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## **‘A secret, melodramatic sort of conspiracy’: The disreputable legacies of Fenian violence in nineteenth-century London.**

Richard Kirkland

On the evening of the 30 October 1883 there were two near-simultaneous bomb blasts on the London Underground. The first occurred between Praed Street (now Paddington) and Edgware Road stations and seriously damaged the windows and wooden frames of the heavily-crowded last three carriages of a Metropolitan Railway train. Later inspection revealed that the bomb had also blown a small crater in the tunnel wall. Seventy-two passengers were injured, many of them seriously. Eleven minutes later there was a second explosion two hundred yards into the tunnel between Charing Cross station and Westminster station. It is likely that the bomb had been thrown from the window of a moving train as it headed westwards. The device exploded on impact and, according to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, ‘the walls of the tunnel were battered as if they had been struck by artillery’.<sup>1</sup> As there were no other trains passing at the time collateral damage was limited, but something of the force of the explosion was indicated by the fact that its shockwave passed along the tunnel in both directions causing damage and great alarm on the platforms of both stations. The windows in the platform staircases at Charing Cross were blown out and all the lights in the station and in a train that was waiting at the platform were extinguished. Westminster station, a quarter of a mile down the line, was less seriously affected, but the windowpanes from a signal box were shattered by the reverberations. Fortunately the explosion occurred underneath a vent through which much of the force of the blast escaped. If this had not been the case it is likely that the damage would have been much more extensive.

Initial investigations of the Praed Street bomb indicated that it had been left on the track by the bombers just before the train arrived at the station. The train’s guard reported that ‘when the train left Praed-street station he looked out of the window as usual and saw a stream of sparks like the burning of a fuse under one of the carriages. Immediately afterwards he heard an explosion, and was knocked down insensible’.<sup>2</sup> Those injured in the attack were in the third class carriages and were mostly artisans, shopkeepers and servants. One of the victims of the blast, John Hodnett, ‘sustained severe injuries to the head and face’, and recounted his experience to *The Standard*:

Whilst laughing and talking with some of his friends he felt a dreadful crash, and was thrown violently towards the side of the train. The next moment the gas lamp was dislodged, and the glass as it fell cut his eyes and face. The window panels and the

sides of the carriage fell in, and all was in darkness. The greatest consternation prevailed, and the passengers rose and commenced screaming. Had the train stopped a number of persons would have jumped out, and fatal consequences might have ensued. In the meantime the shrieks of the female passengers were heartrending. Many were bleeding and were terribly crushed, for the compartments were closely packed with people from the Fisheries Exhibition. On reaching Edgware-road Station the greatest confusion prevailed. The injured passengers were assisted out by the officials and others, and taken to the waiting rooms, but these places were already crowded. Surgeons dealt with the cases as rapidly as possible, and sent those who were the worst injured to St. Mary's Hospital, where he himself was eventually taken.<sup>3</sup>

George Patey, a carpenter who was also badly injured in the attack, reported that after the explosion 'the lights of the carriages were extinguished, and total darkness prevailed, and he, together with a mass of living beings began struggling for life'. As he recalled, 'the suspense was awful, as no one could tell what else was likely to happen'. Another survivor in the same carriage, Elizabeth Lee, stated that during the aftermath, 'suddenly a train passed on the opposite side and illuminated their carriages and a ghastly and sickening spectacle of men and women bleeding profusely from fearful gashes in the head and limbs was presented'.<sup>4</sup> Railway officials later discovered the worst affected of the compartments to be 'thickly splashed with blood, presenting a ghastly appearance'.<sup>5</sup> That night the centre of London was locked down. All available police were stationed on patrol around the two affected stations and at other major public buildings including the Houses of Parliament. The anticipation of further violence paralysed the city.

It was clear that the attacks had been carefully planned. A subsequent inquiry into the incident chaired by Colonel Vivien Majendie, a bomb disposal expert and the Government Inspector of Explosives, reported that the terrorist's intention was 'to produce explosions on the Inner Circle of the London Underground Railway, at points as nearly as possible opposite to one another and, as nearly as might be, the same time'.<sup>6</sup> Such careful synchronisation alongside a willingness to deploy dynamite in a confined urban space indicated that the perpetrators were not only professional in their planning but ruthless in their intentions. The explosions took place along what was at this time the only underground railway in the world, and the choice of this target combined with the technology deployed in the improvised devices spoke powerfully of the jarring juxtapositions of modernity. Certainly, the vivid descriptions of the suffering and apprehension of the survivors of the Praed Street attack as they were trapped in their carriage awaiting rescue seem both universal and

distinctly modern. In short the symbolic logic of the bombings indicates their importance as an archetype for much subsequent urban terrorism.

