

PRINCIPLES AND CURSES: THE HONOURABLE RUARAI DH ERSKINE OF MAR AND SOME IRISH CONNECTIONS

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Abstract: This essay looks at how Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar interacted with some contemporaneous aspects of Irish politics and culture, discussing these points of contact and their impact on Erskine's overall political outlook. I look at some important, if little known and perhaps quirky, interactions: Erskine's relationship with the Irish poet and revolutionary, Patrick Pearse; Erskine's critique of the "Anglo-Irish school" in the form of the Abbey Theatre and, finally, his engagement with obscure ideas to restore the High King of Ireland. There is no specific link between the three points of engagement other than Erskine's political and cultural engagement with Ireland. An important part of my argument is that Erskine's underpinning principles, that is his overarching belief in the twin causes of the Gaelic League and Arthur Griffith's early incarnation of Sinn Féin, became an orthodoxy for him: an orthodoxy that fuelled progressive engagement with Irish language and political activists, and that also blinkered him from opportunities to new cultural initiatives in his own country. I seek to shed some light on a neglected Scottish historical figure through his engagement with a neighbouring country that was very close to his heart.

Keywords: Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar, Scotland, Ireland, Patrick Pearse, Gaelic League, Sinn Féin, Home Rule

Principles, too, sometimes resemble curses, in so far,
and in so often, as they come home to roost.¹

Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar

It is fair to say that the Honourable Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar (1869-1960) was no ordinary Scottish nationalist. Erskine was born in Brighton, the second son of the

¹ Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar [signed as REM], "The Celtic and Labour Movements," *Guth na Bliadhna* 15, no. 1 (1918): 96.

fifth Baron Erskine. Despite being educated in England, his sense of Scottish identity was strong, he claimed to have learned Gaelic from his nanny, and he would commit a large part of his life to the language through his journalism and his political activities. These activities would include Erskine becoming Vice-Chair of the first Scottish Home Rule Association (SHRA) in 1892; winning the Scottish Left over to support Scottish representation at the Paris Peace Conference in 1918-1919; courting leading Irish republicans for support for Scotland's fledgling independence movement; and, helping to set up the National Party of Scotland in 1928.²

His fervent belief that Scotland should be an independent nation set him apart from the majority of nationalists who believed that some form of Home Rule for Scotland would be sufficient. Then again, Erskine of Mar was not 'ordinary' in many things. His liking for the outlandish and, sometimes, the extreme, drew him to other cultural nationalists who were also disillusioned with the Home Rulers and their belief that a British political party at Westminster – be it Liberal or Labour – could deliver a Scottish Parliament.

Erskine did share a common interest in events across the North Channel with his fellow Scottish nationalists, which can be traced from the foundation of the SHRA in 1886 through to the activities of the Scots National League during the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921).³ The Home Rulers were drawn to Ireland, hoping that Home Rule could be achieved in tandem, and that the strength of the movement in Ireland may also deliver Home Rule for Scotland (and Wales) too, although it is fair to say that the first Scottish Home Rule Association, formed in 1886, was envious of the parliamentary time allotted to Ireland and,⁴ one suspects, envious of the strength of the Irish Parliamentary Party too.

For a more cultural, separatist nationalist like Erskine, the island of Ireland and its history, culture, and politics held different attractions. Ireland in the 1890s was going through its own cultural revival, with the formation of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in 1884 and the Gaelic League in 1893, with Gaelic games, literature and language positively promoted. While not overtly political, it would not be long before the more radical cultural nationalists, looking for a deeper change and the political support to enact it, would seek a political alternative to their own Home Rulers with their gravitation towards Westminster and its many charms.

² For a general introduction to Erskine's life, see Gerard Cairns, *No Language! No Nation! The Life and Times of the Honourable Ruairaidh Erskine of Marr* (Perth: Rymour Books, 2021).

³ See Cairns, *No Language! No Nation!* 72-88.

⁴ *Manifesto of the Scottish Home Rule Association, 01/12/1887*, University of Glasgow Special Collections, MS 1484/11/1-3.

My objective in this essay is to bring Erskine's literary and political connections with Ireland and Irish Gaeldom to life through three significant points of interaction: contact and contrast with Patrick Pearse (1879-1916); Erskine's reaction to the Anglo-Irish school of drama, especially in the context of his own ideas on Gaelic drama in Scotland; and, finally, his latterly held belief in the re-introduction of the High King of Ireland. These stories shed a different light on Erskine's story, illustrating hope, zeal, as well as isolation and disappointment at differing times, and there is a moral in these cultural connections for those blinkered by politics. Yet, Erskine's entry point was indeed political, and for that reason it is useful to provide a short political background.

