



‘The Irish were Egyptians long ago’

As England’s oldest colonial territory, Ireland was evoked both as model and warning in Egypt, writes **Hussein Omar**



In his 1920 poem ‘The Second Coming’, WB Yeats pictured the global unrest that had begun to shake the world the year before as an Egyptian sphinx, awakening “somewhere in the sands of desert” west of Bethlehem. His choice of image wasn’t surprising: after what seemed like “twenty centuries of stony sleep”, Egypt was suddenly aflame. At the end of World War I, Britain and France had promised to leave the territories they occupied in the Middle East, but as their intentions to the contrary became apparent, thousands of men and women took to the streets in protest. War-weary peasants staged sit-ins, tore up railroad tracks and seized buildings across Egypt, Libya, Palestine and Tunisia. By 1920, the tremors had spread to Iraq and to Morocco, where guerrillas declared independence from the semi-colonised kingdom. Sudan was engulfed by protests in 1924; by 1925, Syria was in the throes of a full-blown war. When the newly established British Royal Air Force bombed Egypt and Iraq in an attempt to crush the revolutions, the air strikes only energised them instead.

Just as Egyptian revolutionaries had paid close attention to the events of Ireland’s Easter Rising, Irish intellectuals and activists followed the antique land’s sudden eruption into revolt with great interest and sympathy. A popular vaudeville song ‘The Irish were Egyptians Long Ago’ went:

*It must have been the Irish who built the pyramids,
For no one else could carry up the bricks.
It must have been a Doyle who swam the river Nile,
For no one but an Irishman could fight a crocodile.*

From the sublime to the ridiculous, evocations of Egypt were everywhere. Even General John Maxwell — ‘Bloody Maxwell’ — was deployed by the British from Dublin to Cairo to placate Egypt’s rebellious natives after his success in suppressing the Easter Rising. In 1920, on Bloody Sunday, the intelligence officers targeted by the IRA were rumoured to have been spirited in from Egypt, where they had allegedly served.

Such links were notable. They hinted at a family resemblance between the two British-ruled territories, though the nature of that similarity was elusive. Ireland was England’s oldest colonial territory, Egypt one of its most recent. Ireland was technically a formal part of the United Kingdom, whereas Egypt was under occupation. Ireland had been colonised via a combination of land appropriation and social engineering, whereas the ‘temporary’ military occupation of Egypt had left the native population largely untouched. Despite these differences, there was a sense of affinity between Egypt and Ireland that went beyond the com-

mon British enemy. The Irish and the Egyptians — races ‘accounted dead’, in the words of the poet Susan L Mitchell — were very much in the midst of their own second comings. (No one, of course, commented on the parallel between the role of the Irish in colonising India and the Caribbean, and that of the Egyptians in colonising the Sudan and the Levant).

The traffic between Cairo and Dublin was not just metaphorical; nor did it go in only one direction. In Egypt, Ireland was consistently evoked both as a model and a warning. As early as 1882, the Anglo-Irish aristocrat Lord Dufferin, who wrote Egypt’s first constitution, insisted that the Egyptian peasant must be protected from exploitation by landowners, lest Egypt become another Ireland. In 1906, University College Dublin alumnus William Moloney edited (along with the Dublin socialist and playwright Frederick Ryan) *The Egyptian Standard*, the most significant nationalist publication of its day in Cairo. Moloney and Ryan drew connections between the Irish land problem and that of Egypt.

Despite Lord Dufferin’s intentions, Egyptian peasants ended up as landless as their Irish counterparts. By 1919, a leader of the Egyptian co-operative movement, Ibrahim Rashad, came to Ireland to learn how the agricultural inequities of his native land might be resolved. Rashad’s 1920 book *An Egyptian in Ireland*, which documented his time with the mystic writer George William Russell (also known as AE), and the reformer Horace Plunkett is an extensive meditation on how Ireland could serve as a model for Egypt.

In Libya in 1918, in an attempt some have suggested was inspired by the Irish, peasants in Tripoli had tried to establish their own republic independent of Italy. It sparked copycat movements all over north Africa. Only a few months later, the Egyptian town of Zifta in the Nile Delta declared its liberation and elected its own president. Just days after that, the entire province of Minya in Upper Egypt did the same. When the republicans of Zifta ripped up the railway tracks to stop the British from reaching the town, soldiers from Australia and New Zealand were sent to besiege it. The newly elected president of the ten-day-old republic, Yusuf al-Gindi, wrote to the Australian soldiers, begging them not to attack. Assuming them to be of Irish descent, he urged them to join the Egyptians, such that they might together overthrow the British yoke. The Australians, horrified to be seen as brothers to the dark-skinned Egyptians, stormed the town anyway, while al-Gindi fled.

