

Dublin August 1917

Una Birch Pope-Hennessy to Major-General Ladislaus Richard Pope-Hennessy, 22-28 August 1917

This is detailed account of a visit to Dublin in the late summer of 1917 when the country was on the verge of revolution. The author is Una Birch, also known as Una Pope-Hennessy. Her dates are 1876-1949. She was a writer, especially of historical biographies. The daughter of an English colonial governor, she later converted to Catholicism. In 1910 she married Major-General Ladislaus Richard Pope-Hennessy from the Cork Catholic family of that name. This report was written to him when he was in Mesopotamia fighting the Turks. Una's hostess during this visit to Dublin was the historian Alice Stopford Green. Una had been involved with Mrs. Green the previous year in the campaign to have Roger Casement's death sentence commuted. After the war Una and her husband were leading lights in the Irish Dominion League that proposed dominion status for Ireland in 1919. Una was made a dame in 1920 for her Red Cross work on behalf of prisoners of war. In early months of 1921 she wrote a play about the Anglo-Irish war, called 'The Crazy Circle'. It is also online on the CELT website @ <http://celt.ucc.ie/Crazycircle.pdf>.

This letter is contained in Box 146, Folder 4 of the Pope-Hennessy papers in The Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. It was photographed by John Borgonovo in 2009 and has now been typed out in a similar format to the original by Lydia Morgan.

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Hiram Morgan
September 201

22 August, 1917.

Dublin.

I crossed from Holyhead to-day. At Westland Row about five or six hefty porters competed for my suit case, and some twenty cabs for privilege of driving me. An extraordinary contrast to England where we never get a porter or a cab.

Driving up Upper Fitzwilliam Street I was warmly greeted by my hostess, Mrs. J. R. Green¹. It was 7 p.m. and I had had a very rough crossing. She told me to get ready at once as at eight we were expected to dine with the Marquis and Marchioness MacSweeney (sic)² in Fitzwilliam Square, I hastily washed and dressed and we sallied forth.

The Marquis is an appearance an Italian with a great brogue, and his wife a German South American, Von Schlitz. He has an appointment at the Papal Court, and she is a Lutheran, but this seems to make no difficulty for them. He, in a photograph in his official dress, might have walked out of a Spanish picture, short cape, ruff, slash doublet and hose.

There were also there, a priest, Father James Ryan, one of the old international cultivated school who knew your father well, Professor Magennis (Philosophy, of the Catholic College).

The Marquis, after paying me the most extraordinary compliments, settles down into a very interesting talk. He is a man of about 43, knowing Europe from end to end and all the diplomatic scandals of twenty-five years past. He is related to the Czartoriskis and everyone you can think of in Poland and Hungary. He talks Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and the Balkan lingo, Polish and Hungarian. He took part in raising National volunteers, is a constitutionalist and was arrested by mistake during the rebellion. He is very proud of having spent a night in custody.

¹ Her husband, died 1883, had been the English historian John Richard Green.

² Valentine Emmanuel Patrick MacSwiney, Marquis of Mashanaglass (1871-1945)

His wife, a pleasant woman, is anchored in Dublin owing to her nationality. He seems to be well in with the Church and says "If I call myself anything I am papal."

After dinner a strange collection of people came in;

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people interested in Irish tradition, two or three young men and a "brilliant" professor Scott (architecture) and C. H. MacNell (sic)³, brother of the man who was President of Sinn Fein, Professor of Literature at Cork. There was an immense amount of talking about things I would like to talk to you about, but which it would be boring both to write and to read. Everyone seems to remember your father.

23rd August, 1917.

A bad wet morning. Mrs. Green very full of everything connected with the Sinn Fein movement with which she is an ardent sympathiser. She has arranged for me to see a great many people in the movement, and I have made it clear to her that though I want to hear and understand I do not take sides and have no politics. That being understood we are going to work.