The Gaelic League Orthodoxy

Irish language activists brought something fresh that would have a long-lasting impact on Erskine, especially their emphasis on the language and its power as a defining characteristic of their nationality closely allied to notions of an "Irish Ireland." The sense of an "Irish Ireland" influenced Michael Cusack and Maurice Davan in founding the GAA. Sport, that is Gaelic games, were one way to replace English influences with Irish ones. This set the Irish revivalist movement in a more extreme direction, and literature, the language, and politics would further contribute to this sense of an "Irish Ireland."⁵

Douglas Hyde, a young Trinity College graduate, founded the Gaelic League in 1893 with the aim of "de-Anglicising Ireland" through the use of Irish in its spoken and written forms, and one memoirist recalled their first victory in obtaining the recognition of Irish as "a necessary subject in the secondary education of Irish children."⁶ Such protests, combined with other literary and social activities, demonstrated that the League "invested considerable energy into a cultural parallel project of imagining spatial sovereignty."⁷

This cultural revival challenged the politics of both Irish Unionists and Home Rulers almost as strongly as the hated cultural dominance of England, and this political challenge would bring about a re-alignment and a new political party formed by Arthur Griffith (1871-1922), a Dublin journalist, called Sinn Féin

⁵ Cathal Billings, "Speaking Irish with Hurley Sticks: Gaelic Sports, the Irish Language and National Identity in Revival Ireland," *Sport in History* 37, no. 1 (2017): 28.

⁶ John J. Horgan, *Parnell to Pearse* (Dublin: Richview Press, 1948) 92.

⁷ Aidan Beatty, "The Gaelic League and the Spatial Logic of Irish Nationalism," *Irish Historical Studies* 43, no. 163 (2019): 55. Beatty cites the importance of day trips in raising the cultural awareness of League members.

(Ourselves). Griffith's speech to the founding conference of the new party on 28 November 1905 is instructive:

We go to build the nation up from within, and we deny the right of any but our own countrymen to shape its course. That course is not England's and we shall not justify our course to England. The craven policy that has rotted our nation has been the policy of justifying our existence in our enemy's eyes. Our misfortunes are manifold but we are still men and women of a common family, and we owe no nation an apology for living in accordance with the laws of our being. In the British Liberal as in the British Tory we see our enemy, and in those who talk of ending British misgovernment we see the helots. It is not British misgovernment, but British government in Ireland, good or bad, we stand opposed to, and in that holy opposition we seek to band all our fellow-countrymen.⁸

One year before Erskine had also founded something new. *Guth na Bliadhna* (The Year's Voice) would be a quarterly Catholic, Nationalist journal with the added significance that it was bilingual in Gaelic and English. Erskine was very aware of the trajectory of Griffith's politics, especially his study of Hungary, which existed independently and with a dual monarchy that was shared with Austria.⁹ For Griffith, this model of autonomy should inform Ireland's aspiration although Kee has argued that Griffith employed "some dubious historical interpretation" of the Hungarian experience.¹⁰

It should be said that Erskine's interest in Ireland pre-dated the formation of Griffith's new Party. In an early piece in *Guth na Bliadhna* (1904), he articulated his admiration for the advances of the language movement in Ireland:

To say the truth, Ireland has entered on this struggle for the maintenance of all that a self-respecting nation should hold dear to it, far more seriously and thoroughly than we yet have. It would appear as if the calamity of the '45 [reference to the 1745 Jacobite Rising] had knocked all the spirit out of our people.¹¹

⁸ "1905: Founding of Sinn Fein," *Collins 22 Society*, accessed 4 June 2022, <https://www.generalmichaelcollins/life-times/1905-founding-sinn-fein>.

⁹ This was articulated in "The Resurrection of Hungary," a series of articles in the *United Irishman* newspaper in 1904.

¹⁰ Robert Kee, *The Green Flag* (London: Penguin, 2000) 450.

¹¹ Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar [signed as REM], "Ireland and Scotland," *Guth na Bliadhna* 1, no. 2 (1904): 201.

