

The Year of the French

Book review

Ele Siete (Peter Werbe)

1982

a review of

The Year of the French, Thomas Flanagan, Pocket Books, New York, 1980, 642 pp., \$4.50 (Canadian)

At first glance at the dust jacket of Thomas Flanagan's book, one expects either the usual fluff which passes for "historical" novels these days or an exposition on England's bloody-handed colonial rule as setting the stage for sympathy to the modern day IRA, much in the way accounts of the Nazi holocaust wind up to be sales pitches for Israel. Fortunately, this is not to be the case.

Instead, *The Year of the French* is an exciting and penetrating book based on actual events in Irish history, which at once lays bare the social dynamic at work in wars of "national liberation," and exposes as folly any trust placed in politicians as the torchbearers of revolution.

The year in question is 1798; a particularly hard one for the Irish who were groaning under the absentee landlord system enforced upon them since the days of Cromwell. As 1798 arrived, conditions had been getting meaner with each passing year as the English ruthlessly exploited their island colony for all they could squeeze out of it. The periodic risings of the hard pressed Irish were frequent, and each brutally suppressed by the English, then at the height of their imperial power.

The Irish revolts for the hundred years previous to the end of the 18th century had often been led by "White Boys" and "faction-fighters"—small tenant farmers and laborers who turned to violent rebellion when the excesses of the landlords proved to be too much to tolerate. Still, for all of the Irish resistance, it was a foregone conclusion that they would be unable to muster the military force necessary to defeat the experienced armies of the Empire, and the country people suffered bloody defeat after bloody defeat.

But all of this history looked like it could change when the French Revolutionary Directorate in Paris agreed to send a force of a thousand experienced soldiers to aid an Irish rebellion already in progress in County Mayo. Suddenly, the possibility presented itself as the combined Irish and French forces inflicted initial losses on the British armies marshalled against them, even though outnumbered. The ideals of the French Bourgeois revolution—fraternity, equality, and liberty—stood poised to sweep away another bastion of monarchy.

The story progresses swiftly through a series of narratives by the participants and a flavor of the historical period is imparted as each tells their story of the events sweeping Ireland. From all of them one quickly learns that beneath the ringing slogans of national liberation and freedom from colonialism, lie different goals depending upon where you fall in the class structure of Irish society. This bloody account of one year in Irish history has been repeated endlessly in the modern epoch and in each case when the political rhetoric has been stripped aside the real goal emerges—the expulsion of the foreign imperial power and the establishment and growth of domestic capital which had been suppressed by the colonial system.

The tale related here is that of Ireland almost 300 years ago, but it could have just as easily been the story of Vietnam, Angola or Algeria, or for that matter the IRA in Northern Ireland today. The cast of characters line up

the same in each case: In *The Year of the French* they are: the native revolutionaries—Tone and Teeling, totally committed to the liberation of Ireland and aflame with the ideals of 1789; the colonial bourgeoisie—here comprised by Irish farmers and renters who want to end the economic squeeze they labor under and be free of English rule and who are grouped in a newly founded United Society of Irishmen; the leftist, foreign intervention—in this case, the French, who were in Ireland not so much out of the idealism of their revolution, but from the Directory's desire to weaken their traditional enemy, with whom they were then at war, and General Humber, who leads the French expeditionary forces and desires to politically outflank his rival, Napoleon, who was then engaging the British in Egypt, by bringing home a quick victory; and finally, the “masses,” (that vile leftist phrase), the cannon fodder of all national wars of liberation and for that matter, all wars, who desire a return to the days when they lived free of English and Irish landlords.

All of the book's commentators, save MacCarthy, the poet, see the Irish peasant tribesmen as inchoate, inarticulate rabble who live in filth and under primitive conditions. To General Humbert, they are the ones to be thrown, armed with only pikes, into the mouth of the English cannon to create a diversion. To the Irish patriotic gentry it will be they who continue to labor on their estates after the hated English have been driven off and their rule established. These class differences become crystal clear after a raid by a band of White Boys on the farm of a hated English landlord. An Irish rebel, who is also a landowner, explodes, “Our war isn't against landlords; it's against the British!”

So alien are political goals to the Irish peasants that when the French have their Irish compatriots establish a “Provisional Republican Government,” a difficulty arises in explaining the significance to the troops since there did not exist at that time the Gaelic language equivalent of the word “republic.”

Even in the defeat of the uprising do the consequences differ depending on the class in question. The vanquished French are given the royal treatment. Gen. Humbert is transported to Dublin where he is “jailed” in a fine hotel and visited by the victorious English Gen. Cornwallis for a conversation on politics after which he and his men are transported back to France. The rebellious Irish nationalists are given trials and the courtesies of English law before a number of them are executed for treason, but the Irish peasants are slaughtered unmercifully on the spot and hunted down and hung summarily by the thousands, so loath are the victors of the rabble who dared to oppose them.

The gory descriptions of the battlefield horrors are told with such excruciating reality (“the grass was slippery with blood and entrails”) that the romance of even “revolutionary” warfare is laid to rest. This book is indeed grim without a glimmer of hope in it. From its very opening and through over 600 pages, the gloom builds as both the reader and the rebels realize that ahead lie only death and defeat. However, its value lies in the hatred it creates for those who would use and manipulate others for their own purposes—the politicians and militarists of all stripes who are the real villains of this well-told calamity.

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