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yet of the 1916 Rising'

IRISH ECONOMIC & SOCIAL HISTORY

the
RISING
Ireland: Easter 1916



CENTENARY
EDITION

THE RISING
Ireland: Easter 1916

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THE RISING

IRELAND: EASTER 1916

FEARGHAL MCGARRY

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Easter 1916 in 2016

All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

W. B. Yeats, *Easter 1916* (1920)

What do we remember when we remember 1916? Yeats identified the sacrifice at Easter with resurrection, just as Patrick Pearse intended: ‘Life springs from death’.¹ Many veterans recalled it as a transformative moment. ‘Then came like a thunderclap the 1916 Rising’, recorded Ernie O’Malley, a Dublin medical student at the time: ‘Before Easter Week was finished I had changed.’ He described ‘the strange rebirth’ that followed Pearse’s execution: ‘Now was the lyrical stage, blood sang and pulsed, a strange love was born that was for some never to die till they lay stiff on the hillside or in quicklime near a barrack wall.’² In another memoir, published posthumously, O’Malley reflected on his life’s cause: ‘I had given allegiance to a certain ideal of freedom as personified by the Irish Republic. It had not been realised except in the mind.’³ He had dedicated years of his ‘broken’ life to a project paralleling that of the Bureau of Military History (whose records form the core of this book), traversing Ireland to record the testimony of revolutionary veterans, compiling ‘notebook after notebook of material’ in the National Library in an attempt to reconstruct the era. Preparing for his death, O’Malley ‘first left instructions to be buried upright, facing eastwards towards his enemies the British, but added a coda: “in fact they are no longer my enemies. Each man finds his enemy within himself.”’⁴ O’Malley’s experiences convey the protean nature of 1916, even for those who lived through it. His generation, more often than not, recalled the rebellion from the perspective of the futures they had anticipated prior to 1916, and the disappointments they subsequently endured. For each generation that followed, the Rising meant something different again, leading one ethnologist to ask ‘When was 1916?’⁵

My first memory of 1916 is being physically punished for not being able to name the signatories of the Proclamation. This proved less effective in

inculcating patriotic values than our elderly teacher—frustrated by our indifference to his stories about Pearse—assumed. Growing up in the seaside town of Bray, County Wicklow, the meaning of 1916 was refracted through other, not particularly ideological, perspectives. Playing with my cousin, David, in the large, dilapidated Victorian house at Sydenham Villas, owned by my maternal grandmother—a former member of the Royal Dublin Society who had regarded London as the centre of civilization—we discovered a rent book for one of the inner-city tenements she had inherited from her father. Turning to the records for April 1916, we found scrawled across the page: ‘Rising. No rent paid!’, an entry which tells us something about the Rising’s initial impact on those known as ‘Castle Catholics’. A framed postcard of Michael Collins on her living-room mantelpiece testified to the family’s accommodation to the new realities brought about by the Rising (although throughout her life she recalled remarkably vivid—if conceivably not direct—memories of the soldiers killed in Easter Week).⁶

In contrast, my paternal grandmother, who lived in a terraced house in a working-class part of Bray, came from a republican family. Her Fenian husband, Mick, had helped land the Volunteers’ rifles at Howth, and, for a time, led the IRA’s campaign in the revolutionary backwater of Bray. Arrested in December 1920, he saw the war out in Mountjoy, Arbour Hill, and the Curragh. Among the remaining family papers is a notebook of press coverage—compiled, day-by-day, by his mother—detailing the execution of the 1916 leaders, and an almost entirely faded photograph of my grandfather in Rath internment camp. Although Mick’s pride in his actions seems evident from a photograph of him drilling his elderly comrades in a re-enactment of 1916 in the 1950s, my father, Des, has no recollection of his father ever mentioning his activism to him.⁷

Inevitably, my parents’ families had supported opposing sides in the Civil War. Although there was an awareness of this, it was never mentioned when the two grandmothers (who remained on second-name terms throughout their lives) met. Most Irish families have similar stories which reveal how the political abstractions of that period were subsumed into the fabric of everyday life. They also illustrate how the legacy of 1916 was shaped by not remembering, by generational memory, and by the differences between public and private forms of remembering.