The attacks were part of the 'dynamite war', a campaign waged in Britain mostly by Irish-American Republicans organised under the banner of Clan na Gael and a splinter group, Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa's Skirmishers. The war was, and, to a degree, remains, a contentious event in Irish history principally because its instigators were willing to use extreme violence against civilian targets, and in this demonstrated a disposition to transgress codes of martial honour which had previously been regarded as largely sacrosanct. While the history of the campaign, the degree to which it was innovative in its methods as a precursor for urban terrorism, and the manner in which the war has been represented in popular culture and literature have been the subjects of compelling recent research, the extent to which the campaign has been understood within the context of Irish London and its problematic status within narratives of nineteenth-century Irish political insurgency more broadly have been less fully considered.<sup>7</sup> This paper considers these aspects in greater detail, highlighting the disreputable status of the dynamite war and, subsequently, the manner in which allusions to it are often deeply embedded in Irish literary and cultural texts. The essay concludes with a discussion of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), a work which uses fictionalised autobiography to locate the war in the wider history of nineteenth-century Irish nationalism. In so doing Joyce acknowledges the ethical complexity of the campaign in a manner which becomes both an intervention in historiography and an experiment in literary aesthetics.

The dynamite campaign was the result of a complex series of overdetermined events. In 1867 a Fenian uprising in Ireland organised by the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) had been a spectacular failure. Badly organised and compromised from the start by widespread informing, the insurrection revealed something of the limits of the IRB's traditional military tactics and for the more radical figures within the movement indicated that a drastic change in strategy was required. Significantly, this realisation coincided with dramatic developments in the technology of explosives, timers, and detonators. It would prove to be a potent mix. Dynamite itself, as Paul Avrich has noted, was 'cheap in price, easy to carry, not hard to obtain'. As such, for many it was nothing less than 'the poor man's natural weapon, a power provided by science against tyranny and oppression'.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, then, the preconditions for further violence were securely in place. On 18 September 1867, two suspected leaders of the uprising, Thomas J. Kelly and Timothy Deasy, both Irish-American veterans of the Fenian struggle, were in transfer to Belle Vue Gaol in Manchester when the police van in which they were held was intercepted by a large group of men. Kelly and Deasy escaped but

a policeman was shot dead during the attack. State retribution was uncompromising. Twenty six suspects were soon apprehended and interrogated and, as a result, five were identified as 'principal offenders' and sentenced to death. Of these five one was pardoned and another's sentence was commuted, but the other three, William Allen, Michael Larkin, and Michael O'Brien, the 'Manchester Martyrs' as they became known, were hanged from the walls of Salford Gaol on the morning of 23 November 1867. The injustice and cruelty of the executions – the hangings were botched by an incompetent executioner – galvanised sympathy for the Fenians and revitalised the membership of both the IRB and Clan na Gael.

Events in London one month later would prove to be more spectacular again. On 20 November 1867, two notable Fenian operatives, Ricard O'Sullivan Burke and his accomplice Joseph Casey, were arrested in London and placed on remand in Clerkenwell House of Detention to await trial. Such was their importance to the campaign that a reckless plan of escape was devised. On 12 December a wheelbarrow containing a barrel of gunpowder was placed against the prison wall. The intention was to synchronise a large explosion with Burke's period of exercise in the prison yard and thus enable him to escape through the hole in the wall caused by the blast. Due to a faulty fuse, however, the improvised bomb malfunctioned. The Fenians tried again on the next day and this time successfully detonated the gunpowder. Unfortunately the explosion was far larger than anticipated. It caused a massive breach in the prison wall and destroyed a row of houses on Corporation Lane. Twelve people were killed -- six of them instantaneously -- and many more injured. The plan was an utter failure, and, in fact, could never have succeeded as the authorities had been warned that an attack was imminent and so ensured Burke remained locked in his cell throughout.

The immediate effects of the Clerkenwell explosion for the Irish nationalist cause were highly negative, not least because it had the effect of reducing sympathy among the British working class for the cause of Irish independence – a development predicted by Karl Marx in the immediate aftermath of the explosion when he noted to Friedrich Engels that the attack had been 'a very stupid thing'. 'One cannot expect the London proletarians to allow themselves to be blown up in honour of Fenian emissaries. There is always a kind of fatality about such a secret, melodramatic sort of conspiracy', he continued.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, even the IRB itself would eventually condemn the failed rescue as a 'dreadful and deplorable event' in April 1868.<sup>10</sup> For these reasons, and despite the amount of consternation it caused, the Clerkenwell explosion gave the IRB a reputation for a certain degree of incompetence which, in the British popular press at least, fed off existing racial stereotypes. This broad template for understanding Irish terror as simultaneously both blundering and terrifying has remained

within British culture since. That said, the significance of the Clerkenwell explosion on the subsequent course of Irish history should not be underestimated. Indeed, according to Lindsay Clutterbuck, 'its consequences continue[d] to resonate throughout the twentieth century'.<sup>11</sup> This is because it inadvertently provided a model for a new kind of violent resistance based not on traditional military mobilization but rather on spectacular, individual acts whose meaning was intended to be grasped (at least in part) symbolically. In short, while the Clerkenwell explosion had failed as a plot, its sudden shattering violence had been successful in focusing influential minds on the matter of Ireland and its discontents.

