

HARRY NICHOLLS & KATHLEEN EMERSON: PROTESTANT REBELS

MARTIN MAGUIRE
(*Dundalk Institute of Technology*)

Early in the afternoon of Easter Monday 1916 an Irish Volunteer officer, Henry (but always known as Harry) Nicholls, cycled down Earlsfort Terrace, dressed in civilian clothes and carrying an automatic pistol, his pockets stuffed with bullets. He was a man in a hurry. Harry Nicholls was a captain in A Company, 4th Battalion of the Dublin Brigade of the Volunteers, based at Larkfield in Kimmage. On Easter Sunday morning he was preparing to mobilise as ordered when Desmond Fitzgerald called to tell him that MacNeill's countermanding order, published in the morning newspaper, was genuine and was to be obeyed. On Monday morning he cycled to Cathal Brugha's house to discover what was happening, to be told that Brugha had already left to mobilise the 4th Battalion. It was as he was cycling into the city in search of further information that he turned down Earlsfort Terrace. Here he met Liam O'Briain of the 2nd Battalion Irish Volunteers who also had lost contact with his company and was on his way home to collect his rifle.

Seeing the Citizen Army under the command of Michael Mallin taking control of St Stephen's Green, they both immediately decided that in a revolution it was best to fight where you stood. Nicholls abandoned the search for his own battalion (which at that moment was seizing control of the South Dublin Union) and joined in with the Citizen Army. Initially positioned in the garden of the park-keeper's house facing the junction of Cuffe Street and Harcourt Street, Nicholls moved with the Citizen Army into the College of Surgeons. With Mallin and Countess Markievicz he patrolled the Harcourt Street and Camden Street area as far as the Jacob's garrison. On Wednesday morning Nicholls, in command of a combined force of about sixteen Irish Volunteers and Citizen Army, took control of the Turkish baths on Grafton Street. Apart from some exchanges of sniper fire with British soldiers on the roofs of Mercer's hospital and the Shelbourne Hotel, the position saw little action. On Saturday the post was evacuated and the men brought back to the College of Surgeons where Mallin revealed the surrender order. He ordered Nicholls and the other officers to blend into the ranks pointing out

that, though the leaders were certainly to be shot, there was no point in others sacrificing themselves unnecessarily. The garrison then filed out in groups of three and were marched to Richmond barracks and handed into the control of the waiting British military officers and the detectives of the political G-Division of the DMP.¹ Some of the G-men, to their surprise, recognised Nicholls amongst the rebels. Nicholls was a civil engineer in Dublin Corporation, thus a respectable professional man with a promising career ahead of him. But even more surprising to them was that this republican rebel was a Protestant, a member of the Church of Ireland.

In the light of the current focus on Protestants as victims of republicanism in the revolutionary period (as in for instance the RTE documentary on Coolacrees and the correspondence that followed in the *Irish Times*, or Peter Hart's contention that Irish Protestants were harassed, persecuted and terrorized by virtue of being Protestant in an ethnically-based struggle), the careers of Protestants such as Harry Nicholls, who were republicans and rebels, present a challenge of interpretation of both republicanism and Protestantism in revolutionary Ireland.² Both Nicholls and his wife, Kathleen Emerson, are deserving of particular notice for this reason.

I

There is little in Harry Nicholl's family background to make a rebel of this member of the Church of Ireland. His father, William (1837-1932), an inspector of national schools, was an Englishman from Shrewsbury and (so he described himself) an ardent imperialist.³ A widower, he married his second wife, Margaret Kelly, in Tuam Co Galway. She was the sister of R.J. Kelly, owner and editor of the *Tuam Herald*. The 1911 census recorded that ten children were born to the marriage, of which six were then living. The children were born in different cities and towns around Ireland as their father pursued the itinerant life of a schools inspector. Harry was born in Derry in 1889, which meant that he was twenty-seven in 1916, which was a relatively old age for a rebel. His childhood was spent in

¹ Witness statement 296, Harry Nicholls (Bureau of Military History (henceforth BMH), National Archives Ireland (henceforth NAI)); Typescript of an untitled memoir by Harry Nicholls (Military Archives, Cathal Brugha barracks Dublin (henceforth MA) Holmes/Nicholls papers). Harry Nicholls was an occasional newspaper columnist and the Military Archives contain cuttings of many of these columns.

² Peter Hart, *The IRA and its enemies: violence and community in Cork, 1916-1923* (Oxford, 1998), 273-92; idem, *The IRA at war, 1916-1923* (Oxford, 2003), 223-40.

³ W. Nicholls to H.E. Duke, 11 Dec. 1916 (NAI, Chief Secretary's Office, Registered Papers [CSO], 1916 internee files, 16628/1918, ii, Henry Nicholls).

