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## REMEMBERING EASTER 1916 IN IRELAND

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**Abstract.** The centenary of the rising against British rule in Ireland at Easter 1916 provides an opportunity to examine how this event has been perceived and commemorated over the century. Seen by some as a necessary sacrifice of blood that led to the Republic, for others it was unnecessary violence that led to civil war and ensured the partition of the island. For a large part of the century the event was imbued with an almost sacred quality, but thirty years of religious sectarian violence in Northern Ireland have led to efforts in 2016 to respect all religious traditions and to remember all those who died in the uprising rather than just the executed 'martyrs'.

**Keywords:** Easter Rising, Northern Ireland, British rule.

## ВСПОМИНАЯ ПАСХУ 1916 г. В ИРЛАНДИИ

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**Аннотация.** Столетие Пасхального воскресенья, когда в 1916 г. ирландцы подняли восстание против Британии, дает возможность проанализировать, как это событие представлялось и хранилось в памяти на протяжении последнего столетия. Полагаемое некоторыми в качестве должного поклонения жертвам, принесенным во имя Республики, а другими – в качестве напрасного восстания, лежащего в основе кровавой гражданской войны и отделения Острова, это событие вызывает споры и по сей день. На протяжении большей части века Пасхальное воскресенье имело сакральное значение, однако тридцатилетняя борьба за независимость Северной Ирландии к 2016 г. обусловила попытки уважительного подхода ко всем религиозным традициям и к памяти всех тех, кто погиб во время восстания.

**Ключевые слова:** Пасхальное восстание, Северная Ирландия, Британское управление.

On 24 April 1916, the Monday after Easter, a group of around 1500 insurgents launched an uprising in Dublin against British rule in Ireland. They were a mixed group containing a high proportion of teachers, academics, actors, poets and writers, as well as a handful of committed revolutionaries. The main post office and some other public buildings were taken over and from the steps of the post office a proclamation from the 'Provisional Government of the Irish Republic' was read to a largely surprised and apathetic group of passers-by. The leaders behind the uprising came from within the Irish Republic Brotherhood, a body with strong links and financial backing from sections of the Irish diaspora in the United States of America. The main aim of the Brotherhood had been to disrupt and harass British rule in Ireland by every possible means to the extent that the British would want to pull out, but a section believed that only an armed uprising would bring the issue to a climax. Indeed for some, like the intense, scholarly school teacher, Padraig Pearse, true freedom could only be attained if the necessary blood-sacrifice were made. Easter was chosen specifically because of the echoes of Christ's sacrifice at the crucifixion. There was also a small element from within the socialist working class movement led by the Irish-Scot James Connolly, that had been organised since 1913 in what was called the Citizen Army to defend the rights of workers. The rising was crushed within six days, but for many within Ireland this is still the founding moment of an independent Ireland and should be remembered as such. The centenary of this event has led to a plethora of books and articles in Britain and Ireland with many emphasising the need for the event to be seen with fresh eyes, while others claim it as a model for re-affirming a claim to a future united Ireland. It provides an opportunity to examine how the changing patterns of commemoration over the century reflect political and social changes.

There is little evidence that there was widespread support for complete separation from Britain among the mass of the Irish population. For a quarter of a century Liberal governments in Britain, pushed by a vocal group of some 50 Irish MPs at Westminster, had been trying to introduce a substantial measure of devolved government, what was called home rule, for Ireland. In the summer of 1914 a bill had been passed by the United Kingdom Parliament committing to the granting of home rule. The prospect of a Catholic-dominated Dublin parliament had prompted the Unionist opposition in the mainly Protestant north-east of the country to organise the Ulster Volunteer Force and to import 24,600 rifles and three million rounds of ammunition from Germany on 24–25 April, 1914. In response, the Nationalists formed the Irish Volunteers who also imported arms from Germany albeit only 900 rifles and 25,000 rounds. These unofficial armies openly exercised in military formations bearing arms and with many volunteers wearing their own uniforms. The country seemed close to civil war with unionists having the support of elements within the British army who had made clear their reluctance to impose a home-rule settlement on the north-east province of Ulster. The outbreak of war with Germany had led to the suspension of the Home Rule Act and did much to ease the tension. The elected Irish politicians in the UK parliament were supporters of the war against Germany, with some 200,000 Irish men from north and south eventually volunteering for service in the army. Most in Ireland would have gone along with the view that the war was triggered by the invasion of Belgium, another strongly Catholic country, that many in Ireland knew.

At the same time, the twenty years before 1914 had seen a huge revival of indigenous Irish Gaelic culture among Irish intellectuals. There was a revival of the use of the Irish language, with writing on the sometimes mythical Irish past, of Gaelic sports and theatre and poetry. There was something of a generational divide, with the young dabbling in challenging new ideas of feminism and sexual freedom. But the utopian Ireland that many of those caught up in the cultural revival envisaged was catholic and rural with small peasant holdings, uncorrupted by modern industrialisation and foreign influence, not a vision that appealed to the more industrialised north. It was from those that were most influenced by this cultural revival that many of the leading rebels of 1916 came. There was a deliberate linking of the uprising with heroic moments in the Irish past. The proclamation of the republic claimed that the insurgents were acting 'in the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood'. Most saw the war as a British war and a capitalist war which provided Ireland with an opportunity 'supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe'. There had been secret negotiations with the Germans and an expectation of imminent further aid.