For these reasons the subsequent dynamite war would present the security forces with a set of previously unknown problems as its strategy was to generate spectacle and spread alarm through carefully planned explosions. As such, the war was conducted with a strong sense of theatre with the performative element implicit to the idea of an 'outrage' to the fore. The targets chosen would be a mixture of the symbolic, the strategic, and those locations where destruction could be maximised. This made the campaign, as Michael C. Frank has observed, 'the first of its kind in the history of terrorism'.<sup>12</sup> The war proper began on 14 January 1881 when the Skirmishers detonated an explosive in a ventilation shaft in the wall of Salford Barracks, Manchester killing a seven-year old boy and injuring three others. Returning to the site of the Manchester Martyrs' execution was significant and also indicated something of the ruthlessness of the new strategy. Indeed, although both the Clan na Gael dynamiters and the gunpowder-using Skirmishers spoke of the desire to attack property rather than individuals, given the nature of some of the targets chosen it is hard to believe that loss of life was not at least contemplated as an effect of the campaign. As such, and as Clutterbuck has noted perceptively, the activities of both groups crossed a 'conceptual Rubicon'.<sup>13</sup> Once such violence was deemed justifiable there could be no way back and it was only because of the unreliability of the technology deployed and a certain amateurishness on the part of the Skirmishers that greater loss of life did not occur.

The dynamite war came to London on the evening of 16 March 1881 with a failed attempt to blow up the Mansion House and for the next five years the city would be targeted repeatedly. On 15 March 1883 there were explosions at the offices of *The Times* at Blackfriars in the City (possibly in retaliation for the the newspaper's editorialising about the Fenian cause) and Government Offices in Whitehall, the latter causing very extensive damage in a strategically highly sensitive area. At this point the focus of the campaign switched to the transport network and dynamite, rather than gunpowder, became the preferred explosive. Following the attacks at Praed Street and Charing Cross in October 1883, on 25 February 1884 a clockwork-timed bomb, deploying a small revolver as a detonator, exploded at one

o'clock in the morning in the cloakroom of Victoria Station. The bomb had been disguised in a handbag, as were three other identical bombs subsequently discovered at Charing Cross, Paddington, and Ludgate Hill stations. Each bag also contained clothing and newspapers intended to disguise the dynamite and fuse should the bags be opened prematurely. These, however, did not explode. The damage at Victoria was extensive, although no one was seriously injured. William Lomasney, one of the bombers who planned and executed this attack, was later 'blown to atoms' alongside two fellow bombers (including his brother) in December of that year when a bomb they were planting in a drain hole under London Bridge exploded prematurely.<sup>14</sup> Although damage to the bridge was minimal, the huge blast was heard as far away as Highbury in north London.<sup>15</sup> The bodies of the bombers were never recovered but Clan na Gael paid a pension to Lomasney's widow.

Despite this setback the ambition of the attacks became more pronounced. In the spring of 1884, Scotland Yard received an anonymous letter stating that on the 30 May Clan na Gael intended to dynamite a number of public buildings in London, including Scotland Yard. That night there were explosions at the Junior Carlton Club and the London home of Sir Watkin Wynn MP, both on St James Square. Damage to the buildings was significant and five people at the club were injured, but no one was killed. A short time later an explosion occurred underneath the headquarters of the Special Irish Branch at Scotland Yard in a public toilet. A hole twenty feet in diameter was blown into the side of the building while a nearby pub, *The Rising Sun*, was destroyed. The next morning another unexploded bomb was found placed next to one of the sculpted lions in Trafalgar Square. The final attacks of the dynamite war came in 1885. On 2 January, in a repeat of previous operations, a small percussion bomb was detonated on an underground train between Gower Street and King's Cross stations. The carriage was very badly damaged but no one was seriously hurt. Later that month, on 24 January -- a day that became known as 'Dynamite Saturday' -- there was a bomb attack at the Tower of London and two explosions in Westminster Hall and the Commons Chamber in the Houses of Parliament. The terrorists posed as tourists (and in the case of the Parliament bombs, man and wife) and concealed explosives underneath heavy coats and skirts. In this way the bombs were conveyed right to the heart of their intended targets. Again the meticulous planning of the event was to be let down by the unreliability of the explosives themselves. The bomb at the Tower exploded prematurely and the bomber, James Gilbert Cunningham, an Irish American, was apprehended as he tried to flee the scene. Two women and two children were injured by the blast. The bombers of Parliament escaped in the general chaos of the explosions' aftermath, but the blasts themselves only caused slight injuries to two Policemen. Despite the vulnerable security situation that 'Dynamite Saturday' exposed, the events of that day were also to mark a conclusion, of a

