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**John Devoy:
Fenians and Irish-Americans for
Irish Independence**

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Purposes of the dissertation

The aim of this dissertation is to explore John Devoy's life and work. John Devoy (Seán Ó Dubhuí; 1842-1928), the central character of this work was one of the most active, determined, even stubborn nationalists, adherent to his principles, yet also practical almost to the point of being flexible. The timing of this work is significant for two reasons: on the one hand John Devoy seems to have – to a certain degree, at least - slipped from Irish nationalist memory, and this can be seen from the scarcity of studies about his life and work. On the other hand, the centennial of the 1916 Rising is approaching, which presents an excellent opportunity for reigniting interest in this Fenian. With this study the author aims at expanding the existing body of John Devoy-related research and results.

Another goal of this dissertation was to present John Devoy within the wider context of Fenianism in the United States. Fenianism had its origins in Ireland in the failed revolutions of 1848, then 1866-67. Some of the leaders relocated abroad, partly to France, but primarily to the United States, where they found a number of immigrants and/or exiles from Ireland, who did not give up their revolutionary work on the other side of the Atlantic. On a general level it can be said that Fenians, taking their name from ancient Irish warriors, were men who harbored deep feelings towards an Ireland free of British rule, thus an independent Ireland. They believed that legal, parliamentary means would not lead to the ultimate goal of a free Ireland, thus they followed the path of revolution. Much of the work was

carried out within the confines of revolutionary organizations, primarily Clan na Gael (translated as “Family of Gaels”), and the secret, oath-bound Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB).

Devoy led an extraordinary, long, and productive life, his organizational activities spread over at least three continents. The list of nationalists whom he knew personally reads like the “Who is who in 19th and 20th century Irish and Irish-American politics”. All stages of his life are included in this work, starting from his family home in Kill, his moving to Dublin, the beginnings of his Fenian activities, the incarceration, and subsequent release only to continue his work in the United States. While John Devoy was, without a doubt, one of the central figures of the Irish-American Fenian movement, as throughout his career he worked hard to achieve an independent Ireland, he did this often with the help of journalism. He achieved enormous success in his life, such as the *Catalpa* rescue of six Fenian prisoners, the 1879-81 New Departure initiative, as well as crucially helping to finance the 1916 Easter Rising and subsequent revolutionary war (1919-21), all of which eventually culminated in the 1922 Irish Free State. Devoy spent most of his active life in or around journalism, he worked as a successful journalist in New York for *The New York Herald*. He also spent countless hours not only writing, but publishing and editing, and travelled relentlessly to give speeches and ask for donations. He believed it was vital for the Fenian movement to have its own forum. He became the proprietor and editor of his own newspapers, first between 1881 and 1885, with *The Irish Nation*, then with another newspaper, *The Gaelic American*, starting in 1903. He used his

articles and editorials to inform the readership about current Irish and Irish-American issues, to educate, to influence, to argue, to attack, to refute. Devoy would attempt to form and direct general opinion, unite the Irish-American public behind an issue, and tirelessly, relentlessly ask for financial contributions for the Irish cause.

Research methods

This work relied heavily on two contemporary newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Irish Times*, and used collection of articles, analyzed them to determine what context John Devoy was mostly mentioned in. The author has used the archives of both newspapers to find all articles which made mention of John Devoy. This research encompasses articles from six decades, starting from the 1860s all through to the late 1920s. The articles were examined with the following questions in mind: “In what context was the name of John Devoy mentioned in the article?” and “What style and language was used?” The initial assumption was that in the pro-British *The Irish Times* John Devoy was distinctly seen as the Irish-American nationalist supporting the use of violence, and consequently most of the references to Devoy would be related to his organizing activities meant to propagate the armed struggle for Irish independence.

The choice of these two newspapers needs some further explanation. Due to the transatlantic nature of his work, two newspapers were chosen, one from each side of the Atlantic, *The New York Times* and *The Irish Times*, published in the United

States and Ireland, respectively. *The New York Times* was selected because it was by far the most widely read national newspaper, certainly on the East Coast. The primary aim was not to gain an accurate (or indeed, objective) image of the activities of the nationalist Irish-American community and their leading figure, John Devoy. *The New York Times* was much rather chosen in order to present the public image of Devoy as seen by the general readership in the late 19th century United States, taking into account that *The New York Times* was anything but pro-Irish. Conversely, *The New York Times* was also one of the most effective ways of informing the public, as well as forming the public's opinion of issues related to Irish-American community, their nationalist views, and more specifically, Clan na Gael activities.