Templemore, Co Tipperary and in Dublin city. William Nicholls was about forty when he married, Margaret his wife about twenty years younger. When Harry was born his father was fifty-two years of age. The 1911 census return shows the 21 year old Harry was the only young man in the house along with his elderly father, his middle-aged mother and two older sisters of 32 and 30, who were both unmarried.⁴ One can therefore assume perhaps a young adulthood relatively free of parental control. He matriculated from Mountjoy School in 1907 with a mathematics sizarship and junior exhibition and entered TCD as a student of civil engineering, graduating in June 1911 with a gold medal in mathematics.⁵ He was unique in being the only graduate of Trinity College Dublin who was an active republican rebel in 1916! There is, incidentally, no basis for R.B. McDowell's mischievous assertion that Nicholls, whom he portrays as a sort of 'trophy Protestant' for republicans in later years, did not participate in the 1916 Rising.⁶

Nicholls initial introduction to politics was through his brother George who gave him a pamphlet on Home Rule. Harry recalled that on reading the pamphlet he was instantly convinced that Home Rule did not go far enough, and that he was reinforced in this opinion by John Mitchell's *Jail Journal*. George, who changed his name to Seoirse Mac Niocaill (not to be confused with the Sinn Féin TD for Galway of the same name), and who was eight years older than Harry, also introduced him to the Gaelic League. A TCD graduate in mathematics, Seoirse was a schools inspector, like his father. Initially a schoolmaster in Market Bosworth in Leicestershire, he returned to Ireland and to the inspectorate in 1912 and was soon immersed in the Irish language movement. Seoirse remained in the schools inspectorate, rising to become the senior inspector in the Department of Education in the Free State. Along with León Ó Broin and Mícheál Breathnach he was at the forefront of the attempt to revive the Irish language through the Department of Education. He wrote textbooks and reading materials in the Irish language and was instrumental in establishing An Gúm as the state Irish-language publishing house. In 1929 he was appointed the chairman of An Coiste Téarmaíochta, which was established to coin Irish language neologisms and technical terms.⁷ Seoirse believed that his Protestantism prevented him becoming Secretary of the Department of Education, but this

⁴ 1911 Census returns, Dublin 60/52, Church Avenue, Rathmines (NAI).

⁵ MA, Holmes/Nicholls papers, *Irish Times* news-cutting, 13 June 1911.

⁶ R.B. McDowell, *Crisis and decline the fate of Southern Unionists* (Dublin, 1997), 208.

⁷ León Ó Broin, *Just like yesterday: an autobiography* (Dublin, 1985) 66-9.

is unlikely. It is improbable that an inspector could have risen to this position, and it was still less likely in his case because his uncompromising attitude on Irish language policy and particularly his forceful rejection of bi-lingualism had already embarrassed one minister. He had got into trouble with his minister in February 1926 for an incautious statement he made at a public meeting in Kilkenny when he enquired: ‘Why should English be on an equal footing with Irish? We are going to see that every child born in Ireland will speak its mother tongue. Every hog, dog and devil will have to learn it. We are going to drive the English language out of Ireland’. This led to an exchange in the Dáil in which the minister repudiated Seoirse’s speech, and reminded the Dáil that it was highly improper for a civil servant, no matter how highly placed, to make any statement on policy and, furthermore, that it was not the policy of the government to drive the English language out of Ireland.⁸

Lest we read too much into fraternal influences it is important to note that a third brother, William, usually known as Billy, was a life long Unionist and imperialist, serving in the Sudan Political Service, which was considered to be second only to the Indian Civil Service, in the annals of imperial governance. In its short span, from 1899 to 1956, it was staffed by university graduates chosen for their robust physique and character in order to withstand the climate and isolation. William graduated from TCD in Mathematics and Modern Languages. As an applicant for the Sudan Political Service he was required to study in Cambridge and pass the examination in Arabic. William was one of the first cohort of officers sent to the Sudan in 1907, serving to 1932 and finishing his career as Governor of Berber province.⁹ In the course of his career he took part in the Darfur campaign of 1916 (precisely at the time when Harry was imprisoned for his participation in the Easter Rising) and wrote a brief history of the Shaikiya people of the Sudan.¹⁰ He was awarded Commander of the Order of the Nile, for his services to Egypt by King Fuad.¹¹

Both Seoirse and Harry (Aonrai Mac Niocail) were members of the Cúig Cúigí branch of the Gaelic League. Harry Nicholls joined in 1910, when he was twenty years of age. This branch was popularly

⁸ *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 14, cols 980-5, 24 Feb. 1926; Diarmuid Breathnach agus Máire Ní Mhurchú, *Beathaisnéis a dó, 1882-1982* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1990), 64-5.

⁹ A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, *The Sudan political service: a preliminary profile* (Oxford, 1982); G.W. Bell & A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, *The Sudan political service, 1902-1952, a preliminary register of second careers*. (Oxford, 1989).

¹⁰ W. Nicholls, *The Shaikiya, an account of the Shaikiya tribes and of the history of Dongola province from the 14th to the 19th century* (Dublin, 1913).

¹¹ Information provided by Annabelle May, London, daughter of William Nicholls.

known as the Five Protestants branch, because of the number of Protestant members. It met at George Moore's House in Ely Place, where classes were held in Estelle Solomon's studio.¹² Nicholl's admission to the Gaelic League was the beginnings of a period of intense activism, which brought him further and further into radical separatism. He joined with other Protestant Gaelic Leaguers in a short-lived 'Gaelic Mission to the Protestants' to bring Irish history and language to Protestant schools.¹³ Along with Sean Lester, Ernest Blythe and other Gaelic League Protestants, he formed Cumann Gaelach Eaglaise na hÉireann to demand that the Church of Ireland provided texts, hymns and services in the Irish language.¹⁴ In 1912, in response to Patrick Pearse's call, made in the pages of his short-lived newspaper *An Barr Buadh*, for Irish speakers to work to advance Irish freedom, Nicholls, the O'Rahilly, Eamonn Ceannt and Seán McCraith met to found Cumann na Saoirse ar Wynn's Hotel.¹⁵ Cumann na Saoirse, though its business was conducted entirely through Irish, was mainly about getting guns. Nicholls founded the North Dublin Rifle Club; his Protestantism, Rathmines address and professional status providing a cover of respectability for the importation of rifles and ammunition.

