

The Un-Solemn Irish Free State

By ANNE O'HARE McCORMICK

WILL the Irish Free State offer the world the first demonstration of government with a sense of humor?

Of the many things which its friends and enemies predict for the New Ireland, that joyful possibility has not so far been hoped for or feared. It may be too much to expect, but it seems to me there is a sporting chance that the young men who have at last succeeded in the ancient and perilous enterprise of freeing Ireland may, if they do not become old and tired and stale too soon, show us something original, up-to-date and enlivening in the way of government.

The administration of the world nowadays is tediously alike everywhere. You can go from one perfunctory Parliament to another and see the same stereotyped forms, the same slow and cumbrous machinery, the same anxious care for precedent and tradition. You can hear the same pompous rigamaroles, the same obsolete arguments, almost the same dull speeches, in Westminster and Washington, Paris and Rome, Tokio and Prague. All Congresses bear a curious resemblance to one another. Their members sit with the same inattentiveness in the same slack circles, busy with messengers and correspondence and private conversation, while unheard discourses are delivered to the galleries and the press. They look alike, act alike, think alike. They are all alike held by that habit and inheritance of parliamentariness which rules of order have enforced in every language and which nobody knows how to break through.

Without being too sanguine, I have an idea that the new Government of Ireland will be different; that it will smash a good many plaster casts and find short cuts through a good many tangles of tradition. Almost the most exhilarating thing about the announcement from Downing Street of the sudden solution of the immemorial feud between England and Ireland was the assurance it carried that at last the Irish were to have a clear field to exhibit their political genius at home.

Heretofore the talent for government of the most political people on earth has been hampered because they have been compelled to exercise it in other countries. They have governed America, they have ruled most of the British Empire in one capacity or another, but their style has been cramped by certain ready-made rules and constitutions. It must be admitted that the Irish politician abroad has been somewhat traditional in his methods. There is nothing traditional, however, in the young men who have directed the destinies of Ireland during the last few years. They may be depended upon to keep Ireland in the spotlight and to refresh a tiresome and uninspired world with a picturesque and interesting display of new ways of administering government.

For one thing, they are all young. In Ireland, for the first time anywhere, we see a successful demonstration of that revolt of youth against the conventions and cautions of old statesmanship which is fermenting all over the world. Young men everywhere have been itching for a chance to govern a country unhindered by their elders. In Ireland now they have it. There is hardly a man of middle age in the resourceful and brilliant group responsible for the war policy or the peace negotiations of Sinn Fein. There is hardly a man of any previous political experience. Ireland abandoned the old formulas when it threw over John Redmond, the House of Commons and all constitutional methods five years ago. Sinn Fein as a political party is just five years old. It has not a leader whose political career is any older. There is not a parliamentarian or an old-timer in the lot.

Yet these inexperienced youngsters came nearer to beating the most astute parliamentarian in the world at his own game than any one he has ever met before. Lloyd George is alleged to have bamboozled Wilson and outmanoeuvred Clemenceau. He is past master at wheedling oppositions at home and abroad. He rides to fresh power on political crises like a ship borne to port by tempests. He has squeezed triumphantly through

more tight places than any politician living or dead. In the Irish peace he seems to have gained another triumph, but it is a victory more nearly a surrender than any in his career. "Lloyd George has at last met his match," said a chuckling English Tory during the progress of the correspondence leading to the London conference, and in the battle of wits which made the Irish truce almost as exciting and uncertain as the battle of rail and ambush that preceded it, the wiles of the Celt who rules England were never too wily to be recognized and countered by the wiles of the Celts who rule Ireland.

It is related that when the exchanges were taking place last Summer between the British Prime Minister and the President of the Dail Eireann, Lloyd George approached one of the Irish messengers at Gairloch with his usual manner of ingratiating and confidential frankness.

"See here," he is reported to have said, "you and I can get together on this thing. We are both Celts

fortified himself by naming as his fellow-negotiators a delegation that seemed as perfectly "packed" against Irish freedom as was the Senate Foreign Relations Committee against the League of Nations. Chamberlain, Greenwood, Birkenhead, Churchill—outside of Carson there could hardly have been four men in England more notoriously on the loyalist side of the Irish controversy. Yet at the end of the negotiations we have Birkenhead—the famous "Gallop Smith" whose name has been a term of execration in Southern Ireland for a generation—speaking with emotion of the old rights of Ireland as a parent nation and announcing that he stakes everything on his confidence in the good faith and capacity of the Irish delegates!