First we go out to see various persons and then to Gill the great catholic bookseller and publisher near the burned out skeleton of the Post Office. There was a room in this place in which people used to meet and talk before the insurrection. Afterwards it was raided and one of the prisoners, O'Kelly, was taken up and deported. We had a long talk with O'Kelly and one got an idea of what it meant to be deported to England. He was quartered at his own expense in Oxfordshire (which petitioned for the removal of deportees from its boundaries) at Fairford where the 13th century glass was guarded lest they might break it. His letters are still opened and two men watch him day and night. He told me that seventy men were arrested last week and that he heard warrants were filled up for many more.

³ This was Charles McNeill, an editor of Irish manuscripts. His younger brother was Eoin McNeill head of the Irish Volunteers and Professor of Early and Medieval history at University College Dublin. Una gets Eoin's job wrong here and again later in her report. She did not meet him during the visit.

Did the Government wish to provoke a rising? Some think they do and that they were going the right way to make people mad.

He was a handsome, powerful, low-speaking man of about 48, and he said, "If they go on peeping through my blinds and opening my letters, God knows what I won't find myself doing to them one of these days."

Well this talk took some time and we went back to lunch. Mr. Arthur Griffiths, editor of "Nationality" (taken up in the Easter rising, nearly shot, eight months gaol in England) looked upon as a Napoleonic type, short, stocky, strong, optimistic and not Irish in appearance; a passionate Sinn Feiner and wielding great influence. He said Ireland was reading as she had never read before. Everyone was constitution making, pamphlets on political subjects intensely in demand, impossible to cope with supply of literature or lecturers. 600 branches of S.F. founded since June 1. A contagion spreading through the country. You have no conception how completely the "Party" are now out of everything. They do not represent Modern Ireland. Griffith is accounted

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the founder of Sinn Fein and is without doubt a man to be reckoned with. He looks younger than he is, really he does not look more than forty, is very buoyant, very hard hitter, very good intellect and utterly confident of final success. He said that the British Government had completely discredited itself over the handling of Easter week; it had no policy, it was alternately brutal and conciliatory. He let himself go on to the utter stupidity of the ordinary Englishman. He was not "out" himself in the rising. I suppose he had other things to do as he certainly cannot be deficient in physical courage. He was taken up with a lot of others and placed with 68 men in a room at Richmond Barracks. For the first 24 hours they were without water and were not let out for any purpose. They spent a fortnight without blankets on the floor. He said, "I had my clothes on for 17 days together. One learned after a while to sleep on boards. I am very strong, but it was hard on the delicate men and boys. Every now and again two Sherwood Forresters with fixed bayonets, and an officer with a revolver pointed at them in the doorway and ordered seven persons out." He said the soldiers asked them for souvenirs as they went to the Court Martial, telling them they wouldn't require their jewellery

much longer. Every morning they used to open the door and shout 'So and so, and so and so were shot this morning. It'll be your turn next.' Griffiths said not even the frailest in the room put on anything but a smile.

He said the attitude of the soldiers made a bad impression. They seemed both brutal and jocular. In justification of the former attitude one must remember that road from Kingston to Dublin was strewn with English corpses. I will write of this much later.

When Griffiths was transferred to Lewes gaol, he was put into a cell and an officer came round and ordered his mattress to be removed so that he should lie on blankets. He laughed out loud and the officer asked him what he meant by it. He said, "Even without the mattress this is like the Ritz compared with the Richmond Barracks and you think you are doing me a hardship."

And then he went on to say that he simply could not understand why the British Government had let them out before the end of the war. They had all had a good rest in gaol and plenty of time to think, and were fuller of energy and zeal than ever before. From the point of view of the British

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3.

Government he thought they'd botched the whole business. They ought to have been more severe or entirely clement, as it was they were merely stupid and cruel. (I am just trying to give you the impressions I got).

Mrs. Green talked very openly to me about the prospects of Sinn Fein and said the "Party" might at the outside retain six seats if a General Election came along, but if it was a question of by-election they would not retain anything but Dublin city. (?two or three seats). "If we are given another six months to organize there is no saying what we won't be able to do."

