coordinated language policy in his Finance Department which was the most important government department and more importantly for Blythe, it held the purse strings. Not all of those working with Blythe had an enriching experience. Joseph Brennan, Civil Servant to the Ministry of Finance, had a difficult time restraining Blythe's ardour, as he gave vent to his love of the Irish language by sanctioning all sorts of projects. 'Difficulties with Blythe have been getting rather acute of late, and I find it hard to make up my mind what line to take with him. If it were not for the £1700 a year that I get I would have little hesitation in deciding what to do'[56]. Brennan, at the end of his tether, declared Blythe 'a dead loss as a finance Minister, and a man devoted to a number of non-finance matters which he pursued to the detriment of the finance position. The Irish language was the first of them. Blythe directed that all forms used between departmental divisions should be in Irish only. I put it up to him that we could not have fellows signing forms they did not understand for paying out of large sums of money, and he gave in'[57]. 'During Blythe's years as Minister for Finance, hardly a Dáil session went by without some new measure being introduced to advance the cause of the language'[58]. According to Ó Broin:

> During Blythe's time as Minister for Finance there was no minister for Irish or yet for the Gaeltacht, but in a sense, Blythe discharged both roles. He had a Gaeltacht map on the wall facing his desk and, often on late evenings I stood there with him talking about the problems of the language. He believed that a multiplicity of small schemes was needed to sustain the revival and argued that in their totality the cost would not be significant. He was therefore always on the lookout for new schemes and thought up a few himself. He rejected advice from within the department to act more moderately in dealing with projects affecting Irish; to avoid delay to such projects he made an order

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[54] Buckley, 'Blythe, Ernest, de Blaghd, Earnán,' DIB, Vol. 1, 622.
[55] Ó Gadhra, 'Earnán de Blaghd-Appreciation,' 98-93.
[56] L Ó Broin, *No Man's Man: A biographical memoir of Joseph Brennan-Civil Servant & first Governor of the Central Bank* (Institute of Public Administration, Dublin, 1982), 127.
[57] Ibid., 127.
[58] Ó Gadhra, 'Earnán de Blaghd: An Appreciation,' 99.

> that any papers affecting Irish that had not been disposed of within a month were to be brought to his desk for decision[59].

One of Blythe's schemes was An Gúm, a publishing agency, under the auspices of the Department of Education, which came to fruition in 1926. It produced publications and resources in support of Irish medium education and of the use of Irish in general. The four main areas of An Gúm publishing are text books; dictionaries; general reading material particularly for children, and sheet music[60].The most famous publications to come from the press of An Gúm were, in relation to the Irish language, *Focloir Póca*, Niall Ó Dónaill *Irish-English Dictionary,* and, Tomás de Bhaldraithe, *English-Irish Dictionary*. This brain-child of Blythe's is one of his most long-standing contributions to the continuing existence of the Irish Language.

7.5 Ernest Blythe and the Gaeltacht: an endangered Irish language habitat

In 1921, Séan T. O'Ceallaigh presented a report to the Dáil aimed at everyone interested in the Irish language conservation. The theme of the report was the position of the Gaeltacht, which was 'the well from which the language was to be replenished throughout the country. The Gaeltacht was the fading ember form which all else was to be lit and to accomplish that, the people of the congested districts of the western seaboard were to be forced to recognize their uniqueness'[61].

For Blythe, the Gaeltacht was the Irish language's last and best hope for survival and all measures necessary should be employed to this effect. In March 1924 a delegation submitted a list of specific recommendations regarding the Gaelicization of administration in the Gaeltacht, law, education, agriculture, and, social services as existed. Explicit emphasis was put on the linguistic characteristics of the Gaeltacht as a national resource to be safeguarded and, developed by means to be selected by the government and, to be put into effect by using the budget and administration of the state.

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[59] Ibid., 91
[60] H. Ó Murchú, *Irish-Facing the Future* (European Bureau for Lesser Languages, Baile átha Cliath, 1999), 30.
[61] O'Callaghan, '*Language and Religion: The quest for identity in the Irish State 1922-32*,' 167.

In other words, a complete care package to shore up this endangered Irish-speaking habitat. The following statement, once again written in Blythe's distinctive style, shows that he was not averse to using the carrot and stick approach to get the desired results:

> It is imperative that, not only the majority of the government officials in the Gaeltacht, but all of them, should be well able to speak Irish and should be required to do so. It may be argued that to confine the officials who know Irish well to the Gaeltacht and those who know no Irish or are weak in Irish or careless about it to the rest of the country, is to put a premium on lack of knowledge of Irish and of proper Irish spirit, since the Gaeltacht districts are often poor and miserable districts lacking in the amenities of life. This is a thoroughly valid objection and it can only be met by making service in the Gaeltacht districts a higher grade of service with higher pay than similar service in the rest of the country on the grounds that the man who is qualified through a special knowledge of Irish to serve in the Irish districts is a more highly qualified official than his colleague whose Irish is weak. Such a bonus for special Gaelic efficiency would only be a transitional one to carry us on to the time when every government official should be normally expected to carry on his duties in Irish[62].

What was Blythe's rationale behind this scheme for the Gaeltacht inhabitants? Was it a just a means to an end to protect the language? Blythe wanted the Gaeltacht preserved, so the inhabitants needed an incentive to keep speaking the Irish. Blythe was quick to see the potential of this area in the fight to rescue the language and while he could influence the outcome, he would leave no stone unturned until this was accomplished. The inhabitants had to be rewarded for their efforts and their standard of living brought in line with the rest of the country; it was in the interests of keeping Ireland's individuality intact that they should be so rewarded.

Blythe was now bestowing on these Gaeltacht people a position of prestige and honour. They were no longer to be viewed as the poor relations of the state. In December 1924 Blythe called for the setting up of a Commission for the Gaeltacht. He cited that while the importance of preserving the Gaeltacht was unquestionable, a comprehensive programme calculated to ensure its preservation was difficult to devise and that a full investigation of the subject by the Commission was desirable.

Now the process had begun to specify what was and what was not an Irish-speaking district and the extent and location of these districts; to enquire and make recommendations as to the use of Irish in these districts, the educational facilities available and any steps that should be taken to

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[62] Ó Huallacháin, *The Irish Language in Society*, 34.

improve the economic circumstances of the inhabitants. The mapping-out of the Gaeltacht was finally completed in 1926. Blythe was aware as Finance Minister that good budgetary management was essential as he fought with his department for funds. There was nothing to be gained in throwing good money after bad. Eighty-two proposals were submitted in the White paper of 1927.

The Commission recommended that where eighty percent or more of the population of a district was Irish-speaking, that district would be regarded as an Irish-speaking district (Fior- Gaeltacht) regardless of the extent to which English may have an ascendancy in daily use under the circumstances of the time, and, that where not less than twenty-five percent and not more than seventy-nine percent of the population, it is to be regarded as, 'partly-Irish-speaking' (Breac-Gaeltacht). There were encouraging figures for Blythe as the result of the Commission's findings as to the number of 'true' Irish speakers in the Gaeltacht. Statistics showed that in 1911, the Gaeltacht population had been 189,755, 149,677 of whom were Irish-speakers, 70% of the population. In 1925, the Gaeltacht population was 164,774, of whom 146,821 were Irish-speakers, 89.1% of population[63].

In 1953 however, Blythe could have been forgiven for believing that the past had come back to haunt him. In a memorandum to Taoiseach Costello, he issued an appeal that a Board should now be appointed to preserve and develop the Gaeltacht as a last desperate action 'before it is too late'[64]. Depressing figures showed that since the 1946 Census, the number of Irish speakers in the Gaeltacht had decreased by nineteen percent since 1936. Only one hundred and four thousand remained which included those who had learned Irish at school and did not use it habitually. A more realistic figure based on the results of the five pounds annual grant for Irish-speaking children in the Gaeltacht, would be 38,000 thousand and, this number had been decreasing at a rate of one thousand a year.

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[63] Ó Huallacháin, *The Irish Language in Society*, 36.