sort, to the campaign in London. Following the death of Lomasney – who had been skilled at importing dynamite into Britain from the United States – and heightened security around the Channel ports, it became increasingly difficult to obtain explosives. Alongside this, Clan na Gael was ruptured by internal splits, while the security force's use of spies and informers became markedly more effective during the period of the campaign. As Mark Ryan, the one-time member of the Supreme Council of the IRB, noted in his memoirs: 'the vigilance of the authorities made recruiting for our organisation very difficult. Any person we approached would be "shadowed", and his private and business address noted. His employer would also be interviewed by detectives, and he might soon find himself in the ranks of the unemployed'.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond the human suffering caused by the campaign, the dynamite war caused significant tensions within Irish nationalism itself, between Clan na Gael and the IRB (which had always opposed the attacks), and between constitutional nationalists and those committed to the use of physical force. During this period the IRB was increasingly supportive of Charles Stewart Parnell's constitutional campaign with the Irish Parliamentary Party, activity which the dynamiting of London with its subsequent effect on public opinion (carefully encouraged by the British authorities) seriously compromised.<sup>17</sup> The war also hardened political attitudes in Britain and encouraged the spread of anti-Irish sentiment in the media. As *The Standard* thundered on 26 Jan 1885: 'These are not the deeds in which an Emmett or a Fitzgerald would take pride. No Irish maiden would break her heart for the sneaking wretch who creeps about in woman's clothes to commit an outrage which kills the innocent, and runs away himself in safety'.<sup>18</sup> Satirical accounts were similarly brusque in their judgement. An article in the London periodical, *Funny Folks*, 'The Irish Terror in London' from 1883, prophesised the escalation of the campaign to include 'the blowing up of the Nelson column', an attempt 'to shoot Mr. Gladstone with an airgun, during his walk across St James's Park', 'the burning of Madame Tussaud's, and the houghing of the Temple Bar Griffin'. As a result, it continued, newspapers 'preached a crusade against the Celtic inhabitants of London, and fearful scenes were enacted in the Irish quarters about Drury-lane and the Seven Dials. The tocsin pealed from the churches of St. Mary-le-Strand and St. Giles, and the hands of the metropolis were red with Hibernian gore'.<sup>19</sup> The humour of this is barbed, and it is left ambiguous as to whether *Funny Folks* would have objected to such genocide or not.

Did the dynamite war, then, achieve any purpose? To a large extent it did not, although the fear it provoked in London kept the cause of radical Ireland to the forefront of political life, a strategy which was unpleasant but undeniably effective. Certainly it would not be the last time that London would witness simultaneous explosions on the London underground and



experience the terror that such spectacular violence provokes. In this way, one of the main effects of the war was to instil a damaging divisiveness, in that it forced a division between those in London who claimed Irishness and those that did not. Indeed, this was one of Rossa's intentions in mobilising his Skirmishers in Britain in the first place. As Niall Whelehan has argued, the Skirmishers' campaign was to be of a scale 'sizeable enough to ignite a nativist backlash against the Irish population in Britain' with the aim of provoking a greater revolutionary conflict.<sup>20</sup> This was also predicted by Lomasney who, prior to the war's onset, 'was deeply concerned about the terrible revenge which would be exacted upon the Irish living in England if such a campaign took place'.<sup>21</sup> As this suggests, alongside the seemingly random nature of its violence, one of the most disturbing aspects of the dynamite war was its essential alterity in that it did not emerge from London's Irish community or in any way engage with the reality of their lives. Indeed, if anything, the political tide of Irish London was turning away from such extremism during this period becoming, in Lynn Hollen Lees phrase, 'domesticated [...] as extensions of the franchise gave Irish migrants and their descendants a place in the English political process'.<sup>22</sup> Certainly while the diversity of Irish experience in London at this time means that it is not possible to identify an overall culture of feeling or what might be termed a unified émigré consciousness, the range of activity taking place contrasts with the strategy of the dynamite war in striking ways. Firstly, this period was one of increasing confidence among the Irish middle class in the city. Focused on journalism, politics and commerce, as R. F. Foster has noted, Victorian London 'was the magnet for generations of middle-class Irish *arrivistes* determined to make their mark'.<sup>23</sup> Such was their dynamism that Irishness became both visible and, indeed, fashionable; a tendency which would peak with the Irish Exhibition of industries, crafts, and culture at Olympia in West London in June 1888. For this class, at least, the dynamite war was little more than a source of embarrassment, as it constituted an affront to their aspiration for assimilation into London society. Secondly, there is clear evidence in this period of cultural and social mobilisation in the city among the (predominantly Catholic) Irish clerical lower-middle class. While W. B. Yeats's narrative of the development of the Irish cultural revival emphasises the founding of the Irish Literary Society in 1891 as its genesis, that moment inspired by the Parnell crisis when a 'disillusioned and embittered Ireland turned away from parliamentary politics', in fact its origin can be traced to the founding of the Southwark Irish Literary Club by Frank A. Fahy, a civil servant for the Board of Works, in 1883.<sup>24</sup> The work of the Southwark Club was based on ideals of self-help, cultural improvement, and social inclusivity, and was broadly unsympathetic to Fenianism and the use of political violence. For these reasons it is hard to imagine it finding any common cause with Clan-na-Gael and its military strategy. Indeed, the key early ideologues of the revival were unimpressed with the campaign and particularly its seeming disregard for recognised codes of conventional

martial honour. In his *Autobiographies* Yeats noted approvingly that John O'Leary, the veteran Fenian leader and at this stage his mentor and confidant, 'would cast off his oldest acquaintance did he suspect him of rubbing shoulders with some carrier of bombs'<sup>25</sup> because such activity contravened his deeply held sense of what constituted 'honourable warfare'.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, according to Marcus Bourke, 'so strongly did [O'Leary] feel on this topic that at least twice in 1885 he publicly referred to his old friend and associate in the movement, O'Donovan Rossa, as a madman'.<sup>27</sup> Part of Yeats's intention in writing *Autobiographies* was to integrate Fenianism into his particular vision of an evolving narrative of Irish self-determination but the zealotry of the dynamite war remained stubbornly beyond the ambition of this project.

