

THE EASTER RISING AND THE FALL TO FREEDOM

Margaret Hawkins

History regards the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland as a dismal military failure, led by fanatic but condemned rebels resolute in their determination to achieve an independent, republican, Gaelic, united Ireland. However, the Easter Rising set into motion the means by which Ireland would realize her freedom. Though the rebels did not realize their aspirations, their actions set off a series of events that caused Ireland to unexpectedly stumble upon the path that would lead them to freedom. This unanticipated fall onto the right path coincided with perfect timing. That year, the British Parliament had once again pushed Home Rule away from the Irish. Incensed by the disappointments of failed constitutional nationalism, they turned to revolutionary nationalism, in the spirit of the Rising, to achieve what Parliamentary action could not. The immediate effects of the Rising, namely the reaction of Britain, fueled Irish nationalism with the indignation of an exasperated people. With the leaders of the Rising having been executed, two men emerged from the ashes to lead Ireland to independence. Without the military aptitude of Michael Collins and the political resolve of Eamon de Valera, Ireland might not have secured its freedom. However, the combination of timing, the actions of the British and the new leaders who were willing to travel down that unexpected path was just what the nation needed. Inspired by the spirit and the heart of the martyrs, Ireland stood up, looked Britain directly in the eye, and said, "No more."

Historians agree that a military victory against Britain was not feasible. Some, such as Alan J. Ward, describe the leadership of the rebels as disorganized and divided, despite their dedication.¹ As early as 1926, W. Alison Phillips argued that the British reactions to the Rising had started the Irish fall to freedom.² The popular support for the revolutionaries that followed, according to Ward, was an anomaly in Irish history. He strongly believed that if the three nationalisms-constitutional, revolutionary and romantic- would have been merged, the conglomeration would have been a sophisticated political machine, effectively led, enforced with popular support, enabling the cultivation

Margaret Hawkins, from Lerna, Illinois, is a senior majoring in History and History with Teacher Certification. She wrote this paper for Dr. Michael Shirley's HIS 2500 class, *Historical Research and Writing*, in Fall 2005.

¹ Alan J. Ward, *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2003), 62.

² W. Alison Phillips, *The Revolution in Ireland 1906-1923* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1926), 105.

of a distinct nationality.³ Unfortunately for Ireland, these three never seemed to coincide effectively. This mishap did not prevent the Easter Rising from becoming the cataclysm that began the chain reaction. Michael Collins claimed that the Easter Rising awoke "the sleeping spirit of Ireland."⁴ Richard B. Finnegan and Edward T. McCarron argue that the Easter Rising became a symbol of Irish independence and a focal point for nationalist identity. They assert that 1916 was given a place of pride in Irish history, despite its "failure."⁵ The fall to freedom had begun.

The Easter Rising exhorted the first great push to an independent nation with its immediate effects. It had failed as a military venture, it had failed as a political gesture, and it had failed to arouse the support of Dubliners.⁶ The leaders of the Rising had assumed that when the Rising began, the people of Dublin, angry at British grievances, would join in the fray. Their initial reaction, however, was one of inconvenience and distaste.⁷ John Redmond, the leader of the Irish Party in Parliament, condemned them and accused the rebels of obliterating the progress that Ireland had made toward the goal of Home Rule.⁸

Britain itself had been taken by surprise. She knew that the Irish Volunteers and treasonous activities had been growing, but she also knew that, because of the fight for Home Rule, there was no widespread antagonism.⁹ When the Rising caught the attention of the British government, its immediate concern went to the current trouble in World War I. David Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, feared the reaction of his powerful American ally. This grew in importance when Woodrow Wilson told Lloyd George to solve the Irish problem and return his attention back to the war.¹⁰

Therefore, Britain attempted to undervalue the gravity of the Irish situation. *The Times* initially placed blame for the Rising on the Germans, stating, "They have striven to provoke it from the outbreak of the war, and at last they have succeeded in getting their dupes to indulge in an insane rising."¹¹ The newspaper alluded that the

³ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴ Michael Collins, *The Path to Freedom* (Boulder: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1996), 53.

⁵ Richard B. Finnegan and Edward T. McCarron, *Ireland: Historical Echoes, Contemporary Politics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 53.

⁶ George Dangerfield, *The Damnable Question: A Study in Anglo-Irish Relations* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), 207.

⁷ Ward, *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism*, 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹¹ *The Times* (London), 26 April 1916.