It is hardly to be wondered at that Ulster was moved to pained and astonished rebuke by this surrender to the enemy of her old and faithful friend, a defection aggravated by that of Austen Chamberlain, the best loyalist and imperialist of them all.

Since I had been in England and Ireland, eight months before, there had occurred an astonishing change of attitude on both sides of the Channel. In England there was a great deal more respect for the Sinn Fein than there had been in the dark days of the guerrilla warfare. The English, not distinguished for nimble-mindedness themselves, immensely admire cleverness in others. That is why their loyalty to Lloyd George resists all time and change. The diplomatic skill and strategy of De Valera and his associates got a sincere round of applause in England. There was much less talk of Irish unfitness to govern and much more of the identity of interests of the two islands—and their common culture and civilization!

In a London drawing room I listened to a hot discussion of the Irish situation in which an Englishwoman sided with the Sinn Fein and an Irishwoman was against it. It was a not uncommon alignment, especially when, as in this case, Ireland was represented by a member of the old

at their play in the public gardens. These gardens were well kept, spotted in October with beds of violets and the biggest and most beautiful pansies I have ever seen. The pleasant country roads were filled with picnickers gathering bushels of ripe blackberries or seated under wine-colored fuchsia hedges watching white sails in a bay as blue as the Bay of Naples.

At the Mansion House, now the recognized seat of Irish government outside of Ulster, there was the same easy confidence one noticed everywhere. The officials were sure that they would win either this round of the battle or the next, and as they were young and coming and the British Government was old and a little shaky the element of time was of more importance to her than to them. Nothing could be more casual, informal, unworried, even indifferent, than the Mansion House atmosphere. De Valera looked grave and anxious, and the other members of the Cabinet had an appearance of strain and weariness that rather belied their careless air. But all alike were absolutely confident. Ireland was confident. "We have England beaten now," asserted one member of the Dail. "The extent of our success depends on whether she knows it or not."

It was confusing to find a seat of government, and government itself, so accessible, so unhedged by any sort of form or barrier, as the headquarters of the Sinn Fein. I went to the Mansion House one morning with the idea of seeing Desmond Fitzgerald, head of the Dail Publicity Department. I expected to present credentials, to make an appointment, to submit to the waiting process by which all Government officials impress upon you the importance of their time and position and the unimportance of yours. A very casual doorkeeper very casually let me in. "I think Mr. Fitzgerald is inside," he said, with a jerk of his head toward a door. I offered a card. "Ah, why not go in yourself?" he urged, deprecating all such formality.

The tall young man standing inside the door as I entered was Mr. Fitzgerald himself. There were several other persons in the room, and without knowing anything about me or my errand he at once took me into the circle. The brief private interview I had intended developed into a long general conversation. A young woman was pounding out an important statement on a typewriter at the table at which we sat. Every once in a while Mr. Fitzgerald interrupted the talk to throw her a sentence as it occurred to him. Various well-known personages in the movement passed in and out. "Here's Childers. Do you know him?" "I suppose you've met Barton?" Mr. Fitzgerald rose when I recalled meeting Gavan Duffy in Rome. "I believe he's in the next room now. I saw half a dozen of them, De Valera, Griffith and the rest, settling down in Olympian conclave a few minutes ago." "Oh, please do not disturb them," I begged, in a panic lest in this disconcertingly obliging and free-and-easy place of government I could at a word break up a Cabinet meeting.

The Publicity Director's eyes twinkled as he talked, as if he were letting me into one of the biggest jokes ever perpetrated. He was lately out of prison, and his keen young face looked tired and a little haggard from loss of sleep; but he bore the scars of battle jauntily, with the same air as all the others, an air of careless adventure, of the cheerful fatalism of men willing to take all chances if they do not have to take them seriously. There was no doubt of the deadly earnestness under that nonchalant front. It was not a pose. They were actually so sure of their cause and their own invincibility that they could afford not to regard either too solemnly. Over and over again in Ireland I heard their attitude put into words: "Well, if the worst comes to the worst, they can't do any more than kill us, can they?" "You don't want to hear anything about the present situation from me," Mr. Fitzgerald assured me. "We all have to talk too much, and you know everything we can say. Talk to the man in the street. He'll give you the real thing." He offered to let me witness one of the



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and we can understand each other. I assure you that these slower-minded and more literal Britons fret you no more than they fret me. But if we talk it over together, Celt to Celt, we can make a deal in spite of them."