Harry Nicholls spent his holidays in the Dingle area in order to develop his Irish. He records that it was when he isolated himself for a fortnight in an entirely Irish-speaking milieu on the Blaskets that he began to acquire fluency. This was in 1913, the summer when Eibhlin Nicholls, who was later romantically associated with Pearse, was drowned in a tragic accident. Eibhlin was the daughter of Archibald Nicholls, a successful barrister. Cáit an Rí in her recollections remembered a brother of Eibhlin's named Henry who was on the island at the same time. As Eibhlin had no brother of that name Cáit was most likely remembering Harry.

It was whilst spending time in Dunchaoín and the Blaskets that Harry Nicholls came under the influence of Sean Óg Kavanagh (Seán an Cóta) who swore him into the IRB. He joined the Teeling Circle, which had Bulmer Hobson at its centre. Nicholls maintained that Hobson was the key influence on his own emerging republicanism. He joined the Irish Volunteers when they were formed in 1913, and

¹² Timothy G. MacMahon, "'All Creeds and Classes'? Just who made up the Gaelic League?", *Éire-Ireland*, 36 (2002), 154.

¹³ Risteárd Giltrap, 'Ról na bProstastúnach in mblianta tosaigh Chronadh na Gaeilge' in Breandán Ó Conaire (eag) *Comhdháil an Chraoibhin 1993 conference proceedings* (Roscomáin, 1994), 116.

¹⁴ Risteárd Ó Glaisne, *Dúbhglas de hÍde: ceannróidai cultúrtha, 1860-1910* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1991), 174.

¹⁵ *Evening Press*, 3 Jan 1964, article by Cathal O'Shannon.

was appointed engineering instructor to the 4th battalion. In the light of events in 1916, it is interesting to note that his lectures concentrated on street fighting, erecting effective barricades and the use of explosives. In 1913, he paraded to the Wolfe Tone commemoration march to Bodenstown at which Pearse's speech signalled the revival of republican separatism. However, his main activity as a Volunteer between 1913 and 1916 was the smuggling and storage of guns and ammunition.

Nicholls does not describe any specifically protestant circle of republicanism, though he was close to George Irvine. They both attended Church of Ireland services in St Patrick's Cathedral on St Patrick's Day 1916 in their Volunteer uniforms. Of the 1916 leaders Nicholls knew Patrick Pearse (though initially he was sceptical of Pearse's commitment to the republican ideal), Tom Clarke, Seán McDermott and Eamonn Ceannt. He was closest to Seán McDermott, usually regarded as the most determined and uncompromising of the 1916 leaders. McDermott engaged Nicholls for both the Howth and the Kilcoole gun-running operations. At Howth, Nicholls participated in the landing and in the dispersal of the guns. The Kilcoole operation took place under cover of an outing to the Rocky Valley and Kilmacanogue. When war broke out in September 1914 Nicholls was on holiday in the Dingle area, and, along with Sean Kavanagh, Ernest Blythe and Desmond Fitzgerald, he organised the local Volunteers to disrupt a recruitment meeting organised by the McGillicuddy at Annascaul.

Nicholls and the other officers of the 4th battalion (which included Cathal Brugha, William Cosgrave, Ffrench Mullen, Seamus Murphy, Tom McCarthy, Con Colbert and George Irvine) were brought together some weeks before the Rising and made to understand that significant manoeuvres were planned for Easter. Though Nicholls understood that these manoeuvres might be cover for more serious actions, he was not aware that a rising was intended; hence his bewilderment on Easter Monday. After the surrender Nicholls was transferred to Knutsford prison on 1 May and from there to Frongoch towards the end of June, where he was the leader in Hut 11, with Dick McKee as his second.

At Frongoch he was part of a small group of Protestant rebels that included Arthur Shields, Ellet Elmes, Sam Ruttle of Tralee and Alf Cotton of Belfast. He used his Protestantism to vex the authorities, but he did receive some consolation from reading the Bible, which he was given by the local Church of England chaplain. Nicholls' contribution to the Frongoch autograph book was the well-known

line from Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*:

Hereditary Bondsmen! Know ye not,
Who would be free themselves must strike the blow.

Nicholls was not amongst those early releases approved by the Sankey Commission. He had to wait until the general emptying of Frongoch at Christmas 1916 to return to Dublin and to his work in Dublin Corporation. Though he was required to sign a bond to be of good behaviour, it remained blank. Mannion, the DMP detective sergeant who called to the house to get the required surety for £25 from Harry's father (who had agreed to go guarantor for him), reported that when the surety was demanded Mr Nicholls replied that as Harry was now released he saw no necessity in 'perfecting the bond'. The other guarantor for Harry was the Rev. E. H. Lewis-Crosby of Rathmines church, who had previously (in October) gone guarantor for Ellet Elmes.¹⁶ Harry's father's observation that he was embarrassed by the expressions of sympathy he received from his Protestant friends about the awful things the English are doing to the Irish prisoners suggests that not all Irish Protestants automatically supported the post-Rising reaction.

