

**Marnie Hay, 'The rocky road to the amalgamation of the Sinn Féin movement, 1907' in *Cut & Paste 2022: Remembering Arthur Griffith*, Vol. 5, 31 March 2022, pp 10-15.**

## **The rocky road to the amalgamation of the Sinn Féin movement, 1907**

**Marnie Hay**

Breaking up is hard to do, but mergers are not easy either. That was certainly the case when three separate advanced nationalist organisations promoting the Sinn Féin (ourselves) message of Irish political and economic self-reliance – Cumann na nGaedheal, the National Council and the Dungannon Clubs – amalgamated in 1907. Although the ultimate goal of the Sinn Féin movement was the dissolution of the 1801 union between Great Britain and Ireland, members of the movement disagreed about the form a post-union Ireland would take: dual monarchy or republic. Tensions also existed between the centre and periphery of the movement embodied in its two leading propagandists: Arthur Griffith in Dublin and Bulmer Hobson in Belfast.

Arthur Griffith (1871-1922) was the main instigator of the Sinn Féin movement. Its policies were generally based on his 1904 pamphlet *The resurrection of Hungary: a parallel for Ireland*, which was inspired by Hungary's dual monarchy settlement with Austria in 1867. Griffith first cited this example in a speech at the 1902 convention of Cumann na nGaedheal, which was founded in 1900 as an umbrella organisation for literary, athletic and political groups advocating the de-anglicisation of Ireland. Hoping to reconcile Ulster Protestants, Griffith advocated a dual monarchy under the British crown in which Ireland was an equal partner with Great Britain. To achieve political equality with Britain, Griffith endorsed a policy of passive resistance that was later implemented when Sinn Féin MPs elected in

December 1918 abstained from taking their seats in the British parliament and instead established Dáil Éireann in January 1919.

Meanwhile Bulmer Hobson (1883-1969), a quirky Belfast Quaker,<sup>1</sup> was [p. 10] developing a similar two-pronged approach to defeating British rule based on his reading of James Fintan Lalor. The first prong was a policy of passive resistance while the second was the employment of tactics later labelled guerrilla warfare. Hobson described Griffith's Hungarian policy as 'Lalor's policy of 1847 come home with a foreign dress and with a foreign prestige',<sup>2</sup> and asserted that 'the Sinn Féin idea took shape at nearly the same time in Dublin and Belfast'.<sup>3</sup> Although Hobson acknowledged that Griffith's newspaper the *United Irishman* 'was read by all the younger Nationalists and profoundly affected them',<sup>4</sup> he was reluctant to concede that Griffith was one of his own influences. Instead he saw himself as Griffith's equal rather than his disciple, a viewpoint that helped to fuel their rivalry.

In March 1905 Hobson and Denis McCullough established a new organisation, the Dungannon Clubs, 'which would do some serious national work and which [they] could control in Belfast'.<sup>5</sup> This new nationalist organisation reflected their frustration with the drunken conduct of some fellow Belfast Cumann na nGaedheal members and their disillusionment with the National Council. Founded in 1903, the National Council was conceived as a vehicle to organise opposition to King Edward VII's forthcoming visit to Ireland, but continued as an association dedicated to promoting nationalist representation on elected bodies.<sup>6</sup> Hobson and McCullough were disappointed by 'the Dublin people who could think of nothing except winning a few seats in the Dublin Corporation'.<sup>7</sup> Thus the Dungannon Clubs had the dual purpose of promoting the Sinn Féin policy, particularly in Ulster, and driving the Dublin crowd back onto the advanced nationalist track. The clubs became a recruiting ground for the

Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), a secret society advocating the establishment of an Irish republic through the use of physical force if necessary.

The Dungannon Clubs' name was designed to attract Protestant as well as Catholic members. It recalled the Volunteer convention held in Dungannon in February 1782, which led to the final, successful thrust toward Irish legislative independence. The Volunteers were a part-time military force that had been raised in 1778-9 to protect Ireland at a time when the regular army had diminished in size due to the demands of the American War of Independence. [p. 11] They eventually took on a wider political role providing extra-parliamentary support for policies and goals, such as free trade and legislative independence, promoted by the 'Patriot' interest within the Protestant-dominated Irish parliament.<sup>8</sup> Hobson and his colleagues hoped to see Ulster return to the spirit of the non-sectarian United Irishmen, whose initial advocacy of parliamentary reform later shifted to republicanism in the 1790s.

