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From Cahir to Moscow: The Transnational World of David Fitzgerald (1897-1933)

In October 1933, the *Irish Workers' Voice*, weekly paper of the then-newly formed Communist Party of Ireland, printed a letter from the redoubtable Irish feminist Hanna Sheehy Skeffington. Introducing the letter, the *Workers' Voice* noted that it was initially sent to the republican journal *An Phoblacht* who did not publish it. Writing to *An Phoblacht*, Sheehy Skeffington wrote of a 'notable omission' in their obituary of David Fitzgerald, an Irish republican and socialist who had died a month previously at the age of thirty-six¹. Born in Cahir, Co. Tipperary in 1897, David Fitzgerald is remembered largely for intellectual contributions to Irish radicalism in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Writing in 1933, Sheehy Skeffington criticised *An Phoblacht's* 'failure to mention' that Fitzgerald had, alongside Sheehy Skeffington and other Irish delegates, travelled to the Soviet Union in August 1930. Many republicans, Sheehy Skeffington continued, mourned not only Fitzgerald but the 'promising revolutionary movement' he helped launch: Saor Éire. Sheehy Skeffington recalled that the 'very last talk' she had with Fitzgerald centred on the grief he felt for how this movement, 'launched with such enthusiasm', had suffered firstly from state repression and later 'apathy and inertia'. Concluding, Sheehy Skeffington asked: 'Is Saor Éire dead and buried with David Fitzgerald?'²

A primary issue Sheehy Skeffington took with *An Phoblacht's* obituary was not so much that it downplayed Fitzgerald's role in the movement, but rather how it *domesticized* Fitzgerald, relegating his activism to the island of Ireland. Sheehy Skeffington's letter suggested how Fitzgerald's story could speak to a broader moment: the jettisoning of a radical socialist program within the Irish republican movement, partly as a response to a virulent and ultimately successful red scare. This essay on the life of David Fitzgerald responds to Sheehy Skeffington's prompt. It traces the radicalisation of this Tipperary republican whose life was cut short by cancer and explores what his activist career may tell us about the transnational political horizons open to ordinary Irish radicals within and beyond the tumult of the Irish revolution.

¹ For *An Phoblacht's* obituary of David Fitzgerald see: 'Army Mourns for Davie Fitzgerald', *An Phoblacht*, 9 September 1933.

² 'An Unpublished Letter', *Irish Workers' Voice*, 14 October 1933.

A Radical from Cahir, County Tipperary

It was on a microfilm machine in the University College Dublin archives that I first encountered a fellow Irish socialist with an interest in Soviet Russia from Cahir, Co. Tipperary. Scanning through surveillance material on the Friends of Soviet Russia delegation I was fascinated by the details beneath the then-unfamiliar name David Fitzgerald, one of the passengers listed among those who made the journey to the USSR in August of 1930. The entry read:

DAVID FITZGERALD, Cahir, Co. Tipperary.

One of the prisoners who escaped from Mountjoy in 1925. Was re-arrested in Dublin on 12/10/29 and was released from Mountjoy on 15/2/30. He was invited by Peadar O'Donnell to represent the Peasants' and Farmers' Party on the delegation. Described as 'interested in economic conditions, engineering work, agriculture'. Active in the Irish left wing movement. In prison during the British and Free State regime for revolutionary work.³

As a Cahir local who was learning Russian, I was drawn in by the handwritten scrawl above Fitzgerald's entry in the surveillance report: 'Visited Russia.'⁴ I took the file reference to the archivists and asked for a copy of the page featuring Fitzgerald. Armed with this document, I traced his living descendants using my own local networks, granting me access to the fragments of Fitzgerald's personal archive.

Like the ill-fated political initiative he founded, Saor Éire, Fitzgerald's life embodied for his comrades a sense of potential left unfulfilled. Fitzgerald was one of six surviving children born to Michael Fitzgerald, a labourer, and his wife Bridget Burke, in the townland of Ballydrehid, outside Cahir. The son of a working-class family with basic education whose politics were formed initially in emigration, there are typical elements to his political trajectory. Yet Fitzgerald was in many senses exceptional. Peadar O'Donnell described him as 'deeply cultured, with a passionate interest in social problems' and someone with 'more brains than any of us'.⁵ Fitzgerald emerges from the sources as a worldly auto-didact. In a 1929 letter to his sister Bríd, he told her that Dante's *The Divine Comedy* made for 'good reading'.⁶ Fitzgerald honed his theory during the act of *being* a revolutionary - an act that consumed his entire adult life. It was a role he played on more than simply the Irish national stage. One of the few extended pieces of writing on Fitzgerald is an accomplished online essay from

³ Notes on Revolutionary Organisations, c. 1930, Seán MacEntee Papers, University College Dublin Archives, P67/522 (7).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ M. McInerney, *Peadar O'Donnell: Irish Social Rebel*, (Dublin, 1974), p. 100.