The Protestantism of the leadership of the Gaelic League, allied to the centrality of the Gaelic League to 1916, is also suggestive of the limitation of seeing Protestants simply as victims. The path through the Gaelic League and the IRB to rebellion was a path trodden by many and for most of the Church of Ireland rebels it was cultural separatism that initiated them to political separatism. However, there were few for whom revolution had social and political roots and Harry Nicholls should be included amongst these. Nicholls himself credited his radicalism to the experience of police brutality during the 1913 lockout; specifically to blows on the head and mouth he received from DMP constables 33B and 188B in a baton charge on Eden Quay. As Harry himself put it the ferocity of the assault 'made a rebel of a Prod'.

II

Though he remained active in the Volunteers and the Gaelic League following his return from Frongoch, organising a meeting in memory of Thomas Ashe at Dingle in September 1917, Nicholl's primary contribution during the War of Independence was as a trade union leader. Indeed, too much can be made of the armed

¹⁶ Sean O'Mahony, *Frongoch: university of revolution* (Dublin, 1967), 123.

struggle. The creation of Dáil Éireann in January 1919 was more decisive than guns in challenging the British state in Ireland, as it meant the legitimacy of the British state in Ireland was challenged by a popularly elected counter-state.¹⁷ Dáil Éireann sustained its claim to be the legitimate government of Ireland by establishing its own departments of government. Of these, the one that proved most successful in establishing itself as an effective political force was the Department of Local Government under William Cosgrave. Nicholls knew William Cosgrave from when they were both officers in the 4th Battalion of the Volunteers. Acting as a trade union leader Harry Nicholls played no small part in ensuring the success of his department.

Harry Nicholls had particularly close connection with Eamonn Ceannt. Both worked for Dublin Corporation, Ceannt as a clerk and Nicholls as an engineer, and both were strong trade unionists in the Dublin Municipal Officers Association (DMOA) founded in 1901 by a group of senior corporation officials. The DMOA was a very conservative association dedicated to exclusivity and the *status quo*. Ceannt served on the DMOA executive from 1907 to July 1913. Whilst on the executive he proposed several radical policies without success, including that the DMOA should give financial help to the carters brought out on strike by Larkin in 1908. The reaction to the 1916 Rising within the DMOA executive was very muted; it passed a vote of sympathy with ‘Mrs Kent (Ceannt’s name before he gaelicised it) on the death of Mr E. Kent and with Mrs MacBride on the death of Mr John MacBride’. A suggestion that a fund might be established for the relief of their dependents received no support. However, in early 1917 a group of activists, many of them IRB men and some of whom had participated in the Rising, took control of the DMOA. They then used the DMOA to launch a national trade union of local government officials who accepted the Dáil Éireann department of local government as the only legitimate authority in Ireland. At the head of this group was Harry Nicholls.

Organisational genius allied with proven militancy enabled Nicholls to bring many of the Corporation officials along with him, even though many were Protestant and few, even those who were Catholics, were republican in politics. Elected to the DMOA he used that association as a springboard to launch a series of increasingly national organisations that culminated, in the same week that the Dáil assembled, in the launching of the Irish Local Government Officers

¹⁷Martin Maguire, *The Civil Service and the Revolution in Ireland, 1912-38*: “shaking the blood-stained hand of Mr Collins” (Manchester, 2008), 93-5.

Trade Union (ILGOU). The ILGOU was as a national trade union for local government. ILGOU's affiliation to the Irish TUC signalled its commitment to trade union principles of solidarity.

The first task facing Nicholls was that to harness the dissatisfaction of Dublin corporation officials at the erosion of their salaries caused by wartime inflation. Forsaking the former tactics of humble pleading that had proved wholly ineffective Nicholls adopted an aggressive militancy on the wages issue. The campaign on pay was brought to a head with a strike by the Dublin Corporation officers on 21 June 1920, at the height of the War of Independence and at the moment when Sinn Fein was completing its sweep of the local government elections. This strike, called and led by Nicholls, was the first strike ever in Great Britain or Ireland by local government officials. The citizens of Dublin were astonished to see the city law officer, borough surveyor, waterworks engineer, city accountant and other top officials mounting a picket line at the City Hall and leading a march of corporation officials to the union headquarters. These men were the acme of respectability and for them to be seen on strike, as the *Evening Telegraph* put it, 'for all the world as if we were back in the days when licensed vintners' assistants were on picket duty', was a ground-breaking advance in trade union organisation of the white-collar sector. It was also a tribute to the organisation and agitation skills of Harry Nicholls. The Corporation caved in, wage increases were conceded, and the ILGOU grew rapidly as the nation-wide trade union of local government officials.

Buoyed by victory, Nicholls addressed the first annual conference of the union in November 1920. In this speech Nicholls drew together his labour and republican radicalism. His labour radicalism shows the influence of Larkinite syndicalism. From this perspective the world of labour is divided into the employed and the employers who were locked in battle. In this struggle organisation was the key to victory; the unorganised were fated to be crushed. Nicholls envisioned the ILGOU becoming the One Big Union for all the employees of local authorities, regardless of status or grade. However, he also sought in his conference speech firmly to align the ILGOU and the local government officials with Dáil Éireann. It was, he said, the duty of local officers to support the Sinn Fein dominated local council's democratic decision to reject the authority of the British state and to come under the authority of the Dáil Éireann local government department.