A similar line of argument can be brought to clarify why *The Irish Times* was selected from among numerous Irish and British publications. Again, the basis for selection was not the search for an objective image of John Devoy in the media. Furthermore, Irish nationalist opinion was certainly not to be gauged from this newspaper, neither was one to expect an all too positive image of John Devoy. Instead, *The Irish Times* was chosen because it was the most widely circulated Irish national newspaper among the majority pro-British middle classes in Ireland. It was also considered the leading "local" Dublin newspaper, thus its articles would have been quoted both in the British (London), as well as the American press, thereby having direct influence on how Irish political and revolutionary events were reported abroad.

Sources

The Irish Times

The Irish Times has an extensive archive of articles reaching as far back as 1859, found at the address <http://www.irishtimes.com/archive>. The archive for the period in question, the second half of the 19th century and first two decades of the 20th century, is a paying service. The articles were collected with the website's search engine based on the keyword "Devoy." The search engine is not entirely without flaws, because apart from references to John Devoy, it mistakenly included several hits for the word "decoy." But more importantly for this study, it provided a result of 290 overall citations for this Fenian. Unfortunately, it must be stated that not all articles that contained a mention of John Devoy were legible due to the deteriorated state of the print before it was scanned. One such article was titled "Summary" dating March 5, 1881, which could not be deciphered, its content simply had to be disregarded.

The New York Times

The main source for this part of the research was the online archive of *The New York Times*. As stated earlier, this newspaper had a reputation of being less-than-sympathetic in their depiction of the Irish-American community, if not outright anti-Irish. Still, this newspaper was chosen as a representative of general, public, late-19th century U.S. opinion based on its nation-wide circulation. The archive can be freely accessed

online at the address [http:// www.nytimes.com /ref /membercenter / nytarchive.html](http://www.nytimes.com/ref/membercenter/nytarchive.html). The analyzed articles not only presented the viewpoint of the newspaper, but also offered a comment on articles and editorials by John Devoy himself, published originally in *The Irish Nation* and *The Gaelic American*, and often quoted in the pages of *The New York Times*.

The research of *The New York Times* articles was divided into six sections encompassing all articles of a given decade: the 1870s, 1880s, 1890s, 1900s, 1910s, and finally the 1920s. Altogether 89 articles were used as the basis for this study, which contained either a direct or indirect mentioning of John Devoy. The earliest article found was dated August 20, 1876, while the last reference came from June 13, 1929 when Devoy's coffin was reburied in Dublin. Similarly to the research for *The Irish Times*, the aim with *The New York Times* was to find out how often, but more specifically, in what context John Devoy was mentioned on these pages. It must be borne in mind that Devoy was not only an editor, and the Chairman of the Executive Board of the Clan, living as a rather public figure, he was also a member of the IRB, a very secret organization. In this sense it was not very surprising to find a number of "retrospective" articles, which reacted to some documents newly released by the government and dealt with Devoy's role in certain events from years before.

New Results

The new results presented in this dissertation are two-fold. Firstly, the results of the media-research will be summarized, since to the best of the author's knowledge, Devoy's media image has not been traced this extensively through the articles published in these newspapers. The public image, as portrayed by *The Irish Times*, as well as by *The New York Times* provides a valuable addition to the research material available on John Devoy in terms of his journalistic work, but also in terms of him as a public face of the Irish-American nationalists. Secondly, apart from providing an in-depth biographical section on John Devoy and his role in the struggle for Irish independence, this dissertation also set out to answer the question of whether Devoy was a revolutionary or more of a proponent of the peaceful, constitutional approach. The dissertation offers arguments for both approaches, but concludes that Devoy can best be described as a unique combination of the two.

Results of the media-research

Devoy was always seen as a rather menacing, yet leading character of the Irish-American nationalist community. Adjectives used in connection with his person or work in *The Irish Times* more often than not carried a negative connotation. When quoting Irish-American sources for realistic opinion, rarely was Devoy's *The Irish Nation* or *The Gaelic American* cited, but rather Patrick Ford's *Irish World*. Negative actions linked to Devoy's name, such as his sentencing for treason,

imprisonment, or the infamous threat made against the Home Secretary Sir William Harcourt via cablegram, were often repeated in later issues of *The Irish Times*. This current research was not carried out with the aim of presenting a biography of John Devoy through the published articles on him. But the fact was, accurate portrayal or not, *The Irish Times* was widely read and the above-mentioned articles were responsible for shaping the public image of Devoy. It may have not corresponded to the Fenian image of him, but as far as the slightly conservative, pro-British readership was concerned, these were the impressions they formed of John Devoy.