"As for me, I fled incontinently from the danger of the proposed intimate conversations," commented the Irishman. "I dared not bask too long in that Georgian glow. It is fatally easy to like Lloyd George. He creates a perfect illusion of sincerity and open-mindedness."

Perhaps the Welshman felt the same perilous charm in the Irishman. It was generally rumored that he did not wish De Valera to be a member of the Irish peace delegation, a canny foresight justified by De Valera's rejection of the treaty. The Irish President has a Wilsonian passion for exact formulas and a mathematically registering and remembering mind that irks and interferes with the free display of mental gymnastics. Lloyd George also

Evidently the Irishmen had a way with them, too, and outdid the Prime Minister himself in the exercise of statecraft and the radiation of charm.

But the expectation that the Irish Free State will give us something novel and racy and unhackneyed in government is only partly founded on the fact that the leaders are young and ingenious, and that they have succeeded, in spite of the growlings of dissatisfaction in their own ranks, in dictating to a British Government terms that no British Government would have accepted a year or even six months ago. It is chiefly based on certain superficial but suggestive observations of the Dail Eireann in action. I suppose no Government ever functioned with more handicaps, with more absolute authority and with more unconventional common sense than the Sinn Fein ruled Southern Ireland during the months of the war and the truce.

I was in Dublin in October when the Irish plenipotentiaries were starting on their mission to London.

Catholic land-owning class, than whom, it may be noted for the information of those who imagine that the separatists are all Catholics and the Unionists all Protestants, there is nothing more instinctively loyalist and aristocratic in the world.

In Ireland the Unionists seemed more resigned to their fate. One might guess they were almost cheerfully anticipating it. "The Dail Government won't last five years," I overheard one of them predicting to another in the lounge of the Shelbourne Hotel in Dublin, "but at its worst it can't be as bad as the English government we've been getting, and I think there'll be some fun while it lasts." The impressive thing was that nobody in England or Ireland had any doubt that the Dail was going to govern, and not even its enemies regarded the prospect with dread.

Dublin, in contrast to its sullen Winter gloom, was sunny, friendly, almost gay. The streets were crowded. Children sang Gaelic songs

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drills of the Irish Republican Army, busily recruiting and training during the truce. When I also expressed a wish to visit one of the internment camps for Sinn Fein prisoners: "Well," he grinned, "of course you'll have to go to Dublin Castle for that. Ring up Major —. He's an obliging chap and he'll put you in touch with General Macready."

We spoke with equal geniality of Lloyd George and the English report that the interned prisoners would not be released during the conference because they were extremists and might embarrass the negotiators. Mr. Fitzgerald grinned at that, too. "Humph! Most of those they put in were never much good to us, anyway," he remarked.

The talk, all of us joining in at intervals, drifted to the delightful old Georgian houses of Dublin, to Irish

scenery and American newspapers.

It was as eager and whimsical and varied as all talk is in Dublin, unspoiled and unhurried by the great events brewing all about—brewing at the same time, in fact. For the important statement somehow got written, letters were dictated, questions answered, preparations continued for the trip of the peace delegation to London. With all the apparent unconcern and casualness of procedure, business actually moved along as efficiently as and a good deal more swiftly than in any Government office I have ever seen. There was no mystery or secrecy about anything. All conversation and information were evidently free to any wayfarer. The observer, accustomed to established forms and pontifical rituals in Government, looked on first with suspicion and distrust and then with a kind of timid satisfaction. It began to appear that the only thing lacking in this Government was the professional governmental manner. It was actually that lost and forgotten and almost unrecognizable thing—a Government which had not had time to sprout red tape and whose officers had been too busy dodging arrest to settle into the official mold.

It is not strange that the long and vivacious tragedy of the Irish struggle for freedom should find issue in a breed of youth both hardened and mellowed by that searching comic spirit which is the pungent fruit of tragedy. I believe the Sinn Fein will have to grow a great deal older and drier, less humorous and less contentious, before it sinks into the ruts and cushions of age and habit. It will take a long time to conventionalize an administration already resourceful enough to burn the Dublin Custom House to destroy the tax records and make impossible the collection of tribute by the British Government; to take over and tax every municipality in Southern Ireland in defiance of Dublin Castle; to establish courts all over the island that for the first time in modern history rendered instant decisions and meted punishments to fit the crime with an ingenuity that tickled the world's sense of humor; to maintain a system of foreign representation and propaganda almost as effective as England's own, and organize a secret service that made ridiculous the crude and antique methods of the British police force.

