

THE SPIRIT OF '16 IN '66

In this year of 1966 we celebrate the semi-centennial jubilee of five glorious days in Irish history -- the Easter Week Rising. Not everyone is aware that at all time the Gaelic League was as much in the fray as Oglai na h-Eireann or Cumann na mBann. Every Gaelic League hall had been the drillshed and meeting place for volunteers prior to the Rising. Of course when their 'treasonable' use was discovered by the "Defenders of the Realm," the practice was discontinued. Nevertheless, yeoman service to the forces had been rendered.

All of this raises a question in some minds: Why should an organization devoted to strictly cultural pursuits have been so tied up with contrary matters? My first attempt would be to answer that question, simply, with another: Why not? I must admit, however, that the founder of the League, Dr. Douglas Hyde, could not reconcile the two, to the extent of resigning the presidency of the society and disassociating himself from it for several years as a protest against its departing from strictly cultural aims. So the question is not so simply answered.

Ireland, as any casual student of Irish history knows, was at her lowest ebb, economically, culturally, and politically, at the inception of the Gaelic League in 1893 and all during the years of Sinn Fein. The future appeared grim, for neither of the two factions, though wholeheartedly wanting an Irish Ireland, could succeed alone. If the League could carry its aims, Eire would be merely an Irish-speaking shire. On the other hand, if Sinn Fein alone wrested its desires from the invader, Ireland might have attained a measure of political and economic freedom, but would have retained a culture and civilization based on England's because of its use of the English language.

During this time the forces for physical overthrow, which had always existed, were calmly waiting "in the wings" until a propitious time for a stroke that would weld all into a united movement for complete freedom for the country. (Bear in mind that this was the situation during the first decade of this century; the Volunteers were not formed until 1913.)

Taking advantage of its apparently innocuous aura of harmless cultural activity, particularly its forlorn hope of reviving a "dead" language, the Gaelic League held other classes besides those in Irish; history, civics, economics, and later drilling and military tactics were as much a part of the curriculum. Despite the inquisitiveness of the "peelers," these classes prospered, though at times a class in some phase of military science might immediately be transformed into an enthusiastic group probing the mysteries of irregular verbs in Irish when the law hove into view.

In 1913, Padraig Mac Piarais made his historic utterance at the graveside of O Donnabhain Rossa, and in expressing his hope for an Ireland "... not merely Free, but Gaelic as well, not merely Gaelic but Free as well," he gave out a byword for all the leaders and teachers.

During this period our Gaelic societies in this country were doing their part. In fact, several members returned to participate in the fighting.