⁶ David Fitzgerald to Bríd Fitzgerald, 22 June 1929, Fitzgerald Family Papers (Privately held, hereafter FFP).

September 2005 compiled by Patrick Brennan, a descendant of Fitzgerald's fiancée.⁷ Before Brennan's essay, one of the only extended biographical pieces on Fitzgerald was his 1933 obituary.

⁷ 'David Fitzgerald, 1897-1933', http://www.donmouth.co.uk/local_history/ira/david_fitzgerald.html (Accessed 18 October 2021).

Into the Revolution, via London

Although Sheehy Skeffington criticised Fitzgerald's obituary as partial, it does contain many intriguing references for historians of the Irish revolution. Fitzgerald, we are told, first began his 'association with the National movement' with the Howth gun-running of 1914.⁸ He was out on Easter Week in 1916, so the obituary claims, and succeeded in escaping arrest by reaching Glasgow and then proceeding to Newcastle-on-Tyne.⁹ The story continues, noting that Fitzgerald spent time at sea crossing the Atlantic, forming important connections that 'were to serve him in good stead' and upon return to Ireland in 1919 was assigned by Michael Collins for 'important work' in England. It is a remarkable trajectory, with many of its details verifiable, despite the fact that the remains of Fitzgerald's own archive contain few surviving documents from the years of the Irish revolution.

The remains of Fitzgerald's personal archive were contained in a small satchel when I first came across them in the home of his family. The letters complicate a story of a principled anti-colonial republican, single-mindedly progressing his way through the cause. In mostly undated letters sent to his father and his uncle around 1913, Fitzgerald wrote of his life in London working for the Colonial Office in the British Civil Service.¹⁰ Writing from his address in Bessborough where Fitzgerald lodged with an Irish woman, he noted that his job involved 'addressing communications to foreign officials such as to the Governor of East Africa or Ceylon or India.'¹¹ If this work awakened an anti-colonial consciousness in the teenage Fitzgerald, the letters do not reveal it. Fitzgerald was in London for the passage of the Third Home Rule bill in January 1913 and told his uncle Matt Fitzgerald about how he gathered with 'a crowd of other Irishmen' to watch supporters of the Irish Parliamentary Party and the Unionists on the streets.¹²

More suggestive of Fitzgerald's political development, however, is a letter to his uncle describing his membership of a London GAA Club. 'I am writing to you now to ask a special favour of you' Fitzgerald opened.¹³ Continuing, he explained that 'about 20 of the Irish boys working in Govt. offices have got together a hurling team called the "Geraldines" and play matches on Saturday evenings.'¹⁴ Fitzgerald described how he had played with the team 'a few times' but needed to borrow a friend's hurley whenever he did so. Now he wanted one of his own. Although Fitzgerald's obituary claimed that he entered the national movement in 1914

⁸ 'Army Mourns for David Fitzgerald', *An Phoblacht*, 9 September 1933.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ The 1913 approximate date can be surmised from the dated documents contained within the private archive, such as a note to David Fitzgerald from a civil servant colleague: L.C.H. Weekes to David Fitzgerald, 12 July 1913, FFP.

¹¹ D. Fitzgerald to Michael Fitzgerald, undated letter, FFP.

¹² D. Fitzgerald to Matt Fitzgerald, undated, c. January 1913, FFP.

¹³ D. Fitzgerald to Matt Fitzgerald, undated, c. 1913, FFP.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

with the Howth Gun-running, it seems likely that this hurling practice was in fact a consequential step in Fitzgerald's revolutionary development. The Geraldine's was the name of a prominent London GAA club that included among its membership Michael Collins, a man who would play an important role in Fitzgerald's life in the movement.¹⁵ While Fitzgerald's 'Geraldines' may have been a smaller civil-service based club of the same name rather than Collins' own team, it is possible that in the contained world of London-Irish GAA the men would have crossed paths. Regardless of who he played alongside or against, Fitzgerald's quest to make his way into the team reflected a conscious decision to involve himself in an Irish cultural world in the imperial metropole, a world that was increasingly invested in political developments back home.