At their inaugural meeting on 8 March 1905, the Dungannon Clubs showed the influence of Griffith in outlining their goals as the restoration of the Irish constitution of 1782, the conservation of the Irish language and traditions, and the encouragement of Irish industries.<sup>9</sup> By the time the organisation issued its constitution and manifesto in late August 1905, the restoration of the 1782 constitution had been dropped in favour of 'regaining ... the Political Independence of Ireland', while its other stated objective was now to build up Ireland intellectually, materially and physically.<sup>10</sup>

When the Dungannon Clubs launched their short-lived weekly paper *The Republic* in December 1906, it proclaimed:

We stand for an Irish republic, because we can see that no compromise with England, no repeal of the Union, no concession of Home Rule or devolution

will satisfy the national aspirations of the Irish people nor allow the unrestricted mental, moral, and material development of our country.

National independence is our right; we ask no more; and we accept no less.<sup>11</sup>

Despite such lofty words, club member Patrick McCartan reported, 'Outside the IRB there were few Republicans & Griffith knew it & so did we. We were mere propagandists & we realised it.'<sup>12</sup>

Hobson's growing reputation as a persuasive public speaker led to an invitation to undertake a speaking tour to introduce the Sinn Féin message to the United States in February and March of 1907. En route to Cork to catch a steamship to America, Hobson stopped in Dublin where he visited Griffith, whose 'coldness and hostility' came as a surprise. Later discovering that Griffith had written to Clan na Gael leader John Devoy to suggest that he himself should undertake an American speaking tour, Hobson regretted 'inadvertently' queering the pitch for the more senior man.<sup>13</sup>

On the same day that Hobson set sail, Griffith voiced his disapproval on the front page of his newspaper *Sinn Féin*: 'The executive wishes it to be clearly understood that [Hobson's visit to the United States] is not authorised by the National Council, nor undertaken on its behalf.'<sup>14</sup> His words imply that the National Council held a monopoly on the Sinn Féin 'brand', despite the fact that the Dungannon Clubs and Cumann na nGaedheal were engaged in propagating the Sinn Féin message and would soon merge forces as the Sinn Féin League.

A central issue that emerged during Hobson's tour was the refusal of Irish-American nationalists to provide financial aid to the Sinn Féin movement unless its component organisations merged. The existence of three different organisations advocating a Sinn Féin [p. 12] policy, two different leaders, and two different visions

of what Ireland should strive to achieve proved problematic. Advanced nationalists in London and the United States urged their colleagues in Ireland to strive for unity of purpose and a rationalisation of resources.<sup>15</sup>

Hobson and McCullough had already tried to bring about an amalgamation. In October 1906 they proposed that a meeting should be held to discuss a possible merger with Cumann na nGaedheal and the National Council. They were open to amalgamation because Cumann na nGaedheal were expected to support their policy regarding full independence, which would strengthen both the Dungannon Clubs and the imminent launch of *The Republic*. They were less certain of the reaction of the National Council.<sup>16</sup>

The first meeting to discuss a possible amalgamation was held in Dundalk on 21 October 1906. At this meeting the representatives of the Dungannon Clubs put forward the suggestion that in case of amalgamation the constitution should read: ‘That our object is to secure the independence of Ireland believing that the people of Ireland are a free people and that no law made without their authority or consent is or ever can be binding on their conscience.’<sup>17</sup> After some discussion, it was agreed ‘that the new amalgamation should include men who believe in the Constitution of [17]82 as a final settlement and men who believe in separation and that the demand should be *independence*’. Cumann na nGaedheal were expected to accept this, as was the majority of the National Council’s executive.<sup>18</sup> An alternative suggestion was also put forward that ‘a council consisting of an equal number of representatives from each executive should be formed to work out the Sinn Féin policy and agree on a common line of action’.<sup>19</sup> In the end the National Council rejected the proposed amalgamation, so Hobson and McCullough decided to push for ‘unity of action with the Cumann na nGaedheal people in Dublin’.<sup>20</sup>

