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Interview with Seamus Twomey

- Q. We are trying to find out from various representative Irish people what exactly they mean by the words 'Irish Nationalism'. If you could say what these words mean to you it would be helpful as a beginning.
- A. We draw a distinction between Irish Nationalism and Republicanism. A 'nationalist' as such can work for the benefit of his country by doing all in his power to promote industry and help the people etc. Our definition implies the militant republican tradition. Our use of the term 'nationalism' means first of all getting the freedom of our country and then starting to better the welfare of the people.
- Q. What is it, in fact, that makes you know that you are an Irish man? There are so many different traditions and cultures who would all define themselves as 'Irish', some of them protestant some of them catholic . . .
- A. Basically they are all Irish. If you take Ireland as a whole and examine these traditions - different tribes coming in in different ages and at different times - Fir Bolgs, tribes from Europe, Normans, English - they all have integrated themselves into the country and the Irish people today spring from these, and regardless of what religion they hold - whether they are Catholic, Protestant, Jew, Dissenter or atheist. - the basic fact is that they are all Irish.
- Q. Is there any person or persons who should be excluded from this category?
- A. No. I would exclude no person. Every person has a right to freedom of expression and, therefore, I would allow any person whatever his opinion, to express it in a free country.
- Q. What about people who insist that being Irish does not prevent them from remaining part of Great Britain? Would they be allowed to stay here?
- A. Surely they would. What people are forgetting is that less than a hundred years ago these same people were the first ones in Ireland to rise and fight. The Presbyterians who today are most anxious to maintain the link with Britain were, at that time, fighting for Irish freedom. What they are today and what they could be tomorrow are two different things.
- Q. When you say you want to get 'freedom for our country' could you define what exactly that means?
- A. Freedom does not mean simply the freedom of green fields: it means that every person in the country is catered for so that every family in the country would be able to live free from poverty and unemployment.

- Q. How would you see such freedom coming about?
- A. Our first prime and main objective is the unification of our country. This means getting the British out of the occupied part of the country. After that the whole system in North and South would have to be changed.
- Q. Do you think that the British are the major enemy to the unification of Ireland. It is not true that there is, at this moment, a polarization towards two distinct communities in the North and that the removal of the British would simply mean the removal of something which is trying to keep these two antagonistic forces apart?
- A. That sounds like a politician's argument. They always bring in sectarianism where it suits them. Basically, a working class person on either side of the divide is as badly off wherever he may live in Northern Ireland. Improvement of their situation will soon abolish any antagonism.
- Q. What value do you place on democracy? And if, after you had achieved your aims, you found some other group trying to overthrow what you had achieved, how would you deal with them? In other words, how would you set about reinstating a democratic government.
- A. I do not believe that in Ireland there is such a thing as a democratic government. The system in the Free State was never changed. It is still manned by the same Civil Service that was inaugurated by the British. A similar system was set up in the North of Ireland and it is still the same. Democracy in the true sense of the word does not just simply exist. Even in the last couple of years it is true to say that there is no freedom of speech in the country. Even trade union workers expressing their grievances are put down as subversives. I do not believe that democracy has ever existed in this country.
- Q. Could we turn for a few minutes to yourself. You must be a very brave man. Do you feel afraid? You must believe in this ideal even more than in your own life and I would like to know what it feels like to be you, a person who is hunted and who must live in constant dread of his life?
- A. I have most of my life been brought up in a Republicanism tradition. People say to me that this must require a great deal of bravery. Not so. Any ordinary person – and I claim to be an ordinary average person – feels fear. Every human being feels fear and I imagine that the day you cease to feel it is the day you stop being human. However, I grew up in a situation of such degradation and unemployment and humiliation that the life our people lived was just no life at all. I said to myself that when I grow up and get married I will want for my children something better than this.
- Q. Do you think that by the end of your life you will have achieved something which will allow you to look back over it with satisfaction?
- A. I think something will come before the end of my life because in this last seventy years the change has been incredible. The situation at the moment is such that something really dramatic has to happen because everything is polarized now. Politically, militarily, the Republican movement cannot be defeated; sooner or later the British government will realise this and will refuse to spend the pointless millions now being spent on an unsuccessful cause. So there will have to be a change.
- Q. When that happened, when you got rid of the British, what would happen to those people who regard you as an enemy to themselves and to everything they stand for? How would you go about mending the situation?