Germans were attempting to use the Rising to disable Britain, but Britain was certain that the “lack of alarm” in the United Kingdom would prevent its spread. *The Times* directly told the world that the Rising would be suppressed immediately.¹² This, unfortunately, amid the subsequent wave of executions, left the world wondering why Britain had reacted with such savage punishments for a mere street riot.¹³

Britain’s mistake was the fifteen executions of rebel leaders. The irrationality of these executions manifested itself when a chair held up James Connolly, wounded during the actual experience of the Rising, in order for him to be shot. After these needless executions, outrage surged throughout Ireland. The Irish who had previously condemned the Rising were shocked,¹⁴ and they grew weary of long court proceedings and executions each day.¹⁵ Observing the conduct of those to be executed, Irish public opinion began to swing rapidly.

The leaders upheld their cause until their death, securing the sympathy and support of many Irishmen. On the eve of his execution, Sean MacDiarmada declared, “We die that the Irish nation may live. Our blood will rebaptise and reinvigorate the land.”¹⁶ Roger Casement spoke out to his countrymen, maintaining that self-government was their right. He pleaded with them to continue the fight, portraying Ireland as a criminal in worldview. He pledged, “If it be treason to fight against such an unnatural fate as this, then I am proud to be a rebel, and shall cling to my ‘rebellion’ with the last drop of my blood.”¹⁷ George Bernard Shaw warned Britain that if Casement was executed, he would become a national hero. He asserted that if Britain continued to manufacture martyrs “in fits of temper experience has thrown away on her,” she would continue to be governed by the Irish.¹⁸ These claims went unheard, and Casement was hung in August of 1916. The other executions could possibly have been sanctioned as occurring in the heat of the moment, but Casement’s execution, months after the Rising, was just seen as absurd, and it further pushed Ireland’s opinion towards that of the rebels.¹⁹

The Easter Rising alone could not have pushed Ireland into the war for its independence. The actions of the British government were

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Phillips, *The Revolution in Ireland 1906-1923*, 103.

¹⁴ Timothy Patrick Coogan, *Ireland Since the Rising* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1966), 2.

¹⁵ Phillips, *The Revolution in Ireland 1906-1923*, 105.

¹⁶ Ward, *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism*, 10.

¹⁷ Alan O’Day and John Stevenson, eds., *Irish Historical Documents Since 1800* (Savage, MD: Barnes and Noble Books, 1992), 163.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ward, *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism*, 118.

instrumental in turning the majority of Ireland to nationalism. It failed to cultivate the initial belief that the rebels had devastated Ireland’s chance at Home Rule, and instead the British turned on Ireland in rage. Ward believed that it would have been generous of the British to forgive the rebellion, allowing them to keep Irish favor. Instead, he said that the executions aroused and focused the latent hostility towards Britain, and the British government could not control the emotional aftermath of the Easter Rising.²⁰ The martyrs became immortal heroes and the Easter Rising became a foundation for Irish nationalist identity.²¹ The sympathy for the rebels turned the Irish majority against Britain, gave Irish nationalism the fuel it needed to get off its feet, and led to a growing dissatisfaction for the yet unsuccessful approaches of Irish constitutional nationalism.

The Easter Rising signified a change in the Irish approach from constitutional nationalism to revolutionary nationalism. Ireland had allowed its nationalists to attempt the realization of governmental freedom through Parliamentary action, but to no avail. A drawn out, fervent fight for Home Rule had been thrust aside when World War I emerged, revealing the inconsequentiality that the British placed on Irish concerns.

Constitutional nationalism, prior to the Easter Rising, had been one of the best political party organizations of the time. It had adequate funding, dedicated and talented leaders, and it compiled popular support, which was evident from its election successes.²² Constitutional nationalists were primarily concerned with the establishment of a regional government that could focus on the interests and needs of Ireland, not the United Kingdom.²³ They saw this goal as a means to the final end: governmental independence.

The revolutionary movement had been motivated by a hatred for Britain, disdain for the failures of constitutional nationalism, and a strong desire for political independence.²⁴ Prior to the Rising, revolutionary nationalism was purely provoked by hatred of British oppression, and its principal concern was removing Britain from Ireland’s back. The dedicated, unorganized and divided leaders of the Rising left Ireland with the realization that she deserved better. Revolutionary nationalism became devoted to the creation of an independent Irish republic, determined to drive out the British who refused to willingly leave.²⁵

²⁰ Ibid., 116-7.

²¹ Finnegan and McCarron, *Ireland: Historical Echoes, Contemporary Politics*, 53.

²² Ward, *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism*, 41.

²³ Ibid., 56.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 62.