In the same article, Erskine expressed the reason why the member of the Gaelic League was a role model, and it was political although not party political. Be he “Nationalist, Tory or Radical,” he joined the League “in the full knowledge and conscientiousness of the fact that it is Ireland – his nation – that he is desirous to better. Now, can we truthfully say that such a lofty conception of patriotism exists in Scotland?”¹²

The natural thing to do would be to reach out to Griffith’s new party. By 1907, Erskine contributed a piece for *Sinn Féin*.¹³ The previous couple of years, through the medium of *Guth na Bliadhna*, Erskine had bemoaned the lack of a “national politics” in Scotland. Ireland, and her national politics, attracted him. He adopted a Sinn Féin line for his own country and Erskine would remain an old-fashioned Sinn Féiner – in the Griffith / Gaelic League mould – for the rest of his life, albeit working with, and politically flirting with, left-wingers, republicans, and other cultural nationalists from both Scotland and Ireland at various times.

Erskine and Pearse

Patrick Pearse and Ruairaidh Erskine were fellow travellers. Language activism radicalised their politics. Both were Home Rulers at one point and both men would go on to shape the separatist wing of nationalism in their respective countries. At just sixteen years of age, Pearse had joined the Gaelic League in 1896, joining its national executive committee three years later. In 1903, Pearse took over as editor of the League’s bilingual journal, *An Claidheamh Soluis* (Sword of Light).¹⁴ In an important essay on Erskine and the Irish influence on Scottish discontent, Patrick Witt makes the point that the two men probably met at an Eistedfodd in South Wales in 1899.¹⁵ The connection continued when Erskine, in 1905, invited Pearse to submit an article to *Guth na Bliadhna*. Education in the west of Ireland would be the chosen theme.

The Gaelic League had been active on the subject of Irish education for many years, Pearse being prominent in these activities. In 1905 he spoke at a meeting in the Rotunda (in February) organised by the Dublin District Committee of the

¹² Erskine, “Ireland and Scotland” 203.

¹³ Ruairaidh Erskine of Mar, “Ireland and Scotland,” *Sinn Féin*, 13 July 1907. The title was the same as the title of the earlier article in *Guth na Bliadhna*.

¹⁴ Ruán O’Donnell, *16 Lives: Patrick Pearse* (Dublin: The O’Brien Press, 2016) 20-23.

¹⁵ Patrick Witt, “Connections across the North Channel: Ruairaidh Erskine and Irish Influence on Scottish Discontent, 1906-20,” *The Irish Story*, 17 April 2013, accessed 4 June 2023, <https://www.theirishstory.com/2013/04/17/connections-across-the-north-channel-ruairaidh-erskine-and-irish-influence-in-scottish-discontent-1906-1920/>.

League, on Primary Education in Ireland along with Douglas Hyde and John Redmond of the Irish Party. The League were protesting at the “starvation policy” adopted by the Treasury towards education in Ireland. The following month, Pearse lectured in the Catholic Commercial Club on “The Irish University Question: Wanted, a Policy!”¹⁶

It was fitting that Pearse returned to this subject to enlighten his Scottish Gaelic friends. Pearse achieved fluency in Irish during visits to Connemara and became known in the area as “Fear Bhaile Átha Cliath” (The Dublin Man).¹⁷ His article was a critique of the “National” schools and their policy in Irish-speaking areas.¹⁸ Scottish Gaels should understand that Irish children were prevented from conversing “in the only language they know.”¹⁹

This was systemic, creating an “education” system that sought to eliminate the language and any trace of nationality from their young minds and to inculcate the belief “that the English Government is Almighty Providence,” and that emigration is no bad thing.²⁰ Pearse lists the failings of the system, reserving his biggest criticism for the teacher – pupil relationship: the teacher has only English while the pupils have only Irish, with no way of communication. The Scots must appreciate “the sternness of the fight being waged in Ireland” for the language.²¹

Erskine certainly took the message and used his journal to think about the general state of Scottish education. He developed a theme around the need to create a “national atmosphere” that would be conducive to Gaelic – and Catholic – education in Scotland.²² Erskine’s ideas were not based on the kind of observations made by Pearse. Rather, they were instinctive, rejecting the kind of “broad-minded, liberal” values to be found in the English system.

Significantly, Erskine did not develop his ideas around what he actually meant by “atmosphere” and, instead, based his argument around the “irreducible minimum demand” that Gaelic should be taught in all Scottish schools, Lowland and Highland. The hard line that Gaelic was the national language of Scotland represented enough justification and no consideration was given to some of the

¹⁶ O’Donnell, *16 Lives: Patrick Pearse* 27-28.