Though the Dáil could issue decrees and the Sinn Fein councils could pass motions, only salaried officials could make a national local

government system function. Nicholls speech proposed that local government officials would act as administrators in support of a Sinn Féin revolution. He even persuaded the members to defer the increases so recently won in to prevent the collapse of Dublin Corporation. By the end of 1920 the corporation faced bankruptcy as the British state withheld funds. On behalf of the ILGOU, Nicholls agreed that the officials would loan money to the corporation by allowing it withhold a quarter of wages until the following April, thus ensuring its survival. When a dispute arose on sick leave entitlements Nicholls referred the case to the Dáil Éireann courts despite the protests of the official who had initiated the dispute. The official in question was fearful of attracting the attention of the Black and Tans if word got out that he had appealed to the underground courts. When the Kells' town clerk queried the legality of an increase won for him at a Dáil Éireann arbitration court by the Union, he got the frosty reply that the legality of a Dáil appointed body could not be questioned by the Union. Nicholls also refused to allow the union represent or act on behalf of any official that continued to support or obey the British local government board. The assistant town clerk John Flood was dismissed by Dublin Corporation for refusing to record votes in Irish and Henry Campbell, the town clerk, was also dismissed for maintaining contact with the British authorities. Nicholls had little sympathy for either man, though both were members of the union.¹⁸

Nicholls provided other assistance to the revolutionary Dáil that was less public but no less vital. When the new union required a permanent general secretary Nicholls appointed Eamonn Price to the job. Price was a former civil servant, who was dismissed for being active in 1916. He had been interned in Frongoch along with Nicholls. His job as general secretary of the union was to travel the country setting up new branches. However Price was, in a sense, double-jobbing for he was also Director of Organisation of the IRA. His post as general secretary of the union was most likely nothing more than a convenient cover under which he could travel the country on IRA business. In 1920, he left the ILGOU and became a fulltime civil servant of the Dáil until he was captured and imprisoned. Price had acquired sufficient trade union consciousness, however, to demand an increase in his Dáil salary of £270 per annum to bring him up to the £350 per annum he would have enjoyed had he stayed with the local government officials trade union.¹⁹

¹⁸ Martin Maguire, *'Servants to the public': a history of the Local Government and Public Services Union 1901-1990* (Dublin, 1998).

¹⁹ NAI, DE2/159, 'personnel file E. Price'.

III

In late 1919, Harry Nicholls married Kathleen Emerson. Kathleen was a daughter of W.A. Holmes of the Great Southern and Western Railway and Robina Holmes, an early member of the Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL). Kathleen married the Rev. George Emerson sometime around 1910, but their marriage was short lived as he died suddenly (perhaps tragically) whilst they were on a trip to Ottawa in Canada in April 1911.²⁰

It is probable that Nicholls and Emerson's paths had crossed as a result of their different activisms. What they shared was a commitment to a revolutionary change and an awareness of the costs that commitment demanded. Kathleen Emerson was an early campaigner for women's political rights in the IWFL. The IWFL was the largest and most militant of the societies for women's suffrage, it was also the one in which Protestant women formed the leadership and dominated the membership. Kathleen Emerson, as assistant secretary of the League, was one of the women who drove women's militancy in the early months of 1912. She served two months hard labour in Holloway prison for her part in the mass window-smashing campaign of 1 March 1912, when over one hundred and fifty women simultaneously smashed windows in the main shopping areas of Regent Street and Oxford Street in the London West End.²¹ On her release she returned to Dublin where she was a prominent speaker at street meetings for the IWFL. She proved herself well able for the jeers of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH), or Ancient Order of Hooligans as she called them. The Irish Parliamentary Party and the AOH apprehended that the suffrage agitation might threaten the passage of the Home Rule bill and grew more hostile in step with the increased militancy of the women's agitation.

Emerson's public profile meant that she was easily identified. When Herbert Asquith was attacked with a hatchet by Mary Leigh during his visit to Dublin in the summer of 1912, the nationalist press worked up an hysteria against the suffrage campaigners. In the days that followed any woman on her own on the streets was vulnerable and one as easily identified as Kathleen Emerson was in danger of her life. Spotted as she walked along Eden Quay she was knocked to the ground and kicked viciously. She was rescued by supporters before

²⁰ *Irish Times*, 5 Apr. 1911 (death notices).

²¹ *Irish Citizen*, 25 May 1912.

the mob could succeed in throwing her into the Liffey.²² Undaunted, she manoeuvred herself close to the royal enclosure at the RDS Horse Show later in the summer, and managed to heckle Lord Aberdeen on the force-feeding of women prisoners before being ejected. After the House of Commons rejected the Snowdon amendment to the Home Rule bill that would have given votes to women, she returned to smashing windows, this time targeting the Custom House on the Dublin quays. In court she said that she broke the windows because she would be ashamed not to, and that in fact ‘breaking windows was too small a protest, nothing short of a bomb would adequately express her feelings’.²³ Returned to prison she went on hunger strike until she was released when her fine was paid anonymously, by Lady Aberdeen it was suggested. In 1913, as Tullamore was designated a female prison to house the suffrage campaigners, Katherine Emerson moved to the town to monitor developments and to publicise the cause of political status for the women inside.²⁴ Along with Hannah Sheehy Skeffington, she heckled Bonar Law on his visit to Dublin in December 1913. A charge of assaulting a DMP constable laid against her was withdrawn when she admitted the charge but refused to express any regret for it.²⁵

Perhaps intending to drop out of the limelight for while Emerson resigned as secretary of the IWFL in the summer of 1914, but the outbreak of war brought her back into the fray. She called on Irish women not to be induced to support the war, as happened with the English suffrage campaigners, but to maintain the struggle.²⁶ Even some of her supporters were shocked at the vehemence of her denunciation of the war when she urged the ordinary soldiers should shoot their officers.²⁷ In 1915 Hannah Sheehy Skeffington accepted for publication in the *Irish Citizen* a short story by Emerson on an anti-war theme, because, as Sheehy-Skeffington explained, ‘its tone toward the war would rule it out of all commercial markets in this country’.²⁸ The story “The Deserter” is a description of Mrs Mary Cummins, who has lost her son in the war, attending a Church of Ireland service. Enraged by the pro-war sermon of the rector she flings her son’s Victoria Cross (described as a ‘brazen image blasphemously called a cross’) at the rector, smashing the

²² *Irish Citizen*, 27 July 1912.

