

Against the Odds: a reflection on the Battle of Vinegar Hill 1804 and the Easter Rising 1916*

This year marks the 212th anniversary of the skirmish that took place here at Vinegar Hill, when British troops fired on and dispersed a band of convicts, mostly Irish, thereby thwarting their bold plan to win their freedom by marching on Sydney, seizing a ship and sailing home to Ireland.

212 years is not a significant anniversary, unlike say the centenary to be commemorated this year to mark the Easter Rising in Dublin. Yet, just as our study of science teaches us the link between 212 and 100 in terms of the boiling point of water in the Fahrenheit and Celsius scales, so too does our study of history show us the link between the boiling point here in 1804 and that in Dublin in 1916 when British troops also fired on and dispersed a band of Irishmen (and women) with a bold plan to win their freedom, this time by seizing the centre of Dublin and proclaiming Ireland's independence.

In both cases, the plans though bold were ill-conceived, poorly executed and destined to fail. As the Americans say, "You can't fight City Hall". And yet in both cases, Irishmen were prepared to risk their lives in a reckless endeavour against overwhelming odds. And it's not as if the point had not been made before.

To the convicts of 1804 the failed rising of 1798 was fresh in the memory. Many of them had taken part in that rebellion and were well aware of the devastation that had occurred across Ireland both during and after it. Moreover, news of the failed rising of 1803 and of Emmet's execution had reached the colony just before the convicts set out on their march on Sydney.

The convicts well knew that the prospect of success was low and the price of failure was high. No wonder their rallying cry was "Death or Liberty", for they must have known that the British would readily grant them their first choice.

So too the Irish men and women who rose up in 1916. Who among them really thought they could succeed?

So, what is it that drove the Irish convicts of 1804 and the Volunteers of 1916, to answer the call to rise up and to rush, lemming like, towards the ramparts of the ruler, only to plunge to inevitable defeat and in many cases certain death?

The work of anthropologist James Scott on peasant revolts in south-east Asia provides something of an insight. In his 1977 book *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, Scott wrote:

We can learn a great deal from rebels who were defeated If we understand the indignation and rage which prompted them to risk everything, we can grasp what I have chosen to call their moral economy: their notion of economic justice and their working definition of exploitation--their view of which claims on their product were tolerable and which intolerable.¹

As an economic theory it might apply more directly to the convict economy that existed in NSW in 1804 than to the political situation in Ireland in 1916. Nevertheless, at its heart is the idea that people are motivated by a locally embodied sense of justice and

¹ James Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, Yale University Press, 1977, p. 3.

* An address given at the Battle of Vinegar Hill Monument, Castlebrook Memorial Park, Rouse Hill on 6 March 2016 by Dr Jeff Kildea, adjunct professor in Irish Studies at UNSW.

when their vision of social equity is violated they may rebel regardless of the consequences.

We have seen it recently in outbreaks of violence at Australia's immigration detention centres, both onshore and offshore. Humans will put up with a lot of oppressive behaviour at the hands of their rulers, but there comes a time when the collective sense of justice is violated and the claims on them have become intolerable. If the means are at hand, whether they be handmade pikes or German Mausers, in such circumstances they may rise up, regardless of the odds against them.

For many of the Irish convicts of 1804 their sense of justice was violated not only by the harsh conditions under which they lived and worked – the floggings, the banishments, the executions – but by their enforced exile from a homeland for which many of them had been prepared to sacrifice their lives.

For the rebels of 1916, more than 40 years of constitutional agitation had failed to deliver self-government for Ireland. The home rule bill, hastily enacted following the outbreak of the First World War, was suspended until war's end. But, with the war claiming more and more Irish lives, including more than 3000 killed at Gallipoli fighting alongside the Anzacs, and with the British coalition government welcoming into its ranks in May 1915 anti-home rulers such as Edward Carson, many Irish nationalists felt their sense of justice to have been violated, that Ireland once more had been put upon.

High on the list of topics recently discussed in Ireland regarding the upcoming centenary of the Easter rising has been the question of whether the rising was morally justified in its inception and its execution. Those who say it was not point to the inevitability of defeat and argue that had the rising not occurred home rule would have come into operation peacefully once the war was over.

I am yet to be convinced that all would have been as rosy as they make out. But that is beside the point. More significantly, the argument fails to accommodate the phenomenon that Scott described in his study of peasant revolts: the indignation and rage which prompts rebels to risk everything.

While just war theory requires governments to be satisfied there are reasonable prospects of success before resorting to armed force, Scott shows us that, for subservient communities whose sense of justice has been violated, the prospect of success is not a significant consideration and they are prepared to risk all, including their lives, in striking a blow at the injustice under which they are forced to live. And in 1804 and 1916 many rebels did forfeit their lives.

Between 15 and 20 of the convict rebels were shot dead during the skirmish here at Vinegar Hill. Their leader Philip Cunningham, a veteran of the 1798 rising was hanged without trial, and eight others were hanged after being convicted of treason. Nine were sentenced to a flogging of either 200 or 500 lashes, while another 40 were exiled to Norfolk Island, Van Diemen's Land or Coal River (now Newcastle).

In 1916 fourteen of the rebel leaders were executed in Dublin, one in Cork and one (Roger Casement) in England. About 66 rebels were killed during the fighting. British casualties were higher with 143 killed, some of them Irishmen serving in the British Army.

But it was the civilians of Dublin who suffered most of all with 260 killed, which raises another aspect of the moral argument over the Easter rising. Those who resort to

insurrectional violence (like governments employing armed force) are morally answerable for the so-called “collateral damage” which their actions foreseeably cause.

On occasions such as this, and ones which will be occurring over the next few weeks and months in connection with the centenary of the Easter rising, it is right that we pause to reflect on the meaning of the events we are commemorating: to ask ourselves questions, to challenge the received wisdom; to endeavour to understand what motivated the participants to act in the way they did.

For me, the Easter rising of 1916 is an enigma. Initially it was regarded by many, including a large portion of the Irish people themselves, both in Ireland and here in Australia, as an unjustified coup by a small group of unrepresentative recalcitrants. Yet, in retrospect it soon came to symbolise the desire of the Irish people to govern themselves. Inspired by this new vision of 1916, the immediate post-war years saw the Irish engaged in a war of independence with broad popular support. And from 1922 those living in the 26 counties reaped the fruits of that struggle. The moral economy had returned to balance, though it brought with it new and different challenges. But at least the Irish people there were now governing themselves.

But these thoughts are for another day. For here and now we are commemorating what happened, not 100 years ago in Dublin but, 212 years ago on the ground on which we stand. Nevertheless, I believe it is worthwhile to consider the events of 1804 in the light of 1916. For what emerges is a sense of the indomitable spirit of the Irish people in their search for freedom for themselves and for their beloved homeland.

For most of the Irish transported to Australia against their will this land became their new homeland in which they eventually enjoyed the fruits of freedom. With the humanitarian zeal of reforming governors such as Lachlan Macquarie and the Irishman Richard Bourke, the injustices of convictism that drove the Irish of 1804 to rebel were dismantled and removed, eventually replaced by the democratic institutions we enjoy today.

Thus, despite the faint echo at Eureka fifty years later, never again did the Irish in Australia feel the need to raise the cry of “Death or Liberty ... and a ship to take us home”.

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