Fitzgerald's movements between 1914 and his posting to Tyneside to assist the IRA battalion there are difficult to discern - and seem to have mystified and worried his family too. In 1919, the Fitzgerald family reached out to Collins' office at 32 Bachelor's Walk in Dublin to try and learn how and where David had disappeared into the revolution. Only one side of the letters survives and the narrative they tell is enigmatic. On 22 May, Collins wrote to Michael Fitzgerald in Cahir that enquiries would be made with every Volunteer company of the Dublin brigade to try and find his missing son.¹⁶ On 17 June, Collins updated Michael Fitzgerald with the results of some of his enquiries, providing insights into Fitzgerald's own activities in the preceding years. David Fitzgerald, Collins noted, could only be traced up to the summer of 1915.¹⁷ 'He was a member of Mr. McGuinness' Company of Irish Volunteers' but had soon ceased attending meetings. Collins continued: 'From questions put to Officers and men in all areas where there was fighting, it is pretty certain that he was not in the Easter Week fighting, and from what I knew of him personally, I feel certain that he would have been in the fight if he had been in Dublin at all.'¹⁸ 'The conclusion I have come to therefore,' Collins wrote, 'is that he must have left Dublin sometime in the latter part of 1915'.¹⁹ A 26 August letter from Collins begins on a dramatic note: 'Your letter of the 18th. Inst. addressed to Sinn Fein was handed to me. I was naturally very astonished at its contents.'²⁰ Parsing the letter, it seems that the Fitzgerald family was visited in Cahir by someone who declared himself an associate of Collins and claimed that David Fitzgerald was dead and buried in Glasnevin.²¹ Collins declared that this 'casual caller' had delivered the Fitzgerald family a 'bundle of lies'.²²

¹⁵ Fitzgerald's name does not appear in the minute books of the Geraldine's Club that included Michael Collins in its membership. However, it is possible that the absence of his name was due to his lack of a committee position: 'Geraldines Gaelic Athletic Club, Minute Book, 1909-1915', <https://www.gaa.ie/centenary/illustrative-docs/minute-b/> (Accessed 11 November 2021).

¹⁶ M. Collins to M. Fitzgerald, 22 May 1919, FFP.

¹⁷ M. Collins to M. Fitzgerald, 17 June 1919, FFP.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ M. Collins to M. Fitzgerald, 26 August 1919, FFP.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

If David Fitzgerald was not in a Dublin grave nor traceable by Collins, where was he? Subterfuge on the part of Collin is a possibility: perhaps he was covering for Fitzgerald, who would soon be posted to Tyneside. Yet there is also an intriguing suggestion in the *An Phoblacht* obituary that provides a more likely explanation of where Fitzgerald spent these lost years. Fitzgerald, we are told, spent time at sea, forming important connections that 'were to serve him in good stead' in the following years.²³ In Michael McInerney's biography of Peadar O'Donnell, Fitzgerald is described as having been 'a ship's officer for years before joining the IRA in 1920.'²⁴ Assessing the evidence, this is the likely story of Fitzgerald's path through the revolution before the War of Independence: politicised in the London-Irish world, Fitzgerald returned to Dublin and joined the Irish Volunteers before 1915 but was already out of Dublin by the time of the Easter Rising. He took to the sea working on ships, rendering him untraceable to both family and comrades in Ireland. It is strange, however, that Fitzgerald, who clearly cared for his family, would choose to disappear for so long. After resurfacing, Fitzgerald was assigned an important mission: supporting the IRA's activities in Britain. Upon his return to Ireland in 1919, Fitzgerald was assigned by Michal Collins for 'important work' in England.²⁵

²³ *An Phoblacht*, 9 September 1933.

²⁴ M. McInerney, *Peadar O'Donnell*, p. 100.

²⁵ *An Phoblacht*, 9 September 1933.

Arson and Arms Smuggling in Tyneside

Compared to the militant operations in Ireland and republican propaganda tours of the US, the violent republican campaign in Britain has received comparatively little attention. Gerard Noonan, whose work has sought to address this oversight, argues that the ‘most important activity of republicans in Britain’ during the War of Independence and the Civil War was gun running: ‘the acquisition and smuggling of munitions into Ireland.’²⁶ Arriving into Tyneside, David Fitzgerald found himself playing an active role in arming the war at home. With its significant Irish settlement dating to the Great Famine and concentration of mining and shipping industries, the area was a prime location for the development of an Irish republican movement and the fostering of class war.²⁷

Activity for the cause in Tyneside would draw on Fitzgerald’s past experiences and introduce him to new frontiers of politics and militancy. Gilbert Francis Barrington, who served as Quartermaster of the Tyneside Division of the IRA, provided a memoir of the division’s activities from its foundation in early 1920 through to the end of the War of Independence in 1921. The memoir, edited by Mary A. Barrington, provides unique and useful insights into the world that Fitzgerald entered upon arrival in England’s northeast.²⁸ The Volunteer units, Gilbert Barrington noted, were largely composed of ‘artisans, semi-skilled men, small tradesmen and a few teachers and better-off business people’, with many of the active members being well-educated recent immigrants who ‘had not lost touch with Irish relatives and probably knew more exactly what was happening in Ireland.’²⁹ A further important detail that Barrington added to his group portrait of the Volunteer force was that the local ‘tradition of radicalism and a certain class struggle in the North East of England gave a background of rebelliousness’.³⁰