Griffiths' paper has gone up from a few hundred readers to 20,000, counting three readers to a copy. He could sell 20,000 but cannot afford to print more than 7,000 as paper is so dear. He thinks a lot of the new leader, De Valera. Ireland has gone mad about him and his

lightest word would be obeyed by thousands. I have got a picture postcard of him. He looks to me a twin of Kerensky.

Griffiths said that the British Government “expected us to be grateful to them for being let out of prison after eight months. It shows the stupidity. You cannot expect men to be grateful for being sent to gaol or to change their political opinions while they are in gaol. If the Government did not want a tremendous stimulus in the Sinn Fein movement they most certainly ought to have kept us there till the end of the war.” So stupid does S.F. think the action of the British Government that some among them are convinced that it has been done in order to stir up another rebellion which would give an excuse for ruthless separation, a kind of La Vandé (sic)⁴ and I did not forget that the occasion of La Vande had cost some 500, 000 lives.

Griffiths talked a great deal about representation at a Peace Conference and I could not help observing that Ireland’s claim could be regarded as urgent beside the claim of Belgium or Serbia, but he thinks it is a possibility that Ireland might get something out of such a conference.

There is a great many other things he said, but I have other people to describe. One or two less interesting persons I must pass over and go to Plunkett House in Merrion Square, editorial office of A.E.⁵ and the “Irish Homestead.”

We caught him at a lucky moment, just back from the

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4.

Convention where he had a great speech on the economic state of Ireland and export code’s operation, and dilated on the members of the Convention’s position as fairy godmothers endowing the Ireland to be born of every quality possible. Let us make it as Hoppner made his portrait, an ideally beautiful woman, and then make modifications to approximate it to the actual sitter. We will create the ideal and we will leave it to the British Government to do the paring and the

⁴ The brutally suppressed revolt of La Vendée (1793-96) during the French revolution which began after the imposition of conscription from Paris.

⁵ Writer and artist George William Russell, (1867-1935), known as AE.

alterations. He told Ulster that it would be a true kindness to the weary Titan to lift one burden off its back. Think of England staggering along under the burdens of military Mesopotamias now. Think of England in the future staggering along with economic Mesopotamias and social Mesopotamias. Had Ulster any confidence? Had the Convention any confidence that English brains were fit to deal with such problems. For Pete's sake let us relieve them of the Irish question. Now remember that after the war the Irish question might sink into insignificance. Supposing Ireland ever did get to the Peace Conference it would be like a native in a room full of mad elephants. A.E. repeatedly said how stupid the English are. England is the stupidest nation in the world. Do you realise there are seven officials ruling Ireland now who get larger salaries than the Chancellor of the German empire. At any rate the Germans get efficiency. I wonder do we. For an hour he reeled off with tremendous gesture and glorious eloquence and humour what he had said to the Convention.

He seems a marvelous being packed up to the brim with the inexhaustible energy, great knowledge and able to refute and confound Ulster economists and statisticians. I should think no more genial a person lived. He is entirely without rancour, entirely bent on reconciliation, on softening the stubborn, modifying the views of the obstinate. He has a whimsical gift of humour and expression. He made an immense impression on me and I expect on the Convention.

In the room was Susan Mitchell, a nice looking white haired woman of middle height. A bitter hater of England and with a great undisguised contempt for the people of my country. You may see in her books how ironical or satirical, I should say, is her mind. She is sub-editor of the "Homestead."

In the evening James Stephens ("Crock of Gold"), the poet came in for three hours. A miracle of a small man looking like Little Tich. Full of energy, poetic imagination; an immense talker, as wonderful in his own way as A.E. in his.

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5.