As the pre-eminent symbol of Irish nationhood—rather than the scrappy week-long battle for Dublin—the Easter Rising has lent itself to endless re-interpretation over the past century, with new meanings and associations

ascribed in response to events that occurred long after 1916. One measure of an icon is its ability to transcend its original context: its representation 'across time and cultures' assumes greater weight in public discourse than the original image.⁸ In this respect, the Easter Rising must be considered as much a mythical as an historical event, as is reflected by the growing body of literature devoted to assessing the significance of its legacy.⁹

It is a commonplace to observe that commemoration tells us less about the historical event recalled than about the period in which it occurs: the militaristic tenor of the Rising's twenty-fifth anniversary was framed by 'the Emergency' (as the Second World War was known in Éire), the elaborate golden jubilee in 1966 reflected the efforts of the Taoiseach Seán Lemass to fashion a constructive patriotism for the modern state, while the muted seventy-fifth anniversary in 1991 was shaped by sectarian violence in the North. But although commemoration is more clearly shaped by the needs of the present, it is—like history—the product of a dialogue between the past and present.

What light does the run-up to 2016 cast on the Rising's significance almost a century on? One way of reflecting on this is to consider how preparations for the centenary compare with the previous major commemorations. While earlier anniversaries considered the Rising only in the wider context of the 'four glorious years' that followed, a historical era that pointedly came to an end with the Truce of 1921, the centenary has been framed as part of a 'Decade of Centenaries' encompassing the Home Rule crisis (1912–14), First World War (1914–18), War of Independence (1919–21), and Civil War (1922–23). Another difference is the extensive preparation which began in 2012 with the appointment of an All-Party Consultation Group on Commemorations, chaired by the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, and the establishment of an Expert Advisory Group on Commemorations. In Northern Ireland, such was the significance (or anxiety) attached to the centenary, the power-sharing executive assigned to itself the lead role in delivering the commemorative programme.

All this points to another striking divergence from previous anniversaries, at least those that occurred between the fiftieth and the post-Troubles ninetieth (which saw the military parade restored to Dublin's O'Connell Street): the revived desire to remember 1916. 'If you had a pound for every time in the past 20 years that an Irish politician invoked the name of one of the 1916 leaders, you would be in need of the services of St Vincent de Paul', the journalist John Waters wrote in 1994: 'We no longer talk, as a society, about 1916. The whole thing is all a bit embarrassing.'¹⁰

The new emphasis on the need for a pluralistic form of remembrance, not just in terms of the range of events remembered but the spirit in which they are commemorated, marks another shift. The Irish government's 'broad and inclusive' commemorative programme encompasses social and economic conditions, the Irish abroad, unionism, constitutional nationalism, the First World War, and the Revolution. It is intended to promote 'constructive dialogue' and 'to foster deeper mutual understanding among people from different traditions on the island of Ireland'.¹¹ The extent to which this conciliatory agenda (including the Rising's framing as part of a decade of historic events) has been embraced beyond the Irish Republic is also novel. Shortly before St Patrick's Day, 2012, the British Prime Minister David Cameron and Irish Taoiseach Enda Kenny met at Downing Street to announce an 'intensive programme of work' to mark the beginning of a 'decade of centenary commemorations of events that helped shape our political destinies'. Their joint statement emphasized the need for 'mutual respect, inclusiveness and reconciliation'. Even in Northern Ireland, notwithstanding one prominent Unionist politician's memorable allusion to 'some foreign old grubby rebellion', the Anglo-Irish rhetoric of conciliation was echoed in the executive's ostensible commitment to the commemorative principles of 'inclusivity, tolerance, respect... and interdependence'.¹²

Who could object? Almost everyone, as it turns out. Since 2012 the Irish government's efforts have provoked extensive public and press criticism. In Northern Ireland, the breakdown of relations between the major parties leading up to the December 2014 Stormont House Agreement ensured a tone of bitterness rather than reconciliation, not least on matters bearing on the local cocktail of grievances known as 'flags, parades and the past'. The low point (at the time of writing) in the Republic, where different pressures apply, was the launch of the Irish government's commemorative programme in November 2014. The Taoiseach's speech at the event—which was boycotted by 1916 relatives' groups—was periodically drowned out by the noise of anti-austerity protestors banging on the windows of the General Post Office, while a heckler was bundled out of the building for denouncing Kenny as a 'traitor'. Adding insult to injury, the promotional video to accompany the launch, 'Ireland Inspires 2016', was appraised by the most prominent member of the government's Expert Advisory Group as 'embarrassing unhistorical shit'.¹³

In retrospect, none of this is very surprising. While ostensibly occasions of unity, commemorative processes are often shaped by division. Indeed, the criticism of the government's efforts by relatives' groups, rival political

parties, republicans, and academics provides one of the most obvious continuities with earlier anniversaries: 1916 has always been 'a chronicle of embarrassment'.¹⁴ Then, as now, the source of much of this tension is the nature of commemoration itself, a process which demands the subordination of the historical complexity of the past to the needs of the present.