When I lost some money and valuable papers in Dublin I was advised to apply to the Sinn Fein authorities

for assistance in finding them. "Sure, the police know nothing and never find anything!" I was told. I received, in fact, no help but plenty of sympathy at Police Headquarters, and a testimonial for the honesty of the Irish capital that the event justified. "The only good luck ye've had," said the head of the Detective Bureau, "is that ye've lost your things in Dublin. If it had been in London, now, there'd be no hope. In Dublin ye've a chance."

I was taken one day to see Mrs. Richard Green, widow of the English historian and a devoted friend of the Irish freedom movement. She was convulsed over a fresh demonstration by Sinn Fein of the incapacity of the Royal Irish Constabulary. "These boys will make me die of laughter yet," she exclaimed. "Have you seen this morning's account of their latest exploit? For months a gang of petty thieves and thugs have been working in Dublin in open derision of the helpless efforts of the Metropolitan Police to catch them. Yesterday the Dail either got tired of the thing or had a few minutes to spare from more important business. Last night they sent a party of their secret agents to round up the gang. They got fifteen of them in half an hour; and this morning they are all pleasantly disposed of—deported, jailed or set free, according to their deserts. There'll be no more thieving in Dublin. And have you seen our police? They are now reduced to such helplessness that they are trying to justify their existence by acting as traffic officers. You'll observe them at every street corner, apologetic, ingratiating, and, being Irishmen, a bit sheepish. Imagine traffic policemen in Dublin, where there's hardly a motor car and nothing speedier than a creaking old barouche or a jogging side car! Ah, it's pure joy to live in Ireland these days, and when the Dail really gets going, free and unobstructed, so to speak, I'll wager we older folk will be left gasping."

I ventured to suggest to the Dublin-born American who was with me that a little of this new energy of Government might profitably be diverted to cleaning the very dirty streets of the charming old capital. She shook her head smiling.

"You may be sure no Irishman will take the safe and monotonous job of street cleaner to save the face of his country while there's any chance of his keeping the dangerous one of risking his life for her. For myself, I can rejoice over a revo-

lution that put up these new, ugly, but modern buildings along O'Connell Street, and I have faith in a Government that has already freed Dublin from beggars and stalking poverty. If you knew the old town as well as I do, you'd feel the new spirit of hopefulness, self-assertion and self-respect in the very air. If Sinn Fein can do what it has done in five frightful years, there's nothing it can't do in fifty."

Whatever the Irish Free State does, it will not be the usual or conventional thing. A Government with imagination and a sense of humor, if such a thing can be conceived in a world in which Government is the last refuge of pomposity, invariable custom and solemn twaddle, ought to be competent as well as infinitely diverting. Think of the gorgeous nonsense it could slough off, the paralyzing precedents, the ponderous pretenses. Think of the luck of being able to start national housekeeping at a time when the neighbors are all trying to scrap their old furniture, their grandfather clocks and revolutionary locks and ships in glass cases and incriminating family archives, and of being young, and wise, and junkless!

A new Government with a sense of humor ought also to be able to get a good many laughs at the expense of its burdened elders. It seems to me that the first joke of the New Ireland is on us. One of the chief negotiators of the new treaty and the head of the Irish Republican Army announces that the Irish Free State will go into the League of Nations, guaranteed in its territorial integrity by Article X, and assured of its place by the article giving a seat in the Assembly to each of the British free dominions. It was on account of these two articles in the covenant, it may be remembered, that the Irish in America kept us out. They now seem to have left us only one reason to remain out, and that is that a League of Nations that includes Ireland, and those uncannily clever, nonchalantly calculating and subtly humorous young men who represent her, will be a rather humiliating association for us. There is doubtless some shrewd patriotic foresight in Lloyd George's surrender to Sinn Fein. He knows that he cannot last forever, and that the British Empire is not what it was in its palmy days. And he knows that if Ireland is in the League of Nations England will be relieved of the job of running it. Ireland will attend to that.