

SINN FEIN

By Louis J. McQuilland.

IN the newspapers there has been printed much—and not too much at that—about the gallant if mistaken men of the Sinn Fein movement in Ireland, the poets and dreamers—Pearse, Connolly, Plunkett, Sheeery-Skeffington and others—but little about the movement itself. The movement was in its origin and purpose, as we say, "practical." Then it took on a poetic tinge, through alliance with the Gaelic League for the preservation of the Irish language. That is where the poets and dreamers come in.

It is claimed for Sinn Fein that it is a legitimate successor of former patriotic native movements for Irish freedom. Sinn Feiners assert that they are the legitimate heirs of all previous revolutionaries who fought for an Irish Ireland. Their leaders say they are the successors of Wolfe Tone, of Robert Emmett, of Lord Edward Fitzgerald and other eighteenth century militant Irish patriots—the United Irishmen and of John Mitchell, Smith O'Brien, Thomas Francis Maegher, and Charles Gavan Duffy—the Young Irelanders of the nineteenth century who, despairing of the Constitutional Repeal methods of O'Connell, took up arms against the English Government. Ostensibly, the Sinn Fein claim is a sound one; but—and this is a great but—circumstances alter cases. The United Irishmen and the Young Irelanders and the men of 1848 and 1867 were fighting against great wrongs and cruel tyrannies; they were fighting for an Ireland which was being bled and starved to death by its English rulers; they were fighting for an Ireland which was being grossly misgoverned by a privileged and despotic caste on crushing every national tradition out of the country, and even of depriving her of the last solace of her religion.

At the time when Sinn Fein (meaning "Ourselves") was founded in 1905, practically all the old evil conditions had disappeared. England had ceased to rule Ireland as a conquered and alien colony. The Irish were allowed to worship God in their own way, the country was prospering, and was well in the way of continued improvement. Thanks to the sustained efforts of a pledge-bound Irish Parliamentary Party—pledged not to take office in any English Government—sweeping reforms had been thrust on the Tory Administration in the long period of power they enjoyed after the Liberal cataclysm. In 1898 the Local Government Act had been passed, which swept away the old oligarchical Grand Jury system, and gave the Irish people popular local control of their own affairs. In 1903, George Wyndham had carried his great Land Purchase Act, which gave back the land to the people and provided that the evicted tenants, "the wounded soldiers of the Land war," should be restored to their holdings. The Act evaded in several ways, and notably as regards the evicted tenants; but nevertheless the broad principle of giving the people back their land had been established. The Tories had been forcibly converted to the doctrine of Irish conciliation. They were even considering a scheme of modified Home Rule, Mr. George Wyndham and Sir Anthony (now Lord) MacDonnell being the agents. At the instigation of the Orange Party Mr. Wyndham was recalled by Mr. Balfour, much to Mr. Balfour's discredit, as he was not only betraying a trusted colleague, but an intimate friend. Still, things were well in train for extended conciliation, as Sir Anthony continued to retain his position as Under-Secretary. It was just on the eve of the return of the Liberals to a long reign of power that the Sinn Fein movement was started. The National Policy of Sinn Fein was outlined in November, 1905, and was based on the principle, "that the Irish people are a free people, and that no law made without their authority or consent is, or ever can be, binding on their conscience."

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