[64] An Comhdháil Naisiunta na Gaeilge, '*Memorandum for the Taoiseach, A Board for the Gaeltacht*,' Dublin, Deireadh Fomhair, 1953, 3.

7.6 A new language revival movement emerges: An Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge and Ernest Blythe

> It is not merely, however, in the field of economics and demography that the desertion of Irish has wrought damage. But for our west Britonism, or Shoneenism, or, if the term is preferred, general Anglicanism, there would have been no partition of Ireland and no thought of partition. That fact is, I know, not generally accepted yet. Indeed, it is only comparatively recently that even those who give most thought to national affairs have begun to grasp it. We still suffer to some extent from a hang-over of that disastrous blindness to the truth about language and nationality which, during the nineteenth century, afflicted our people. Until the revival movement and Sinn Féin began to sweep the country, our more influential leaders, with a few exceptions like Thomas Davis, Archbishop MacHale and O'Donnovan Rossa, failed to realise or remember that nationality, in circumstances such as ours, demands the protection and dynamism provided by the native language[65].

Following a dispute between Eamon de Valera and Conradh na Gaeilge, a new organisation, An Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge, was established in 1943 as an overall co-ordinating body with state subvention for the various voluntary Irish-language bodies. In a situation which would have been unthinkable in 1922, Ernest Blythe, in 1947, was chosen as An Comhdháil President. 'He owed his new position largely to de Valera and Fianna Fáil, his former bitter civil-war enemies, a reflection of the cross-party respect for his unswerving Irish-language revivalist beliefs. Many of the language promotional measures then advocated by Blythe as Comhdháil president were implemented by Fianna Fáil governments'[66]. In December 1947, Blythe gave his presidential address to An Comhdháil Náisiúnta, at which he brought to the attention of the Irish government and the Irish people the state of the Irish language since the formation of An Comhdháil in 1943, with its recommendations for the preservation of the ethnic language:

> I think it is now time for the Comhdháil, the government and the public generally to examine, in a fact-facing atmosphere, the present position of the language, measuring what has been done up to the present against what remains to be done, so that me may see whether we are doing enough to make the future of the language secure, or whether we are merely doing enough to ensure that its death shall be gradual and dignified, that its passing shall be suitably mourned and that its memory shall be perpetuated by a pyramid of barren learning in some scholastic cemetery[67].

In the early nineteenth century the number of Irish speakers was approximately three to four million. By 1851 the numbers had dropped to

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[65] E. Blythe, '*Tomorrow is too late*,' (Comhdháil Naisunta na Gaeilge, Baile átha Cliath, 1952), 19.
[66] Buckley**, '**Blythe, Ernest (de Blaghd, Earnán),' DIB, Vol. 1, 616.
[67] E. de Blaghd, '*The State and the Language*,' (Comhdháil Naisiunta na Gaeilge, 3 December 1949), 1.

between twenty-five and thirty per cent of the overall population[68]. Did Blythe have an opinion as to why this situation had arisen? Who or what irritated him with their negative attitude to the language? On whom would he lay the blame for this catastrophe?

Blythe believed that the problem arose when the native Irish and those British whom Ireland had absorbed, began re-entering liberal professions, re-establishing their grip on the land, re-accumulating wealth and themselves becoming politically powerful, they lost track of their cultural heritage to which their ancestors had clung to, despite centuries of British subjugation. By 1890 only one sixth of the population spoke Irish. According to Blythe, 'The establishment of a system of State elementary schools all over the country in which Irish had no place, together with the absence of printed books in Irish, and, the death of a million of the poorest, most Irish of the people in the famine 1845/7, was enough to give momentum to the movement away from Irish, that for several decades Ireland seemed destined to lose her individuality, and to degenerate into a mere West Britain'[69].

The native language was now supplanted by English which was perceived as vital for advancement both at home and abroad. From now on the native language would be associated with poverty and backwardness and its abandonment was on the horizon. Between 1861 and 1911 the number of native speakers further decreased to half a million. Daniel O'Connell, when asked if the use of Irish among the peasantry was diminishing stated that, 'although the Irish language had a sentimental value the English language, as the medium of modern communication, was so superior that he felt no sadness at the gradual decline of the Irish'[70].

Blythe, who held an undisguised contempt for O'Connell, would blame him for not encouraging the Irish people to have a pride in their language and work to keep it alive. Blythe also blamed O'Connell for having played

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[68] N. M. Wolf, *An Irish-Speaking Island-State: Religion, Community and the Linguistic Landscape in Ireland, 1770-1870* (The University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin, 2014), 3.
[69] UCDA, P24/1902, '*Blythe's musings on the reasons for Irish language abandonment*,' 2-3-4.
[70] R. English, *Irish Freedom-The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (Macmillan, London, 2006), 138.

an indirect part in the future sectarian strife in Ulster. Blythe believed 'that by neglecting cultural nationalism and stressing Catholicism as the basic tenet in the Irish struggle, O'Connell, Blythe argued, had alienated the northern Protestant who could see no real reason for a separate Irish Parliament in Dublin, save to ensure a Catholic majority'[71]. 'The Irish Language reached its nadir as a medium of literature, public discourse and everyday language and was spoken by less than 15 per cent of the population by 1901; at this time a vigorous revival movement brought it from the brink of death. The language revival movement and national independence together made Irish an increasingly visible aspect of political events'[72]. In the 1840's Thomas Davis had agitated for Irish to be restored as the national language, 'as part of any renewal of national culture under the banner of independence'[73]. According to Blythe:

> In the nineteenth century there were some political leaders who realised that it was absurd to seek self-government, yet allow the people of Ireland to be transformed into mere West Britons - West Britons who in a few generations would be indistinguishable from the inhabitants of the neighbouring island and, who having become conscious of the cultural and ideological identity of the two populations, would see no need for the continued maintenance of two complete sets of governmental machinery. But Davis was the only one of them who might have brought about a substantial change in public opinion and his premature death was a national calamity[74].

In an earlier speech to the Comhdháil, Blythe had told his listeners not to believe in old wives' tales regarding the saving of the language by drawing comparisons between Hebrew and the Irish Language. 'As I said at the last annual meeting of An Comhdháil, it was not understood when the Gaelic League was founded and unfortunately it is not sufficiently understood even yet, that a much greater effort is needed on behalf of the Irish Language than was needed on behalf of any other language which has benefited from a revival movement - with the sole exception of Hebrew. Failure to grasp that fundamental fact has been one of the prime reasons why the State has not, up to the present, adopted an effective language policy'[75].

> When I joined the Gaelic League as a boy, stories were told of continental languages which had at one time so fallen into disuse that only a mere handful of people knew

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[71] Ó Gadhra, "Appreciation, Earnán de Blaghd, 1889-1975," 102.
[72] Wolf, *An Irish-Speaking Island State: Religion, Community and the Linguistic Landscape in Ireland, 1770-1870*, 7.
[73] Ibid., 8.
[74] Ó Gadhra, 'Appreciation Earnán de Blaghd, 1889-1975,' 104.
[75] Blythe, '*Tomorrow is too late*,' 6.

> them but, which had, nevertheless been triumphantly restored. Those stories gave us extra courage for a period but, unfortunately, they were entirely without foundation. Later on, the illusions which arose from such fantastic tales did great harm and, indeed they continue to do harm to this very day, preventing our people and our governments from appreciating the vital fact that we are pioneers engaged in an unprecedented struggle and, that we cannot take anything that has been done for a national language in any other country as a measure of what it is necessary for our own public authorities to do for Irish[76].

Irish was now on the verge of extinction but could still be saved with the right attitude, backed up with strong government support. On whom then did Blythe now place the responsibility for ensuring that the language survived? Was Blythe not overreacting to the situation? Was he not in danger of putting people off the whole idea with his constant harping? Why was it so important to Blythe that Ireland should revive its native tongue? What benefit would it be in the grand scheme of things for this language with its connection to poverty and backwardness, to now become the national and first language of Ireland when the English language was what had ultimately been the medium through which the people had supposedly thrown off their mantle of inferiority.

