

*New Zealand's Responses to the 1916 Rising*

Peter Kuch and Lisa Marr, editors. Cork, Cork University Press, 2020.

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Reviewed by Charles Ferrall

When the Irish-born Archbishop of Melbourne heard that Michael Collins had been executed, he broke down weeping: “Michael they have shot him”. According to one of his biographers, Brenda Niall, “[s]omething in Daniel Mannix was released in the aftermath of the Easter Rising” and he was soon to play a decisive role in defeating two conscription referenda. The Australian Prime Minister, Billy Hughes, later complained to the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd-George, that the Irish had “killed conscription”.

In contrast, New Zealand had no referenda and the Prime Minister W.F. Massey’s conscription bill, which was introduced in the month after the Rising, was passed on 1 August 1916. This may have been in part the consequence of the relatively smaller proportion of Catholics in New Zealand, most of whom were of Irish descent – 14 percent as opposed to Australia’s 21 percent. If the Rising did in part prompt anti-conscription sentiment in Australia and Peter Kuch is right that we cannot “claim that the Rising prompted conscription” in New Zealand, then the impact of the Rising must have been less in New Zealand than Australia. Perhaps for that reason this is the “first considered account of New Zealand’s responses to the 1916 Rising”. Perhaps that is also why, despite their uniformly high quality, some of these essays tend to be only tangentially about the New Zealand response to the Uprising.

One exception is Jim McAloon’s nuanced analysis of Harry Holland’s response in *The Maoriland Worker* to the Rising in forty-eight installments, “Historic Foundations of the Irish Rebellion”. Holland was ambivalent about the Rising but believed that James Connolly’s involvement gave it a “‘deep working class significance’”. McAloon concludes that Holland’s installments “were in essence an extended homage to James Connolly”.

Rory Sweetman also deals directly with responses to the Rising in his discussion of Bishop Henry Cleary’s interviews in February 1917 of witnesses to the murder of fifteen civilians in Dublin’s North King Street. Unlike the “rabid” Dr James Kelly, the editor of *The New Zealand Tablet* where Cleary reported his findings in a letter soon after, the Bishop was no radical. Sweetman points out that Cleary avoided the “sectarian firestorm” partly lit by his Australian counterpart, Mannix, and that for all his detailing of the brutality of the British troops “Cleary’s real message lay in the letter’s sub-text, where he consistently minimized the significance of the Rising and the degree of support it had evoked among the general population”.

Some of the essays also include discussions of the Australian response. One is Dianne Hall’s entertaining description of the response of the press in both countries to the Irish women involved in the Rising. But even here such responses were probably due, at least in part, to the fact that so many women were involved - 300 according to one estimate - and that so many of these played such central roles, in contrast to most other uprisings of the previous century. As Hall points out, when Constance Markievicz surrendered “‘clad in green tunic, a hat with green feather, green puttees and green boots ... kissed her revolver and announced ‘I am ready’” she was indeed a “picturesque” character and likely to capture the attention of New Zealand journalists and their readers. Moreover, while Lisa Marr concludes that New Zealand “[W]omen were shocked, outraged, or saddened by the reports”, only a few put pen to paper and so it is difficult to judge the depth of these responses. But among those such as “Lady

Sympathiser” were Katherine Mansfield and Jessie Mackay about whom Marr is able to write at interesting length.

Kuch’s essay attempts to link responses to the Rising in *The Otago Times*, a “highly regarded” paper that devoted significant columns to the conflict, to the staging of plays in Dunedin’s nine theatres after the Rising. The five plays were *John Bull’s Empire Party* (staged on 25 May and 5 June), *O’Leary V.C.* on 26 July, *Peg o’ My Heart* on national tours in 1916 and 1918, W.B. Yeats’ *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and John Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* in early April. All of these plays were written before the Uprising. It’s possible that all but *Peg o’ My Heart* had been scheduled before the news of the Rising hit New Zealand (only examination of apparently non-existent theatre records would show this). *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and *Riders to the Sea* played before the Rising and the others were all the kinds of play that might have been chosen if the Uprising had never taken place. And there is only one response linking the plays to the Uprising: “Constant Reader” who had heard a famous English actress recite *Cathleen ni Houlihan* – the play that its author later worried “sen[t] out/Certain men the English shot” – and remembered in early May that:

Not one person in the audience which [sic] listened to Miss Dorothea Spinney ... had any idea that in the following weeks the meaning and the moral of the play would be sorrowfully and dramatically presented to the whole world ...

As Kuch points out, Constant Reader makes a “number of telling observations that use the historical setting of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* [the rebellion of 1798] to interpret [sympathetically] the 1916 Rising”. Kuch has made a find here but unfortunately could not identify who “Constant Reader” was. In any case, this is a stimulating account of representations of the Irish in British and Irish plays, even if it cannot relate them directly to the Rising.

In one instance New Zealanders’ response to the Rising was a part of a dominion response that was itself not significant. There were no Anzac units in Dublin at the time but some individual soldiers were on leave. Jeff Kildea identifies Trinity College as playing a crucial role in the resistance and one that has been overlooked by historians. But as he admits:

While, in the overall context of the Rising, the role played by the Anzacs is not significant, they and their dominion comrades made an important contribution to the Crown cause during the first forty-eight hours before reinforcements arrived from England, harassing the rebels and confining them to their initial positions.

Since there were only six Anzacs in Trinity it is unlikely that their contribution could have been very important.

Three of the essays pass over the New Zealand response. Brad Patterson situates the Rising in the context of the rise of the Protestant Political Association which was founded on 11 July 1917. However, while Patterson claims that the Rising “ultimately facilitated the public emergence of the PPA” he goes on to add that “the foundations for an aggressively activist pan-Protestant organization had been successfully laid *before* the first Dublin shots rang out”. Yet Patterson’s is nevertheless a valuable account of sectarian conflict around the time of the Uprising. Similarly, Sean Brosnahan’s account of New Zealand’s Fenian resistance to military service barely mentions the Uprising but covers its subject with aplomb. And Stephanie James’ “Challenging Times: The Irish-Catholic press in Dunedin and Adelaide, 1916-19” makes only about a half-dozen references to the Rising, some of those in the Australian newspaper. Nevertheless, her account of the “challenges” faced by these two newspapers, including

conflict between *The Tablet's* firebrand Fenian, Dr. J.J. Kelly and his directors and some bishops, is certainly valuable.

The origins of this book were in a conference held on the centenary of the Rising. While such books can be mere commemorations, this one does fill a gap in the historiography, albeit while often roaming around the gap. New Zealand's response to the Rising may not have been as significant as Australia's but it was not merely a watered down one. In the fine concluding essay, Malcolm Campbell demonstrates that in contrast to the reporting of anti-colonial protests in the British press going back to at least the Indian rising of 1857, "news reports in New Zealand in 1916 exhibit from the outset a good measure of sympathy for the general population of Dublin". Such reporting was also "largely devoid of the racial stereotypes that had characterized English reporting of Irish affairs over the course of the nineteenth century". The New Zealand response to the Rising may not have been as intense as in countries such as Australia but it was at least kind.