¹⁷ Regina Uí Chollatáin, “O Chéitinn go Conradh: The Revivalists and the 1916 Rising,” *Studies in Arts and Humanities* 2, no. 1 (2016): 8.

¹⁸ These were UK state administered, non-denominational primary schools.

¹⁹ Patrick Pearse, “Education in the West of Ireland,” *Guth na Bliadhna* 2, no. 1 (1905): 377.

²⁰ Pearse, “Education in the West of Ireland” 377.

²¹ Pearse, “Education in the West of Ireland” 379.

²² Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar [signed as REM], “Education and ‘Atmosphere,’” *Guth na Bliadhna* 2, no. 4 (1905): 320.

basic, practical issues that might arise from the curriculum to the teaching staff. Let St Columba inspire, he argued, as the “Evangelist of Scotland.”²³

A distinct spin-off was in the radicalisation of Erskine’s politics. Erskine was moving towards a political position in favour of Scottish independence. He envisioned a unitary Gaelic State in Scotland and by 1907 could assert: “We regard the Sinn Féin standpoint, namely, that it is better to have nothing to do with Westminster as by far the wisest, most dignified, and most consistent attitude for all Nationalists, Irish or Scottish to adopt.”²⁴

Pearse’s politics were also evolving, and his innate separatist political position led him in an increasingly republican direction. Their journeys were contemporaneous but independent. Pearse proclaimed the Irish Republic outside Dublin’s General Post Office at Easter 1916, and this action would lead to the last point of contact, albeit indirect, between the two men. As world war raged, and the Irish rebels were condemned for their alleged folly and treason, Erskine of Mar defended them.

There were wartime censors to contend with, and therefore Erskine’s article only came out in the autumn edition of the *Scottish Review*.²⁵ Erskine begins by conceding that the rebels could not hope to contend with the military power of England and sees a comparison with the repeated, failed attempts of the Scottish Jacobites. Both required foreign military assistance. Erskine sees two reasons for the Rising. The first was the formation of Sinn Féin. While Griffith played no part in the rebellion, the separatist politics of his Party lent themselves to its cause. Secondly, England, and in particular the Prime Minister, Henry Asquith, was to blame in its insistence that it was waging a war to free Belgium and the small nations: “In the circumstances in which that country was then placed, what other effect on Ireland could his [Asquith’s] cry of ‘Long live the Small States!’ produce therein than that which it actually had during Easter Week?”²⁶

Erskine concludes by looking to the three Celtic nations of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales to seek to build a new “Celtic Confederacy” after the War has come to an end. However, Ireland’s claim must be acknowledged, and “nothing short of the full possession of liberty,” he argued, will “content them or lay aside their resistance to the levelling and de-nationalising tendencies of English rule and civilisation. This is the true spring of the recent Irish rising.”²⁷

²³ Erskine, “Education and ‘Atmosphere’” 320.

²⁴ “Editorial,” *Guth na Bliadhna* 4, no. 4 (1907): 406.

²⁵ A point well made by Witt, “Connections across the North Channel.” For all that, Erskine’s support was brave and contemporaneous.

²⁶ Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar, “Who Fears to Speak of Easter Week,” *Scottish Review* 39 (Autumn 1916): 369. The lack of a question mark at the end of the title is noteworthy.

²⁷ Erskine, “Who Fears to Speak of Easter Week” 374.

Erskine was not afraid to announce this as a fact. For reasons of censorship, Erskine could not mention the leaders' names or the executions. Privately, he was critical of their recklessness in undertaking the Rising.²⁸ However, he understood Pearse's motives, and those of his fellow martyrs. As Erskine put it three years later, the Rising "paved the way for Ireland to find her soul again."²⁹ Erskine never made any personal reference to Pearse by name, yet his support – part as it was of Erskine's immersion in the coming Irish Revolution – is a fitting acknowledgement of the ideas that he heard his Irish colleague espouse in Wales back in 1899 and, perhaps, a deeper connection with the Rising and its aims than any indirect personal connection with Pearse alone.