Michael Collins believed that the “valiant effort [the Easter Rising] and the martyrdoms which followed it finally awoke the sleeping spirit of Ireland.”²⁶ He knew that revolution would follow. Collins concluded that the Rising had expressed the Irish right to freedom and their determination to have it, and he proclaimed that Ireland would challenge the right of Britain to dominate her.²⁷ Ireland had been put under martial law. Constitutionalism had lost its appeal. Ireland was itching, resolute to remove the sand from her shoe.²⁸ The time for change had come.

Irish politics had been altered as a result of the Rising. Although the faction had no formal role, the press and the government hailed it as the “Sinn Fein rebellion.” This was not entirely accurate, but following the Rising, the Sinn Fein officially became the political wing of the revolutionary movement.²⁹ The Irish people, growing in resolve, began to put nationalists in power. The General Election of 1918 returned a Sinn Fein majority of 73 seats, although protest became their parliamentary policy and they refused to take their seats, not accepting the legitimacy of the United Kingdom’s Parliament.³⁰ The Irish Party temporarily disappeared when nationalists, frustrated with a party of moderation, had nowhere to turn except to Sinn Fein.³¹

It grew increasingly clear to the Irish Party that they had to assume more active opposition to the United Kingdom if it was to retain credibility in Ireland. It condemned the executions, but more importantly, it abandoned a Home Rule objective. The Irish Party realized that the Irish would not accept limited autonomy, and it therefore demanded dominion status.³² Unfortunately, posture now was more highly regarded than policy, and Sinn Fein’s militancy was proving to be more attractive.³³

Revolutionary nationalism rapidly won political favor and Irish support. It was the support of the Irish-Americans, however, that kept it alive. They viewed Britain as the oppressor of Ireland and the traditional enemy of American democracy.³⁴ They had long supported the goals of constitutional nationalism financially, but this crumbled

²⁶ Collins, *The Path to Freedom*, 53.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁸ Coogan, *Ireland Since the Rising*, 22.

²⁹ Ward, *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism*, 10.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 122. The term “Sinn Fein” became the collective designation for anyone who promoted the goals of the Easter Rising, and the faction grew tremendously. *Ibid.*, 121.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 126.

³² *Ibid.*, 121.

³³ *Ibid.*, 122.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

when Redmond announced Irish support of Britain’s World War I involvement in 1914.³⁵ The money from Irish-Americans then went to revolutionary nationalism, which kept the previously weak movement strong.³⁶

Thus, dissatisfied with the disappointments of constitutional nationalism, the Irish turned to revolutionary nationalism to attain their freedom. This would prove to be a wise venture, for it ultimately would lead to their goal. This ambition could not have been possible, however, without the dedication and leadership of two men that emerged from the ruins of the Easter Rising. Michael Collins and Eamon de Valera would prove to be crucial to the events that followed the revolutionary conversion until the attainment of freedom.

At the end of 1916, hoping to improve Irish opinion, the British government released many of the prisoners from the Rising.³⁷ This proved to be a terrible mistake, for two of those prisoners were the men that would damage the union the most – Collins and de Valera. Between the years of 1919 to 1921, Michael Collins pioneered 21st century guerilla warfare, aided by the sanctuary of a few sympathetic people,³⁸ while Eamon de Valera commanded an illegal Irish government in order to stabilize the fight of the country. Collins called the period between 1918 and 1921 the “struggle between our determination to govern ourselves and to get rid of British government and the British determination to prevent us from doing either.”³⁹

Sinn Fein was determined to make Ireland ungovernable for Britain. From 1917-1919, the British government authorized thousands of raids on private homes. Erratic fighting broke out between the Irish Republic Army and the British police. Labour arranged transportation strikes to impede British troops. Michael Collins led ‘The Squad,’ which was a branch of the IRA that was liable for disabling British intelligence through murder, informants and double agents. Lawlessness spread through the country.⁴⁰ Brutal murders occurred on each side. Between January 1919 and December 1921, the Irish suffered 752 dead and 866 wounded, while the British endured 600 dead and 1200 wounded.⁴¹

In 1918, Lord French was summoned to complete an investigation of public order in Ireland. He professed that “a minority of rebels” misled Ireland. He proceeded to extend martial law into

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

³⁹ Collins, *The Path to Freedom*, 64.