In 1920, David Fitzgerald, alongside Richard J Purcell and Barrington, was sworn into the IRB when Rory O’Connor, O/C of the IRA in Britain, sent Mick McEvoy to Tyneside to conduct the swearing in.³¹ In October 1920, Barrington was instructed by Liam Mellows ‘with the duty of obtaining by purchase or otherwise supplies of arms and munitions for Ireland’, which would be shipped to Ireland via Liverpool.³² The first operations of the Tyneside IRA were arson attacks carried out in late February 1921. Barrington, in his Witness Statement, noted the targets, approved by Rory O’Connor, were ‘the bonded stores and neighbouring oil

²⁶ Gerard Noonan, *The IRA in Britain, 1919-1923: ‘In the Heart of Enemy Lines’* (Liverpool, 2014), p. 5.

²⁷ For a statistical breakdown of the Irish in Newcastle, with details on industry, see: Frank Neal, ‘The Foundations of the Irish Settlement in Newcastle upon Tyne: The Evidence in the 1851 Census’, *Immigrants & Minorities*, 18:2-3, pp. 71-93.

²⁸ Mary A. Barrington, ed., *The Irish Independence Movement on Tyneside 1919-1921: Based on the Testimony of Gilbert Francis Barrington, Dublin, Formerly of South Shields and Quartermaster, Tyneside Division, I.R.A* (Dublin, 1999).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Gilbert F. Barrington, Witness Statements, Bureau of Military History, Witness No. 773, p. 4.

stores on Newcastle quayside, and the timber stores at Tyne Dock'.³³ Joseph Connolly, Adjutant of the Tyneside IRA, was tasked with starting one of the fires, but did not turn up on the night. He was, according to Barrington, subject to an enquiry and 'quietly replaced' by David Fitzgerald.³⁴

Around October 1921, Fitzgerald made a note of an encounter with an organisation that would shape his later political life: the Communist International, or Comintern. 'Flirting about on the edges of this organisation for some time now', Fitzgerald wrote: 'Think I have at last struck oil. Very suspicious these people. Must handle the business carefully or may frighten them off.'³⁵ This encounter between Comintern agents and the IRA in Tyneside proved of little use. The Comintern provided weapons that Fitzgerald considered 'too small in calibre' and a number of machine gun tripods that proved 'more trouble than anything else' because they were fitted for 'sleigh work on the snows of the Russian Front'.³⁶ In the truce period, a return to conflict remained a possibility but the chances of the IRA engaging in sleigh-mounted combat must have appeared vanishingly slim.

Yet life in Tyneside was not all arson and smuggling for David Fitzgerald. There was also friendship and romance. Fitzgerald became close to the Tyneside-Irish Brennan and Hanratty families. By 1922, when Fitzgerald had moved his place of permanent residence to Ireland, he was engaged to Millie Brennan of Tyneside.³⁷ Yet the dangers of his chosen career worked against him ever marrying his Tyneside fiancée and starting a family. While travelling to England once more in 1922, Fitzgerald was arrested and put on trial, but released on bail. Patrick Brennan notes that it is probable that the money for Fitzgerald's bail came out of Irish Self Determination League funds.³⁸

³³ Gilbert F. Barrington, Witness Statements, Bureau of Military History, Witness No. 773, p. 3.

³⁴ Barrington, ed., *Irish Independence Movement on Tyneside*, p. 15.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ P. Brennan, 'David Fitzgerald'.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Moving Left in the Free State

Fitzgerald was an immediate opponent of the Anglo-Irish Treaty that led to the creation of the Irish Free State. Writing to Frances Hanratty in Tyneside in July 1922, Fitzgerald wrote that the results of the election which saw pro-treaty factions put in power were 'damnable'.³⁹ Across the 1920s, Fitzgerald's importance within the anti-treaty IRA would grow as his own intellectual direction formed part of the republican move to the left. After participating in the Irish Civil War through the operations of the 5th Mullingar Brigade, Fitzgerald moved from militant actions to militant organisation and theorising.⁴⁰ After 1923, the republican movement entered into something of a doldrums before a resurgence in activity later in the decade. Yet there were still opportunities for exhilaration: in November 1925, David Fitzgerald was among 19 prisoners who were sprung from Mountjoy Jail in a daring operation, partly organised by George Gilmore.