Erskine's Politics and the Anglo-Irish School

In June 1906, Dublin's Abbey Theatre played six nights in Glasgow as part of a tour of Scotland. Though unaware of this successful tour, Erskine would become highly aware of the Abbey group and what they represented in terms of the so-called Anglo-Irish School of theatre. Erskine would go on to promote Gaelic drama in Scotland. His vision would be set out over a series of articles in *Guth na Bliadhna*, as detailed and analysed comprehensively by Petra Johana Poncarová.³⁰ Erskine looked to Ireland, as he often did, for inspiration.

The Abbey Theatre was launched as the Irish Literary Theatre (ILT) in 1899 and its first production was W.B. Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* in Dublin's Ancient Concert Rooms. Douglas Hyde, President of the Gaelic League, was initially welcoming of the initiative believing that an Anglo-Irish theatre had value in the process of de-Anglicisation.³¹ The first play, featuring allusions to paganism, drew traditional Catholic criticism and was interrupted somewhat infamously by twenty University College Dublin students.³² The criticism would intensify as the new ILT sought to promote Irish drama through the medium of English. As Patrick

²⁸ Erskine to Charles Loch, letter, 6 June 1916, Charles Loch papers, University of Glasgow, Gaelic Collection, Gaelic Correspondence 1. Loch was a Gaelic collector and enthusiast based in Australia.

²⁹ Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar, "Chronicles of the Quarters," *Scottish Review* 42 (Summer 1919): 230.

³⁰ Petra Johana Poncarová, "'A Fitting Offering to the Gaelic Thalia or Melpomene': Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar and Drama in Scottish Gaelic," *Litteraria Pragensia* 30, no. 59 (2020): 77-92.

³¹ P.J. Mathews, *Revival: The Abbey Theatre, Sinn Féin, the Gaelic League and the Cooperative Movement* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2003) 19.

³² Mathews, *Revival* 54.

J. Mathews explained, “the question of whether an Irish theatre in the English language was possible would become a major point of contention between elements within the Gaelic League and leading figures within the Irish Literary Theatre.”³³

Pearse summed the feeling of many in the League camp when he labelled the ILT’s efforts as “a heresy.”³⁴ J.M. Synge’s plays came in for particular criticism, especially his portrayal of the west of Ireland in his *Playboy of the Western World* (1907). To add insult to injury, the “Sinn Féin ideologues,” to use Foster’s phrase, objected to the Abbey Theatre organising police (state) protection for the play to go ahead.³⁵

Yeats believed that their initiative was essential to the creative development of the nation and believed that for “a meaningful engagement, the Gaelic cultural inheritance would happen in English until Irish could rival it.”³⁶ Perhaps, in a backhanded way, the Abbey’s critics realised this. Griffith used his *United Irishman* paper to run playwriting competitions in English, in addition to such names as Constance and Casimir Markievicz, Willie Pearse, Terence MacSwiney and Bulmer Hobson setting up their own theatrical / drama groups; the latter two, both prominent republicans, set up their companies in Cork and Ulster respectively.³⁷ It seems to be another variant of the old pragmatism versus principle debate. While the Gaelic true believers would label the Abbey Theatre as the “Anglo-Irish school,” the Theatre’s pragmatic approach and their belief in the cultural side of the literary revival would soften the hearts of many of the critics.

In Scotland, Erskine also provides an example of this softening. In addition to the series of four articles on Gaelic drama, there appeared a piece in *Guth na Bliadhna* in Winter 1912 on the “Anglo-Celtic school.”³⁸ This article is unsigned, but it is almost certainly the work of Erskine, whose charming and sometimes quite beautiful prose, could also give way to intemperate language. The line adopted is very hostile to the efforts of the Abbey Theatre and is prompted by a report of their recent tour of the United States. The touring party were pelted with rotten eggs at some of their productions. The author considers the morality of such actions, but later states that artists should expect this. The Gaelic League’s envoy to the US, Father O’Flanagan is quoted extensively. Lady Gregory’s plays have

³³ Mathews, *Revival* 24.

³⁴ Mathews, *Revival* 58.

³⁵ R.F. Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890-1923* (London: Allen Lane, 2014) 257.

³⁶ Mathews, *Revival* 103.

³⁷ See Foster, *Vivid Faces* 232ff for an informed and lively discussion of these groups and their impact.

