Devoy, John

by Patrick Maume

Devoy, John (1842–1928), journalist and Fenian, was born 3 September 1842 at Kill, Co. Kildare, the third of eight children of William Devoy, smallholder and building contractor, and his wife Elizabeth (née Dunne). In 1848 the family moved to Dublin for economic reasons precipitated by William’s involvement in nationalist politics; this experience later made the old man apprehensive about his children’s political involvement. Devoy was educated at Kill national school, the Christian Brothers’ O’Connell School in Richmond Street, Dublin, and the model schools in Marlborough Street and School Street, Dublin. His progress was retarded by his short-sightedness and the harshness of his teachers; after leaving school in 1859 to become a clerk he pursued self-education in the local Catholic Young Men’s Society library, and made an abortive attempt to learn Irish.

Fenian and prisoner, 1861–71 In 1861 Devoy joined the IRB; this led to disputes with his father, which caused him to leave home and join the French Foreign Legion to obtain military training. He was on garrison duty in north Africa between May 1861 and March 1862, when he was discharged and returned to Ireland. He became local IRB organiser for the Naas area, and wrote letters to the *Irish People* anonymously and under the pseudonym ‘A Bog of Allen Turf-Cutter’. In September 1865 he went on the run after the suppression of the *Irish People*, when he discovered that a warrant had been issued for his arrest. In October 1865 he was placed in charge of Fenian recruitment among soldiers in the British army. He also appears to have been linked to a shadowy assassination circle which attacked suspected spies and informers without the sanction of the IRB leadership. Devoy participated in the rescue of James Stephens (qv) from prison on 24 November 1865.

On 22 February 1866 he was arrested and was held on remand for a year until his trial on 19 February 1867; his decision to plead guilty was much criticised by his opponents within the separatist movement. He was sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment with hard labour. In Milbank prison, London, between March 1867 and February 1868, he was transferred to Portland prison in Hampshire, but was returned to Milbank twelve weeks later after participating in a work stoppage in protest against prison conditions; he remained at Milbank until 15 March 1869, when he was transferred to Chatham prison. His prison experiences caused further damage to his eyesight.

Clan na Gael and the New Departure Devoy was released on 6 January 1871 in connection with a partial amnesty of leading Fenian prisoners, who were exiled from British territory until the expiration of their original sentences. He sailed for New York on the steamer *Cuba* with four other IRB activists (including Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa (qv)). Soon after his arrival Devoy joined Clan na Gael, a secret society that
practised rituals of a masonic kind, founded by the journalist and meteorologist Jerome Collins (qv) in 1867. As secretary of the revolutionary directory of Clan na Gael, Devoy took a leading role in organising the rescue of Fenian prisoners from Western Australia by the schooner Catalpa in April 1876. At the same time he worked as a journalist, at first on the New York Herald (where he rose to become editor), then as a freelance. For the rest of his life Devoy carried on an incessant correspondence with activists in Europe and America. Although he had been engaged to a young woman in Kildare called Eliza Kenny, he made no attempt to contact her after his release and appears to have seen himself as married to the separatist cause.

In November–December 1877 Devoy published a series of articles signed ‘Exile’ which advocated an alliance between advanced nationalists and parliamentarians who were prepared to pledge themselves to a more radical (but undefined) form of nationalism than the brand of home rule advocated by Isaac Butt (qv); in autumn 1878 he organised an American lecture tour given by Michael Davitt (qv), who was newly released from prison. This led to the ‘New Departure’, a tacit alliance between Clan na Gael and the parliamentary grouping led by Charles Stewart Parnell (qv). Devoy first proposed such an alliance in a telegram to Parnell, the publication of which, on 25 October 1878, produced a breach with the IRB led by Charles Kickham (qv), who disagreed with the policy and objected to the launch of so public an initiative without prior consultation. Devoy visited Europe in 1879 and travelled clandestinely throughout England and Ireland, observing the political situation and attending the Claremorris land meeting of 13 July. He met Parnell and Davitt in Dublin and Boulogne, and later claimed that a definite understanding had been arrived at in support of the New Departure, though Parnell and Davitt both subsequently denied that any such specific agreement had taken place (the exact truth is unclear). A sanitised (and partly ghosted) account of this trip, written in the format of a tourist guide, was published in 1882 under Devoy's name as The land of Erin.