In November 1925, Fitzgerald escaped into a republican movement at a political crossroads. In Brian Hanley's estimation, the years of the late-1920s and into the 1930s were 'of vital importance for Irish republicanism'.⁴¹ Fitzgerald, and his close comrades George Gilmore and Peadar O'Donnell, would play a pivotal role in these years. Beyond Ireland, the mid to late twenties saw the rise of new forms of radical cultural expression and political regeneration. A traffic of intellectuals, artists and activists moved along the train and sea routes to Leningrad and Moscow, eager to encounter the Soviet experiment in person. The clandestine apparatuses of the Comintern also made overtures towards Irish republicans. Emmet O'Connor notes that frustration with Jim Larkin's intractability led to Comintern look increasingly to the IRA 'for intelligence on Ireland and for cadres to maintain red fronts', receiving republican delegations to Soviet Russia in 1925 and 1927.⁴² The years 1929-1932 are fittingly described by O'Connor as the 'high tide' of Irish communism in the Comintern-era.⁴³ In these years, Fitzgerald would encounter the Comintern once more, but this time as the embodiment of an all-encompassing revolutionary culture rather than an anxious offloader of sleigh-mountable machine gun tripods.

In early April 1930, the Irish Friends of Soviet Russia (FOSR) held its inaugural meeting in Dublin. The organisation, part of an international network of Soviet friendship societies linked to the Comintern, was heavily shaped by the interests of its prominent members, which included such radical intellectual types as the artist Harry Kernoff and republican feminists

³⁹ David Fitzgerald to Frances Hanratty, cited in Ibid.

⁴⁰ P. Brennan, 'David Fitzgerald'.

⁴¹ B. Hanley, *The IRA, 1926-1936* (Dublin, 2002), p. 9.

⁴² E. O'Connor, 'The Age of the Red Republic: the Irish Left and Nationalism, 1909-1936', Saothar, 2005, Vol 30 (2005), p. 79.

⁴³ Emmet O'Connor, *Red and the Green: Ireland, Russia and the Communist Internationals, 1919-43* (Dublin, 2004), p. 179.

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Charlotte Despard and Rosamond Jacob. Elaine Sisson places the FOSR in the context of a flowering of radical culture that was incubated in 1920s Dublin through an avant-garde social world that navigated venues such as Madame Cogley's cabaret.⁴⁴ David Fitzgerald joined the group early in its existence and eventually participated in the first of only two delegations to the Soviet Union launched by the FOSR.

⁴⁴ E. Sisson, 'Designing Modernism: Harry Kernoff, Russia, and Postindependence Ireland,' *Éire-Ireland*, 52:3&4 (Fall/Winter, 2017), pp. 31-56.

An Irish republican in Soviet Russia

On 8 August 1930, the Soviet daily *Pravda* announced that Irish visitors were among a group of workers' delegates making their way to the USSR.⁴⁵ Among these delegates was David Fitzgerald, who was accompanied on his journey aboard the Soviet ship *Kooperatsiia* by other FOSR members including Kernoff, Despard, Sheehy Skeffington and George Gilmore. Soviet visiting delegations were a tightly organised affair, with visitors guided through special locations that acted as models of the society the Soviets were attempting to build.⁴⁶ It is common to dismiss these visitors as duped pilgrims who were only shown the bright sides of Soviet life. While it is true that the Soviets placed an emphasis on displaying model institutions - such as the limited number of airy and clean Moscow prisons rather than the vast network of brutalising labour camps - such techniques were hardly a uniquely Soviet phenomenon. Presenting the best side of a state is the core tenet of cultural diplomacy.

Fitzgerald travelled to the USSR as a student of the new society rather than as a clandestine operator. A footnote in Uinseann MacEoin's 1980 oral history collection *Survivors* notes that 'George Gilmore and Dave Fitzgerald were in Moscow for a military training course when word leaked to British Intelligence and they returned home'.⁴⁷ In MacEoin's 1997 follow-up *The IRA in the Twilight Years*, a contextual essay by J Bower Bell retells a similar story with a different ending. Bower Bell writes that Gilmore and Fitzgerald arranged for training in Soviet Russia but realised that the effort was impracticable.⁴⁸ Jonathan Hammill similarly describes Fitzgerald as a 'frequent IRA envoy to Russia in the mid to late 1920s'.⁴⁹ My own research in the Russian State Archives of Socio-Political History in Moscow revealed little of significance relating to Fitzgerald. If Gilmore or Fitzgerald had spent time in Moscow undergoing military training, one would suspect them to have generated a Comintern personnel file. But their names do not appear among the seventy-odd Irish radicals who earned a place in the archives of the Comintern cadre department. Gilmore and Fitzgerald did indeed spend time in Moscow, but, I believe, only on one occasion: 1930. They travelled more as privileged tourists than military trainees.⁵⁰ Visits to Red Army barracks were also standard

⁴⁵ *Pravda*, 8 August 1930.