³⁸ “The Gaelic Movement and the Anglo-Celtic School,” *Guth na Bliadhna* 9, no. 1 (1912).

nothing to do with the language revival movement in Ireland, and the envoy objects to the literal translation of Irish idioms into English:

This is purely a literary dialect, and is not spoken in any part of Ireland. The Gaelic League is not interested in the creation of a new English dialect. Its concern is with the Irish language, the spirit of the Gaelic League is a thing entirely different from the Abbey Theatre, the very antithesis of it in many ways.³⁹

This was the orthodoxy, quoted with approval by Erskine who roundly turned on the key writers within the Abbey Theatre. J.M. Synge was a “decadent,” while Yeats was a “literary parasite.” The author’s point was that the Gaelic Movement was being exploited in the name of a “school which is neither Gaelic nor English.”⁴⁰

Erskine would go on to set out his stall for the future of Gaelic drama in Scotland over the course of four articles. Of special interest is the concluding piece because he seems to have mellowed his position. He is giving the Abbey playwrights a lot more credit for their achievements and acknowledging that they have set down roots on Irish soil; he praises their cast and production with some “excellent trained actors” including Sarah Allgood and the Fay brothers. There are signs of “permanence” for their future. He gives credit that Lady Gregory has a command of Irish and his only criticism is that if the same “time, money and resources” had been put into Gaelic drama then the outcome would have been “immeasurably greater.”⁴¹ Erskine still rejected the notion of an Anglo-Scottish school and stressed the importance of the traditional languages for Scotland and Ireland in the project of “nation-building.”

The question must be asked, especially in the light of the acknowledgement of the success of the Abbey on both sides of the North Channel: was Erskine wrong to reject an Anglo-Scottish school of theatre? He needed a forum to channel his creative ideas. He had serialised two Gaelic plays by Donald Sinclair and in 1912 had set up Àrd Chomhairle na Gàidhlig (Scottish Gaelic Academy) and had sponsored a silver Cup and a £10 cash prize for the best new Gaelic play on the subject of MacBeth.⁴² These Gaelic only initiatives came to nothing as there were no published finalists or winners.

³⁹ “The Gaelic Movement” 94-95.

⁴⁰ “The Gaelic Movement” 95. William Sharp (aka Fiona Macleod) from the Scottish Celtic school received the same criticism.

⁴¹ Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar [signed as REM], “Gaelic Drama,” *Guth na Bliadhna* 11, no. 2 (1914): 217.

⁴² Cairns, *No Language! No Nation!* 50-51.

Did Erskine's political view of theatre blinker him to other approaches? I believe that the Scottish tour of 1906 by the Abbey Theatre can shed a light on a missed opportunity. The little programme, simply entitled *Irish Plays*, points out that the Abbey Theatre are patented (from the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland) to operate as the National Theatre. Their patent carried restrictions that "compel the Society to produce only plays by Irish authors, or upon Irish subjects, or great foreign masterpieces. But, for all that, it is a National Theatre, and its opening marked a new epoch in the history of drama."⁴³ All the main playwrights are featured in the tour, and the programme visualises the cast and pays credit to the musicianship. The programme is still sensitive to the criticism from the Gaelic activists. The company are at pains to point out that authentic costumes are worn, and there is Gaelic song and traditional Irish music.

There is another point of interest in this tour. It provided direct contact with a fledgeling theatre movement in Scotland. The programme cites the tour director as Alfred Wareing, an Englishman resident in Glasgow, who would go on to found the Glasgow Repertory Theatre in 1909. He rented the Royalty Theatre in the city's Sauchiehall Street. Wareing stated that he was influenced by the success of the Abbey and believed that a strong civic theatre would provide the prototype for a national theatre in Scotland.⁴⁴

Nor were there any demonstrations from Glasgow's Irish community, as may have been expected, given the fact that the city had its own Gaelic League committee. Indeed, the plays were well received. One reviewer saw the plays as a key part in the Celtic revival and hailed the Irish authenticity of the players and the skill of the fiddle player, Arthur Darley.⁴⁵

Erskine did not appear to be aware of Wareing's efforts and certainly did not cite them in any of his English language articles that year. Both men would be frustrated in their aims for national theatre in Scotland. You cannot doubt their sincerity or their passion. In fairness, Erskine's thoughts in 1914 would naturally gravitate back to politics with the onset of war and a new venture, *Scottish Review*. The sad part is that Erskine wanted Glasgow to be the centre for his Gaelic theatre. It all seems, with hindsight of course, that dots were not joined and if they had been, then an Anglo-Scottish school would have been a viable option. Politics and principles stood in the way.

