

CREATING THE DREAM, 1916

The original leaders of the Irish Republican Army would be astonished to find now, more than eighty years later, there is still no thirty-two county Irish Republic. The received wisdom of the 1920s was that the new artificial construction, the Border dividing Ireland into the six-county Northern Ireland province of the UK and the twenty-six county Irish Free State, would wither with time. With it would wither Britain's last vestiges of power in Ireland. Yet the unthinkable *was* happening. Crossing a new millennium another generation of IRA activists was fighting the same fight. The Partition of Ireland and British jurisdiction over Northern Ireland had become more, not less, embedded over the years and gained more, not less, enduring nationalist acquiescence. Looking beyond the 2000s an independent unitary Irish state, ruled from Dublin, was widely regarded as a remote and impossible dream. For a great many would-be Irish republicans, even the dreaming had stopped.

Yes, the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 re-kindled hope. But Óglaigh na hÉireann had been forced to accept unthinkable compromise, despite being more entrenched than at any stage since the 1920s. The modern IRA, re-constituted in December 1969 and on the offensive for most of the time since August 1971, had sustained the longest-ever unbroken armed resistance against British rule in Ireland. Yet they had not achieved their goal. When the Army Council confidently declared a unilateral cessation of military operations in August 1994 to enter round-table negotiations, they received no guarantee of winning the Republic. They had neither been victorious nor had they been defeated. Not to be defeated by overwhelming

British forces during almost a quarter of a century of armed action was in itself regarded as a major success. But with no victory in sight ambitions had become chastened. The unambiguous demand for a British withdrawal from Ireland had been replaced by the language of compromise. And the fact that the IRA had effectively come to recognise the legitimacy of the southern state, for so long regarded as an illegal puppet regime, was a very real manifestation of their failure.

When the IRA's cessation of violence broke down in early 1996 most of the volunteers and local commanders were happy to be back in action, back at the British, ready as always to finish the business. One more push and the British would be forced to 'face their responsibilities', as it was now ambiguously put in Army Council statements. The resumption of armed struggle, however, reopened old divisions over politics and armed force; divisions which had bedevilled modern Irish separatists ever since Pádraig Pearse publicly proclaimed the still-elusive thirty-two county Irish Republic around noon on Easter Monday, 24 April 1916. That was, in effect, the time and date when the Irish Republican Army was born.

THE EASTER RISING

The 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, as begun by Pearse's proclamation, was not a neat and tidy affair between a newly formed Republican Army and the British forces. In the first instance, it was not so much a rising, more an attempted military coup, secretly plotted by a handful of mainly unknown men. The self-proclaimed Army of the Republic was at first an uncertain collection of dedicated militarists; primarily Irish Volunteers supported by the Irish Citizen Army and even smaller groups like the Hibernian

Rifles, all under the command of the Military Council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood.

This was no cohesive fighting force welded together over time with a disciplined structure and ideology. Some were separatists but not republicans. The Irish Volunteers, founded in 1913, was a broad church numbering close to 200,000, few of whom were armed and most of whom in 1914 followed the lead of John Redmond, moderate leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, in pledging Ireland's support for Britain in the Great War against Germany. Those Volunteers who dissented from Redmond's call numbered just over a thousand under Chief of Staff Eoin MacNeill. And even when the Rising came in 1916 it was started against the wishes of MacNeill, who correctly argued that it would end in military disaster and public hostility.

Ideologically, the small Irish Citizen Army, formed by the revolutionary socialist trade union leader James Connolly, was a group apart. Connolly had far more radical ambitions than people like Pádraig Pearse and the traditionalist Roman Catholic Hibernian Rifles group, connected with the Ancient Order of Hibernians. Alongside this collection of disparate organisations was a new political grouping called Sinn Féin, meaning 'Ourselves Alone'. At the time Sinn Féin was more separatist than the Irish Parliamentary Party but, in proposing a dual monarchy for Britain and Ireland, was not republican.

Where there was cohesion was within the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), the main driving force behind the attempted military coup. The IRB was a dedicated, secretive body formed in March 1858, first called the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, avowedly republican and militaristic with support among the immigrant Irish in the emergent United States, where it was known as Clann na Gael.

Despite these uncomfortable combinations, a single military group *had* come together, acting within the terms of the decision adopted on 9 September 1914, by the Irish Republican Brotherhood, to strike against Britain at some time during the war which had just begun. When it came to it, the bulk of Irish separatists were unwilling to take up arms against what was then their own legal government at a time of war. Many had enlisted and were dug into trenches in foreign fields, fighting Britain's fight. In addition, the Liberal government in London had developed a policy of Home Rule for Ireland. The fuse of armed resistance to British policy came not from republicans demanding more but from the Ulster Volunteers demanding less. Formed in 1912 these Unionists were pledged in blood to fight against Home Rule, a pledge backed in part by elements in the British Conservative Party and in the British Army. Still, some measure of independence for Ireland, albeit under the Crown, was a probability at war's end. Given the electoral strength of Redmond's Irish Party, the advocates of Home Rule, it seemed a majority of Irish people would have been content with that.