Little wonder, then, there appears to have been considerable ambivalence on the part of the Irish London community towards the attacks, even if it was they who would endure the repercussions of the bombings through sporadic, although usually small scale, outbreaks of retributive violence. Indeed, for the Irish in London the dynamite attacks established an atmosphere of living that would become the norm for much of the next century -- the condition of existing between the poles of assimilation and prejudice, of being part of the city while also being held apart from it. As such it was the peculiar fate of the London Irish to be the target of both fetishisation and suspicion, often simultaneously. As Fahy and D. J. O'Donoghue noted in 1889, as a result of the campaign they were 'more carefully studied, and their suffrages more sought after'.<sup>28</sup> It was this bifurcated existence that created the particular, and easily distinguishable, attitude that the Irish have held towards London since: the city is both a kind of home, a place of distinctive Irish settlement, culture and economy, and, at the same time, a place of strangeness, hostility, and prejudice.

Given that the creation of spectacle was one of the campaign's primary objectives, it can be argued that the dynamite war was, in itself, a product of popular media. Newspapers reported the attacks in exhaustive detail with countless witness statements, diagrams, maps, and opinion pieces and it is hard not to perceive this detail as a means of compensating for the one truly terrifying element of the campaign: its fundamental unknowability. Reports were frequently inclined to describe the attacks in the form of the then nascent detective story genre with the dogged Majendie usually cast as the hero. In turn, these reports were, to use Deaglán Ó'Donghaile's term, 'recycled' as popular fictions.<sup>29</sup> It is noticeable that in this recycling the dynamitards were often depicted as both fearsome and yet slightly ridiculous, a combination that found a natural home in the excesses of the sensation genre then much in vogue. In these terms the war was depicted in melodramas, comedies, sensation novels (of which Robert Louis and Fanny Van de Grift Stevenson's *The Dynamiter* of 1885 is the most

well-known and best) and reams of political satire. It also offered itself as a topical plot device. Consider, for instance, *Helter Skelter* by Walter Browne, a comedy performed at Alexandra Opera House Sheffield in 1886. This was a convoluted farce driven by a suspicion that a nearby jail is to be dynamited in a Fenian plot. The play featured the character 'Inspector Messiter' (a borderline incompetent version of Majendie) and used the notoriety of the dynamite campaign to bring urgency to what was otherwise a lacklustre venture. Of greater ambition was *The Nationalist* by J.W. Whitbread, produced at the Queen's Royal Theatre Dublin in 1891. A four-act political melodrama, the play was part of a series of Irish-themed historical productions at the theatre that frequently provoked a feverish audience response.<sup>30</sup> *The Nationalist* combined grievance at agrarian evictions with the emergence of a new terrorist group, 'The Dynamitards', who lurk offstage as an unseen threat of physical force. Despite being, in Christopher Fitz-Simon's judgement, a 'fairly turgid example of stock in trade melodrama',<sup>31</sup> the play was popular enough to be revived on a number of occasions, perhaps because, in Joseph Holloway's phrase, it knew 'the pulse of the popular audiences'.<sup>32</sup>

Such representations indicate that the capacity of the dynamite war to create new and jarring juxtapositions in the fabric of modern urban life – its status as an act of modernity -- was perceived at the time. And yet despite this immediate processing of the war as spectacular event, the speed at which Irish politics moved in this period in the whirl of the Parnell crisis meant that it was soon superseded. This is partly because of the disdain in which the campaign was held by many Irish nationalists, but also because of the manner in which it contradicted a narrative which proposed the possibility of a seamless assimilation into British social life for Irish immigrants. Despite this, it is not the case that the campaign disappeared from political or cultural memory. Instead it would continue to be alluded to with surprising frequency but in ways that were often encoded or deeply embedded in textual detail. In these terms, while the war was frequently a subject too controversial to be faced head on, it could be deployed as a useful metonym for indicating the extremities of political violence. It is, for instance, a presence in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* of 1907 and an occasional shadowy threat in the Sherlock Holmes mysteries of Arthur Conan Doyle. More enticingly, it reappears in what is perhaps the greatest nineteenth-century Irish London text of all, Oscar Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest* from 1895. In this comedy the resolution of the drama revolves around the fact that in her earlier life a governess, Miss Prism, had absent-mindedly deposited a hand-bag containing her charge, the baby Jack Worthing, in the cloakroom of Victoria station – or, more precisely, the cloakroom for 'the Brighton line' as Jack is quick to confirm (this being the more upmarket part of the station). The conceit sharply satirises middle-class ideas of appropriate child care in the period and the implications of Miss