⁴³ *Irish Plays* (Glasgow, 1906) 4-5.

⁴⁴ Alasdair Cameron, "Theatre in Scotland: 1214 to the Present," in *Scotland: A Cultural History*, ed. Paul H Scott (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1993) 151. Cameron mentions that Wareing's company staged the first production of a Chekhov play in Britain, *The Seagull*, in November 1909.

⁴⁵ "King's Theatre – The Celtic Drama," *Glasgow Herald*, 5 June 1906, 6.

Erskine: A Monarchist for Ireland

Kingship has long held a mythical status in Ireland. The country has had no king since the Scot, Edward Bruce was crowned High King at Dundalk in 1316. He was invited over – being Robert’s brother – the year before to assist in removing the English presence in Ireland.⁴⁶ Many of the Gaelic clans up to the early modern period still saw the restoration of the High King (Árd Rí) as essential to the liberation of the country. It is fair to say that any such notions died a long time ago.

In 1931, nobody wanted a king of Ireland except Ruaraidh Erskine who still held to Arthur Griffith’s vision of a dual monarchy (one that did not mean the removal of the ruling British dynasty). Erskine had worked tirelessly with Irish republicans, and supported their cause, during the war of independence in 1919-1921.⁴⁷ This changed in 1931, with his book *Changing Scotland*, as he briefly surveyed the state of the three kingdoms of Scotland, England, and Ireland. The book was Erskine’s personal manifesto. Although he had been a founder member of the National Party of Scotland in 1928, he had resigned from the party in 1930 over their decision to contest in Westminster parliamentary elections. He still held to the belief that Scottish nationalists could gain nothing there. He was not alone in this belief but he made it a point of principle and left the party. By January 1931, Erskine was re-evaluating his political position in relation to Ireland.

His brief look at the state of Ireland was quite incredible given his recent past. He entitled a section “Why Kings Should Govern Ireland.” Erskine’s view was that republicanism in Ireland had no historical basis before the 1798 rebellion. He saw it as a divisive creed and cited the unity of those who supported the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, the Free Staters, with the division of its republican opponents. No evidence was provided to support that view. He hoped that the transition of Ireland into full independence would be one of national prosperity. One thing could make it better:

It is plain from history, as well ancient as modern, that the principal distemper of the Irish State has ever been internal disunion. It is reasonably sure that a King (whose symbol, as whose interest, is unity) would cure this distemper. Therefore, the monarchy should be re-erected in Ireland.⁴⁸

This call seemed to come from nowhere. It was surprising given that those who were running the Irish Free State in 1931, themselves former republicans, had no

⁴⁶ Ronald McNair Scott, *Robert the Bruce, King of Scots* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1982) 174.

⁴⁷ See Cairns, *No Language! No Nation!* 72-88.

⁴⁸ Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar, *Changing Scotland* (Montrose: Review Press, 1931) 14.

such notion. Erskine himself could be classed as a former republican. As head of the Scots National League, he was close to some of the leading members of the Irish Republican Army and liaised with Art O'Brien, who was the IRA's link in London.⁴⁹ He must have known the political desires and motivations of the Irish. Such motivations permeated his own organisation and other leading figures such as William Gillies, Seumas MacGaraidh, and John MacArthur all wanted a Scottish Republic and also supported Irish republicans.

Erskine did not volunteer a name for the role, yet he still called for the restoration of the High King. This has puzzled me until another interesting literary link came to light. There was one other voice – an Irish voice – who made the same call at the end of the war in 1921. Erskine makes no reference to this work in his own book but there is a striking similarity in its aspiration.

William Ferris was a priest in the Diocese of Kerry and had been chaplain to the Free State forces during the Civil War in 1922-1923. In the tumult and upheaval of the last seven years, since the Rising in 1916, Ireland had an opportunity to form a new Gaelic Commonwealth, the title of his book, published in 1923.⁵⁰ Like Erskine's later book, this is also a manifesto, although it is labelled under the auspices of the Irish Progressive Party. Yet Ferris' book reads and feels like a highly personal statement.

Ferris sets out his stall in the introduction. He is for the revival of the Gaelic State which is a throwback to "the excellent system of government which for centuries made the Irish State the foremost in Europe."⁵¹ The mechanism for this would be the replacement of a "discredited" system of parliamentary government with what can only be called theocracy. Ireland was to be split into Church areas that would administer a mixture of national and local government: from jobs, the road system and "the poor." This would mean that the Dáil (Parliament) would be disbanded.

