

NINETY-EIGHT AND AFTER

(By J. HERON LEPPER, in the *New Witness*.)

"France is in trouble; Italy is ravaged; Spain is on the eve of a revolt; Germany is ruined; Switzerland is about to declare war; Holland exists no longer; and here in Belfast they are breaking our windows!"

Such was the complaint in 1797 of a disgusted citizen to a French Royalist refugee who toured Ireland in that year, and happily has left us a record of his wanderings. Everywhere the *émigré* went, and he travelled through the length and breadth of Ireland on foot and unmolested (a tacit comment on the "lawlessness" of a race that had been living under an insurrection Act since 1796), he found rampant loyalists rattling their sabres and using their lungs while the disaffected went about their work in silence; but the former made noise enough for both parties. At Waterford where he visited the theatre the performance had to be stopped while the actors were summoned to the front of the stage to sing "God Save the King," and one old gentleman in the audience who had fallen asleep had his head punched for showing such disrespect to players and anthem; in Armagh he found half the population serving the other half with notices to get to hell or Connaught and enforcing the injunction not without outrage and slaughter; at Ballycastle he learnt of a detachment of Scotch soldiers being welcomed by the inhabitants, plied with poteen, and waking after a night's carouse to find themselves minus their arms and accoutrements; at the fair of Banbridge he saw the soldiers going round and tearing the green ribbons from the dresses of the women; in Belfast he found all lights extinguished by nine and arrest awaiting anyone found in the streets after that hour, while the troops roamed the deserted streets breaking with sticks the windows of those suspected of disloyalty. All these incidents we have been able to parallel in the present year. Yet, if Monsieur Latocnaye, whom I assume to be an unprejudiced observer, could make another tour of Ireland now and convey to us his observations, I do not doubt they would disclose things altered for the worse during six score years.

For example, I cannot recall a single instance during the struggles leading up to and following '98 where Government troops were allowed to get out of hand and divert themselves by sacking towns, expelling the inhabitants, burning public buildings, destroying private property, and committing all the outrages we have now grown accustomed to expect. I know that such crimes were not infrequent in the country districts, but the towns remained fairly secure for non-combatants, and even the rural sports of the soldiery have met with universal condemnation since from historians of every shade. But now, it seems, the methods of Cromwell are to be resuscitated, condoned, or if public indignation makes that impossible, as it will, I trust, the malefactors are not to be without their apologists. The present position is that the officers who fail to keep their men in hand are not brought to a court-martial, much less the culprits; any man in uniform may shoot any man out of uniform with good hope of impunity; and the unwanted centurions of a disbanded army are formed into a band of janissaries to carry out a campaign of endless dragonnades. Even the C.I.C. of Ireland, who, as a soldier, ought to value the one good thing that soldiering teaches—discipline—cannot find words to condemn "reprisals" and the Chief Secretary contents himself with spreading a little melted Canadian butter on the conflagration, for both seem to look upon these deeds as regrettable but very natural, regrettable because of the effect they will produce abroad, natural because the Irish do not deserve any protection from the worst passions of the army of occupation. We sang such a different tune in 1914 when the Germans entered Belgium that most men will not have the heart to join the popular chorus of the moment.

There lies so much in that word "reprisals" that I had better define what the word conveys to me:

simply this, making innocent people who have done no wrong suffer for deeds done by others. That is the commonest operation being carried out by the police and, to a lesser extent, by the military in Ireland today.

In one week six towns have been looted and burnt with the aid of Government bombs; several harmless persons have been done to death by Government bullets and bayonets; many flourishing businesses, such as the factory at Balbriggan, have been destroyed and their proprietors, in all probability, ruined by Government servants; hundreds of women and children of tender years have been driven from their houses by the forces which were sent into Ireland to *support law and order*!

Good heavens! do those responsible for this travesty of government suppose that their hypocritical disclaimers of proven facts will throw dust in the eyes of all the world? At least they might have learnt from the German occupation of Belgium and the retribution which followed that there are certain elementary laws of Christianity against which the mailed fist beats in vain.

What makes the situation of an Irishman in Ireland so desperately hopeless now, much worse than in 1798, is that the law of the land has ceased to exist and there is no impartial tribunal to stand between him and the abuse of military authority. In the worst days of the former rebellion there was a Chief Justice sitting in the Four Courts bold enough to challenge the jurisdiction of a military tribunal which had condemned a rebel to hang; and the law reports of the times record where a tyrannous high sheriff was mulcted in heavy damages before a civil jury for excesses committed by him in trying to suppress rebellion. We lack such judges now, and there are no juries. Now not even a coroner's court can be held without permission of the military, and a man may be done to death and hustled into the grave and no one dare ask who did it, or why it was done. This is too much power to commit to the hands of a body of men not trained to weigh evidence and administer justice. All the acts that ever were or ever will be passed at Westminster cannot make such proceedings anything but a tyranny foul and abhorrent in the eyes of liberty-loving people.

There is another aspect of this policy of "reprisals," which may be illustrated by what happened not so long ago in another country. A Belgian professor who was present at the sack of Louvain assured me that the opinion he formed of the conduct of the German troops on that occasion was this, that they really were not responsible for their actions at the time, being mad with terror. A somewhat similar excuse, that of indiscipline, has been offered for the vagaries of the "Black-and-Tans." Grant that both factors have been responsible in a great degree for the recent pogroms in Ireland, yet it says little for the humanity or credit of a government who can unloose such dogs of war on the civil population.

In other ways Irish events are running in much the same course as during the movement initiated by the United Irishmen. In 1796 an Insurrection Act was passed. By it the Lord Lieutenant and Council could on the requisition of any seven magistrates declare a county in a state of insurrection. When that was done magistrates possessed extraordinary powers of arrest and imprisonment without trial. Later in the same year the Habeas Corpus Act was suspended, and the notorious Yeomanry Corps established. At present we have not got quite so far as the last step, but all the others have been taken, and the Government is hardly likely to boggle at plunging ankle-deep in civil war. In fact to encourage Irishmen to cut each other's throats will be quite in keeping with that time-worn but serviceable Castle maxim, divide and rule.

If then we come to reckon up the assets on either side, there appears to be an immense advantage of material for the coercionists. They have tanks, aeroplanes and the control of the railways and telegraphs; they have the command of the ports, unlimited credit, and an unscrupulousness as unlimited; moreover, they

MAURICE O'CONNOR, "The Property Man," (Tate's Bldg's.) Stafford Street, TIMARU

Phone 944. :: Has Farms of all descriptions for Sale. :: P.O. Box 186.