Hobson promised Irish-American nationalists to do his best to bring about a merger upon his return to Ireland. As a result, the executives of the Dungannon Clubs and Cumann na nGaedheal, both of which were controlled by IRB men, held a meeting in Dundalk in early April 1907 at which they decided to amalgamate immediately, calling the newly merged organisation the Sinn Féin League.<sup>21</sup> Its main objective was ‘the regaining of the sovereign independence of Ireland’. Although this wording implied a rejection of the 1782 settlement of legislative independence, it did not assert overt republicanism. At a second meeting on 21 April, P.T. Daly was elected president, with McCullough and Sean McGarry as joint secretaries. Richard Davis has suggested that Hobson’s demotion to a position as a mere member of the executive committee may have been designed to appease Griffith in hopes of coming to a future settlement.<sup>22</sup>

Griffith and the National Council, however, remained aloof. Ironically, the term ‘Sinn Féin’ has been associated with Griffith even though he did not belong to the first body bearing that name, which was in fact an organisation that he resented. As Michael Laffan [p. 13] points out:

Almost a year earlier Griffith had appropriated the term ‘Sinn Féin’ by using it as the title for his own newspaper, and a feeling of affronted proprietorship may have been part of the reason for his hostility towards the new party. He virtually ignored it in the columns of *Sinn Féin*.<sup>23</sup>

The isolation of Griffith and the National Council proved short-lived.

The conversion of Irish Parliamentary Party MP Charles J. Dolan to Griffith’s political views in June 1907 strengthened Griffith’s hand. This allowed him to dictate favourable terms when the National Council finally amalgamated with the Sinn Féin League at the end of August 1907.<sup>24</sup> This merger helped to bring unity to Dolan’s re-

election campaign in North Leitrim on a Sinn Féin platform, though he was ultimately defeated in the February 1908 by-election by the Irish Parliamentary Party candidate, F.E. Meehan, 1,157 votes to 3,103.<sup>25</sup>

The decision to amalgamate the Sinn Féin League and the National Council was finally made after a two-hour discussion at the third annual congress of the National Council in Dublin at the end of August 1907. The newly amalgamated body initially retained the National Council's name. Hobson was elected as a non-resident member of its executive.<sup>26</sup> His move to Dublin six months later enabled him to participate more fully on the executive of the National Council, which was known as Sinn Féin from September 1908 onwards. At the annual congresses in 1908 and 1909 Griffith and Hobson were elected co-vice-presidents of the organisation. In the election for the latter year, Hobson received only twenty-nine votes to Griffith's fifty,<sup>27</sup> demonstrating the latter's dominance.

Hobson left Sinn Féin in late 1910 due to frustrations similar to those that had sparked the formation of the Dungannon Clubs. He recalled night after night of attending Sinn Féin committee meetings where some attendees appeared more interested in winning seats in Dublin Corporation than in organising the movement around the country. The seeming futility of endless meetings and his continuing inability to work with Griffith resulted in Hobson's departure.<sup>28</sup>

Views differ regarding the root of the rivalry between Hobson and Griffith and its effect on the Sinn Féin movement. McCullough and Constance Markievicz saw the rivalry as more personal than political. According to McCullough,

Hobson was a very headstrong and somewhat egotistical person, and being much younger than Griffith, the latter naturally resented Hobson's endeavouring to force his or our opinions on Griffith and his friends. This

naturally created a certain amount of friction between two strong personalities, but I must say that I never knew it to interfere with either of them, in any action that would be for the good or forwarding of the movement.<sup>29</sup>