New institutions were proposed that would take their place. At the top was the High King of Ireland (Árd Rí na h-Éireann) who would be appointed for life. There would also be the appointment of district and county kings supplemented by parish rulers. Ferris concedes that this will not happen overnight. The transition would involve the use of existing structures to elect men, he probably meant only men, committed to his programme. Catholic Church structures provided his

⁴⁹ The Art O'Brien papers, National Library of Ireland, Dublin has extensive correspondence between Erskine and O'Brien, in MS8421, 8427, 8428, 8429, 8433, 8435, 8436 and 8460.

⁵⁰ William Ferris, *The Gaelic Commonwealth. Being the Political and Economic Programme of the Irish Progressive Party* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1923).

⁵¹ Ferris, *The Gaelic Commonwealth* 1.

model although the Protestant churches would make the appointments in Protestant dominated areas of Ulster.⁵² In fairness, Ferris did seek to elaborate on how his system would work although it does not make for enlightened twentieth-century thinking.

Two points are of interest. Firstly, it is not clear why he can be so critical of an Irish system of parliamentary government that was still in its infancy. Republicans believe that the Dáil was formed in January 1919. Their British rulers saw this as an illegal institution and suppressed it. The Free State was formed in early 1922 and the Dáil was re-convened. Could this system of parliamentary government be so “discredited” in such a short period of time? His dislike of democracy and, by association, socialism run through his book. The Irish worker is lauded for his Catholicism, while there are stereotypical portraits of the Protestant, Socialist English worker. These are crude yet understandable from Ferris’s view of the world. His condemnation of the Free State version of democracy, given that he was a supporter of that side in the Civil War, is harder to fathom.

Secondly, his call for the restoration of a Catholic, Gaelic monarch definitely arose in a vacuum. It was not in any programme, be it the 1905 Sinn Féin programme or the 1919 Dáil with its raft of political and economic measures for Ireland. Politics is like that, and in political isolation ideas can be constructed from one’s own imagination. No one rallied to his programme in Ireland. The equally isolated Ruaraidh Erskine would be the main exception, although it is not known if Erskine ever read Ferris’s book. He may have come across it in his two visits to Ireland for the Tailteann games in 1924 and 1928: Erskine was invited by the Free State government for this cultural and sporting festival dedicated to an ancient Gaelic queen, and on the second occasion was accompanied by the Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid.⁵³ There is no hard evidence to suggest this. The connection, if any, before the notion became fully extinct, lies in the dedication of *The Gaelic Commonwealth*. Ferris dedicated his book to Arthur Griffith, whose formation of Sinn Féin had so influenced Erskine, and whose reactionary politics during the period of upheaval after 1916 had so influenced Ferris.

Conclusion

Erskine was a fundamentalist nationalist, a Scottish Sinn Féiner, and a Gaelic language activist. They were the constants, the first principles. He flirted with

⁵² Ferris, *The Gaelic Commonwealth* 14.

⁵³ See Cairns, *No Language! No Nation!* 88. In itself, the invitations were recognition of Erskine’s contribution to Ireland’s national struggle.

socialists, republicans, monarchists all to push forward his goals. Deliberations on these ideas, and associations with those who promote them, does not mean commitment. Erskine had a personability and a way about him that engaged with people.

My purpose in this essay has been to show that Erskine's interaction with Ireland was principled yet problematic. The three points of engagement that I have chosen show Erskine interacting with Patrick Pearse and, latterly, his sacrificial actions; with the Abbey Theatre and the challenge that they posed to his Gaelic League orthodoxy; and, finally, his retreat into a reactionary political stance underpinned by his own political isolation. They are not linked, just examples, and others could have been chosen. As I have quoted in the preamble, his principles could resemble curses, and he carried these with him into isolation but not before leaving a mark on all those whom he touched. It is heartening that he is still encouraging discussion today,⁵⁴ and, in the view of this author, more can be researched in terms of Erskine's connections with the Irish press and the political Left. There is certainly much more to uncover in this revolutionary Scottish earl.

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⁵⁴ For example, in addition to Patrick Witt, there is also the recent article by Alex Murray, "Unionism, Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism: Ruaraidh Erskine of Marr at the Fin de Siècle," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 48, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.51221/sc.ssl.2022.48.1.7>.

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