Blythe believed that the work to date had lacked strength and purpose and, that to keep relying on ineffectual efforts would lead eventually to the loss of Ireland's distinctive language and the survival of Ireland as a separate nation. Blythe then spoke directly to those in power whom he felt had to get more fully involved and, put their weight behind the language movement:

> In my opinion, the reason why the state has not yet begun to take seriously its responsibilities with regard to Irish, is that very few of those who are active and influential in politics realise the immensity of the difficulties that have to be overcome. Many of them think that it should be possible for the Gaelic League, Glún na Buaidhe, the Comhchaidreamh and other voluntary organisations, with a little help from the exchequer through the Comhdháil, to do all that is necessary without calling on the state. Perhaps they are not to blame for entertaining such an unrealistic idea, since even those of us who are closest to the work have only gradually come to understand the position. But it is essential to convince political leaders without delay that our present languid pace will not do[77].

Blythe believed that the language issue should be outside party politics; there was nothing to be gained by parties points scoring as to who was ahead of whom in supporting the language; that all people and parties who

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[76] Ibid., 2.
[77] Blythe, 'The State and the Language,' 2.

accept the teaching of Pearse believe it only right and proper that the Irish language should be saved. Blythe believed that 'apart from the odd hypocrite, the vast majority of members of every party would, so far as the language is concerned, act sincerely in accordance with the political creed which they profess, if only they could see clearly what needs to be done'[78].

What was Blythe trying to accomplish by referring to Patrick Pearse? Pearse, like Blythe, was a cultural nationalist who believed that saving the language was a cultural priority of the utmost importance. Blythe was attempting to draw the Irish people back to the cornerstone of Irish nationalism by reminding them that the Irish language was part and parcel of the blood sacrifice for Irish freedom and that to abandon the language was a betrayal of 1916. Blythe wanted those in positions of influence to return to the core fundamentals of their Irish heritage.

What had happened to the movement for language restoration since those heady days of the 1920s, until 1949, when Blythe addressed the Comhdháil Naisunta na Gaeilge? Why was there such a blind panic to pull the language back from the brink of extinction? Was there an altruistic motive behind the state's vow to put brí [life] back into the language? According to Atkenson:

> The common thread binding almost all language revivalists was an equation of national identity with the ethnic language… the language was given high priority, not for intellectual or educational reasons, but for nationalistic ones…the embracing of Irish was an intuitive act. Irish was seen as a magical panacea…it came to have mystical, nearly magical properties…this led to a phenomenon amongst the Free State leaders called 'psycho-logic' which in turn led to the radical curriculum revision in education. Simply put, the Free State leaders were now aware of the irrefutable fact that Ireland's ethnic language had long ceased to be its native language, which was now English[79].

W.T. Cosgrave proclaimed that, 'the possession of a cultivated national language is known by every people who have it to be a secure guarantee of the national future. Our language has been waylaid, beaten and robbed, and left for dead by the wayside, and we have to ask ourselves if it is to be allowed to lie there, or if we are to heal its wounds, place it in safety and proper care and have it restored to health and vigour'. Eamon de Valera told the GL that, 'in his opinion Ireland with its language and without freedom is preferable to Ireland with its freedom and without its language'. Eoin

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[78] Ibid., 3.

[79] Akenson, *A Mirror to Kathleen's Face: Education in Independent Ireland 1922-1960*, 35-36.

MacNeill, first Minister for Education, declared that, 'for the members of the government to abandon the attempt to revive Irish would be to abandon their own nation'[80]. Blythe himself also spoke of his desire for Gaeilge agus Saoirse and in that respect, he was at one with his contemporaries. According to Atkenson, the Irish revolutionaries were:

> Neither ideological nor programmatic in their thinking, and instead of specific plans for the future government of their country they filled their minds with a romantic idealization of Ireland's Gaelic past. Ireland free and Ireland Gaelic became synonymous phrases, so that when the former revolutionaries came to power it was virtually automatic for them to try to reincarnate the virtues of the old Celtic order - and the Irish language they believed had been the lynch-pin of that order. The men who formed the Free State government would have had to embrace it through political necessity. Accused by their opponents in the post-treaty divide as having sold the pass to the British, the affirmation of the language revivalist's ideals was one way in which the government could establish that it was Irish to the hilt[81].

What exactly did the term 'language revival' mean? According to Fellman, 'the term 'revival' as applied to a language can have many different meanings, depending upon the type of reversal or decline the language has previously undergone. For example, the revival of Irish is the hitherto unsuccessful attempt, to sufficiently expand the use of Gaelic, previously the language of small farmers and fishermen, to become ultimately the national language of Ireland'[82]. For the more extreme Irish-Irelanders revival would mean the complete eradication of English with Ireland eventually becoming a monolingual Irish-speaking country. Most people would have opted for a bi-lingual Ireland with Irish being the 'home-language' and English being retained as useful in their dealings with outsiders.

What was Blythe's own position after a period of almost four decades since he first espoused his desire for Gaeilge agus Saoirse? Blythe's instincts were for a monolingual, Gaelic speaking, free Ireland. However, he was now at the stage where to hope for that was like howling to the moon. The condition of the language was almost terminal and the ultimate dream of it being once more on the tongues of all was fading fast. His assessment

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[80] Ibid., 36-40.
[81] Ibid., 36-37.
[82] J. Fellman, *The Revival of a Classical Tongue: Eliezer Ben Yhuda and the Modern Hebrew Language* (Mouton & Co, N.V, The Hague, Paris, 1973), 11.

of the revival movement from its inception was bleak; Blythe, who never applied balm to the wound, had this to say:

> It is essential to grasp and to appreciate the key fact that, in its most brilliant and vigorous period, the movement had no effect on the condition of the language itself. It did not prevent or even delay the decay of Irish in the Breac-Ghaeltacht (partly Irish-speaking area) It did not prevent or delay the transformation of any parish, or even of any town-land, from Fior-Ghaeltacht (true Irish-speaking area) to Breac-Ghaeltacht. The voluntary movement of today is weak compared with the voluntary movement of forty years ago, because it is no longer constantly and everywhere possible to draw hosts of adults into language classes. The ordinary citizen is no longer inquisitive about Irish and, he knows moreover that he could not learn very much extra in a year or so attending a weekly class. Consequently, he cannot be easily induced, as his father or grandfather was induced, to put himself once again under a teacher, even for a single winter[83].

For Blythe, the symbiotic relationship between the language and the nation was paramount and needed protection. During his speech to the Comhdháil, Blythe states that Ireland as a nation would disappear if the language were to be lost:

> The final stage of the age-long struggle for freedom and individuality of the Irish nation is now being fought out and if we are defeated in it, the fruit of all the successes we have heretofore achieved will be utterly lost…There is no example to be found which will support the notion entertained by short-sighted Irish politicians of a former generation, that Ireland could abandon her ancient language and culture and adopt the language and culture of England and yet manage, for an appreciable time, to retain a national individuality of her own… If the languid, inadequate effort of the past thirty years were to continue for another generation, it is to be feared that the language, instead of being placed ultimately in a position of safety, might become so enfeebled as to make its preservation impossible[84].

Blythe had repeatedly voiced his concerns about the language decline loud and clear and, the half measures employed by the state to save it. He still had praise for the voluntary sector which as far as he was concerned was useful, important and necessary; if the state did its duty, a time would come when within a new framework and with new methods, they will become powerful once again.

However, Blythe's focus was now on spreading Irish within the Galltacht (English-speaking area). His argument was that under the existing conditions where monoglot speakers were almost non-existent, it was only custom and the adherence to custom which kept the habitual use of English from drowning the Gaeltacht:

> If Irishmen generally stick to English, the people of the Gaeltacht will gradually and inevitably turn to English too. Consequently, the position is that we must within the life

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[83] Blythe, '*The State and the Language*,' 6.
[84] Ibid., 9-10-8.