Squabbles and journalism On returning to America, Devoy helped to organise the American Land League, a vital source of funds for the Irish organisation. By 1881–2 tensions appeared in the alliance: there was friction between Parnell and Devoy over the question of whether the American organisation should be controlled from America or from Ireland. Devoy, like other Fenians involved with the Land League, had assumed that the British government was too committed to upholding the aristocracy to make serious concessions on the land issue, and hence that land agitation would expose the bankruptcy of parliamentarianism and produce mass support for a rising. Instead, Gladstone made significant concessions in the Land Act of 1881, and after the Kilmainham treaty of the following year the radical Fenian element within the Parnellite organisation was marginalised and many Fenian activists were drawn off into parliamentarianism. Davitt and Devoy also fell out over Davitt's support for land nationalisation and the question of who had been responsible for the New Departure. Devoy's public threats of a renewed dynamite
campaign in Britain were used against Parnell's party by his opponents. Between 1881 and 1885 Devoy ran his own weekly newspaper in New York, the *Irish Nation*; it collapsed after Devoy was successfully prosecuted for libel by a banker whom he had accused of embezzling Fenian funds.

Devoy resigned from the Clan na Gael executive on the establishment of the *Irish Nation*, and the organisation came under the dominance of Alexander Sullivan of Chicago and two associates (collectively known as ‘the Triangle’); in 1884 the Sullivan Clan na Gael formally broke with the IRB in Ireland. Devoy founded a rival Clan in 1887, which was reunited with the main organisation under a compromise leadership in 1888. Shortly afterwards Devoy accused Sullivan and his allies of embezzling Clan funds. The resulting dispute brought about the murder of Devoy's Chicago ally Dr P. H. Cronin (qv) by Sullivanite sympathisers in May 1889, after the dissemination of rumours (lent credence by the unmasking of Henri Le Caron (qv) as a spy) that Cronin was a British spy within the Clan. Sullivan was tried for murder but acquitted; Devoy continued the struggle, and the ensuing revelations and squabbles proved highly damaging to the Clan.

The divisions within Clan na Gael persisted until the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1900 Devoy was elected secretary of the reunited organisation and from this time his closest ally was the New York judge Daniel Cohalan (qv). In September 1903 Devoy became editor of the weekly *Gaelic American*, holding the post for the remainder of his life. The paper combined commentary on news at home and abroad with historical material. It campaigned against ‘stage-Irish’ drama (in which category Devoy included J. M. Synge's (qv) *The playboy of the western world*) and supported German–American groups in opposing a proposed Anglo–American arbitration treaty (regarded as a first step towards an Anglo-American alliance). In American politics Devoy tended to support the Republican Party – he saw its protectionist policies as beneficial to America and damaging to Britain. In 1884 Devoy played a leading role in an attempt to deliver the usually Democratic Irish-American vote to the Republican presidential candidate, James G. Blaine, and he campaigned for the Republican candidate Benjamin Harrison in 1888.

By the early twentieth century Devoy was experiencing increasing personal isolation through short sight and deafness (the latter contributing to the lifelong persistence of his Kildare accent). While he displayed charm and devotion to close friends and to his siblings (who regarded him as head of the family after his father's death in 1884), to those less familiar with him he appeared a quarrelsome, implacable old man; the *Gaelic American* became renowned for its bitter feuds – for example, with the Redmondite *Irish World* and John O'Callaghan (qv) of the United Irish League of America.