The difficulty of reconciling the historical event that occurred in 1916 with the conciliatory rhetoric of the 'peace process' accounts for the present uncertain tone of official discourse. A violent insurrection by militants who aimed to destroy British power in Ireland, the Easter Rising was not intended to deepen understanding, promote mutual harmony, or heal the divisions of the past. Consequently, the government's video included only the most fleeting glimpse of the Proclamation and, remarkably, no images of the rebel leaders or the destruction in Dublin, featuring instead such figures as W. B. Yeats, Queen Elizabeth II, Ian Paisley, Katie Taylor, and Bob Geldof. The *Irish Times*' headline—'Don't mention the war'—conveyed the sceptical public response to this misguided attempt to market violent insurrection as feel-good heritage.¹⁵ This debacle was shortly followed by the Cabinet's decision that 'it would be better not to invite the royal family to the Easter Week events', an embarrassing retraction of an invitation that had yet to be extended.¹⁶ Predictably, the government's struggle to find an appropriate register to commemorate the Easter Rising with historical integrity gifted its political rivals an opportunity to seek to appropriate its still potent legacy to their own cause. Supported by relatives' groups, Sinn Féin subsequently launched its own commemorative programme to allow the Irish public—in the words of the party's president Gerry Adams—to rededicate themselves to 'the politics of . . . Pádraig Pearse, and James Connolly, of Maire Drumm and Mairead Farrell, and of Bobby Sands'.¹⁷

Such manoeuvring indicates how the continuities with previous commemorations—including the continued overshadowing of the Rising by the Troubles—are more evident than the differences. There has never been a time when the Rising's legacy was not contested, and the present government's efforts to control the narrative have proven no less tenuous than those of its predecessors. In 1966, for example, at the time of the fiftieth anniversary, the Republic's ability to 'reverse ferret' decades of cultivating anti-partitionist grievance proved similarly ineffective. Its week-long jamboree became identified in popular memory—albeit largely erroneously—with Southern triumphalist nationalism, and the subsequent outbreak of the Troubles.¹⁸

Considered in a different light, these controversies—not least the implicit assumption that the public has the right to shape what happens in 2016—might be viewed more positively. Just as history is too important to be left to professional historians, commemoration should not necessarily be left to the state or its political parties: in Northern Ireland, where politics reinforces sectarian division, civic organizations are often more effective in engaging with popular historical narratives. The public debates around 2016 have also raised significant issues. The Irish government's willingness to dedicate €48 million to 'flagship capital projects' has been contrasted with the downgrading of history in the post-primary syllabus, and a reduction of funding to institutions such as the National Library that has undermined their ability to maintain basic services. Although the very existence of relatives' groups has been criticized as 'un-republican', their campaigns against property developers have helped to secure the preservation of remnants of the Rising's built heritage.

The shifting collective memory of 1916, moreover, suggests that the commemorative glass is more than half-full. Whereas Troubles-era remembrance was characterized by polarized and largely ahistorical debates about the morality of republican violence, recent years have seen a willingness to consider overlooked facets of the Rising, such as the Irish identity of many of those who fought for the British Crown. Whatever its limitations,¹⁹ the embrace of a pluralist agenda means that seeking to remember the forgotten, such as the unarmed Catholic policemen shot by rebels, or the forty children killed during Easter week, is no longer seen as anti-nationalist, just as acknowledging the rebels' idealism does not necessarily mark one out as a 'sneaking regarnder'. This more honest attitude to the past is bound up with the emergence of a more tolerant and flexible sense of Irish identity.

Ironically, the last remaining victims of wartime Ireland's much-analysed collective amnesia may be the one hundred and twenty or so British army soldiers killed during Easter week. Those whose bodies were not claimed by their families now lie buried in lonely graves at Grangegorman military cemetery, Kilmainham's Royal Hospital, or public cemeteries such as Deans Grange. Serving no obvious commemorative purpose, these men became an awkward memory in Britain: ignored, or silently incorporated into official memorials to the dead of the First World War. Their fate is mirrored by the continuing neglect in both British collective memory and scholarly historiography of the impact of the rebellion's ripples on the United Kingdom. How many British people realize that their state, in its current

form, is a product of Irish revolutionary violence,²⁰ or that the resulting territorial loss rivalled that of many defeated states? While historians of Ireland increasingly emphasize the centrality of the First World War to the attainment of Irish independence,²¹ historians of Britain still argue that the their state (by which they often actually mean Great Britain, i.e. England, Scotland, and Wales, rather than the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland as then constituted) largely escaped the destabilizing pressures that reshaped post-war Europe.²² It was not only in far-flung parts of Eastern Europe that multinational empires were torn apart by the forces set loose by the Great War. Disquieting as the thought may be, the rise of self-determination, paramilitarism and state terror, sectarian violence against minorities, and partition and succession also formed part of the United Kingdom's First World War experience.

