

'One-pager' - Emer Nowlan, Great Granddaughter of Arthur Griffith

I always got the impression that my Granny (Ita, Arthur's daughter) knew very little about the politics of independence, and she never said much about her father. He died when she was ten, and she probably saw little of him in the preceding years. Even before long spells in jail, abroad, or in hiding kept him away from home, his work as a newspaper editor and for the cause of independence consumed him.

My granny would tell one story of the Black and Tans coming to the house at night, searching her room, tearing up her mattress and looking up the chimney, declaring as they left that her father would be shot or hung. Perhaps the trauma of the times was one reason why there was so little talk of them in the subsequent generations? Along with an unspoken shame invoked by years of denigration and division over the way things went?

My mother (Nora) remembered her grandmother (Arthur's wife) as a severe and strict woman. Maud (or Mollie, as Arthur called her), was reportedly extremely bitter in the run-up to Arthur's death and afterwards. He died of a brain haemorrhage, and Maud was convinced this resulted from stress and over-work. She wrote:

For four months beforehand I had to watch him declining day by day, and he as quiet and accepting in the face of death as he had been in life...the poor man, he was tortured and tormented to the edge of the grave, by the people who were once his friends, if they are to be believed. I am glad he escaped them in the end.

When family members die suddenly, we lose the opportunity to ask them about their past. We can only guess at what motivated the young boy from Dublin's inner city, who left school at 12, and became an apprentice printer, to become a journalist, a political activist, and ultimately a key figure in negotiating the beginning of Ireland's departure from the British Empire.

An active member of the Gaelic League, he sought to stimulate cultural revival through his newspapers, where he was known for publishing a wide range of contributors including some who could not get published elsewhere, like Joyce. With Willie Rooney, he formed first the early Cumann na nGaedheal and then the National Council, before eventually bringing nationalist organisations together under the banner of Sinn Féin, whose central policy was abstentionism.

He seemed a reluctant leader, and by all accounts did not have an inflated view of his own political or negotiating abilities. He was happy to step aside as leader of Sinn Féin for de Valera in 1917, but ended up running the provisional government anyway after the 1918 elections when de Valera left for America. He argued strongly that de Valera should lead the treaty delegation in 1921, but did not refuse the responsibility himself when asked.

Arthur Griffith was a pragmatist, who, for all the importance he placed on cultural nationalism, saw economic independence and sustainability as paramount. He placed the will of the people over any theoretical ideals and saw it as his duty, once the best possible deal had been achieved in the treaty negotiations and it was approved by the Dáil, to organise the transition and enable the will of the people to be known through an election. He was bitterly disappointed when that process was subverted, and with the 'pact' that was subsequently agreed between Collins and De Valera, which effectively meant that people would not be given

a clear choice. He agreed to the pact under pressure in a vain attempt to avoid civil war, and was dead within two months of the vote.

Maud did not attend cenotaph commemorations, objecting that there should be one to commemorate Griffith alone, but she did send her children, Nevin and Ita. In her later years my granny rarely attended any commemorations and neither my mother nor my uncle ever had great interest. The 'Collins / Griffith Commemoration Society' holds annual events in Glasnevin, but the fact that this is organised primarily by members of the Fine Gael party has made it less attractive or comfortable for us as a family to engage with, especially for my mother who was a lifelong member of the Labour Party.

Looking back at Arthur Griffith now - with the eyes of a family member, and through the lens of historians and biographers - I feel sorry for the loss of family connection. I appreciate greatly his work, his contribution, and the sacrifices he made that we might have our independent state.

*Do not be afraid of changing your opinion when you are convinced your opinion is a wrong one. The wise man, say the Spaniards, changes his opinion often, the fool never does. But never **desert** your opinion.*

Cuguan (Arthur Griffith pen name), United Irishman, 21 September 1901

On my part in the conversation

I come to this discussion with considerable trepidation. I have minimal knowledge of my great grandfather, Arthur Griffith. He was barely spoken of in the family, and I have not read extensively about him or about the history of the time. Nevertheless I want to participate, to deepen my understanding of the man himself and the events and people of the time, and to make whatever contribution I can towards reconciliation. I feel this is timely in the light of a lack of progress towards integration and mutual understanding across the island of Ireland, and the increased threat to peace and reconciliation presented by Brexit and increased polarisation in public discourse globally.

I view these 'fallen leaders' as five impressive and imperfect humans; very different individuals who had in common the qualities of commitment, sense of duty, and passion for and dedication to the cause of Irish independence. That all of them experienced fear, violence and trauma, and then lost their lives so young was tragic. I consider them all as instrumental in gaining Irish independence; people who worked hard with the aim of doing 'the right thing' in an impossible colonial / post-colonial context. One hundred years on, I hope that we can all step back far enough from all that happened and all that has been said since to have a constructive dialogue that serves to break down barriers and open doors.

"Postcolonialism looks to reveal the mutuality that colonialism sought to hide in unveiling the discourse between the colony and coloniser as an ongoing negotiation" (Noxolo 2006)

Assumptions

I will not be speaking for Arthur Griffith, or for any other family member in the conversation. I understand the following to be outside the scope of what we are trying to do:

- Proving facts to be correct or incorrect.
- Assigning blame or proving innocence.
- Reaching simple conclusions or resolutions.