He starved as an errand boy for eight years. His people deserted him and he went to England when he was seven. He has been so hungry that he has taken the bread thrown to the swans in Stephens Green and from dogs and so on; now after all these years he is secretary to the National Gallery of Ireland - £150 a year. He has a wife and two children and though self educated has read everything. He discusses Verlaine, Gorki, what you like. Has published volumes of verse that don't pay, a novel that did pay and the little book on the Insurrection which goes to you this week. Quite unpolitical and unmilitant and without a trace of bitterness against the social system he has been up against all his life. His health is undermined by privation; he has goiter. You would love to hear him chant his own poems and 'Yeets' poems. Another man full of supernatural, un-English energy. What is it?

August 24th, 1917.

Another day filled with people. First a tour of the ruins. I stared at the pock marked College of Surgeons, Liberty Hall, at the streets and at the roofs held in destroyed Sackville Street. The strategical plans of the rebels were very bad. To dig in on St Stephen's Green was madness. This I understood was entirely Countess Markiewitiz's idea. Could anything be easier than to shoot down boys in trenches (which were only three feet deep) from any window in the square. They could have done a great deal better than this.

Late in the afternoon we went to see Sean T. Kelly, President of the Gaelic League at the Office in Parnell Square on the North side. A compact, agreeable, business-like young man about forty. Mrs. Green introduced me and then they started off, without any restraint at my presence, on the plans of S.F. volunteers for their October Convention. Quite likely the Government will proclaim the Convention. The idea of holding it is to convert S.F. militarism, now an underground body, into an open body with elected leaders and representatives. John MacNeill as you know was President at the time of the rising. He was a Trinity College professor.⁶ He will not be re-elected as De Valera was the only cry. His election will be unanimous. There is likely to be a collision over this Convention and

⁶ More generally known as 'Eoin'; actually UCD not TCD.

I have a notion that I might be able to do something to stave it off through Aubrey Herbert, Duke's parliamentary private secretary. I listened to very interesting criticism of the organization as it now exists. There is no wish for a collision, very much the reverse, but a strong belief that it is right for S.F. to be organised. (Let me tell you that Duke⁷ has made the wearing of badges and armlets and bits of uniform punishable with two years imprisonment, so you don't see much of that sort of thing about).

The followers demand outward existence for their leaders. From John. T. O'Kelly I learned that the Executive of Sinn Fein militarism were kept absolutely secret. Neither he nor de Valera nor MacNeill nominally President, knows who they are. Isn't that an odd state of affairs. If the movement is allowed to come above ground, the names of the officers will be made public. I rather fear secret organisations. I think they are more dangerous than open ones.

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2.

The activities of the League are strong and O'Kelly said his rest in England had done him no end of good, as he was terribly overworked before. He didn't say it as an Englishman would, as a kind of joke, but as a matter of fact. I liked him very much.

Mrs. Green was greatly struck by the way all these men instinctively trust me and talk so naturally and so openly with no fear of me giving them away or even making mischief for them. She said they were usually so frightfully suspicious of anything English.

Well after this I walked about by myself in the poorer parts of the city and bought Irish republican buttons with Casement, Connolly and other heads on them, and postcards, just for souvenirs for the children. They are only for sale in the worst slums, and in the worst slums these men are deified. Of all that, more in its proper place.

In the afternoon I went over to the College of Science to see Professor Henry.⁸ He is a Unionist and a great believer in Ireland and her possibilities when she is free to soar. He is a methodical catholic with unusual spiritual insight, and he said in talking of S.F. and Easter

⁷ Sir Henry Duke, chief secretary for Ireland.

⁸ Augustine Henry, (1857 -1930), a famous botanist.

week that the priests had “captured” it, and that in some churches daily masses were said for the souls of the men of Easter week, that the churches were packed on the anniversary and during the month that followed it. The martyrs of Easter week are replacing the saints. Intercession is made to them. Petitions are granted through them. There is the story of a priest who confessed one of them just before execution and he said, “You will go straight to Heaven. Will you not take a message to my patron saint. There is something I have asked him for for six years, and maybe he has forgotten.” He gave the message. The man promised to give it and went out to be shot. The petition was granted that afternoon at five o’clock.