> of the next two generations at most, do enough by way of re-Gaelicising the Galltacht to ensure that the Gaeltacht, as we know it today does not fade into relative insignificance, and, indeed, is not duly weakened until an adequate new Gaeltacht has arisen to supplement and, in part, replace it[85].

The Memorandum of 3 December 1949 from the Comhdháil to the Government point 4(e), clearly states, 'that it had now become a matter of the most urgency that action be taken to give immediate and effective aid to the Irish language because, the Fior-Ghaeltachtaí (true Irish-speaking areas) have become small and weak and are rapidly being de-populated, and because the Breac-Ghaeltachtaí (part Irish-speaking areas) are melting away like snow in Maytime and because there is consequently, great danger that Irish may be lost in the districts that are now Irish-speaking before it has been restored in other parts of the country'[86].

The voice of Blythe can be detected throughout the memoranda. His dogmatic style and old-fashioned turn of phrase is very much that of the Ulsterman. It is the view of this thesis that Blythe was the author of the memorandum and that he was the brains behind the Comhdháil Naisiunta na Gaeilge. His war-like propaganda is reminiscent of his anti-conscription statement which declared death to anyone assisting the British in the conscription of Irishmen. For instance 4(a) of the memorandum states that, 'the struggle for the Irish language is a war to save the spiritual identity of the Irish nation and that, as in any other war, victory can be obtained only if the full power of the State is thrown into the scale and parsimony eschewed'; 4(b) 'that in view of the fact that the public speech of one generation tends to become the home language of the next, Irish cannot be re-established as the ordinary speech of the people throughout the country, nor even kept alive in any individual district, unless it receives such continuous and effective support from the State in all areas and institutions that it will become the medium for transaction of every sort of public business'; 4(d) 'that if the national and local services, and the institutions dependant on them, are to be Gaelicised within any reasonable period, it is necessary to take determined action to secure that all young people in the country will be able, at the conclusion of their school courses, to speak and

[85] Ibid., 9.
[86] Ibid., 21.

read Irish well; that they will keep their Irish thereafter without need for any deliberate personal effort; that those who have not yet a good knowledge of Irish and who are under middle-age, will have adequate opportunities and inducements to improve the knowledge'[87].

What was Blythe really saying to the Irish people? Blythe's message was evidently, 'You will learn Irish or be damned!' It is no wonder then that so many reluctant scholars of Irish adopted a jaundiced view of the language. They were under pressure from Blythe et al to secure the future of a language that they no longer used in their daily lives, and for the many, they had not the slightest bit interest in it. How was Blythe intending to stop the rot? In which direction would he now go with his suggestions for language revival that he had not already pursued? And who would be the butt of his frustration?

The Comhdháil proffered a range of solutions ranging from improved teaching in the schools, obligatory oral tests in school and public examinations; through films, theatre, radio, newspapers, periodicals and books in the language. Complete saturation was now prescribed by Blythe for reluctant Irish men and women, 'So that those who may now or hereafter have a knowledge of Irish are brought so frequently into contact with it in their daily lives that they will be in no danger of forgetting it, and so far is possible the public services and the activities and influences of every institute, company, and organisation which receives aid, special protection or privilege of any kind from the State'[88].

There was no escaping Blythe's mania for language rejuvenation which now appeared to gain momentum as evidenced by section 5(c) 'As soon as the Irish-speaking citizen is enabled to adhere to his own language in his cultural and recreational life in the same way as an Englishman, a Spaniard, or a Swede, thousands of books of every description are to be provided, in Irish, together with scores of periodicals of different types, not to speak of public lectures, educational courses, radio programmes, dramatic performances and so forth'[89]. This, 'and so forth' was Blythe's signature

[87] Ibid., 21.
[88] Ibid., 22.
[89] Ibid., 22.

ending of a statement which confirms that he was the mastermind behind the Comhdháil Naisiunta na Gaeilge.

Universities too came under attack for their neglect of the use of Irish which destroyed a good measure of the results obtained in secondary schools. State-controlled companies and monopolies and all institutions substantially supported by the state should be obliged to require, when hiring young people, a knowledge of Irish equivalent to that required for corresponding classes of entrants to the civil service. Examples of these kinds of establishments ranged from Messrs. Dunlop Ltd., the Racing Board, the Abbey Theatre, to the commercial banks affiliated to the Central Bank[90].

Blythe was by this time almost two decades retired from government but was still a bugbear when it came to the promoting of Irish. Long after the language had outgrown its usefulness in terms of its utility during the revolutionary period, Blythe fought for Irish language preservation solely for its own sake:

> Practically everyone who is personally engaged in work for the preservation of Irish will affirm that much more than is now being done is necessary if success is to be attained. In setting out to save the language and, to bring it again into extensive use we have undertaken a task of surpassing difficulty – a task the like of which has not heretofore, so far as I am aware, been successfully tackled anywhere. I do not know precisely what progress is being made with the revival of Hebrew in Israel; but if we leave that one case out of account, it can safely be said that never before has a language been saved after it had fallen into a state of disuse, comparable with that to which the last couple of generations consigned Irish[91].

Here again Blythe uses the Hebrew as an example of a language brought back to life. As far as Blythe was concerned the Irish language would suffer the same fate if left to drift away. The Irish people still had the basics of their language, it was still spoken, nor, was it too late to save it. Blythe saw no reason why this should continue or even be a subject for discussion, given the advanced 'state of the art' modern inventions to which Irish people now had access:

> It is however, right to recall that all our people receive primary education and that, besides printing, there are modern inventions which enable them to be reached linguistically in ways which were not open to the leaders of the past. Things therefore

[90] Ibid., 24.
[91] Ibid., 1.

> can now be done here which would have been impossible formerly and may still be impossible elsewhere[92].

Blythe believed that originally, the lackadaisical Irish attitude to the problem stemmed from the deluded notion that other 'lost languages' had, in the past, been recovered from oblivion so there was not need to panic. Blythe relieved them of this idea with another of his pointed statements. He points to the government as the ultimate role-model for the people as the beacon of hope for the language and should lead by example. He understood that English offered many advantages to the ordinary citizen who couldn't be expected to make, without help, a determined effort to replace English with Irish as his language of daily living:

> If the government as the central committee of the Irish people is in future seen to be pushing resolutely ahead with the language revival, the greater part of the population will take it that the language is going to live and triumph; and it is a commonplace that help is always plentifully forthcoming for what seems destined to succeed. But conversely, if it is thought that the attitude of the government is cold and dubious, it will also, naturally be thought by many that the ultimate disappearance of Irish is certain. And of course, after anything has for some time seemed certain to die, nothing is more natural than that onlookers begin to hope that its death may come soon[93].

Successive government Ministries since 1922 had had no impact on the loss of the language. What would Blythe now pull out of the hat in terms of a new approach to the problem? Had he run out of ideas? Would he even be listened to especially now that a new government was in power? Was Blythe's language mission beginning to sound like a cracked record that people were fed up listening too? No longer in government and lacking power to influence the decision-makers, Blythe now wanted the development of the Gaeltacht put into the hands of a board whose objects would be to preserve and extend the use of Irish in the Gaeltacht, to secure an increase in the present Irish-speaking population and, to help native speakers who cannot obtain work in their own areas find suitable, permanent employment elsewhere in Ireland. The board would also advise and help the young people of the Gaeltacht to make a living in Ireland; a board, focusing on these points it was emphasised, could quickly stem the flow of emigration from the Gaeltacht. In 23 August 1954, Blythe wrote to

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[92] Ibid., 1.
[93] Ibid., 40.

An Taoiseach, John Costello with his proposals for dealing with the Gaeltacht dilemma:

> It (the Comhdháil) would ask that the proposal should not be set aside as too visionary or, because it might cause considerable procedural difficulties. Visionary proposals attended by considerable procedural difficulties might be said to be the hallmark of all Irish efforts towards political and economic freedom. The objections to the visionaries and disturbers of procedure have long since been forgotten in the triumph of their achievements. The Comhdháil asks you, as the head of government, to give a chance to those of this generation who have faith that the battle for the Gaeltacht can be won, and whose courage and ability need only your help to win it[94].