²³ *Irish Citizen*, 16 Nov. 1912.

²⁴ *Irish Citizen*, 1 Feb. 1913.

²⁵ *Irish Citizen*, 13 Dec. 1913.

²⁶ ‘Will Ireland Heed?’, *Irish Citizen*, 17 Oct. 1914

²⁷ *Irish Citizen*, 17, 24 Oct. 1914.

²⁸ Emerson to Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, 5 Nov. 1915 (Trinity College Dublin, Mrs K. Nicholls papers, MS 7932a).

stained glass window above his head.²⁹ In another piece published in the pages of the *Irish Citizen*, entitled 'Whitening Unto Harvest' she attacked the hypocrisy of the proposal of church and state to legitimise 'war babies', by evoking the support of the 'dead of the Magdalens and those women and children who found their graves in the Liffey or the Thames'.³⁰

Emerson was again active in the attempt to get an Irish delegation to the 1915 Women's International Congress at The Hague, called to internationalise women's resistance to the war. At the meeting to protest the government ban on travel she shared the platform with Hannah Sheehy Skeffington, Tom Kelly of Sinn Féin, Louie Bennett and Thomas McDonagh. In her speech she attacked the cost of the war and suggested that as a militant suffragist she would advise soldiers to rebel.³¹

In the months after the Rising of 1916 she wrote memoirs of Francis Sheehy Skeffington and James Connolly for the *Irish Citizen*. She also kept a copy of MacDonagh's alleged last statement to his court-martial amongst her personal papers.³² She also served from 1916 to 1924 as the manager of the Dublin Branch of the British Vacuum Cleaner and Engineering Co, which she ran as an agency until she was dismissed, and the branch closed down due to the fall in business.

After her marriage to Harry Nicholls, Kathleen withdrew from active politics but she remained in contact with her former comrades. She diverted her energies into literature and harboured ambitions to become a successful writer. She was on the executive of the Dublin Literary Society and her letters from the 1920s show a critical appreciation of the works of Proust, Joyce and Wyndham Lewis. In the early 1930s she plunged into the Theosophical circle in Dublin until a disagreement about what she termed 'The Ritual' convinced her to withdraw.³³

The campaign against de Valera's 1937 constitutional provisions on the status of women brought her back into activism. She was now described as 'a veteran fighter of the old IWFL'.³⁴ Although not a university graduate she acted as Honorary Secretary of the National University Women Graduates Association (NUWGA) formed

²⁹ *The Irish Citizen*, 24 Apr. 1915.

³⁰ *Irish Citizen*, 24 Apr. 1915.

³¹ *Irish Citizen*, 15, 22 May 1915.

³² TCD, Mrs K. Nicholls papers, MS 7932a/4.

³³ MA, Holmes/Nicholls papers, correspondence.

³⁴ University College Dublin Archives, NUWGA/1/1-11, news-cutting *Irish Independent*, 25 Nov. 1937.

to resist the degraded position proposed for women in the new constitution. Right through the 1930s and 1940s she was a member of the executive of the Women's Social and Progressive League, which grew out of the Graduates Association and whose aim was to 'organise women voters, to secure equal pay for equal work, to promote candidature of women as independent members of Dáil and Seanad Éireann and public bodies'.

IV

As mentioned above, Harry Nicholls opposed the Treaty, and he withdrew from political activity and trade union activity after the establishment of the Free State. The major project of his engineering career and a significant contribution to the improvement to the health of the city was the digging of new main drains along the quays and a tunnel under the Liffey at Ringsend.³⁵ Despite his ability Harry never achieved the post of City Engineer. He blamed this on the city manger P.J. Hernon and the network of Knights of Columbanus in Dublin Corporation. Harry believed he was blocked because he was a Protestant, a view shared by Seán T O'Kelly who upbraided Hernon for his treatment of Harry.³⁶

In 1954, Harry was elected to the presidency of the Institute of Civil Engineers and was then nominated as a candidate for the commercial and industrial panel of the Seanad. His campaign mentioned but did not labour his republican activism; he did not mention at all that he was a Protestant, but made most of his work as a civil engineer and his years of service to Dublin city. There were nine seats on the panel with twenty-five candidates contesting them. Harry was not one of the successful candidates.³⁷

In the 1950s he had a major falling out with the union he had founded. In 1949, the union executive decided to appoint a Catholic spiritual director and approached Archbishop John Charles McQuaid to nominate one. It was a case of a stupid idea that nobody had the good sense to quash before it began to grow; it had little real support. It was opposed by the Dublin branch of the Union, but too late to prevent it. Nicholls was furious, both as a Protestant and as a republican. Afraid of losing the status and prestige that attached to his name the executive offered to appoint a Church of Ireland spiritual director as well, but this suggestion further infuriated Nicholls. He only rejoined the union in the late 1960s when a new generation

³⁵ *Transactions of the Institute of Civil Engineers of Ireland*, 55 (1930), 186-230; *ibid.*, 80 (1954), 1-9.