⁴⁰ Coogan, *Ireland Since the Rising*, 26-7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

nationalist parts of the country, and soon most of Sinn Fein's leaders were imprisoned without a trial on the basis of the "German plot in Ireland."⁴² Also in 1918, the British Parliament, desperate due to World War I devastation, extended conscription to Ireland. Its effect was immediate, overwhelming and unprecedented.⁴³ The Irish Party, Sinn Fein, the Irish Catholic bishops and trade unions, united by de Valera and John Dillon, rallied to oppose conscription. Ward believes that nothing did more to legitimize the Sinn Fein than this anti-conscription coalition.⁴⁴

Collins contended that all the brutality, disorder and slaughter transpired from the British forces. He publicized murders and wounds of innocent men, women and children. He emphasized that nationalist newspapers were suppressed, thousands were arrested for political offenses, and nationalist leaders were deported. The British government attempted to stifle the nationalist movement before it suffered defeat. Collins declared that the Irish did not instigate the atrocities, but only defended themselves.⁴⁵ He stated that they broke up communications and attacked armed forces and British spies. According to Collins, it was because of the British brutality that Irishmen hailed the war as "the Terror".⁴⁶

The war led by Collins eventually ended in victory. By 1921, Britain was proposing a truce, having failed to subjugate the rebels. The distraction of World War I led to the use in Ireland of poorly trained police and military forces that were never properly integrated. Britain attempted to succeed by utilizing a large force, which the government believed would be necessary to defend possible targets from attack and to search out adversaries.⁴⁷

The objective of Collins and de Valera was not a military overthrow, which they knew was not possible. Instead, they focused on creating propaganda and anarchy in the hopes that the British would withdraw from Ireland.⁴⁸ One purpose of guerilla warfare, which Collins used to great effect, is to use calculated aggravation to coerce the government to participate in the collapse of law and order. Thus, the government becomes the enemy. The malice of the government indicated that the provocation of the IRA was prevailing, and the British forces became the problem, not the solution in Ireland.⁴⁹

Ireland secured world sympathy, however passive, due to the murderous rage of Britain. Therefore, although Britain could regain control of Ireland, she was reluctant to do so against world opinion.⁵⁰ Their radical neighbors terrified the Unionists in the North.⁵¹ The overwhelming support for revolutionaries, according to Ward, was an anomaly in Irish history that has since been regretted.⁵² Thus, the Irish understandably turned back to constitutional nationalism once revolutionary nationalism had brought Britain to submission.

While Michael Collins was instrumental in the revolutionary tactics that attained independence for the Irish, it was Eamon de Valera who ensured that Ireland retained a system of government during the war, and it was de Valera who became imperative to the conversion back to constitutional nationalism.

In January of 1919, twenty-four Sinn Fein members of Parliament gathered for the creation of the Dáil Éireann, the illegal legislature of Ireland. It established a government for Ireland, and in April, de Valera became its president.⁵³ The Dáil instituted its own court system, as well as departments of education, labor, fisheries, trade, industry and agriculture. It was not, however, able to completely control the IRA, which was still diffused with the Irish Republican Brotherhood.⁵⁴

De Valera went to America in 1919 to campaign for the Irish Republic, the definitive governmental goal of the Dáil. The British atrocities and the Irish suffering won political support in the United States, and De Valera earned American recognition of the Irish Republic through the American press and people. His excursion renewed America as a financial benefactor.⁵⁵

Impeded by Collins' revolution, the British Parliament instituted the Government of Ireland Act in 1920. This granted Ireland two Parliaments, one in the North and one in the South, with a Council of Ireland to plan for eventual integration. The Unionist approved this because the Southern Parliament could not absorb the North without its consent. The Sinn Fein declined on the basis that the Irish Republic, albeit illegally, had been in effect since 1916.⁵⁶ Collins increased military efforts after this slight, but de Valera, upon his return from America, willingly went into negotiations with David Lloyd George.⁵⁷

⁴² Ward, *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism*, 125.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴⁵ Collins, *The Path to Freedom*, 66.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴⁷ Ward, *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism*, 130-1.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁵⁰ Collins, *The Path to Freedom*, 87.

⁵¹ Ward, *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism*, 150.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 159-60.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 128-9.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 133-4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

In 1921, a series of letters were written between de Valera and Lloyd George. These began with a persuasive document from Lloyd George imploring for peace. He called the conflicts with Ireland an “embarrassment to our forefathers.”⁵⁸ He offered a settlement giving Ireland all the powers and privileges which the self-governing dominions of Britain had, including control of home defense, police, courts, education, transportation and many other local matters.⁵⁹ Britain would be allowed free trade, military bases in Ireland, money and troops for the military, and aid in the debt of the United Kingdom.⁶⁰

De Valera, whose primary concern was a republic for Ireland,⁶¹ adamantly refused. He called dominion status an illusion, and maintained that a harmonious relationship with Britain would only be achieved through complete separation.⁶² De Valera informed Lloyd George, “The sole cause of the ‘ancient feuds’ which you deplore has been, as we know, and as history proves, the attacks of English rulers upon Irish liberties. These attacks can cease forthwith, if your Government has the will. The road to peace and understanding lies open.”⁶³