Costello had chosen his own way of addressing the issue with the implementation of a ministry, rather than a board, as Blythe had suggested. It must have been galling for Blythe to have his idea of a board thrown out- but he wasn't beaten in the matter just yet as Costello would find out. Blythe would acquiesce with the idea of a ministry provided, that they focused only on the Fior-Gaeltacht areas where Irish was the habitual speech. He also wanted a carefully chosen staff who would appreciate the importance of the language, headed by a minister who was an Irish speaker. He hoped that the ministry would mark a new era of hope and progress in the shrinking Gaeltacht and, he reminded Costello about the language being contiguous with national individuality:

> Consequently, the issue of the statement of policy in which the promise of a ministry for the Gaeltacht was first formally made will, it may be hoped, mark an important turning-point in Ireland's struggle for the preservation of full national individuality. It is because it is convinced the government's proposal holds such promise that the Comhdháil attaches importance to the qualifying recommendations set out above and would be greatly obliged if the Taoiseach would receive a deputation to enable it to put its views more fully before him[95].

7.7 Ernest Blythe and the Irish language in the six counties

The focus so far in this chapter has been on the Irish language in the twenty-six counties. Did Blythe have anything to say regarding the use of Irish in his homeland of the six-counties? Were they included in his language revival campaign? First and foremost, it must be made clear what the north's view was on the Irish language and the Free State's intentions for the use of the language. The *Whig* declared, that 'the men to whom the twenty-six counties were being handed over had proclaimed their intention

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[94] UCDA, P/24/997, Comhdháil Naisiunta na Gaeilge, '*Memorandum for the Taoiseach, A Board for the Gaeltacht'*, Deireadh Fomhair, 1953, 2.
[95] UCDA, P/24/984, '*Letter from E. Blythe to An Taoiseach, John A Costello'*, 23 Lunasa. 1954, 1.

to revive the Gaelic civilisation. This did not mean reproducing the Ireland of Brian Boru but, setting up something as much unlike the British civilisation as possible'[96].

In a similar vein the *Belfast News-Letter* poured scorn on the attempts by the Free State government to make the Irish a compulsory subject in schools:

> It is to be taught as a living language in every school in the country, although it is absolutely dead in the greatest part of it. The millions of people who cannot speak or read it are compelled to learn it if they want either to do business or retain employment. English may be taught as an extra subject - like Latin, Greek or any of the modern languages, but generally it is to be suppressed, for is it not a language of heretics[97].

The northern establishment and its politicians had in the Irish language a useful piece of ammunition with which to justify the existence of Ulster. In October 1927 the Minister of Finance, H.M. Pollock, delivered the following speech:

> English is the mother tongue of the Ulster people, and to compel the children of the province to acquire a language which is dying a natural death would be as insanely tyrannical as to force the teaching of Kaffir or Abyssinian on them. We have been delivered from less desirable things than the Gaelic incubus by remaining in the United Kingdom, but protection from this nuisance is not a negligible boon[98].

With this level of institutional loathing for the Irish language in the six-counties, what was Blythe's solution for keeping some vestige of it alive in that alien habitat? Blythe acknowledged that much of the work of saving the language had to be done in the south because the public authority there would do its share, however, the contribution of the people of the north would be of enormous value through word or deed and would be an indispensable encouragement to those who direct the campaign in the south. Blythe is full of encouragement to both the fluent and the cúpla focal (a few words) speakers of Irish and welcomed each individual effort, issuing a warning to nationalists who are lax about the Irish:

> I should say that all in the north who want to play the part of genuine patriots and who have the aptitude and the opportunity and are young enough, ought to learn and write it will be able to play the part of members of a kind of active service units we need in the critical struggle for national survival. The individual who finds he is not likely ever to become a fluent speaker of Irish should not give up studying it because of that. If he can read fairly-well, he can help the work by buying an occasional Irish book or newspaper. If, though unable to talk much Irish himself, he can understand it when he hears it, then he can aid and

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[96] "The Irish Language and Brian Boru," *Whig*, 20 November 1922.
[97] "Irish-A dead language to replace English," *Belfast News-Letter*, 10 April 1919.
[98] "The benefits of living in Ulster," *Northern Whig*, 8 October 1927.

encourage use of Irish by others without making a martyr of himself. People who only learn a little Irish will find even that little useful in encouraging children or other young people to become proficient in it. Those who have no Irish at all and who because of age or circumstances could not hope to learn it can do their bit on its behalf and give genuine service to the nation in the special sector in which it is most urgently needed. They should not develop an inferiority complex as far as linguistic aspect of national affairs is concerned or take the line that they should leave the fight to others who have plenty of Irish. The truth is that the non-Irish speaker who is a genuine believer in the revival of the language, can often do more to influence the man in the street in its favour than could be done by a scholar who could conjugate the twelve irregular verbs backwards. The man whose views about Irish are right though he knows not a word of the language can perhaps take care that it is taught to his children; he can aid in the establishment of scholarships which will help other people's children go to the Gaeltacht; he can ensure that Irish songs are sung at the local concerts; he could fill his bookcase with Irish books which a young relative or guest will someday read. And so on. Without any kind of a favourable attitude towards Irish a man may be a good citizen in the social sense like many a Unionist; but, at this time of the day he cannot be regarded as being any use as a Nationalist unless he is prepared to do something to help ensure the survival of the Irish language which is the badge and keystone of Irish nationality[99].

The above statement by Blythe is without doubt the confirmation that for him, the Irish language and Irish nationalism were conjoined.

7.8 Blythe introduces the Irish language to the Abbey Theatre and helps establish An Taibhdhearc na Gaillaimhe [the Irish Language Theatre of Galway]

Blythe's endeavours for keeping Irish abroad in the country were not just confined to arguments with the government. His other great passion was the stage. According to Ó Broin, Blythe had always been a man of the theatre. A controversialist in all aspects of his life and career, his management of the Abbey Theatre is a case in point. Blythe promoted Irish language plays at the Abbey incurring the wrath of patrons and performers alike with his controversial policy of rejecting good plays for bad, Irish plays over English and insisting that only Irish-speaking actors be employed regardless of their acting ability.

According to Blythe, however, the over-riding purpose of the movement which brought the Abbey into being in 1899 was to preserve and strengthen Ireland's national individuality by fostering the growth, both in Irish and in English, of a distinctively Irish drama. Because of the Irish language being lost over much of the country, the Abbey had to be mainly an English-speaking theatre. That left it no way to maintain fully its Irish character and

[99] UCDA, P24/1909, 'Blythe issues advice to northern nationalists regarding their duty regarding Irish language survival', 2-6 (undated).

carry out its mission, except that chosen by its founders and inscribed in its patent:

> If the Irish language had held its ground better and the Abbey had been mainly an Irish-speaking theatre, it could have had full freedom of choice in so far as the material to go on the stage was concerned, because use of Irish would, of itself, have made it a theatre with a difference, whether its plays hailed from Ireland, Iran or Idaho. For practically forty years the Abbey did all its work in English, there was never any doubt as to the attitude of its directors towards the Irish language. It was not until 1938, after the country had had sixteen years of Irish Government and of an Irish-controlled educational policy, that a practical plan to give the Irish language its due place could be put into operation[100].

Blythe explains the reasoning behind the recruitment of Irish speaking actors which had attracted a certain amount of hostility:

> Certain competent Irish speakers were then engaged and, it was arranged that in future recruitment for the company should, as far as possible, be confined to people able to play both in Irish and in English. The steps taken by the directors to build up an Irish-speaking company and to use it increasingly to present plays in Irish has naturally enough aroused some wrath amongst players, producers and critics who do not know the language and feel themselves disadvantaged. Their anger occasionally vents itself in tirades which ostensibly have nothing to do with the Irish language. In view of the policy of the State, of the effort being made to restore Irish to wider use and of the vital need to preserve the language as the one sure guarantee of national continuity, failure on the part of the Abbey to get ready to work to a reasonable extent through Irish could soon have made it in reality an anti-National Theatre rather than the National Theatre[101].