³⁶ Personal communication from Ken Nicholls.

³⁷ MA, Holmes/Nicholls papers, correspondence; *Irish Times*, 19 May 1954.

emerged to take over the leadership in an emerging new Ireland.

From the 1930s to the 1950s he was the secretary of the Contemporary Club, a weekly discussion founded in 1885 by a group of liberal freethinkers and Protestant home rulers whose previous members included AE, William Butler Yeats, Francis Sheehy Skeffington and in its later days Tod Andrews, that most anti-clerical of the founding generation of Fianna Fáil. Among the eclectic group of speakers that Harry brought to the club were Seán O Faolain, Arnold Toynbee, Douglas Hyde, Stephen Spender, George Gavan Duffy, Charles Trevelyan, Colonel Walter William Buchanan Topping, MP for Larne and Chief Whip of the Ulster Unionist Party at Stormont, along with Mr William Douglas, secretary of the Ulster Unionist Council (who spoke on Partition from a northern perspective), Robert Briscoe (who spoke on Zionism) and Kingsmill Moore (who spoke on Freedom). It fell victim, in the words of Andrews, to ‘the zealots of censorship, religious triumphalism and the dominance of materialism in the national ethos’ though Harry Nicholls thought the decline was due to the more prosaic fact that people did not live in the city anymore and, in any case, preferred golf to earnest discussion.

Harry and Katherine Nicholls lived for a few years in Portmarnock in a house that Harry himself built, but then they moved back into the city. They lived in an apartment in 42 Grafton Street, the area of what was undoubtedly the defining moments of Harry’s life. They travelled in Europe, especially in France and once to Rome. Kathleen kept a lively journal of their travels which is in her papers.

Kathleen died in 1970, after many years of ill-health. In his last year Harry travelled to India as the guest of his nephew-in-marriage Denis Holmes, the Irish ambassador in Delhi. He died on 2 February 1975, one week after collapsing with a stroke after attending a rugby international in Lansdowne stadium. His funeral was held in St Ann’s Dawson Street. He is buried with his sisters in the churchyard of Enniskerry parish, the authorities in Dean’s Grange cemetery having refused to allow him be buried, as he had wished, along with his wife because the plot was full. His gravestone records that he was a ‘1916 patriot and founder of the ILGOU’.

V

The current emphasis on Protestants as victims of republicanism in the revolutionary period prompts the question as to how we should understand those Protestants who were themselves republican rebels. If republicanism in the revolutionary period was as an attempt at the

ethnic cleansing of Protestants from Ireland, as has been suggested, then Protestant republicans would have to be either fools, mad, or traitors. The number of Protestants who were actively engaged in or supported the republican rebellion is a relatively long list, the number of these rebel Protestants who were women is also remarkable (see Appendix).

For León Ó Broin, in his study of the Stopfords and the circle of Protestant republicans that gathered around them, they were eccentric oddities best understood as deviations from, rather than expressions of the norms, of Irish Protestantism.³⁸ He argued that Catholics had access to a political hinterland that provided approval, or least validation, for republicanism. Protestants did not have access to this same validation and their adoption of republicanism was a rejection of their own traditions. They were in fact therefore traitors to their own ethnic group. Some Protestant republicans went as far as possible in their rebellion and converted to Catholicism though usually as an ultimate gesture rather than an act of conviction. For Countess Markevicz, conversion to Catholicism was less a product of religious conviction than a further step in her identification with the cause of the Irish working class. For Roger Casement conversion was a defiant gesture in the face of imminent execution. However conversion was rare and most Protestant republicans remained true to their religious identity. Harry Nicholls never doubted his faith and identity as an Irish Protestant and remained and was accepted as a member of the Church of Ireland all his life. Kathleen, in a letter dated from her period in theosophical circles describes herself as moving 'from Biblical religion through agnosticism into intellectual theosophy and then into occult arts'. The witness statements in the Bureau of Military History Archive made by a number of Protestant republicans show little consciousness that they were in a predominantly Catholic movement and no consciousness of being considered cultural or ethnic intruders. Elizabeth Bloxham is one of the few who did attempt to analyse the relationship between her Protestantism and her republicanism. She saw republicanism as an affirmation of her Protestant-inspired conscience and that in fact, rather than being a traitor she was 'the best Protestant of them all'.

However, to be a republican rebel was in itself exceptional, even for a Catholic. Although it proved to be the foundation event of modern Ireland the 1916 Rising was a bolt from the blue for contemporaries. Despite the evocation of a long tradition of insurrection, the

³⁸ León Ó Broin, *Protestant nationalists in revolutionary Ireland: the Stopford Connection* (Dublin, 1985).

proclamation of the republic was in reality a profound rupture in both contemporary Irish politics and within the republican tradition. It is the moment of creation of a new and contemporary republicanism, which drew upon all the contemporary forms of social radicalism available. The proclamation explicitly refers to the equality of women and men, envisages a state-regulated economy for the welfare of all citizens, rejects sectarianism, and proposes a civil as well as political republicanism. Significantly, republicanism was part of a radical Protestant culture. A list of key figures in the pantheon of Irish republicanism who were Protestant, must include Wolfe Tone, Robert Emmet, Thomas Davis, John Mitchell and William Smith O'Brien, which indicates that the republican revolutionary cause could also be appropriated as a Protestant cause. Nicholls himself refers to the writings of Mitchell as a key influence on his own republicanism.

