

A Rolls-Royce and shopping in Harrods: how the Irish sought a strong image



Conor Mulvagh

While social events and dinners helped delegates win allies, such bonhomie was markedly absent from the negotiations

was at two properties: 22 Hans Place and 15 Cadogan Gardens. Both were a little over a mile from Buckingham Palace and two miles from Downing Street, where the negotiations took place. To further enhance their status, the delegation rented a series of motor cars. These included at least one Rolls-Royce, which brought delegates to the conference on the opening day, October 11, 1921. Echoing the extravagance of salubrious London addresses and luxury cars, the Irish provisioned themselves at Harrods department store, where one receipt details bonbons, peppermint lumps and assorted chocolates being purchased for the residents of 22 Hans Place.

JUSTIFIED EXPENSES

A memorandum from Robert Brennan, the Dáil’s under-secretary of foreign affairs, dated October 20, 1921, suggests a rationale for expenses that others might see as excessive for a rebel administration on a war footing: “It is essential that our representatives be as well dressed as the people (official or social) amongst whom they are expected to move. I suggest, therefore, that representatives or others going abroad be supplied in advance with sufficient funds to enable them to purchase an outfit in accordance with the dignity of the office they are about to fill.”

He suggested a sum of £100 for outfitting each representative.

Around the Irish delegates were assembled a small team of secretaries, additional legal advisers, bodyguards and other aides. Many of this team had strong previous connections to either Michael Collins or Arthur Griffith. In Collins’ case, he brought in many trusted members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, of which he was president of the Supreme Council.

The delegation rubbed shoulders with members of London high society, including the Belfast-born painter Sir John Lavery and his glamorous American wife, Hazel. Sir John painted a series of portraits of the delegates that capture both the mood and the moment in striking terms.

Dinners and social events played a key part in consensus-building and soft power. This sociability and conviviality did not, however, always extend to the negotiations, either within or between the delegations.

In Downing Street, David Lloyd George isolated both Griffith and Collins early on and negotiated with them separately on key issues. The prime minister identified the cousins Robert Barton and Erskine Childers, secretary to the Irish delegation, as the most intransigent of the Irish team and sought to keep them as far from the action as possible.

He was equally troubled by factionalism on his own side. In early November, he had brought fellow delegates Lord Birkenhead and Winston Churchill around to supporting his plan for an Irish peace. However, at

cabinet, Andrew Bonar Law, who would succeed him as prime minister within a year, was engaged in machinations behind the scenes and was mobilising Conservative diehards against Lloyd George’s scheme.

Looking at the negotiations at a century’s remove,

it is easy for us to downplay the looming threat of “immediate and terrible war” that hung over both the deliberations in London and the debates in Dublin when the treaty was brought home. Such was the fear of war that the Irish side maintained a contingency if talks broke down. South of London at Croydon Aerodrome, a Martinsyde Type A Mark II biplane was purchased and left on

standby from November 24 to get Collins (and presumably other delegates) back to Ireland in the event of a breakdown in talks. That same day, Frances Stevenson, Lloyd George’s secretary and mistress, recorded in her diary that “SF are being very difficult and D[avid] says tonight that it looks as though a break may occur at any moment”.

The negotiations were kept on track and revised articles of agreements were under consideration by the Irish delegation on December 1 and 2. The Dáil cabinet met on December 3 to consider the situation.

The following day, Griffith wrote to Éamon de Valera after another meeting between the two sides: “They talked of their difficulties. We said we had just as many. We had tried to meet them. They asked what was the difficulty about going in like Canada in the Empire?”

Gavan Duffy said that we should be as closely associated with them as the dominions in the large matters, and more so in the matter of defence, but our difficulty is coming within the empire. They jumped up at this and the conversation came to a close, we undertaking to send them copies of our proposals tomorrow and they undertaking to send in a formal rejection tomorrow. They would, they said, inform [Northern Ireland prime minister James] Craig tomorrow that the negotiations were broken down. We then parted.”

By December 5, Griffith, Collins and

Éamonn Duggan were ready to sign. Gavan Duffy would not stand alone in opposing the document. Robert Barton essentially held the casting vote and had the fate of the document in his hands. Childers worked hard to convince him not to sign the document, while Duggan made an impassioned plea to him to agree to the terms on offer.

GRUDGING CONSENT

According to Frank Pakenham, Griffith, Collins and Duggan had got their hats and coats and were ready to leave to sign the agreement and three times they were pulled back by Barton. When Duggan finally won his grudging consent, the delegates progressed to Downing Street, ironed out some small but important last-minute amendments and agreed to sign the document.

When finalised copies of the text were ready for signing, it was 2.20am. The negotiations had lasted eight weeks. It would be a further month until the Dáil voted to ratify the terms on January 7, 1922.

In assessing the Anglo-Irish Treaty, it is useful to ask not what Ireland failed to gain but what Britain failed to hold. It was a climbdown for the British Empire and a last attempt to extract itself from the Irish morass with honour.

From the British perspective, Home Rule and devolution can be seen as a long attempt by the imperial centre to orchestrate an



Difficult negotiations: Michael Collins leaving 10 Downing Street in 1921. Below: Arthur Griffith and his wife Maud outside 22 Hans Place, one of the Irish team’s two London bases



orderly reconfiguration of empire. In April 1912, prime minister HH Asquith criticised the scale of responsibilities, large and small, that Westminster had heaped upon itself. He asked the Commons if “any deliberative assembly in the history of the world ever taken upon itself such a grotesquely impossible task?” A decade on, having won the war in Europe, Britain had been forced to negotiate truce terms in a war at home to Irish republicanism.