⁴⁶ There is a wide literature on these delegations and Soviet techniques of managing visitors. A recent and useful text is Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921-1941* (Oxford, 2011).

⁴⁷ Uinseann MacEoin, *Survivors: The story of Ireland's struggle as told through some of her outstanding living people recalling events from the days of Davitt, through James Connolly, Brugha, Collins, De Valera, Liam Mellows, and Rory O'Connor, to the present time* (Dublin, 1987 [1980]) fn. 11, p. 30.

⁴⁸ J Bower Bell, 'May 1923 to February 1932', in Uinseann MacEoin, *The IRA in the Twilight Years, 1923-1948* (Dublin, 1997), p. 4.

⁴⁹ Hammill, 'Saor Éire', fn. 4, p. 65.

⁵⁰ Between 1925-1927, the IRA did have an agreement to share information with Soviet intelligence in exchange for a monetary sum, but Fitzgerald does not appear to have played a role, see: Adrian Grant, *Irish Socialist Republicanism, 1909-1936* (Dublin, 2012), p. 158.

fare for visiting delegations. Here, republican oral tradition seems to have cast an erroneous clandestine aura over the delegation.⁵¹

The studious impressions of Fitzgerald's visit to the USSR published in *An Phoblacht* further emphasis his status as an interested delegate rather than cadre in training or emissary. These reports, printed from late September through to early November 1930 following his return, also provide us with an insight into Fitzgerald's itinerary and impressions of the tour. The first article opened with an editorial note, describing how Fitzgerald 'refused to give any promises beforehand that he would undertake propaganda for the Friends of Soviet Russia' and thus could be read as an 'unbiased seeker of the truth'.⁵² The journey began on a ship organised as a cooperative, providing visitors with their first sample of Soviet workers' equality. What struck Fitzgerald was the 'whole atmosphere' of the ship'; the 'close-knit friendly relations of officers and men, a sense of freedom and responsibility too, an absence of petty restraints'.⁵³

Upon arrival in Leningrad, Fitzgerald studied the food-situation. Fitzgerald, who was taken to a co-operative canteen, concluded that there was 'no starvation such as we hear [in the western press]' but there were lengthy queues.⁵⁴ His next report covered the Soviet justice system. Fitzgerald acknowledged that 'there can be no doubt' capital punishment was still in place within the Soviet system, however he contextualised this statement by depicting a revolution-in-peril.⁵⁵ Attendance at a court session brought home to Fitzgerald the 'actual meaning of the cry "All Power to the Workers"'.⁵⁶ In his final reports, Fitzgerald dealt with diverse topics including collectivisation (a 'comparatively easy task'), Kulaks ('the rich farmer who works his hand by hired labour' and who 'has been practically "liquidated."') and electrification ('proceeding rapidly').⁵⁷ Fitzgerald, at each stage on the visit, evidently accepted official Soviet lines on the state's development and absorbed the rationalisations produced for the consumption of delegates.

The Irish delegates also travelled to other Soviet republics, including Azerbaijan and Georgia. Intercepted by a reporter for the Georgian publication *Dawn of the East*, Fitzgerald gave an interview about the Irish delegation's impressions. Fitzgerald noted a particular interest in the Soviet nationalities policy: how the USSR sought to unite the many minority ethnicities that populated its vast territory.⁵⁸ Fitzgerald was impressed by how each nationality, 'even the smallest, is allowed and encouraged to develop its national culture and its own

⁵¹ The origins of the myth of Gilmore and Fitzgerald's undergoing military training in Russia appears to be the later recollections of Peadar O'Donnell, see: Michael McInerney, *Peadar O'Donnell: Irish Social Rebel* (Dublin, 1974), p. 111.

⁵² *An Phoblacht*, 27 September 1930.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *An Phoblacht*, 4 October 1930.

⁵⁵ *An Phoblacht*, 11 October 1930.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *An Phoblacht*, 1 November 1930, 8 November 1930.