Blythe was also responsible for the emergence of An Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe. Opened on the 27th August 1928 and situated in the heart of medieval Galway city, An Taibhdhearc is the national language theatre of Ireland and is one of the great success stories of Irish theatre opened at a time when the Irish Free State was struggling for legitimacy. Galway was viewed as a perfect location for an Irish language theatre due to its proximity to Ireland's Gaeltacht, for its large Irish-speaking population and the large number of Irish language enthusiasts and scholars at University College Galway. In the early 1920's plans for a theatre fell into abeyance due to the unstable conditions of the country with several of the theatre supporters in prison or on the run. In 1927 new efforts were resumed in earnest when a new committee was set up.

The project benefited from Blythe's personal interest in it being keen as he was to establish the prestige of the Irish language within the new state. Prior to the establishment of An Taibhdhearc state funding for Irish

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[100] E. Blythe, *The Abbey Theatre* (The National Theatre Society Ltd., Abbey Theatre, Dublin), 19-20. (Undated)
[101] Ibid., 20.

language theatre was administered by the Dublin-based An Comhar Drámaíochta which operated under the auspices of the Department of Education. It also supported and subsidised the performance of Irish language plays at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Blythe, who never handed over money without strings attached, agreed to fund the Galway venture on the condition that the committee become a Galway branch of An Comhar Drámaíochta, which would then administer the funding of An Taibhdhearc. On 9 February 1928 Blythe advised them that £600 was being paid to them but asked if there was a possibility that some money could be made raised locally! Micheál Mac Liammóir and Hilton Edwards were hired as artistic directors and on 27th August 1928, An Taibhdhearc opened its doors with Mac Liammóirs successful production of *Diarmuid agus Gráinne*. Patrons included Ernest Blythe and Lady Agusta Gregory. Mac Liammóir and Edwards eventually left to establish the Dublin Gate Theatre Company[102]. An Taibhdhearc successfully adapted to the modern world of theatre. In 2003 it celebrated 75 years of its existence, thanks in great measure to the vision of Ernest Blythe and his determination to make the Irish language universal.

In Ó Broin's opinion, Blythe 'was what you might call a moderniser. He directed the civil service to follow the translation staff's system of orthography which involved modifications of the spelling given in *Dineen's* dictionary, and that the Roman script and simplified spelling should prevail in an English-Irish dictionary which was being prepared'[103].

According to Blythe, who apologises for the trouble he is obviously causing regarding the use of Roman script:

> I am sorry to trouble you so often on the question of Modern versus Elizabethan type for printing Irish. Some stray Elizabethans hope that if there was a change in goverment they might be able to get the policy reversed. Although there is no likelihood of such a thing within the next seven years, I should nevertheless like to have the Roman type brought into use generally, in every sphere in which we can exercise influence so that there will be no risk of the confusion that would be caused if a reversal policy were to take place later on[104].

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[102] Ollscoil na hÉireann, Gaillimhe (National University of Ireland, Galway) 'Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe 1928-2003', 5,8,9,10,11.
[103] Ó Broin, *Just Like Yesterday: An Autobiography*, 94.
[104] UCDA, P/24/425 (27), 'Blythe's instructions for the immediate application of Roman script,' 26/2/1931.

Blythe had been having an ongoing dialogue with a concerned General O'Duffy regarding the introduction of the Roman script for An Garda Síochána. In his usual brusque way, Blythe instructs O'Duffy on the necessity of the modern script and makes little of the problem that it might pose for the Guards:

> The position of the Irish language is too critical to enable it to bear the handicap of the so-called Gaelic type and, it is necessary that everything that the government can do to bring about the use of the modern type should be done. Of course, the Gaelic League and other ignorant reactionary organisations have passed resolutions against the printing of Irish in modern characters, but no attention should be paid to them[105].

Blythe barely conceals his irritation with the excuses of O'Duffy's Guards:

> If the Guards are to become proficient even in the oral use of Irish, it will be necessary for them to read some interesting books which will be available in the near future. The Guards need not fear the exams in Roman type. In my opinion any man who knows Irish at all well, needs only from ten minutes to two hours practice to enable him to read the Roman type[106].

7.9 An Teanga Gaeilge [the Irish Language]: Ernest Blythe's first and last love

Ernest Blythe was the Irish language greatest promoter. He expended an enormous amount of time and energy on keeping the language to the fore-front of the minds of the Irish people, especially the government. He held them all to account for the preservation and future usage of the ethnic tongue which, if it were to die away, would be the end of Ireland as a distinct and individual nation. According to Bernfeld in *The Challenge of Re-Vitalizing Hebrew*:

> No language or even dialect has been revived after having ceased to be a spoken language. Broken glass cannot be mended nor can a language whose natural development has been arrested and is no longer alive in the mouths of the people becomes, as history demonstrates, anything other than a literary or religious language, but not a vehicle of living popular speech[107].

In his opening speech at the start of this chapter, Blythe, like Bernfield, alluded to the Irish language ending its life in a 'pyramid of barren learning

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[105] UCDA, P24/425 (29), 'Letter from Blythe to General O'Duffy explaining the need for the Roman script,' 6/12/1930.
[106] UCDA, P24/425 (20), 'Letter form Blythe to General O'Duffy on the use of the Roman script in the Garda Síochána,' (no date)
[107] 'Eliezer Ben Yehuda: Reviver of Spoken Hebrew: The Challenge of Re-Vitalizing Hebrew,' cms.education-gov.il/NR/rdonlyres/ICDC7927-DF43-44D7-eliezerbenyehuda.pdf (accessed July 1, 2018).

in a scholastic cemetery and not as a vehicle of living speech'. Blythe was entitled to rage at the leaders of national opinion who had dragged their coat tails, talked the talk, with little to show for it in terms of the language being safe. Throughout the chapter the use of the term 'individuality' is frequently used by Blythe. Had the Irish people lost their sense of individuality? Had they lost their pride in their native language and couldn't be bothered to work for its rejuvenation? Unlike the Jews and their Hebrew language revival, the Irish were complacent in the face of the facts presented to them by Blythe who refused to let them off the hook:

> Particular groups of public officials and of local and national leaders of public opinion have long contended that Ireland ought to have her own distinctive language like other countries, but they have failed to realise that more than vague political sentiment or a natural desire to be in the fashion internationally is involved. They have never understood that the preservation of the language is a matter of life and death to the nation - that in consequence of our geographic proximity to Britain and our economic ties with her, mere political separation would not enable a completely English-speaking Ireland to retain, for more than a couple of generations, any real individuality or even a desire to remain independent. Moreover, it has apparently not occurred to the groups in question that a national language, with its immense influence on the mind of the people, has an importance far exceeding that of a formal and arbitrary symbol like, say, a national ensign or crest or coat-of-arms and, that correspondingly greater sacrifices for its preservation should be made[108].

Ernest Blythe was the most active Irish language enthusiast in the 1923-1932 Free State government. According to Ó Gadhra some of the language revival measures introduced by that government, such as the position of the language in state examinations and for civil service entry for example, were described as inhibiting and unimaginative and abandoned by Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave, son of W. T Cosgrave, whose government originally introduced them. What was Blythe's reaction to this assessment? Naturally, he would not let this slur on his policies pass without comment. According to Blythe, the real failure since 1932 was not the measures he had introduced but the failure of successive administrations to build on their foundation. According to Ó Gadhra, 'Blythe never accepted the argument that 'all compulsion' would have to be removed from the state's Irish revival effort. On the contrary Blythe insisted that strong state backing was vital for success. The urgency of the language question was one of the reasons why he and others had accepted the unsatisfactory Treaty settlement

[108] Blythe, '*Tomorrow is too Late*,' 7.

of 1921. De Valera stated that if he had to choose between the revival of the language and full national freedom, he would choose the language, arguing that if Irish finally died out it could never be restored, while there would always be another generation to take up the struggle for full political independence. However, Blythe frequently castigated de Valera for not building on the revival foundation when Fianna Fáil came to power in 1932. And when de Blaghd's old friends in Fine Gael openly abandoned the requirements of Irish in the state machine in 1966, de Blaghd openly disassociated himself from the change'[109].