It was virtually unimaginable that the 1916 Proclamation declaring Ireland a republic, read on that ordinary Easter Monday to a bemused and disinterested Dublin population outside the General Post Office, would in time become the bedrock of 20th century Irish republican ideology. Headed 'POBLACHT na HÉIREANN: THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT OF THE IRISH REPUBLIC TO THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND', it read:

Irishmen and Irishwomen: in the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of manhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.

Having organised and trained her manhood through her secret revolutionary organisation, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and through her open military organisation, the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, having patiently perfected her discipline, having resolutely waited for the right moment to reveal itself, she now seizes that moment and, supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe, but relying in the first on her own strength, she strikes in full confidence of victory.

We declare the right of the Irish people to the ownership of Ireland and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies to be sovereign and indefeasible. The long usurpation of that right by a foreign people and government has not extinguished that right nor can it ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people. In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty: six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms. Standing on that fundamental right and again asserting it in arms in the face of the world, we hereby declare the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State; and we pledge our lives and the lives of our comrades-in-arms to the cause of its freedom, of its welfare and of its exaltation among the nations.

The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.

Until our arms have brought the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women, the Provisional Government, hereby

constituted, will administer the civil and military affairs of the Republic in trust for the people.

We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, Whose blessing we invoke upon our arms, and we pray that no one who serves that cause will dishonour it by cowardice, inhumanity or rapine. In this supreme hour, the Irish nation must, by its valour and discipline and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called.

Signed on behalf of the Provisional Government: Thomas J Clarke, Seán Mac Diarmada, Thomas MacDonagh, PH Pearse, Eamonn Ceannt, James Connolly, Joseph Plunkett.

It seemed a preposterous and outrageous statement: these seven men claiming to be the Provisional government of a new Irish Republic, attempting to overthrow the might of the British Empire in an open battle. In any event, by the time the Proclamation was read out the seven signatories knew that defeat was inevitable. They would not have the arms to do the job as planned. A German arms ship, the *Aud* destined for the insurgents, was intercepted by the British off the southwest coast days before the Rising. This led Eoin MacNeill, a reluctant and late supporter of the secret plot, to send orders for the operation to be called off. Those who proceeded, particularly Pearse, were engaged in a blood sacrifice, intent on adding another glorious chapter to the story enshrined in the Proclamation, passing on the flame to another generation. As for leadership, Pádraig Pearse was more a political romantic than a military strategist.

Still, the insurgents put up a real fight, though the action was confined to Dublin. Only tiny and sporadic support came from the country. Using vastly superior military might the British forces crushed the insurrection to

unconditional surrender at 3.30pm on Saturday 29 April. One of the last groups to hold out was the company of Irish Volunteers at Bolands Bakery on the outskirts of the city under the command of Eamon de Valera.

When it was over, much of central Dublin lay in ruins and many of the city's working-class slum areas were damaged by stray over-fire. The people were not amused by the antics of the insurgents, their seemingly farcical Proclamation and their extraordinary claim to be the provisional government of the country. Political and press reaction was hostile in the extreme.

In that atmosphere the British government, with a real war on its hands to the east and not wanting a weakened western flank, decided on the toughest of reprisal measures. Under the new command of General Sir John Maxwell, the government's military response was to crush both the spirit and the flesh of this fledgling militant Irish republicanism. The leaders would be executed, hundreds of others would be given penal servitude, hard labour and deportation. Executions and deportations had proven effective in quelling past Irish military adventures: 1798 – Theobald Wolfe Tone; 1803 – Robert Emmet; 1848 – Young Irelanders; 1867 – Fenians. Then, the rebels and their cause had failed to stir the broad public conscience and life carried on as normal. It would be the same this time.

But far from repeating itself, history took a dramatic turn. This time, Britain's crushing and ruthless measures failed even on their most justifiable military level, that of keeping her western flank quiet in time of war. Irish nationalism was stirred like never before. From 3 May 1916, fifteen leaders were executed, including all seven signatories to the Proclamation. A severely wounded James Connolly was shot by firing squad while tied to a

chair. De Valera's life was spared on the grounds that he was a foreign, American, citizen. In terms of the effect on militant Irish republicanism, the British miscalculation was immense. It proved the catalyst for the merging of the disparate fighting forces into a broadly supported Irish Republican Army allied to a new political force in the land, Sinn Féin.