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History of Ireland

The Republic of Ireland: A socialist Rosetta Stone

- Reviews section -

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I first read Rayner Lysaght's book *The Republic of Ireland* in the 1970s. In the event of his recent death I sat down to read it again.

It was tough going in the 70s and it's a major read today. The book is extremely dense. From a different field of study it reminds me of Lenin, in that, when you read a paragraph, you find that you have to go back and read it again two or three times in order to gain an understanding of the full meaning.

There is a reason for the density. Most Irish historiography up to that point had been written as accounts, with the author signaling political orientation through their selection of facts. Rayner, in a continuity of the tradition of James Connolly, produced a class analysis of Irish society but continued with a detailed account of actors and events. The result is a dense text, but also a wonderful reference work, where every step in analysis is buttressed with endless examples of the playing out of class struggles.

Yet the book remains on the margins of historiography. In part this is because Rayner, despite his characteristic absentmindedness and bookishness, was not an academic, but a revolutionary, and was never fully accepted into Irish academia.

However this is not a sufficient explanation.

Since the publication of *The Republic of Ireland* a number of academics have written detailed accounts of the Irish counter-revolution. Their work is also sidelined and a torrent of revisionist history has been produced to justify the current phase of reaction.

Every intellectual expression requires a material base in society. In Rayner's case that base was the 1968 New Left in Ireland and his association with the Fourth International.

That current was never strong in Ireland and is today weaker still. Everyday discourse is utterly hostile to class analysis and revolution. Even the left writers, looking back at the events of the 60s and 70s, display a total incapacity to understand the times, or to step away from today's reliance on identity politics and soft liberalism. Many participants in the '68 events have developed amnesia about what they once believed and said. This process has even eroded Rayner's seminal work on the Limerick Soviet, now downgraded by current leftists to a clap-happy unity of workers and union bureaucrats.

Yet in *The Republic of Ireland* what shines through is the continuity of the class struggles and the continuity of capitalist interests.

The book is at its strongest in its overview. It shows that the revolutionary socialist potential of the workers, of the small farmers, the landless labourers, was far from exhausted following the rising but was subject, over the development of the state, to on the one hand, ongoing attacks by the church and state, and on the other the unwillingness of the labour and union leaderships to step forward as an opposition to the new capitalist state.

Rayner Lysaght charts a course through the prehistory of the new state, the Rising, the counter-revolution, the

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consolidation of the new state, the war and postwar societies and the modern Ireland of Europe and transnational capital.

Throughout these phases the same forces operate.

The factions of Irish capitalism, the church, the state bureaucracy produced by melding the imperial and local civil servants, small farmers and petty bourgeois and the workers.

What is astonishing is how familiar the post Good Friday landscape is. Rayner never gave the current settlement the time of day and would have agreed with the old saw about the past not only not being dead in Ireland, but not even past.

Today *The Republic of Ireland* is little read and we have to thank Rob Marsden, of the archive website [Red Mole Rising](#) who has converted the text to an ebook. Thanks also to those friends and comrades of Rayner's who contributed to the project.

The revolutionary environment that made Rayner's book possible has largely evaporated, but the work lives on and as a socialist Rosetta Stone, will find its place in the future resurgence of working class struggle.

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