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- A. History, especially recent history, shows that yesterday's enemies can very soon become today's friends. Countries of the Third World and countries of Europe provide us with endless examples. The media are largely responsible for inflaming people's antagonism by endless propaganda and exaggeration.
- Q. What role would the Provisional I.R.A. have if the British did withdraw?
- A. In the event of a withdrawal it would be our duty to safeguard the population irrespective of class or creed. Then we would have to implement a programme of social and economic reform. There would be no question of coming under the government of the Free State. That would be ludicrous. It would mean just swapping one master for another. They are the people who are implementing sectarian policies through their press and media. Instead of presenting our cause as a national struggle in the occupied section of our country, they are presenting it as a sectarian war which it is not. Ours is a struggle for freedom and sectarianism does not enter into it one way or the other.
- Q. Do you believe actually in real democracy?
- A. I do surely. But there are two words which sound very alike and they are democracy and hypocrisy. What most governments call democracy is really dictatorship.
- Q. In your own personal life what is your major source of inspiration?
- A. My family is my major source of inspiration.
- Q. Do you always feel convinced about what you are doing? Do you ever wake up in the morning and wonder in a panic whether the whole thing hasn't been some terrible mistake?
- A. No. That's one thing that never crosses my mind. As I say, I have been involved a long time in the Republican movement, I have given it a lot of thought, I have read a lot about it and I have lived it most of my life.
- Q. What, in your opinion, makes up an Irish man? Is it necessary to speak Irish, to play certain games or wear certain clothes?
- A. No. Those are all the trimmings that sometimes help and contribute to the making of an Irish man but they are not the person himself. It doesn't matter what song a man sings, what language he speaks, what game he plays, what matters is his humanity and his care for his people.
- Q. But you do think that the whole of Ireland as a geographical entity belongs to the Irish?
- A. Yes. It is an island and for thousands of years it has been one unit and you can't just slice off one part and say there you are you are two different countries.
- Q. What value does the I.R.A. place upon peace?
- A. Peace is a very important part of the I.R.A. programme. Peace is a word which is often abused. Peace to some people means passively accepting the status quo. Peace has to come with justice.
- Q. But how can you build peace out of violence?
- A. This is a ridiculous point of view. From all wars peace has sprung. Peace has never been built out of anything else except violence.
- Q. Does it matter to you what the Irish people as a whole think of the I.R.A.?
- A. Yes, it matters alright. But, again, to quote another Irishman who is Terence McSweeney, it doesn't mean that if you haven't the full support of the

population that you are wrong. Any person whose country is torn asunder is entitled to stand and demand the freedom of his country. That is really true democracy as I see it.