⁵⁸ *An Phoblacht*, 13 September 1930.

language is taught'.⁵⁹ In Baku, the Irish delegation laid a wreath upon the grave of Red Army soldiers killed in engagement with British troops. The wreath carried the message: 'To the victims of British Imperialism from the Irish Delegation'.⁶⁰

Whether or not Fitzgerald's impressions of the USSR accurately reflected the totality of Soviet experience, in all its complexity, is a moot question. What matters is that Fitzgerald was evidently impressed with what he saw: a vision of an existing socialist society. The FOSR delegation was a means by which radical intellectuals from Ireland could see the Soviet experiment for themselves. It was not a chance for the Comintern or the Soviet security apparatus to cultivate closer ties with Irish revolutionaries. Yet this sojourn was impactful on a personal level for delegates like Fitzgerald. After his journey through the Soviet experiment, Fitzgerald revitalised a new experiment in republican political thought: Saor Éire. The enthusiasm of Fitzgerald's Soviet trip surely provided the confidence necessary to launch an ambitious radical program in adverse circumstances.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Saor Éire and Decline

Later in his life, Peadar O'Donnell told an interviewer that 'it was a man known only to Republicans, the late David Fitzgerald, who was the real force behind the radical and socialist analysis of economic life in Ireland contained in Saor Éire documents.'⁶¹ Originally proposed to the Army Congress in 1929, a redrafted programme for Saor Éire was eventually endorsed at the Army Congress of 1931.⁶² In seeking an organisation that moulded together social radicalism and republican thought, Saor Éire became a precursor to the Republican Congress initiative. Saor Éire was formed in February 1931 with the objectives of establishing an 'independent revolutionary leadership' to build a coalition of workers and farmers that would overthrow British imperialism and Irish capitalism, leading the way for an Irish Republic to be organised along the lines of collective ownership of land and industry.⁶³ Writing in *An Phoblacht*, Fitzgerald argued that there was a 'spirit of revolt' within the 'proletariat of town and country' that Saor Éire could seize on. 'Why not go to the people?', he asked.⁶⁴ However, Saor Éire's quest to 'go to the people' was diverted towards disaster. A more organised and revered force in Ireland 'got' to the people first: the Catholic hierarchy. Saor Éire's programme placed it at the epicentre of an outbreak of anti-communism in the Irish Free State that would evolve into different variants across the thirties.

Shortly after its appearance, Saor Éire was forcefully challenged by an alliance of clerical and state actors that resolutely placed public opinion against Saor Éire's radicalism. Fearghal McGarry notes that the then-reigning Cumann na nGaedheal government 'saw the establishment of Saor Éire as an opportunity to move against the IRA with public and clerical support.'⁶⁵ The hierarchy of the Irish Catholic Church issued a collective pastoral specifically condemning the policies of Saor Éire as a 'blasphemous denial of God' that sought 'class warfare, the abolition of private property and the destruction of family life.'⁶⁶ In October 1931, Cumann na nGaedheal instituted a 'draconian' set of legislation that was targeted chiefly at suppressing Saor Éire, the Constitution (Amendment No. 17 Public Safety) Bill.⁶⁷

Fitzgerald immediately found himself in the crosshairs. In the Dáil debate on the bill in mid-October 1931, government TD James Fitzgerald-Kenny stated: 'I am asked what has Russia got to do with this Saor Éire... Mr. David Fitzgerald, who is secretary of Saor Éire,

⁶¹ McInerney, *Peadar O'Donnell*, p. 116.

⁶² Hammill, 'Saor Éire', p. 47.

⁶³ F. McGarry, 'Radical Politics in Interwar Ireland, 1923-39', O'Driscóil and Lane, eds., *Politics and the Irish Working Class* (), p. 218.

⁶⁴ Fitzgerald quoted in Hammill, 'Saor Éire', p. 57.

⁶⁵ McGarry, 'Radical Politics in Interwar Ireland', p. 218.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 218-219.

⁶⁷ Jason Knirck, *Afterimage of the Revolution: Cumann na nGaedheal and Irish Politics, 1922-1932* (Madison, 2014), p. 234.

spent a very considerable time in Russia.⁶⁸ In a lengthy and passionate late October letter to Frances Hanratty, Fitzgerald's old friend from his revolutionary life in Newcastle, the newly-anointed public enemy surveyed his own political and personal crisis:

You will see we are outlawed. Every revolutionary working-class organization in Ireland or rather in the 26 counties is outlawed and may neither meet nor speak nor print and the leaders it seems are to be dealt with by the Tribunal. The state, the Interests and the church have found their common expression in the Supreme Military Tribunal. It is wonderful the gusto with which these 'meek' priests demand blood. One of them in a house a week ago where a friend of mine was present prophesied 'plenty of executions.' Let them. They are free to do all this for all I care. What makes me furious is the blackguardly campaign of lies and misrepresentation they have pushed in the country. I never dreamed they could be so dirty - so utterly disregarding (sic) of truth or fair dealing. From people all over the country I get reports of a campaign of personal vilification of ourselves by men who never saw us... To hear these rogues talk of Russian gold of Anti God etc knowing full well they lie. Not alone do they lie by mouth - they live a lie. They know no Christianity. I've been in every parish in Ireland this last ten years and I know them - and I know the starvation and misery & ignorance they fatten amidst.... Killing a few of us may retard the movement but it will not squelch it - for its roots are too deep. They are sunk in the economic misery of the nation - and sooner or later the growth will destroy 'them' and perhaps many other things along with them. I certainly write you pleasant letters - what a tirade this is - but I feel angry at the injustice of it all... I can see only the system, I identify it with the whole class which maintains it and against that class I direct my antagonism.⁶⁹

