

As dust settled, whose

Building a nation from the rubble of 1916 was a process replicated on the pathway to freedom in several other countries, writes **Conor Mulvagh**

THE Easter Proclamation was by no means the only vision for an Irish future to have been circulating a century ago. It is interesting to study the history of failed projects.

One such project was that of creating a new Irish identity during the First World War. Championed by Irish party leader John Redmond, the intention was to move beyond the racial and religious constructs of Irish identity which had dominated 19th century thinking. Redmond's wish was that orange and green could come together in the trenches to forge a new civic form of Irish identity.

Like Pearse's vision of a new Ireland, Redmond's relied on blood sacrifice. This should come as no surprise. Australia likewise established a modern identity through the blood sacrifice and mateship with the invention of an idealised Australian masculinity in the 'digger'. This is analogous to the wartime reinvention of the British 'Tommy' and the 'Poilu' in France.

Whereas modern national identities were successfully shaped through British, French, and especially Australian service and sacrifice, in the Irish case, the vision of a non-sectarian new Irish identity failed.

The greatest hope for this new Irishness was encapsulated in the 10th (Irish) Division. Comprised of Catholics and Protestants from all four corners of the island of Ireland, John Redmond hoped that this, the pride of Irish manhood would become the foundation stone of a civic and non-partitioned Home Rule nation.

The 10th served alongside British and ANZAC forces at Gallipoli. Despite the bravery of its soldiers, the division failed to turn the crippling losses

suffered into a triumph of failure. In the words of Bryan Ricco Cooper, sometime Unionist MP for south Dublin and Major of the 10th (Irish) Division, '[Suvla] is a name which has brought sorrow to many homes, and which will be perpetually associated with failure, but there are many glorious memories associated with it.'

Cooper wrote the official history of the 10th (Irish) Division at Gallipoli in 1917. The book in itself was an attempt to salvage the 'glorious memories' of the action there. In a passionate and heartfelt introduction to the book, written on St Patrick's Day 1917, John Redmond struggled to vindicate the sacrifices of his beloved 10th Division.

Redmond's words, along with Cooper's book itself, represent one of the firmest articulations of this project for a new Ireland. Redmond hoped in vain that the carnage of Suvla Bay, rather than the Paschal sacrifice of the rebels, could heal the sectarian divide in Irish society and avert partition. In this regard, Redmond and Pearse shared an improbable ideal.

Redmond's introduction claimed that: 'No Division in any theatre of the War suffered more severely or showed greater self-sacrifices and gallantry.

And yet, largely, I fancy, by reason of the fact that its operations were in a distant theatre, comparatively little has been heard of its achievements'.

Trying to salvage the political project behind the then decimated 10th Division, Redmond continued: 'The men who had differed in religion and politics, and their whole outlook on life, became brothers in the 10th Division. Unionist and Nationalist, Catholic and Protestant, as Major Bryan Cooper says — "lived and fought and died side by side, like brothers." They combined for a common

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If this was Redmond's failed project for a united Ireland won in the trenches, what of the simultaneous Ulster unionist project to ensure regional exclusion from any Home Rule settlement through their wartime sacrifices?
Where Redmond failed, Carson succeeded



purpose: to fight the good fight for liberty and civilisation, and, in a special way, for the future liberty and honour of their own country.'

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Where Redmond failed, Carson succeeded. The 36th (Ulster) Division found its showdown not on the Turkish periphery but at the Somme. Buttressed by the Boyne narrative, the Somme reinforced a powerful Ulster Protestant identity for unionists. The fusion of community ties and imperial loyalty were perfect in articulating Ulster unionist identity when James Craig's Northern Irish cabinet

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Ireland was it anyway?



Above: A Royal Irish Fusilier from the 10th Division teases a Turkish sniper from the World War One trenches in 1917.

Left: John Redmond in 1910.
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Main: Conor Mulvagh outside the GPO.
MARK CONDREN

India was famously partitioned in 1947 and this parallel is easily the closest to the Irish case. Two-state or multi-state solutions form part of the histories of Germany, Korea, Cyprus, Yugoslavia, Nigeria/Biafra, Congo/Katanga, Israel/Palestine, and Czechoslovakia. More recently, new borders saw the birth of new states in East Timor, Kosovo, and South Sudan.

Secession is an unresolved phenomenon across the modern world. Independence movements of all types can be found everywhere from the disputed oblasts of former Soviet republics, to the Balkans, Catalonia, Scotland, and the Kurdish territories.

It seems as if the corollary of increasing supranational integration — through entities such as the European Union, NATO, and the African Union — is that calls for greater regional autonomy have increased rather than subsided.

Returning from the present to the past, what of those different visions of Irishness being articulated a century ago? Is it worth wondering why Redmond's vision for a new Ireland failed whereas the foundation narratives of the GPO and the Somme succeeded in different communities.

However admirable Redmond's vision for a shared history was, it did not receive a mandate. The war service upon which it was based was unpopular even in 1915; by 1918 it had become toxic among Irish nationalists. Equally, despite Redmond's rhetorical appeasement of unionist concerns, elements of the Home Rule movement remained deeply clerical, overtly sectarian, and unsupportive of an industrialised economic model such as existed in the northeast.

History is important but imagination can be even more powerful. The two Irelands created in the 1920s both found their mythologised origin points in 1916, one in the rubble of Dublin and one in the mud of the Somme.

As important as these events were in fact, they became colossal in collective memory. It is not so much a question of whose Ireland, but of which Ireland. Even today, history must compete with rival mythologies.

Dr Conor Mulvagh is a lecturer in Irish History at the School of History at University College Dublin (UCD) with special responsibility for the Decade of Commemorations



established the only true 'Home Rule' government ever seen on this island in 1921.

Ireland's transition from empire to independence is one for which broad parallels can be found in other regions of the globe. Two closely aligned processes: self-determination and decolonisation occurred in the 20th century and raise the question — to which of these does Ireland

more closely conform?

If the Wilsonian self-determination was the vision the rebels saw for themselves, the other global parallel was decolonisation. In the way Ireland developed both internally and internationally during the 20th century, it demonstrated many post-colonial traits. The development of its political system, the incrementally achieved sovereignty of the state, and

the contested definition of the national territory were experiences shared by post-1945 'nation-states' such as India, Nigeria, and Tanzania to name but a few.

One aspect of Ireland's independence that is often spoken about, as if it is somehow unique, is partition. However, partition was in fact more the rule than the exception for many countries during the 20th century.

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