Prism's memory lapse propel the drama to its climax with an irresistible momentum. Alongside this, however, the moment also recalls the previous time that a deposited handbag in Victoria Station's cloakroom intruded into public consciousness: the handbag containing a clockwork-timed bomb that exploded in the early hours of 25 February 1884. As a result, for contemporary audiences the detonation of the play's comic climax had a very charged political fuse. As with many similar moments in his work, Wilde is careful not to over-emphasise the reference but it is notable that when she is asked to identify the handbag as her own, Miss Prism recognises it in part because it bears the marks of an 'explosion' -- though in this case, and as one would expect given her seemingly respectable status, it is the 'explosion of a temperance beverage'. Such a reading reveals a further slyly subversive streak to the play -- a work which was anything but the 'trivial comedy' he claimed it was -- and accords with the way that Wilde elsewhere would allude to sympathy for the cause of radical Ireland while rarely quite stating it.<sup>33</sup>

It is in examples such as this that the dynamite war has its afterlife in culture. Despite the dubious legacy of the campaign, the indefatigable commitment of figures such as Lomasney and their certainty about the integrity of their sacrifice cast a long shadow. Indeed, the irreducible fanaticism they both embodied and demanded from others would become a constant and crucial element in twentieth-century Irish republicanism. It is this imperative that Joyce examines in his *Ulysses* of 1922, a work which, among many other things, can be described as an alternative history of Irish nationalism. Here Joyce returns to the subject of nineteenth-century Fenian terrorism at a time when it appeared to be almost entirely anachronistic and he does so as part of the high modernism of the 'Proteus' chapter, Stephen Dedalus's dense and allusive interior monologue on Sandymount Strand. The groundwork for the intervention is carefully prepared. In 'Nestor', the previous chapter, Garret Deasy, the master of the school at which Stephen teaches, delivers a ponderous and muddle-headed lecture on Irish history to Stephen while making him wait to receive his salary. His justification for such action is partly because he likes to 'break a lance'<sup>34</sup> with the younger man but also, and more pointedly, to remind him that 'you fenians forget some things'.<sup>35</sup> In the context of the exchange -- an Ulster Protestant addressing a Catholic subordinate in the workplace -- the appellation is offensively sectarian but, as is often the case with Deasy, it is also not entirely incorrect. Fenianism was an integral part of Joyce's political and creative inheritance and, moreover, was a doctrine inextricably linked to his perception of (and relationship with) his father.<sup>36</sup> By the early years of the twentieth century it was also a movement that he deemed fundamentally anachronistic. As he noted in 1907 in his article 'The Last Fenian', while Fenianism was sufficiently mutable to have 'once more changed its name and appearance', morphing into Arthur Griffith's Sinn Féin and

abandoning dynamite, in its classic nineteenth-century form it had been nothing less than 'a desperate and bloody doctrine' whose lifespan had expired.<sup>37</sup> As a result, and as Andrew Gibson observes, 'The Last Fenian' 'not only confers a serious pathos on Fenianism, but conveys a sense of what is by now its historical remoteness'.<sup>38</sup> Acknowledging historical remoteness, however, is not the same as willing a deliberate amnesia and Deasy's accusation that Joyce's fictionalised self, Stephen, is a 'forgetful Fenian' is one that will preoccupy him in the next chapter of *Ulysses* as he attempts to recall what he can of the fragmented history of nineteenth-century militant Irish nationalist activity from his own scattered memories. That this is attempted through the freewheeling, highly discursive, style of 'Proteus' is, in itself, a reaction to Deasy's lecture. If the older man's take on history is both vacuous and portentous, intoning that 'all human history moves towards one great goal, the *manifestation of God*', the history that Stephen constructs will, in turn, be freewheeling, subaltern, and alive to alternative narratives.<sup>39</sup> Key to this is Stephen's recollections of his acquaintance with Kevin Egan, a fictionalised version of the Fenian Joseph Casey, in Paris. Casey had been one of the prisoners in Clerkenwell House of Detention whose attempted rescue by gunpowder-equipped Fenians in 1867 had been so badly mismanaged. On his acquittal he moved to Paris and found work as a printer. His brother Patrick was friendly with Joyce's father back in Dublin so it was natural that Joyce would seek out Casey when he moved to Paris in 1903. Casey lent money to the perpetually impoverished Joyce and Richard Ellmann notes that they would meet regularly for lunch at the Restaurant des Deux-Écus on the rue du Louvre. There, according to Ellmann, Casey 'drank absinthe without water while he talked about the blows that had been struck for Ireland'.<sup>40</sup> This recollection is lightly fictionalised in Stephen's recollection of Egan in *Ulysses*:

Noon slumbers. Kevin Egan rolls gunpowder cigarettes through fingers smeared with printer's ink, sipping his green fairy as Patrice his white. About us gobblers fork spiced beans down their gullets.

[...]

