



People and Place: Dublin in 1911

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Like every great city in any given year, Dublin in 1911 was a mass of contradictions. A second city of the British Empire, Dublin was also the first city of nationalist Ireland and, within its boundaries, the divisions of class and culture were extraordinary. This was a city of genuine diversity: rich and poor; immigrants and natives; nationalists and unionists; Catholics and Protestants and Jews and agnostics and so many more, all bound together in the life of the city.

Much has been written about the slums of Dublin, the notoriously high death rate, the darkness of poverty that defined life for so many families. However, there was much more to the city than its poverty, and my ambition for the next 20 minutes is to give you a flavour of some other aspects of Dublin in 1911.

At the heart of Dublin stood the huge stone fort of Dublin Castle, the focal point of British rule in Ireland for almost seven centuries. Ireland had lost its parliament through the *Act of Union* in 1800, and administrative power in Ireland rested behind the gates of the Castle. The importance of the Castle and of the government offices which stood in the most prestigious streets of the city defined the colonial nature of Dublin's existence.

Dublin was also a port city, though not on the scale of Belfast, Liverpool or Glasgow. On April Fools' Day, 1911, the *Titanic* was launched from the Harland and Wolff Shipyards in Belfast; but no project of this scale could be undertaken in Dublin. There was no major ship-building industry, no vast industrial sector, no sense of a place driven by the impulses of manufacturing entrepreneurs and their workforce. There were, of course, industry and innovation, but never on the scale of comparable cities in other parts of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Administration and commerce, rather than industry, drove the city's economy.

To this end, Dublin port was more a transit point for British goods imported to Ireland and for the agricultural export trade of the city's rural hinterland, not least the cattle boats that left at least seven times a day, as part of the 80 weekly sailings to England. Alongside the cattle on many of those boats were emigrants leaving a country unable to offer even the possibilities of a basic existence. The emigration of Dubliners traditionally continued at a pace far behind that of the rest of the country. In the decade 1891 to 1901, more than 430,000 people emigrated from Ireland; fewer than 10,000 of these were Dubliners. This was a story retold through the decades and helps explain why Dublin -- with the total population of Ireland in freefall in the second half of the 19th century -- actually enjoyed a small increase in population.

As it was, most of the emigrants who left through Dublin port were from the Irish countryside and were merely passing through the city, certain in the knowledge that there was simply no work available to them. The number of people from rural areas living in Dublin was remarkably low, particularly in comparison to the inward-migration experienced by other comparable cities in the United Kingdom. In 1911, more than 70% of the city's population had been born there. In many respects this was related to stagnation of the city's economy. Dublin was unable to absorb the tens of

thousands who left the land every decade. The extent to which Dublin was primarily a city for native Dubliners is emphasized even by the number of boarding houses that were filled with Dubliners, not least a 19-room boarding house on Church Street where 108 of the 114 lodgers were born in Dublin.

Probably the most striking evidence of the clustering of country people in Dublin came through the barracks of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, the city's primary law enforcement agency. There were virtually no Dubliners on the force: almost all were farmers' sons or farm labourers, drawn from every county in Ireland, and they had an uneasy relationship with certain sections of the city's inhabitants. Nonetheless, Dublin was not considered a violent or dangerous city, though it was notable for its high level of public drunkenness and its attendant disorder.

Despite the evidence to the contrary, Dubliners were devoted to the notion that the city was being overrun by country people and foreigners, and were particularly convinced that migrants were displacing Dubliners in employment. And people did come to Dublin to seek work from cities such as Liverpool and Glasgow, many leaving their families behind them, just as Irish men did when travelling in the opposite direction. If the new arrivals faced opposition in the city, that opposition was not confined to the streets, but also surfaced in political chambers. In 1907, a Dublin Corporation member complained that the Hammond Lane Foundry employed "only Scotsmen and niggers." In reply, the manager of the foundry pointed out that the workforce comprised 87 Irishmen, 15 Scots and one American and that the employment of the foreigners was the consequence of the lack of specialist skills in the local labour market. This was a widespread feature of industry in Dublin, as foundries, mills, engineering and electrical firms regularly brought in skilled labour. This influx contributed to the fact that 25% of all migrants living in Dublin in 1911 were born outside Ireland.

Skilled labour was not confined to the manufacturing sector. The hotels of the city offer a valuable insight into the people who lived and worked in Dublin, as well as those who travelled there. The Shelbourne Hotel on Stephen's Green was perhaps the most prestigious in the city, a place where many moneyed visitors stayed and wined and dined in considerable style. The staff was truly cosmopolitan: the cooks and chambermaids were Irish, while the waiting staff comprised eight Germans, three Austrians, and one each from Bohemia and England. They all lived together in a house near the hotel until, at the outbreak of the First World War, the German contingent was interned. In the area around the Shelbourne Hotel the fashionable elite clubs of London were replicated, most obviously in the prestigious Kildare Street club. On the night that the 1911 census was taken, there were 32 servants under the direction of the Club Steward, all to look after six visitors. The visitors -- who included a landowner, a retired colonel, the official starter at Irish race meetings, and the peer, Lord Fermoy -- were all Protestant, though 27 of the 32 servants were Catholic.