The questions that arise when we consider Harry Nicholls and the other Protestant rebels are: was it harder to be a rebel and Protestant, or easier? What of the women then, who were Protestant and as rebellious as the men? Did being Protestant make it harder or easier for them to be rebel women? Kathleen Emerson displayed toughness and a rapier wit in her suffrage campaigns. The *Evening Herald* described her on her release from Holloway in May 1912 as 'the last person one would expect to adopt an extreme militant attitude; modest, retiring and almost shy, she is not in the least like what one would picture a strenuous advocate of votes for women to be'.³⁹ Nor it, may be implied, was she the least like what one would expect a respectable Protestant to be. The openness of the republicans to the cause of women's suffrage and their willingness to appear on their platforms was a counter to the more usual hostility amongst the home rulers and the Irish Parliamentary Party.⁴⁰

Amongst Harry Nicholls papers there is an undated autograph reflection on what had been hoped for and what had been achieved by the 1916 rebels, written for either the fortieth or the fiftieth anniversary of the Rising. Harry writes that, after 1916 and the proclamation of the republic, the principles of republicanism came in for open discussion in the IRB. 'Many of us felt that this was a very conservative country and that in the early years of independence this conservatism would hold sway'. Harry then listed the disappointments of the hopes that had animated those discussions: education that had been expected to derive inspiration from the life and work of Patrick Pearse had not

³⁹ *Evening Herald*, 18 May 1912.

⁴⁰ Cliona Murphy, 'A problematic relationship: European women and nationalism 1870-1915' in Maryann Gialanella Valiulis and Mary O'Dowd (eds) *Women and Irish history: essays in honour of Margaret MacCurtain* (Dublin, 1997), 144-58.

been transformed but had remained conservative and elitist; the Irish language continued to decline despite a generation of compulsion; the second-class status of women in the Irish state was an offence to republican principles, while the stupidity of censorship did nothing for intellectual life. Despite these disappointments, shared no doubt by many of that revolutionary generation, Harry remained engaged and interested in the developing independent Ireland. There was no sense of regret.

Was there a common element that can explain why Protestants such as Harry Nicholls embraced an anti-English rhetoric, a secessionist nationalism and a political culture that was overwhelmingly Catholic in its support? It was not class, nor did it have an urban-rural basis. For the men a key transforming influence was the Gaelic League. Harry Nicholls was part of a group of Protestant Gaelic leaguers in Dublin city, which included Seán O'Casey, George Annesley Ruth and Seamus Deakin. Other Protestants for whom the Gaelic League was an introduction to republicanism were Sean Lester, Alfred Cotton, Aodh de Blacam and Ernest Blythe. The Gaelic League was not identified as a Catholic movement and in fact in its earlier years had a distinctive Protestant flavour. Many members of the Church of Ireland sincerely believed that their church was the authentic successor of the original Celtic Christians of early Ireland that had resisted Rome and developed its own traditions rooted in a native culture. The formation of Cumann Gaeilge Eaglaise na hÉireann was more than propaganda, it reflected a genuine belief about the innateness of the Church of Ireland.⁴¹

For Protestant women the key introduction to rebel politics was the feminist movement and the demand for equal suffrage rights.⁴² What we can also see in Harry Nicholls, his wife Kathleen and in all these protestant rebels was a multiplicity of interests and causes; they were all inveterate joiners of organisations that connected across many fronts. They also remained engaged in causes long after the revolutionary period had passed. If there is a common element in these causes it is the fundamental value of equality. As Protestants rebels they saw themselves as neither traitors, not fools, nor mad but as politically active citizens. Untroubled by religious difference they adopted a self-definition that was radically committed to egalitarianism, and therefore to republicanism.

⁴¹ Diarmuid Breathnach and Maire Ní Mhurchú, “‘Who were those guys?’: pearsana Chonradh na Gaeilge in Ó Conaire (eag) *Comhdháil an Chraoibhín 1993*, 67-71.

⁴² Oonagh Walsh, *Anglican Women in Dublin: philanthropy, politics and education in the early twentieth century* (Dublin, 2005), 44-50.

Appendix

Protestant women and men in the republican movement 1916-21

Women

Bennet, Louise
 Bloxham, Elizabeth.
 Brodrick, Albinia.
 Duncan, Lily.
 English, Ada.
 French, Dora.
 Gifford, Grace.
 Gifford Muriel
 Gifford, Nellie.
 Gifford, Sydney.
 Gonne, Maud.
 Jacob, Rosamund.
 Kearns, Linda (Mrs MacWhiney)
 Lynn, Kathleen.
 Markievicz, Constance.
 Moloney, Helena.
 O'Brien, Nellie.
 Stopford-Price, Dorothy.
 Stopford Green, Alice.
 Smithson, Annie.
 Spring Rice, Mary.

Men

Barton, Robert.
 Black, Hugh/Aodh de Blacam
 Blythe, Ernest .
 Casement, Roger.
 Childers, Erskine.
 Cotton, Alfie.
 Coulter, Geoffrey.
 Deakin, James.
 Elmes, Ellet.
 Gilmore, George.
 Heron, Archie.
 Hobson, Bulmer.
 Irvine, George.
 Joynt, Ernest.
 Lester, Sean.
 Maguire, Sam
 Nicholls, Harry.
 O'Casey, Sean.
 Ruth, George.
 Ruttle, Sam.
 Shields, Arthur.
 Beaumont, John Nelson (Sean).
 MacWhinney, Charles.
 White, Jack.