The Irish language is what defined Ernest Blythe. It is a constant theme running through-out his life; through childhood, adolescence, early manhood and adulthood; throughout his period as an Irish revolutionary; political activist; as a Government minister. When his days in government were at an end, Blythe continued his campaign for the preservation of the language. He was like a dog with a bone; he could not, and would not, abandon this ancient language which he cherished and which he believed gave Ireland its individuality. Blythe believed that the Irish people had a moral duty to future generations to protect their heritage. Blythe made a major distinction between an ideal Ireland and the Irish people, who had only a life-interest in the country; 'they (the people) are trustees for citizens unborn, and to sell, surrender or partition they have no shadow of right'[110].

> We did not want to make our people fundamentally different from other present-day Europeans. We want only to make them as Irish as the people of France are French or the people of Italy, Italian. The more we allow the language to slip away the less reason is there for a politically separate Ireland[111].
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> I knew the process of Gaelicising society would be a very long one. I knew what a slow process it was to kill a language and how slow the process of revival would be. Had there been a scientist from abroad who could give some sort of direction, we would like to have such, but we thought we could do our own work[112].

[109] Ó Gadhra, 'Earnán de Blaghd: Appreciation', 99.
[110] Laffan, *The Resurrection of Ireland: The Sinn Féin Party 1916-1923*, 218.
[111] "Facing the Political Facts of 1975," *Irish Times*, 4 January 1975.
[112] Ó Hullacháin, *The Irish Language in Society*, 38.

Conclusion

This dissertation comprises an abstract, an introduction, seven chapters, conclusion, and select bibliography. Each chapter focused on specific periods of Blythe's life, through childhood and adolescence, through early manhood to that of the mature man, concluding in 1932 at the end of his political career.

Chapter one focused on Blythe's formative years growing up in Magheragall which highlighted the early influences that aided the development of a patriotic mind-set. His interaction with the Irish-speaking maids was the beginning of a life-long passion for the Irish language leading to his becoming the most dedicated and persistent proponent of measures during the twentieth century to prevent the death of the language; Ireland's troubled history was revealed to him via the nationalist newspapers brought to the Blythe farm by the Catholic men-servants, which, also encouraged young Ernest's developing penchant for Irish nationalism.

Blythe's mother, being a Presbyterian with a family connection to William Orr, was an influence also as she enlightened her son on the United Irishmen and their fight against the English in 1798. Blythe however stated that it was not the stories of the United Irishmen that set him on the path of Irish nationalism but the Irish language that he had learned from the maid-servants. The final stage of his primary schooling under Joseph Begley transformed an unruly young Blythe into a model student who successfully passed the civil service entrance exam at fifteen years of age.

In 1905 young Blythe went to work in the civil service in Dublin as opposed to London, a decision which was life-changing in every respect for the young northerner. Working in Dublin placed him in an environment conducive to nurturing latent Irish nationalism. There, Blythe met young men with a different political outlook from that of his Unionist upbringing being more in line with his own budding nationalist aspirations. These encounters led to his joining the GL, the GAA and finally becoming a member of the IRB at age eighteen years. Blythe had now passed through a common, advanced nationalist apprenticeship - the holy trinity of membership of the GL, GAA and the IRB.

Blythe returned north in March 1909 to work as a junior reporter for the pro-Unionist *North-Down Herald and Bangor Gazette*. He had by now donned the mantle of an Irish separatist and in conjunction with Bulmer Hobson and Denis McCullough, he assisted in the setting up in Belfast of Freedom Clubs and the Dungannon Clubs, working hard to convert Royalist Ulster to Irish nationalism through immersion in Irish politics and culture.
In 1910 Blythe controversially joined the OO for a short period, at the same time he was also a member of the IRB. Fitzpatrick had accused Blythe of 'astonishing duplicity' regarding this episode however, this study has found no definitive evidence to support Fitzpatrick's claim as to why Blythe joined the order other than his own statement of having been invited to join.

Having failed to convert Ulster loyalists, Blythe directed his energies towards fulfilling his dream of becoming a fluent speaker of Irish. He left the north again in 1913 migrating to the Kerry Gaeltacht and worked as a farm labourer on the farm of Tomas Ashe, where he became proficient in Irish. He was bitterly disappointed at the decline of Irish in the area. This experience convinced Blythe that Ireland must obtain its freedom and put in place strong measures to fully ensure the survival of the language. He also had contact during that period with known Irish separatists who were making plans for an offensive against the British at some undefined date in the future, which indicates that Blythe was fully committed to his dream of Gaeilge agus Saoirse.

In 1913 Blythe put aside the Irish language in order to concentrate on a campaign to rehabilitate the near defunct northern IRB, and a recruitment drive to find men willing to follow MacNeill as opposed to Redmond, for the Irish Volunteers. Blythe became a peripatetic recruitment officer, with responsibilities for organising and training his recruits in Counties Clare, Kerry, Limerick and Cork with no specialist skills, equipment or money. He recruited large numbers of Irishmen and youths, in the process inflicting major damage to Britain's First World War recruitment campaign. Viewed as a great threat to British military interests in Ireland, the British tried to restrict Blythe's sphere of influence through deportations and imprisonments. Described by the British as being of a hostile intent, a most dangerous man and a person who could not be left at large, Blythe never

faltered from his belief that Ireland should be free and Gaelic whatever the cost and, that Irishmen should be fighting for the rights of their small nation. His estrangement from his homeland of Ulster was the ultimate price Blythe for his convictions. He was rewarded for his dedication to the cause by being elected SF M.P for North Monaghan in the general election of 1918. Blythe's 'hard-bitten realism to violence'[1] confirmed that the severing of his Ulster Unionist roots was complete.

From 1919 to 1932 Blythe occupied a variety of posts in government during the critical period of establishing democracy and stability within the new Free State. Appointed as Minister for Trade and Commerce he managed to set up a working department during which time he was arrested, imprisoned and on the run; his department were responsible for the establishment of the Clover Meats factory. He was a strong supporter of the agricultural sector and was against levying stringent tariffs that could damage the Irish farmers.

Blythe's exploits during Collins' war of attrition against the RIC brought him to the attention of the British when he was arrested in possession of a seditious document. Strenuously denying any knowledge of the document's contents his plea of innocence was dismissed and he received another gaol sentence of one year. The conclusion was that Blythe knew the contents of the document and that he was in all probability the author of the document. Collins valued Blythe as a fellow revolutionary and important to the boycott as can be seen from the execution of Blythe's arresting officer one month after Blythe's arrest by Collin's execution squad.

A break-down in law and order followed the implementation of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. The anti-Treatyites brought the country to the brink of anarchy forcing the government to apply stern measures to those insurgents who were out to bring the state down. These measures included summary execution and were designed to put terror into the heart's and minds of other anarchists. Blythe had no trouble supporting this harsh measure, neither was he conflicted in giving his assent to the execution of men with whom he had at one time been fighting for the same ideal, namely Irish freedom. He said

[1] M. Laffan, The Resurrection Of Ireland: The Sinn Féin Party 1916-1923 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999), 320.

personal feelings did not come into it, that it was a counter-revolutionary measure to stamp out anarchy so that the Treaty could be implemented in full.