Victorious at Versailles in 1919, Lloyd George had mocked the IRA as the latest iteration of the “small and disreputable” “murder societies that thrive now and again” in Ireland. Two years later, he would be signing a document with them on an ostensible equal footing.

Reactions to the text in Westminster are perhaps more illuminating than the often-quoted Dublin treaty debates. In the House of Commons, one of the diehard Conservatives, John Gretton, said: “[This] House regrets that the proposed settlement of the government of Ireland... involves the surrender of the rights of the Crown in Ireland, gives power to establish an independent Irish army and navy, violates pledges given to Ulster, and fails to safeguard the rights of the loyalist population in Southern Ireland.”

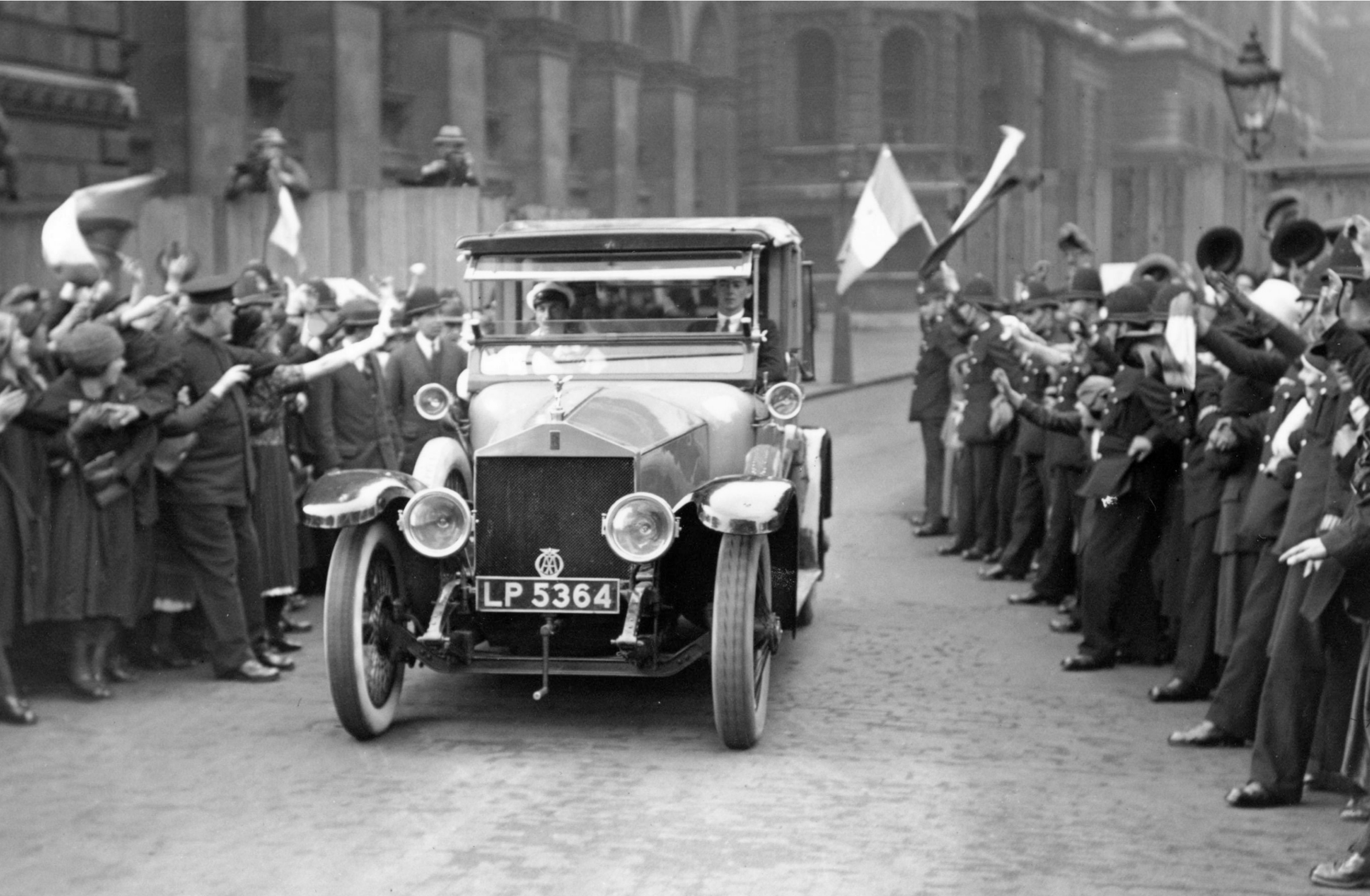
He derided the term ‘British Commonwealth of Nations’, saying that no such entity existed and, just as Irish TDs were decrying the oath for being too much, he saw it as the “least

binding oath or form of oath that one could possibly conceive”.

Meanwhile, that same day in the House of Lords, Edward Carson offered the most far-sighted analysis of the treaty’s wider ramifications. To his fellow lords, he observed: “[The] reason why they had to pass these terms of treaty, and the reason why they could not put down crime in Ireland, was because they had neither the men nor the money, nor the backing; let me say that that is an awful confession to make to the British Empire. If you tell your empire in India, in Egypt, and all over the world that you have not got the men, the money, the pluck, the inclination, and the backing to restore law and order in a country within 20 miles of your own shore, you may as well begin to abandon the attempt to make British rule prevail throughout the empire at all.”

Although he could not have known how accurate his prediction would become, he was right that nationalists and revolutionaries across the empire were taking note. The British government had redefined its very essence in treating with Ireland, and Ireland’s independence would serve as an example and an inspiration throughout the decolonisations of the 20th century.

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Fanfare: Crowds cheer the Irish delegation as they arrive at Downing Street for negotiations. PHOTOS: HULTON ARCHIVE