The British authorities were well aware of the possibility of some kind of disturbance over Easter, but were initially unprepared for the scale of it. However, they reacted quickly. Newly-drafted troops were brought across from England; little compunction was shown about using heavy artillery to bombard the rebel strongholds and to reduce to rubble a substantial part of the centre of Dublin. Most significantly, with no consultation with the political leaders in London, martial law was declared by the army. There were mass arrests and some arbitrary executions. It was under military law that the participants in the uprising were tried. Death sentences were passed on 90 of them, but 75 of these were commuted and only 15, identified as leaders, were executed. Over a period of twelve days in May they were taken out and shot. There is a consensus that it was the inept handling of the aftermath of the rebellion and what came to be seen as brutally harsh retribution by the military authorities that brought a dramatic change in public attitudes within Ireland. The veteran home-rule politician, John Dillon, saw the shootings as 'washing out our whole life work in a sea of blood'. Rebels began to be transformed into martyrs. In the general election immediately after the end of the war in 1918 the Home Rule Party that stood for devolution of power within Britain was wiped out and the Sinn Fein (Ourselves Alone) Party that backed independence won most seats across southern Ireland. They refused to participate in the Westminster parliament and established a separate parliament in Dublin, the Dáil Éireann.

Two years of attempted British suppression followed until December 1921 when an Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed recognising the establishment of an Irish Free State consisting of 26 counties but still loosely linked to Britain, with an oath of allegiance to the monarch. The six counties of Ulster were formed into a separate Northern Ireland still represented in the Westminster Parliament, but also with its own devolved parliament in Belfast. For many of those who had been participants in the events of Easter 1916, the failure to insist on a republic was a betrayal, and years of civil war followed within Ireland. Éamon de Valera, one of the leaders of the 1916 insurrection, who had narrowly

escaped execution because of the fact that he was American born, led the anti-Treaty forces with a pattern of assassinations and arson. It was 1923 before the civil war ended and not until 1927 did De Valera and other Republican leaders agree to take the oath and take their seats in the Dáil.

During the early years of the Free State the remembrance of 1916 was largely confined to catholic services for the dead and a few hagiographical accounts of some of the participants, encouraged by the increasingly powerful Catholic Church within the state. However, W.B. Yeats poem, 'Easter, 1916', published in 1920, created a mystical aura around the men of 1916.

For all that is done and said  
We know their dream; enough  
To know they dreamed and are dead.  
And what if excess of love

Bewildered them till they died?  
I write it out in a verse –  
MacDonagh and MacBride  
And Connolly and Pearse

Now and in time to be,  
Wherever green is worn,  
Are changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.

There were efforts in the new state to create something akin to Pearse's vision by focussing on rural development and protecting the country from corrupting foreign influences. A repressive censorship acted against the threat from 'evil literature' in books and films. In 1932 the Republicans won a majority in the Dáil and de Valera became Taoiseach (Prime Minister). From then on the events of 1916 were officially imbued with a sacred quality, as the founding event of the state. Pearse's school was turned into a national museum of the Rising. The role of the home-rule politicians and of Irish men in the 1914–1918 war was written out of Irish History.

The twenty-fifth anniversary took place in the midst of war, what in neutral Ireland was dubbed 'the Emergency'. With rumours of a possible British attack on Ireland the anti-British aspect of Irish identity was particularly powerful. The peak of annual remembrance came in 1966 on the fiftieth anniversary when de Valera was now President of the Republic. There were pageants, posters and parades and a dramatization of the events of Easter 1916 nightly on television. It was taken for granted that the so-called 'blood-sacrifice' of the men of 1916 had been the heroic and necessary gesture that had inevitably brought independence. Galway Cathedral had an image of Pearse in prayer before Christ. A remaining symbol of a former British presence, a column to Admiral Nelson in Dublin's main street, was blown up by a

bomb just before the Easter commemoration. The state had come about because of violent, self-sacrifice. It was a perception that re-inspired many in the south to hope that violent actions could be the means of bringing the six counties of Northern Ireland into the state. In catholic/nationalist areas of Northern Ireland there was a celebration of and pride in the events, a growing bitterness at discrimination against Catholics by Protestant-dominated public bodies and an increased demand for full civil rights for Catholics. For the Protestant/Unionists there was much unease and a reassertion that Northern Ireland would remain a Protestant state that would never accept unification. An armed Loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force was involved in attacks on individual Catholics. There was particular resentment that these celebrations were overshadowing remembrance of the battle of the Somme in June 1916 when 3,500 Irish men died, many from a relatively small area of Ulster.

Within two years of the celebrations of 1966 there was the start of numerous marches in Northern Ireland calling for Civil Rights for Catholics. The tension mounted with riots and sectarian murders. A split within the Irish Republican Army led to the emergence of the Provisional IRA committed to forcing the British to negotiate for withdrawal from Northern Ireland and for the creation of a unitary state. Thirty years of violence followed in what are referred to as 'The Troubles'. A peace agreement in Good Friday 1998 led to a measure of calm and in 2005 to a decision by the Provisional IRA to disarm.