- Q. Would that not mean that true democracy meant each person following the dictates of his own conscience? Does not democracy imply at some stage or other that the individual accept the will of the majority expressed in some kind of democratic way?
- A. Exactly. But only when that expression is free and not the result of some brainwashing exercise. A person on his own coming to a logical conclusion and expressing this is a very different kind of freedom.
- Q. If you were made Taoiseach, or whatever the appropriate person in the new state would be called; if you were given responsibility for the exact situation we are in at the moment, and if this responsibility were given to you tomorrow morning, what would you do?
- A. I would never allow myself to be put in that position because I do not think it would be right for a man of my education to go into a position of that kind. At the level of dealing with world statesmen I would feel quite inadequate and so I would not allow such a thing to happen. I am only an average person with an average outlook.
- Q. Supposing a young man came to you asking to join the I.R.A. would you not have some second thoughts about inviting him to lead the kind of life which you have led yourself?
- A. No scruples whatsoever.
- Q. Do you have strict control over all your recruits?
- A. Yes. That is true.
- Q. What is the precise system of government of the I.R.A.? First of all what is your own position?
- A. I am chief of staff of the I.R.A. which is essentially a military role. I am not a politician I have really no great bent for that. Others look after that sector. The system of government, then, is that all companies, all units, have what are called conventions. There they put forward a policy and pick delegates to represent them at battalion, brigade and command levels; things are then thrashed out among the delegates who come up with a programme which goes forward to the general convention. An army executive is then picked from the different members present. The executive choose the army council. That army council pick a chief of staff. He is then allowed to pick his own staff.
- Q. Where would these people get their knowledge of such matters? I mean they are not trained in any conventional army establishment.
- A. They are not trained but don't forget that their knowledge comes from a background of different Irish revolutions. I think that Ireland has produced one of the best guerrilla forces with the most effective tactics of warfare and a study in depth of all these campaigns etc, supplies us with most of our military knowledge. Without boasting I would say that we have very little to learn from any other countries in the matter of guerrilla warfare.
- Q. It is often claimed that your movement is only a facade for much larger international revolutionary movements who are always happy to support

unrest of any kind wherever they find it. What would you say to this?

- A. I'd say 'rubbish' number one. We get most of our support from the Irish people themselves in exile. International socialism or anything of that sort — no. There are no foreign interests whatsoever of any kind. At heart I am a socialist. I always was a socialist. I have been involved in setting up trade unions and so forth. But at the same time I am a right winger. Some of my greatest comrades in the movement would have very left-wing socialist tendencies. Now, propaganda would try to explain that for these reasons we were divided in our ranks. This is another method of trying to conquer by dividing and by spreading confusion among the rank and file of the movement. In fact it is complete rat rubbish.
- Q. Before meeting you I had the impression that I would meet someone very different. I expected you to be very aggressive and very hard. I am amazed to find you so 'human' and almost vulnerable. The thing that really disturbs me is the fact of killing people, I do not think that I would be able to kill another person even if I wanted to. I would be physically incapable of doing the deed. And I would like to know how someone like you feels about this. Is it true that you do not have any qualms about this?
- A. No. If I felt in my conscience I was right in doing it. I am dictated to by my conscience in what I think. I would never agree to doing anything which would create a monster out of me. Human life is irreplaceable. In a struggle, in a fight, you have to be one hundred per cent sure and convinced in your own mind and your own thought that you are not doing anything to destroy yourself as a human person. You must have no thought whatever that what you are doing might be wrong. If you have even the tiniest doubt in your mind about this you are better not to carry out an operation. Any person that is in the Republican movement, if he does not feel that he is quite capable of carrying out military operations, if these things give him cause for doubt at all, then he simply shouldn't be in the movement.
- Q. We have used the word 'democracy' a great deal. It would be helpful if you could define what you mean by this word.
- A. Well, to avoid using meaningless generalizations, I will describe democracy in the Republican movement, which is a working democracy that I understand and approve of. In a movement such as ours everything springs from and returns to the grass roots, the volunteers at ground level. They hold their conventions, pick their delegates, send them to the brigade level conventions where representatives are elected to go forward to the General Army Convention. In this Convention there are three ruling bodies: the army executive, the army council and the G.H.Q. staff. At the convention every person present just becomes a volunteer member of the Republican Movement. The army executive remains the watch-dog of the movement in case we should ever deviate from the path. This executive then chooses an army council who choose a chief of staff. This, to me, is the true meaning of the word democracy. When the Chief of Staff chooses his own staff he has to return to the Army Council to get his choice ratified. They themselves, as an army council, have to be ratified by the general party of delegates at the convention. So it is democracy at work from the lowest to the highest and back down again.

Q. Would you yourself like to be a politician?

A. I would have no great grá to be a politician. It just wouldn't suit my temperament. If this war was over tomorrow I would like to go back to my own ways: going to football matches, watching sports which I'm very fond of and having a few bets maybe on a horse.

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