In 1923 Blythe was appointed Minister for Finance in the Cumann na nGeadheal government. This appointment brought Blythe's name into disrepute for his reduction of the old-age pensions. Blythe, under the vigilant guidance of the finance department's civil servants, made swingeing cuts to the budget through a process of fiscal retrenchment, but the most damaging to Blythe's future reputation, was the cut in the old-age pensions. Blythe's position was unique during this period of consolidation of the new state, money was scarce and government spending had to be kept under control. A balanced ledger was the government's mantra. Blythe has since been heavily criticised for taking money from the pockets of Ireland's elderly. Any criticism of Blythe must be set against the special circumstances pertaining in Ireland at the time and the onerous financial responsibility of getting the country up and running; could his detractors have done any better in the circumstances? Civil servant, Joseph Brennan, declared that Blythe was 'a dead loss as Minister for Finance'. Was this a true reflection of Blythe's competence? Blythe had infuriated Brennan with his constant demands for money to fund his Irish language projects. This study states that differing ideals and priorities led to intense friction between the two men which became the source of Brennan's damaging epithet.

Blythe held unpopular opinions and unorthodox, but far-sighted views on partition. He disagreed with the nationalists that partition was England's crime against Ireland. His view was that it was Ireland's crime against herself. He claimed Daniel O'Connell's brand of Catholic nationalism as opposed to cultural nationalism had been a mistake, leaving the Protestants to believe there was no purpose for a separate parliament in Dublin other than to endorse a Catholic majority. For Blythe, Irish culture and not religion, should be the bed-rock of Irish nationalism, and that the political future of the country would be influenced ultimately by how well Irish culture was nurtured and protected. He castigated nationalist coercion as practised by the physical force element (IRA) as counter-productive, causing the Ulster Protestants to adhere more strongly to England. He also

believed that had the British used force against the Ulster militants when partition had been first mooted in 1913-1914, the situation would not have arisen. A committed separatist himself, he laid the blame fairly and squarely with the nationalists for holding on to the old mentality of 'England's to blame'. That they should embrace a policy of peaceful persuasion towards Ulster Protestants; set a good example by raising a toast to the Queen and, refrain from flying the tri-colour in the north.

For Blythe, differing religious faiths was at the source of partition. Protestants were terrified lest they be placed under the domination of the Roman Catholic church. He blamed the south for failing to recognize the religious barriers inherent in resolving partition, and by implementing policies designed to alienate the Ulster Protestants who had chosen to live under Imperial rule; under the terms of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, the south had an obligation to honour their wishes and to recognize the Stormont government. For Blythe, Protestant consent was paramount in any future plans for ending partition. Unless some of Ulster's Protestants could be persuaded to support a united Ireland, partition would remain indefinitely. Presciently, Blythe predicted that partition would outlast the twentieth century.

The Irish language is what defined Ernest Blythe. He was an Irish language enthusiast par excellence. For Blythe the language was intrinsically part of the Irish identity without which Irish freedom was valueless. The language also became a part of Blythe's personal identity by adopting cultural nationalism as his political identity. He spoke and wrote fluently in the language, believing that every nationally-minded Irish man and woman should have the same opportunity.

In government Blythe's primary focus was on finding ways and means to rescue the language from extinction. He was responsible for protecting the Fior-Gaeltacht areas which he believed were the well-spring of the language and vital to its survival. He introduced the Irish language to the Arts - the Abbey Theatre for instance became the setting for his Irish language productions, which, although unpopular with many patrons, he believed to be necessary in order to make the Abbey a truly national theatre. He also founded the Irish language theatre, An Taibhearc na Gaillimhe. He founded

the publishing company, An Gúm, which was responsible for the translations of popular novels and books into Irish so that the ordinary Irish person could keep their Irish intact. He drew up plans, whilst in Kerry, for an original method to save the language which had correlations with that used to save the Hebrew language. Blythe was adamant that Ireland's individuality as a nation would cease to exist if she lost her native tongue. The language was part of the blood-sacrifice of 1916, part of the hallowed creed of Patrick Pearse and all right-thinking Irish men and women should rally to its cause.

This study concludes that the Irish language was the springboard for Ernest Blythe's future revolutionary and political career. Through the medium of the language he was introduced to a Gaelic vision of Ireland as opposed to the Unionist/ British model which he had inherited from his upbringing. Joining the civil service in Dublin was also influential. Civil servants were prominent in the GL for instance and these cultural movements were the initial introduction to Irish-Ireland ideals, leading to the more advanced separatist politics of Sinn Féin and the IRB. The civil service, by separating these young men from home and community, provided them with independence and a cosmopolitan rather than a parochial outlook on world affairs.

That Blythe's decision to learn the language viva voce in County Kerry was not a major factor in his radicalisation; he was by this stage a good command of Irish and had already announced his political stand when he joined the IRB at age eighteen years. It did, however, give him the opportunity to meet and discuss politics and revolution with future Irish revolutionaries such as Desmond Fitzgerald and the O'Rahilly and, to be in a position when needed by the IRB for active service as a Volunteer recruitment officer.

That Blythe's political radicalisation was a gradual process over a period of three years, from the cultural nationalism of the GL to the outright separatist violence of the IRB making him, according to Regan, one of the most vocal proponents of the Gaelic-State ideal to emerge in the Treaty debates. Regan posits that while Blythe professed to be a spokesman for his northern co-religionists he was probably more misleading than enlightening

to his southern audience who were largely ignorant of Ulster Protestantism, and that he adopted extreme positions to compensate for being an outsider. This study argues that Blythe's credentials as a native Ulster-Protestant enabled him to convey to the southerners, the depth of sectarian bitterness and bigotry directed at Roman Catholics and which was the major stumbling block to re-union. Neither does Regan's further argument that Blythe adopted extreme measures in order to compensate for being an outsider does not hold up to scrutiny. Ernest Blythe would have to be a masochist to willingly inflict the hardships upon himself that he underwent during his period spent with the Irish Volunteers and the IRB. Likewise he certainly wasn't looking for admiration when he reduced the old-age pensions!

Blythe's views on partition were not directly influenced by the fact that he was of Ulster-Protestant stock or that his immediate Unionist family still lived there. Blythe's belief that Ireland should be a self-governing, Gaelic state was totally at odds with his up-bringing, a belief that remained unaltered throughout his life-time. He believed that the British should have used force against the loyalists at the very beginning. His seemingly ambiguous behaviour during the Belfast Trade Boycott for example (primarily used to bring attention to the plight of Ulster's Catholics) was a stalling mechanism, in order to assess if the boycott would be successful in smashing the border. When the Ulster Loyalist's appealed for British support, Blythe knew that the Trade Boycott as a weapon to end partition, was dead in the water.

That Ernest Blythe was a major player in the formation and consolidation of the Irish Free State is beyond doubt. His initial participation in the build-up and training of an armed Volunteer Army which would take on the might of Britain was crucial to winning future Irish independence. For instance, his impact on the British conscription campaign was of major importance. Blythe's combined propaganda writing and continuous travelling around the province of Munster on a bicycle recruiting men, had a detrimental effect on the recruitment of Irishmen to the British army. Encouraged by Blythe, they remained at home to fight for their own small nation. Blythe willingly sacrificed his own personal liberty and livelihood, risking his neck to the hangman's rope for Irish freedom during this period.

In government he was a supporter of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, referring his government colleagues to the sentiments contained within it with regard to the establishment, and recognition, of the six counties government for instance. He resolutely followed his party's conservative policies on finance also, in order to keep the new state afloat thereby preventing a return to British rule. Similarly, when anarchy threatened the country, Blythe had no qualms about despatching the trouble-makers who were a threat to the democratic principles contained within the Treaty.

Ernest Blythe was, rightly or wrongly, the subject of intense character assassination throughout his life. His endeavours on behalf of Irish independence for example were of little consequence to his detractors then and as now. This study argues that Ernest Blythe was a man of substance, convinced absolutely of the rightness of Ireland's cause and laboured accordingly to fulfil his childhood dream of Gaeilge agus Saoirse na Tíre. After a long life spent in the service of his adopted country, Ernest Blythe died in 1975 aged 86 years and is buried with his wife Eithne in Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin. Sir Walter Scott's poem 'The Lay of the Last Minstrel' contains the following lines which are particularly applicable to Ernest Blythe.

'Breathes there the man with soul so dead
Who never to himself hath said
This is my own, my native land'.

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