In Ireland, a narrowing of the gap between scholarly historiography and popular history in recent years has enhanced public understanding of the Rising. The tendency to regard scholarly—that is, critical—history with hostility has, with notable exceptions, diminished. One example is the extent to which it is no longer controversial to depict Easter 1916 as part of the 'seamless robe' that was Ireland's experience of the First World War.²³ Another is the reintegration of the losers of Irish history—whether Redmond's home rulers or Catholic servicemen—into collective memory. The 'Decade of Centenaries' has contributed to this by broadening the focus from men with guns—a key theme in 1966²⁴—to the impact of class and gender, as was demonstrated by the high profile of the commemoration of the 1913 Dublin Lockout and the founding of Cumann na nBan (the Irish republican women's organization) in 1914.

Archival developments—particularly the digitization of the Bureau of Military History (completed after the writing of this book) and the release of the Military Service Pensions Collection, one of the most significant state initiatives to mark the Decade—are democratizing historical research. They are also reshaping scholarly understanding of the period, prompting, for example, a new focus on generational approaches. Exploring such themes as education, family relations, associational activity, intellectual influences, and private life, group biographies of 'ordinary' activists, middle-class revolutionaries, Easter widows, and their children have deployed personal narrative to excavate layers of myth and memory and to widen the lens to include the excitement of the 'pre-revolution' and the often disappointing realities of independent Ireland.²⁵

Historiographical fashions have also been shaped by contingent factors. The impact of the recent economic crisis, the cumulative effect of revelations about political corruption, and an increasing awareness of the state's responsibility for the historic abuse of its vulnerable citizens, has led to an unprecedented acknowledgment of the failure to achieve the ideals proclaimed in 1916. The rapid collapse of the power of the Catholic Church, most recently demonstrated by the popular referendum in favour of same-sex marriage in May 2015, has also contributed to the reshaping of ideas about what it means to be Irish. Coinciding with the end of the Troubles, this has seen debate about 1916 shifting—in a manner reminiscent of Ernie O'Malley's final epiphany—from a preoccupation with republican violence and with Ireland's relationship with England to more interesting and challenging questions about the kind of society the revolutionary generation wished to create, and why they found it more difficult to change society than to win independence. These are questions for which historians can provide some answers;²⁶ for example, by retrieving radical lives whose absence from the historical record was a product of post-independence conservatism. These questions may also prompt a more constructive public engagement with the legacy of 1916 in 2016. Rather than simply re-enacting the past, the most successful forms of commemoration allow for its energies to illuminate the possibility of alternative futures.²⁷

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This book is dedicated to the girls in my life—Selina, Sofia, and Ava—not least for putting up with the writing of it.

F McG

Who is Ireland's Enemy?

Who is Ireland's enemy?
Not Germany, nor Spain,
Not Russia, France nor Austria;
They forged for her no chains,
Nor quenched her hearths,
Nor razed her homes,
Nor laid her altars low,
Nor sent her sons to tramp the hills
Amid the winter snow.

Who spiked the heads of Irish priests
On Dublin Castle's gate?
Who butchered helpless Irish babes,
A lust for blood to sate?

* * * * *

O God! that we should ever fail
To pay those devils back.
Who slew the three in Manchester,
One grim November dawn,
While 'round them howled sadistically
The Devil's cruel spawn?

Who shattered many Fenian minds
In dungeons o'er the foam,
And broke the loyal Fenian hearts
That pined for them at home?
Who shot down Clarke and Connolly
And Pearse at dawn of day,
And Plunkett and MacDiarmada,
And all who died as they?