In contrast, Markievicz believed that the rivalry between Hobson and Griffith detracted from the efficacy of the movement, reporting that ‘the two men became more and more bitterly opposed, [p. 14] and more concerned in blocking each other’s schemes than in getting work done for Ireland’.<sup>30</sup> Laffan has argued that the manoeuvrings of Hobson and Griffith ‘took place on a modest, insignificant scale, and most Irish nationalists remained unaware of these sectarian squabbles between rival leaders who had few followers’.<sup>31</sup>

Differing views of what form a post-union Ireland should take, tensions between centre and periphery, and the rivalry between Griffith and Hobson were among the challenges faced in bringing about the 1907 amalgamation of the Sinn Féin movement. The merger was a landmark in the history of a movement that finally gained mass support in the aftermath of the 1916 Easter Rising and contributed to the dissolution of the union between Great Britain and 26 counties of Ireland.

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<sup>1</sup> See Marnie Hay, *Bulmer Hobson and the nationalist movement in twentieth-century Ireland* (Manchester, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Bulmer Hobson, *Ireland yesterday and tomorrow* (Tralee, 1968), p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> McCullough, statement, 1957 (University College Dublin Archives [UCDA], McCullough Papers, P120/29).

<sup>6</sup> Richard Davis, *Arthur Griffith and non-violent Sinn Féin* (Dublin, 1974), pp 19-20.

<sup>7</sup> Bulmer Hobson to Martin McCullough, 25 Nov. 1962 (UCDA, McCullough Papers, P120/24/19).

<sup>8</sup> ‘Volunteers’ in S.J. Connolly (ed.), *The Oxford companion to Irish history* (Oxford, 1999), p. 581.

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- <sup>9</sup> Dungannon Club minute book, 1905 (National Library of Ireland [NLI], Hobson Papers, MS 12,175); Davis, *Sinn Féin*, p. 26.
- <sup>10</sup> ‘Constitution of the Dungannon Club’, quoted in Hobson, *Ireland*, pp 23-4.
- <sup>11</sup> *Republic*, 13 Dec. 1906, p. 4.
- <sup>12</sup> Patrick McCartan, witness statement (Bureau of Military History [BMH], WS 99).
- <sup>13</sup> Hobson, *Ireland*, p. 10.
- <sup>14</sup> ‘Irish Ireland – the National Council – the Resident Executive’, *Sinn Féin*, 2 Feb. 1907, p. 1.
- <sup>15</sup> Davis, *Sinn Féin*, p. 28.
- <sup>16</sup> Patrick McCartan to Joseph McGarrity, 2 Oct. 1906 (NLI, McGarrity Papers, MS 17,617/1); Minutes of Sinn Féin amalgamation meeting, 21 Oct. 1906 (NLI, MS 8,198).
- <sup>17</sup> Minutes of Sinn Féin amalgamation meeting.
- <sup>18</sup> McCartan to McGarrity, 23 Oct. 1906 (NLI, McGarrity Papers, MS 17,617/1).
- <sup>19</sup> Minutes of Sinn Féin amalgamation meeting.
- <sup>20</sup> Denis McCullough to Richard P. Davis, 14 Oct. 1957 (UCDA, McCullough Papers, P120/23/12).
- <sup>21</sup> ‘Sinn Féin League’, *Republic*, 11 Apr. 1907, p. 1.
- <sup>22</sup> *Peasant*, 13 Apr. 1907, 27 Apr. 1907; Davis, *Sinn Féin*, p. 33.
- <sup>23</sup> Michael Laffan, *The resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Féin party, 1916-1913* (Cambridge, 1999), pp 25-6.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> Ciarán Ó Duibhir, *Sinn Féin: the first election, 1908* (Manorhamilton, 1993), p. 82.
- <sup>26</sup> ‘The National Council – the third annual congress’, *Peasant*, 7 Sept. 1907, p. 5.
- <sup>27</sup> Davis, *Sinn Féin*, p. 174.
- <sup>28</sup> Hobson, *Ireland*, p. 12.
- <sup>29</sup> McCullough, witness statement (BMH, WS 111).
- <sup>30</sup> Countess Markievicz, ‘Memories’, *Éire*, 18 Aug. 1923, p. 6.
- <sup>31</sup> Laffan, *The resurrection of Ireland*, p. 24.