This in a city that, in 1911, was 83% Catholic, 13% Church of Ireland, 2% Presbyterian and Methodist, and 2% others, including Quakers, Plymouth Brethren and a growing Jewish presence. Religious divides were rarely marked with violence; Dublin was not Belfast or Derry. And yet the influence of religion on the city was profound. This was especially true in the running of institutions, notably schools and

hospitals, where the various denominations controlled their own establishments. Beyond the institutions, though, there was all manner of integration. Poverty in Dublin knew no creed, and people of different religions shared beds, rooms, houses and streets. There were also those who denied religion, who proclaimed to have no religion at all, describing themselves on census forms as freethinkers or agnostics. More problematic were those -- and there were quite a few -- who simply refused to disclose their religion, leaving the census enumerators to write simply "information refused."

There was an element of religious clustering in the suburbs of Dublin -- Kingstown, for example, with its Orange Hall and Gospel rooms, was disproportionately Protestant. More important to the development of the suburbs, however, were the railways and the trams that carried commuters to work in the city centre. By the end of The First World War there were over 3,500 miles of railway in Ireland, with Dublin the focal point of the network. This was not just about work or about trade: a mutually-beneficial leisure industry developed in tandem with the railways. The expanding middle class adopted a culture of travel and day tripping that benefited Dublin coastal villages such as Blackrock and Kingstown as seaside resorts grew and race meetings were established. Through the late Victorian era the development of sport had been driven by the railways, and Dublin was home to many horse trainers and jockeys, native professional golfers, professional cricketers from England, and, intriguingly, a couple of Swedish gymnasts who lived on Harcourt Street.

The influence of the railways extended even to the notion of time in the city and beyond. The development of railway timetables was critical to the passing of the *Time Act*, 1880, establishing Dublin Mean Time across Ireland. Previously, clocks in Cork were 11 minutes behind those of Dublin, while those in Belfast were one minute and nineteen seconds ahead. In 1911, Dublin was still 25 minutes behind London; it was not until 1916 that Greenwich Mean Time was extended to Ireland.

As well as the railway, Dublin had its iconic tram system and a love of cycling to work, which explains the necklace of bike shops that ringed the city. Ireland had been at the forefront of the cycling craze that swept the Western world in the late Victorian era. Dubliners did not merely adopt the bicycle, they contributed to its development. John Boyd Dunlop invented the pneumatic tire after his son complained of the pain caused by cycling on solid wheels over Dublin's cobblestones. The tire was an immediate success; Dunlop went into business with Harvey du Cros, a paper manufacturer of Huguenot origin, and made the tires at a factory on Stephen's Street in Dublin.

Even in 1911 the train, the tram and the bicycle came under pressure from the motor car. In that year there were 5,058 registered automobiles in Ireland, a large proportion of them based in Dublin. The first petrol car seen in Ireland was owned by a Dubliner, Dr. John Colohan, who imported a Benz Velo in 1896. He was quickly followed by other prominent Dublin citizens such as H.M. Gillie (editor of the *Freeman's Journal*) and a busload of titled landowners, military officers, and wealthy brewers and distillers. In 1911 Dublin Corporation sought to establish a 10-mph (16-kmh) speed limit on the city's streets -- keeping cars in line with what it considered the city's horses might manage. The relentless rise of the car continued to the point where automobiles eventually choked the city. But in 1911, this was a work in progress, and

trains, horses and bicycles still prevailed. Dublin was changing, but there is no watershed moment where a city moves from being one thing to being entirely another. The old and the new lived side by side, not least on Gardiner Street where harness makers and blacksmiths lived next door to chauffeurs and bus drivers.

By 1911, the Dublin of Bloomsday (June 16, 1904, the date on which James Joyce set *Ulysses* and Leopold Bloom's epic tour of Dublin) was already being lost. The city of Joyce was also the city of Yeats and O'Casey -- and these were only the famous few. The 1911 census shows that there were writers across the city, almost to the point of cliché. As well as those who plied their trade in the newspapers, there were a variety of writers -- many of them women -- producing works in many genres, including historical novels, biographies and plays. With Yeats at its heart, a national theatre movement, which saw vulgarity as an English import and attempted to promote Irish patriotism and traditions, had brought about the establishment of the Abbey Theatre in 1904. Theatre was hugely important to the city and to the great array of actors, stage assistants and stage designers who worked in the city. To the chagrin of those who drove the national theatre movement, however, there could be no accounting for taste, and music-hall humour imported from England was enduringly popular. Its mix of comedy, pantomime and the absurd was perfectly attuned to many Dubliners' way of thinking. A number of the music hall acts who brought their bawdy sketches and dance troupes found a permanent home.