By the 1990s there were signs that many within Ireland were seeking an alternative way of defining their identity; something beyond catholicism and anti-Britishness was needed in a global world. The celebrations of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1991 amidst 'the Troubles' were deliberately muted. With the centenary of the Rising approaching there was a determination by the Irish government that the emphasis in 2016 should be on peace and reconciliation not on violence. An Irish Government Commission came up with initial proposals that made no mention of the executions of the 1916 leaders. There were protests from Sinn Féin, a growing opposition party, and an attempt by that party to set up its own programme of commemoration, with talk of re-dedication to the politics of 1916. The initial proposals were revised to be slightly more nationalistic. The army sent a copy of the rebels' Proclamation to every school in the country. But there was also a concern to include unionists and to reach out to Northern Ireland. The final shape of the commemoration began with a declaration that the Irish Government was 'committed to respecting all the traditions of this island equally' and of 'a shared history, in all its diversity'. A memorial to *all* those who died in 1916 has been unveiled, the soldiers, the policemen, the men and women in the slums surrounding the post office who fell victim to the shooting.

In March 2016, John Bruton, a politician who had been Taoiseach from 1994 until 1997, went further than any other had dared in questioning the choice of 1916 as the founding moment of the state. To him these were people who claimed legitimacy from 'dead generations', who would brook no compromise and who left no room for negotiation with contemporary democracy. They had ignored the fierce resistance to home rule in Protestant Ulster, 'oblivious of the difference carefully fostered by an alien government'

and, as others have argued, effectively ensured that a united Ireland would not be achieved. In an Ireland strongly committed to military neutrality a group that identified with German and Austrian allies like the men of 1916 was hardly a model to be held up to the present generation. By an insistence that the state consisted of 32 counties the rebels and their successor republicans had built coercion and force into the very heart of the state they envisioned. The desire to impose their views of history and their vision of the future had led to the deaths of fellow Irishmen, not just Britons.

Bruton went on to argue that there had been no justification for launching a war when it was clear that much of what most Irish people sought was well on the way to being achieved democratically: in the decade before 1914 social conditions had been steadily improved; the system of land ownership had been revolutionised and home rule was guaranteed at the end of the war. But the achievements of the home-rule politicians in 1914 had been largely ignored. A violent solution adopted in 1916 and again in 1919 had led to death and destruction for nearly a century and had still failed to achieve the goal of a united Ireland.

The commemoration has also brought a flood of books on the events of 1916, which reveal the extent to which the old perceptions of 1916 have been questioned and re-focussed. The fact that the 1916 Declaration proposed a government 'elected by the suffrages of all her men and women' is presented as a forward looking aspect. The role of women in the Rising as fighters, messengers and nurses has been highlighted. Indeed when the Abbey Theatre announced a commemorative programme of plays entitled 'Waking the Nation' that included only one female playwright there was a huge outcry. It is the forward-looking sense of human rights in the Proclamation that is highlighted, but which for much of the early decades of independence was lost sight of. The role of Irish soldiers in the 1914–1918 war, the ignoring of whom had been further strengthened by Ireland's neutrality in the second world war, is re-emerging from obscurity. Commemoration of the Rising has over the century proved to be a most flexible tool for politicians, but time and the release of formerly restricted eye-witness accounts of the event is allowing historians to bring out its complexity and the variety of visions that motivated its participants.

## SOME RECENT BOOKS ON THE EASTER RISING

Allen, Kieran, 1916. *Ireland's Revolutionary Tradition* (London: Pluto Press, 1916)

Dudley Edwards, Ruth, *The Seven. The Lives and Legacies of the Founding Fathers of the Irish Republic* (London: One World Publications, 2016)

Duffy, Joe, *Children of the Rising: the Untold Story of the Young Lives lost during Easter 1916* (Hachette Books Ireland, 2015)

Foster, Roy F., *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland 1890–1923* (London: Allen Lane, 2016)

Grayson, Richard & McGarry, Fearghal *Remaking 1916. The Eastern Rising, the Somme and the Politics of Memory in Ireland* (Cambridge University Press, 2016)

Heartfield, James & Rooney, Kevin, *Who's Afraid of the Easter Rising? 1916–2016* (London: Zero Books, 2016)

McGarry, Fearghal, *The Rising. Easter 1916* (Oxford University Press, 2016)

O'Sullivan, Brighid, *Petticoat Rebels of 1916: Extraordinary Women in Ireland's Struggle for Freedom*

Richardson, Neil, *According to Their Lights: Irish Soldiers in the British army during the Easter Rising, 1916* (Cork: Collins Press, 2015)

Townsend, Charles, *Easter 1916. The Irish Rebellion* (London: Penguin Books, 2006)

O'Brien Press in Dublin has published under the general title of *16 Lives* biographies of those who were executed in 2016, the 15 shot in Dublin and Roger Casement, hanged in London.