In light of this, it was interesting to note how the tone of Devoy references changed after the formation of the Irish Free State. After all, the new government was composed of nationalists who grew up on Fenian stories of old, in which Devoy played an important role. His visit to Ireland, which was promoted as a state visit, was amply reported on, as was the progress of organizing Devoy's public funeral. Journalists recounting Devoy's threatening cablegram to Sir Harcourt in the early 1880s surely would not have foreseen such a change of tone in *The Irish Times*.

Comparing the analyzed articles from *The Irish Times* and *The New York Times* it can be concluded that the overall language used in reference to John Devoy seemed to be less strong, less likely to point out his violent, revolutionary side in *The New York Times*. Instead, in the latter there were more references to him as a journalist and editor. Terms that were repeatedly used in *The Irish Times* in relation to Devoy, such as

“treason,” “convict,” or “ex-convict” were not found in the columns of *The New York Times* articles to the extent as they were present in *The Irish Times*. Conversely, in *The New York Times* the analyzed articles not only presented the viewpoint of the newspaper, but also offered a comment on articles and editorials by John Devoy himself, published originally in *The Irish Nation* and *The Gaelic American* and quoted in the pages of *The New York Times*. However, in the period when the articles dealt with the Irish-Americans’ secret negotiations with the Germans, the language and tone became somewhat more heated, as they detailed events and threats, directly related to the United States’ international position.

Results of the dissertation regarding Devoy’s approach towards the struggle for Irish independence

The struggle for Irish independence was never a choice between either/or, but a constant move between two approaches: all-out rebellion, which would overthrow British rule in Ireland or peaceful parliamentary settlement bringing independence. Throughout his political career, Devoy walked a precarious path between these two extremes. The central question in Chapter 5 of this dissertation is whether John Devoy was a die-hard revolutionary (wedded to physical force), or a constitutionalist, or a mix of both? Devoy called himself a rebel in his memoirs, *“Recollections of an Irish Rebel,”* but examination of his exact role in both revolutionary and constitutional work showed that he was precisely the type of rebel who also had a keen sense for when to remain a hard-

liner, and when to resort to other means apart from violence. The “other means” in Devoy’s arsenal principally comprised his genius at negotiation.

Devoy started out as a Fenian working in and around Dublin in the mid-1860s, helping to organize the planned Fenian insurrection, light-years away from any diplomatic work. In 1865 he worked in the Irish Republican Brotherhood as the Chief organizer of the British Army stationed in Ireland. His organizational skills were fully displayed during the *Catalpa* rescue mission in 1876, when Devoy managed to organize the escape of six Fenians from prison in Western Australia. This rescue had an enormous positive influence on the morale of Irish-American nationalists. This mission also confirmed John Devoy in the belief that the path to Irish independence did not depend solely on violent insurrection, that other legitimate options might exist leading to the replacement of traditional physical force Fenianism with alternative solutions to achieve an independent Ireland. Devoy slowly steered the U.S. wing of Fenianism towards the middle-ground, towards what could be achieved by negotiations and cooperation, rather than lashing out against the British Empire by means of dynamite and random acts of violence, as was promoted by Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, and Clan na Gael under the leadership of Alexander Sullivan. Devoy was repeatedly highly critical of O’Donovan Rossa, referring to “Rossa’s lunacy” and the “mad and bad notion” which the Skirmishing Fund embodied. In fact, most of the literature on this topic juxtaposed Devoy and O’Donovan Rossa, with Devoy being portrayed as the sort of calmer person, versatile, better skilled at organizing and

negotiating one of the two of them. The fact that Devoy took it upon himself to rename the “Skirmishing Fund” into the “National Fund” just underlined the fact that he helped steer Irish-America away from Rossa’s radical agenda, and towards the middle-ground.

Devoy’s cooperation with Charles Stewart Parnell lent further proof to Devoy’s sense for flexibility concerning how to best achieve the ultimate goal of Irish independence. With the first meetings between Devoy, Parnell, and Michael Davitt in Dublin in 1879 the groundwork for the New Departure was laid. The underlying idea was that through the cooperation between a Fenian, a nationalist promoting social changes, and a member of the British parliament, the Irish cause could be furthered. Exactly to what extent these three agreed to the cooperation, whether or not the ultimate goal was defined as a republic, or if the use of violence was quietly accepted, avidly promoted, or simply agreed to be disregarded – remained open for discussion. However, both Devoy and Parnell would at some point in their career be called on to answer for their unlikely cooperation: Parnell was criticized in Westminster for dealing with a former felon who was convicted for treason, while Devoy’s choice to bring Clan na Gael out of the extremist revolutionary niche into the mainstream was also not welcomed by all factions of the Clan or the Irish Republican Brotherhood. In fact, this was the first occasion when Clan representatives acted not in unison with IRB directives. Though it must also be again stressed that the “violent” and “parliamentarian” methods were never controlled by means of some form of a switch, so that it would be *either* the revolutionary option *or* the constitutional solution.