Britain’s imperial authorities struggled to understand the rebellions that were breaking out everywhere. Before 1919, they had often viewed Egyptian demands for independence not as a political position but instead as a manifestation of the natives’ implacable Muslim

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rage. But the scale of the 1919 uprisings was too large, its political demands too extensive and sophisticated to allow for such an easy dismissal. In a memorandum, a British officer expressed fears that the Egyptian revolutionaries would soon “go Sinn Féin”. Britain had failed to contain her subjects, the memo warned; Egypt might soon “create a Pan-Islamic-Sinn Féin machine making mischief everywhere”.

British officials sometimes described Sa’d Zaghlul, the leader of the uprising, as the Michael Collins of Egypt, or sometimes as its Éamon de Valera. Occasionally, Zaghlul was Arthur Griffith. His aristocratic rival Adly Yeghen was John Redmond.

Why were British imperialists so keen to understand Egypt in Irish terms? And why did

Irish Independent

'England and Egypt: A promise, not a problem'

From the Irish Independent,
Monday October 4, 1920Book review by 'FFB': *The Egyptian Problem* by Sir Valentine Chirol

Except in the matter of time there is a remarkable resemblance between the British occupation of Egypt and the British occupation of Ireland. It was only in 1882 that they occupied Egypt. Amongst other things, this occupation created a problem. There is always a problem after British occupations. But when one analyses the situation one discovers no problem at all. The British bombarded Alexandria and took over Egypt. They promised solemnly to withdraw. Three years was the limit they set themselves on one occasion. This is 1920 and they are there yet. Their promise was not worth the paper on which it was written.

Many books have been written about what is called the Egyptian problem. Sir Valentine-Chirol has added to that list by a ponderous volume of over 300 pages. Yet the subject can be summarised in three lines. The British promised to leave Egypt and they have not kept their promise. All the words in the world cannot obscure that simple sentence. A man may write a book to prove that black is white. But black is still black. And the moon is not made of green cheese.

The usual apology

So, too, with Sir Valentine Chirol's apology for the British occupation of Egypt. It is the sort of apology that we know very well in Ireland — an apology that arouses cynicism, not respect. It appears that if the British withdrew from Egypt chaos would follow. The Egyptians are not fit for complete independence. The British have been benefactors, not tyrants. How well we know those phrases in Ireland.

Seriously we are invited to believe that England is animated by philanthropic considerations — that the welfare of the Egyptians is a dominant feature of the occupation.

The Germans could have pleaded the same, with as much real reason, in the case of their occupation of Belgium. Any great power can plead it with relation to any small power. It is an old weapon in the armoury of empires.

Mexico and Portugal are, at least, as ill-governed as Egypt ever was. One might ask why England, if she persists in regarding herself as the policewoman of the world, does not occupy these two countries? Of course, the answer is that their occupation would not suit her. But Egypt's does.

In view of [former British foreign secretary] Sir Edward Grey's suggestion about a two years' withdrawal in Ireland, I commend this book to thoughtful Irish readers. The fictions by which England fooled the world into the belief that her occupation of Egypt was only temporary are clearly shown.

1882-1920: if one were in the least inclined to trust British promises, these figures would shatter that confidence.

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Monuments men:
British infantrymen pose
for a photograph on the
Great Sphinx at Giza
in March, 1920

PHOTO: MICHAEL NICHOLSON/
CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

Enforcer: John Maxwell (circled) was
deployed by the British from Dublin to Cairo
to placate Egypt's rebels after his success
in suppressing the Easter Rising

Egyptian and Irish freedom fighters alike lean so heavily upon the comparison? It was a way to speak of something that was clearly visible to all involved, but was yet to have a name. In 1920, there did seem to be a word that captured and contained the force that troubled the sights of the British empire's devoted servants. It was only in 1955, at a later moment of great upheaval, that the word — "anti-colonialism" — gained currency. But in 1920, as the word was yet slouching to be born, the best that contemporary observers could do was approximate it, through such globe-spanning analogies.

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