**Support for Irish separatism** Through Clan na Gael, Devoy played a major role in financing the resurgent separatist movement and the IRB in the years leading up to the first world war. On the outbreak of war his fierce opposition to American support
for the allies and his work with the German government (both in publishing German propaganda and in cooperation, to an unknown extent, with German clandestine agents in America) led to his being denounced as a leading specimen of what Woodrow Wilson called ‘hyphenated Americans’ of questionable loyalty. Devoy’s response was that, as an American citizen, he acted in what he believed to be America’s best interests as well as Ireland’s. Devoy was the main conduit for contact between Germany and the group planning the 1916 rising. He oversaw the visit to America of Roger Casement (qv) in 1914, helped him to get to Germany, and lent him a large sum of money to carry on his activities; in this he appears to have been partly motivated by a belief that Casement was a potential national leader whose protestantism made him well suited to convert his co-religionists to nationalism. He was soon disillusioned by Casement’s erratic behaviour, and after Casement’s death fell out with the dead hero’s supporters because of his publicly expressed view that Casement had bungled his mission and his private belief (apparently based on interrogating Casement’s associate Adler Christensen) that Casement had in fact been homosexual. The Clan na Gael treasury was virtually drained by preparations for the rising, and Devoy also spent a significant proportion of a legacy which he had received from a brother; he even made an abortive attempt to obtain false papers in order to return to Ireland and participate himself.

After America entered the war in April 1917 Devoy was forced onto the defensive; several of his associates were victimised under security legislation, and the Gaelic American was banned from the US mails (which confined its circulation to New York). Nevertheless, at the end of the war Devoy and Cohalan emerged as the leading figures in the growing American support organisation for Sinn Féin, the Friends of Irish Freedom.

Conflict with de Valera  When Éamon de Valera (qv) arrived in America in July 1919 he rapidly came into conflict with the Devoy–Cohalan group. De Valera believed that as president of the Irish republic he should direct the nationalist campaign worldwide and accused Cohalan and Devoy of subordinating the Irish cause to American politics. (He disagreed with them for opposing the League of Nations in principle – his own opposition was merely tactical.) Devoy and Cohalan retorted that they were better acquainted with the American situation than de Valera, and that an American campaign should be directed by American citizens. Matters were not helped when in February 1920 de Valera gave an interview suggesting that Ireland should make guarantees to Britain similar to those made by Cuba to the United States (generally known to have reduced Cuban sovereignty to a nullity). Devoy mounted an aggressive press campaign against de Valera, who responded by leading a large majority of the Friends of Irish Freedom into a new organisation (endorsed by the dáil in Ireland), the American Association for the Recognition of the Irish Republic. For the rest of his life Devoy persistently referred to de Valera as ‘the first man to haul down the Irish flag’ and repeated rumours that de Valera was ‘a half-breed Jew’. After initially opposing the Anglo–Irish treaty (December 1921) in
the belief that de Valera supported it, Devoy and his allies afterwards supported it, largely because de Valera opposed it.

Devoy paid a final visit to Ireland in July–September 1924, and was greeted as an elder statesman by the Cumann na nGaedheal government (though he later expressed suspicion of their ‘imperialist’ policies). He died 29 September 1928 at Atlantic City, New Jersey; his body was returned to Ireland for burial at Glasnevin cemetery, Dublin.

**Publications and reputation** His posthumously published *Recollections of an Irish rebel* (New York, 1929), compiled from material published in the *Gaelic American*, is primarily a history of Fenianism containing some of Devoy's own reminiscences. His voluminous papers were returned to Ireland in 1938 and deposited at the NLI; a selection was edited by William O'Brien (qv) and Desmond Ryan (qv) as *Devoy’s postbag* (2 vols, 1948–53) and is recognised as one of the major sources for the history of Irish nationalism in the late Victorian and Edwardian period. Devoy is recognised as a major figure in the Irish politics of his day, though the vast bulk of source material, the transatlantic nature of his activities, and his somewhat rebarbative personality have so far prevented any definitive assessment of his career; from sheer political longevity the assessment of some commentators that he was ‘the greatest of the Fenians’ is plausible though debatable.