

Conscription, US intervention and the transformation of Ireland, 1914-1918: divergent destinies

by Emmanuel Destenay, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, xx, 249 pp., maps + illustrations, £85.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9781350266582

With the end of the decade of centenaries in Ireland we can now look back in admiration at the impressive range of monographs and articles that have emerged to add to our understanding of the Irish revolution. For a period that had already been well covered in the literature, credit is due to those scholars who have attempted to find new interpretations of events so well known. Among those scholars is Emmanuel Destenay, whose writings over the past several years have cast a revealing light on the significance of the First World War for Irish domestic politics during the revolutionary period.

His latest monograph, *Conscription, US Intervention and the Transformation of Ireland*, is an ambitious project. First, it seeks to challenge conventional narratives and distance itself from the view that Easter Week 1916 was a watershed event that 'divert[ed] nationalist civilian populations from the long-established support for the Irish Parliamentary Party, thus redirecting the course of Irish history' (p. xii). Second, it aims 'to fuse international and diplomatic perspectives with the concerns of social and cultural history, in order to demonstrate how American and British foreign and domestic policies variously thwarted or fed into [...] the dynamic of the Irish Revolution' (p. 12). Destenay is well placed to achieve the latter having spent much time researching the archives of the French diplomatic service, including reports written by France's representatives in Dublin, London, and Washington. He tells us that the effect of that research was to 'reshape my understanding of Easter Week 1916 and its aftermath' (p. 13).

While the inclusion of the insights of French diplomats adds an interesting and little-known perspective to the book's narrative of the course of Anglo-Irish politics during the war, it does not always advance the author's primary purpose. This he describes as 'to revisit the transformation of Ireland, focusing on how fears of compulsory military service radicalized civilian populations and paved the way for the accession of Sinn Féin to a position of hegemony in nationalist Ireland' (p. 8). The views of French diplomats on the troubles in Ireland and their effect on Britain's capacity to continue to assist in the defence of France are, of course, important for our understanding of the dynamics of the relationship between these two allies. However, it seems to have less relevance to our understanding of what motivated the Irish people to shift their allegiance from the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) to Sinn Féin. The same cannot be said of his discussion of US intervention, which did have a direct impact.

In terms of the book's primary purpose, Destenay begins with what some might regard as a straw-man argument by asserting that in the conventional narratives of the Irish revolution there is 'an artificially constructed continuity between Easter Week 1916 and the December 1918 general elections' (p. xiii). His corrective is to 'argue that the triumph of Sinn Féin in December 1918 [...] cannot be dissociated from the larger stage of wartime politics, and that it cannot be seen solely as the spectacular after-effect of the executions of the 1916 leaders' (p. 10) and, in particular, that it was 'the set of immediate anxieties aroused by the possible introduction of conscription which decisively redirected the course of Irish history' (p. xiii).

Destenay is correct to contend that most historians generally regard Easter Week 1916 as a turning point in the history of Ireland, but most would also argue that from then to December 1918 there were many twists and turns along the road as a result of which Sinn Féin eventually displaced the IPP as the predominant voice of Irish nationalism. Not one event, certainly not Easter Week and the executions that followed, is generally advanced as the means by which the transfer occurred.

The main strength of this book is the detailed exposition of the way in which the conscription issue fed into Irish domestic politics, particularly during the 1917 by-elections. The author demonstrates how Sinn Féin cleverly used the issue to advance itself at the expense of the IPP, even though John Redmond's party also opposed conscription. If anyone thinks that fake news and alternative facts are recent phenomena in political discourse, this book provides evidence to the contrary. However, despite the detail with which the conscription issue is covered, this reviewer came away less than convinced that 'it was largely the fears of being conscripted which precipitated the divorce between the Irish Party and its support base within nationalist Ireland' (p. xiii). Destenay states he does not believe Sinn Féin would have displaced the IPP but for the emergence of the question of conscription (p. 217). But, just as Easter Week and its aftermath do not provide a single cause for the change in the aspirations and allegiances of the Irish people, the same can be said of the fear of conscription.

Conscription was a significant factor in that change, but it was one of many. Other causes, such as the fallout from the war, the failure to resolve the constitutional stalemate, the repetition of sterile negotiations over 'home rule', and Redmond's entrapment in the Irish Convention – all of which Destenay acknowledges (pp. 218–219) – cumulatively led to the transformation. The IPP's failure to prevent fellow Westminster MPs from extending conscription to Ireland in April 1918 was the final straw that dealt the death blow to the party.

The book contains a detailed table of contents, enabling easy navigation of its various sections. It also includes maps showing the results of by-elections in 1917 and 1918 and among its many illustrations are images of election pamphlets, selected to emphasise the relevance of conscription in those campaigns.

Despite this reviewer's reluctance to adopt the author's thesis, those with an interest in better understanding the Irish revolution would be well served by reading what Emmanuel Destenay has written in this book.