Most of the time these two options ran side by side and the majority of characters in the struggle for Irish independence were to some degree active in both. Devoy most certainly was. Devoy's comments such as "[...] for every Irishman murdered we will take in reprisal the life of a British Minister. For every hundred Irishmen murdered we will sacrifice the lives of the entire British Ministry"¹ were harshly criticized by his more moderate collaborators, yet they showed that he was not above condoning violent actions.

Devoy's talent for considering unconventional methods for fighting for an independent Ireland was perhaps best proven by his promotion of John Holland's submarine plans. Holland built a torpedo boat financed by the Clan, which could be used to sink British warships.

During the Triangle period Devoy did not support the overt return to violence, and his negotiating skills were again highlighted around the turn of the century when he worked on reuniting Clan na Gael. Several attempts at international cooperation were made with Devoy's involvement, including enlisting Russia's help in attacking Britain, the Boer War and, most prominently, cooperation with Germany during WWI. In terms of preparations for the eventual Easter Rising, Devoy's role as a "confidential agent" (as defined by Wolf von Igel of the German consulate in New York) was vital. At the first meeting between Irish-American nationalists and members of the

¹ Golway, Terry. *Irish Rebel - John Devoy and America's Fight for Ireland's Freedom*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998. Print.132.

German consulate, the Clan representatives pointed out that as far as they were concerned, Ireland did not have a quarrel with Germany, instead they saw this conflict as an opportunity to finally achieve a free and independent Ireland. Devoy was in close cooperation with Sir Roger Casement to organize a substantial weapons shipment to be landed in Ireland for the Easter Rising. On more than one occasion during those turbulent years there were explicit references found in Devoy's correspondence that highlighted the fact that the Irish leaders were looking towards Irish-Americans for support as well as, at times, for guidance. Devoy represented not only an organization that was a source of money, desperately needed for a successful rising. He was seen as a figure of importance whose opinion or advice mattered.

Following the unsuccessful Easter Rising in 1916, Devoy focused his efforts promoting the work of the Friends of Irish Freedom, the organization which was founded at the First Irish Race Convention in March 1916. The event was the largest ever gathering of Irish-Americans. In fact, Devoy's personal memoir ended with the First Irish Race Convention. This is not to say that nothing note-worthy happened to him in the years to come, events and repercussions of those can be traced through his immense correspondence.

Eventually, events took a different turn and it was not peaceful political negotiation but the War of Independence and the subsequent Civil War that resulted in the formation of the 26-county Republic. The new government understood the symbolic importance of having the support of a Fenian

Nationalist such as Devoy and turned his intended private visit in 1924 into a state affair. Devoy met members of the William Cosgrave administration and attended the Tailteann Games as a distinguished guest of the Republic.

Unlike many of his Fenian associates, Devoy lived to see the creation of the Irish Republic. While the separation of the six northern counties meant that the achieved independence was not ideal, Devoy still believed that it was an important step towards their ultimate goal, an independent united Ireland. Devoy, already in his 80s, did not remain in Ireland, as some had assumed, instead he returned to the United States. He continued to follow current events, but his health, eyesight and hearing started to fail him. He died in 1928 in Atlantic City, though as Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa's body before him, Devoy's remains were also transported back to Ireland in June 1929 and eventually buried in Glasnevin cemetery in a Republican plot close Rossa's grave.

As an answer to the question "Rebel or parliamentary?", based on the historical evidence presented in this dissertation, I would suggest that Devoy was a combination of two extremes, the physical-force-based approach and the constitutional approach. In fact, he can best be likened to a tightrope walker. Throughout his career he displayed a healthy dose of flexibility and a sense for pragmatism to use the best options available. Devoy had no problem with supporting whichever solution worked best, be it either armed revolt or a constitutional approach, as long as it would lead to the ultimate goal: an independent Ireland.

In this period leading up to the centennial celebration of the Easter Rising, it feels important that Devoy's role in the struggle for Irish independence should be highlighted and promoted. He did not win any battles single-handedly, he did not lead a rebellion, he did not plant a bomb himself to disrupt Victorian British life to further the cause of Ireland, he did not even personally smuggle any guns into the country or participate in the Rising. However, it was his persistent journalistic work, his enormous energy that he put into writing, editing, fund-raising, which contributed to the eventual success and establishment of an independent Ireland. His role as an organizer inspired and motivated countless Irish and Irish-American Fenians and politicians of his time, and hopefully of our time, as well.

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