Legends have already grown up on the deaths of these men. Pearse, led out to the yard, knelt and made a tracing in the dust. The officer in charge asked him what he was doing. He got up quickly and said, “You can fire now!” and fell forward on the Irish cross he had traced. This and other legends are believed, so it doesn’t matter whether they are true or not. It is believed that intercession of these men is more efficacious than that of the saints.

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3.

Young men who went to mass once a year out of respect for tradition or habit, now go daily. The priests have woven it all into the advantage of the church. All the young priests are S.F. A few men die in a prison yard in Ireland and fires of legend and poetry spring at once from their graves. Thousands of men are killed in heroic action in France and not a legend or a litany (Yeats has written a wonderful sort of dirge which goes round by mouth only) blooms on their graves. The fact that the bodies of the martyrs were buried in quick lime makes no difference at all.

Stephen McKenna⁹ came in late and talked enthusiastically about Gaelic and its study as one of the things that is preventing the lads from becoming the “carrion” that mankind tends to become if the soul is not occupied and the mind kept busy. All over Dublin, and indeed Ireland, small boys wearing a tiny ring in the coat, pledge themselves never to speak an English word to each other. He said there was a great sense of responsible nationality given to the boys.

⁹ Stephen MacKenna (1872–1934), Classicist and Gaelic Leaguer.

The conviction that it would be up to them to make Ireland a success once their fathers had won freedom for them. Stephen McKenna thinks Ireland is the natural ally of England but will tolerate no other bonds. There is no hatred of England in S.F. at all, he says, only hatred of a system that has proved an admitted failure.

It is obviously impossible for me to write down everything I have heard, but again I say Mrs. Green said, she had never seen proud, sensitive, poor men take so immediately to anyone before, and with them indeed I felt no barrier. They took me as simply as I took them. My sympathies certainly go out to a fight to free themselves from English administration. These men would settle down and work Dominion Government for themselves if they were given a chance. Someone should write an article "Allegiance and Alliance" and embody the series (sic)¹⁰ view of Sinn Fein. The cry has always been for a republic, but it seems to me now that what is wanted is a policy and that they are asking a great deal more than they want as a means of intimidating the British government and keeping the Convention on definitely forward lines.

Germany is looked upon as a friend of Ireland because the opportunity of the war made the rebellion possible. They had to rebel to draw attention to themselves. England had to concern herself with the problem of Ireland after suppressing the rebellion in order to get the good will of America. The rebellion is considered to have been well worth while and one of the things I heard was that it had put an end for ever

24th August, 1917 (continued)

4.

to the Ulster notion that the South couldn't organize and wouldn't fight. There is a general feeling that the Morning Post section of society, which A.E. says truly represents the English mind! desires to provoke another rising. There are secret agents everywhere. Colonel Moore said to me (brother to George Moore) the country is full of people whom we think must be agent provocateurs. No one can account for their presence amongst us. I fear that the British Government has coercion at the back of its mind. Some 70 arrests were made last week and a few take place daily.

¹⁰ serious

25th August, 1917.

Another lot of people today, of the professional world, culminating in tea at Trinity with two young S.F. professors and a doctor. I cannot express to you the vitality and enthusiasm of these young men and their hopes for the ideal Ireland which is to come out of it all. They talked a great deal about the English view that they were incapable of running a country, that they were morally and politically imbecile, also England's conviction that they would do the worst and most stupid things in the way of tariffs and trade when freedom came. They are unanimous in regarding England as their natural ally and America, and said a new and friendly relationship would grow up at once. There was no one in the movement but a few embittered extremists thought otherwise. They are determined to get out English officialdom, bag and baggage. They are leaving it to the Convention to arrange this and meanwhile are hatching plans for the future.

I told them how unfavourably impressed I was by the want of gratitude shown to the Party who, after all, had served their interests well over forty years, and they said, "Oh, they're not in touch with young Ireland. They are hierarchical. They agreed - crime of all crimes - to partition our country. That is the real occasion of their fall. The party is nothing, less than nothing to us now. We used to believe in it, but one rebellion has done us more good than the whole Party.