The blue fuse burns deadly between hands and burns clear. Loose tobaccoshreds catch fire: a flame and acrid smoke light our corner. Raw facebones under his peep of day boy's hat.<sup>41</sup>

In an extraordinary moment of literary compression, Egan's cigarette morphs into the fuse that detonated the Clerkenwell bomb more than thirty previously, yet, despite the implicit menace of this noir image, he is presented as an essentially tragic figure: one of the few surviving representatives of a political movement now rendered obsolete, estranged from his wife and child, and, as Stephen dryly observes, 'unsought by any save me'.<sup>42</sup> As his life is

now little more than the mundane routine of 'making his day's stations, the dingy printingcase, his three taverns, the Montmartre lair he sleeps short night in',<sup>43</sup> so he is reduced to boasting to those who will listen of his past when he was a 'strapping young gossoon'.<sup>44</sup> Most notably he returns to the chaos and destruction of the failed prison escape when 'he prowled with colonel Richard Burke, tanist of his sept, under the walls of Clerkenwell and, crouching, saw a flame of vengeance hurl them upward in the fog. Shattered glass and toppling masonry'.<sup>45</sup> The image is vivid but it is also mythologised, remote from the actuality of daily politics, and ultimately little more than a symbol of the self-mutilation Joyce was inclined to see as ever-present in the nationalist narrative.<sup>46</sup> As such, and as David M. Earle argues, 'Egan becomes a symbol not only of Irish nationalism but of disruptive methodology'.<sup>47</sup> If this were not devastating enough, Joyce makes clear that such retrospection also demands a price. In return for his hospitality Stephen suspects that Egan wishes to 'yoke me as his yokefellow, our crimes our common cause'.<sup>48</sup> However, in this, as in the other aspects of his life, Egan will have no luck; Stephen has no intention of entering into such servitude.

In its recreation of Casey as Egan, then, *Ulysses* returns to the Fenian outrages in London and records both their violence and their ultimate pointlessness. Egan, as a slightly despised and mostly forgotten figure, stands synecdochally for this period, and, in this way, *Ulysses* recasts the story of Irish nationhood in a manner that demands that even those elements that were 'desperate and bloody' should be accounted for and weighed in the balance. This is appropriate not least because of the book's status as the epic of modern Ireland, but also because 'Proteus' as a chapter is concerned with the role of detritus, both material and psychological, and the extent to which such waste can be remade and recycled. Indeed Sandymount Strand itself, the place where Stephen's grapples with these thoughts is, as Willam Viney notes, 'an incoherent place that amasses the detritus of a variety of places, times, activities, or events'.<sup>49</sup> The significance of this is that in casting light on what was, by this time, a deliberately obscured aspect of nationalist history, *Ulysses* presents a model for the narrating of Irish political experience that is willing to incorporate those erroneous, misplaced, or simply embarrassing diversions that, in 1922, it might have been considered politic to have overlooked. In this Joyce's method is exemplary: in recognising both the determination and the futility of the Fenians' London campaigns, their manifest failures as well as their few inadvertent successes, a more complex, if untidy, understanding of pre-Revolutionary Irish political life can be achieved.

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<sup>1</sup> Unnamed author, 'The Explosions on the Underground Railway', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 31 October 1883, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Explosions on the Underground Railway', *Standard*, 1 November 1883, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> 'Terrible Explosions in London', *North-Eastern Daily Gazette*, 31 October, 1883, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> S. Kenna, 'The Philosophy of the Bomb: Dynamite and the Fear in Late Victorian Britain', *Postgraduate History Journal: A Collection of Essays Presented at the TCD-UCD Postgraduate History Conference 2009*, 1 (2009), 89-100, 92.

<[https://issuu.com/gearoid.orourke/docs/phcj\\_2009](https://issuu.com/gearoid.orourke/docs/phcj_2009)> [accessed: 6 November 2018].

<sup>7</sup> For an excellent history of the campaign see: N. Whelehan, *The Dynamiters: Irish Nationalism and Political Violence in the Wider World, 1867-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), for a discussion of its innovative nature see: L. Clutterbuck, 'Countering Irish Republican Terrorism in Britain: Its Origin as a Police Function' (*Terrorism and Political Violence*, 18:1 (2006), 95-118), and for an analysis of the ways in which the campaign is represented in literature see D. Ó'Donoghue, *Blasted Literature: Victorian Political Fiction and the Shock of Modernism* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> P. Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 166.

<sup>9</sup> M. O'Riordan, 'Marx: The Irish Connection', *The Crane Bag* 7.1 (1983), 164-166, 165.

<sup>10</sup> J. Lydon, *The Making of Ireland: From Ancient Times to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 308.

<sup>11</sup> L. Clutterbuck, 'The Progenitors of Terrorism: Russian Revolutionaries or Extreme Irish Republicans?', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 16.1 (2004), 154-181, 159.

<sup>12</sup> M. C. Frank, 'Plots on London: Terrorism in Turn-of-the-Century British Fiction', in *Literature and Terrorism: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by M. C. Frank and E. Grube (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), p. 48.

<sup>13</sup> Clutterbuck, 'Progenitors of Terrorism', 175.

<sup>14</sup> J. Devoy, *Recollections of an Irish Rebel* (Dublin: Irish University Press, 1969), p. 212.