Cinema arrived in Dublin in April 1896, when a demonstration was held in Dan Lowery's Star of Erin theatre. James Joyce was briefly the manager of the first cinema in the country, the Volta, which opened in December 1909; this sparked the establishment of several other institutions that showed motion pictures. The first film produced in Ireland (in 1910) was, fittingly, a tale of emigration called *The Lad from Old Ireland*, made by the Irish-Canadian Sidney Olcott. Although cinema was making its presence felt in the city, there was nothing to compete in importance with the city's pubs. Stephen Dedalus remarks in *Ulysses* how it would present a formidable challenge to cross Dublin without going past a single public house. This was true, but a more formidable challenge would surely be to cross Dublin and stop off in every pub you encounter. The pubs of Dublin were probably the single most notable feature of the city's social life, a vibrant institution that was largely the preserve of men.

More contentious even than the exclusion of women from pubs was their continued exclusion from voting. In 1911, Louie Bennett founded the Irish Women's Suffrage Federation, a co-ordinating body for the dozen or more societies across the country campaigning for an extended franchise. In 1911, one woman, Edith Colwill, who lived on Ailesbury Road, gave her profession in the census as "suffragette." That women did not have the right to vote did not preclude their participation in activism. In 1911, the Irish Women Workers' Union was founded, with Delia Larkin as its first general secretary. Delia was a sister of Jim Larkin, who had helped to reorganize and radicalize the trade union movement; he established the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union in 1909, and by 1911 it had 18,000 men in its ranks. The response from employers was trenchant. William Martin Murphy was the most prominent businessman in the city. He owned railways, tramways, Clery's department store, the Imperial Hotel and, critically, the *Irish Independent* newspaper. He was at the heart of the reaction against the growing militancy of labour, and established the Dublin Employer's Federation. Across the city there was a rise in labour disputes, and 1911

saw a wave of strikes. The bakers' union engaged in a strike that was the culmination of two decades of disputes over work practices and pay; they lost. A railway strike also ended in an abject defeat for workers who had taken on the Great Southern and Western Railway Company. Some disputes did bring workers minor gains, but the reality was that there was a huge surplus of unskilled workers that undermined union efforts. The battle was growing increasingly desperate as the city moved towards its greatest labour conflict: the 1913 Lockout.

Historians are often advised of the dangers of looking at the past in the light of what comes afterwards. There is obvious merit in that advice, but there is equal merit in ignoring it. Why would you look at Dublin in 1911 and ignore the extraordinary events of, for example, 1913 with its epic labour unrest, and 1916 with its armed nationalist rebellion? The clarity these events bring is vital to understanding Dublin in 1911, for this was a city moving into a decade of remarkable change -- not least on the political front.

Looking at the city as it was in 1911, you can see how such change became possible, without ever considering it inevitable or even probable. It would be entirely wrong to say the stirrings of political change were everywhere. They weren't. There was much about Dublin to suggest that this was simply a loyal city of Empire. In July 1911, King George V spent six days on a royal visit to Dublin. There are some beautiful pictures of the king and the royal party, led by the 8th Royal Hussars on horseback, travelling from the harbour in Kingstown (now Dún Laoghaire) to Dublin Castle. He is starched into his royal carriage, resplendent in his robes, the plumage of the military horses dancing along in front of him. Along the footpaths are thousands of people, pressed together, trying to get a proper look at real, live royalty. Many of the spectators are cheering, some are protesting, others are there -- as they always are -- simply to look at the spectacle. As you look at the pictures, you cannot credibly imagine that within five years Dublin would be the headquarters of an armed nationalist rebellion that would, in time, lead to the south of Ireland leaving the Empire.

And yet behind the apparent loyalty to king and country, the contradictions and contortions of political life were also in evidence. Even as King George V was visiting Dublin, a Wicklow-reared Protestant, Erskine Childers, published a treatise, *The Framework of Home Rule*, that called for the restoration of a parliament to Dublin for the first time since the *Act of Union* of 1800. Childers, who was originally a strong supporter of the British Empire and an officer in the British army, would later be shot by firing squad by Free State forces during the civil war. His was a separatism that evolved over time.

Nationalists and separatists did not pose the only threat to the status of the British Empire in Ireland, however: there was nothing straightforward about Irish unionism and its peculiar brand of loyalty. In September 1911, unionist leader Sir Edward Carson -- born in Dublin and still an MP representing Trinity College Dublin in the House of Commons at Westminster -- told an Orange Order meeting, "We must be prepared... the morning Home Rule passes, ourselves to become responsible for the government of the Protestant province of Ulster." Those words would later acquire a meaning that had implications for what exactly Dublin was capital city of.

Finally, the most prophetic political act of 1911 came through words carved in stone. In October, a large crowd turned up at the top of Sackville Street (now O'Connell Street) to witness the unveiling of a monument to Charles Stewart Parnell, the great nationalist politician of the 1880s. The monument was one more on the streets of a city where tributes to nationalists were greatly outnumbered by statues in honour of imperialists. It was unveiled by John Redmond, who (like Parnell before him) was leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Its inscription, plain in its independent intent, might as easily apply to Dublin the city as to the country about which it was written:

No man has a right to fix the boundary to the march of a nation.
No man has a right to say to his country,
'Thus far shalt thou go and no further.'