They spoke strongly about the way in which young Ireland was treated in 1914. A wave of enthusiastic championing of Belgium went through the country. Thousands upon thousands wished to enroll. They were checked, discouraged and pushed into English regiments. There could be no catholic division. Cold water was dashed over them when at the end of a few months they subsided and settled down to watch. They said that England could have done anything with Ireland in 1914 but stupidity prevailed. Would England never understand.

In the evening we went to the weekly reception of the Marchioness MacSweeney (sic). Dancing was taking place in one room and talking

in another. The Marquis asked me to dance and I declined, saying that I had not danced since the war began and should not dance till it ended. This created a great sensation. I was able to make a little impression and to say that for me at any rate the war was not being fought on

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2.

another planet and other things of the kind.

I met a Mrs. Barry from Cork who knew your people, Professor Stockley from the College at Cork and his Bavarian wife. I suddenly had a great success. Everyone said to me, "Your place is in Ireland." I hope not, as the find the climate in Dublin terrible.

26th August, 1917.

Off to Howth to luncheon with Professor and Mrs. Allison Philips¹¹ (Modern History) then to tea with Mrs. Green and the Stockford¹² (sic) family, then to Professor Henry, then to an evening party at A.E.'s. I have seen practically all the leaders except De Valera who was expected at A.E.'s. and who did come in for a moment at the end of the evening straight from his election. He is very well thought of by his followers and considered extremely dangerous by the authorities. They had a warrant out for him last week, but A.E. managed somehow to persuade the Castle that it was putting the match to the bonfire to arrest him. He is deified. He is 34, dark, intellectual. He has dissociated S.F. from all labour associations such as Connolly wove into it. He believes in doing one thing at a time and is not anxious to identify S.F. with a sectional or international interest. The first thing to be done is to get rid of Castle Government.

I talked to a man at A.E.'s who had been at the marvellous Kilkenny election. He said that De Valera does not stand only for freedom from English administration. Once that was accomplished he would be the first for equal friendship and alliance with England, but he will fight England to get it, and die gaily for the only good they believe they can give their country. Everything I hear about him seems to me sound

¹¹ Walter Alison Phillips, Lecky Professor of Modern History at TCD.

¹² 'Stopford'

from his point of view. He was a professor and spent eight months in gaol. He came back and was elected for East Clare. He is worshipped and adored and if he were arrested the remotest districts of Ireland would blaze with rebellion.

If I could stay on another day I could meet him at the Gaelic League office but I have to go back.

28th August, 1917.

England again. I feel I have lived through an eternity in five days and come back with all preconceived ideas of Sinn Fein gone.

The soldiers earned a bad name in Dublin. They were welcomed by the poor people with chocolate and cigarettes and cakes. Poor Dublin was dead against S.F. They behaved with extreme stupidity, offensive rudeness and brutality and they showed fear. Of the Sherwood Forresters on the Kingston Road I heard from Mrs. Green's brother, Mr. Stockford, and Tony as you know found all the officers drunk when he went over with despatches, tried to kick them up and could not. Well this very battalion was given a map and told to march to a rendezvous in Dublin; and that the route was fairly safe but that they must beware of Carisbrook House. They started with no scouts and no enquiry as to where Carisbrook House was. Called a halt to look at maps and ask directions just under the windows of Carisbrook House. They were all shot. Drunken soldiers bayoneted and hammered their way into houses and shot inmates and, as the Marquis said to me, there was a good deal of cold blooded murder done. Mr. Stockford said the officers were preposterous in their rudeness to him and threatened to transfix him if he moved when he asked whether he might cross the canal to go to his business. Professor Henry said the same. He was frankly disgusted with the British army. The regiments now in the city look to me a pretty rubbishy lot – H.L.I.¹³ and a London regiment. The Government refused to allow any Irish regiment in the city.

I suppose I must stop this letter some time but I could go on for ever and ever.

¹³ Highland Light Infantry