There would be no executions at the hands of the tribunal, but Saor Éire was dead. The IRA's response, notes McGarry, was 'to retreat from a radicalism to which relatively few of its members were genuinely committed'.⁷⁰ Activists like Gilmore, O'Donnell, Nora Connolly O'Brien and others would spend the next years building towards the Republican Congress initiative. Fitzgerald, who lived a transient life, much of it on the run and engaged in activities that could have easily placed him before a firing squad, was soon to meet a different tragic fate. From 1932, Fitzgerald's health declined rapidly until he died with cancer in a private nursing home on Dublin's Eccles Street on 1 September 1933. He was thirty-six years old.

If Saor Éire was David Fitzgerald's swan-song, then the Republican Congress, established in 1934, provided him with a political afterlife. His intellectual imprint was present at the founding meeting, as was his sister, Mollie Fitzgerald, who was listed as the Jarrow representative of the Republican Congress.⁷¹ The Congress journal marked the first anniversary of his death with a front-page tribute: 'David Fitzgerald's brief life, racked by

⁶⁸ Dail Eireann Debate, 14 October 1931, Vol. 40, No. 1, accessed via: <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/> (accessed 3 December 2021).

⁶⁹ D. Fitzgerald to Frances Hanratty, 22 October 1931, Hanratty Family Papers. I am grateful to Luan and Benedict Hanratty for sharing with me a scan of this letter.

⁷⁰ F. McGarry, 'Radical Politics', p. 219.

⁷¹ Mollie Fitzgerald's was later a secretary and nurse to Charlotte Despard. The greatest detail on her difficult-to-trace life can be found in M. Mulvihill, *Charlotte Despard: A Biography* (London, 1989), pp. 183-5; 191-4.

illness, was nevertheless crowded with work for the Irish working-class. To him let us erect the monument he would wish - an Irish Workers' Republic.⁷² He is buried beneath a Celtic Cross in Kiladrieffe Cemetery, located in the Ballydrehid townland where he was born.

Conclusion

In September 2016, I gave a talk on the life of David Fitzgerald in Cahir House Hotel. Shortly after I began the talk, I noticed an elderly woman take a seat close to the front of the conference room where I was speaking. Later, an attendee who spoke with the woman told me she had arrived with a sense of purpose. In 1933, as a young girl, her father brought her to the funeral of David Fitzgerald and told her that this was the funeral of an important man. Her father's words obviously stuck with her - so much so that many decades later she joined another gathering of people in Fitzgerald's town who were collectively attempting to understand his importance.

In his 2002 work *The IRA, 1926-1936*, Brian Hanley described Fitzgerald as a 'little-known figure outside republican circles'.⁷³ Two decades later, this remains the case. Perhaps it is the fact of a life cut short that has contributed most to his obscurity within the broader historiography. Yet there are other factors at work: the fragments of Fitzgerald's own personal archive were sitting in a cupboard in Tipperary before I set out in search of him. There is a case of contingency here: I only began this search because we came from the same town. Fitzgerald's life beyond Ireland's borders has also made him an elusive subject for Irish radical history.

Unravelling the threads of Fitzgerald's short life can help us think more clearly about the potentialities and horizons of interwar Irish radicalism. In many ways, Fitzgerald is emblematic of his own political generation and the routes that could be followed from rural upbringings toward radical epiphanies in the urban centres of their world. But Fitzgerald's life was neither strictly 'rural' nor 'urban' but deeply transnational. Fitzgerald's life transcended not only the standard urban confines of Irish labour history, but also the national borders that delimit Irish radical history more broadly. Importantly, his was not only a life that traversed through different lands - Ireland, England and Soviet Russia - but also a life lived partly at sea. The ships that carried radicals, ideas and arms should loom larger in this activist history. Sheehy Skeffington was correct to note the failure of Fitzgerald's *An Phoblacht* obituary to describe how he had travelled to Russia. This was an important detail. If we lose sight of Fitzgerald's travels - from British civil servant to IRA gun-smuggler, from republican to socialist

⁷² *Republican Congress*, 1 September 1934.

⁷³ Hanley, *The IRA*, p. 192.

republican and from Cahir to Moscow - then we lose sight of where he developed the political ideas that altered the course of the republican movement in the interwar years.

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