<sup>15</sup> J. McKenna, *The Irish-American Dynamite Campaign: A History, 1881-1896* (North Carolina: McFarland, 2012), p. 96.

<sup>16</sup> M. F. Ryan, *Fenian Memories* (Dublin: Gill and Son, 1945), p. 136.

<sup>17</sup> Although the discovery of a huge IRB arms cache in May 1882 in a stable at 99 St. John's Road, Clerkenwell suggests the organisation was also prepared for violence on a large scale if necessary. The cache consisted of 70-80,000 rounds of ammunition, 400 rifles with stocks marked with the shamrock, bayonets and sixty revolvers (K. R. M. Short, *The Dynamite War: Irish-American Bombers in Victorian Britain* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1979), p. 92-3).

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- <sup>18</sup> Unnamed author, *The Standard* (26 Jan 1885), p. 5.
- <sup>19</sup> Unnamed author, 'The Irish Terror in London', *Funny Folks* (31 March 1883), p. 98.
- <sup>20</sup> N. Whelehan, 'Skirmishing, *The Irish World*, and Empire, 1876-86', *Éire-Ireland*, 42.1-2 (2007), 180-200, 185.
- <sup>21</sup> Short, *The Dynamite War*, p. 57.
- <sup>22</sup> L. H. Lees, *Exiles of Erin: Irish Migrants in Victorian London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), p. 233.
- <sup>23</sup> R.F. Foster, 'An Irish Power in London: Making it in the Victorian Metropolis', in 'Conquering England': *Ireland in Victorian London*, ed. by R. F. Foster and F. Cullen (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2005), 12-25, 14.
- <sup>24</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'The Irish Dramatic movement, A Lecture Delivered to the Royal Academy of Sweden', *Autobiographies* (London, Macmillan, 1980), p. 559.
- <sup>25</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London, Macmillan, 1980), p. 210.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 100.
- <sup>27</sup> M. Bourke, *John O'Leary: A Study in Irish Separatism* (Georgia, University of Georgia Press, 1968), p. 175.
- <sup>28</sup> F. A. Fahy and D. J. O'Donoghue, *Ireland in London* (Dublin: Evening Telegraph, 1889), p. 7.
- <sup>29</sup> Ó'Donghaile, *Blasted Literature*, p. 3.
- <sup>30</sup> For more on this phenomenon see C. Herr, *For the Land They Loved: Irish Political Melodramas, 1890-1925* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1991), p. 9.
- <sup>31</sup> C. Fitz-Simon, 'Buffoonery and Easy Sentiment': *Popular Irish plays in the Decade Prior to the Opening of The Abbey Theatre* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2011), p. 115.
- <sup>32</sup> Fitz-Simon, 'Buffoonery and Easy Sentiment', p. 27.
- <sup>33</sup> For more on what can be termed 'Hibernian Wilde' see J. Killeen, 'The Greening of Oscar Wilde: Situating Ireland in the Wilde Wars' (*Irish Studies Review*, 23.4 (2015), 424-450) and S. Kandola, '(Re)Hibernicising Wilde? A Genetic Analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*' (*Irish Studies Review*, 24.3 (2016), 351-369).
- <sup>34</sup> J. Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. by H. W. Gabler (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 2.423-4.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., 2.271.
- <sup>36</sup> B. Fox, 'Land of Breach of Promise': *James Joyce and America* (Unpublished Ph.D thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2014), p. 109. For a full discussion of Fenianism in the work of Joyce see A. Gibson, *The Strong Spirit: History, Politics and Aesthetics in the Writings of James Joyce 1898-1915* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 69-91.
- <sup>37</sup> K. Barry, ed., *James Joyce: Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 140.



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<sup>38</sup> Gibson, *The Strong Spirit*, p. 90.

<sup>39</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, 2.380-1.

<sup>40</sup> R. Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 125.

<sup>41</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, 3.216-18, 3.239-241.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.250.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:250-1.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:245.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.247-9.

<sup>46</sup> The clearest indication of Joyce's intention here is how the 'Shattered glass and toppling masonry' of this image is revisited in 'Circe' at the climax of Stephen's journey of artistic martyrdom: 'He hits his ashplant high with both hands and smashes the chandelier. Time's livid final flame leaps and, in the following darkness, ruin of all space, shattered glass and toppling masonry' (*Ulysses*, 15.4243-4245). The resonances of this moment are complex but at the least they indicate a deepening of the association of Stephen's artistic rebellion with his Fenian sympathies.

<sup>47</sup> D. M. Earle, "'Green Eyes, I See You. Fang, I Feel": The Symbol of Absinthe in *Ulysses*', *James Joyce Quarterly*, 40.4 (2003), 691-709, 699.

<sup>48</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, 3.228.

<sup>49</sup> W. Viney, 'Reading Flotsam and Jetsam: The Significance of Waste in "Proteus"', in *Polymorphic Joyce: Papers from The Third Joyce Graduate Conference: Dublin 22-23 January 2010*, ed. by F. Ruggieri and A. Fogarty (Rome: Joyce Studies in Italy: 2012), p. 170.

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