Lloyd George was willing to compromise for peace, but could not accept separation.⁶⁴ De Valera was insistent on a small nation’s right to defend its liberties from the powerful, and he threatened war if Britain attempted force.⁶⁵ In the end, they agreed to meet, after a quarrel over Ireland delegates as coming from a sovereign and free state. During the course of these letters, the eloquence and evidence the leaders use dissipates, and by the closing stages, they became very short, terse, firm and unyielding. The tension was evident and negotiations were set for October of 1921.

De Valera sent Michael Collins, among others, to the negotiations. On December 6th, the Anglo-Irish Treaty was reached. This treaty inaugurated an independent Irish Free State with dominion status under the crown and a governor general.⁶⁶ The new state had to assume some of the United Kingdom’s debt, to assist with

war and defense amenities for British forces,⁶⁷ and to submit to a boundary commission to determine the line between Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State.⁶⁸

The Anglo-Irish Treaty split the wartime partnership of Collins’ military tactics and de Valera’s governmental strategies. The Civil War in Ireland had begun. De Valera and others were irate that the representatives failed to accomplish a united Ireland, but they were absolutely livid at the betrayal of their republic ideal.⁶⁹ Collins upheld that they had maneuvered the best arrangement for the circumstances, for Lloyd George had threatened full-scale war if the treaty was refused. Collins knew that the IRA had the power to compel Britain to negotiate, but winning a military victory was decidedly improbable. Lloyd George would not tolerate a united Ireland or a republican government. Collins defended his decision, stating that the treaty granted “not the ultimate freedom that all nations aspire and develop to, but the freedom to achieve it.”⁷⁰

As it turned out, Collins was accurate. The Civil War brought a divided Ireland to her knees. Restoration of civic order was arduous.⁷¹ A war of erratic guerilla attacks and retaliations ensued, creating a brutal war, with many dead and many executed. The anti-treaty forces were finally forced to surrender in May of 1923.⁷² The Civil War resulted in the death of Collins, a legacy of blame,⁷³ and the ancestors of Ireland’s future political parties, the Fine Gael and the Fianna Fáil, from the pro-treaty and anti-treaty factions respectively.⁷⁴ Shortly after the end of the Civil War, Collins’ prediction of the treaty as a means to an end came to light.

By 1932, de Valera became the Prime Minister of the Irish Free State, from which he legally abolished the Irish oath of allegiance to the British crown. In 1937, the Irish Free State eradicated all allusions to the crown from its constitution, other than that allowing the British king to act for Ireland in foreign affairs. Later that year, the Irish Free State adopted an entirely republican constitution and renamed the country Eire. Consultation in 1938 resulted in the abandonment of United Kingdom naval bases in Ireland. Eleven years later, in 1949, Eire assumed the designation “Republic of Ireland,” and she withdrew from the British Commonwealth. As stated by

⁵⁸ Tim Coates, ed., *The Irish Uprising 1914–1921: Papers from the British Parliamentary Archive* (London: The Stationary Office, 2000), 155.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁶¹ Ward, *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism*, 138.

⁶² Coates, *The Irish Uprising 1914–1921: Papers from the British Parliamentary Archive*, 165.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁶⁶ Ward, *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism*, 138.

⁶⁷ Coogan, *Ireland Since the Rising*, 35.

⁶⁸ Ward, *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism*, 138.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁷¹ Coogan, *Ireland Since the Rising*, 47.

⁷² Ward, *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism*, 141.

⁷³ Coogan, *Ireland Since the Rising*, 49.

⁷⁴ Ward, *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism*, 145.

Desmond Williams, "By the time the British found the answer, the Irish had lost interest in the question."⁷⁵

The Easter Rising of 1916 had set into motion the events that led to the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922. After repeated mistakes on the part of the British, they eventually had to surrender to the revolutionary force that the Rising and its aftermath incited. Ireland was no longer playing the games of the British. After the sacrifices of the Rising, she was inspired, relentless, and angry. Collins and de Valera refused to fail, they refused to deter from their dream, and they refused to settle for anything less than everything. Pearse and the other leaders of the Rising had died for the realization of an independent, republican, Gaelic, united Ireland.⁷⁶ It was because of them that Ireland fought in the way that she did, invigorated by the support the Rising secured and the leaders that the Rising left behind. They died so that Ireland might live, and live she did.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 143.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 147.