Brian O'Higgins

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List of Abbreviations

AOH	Ancient Order of Hibernians
DMP	Dublin Metropolitan Police
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
GOC	General Officer Commanding
GPO	General Post Office
ICA	Irish Citizen Army
IPP	Irish Parliamentary Party
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IRB	Irish Republican Brotherhood
OTC	Officer Training Corps
RAMC	Royal Army Medical Corps
RIC	Royal Irish Constabulary
UIL	United Irish League
UVF	Ulster Volunteer Force

Chronology

- 1798 23 May: United Irishmen rebellion, resulting in thirty thousand dead
- 1801 1 January: Ireland becomes part of the United Kingdom under Act of Union
- 1803 23 July: Robert Emmet's rebellion in Dublin
- 1829 13 April: Catholic Emancipation Act
- 1845–51 Great Famine, resulting in one million dead and mass emigration
- 1858 17 March: Formation of Irish Republican Brotherhood in Dublin
- 1867 5 March: IRB (Fenian) rebellion
- 1870 19 May: Home Rule movement founded by Isaac Butt
- 1879–81 Land War hastens land reform in Ireland
- 1880 17 May: C. S. Parnell elected chairman of Irish Parliamentary Party
- 1884 1 November: Gaelic Athletic Association established
- 1886 8 June: W. E. Gladstone's Home Rule Bill defeated in House of Commons
- 1890–91 November 1890–February 1891: Irish Party splits following O'Shea divorce scandal
- 1891 6 October: Death of Parnell
- 1893 31 July: Formation of Gaelic League
2 September: Gladstone's second Home Rule Bill defeated by House of Lords
- 1900 30 January: John Redmond reunites Irish Parliamentary Party
- 1905 28 November: National Council Convention adopts Sinn Féin policy
- 1907 5 September: Sinn Féin formed
- 1909 30 November: Lloyd George's 'People's Budget' rejected by Lords
- 1911 18 August: Parliament Act revokes Lords' power of absolute veto
- 1912 11 April: Government of Ireland (Third Home Rule) Bill introduced in Commons
28 September: Ulster Solemn League and Covenant signed by unionists on 'Ulster Day'
- 1913 31 January: Ulster Volunteer Force formed
26 August: ITGWU strike, leading to lock-out, begins

- 19 November: Irish Citizen Army founded by James Connolly
- 25 November: Irish Volunteers formed in Dublin
- 1914 20 March: Curragh ‘mutiny’ undermines British government’s Irish policy
- 2 April: Formation of Cumann na mBan
- 24–5 April: UVF land rifles at Larne
- 10 July: Ulster provisional government launched in Belfast
- 26 July: Irish Volunteers land rifles at Howth and British army kill four civilians at Bachelor’s Walk, Dublin
- 3–4 August: Great War begins
- 18 September: Government of Ireland Bill enacted but suspended
- 20 September: Redmond commits Irish Volunteers to war effort
- 24 September: Redmondite majority split from Irish Volunteers, forming National Volunteers
- 1915 25 May: Conservatives and Unionists join Asquith’s coalition government
- May: IRB form a military committee to plan an insurrection
- 1 August: IRB stage funeral of O’Donovan Rossa in Dublin
- 1916 20–1 April: *Aud*’s cargo of German arms intercepted by British navy
- Roger Casement arrested at Banna Strand, Co. Kerry
- 22 April: Eoin MacNeill countermands mobilization of Irish Volunteers set for 23 April (Easter Sunday)
- 24 April: Rebels seize buildings in Dublin on Easter Monday
- 25 April: Martial law declared in Dublin
- 29–30 April: Rebels surrender
- 3–12 May: Fifteen leading rebels executed
- 3 August: Roger Casement hanged at Pentonville jail, London
- 4 November: Martial law ends
- 22 December: Internees in Britain released
- 1917 5 February: Count Plunkett wins North Roscommon by-election
- 16 June: Convicted rebels released from British jails
- 10 July: De Valera wins East Clare by-election for Sinn Féin
- 25–7 October: De Valera elected president of Sinn Féin and president of the Irish Volunteers
- 1918 5 April: Irish Convention fails to agree on introduction of Home Rule
- 18 April: Military Service Act with provision for conscription in Ireland enacted at Westminster
- 17–18 May: Sinn Féin leadership arrested in ‘German plot’
- 11 November: Great War ended by armistice
- 14 December: Sinn Féin win 73 seats in Ireland in UK general election

- 1919 21 January: Dáil Éireann (Irish parliament) convened in Dublin
Irish Volunteers at Soloheadbeg ambush kill two policemen
- 1920 23 December: Government of Ireland Act partitions Ireland and devolves
power to Northern Ireland state
- 1921 11 July: War of Independence ended by truce
6 December: Anglo-Irish Treaty signed in London
- 1922 7 January: Dáil Éireann approves Treaty by 64 to 57 votes
28 June: Irish Civil War begins with fighting in Dublin
- 1923 24 May: Civil War ends in defeat for anti-treaty IRA forces
- 1949 18 April: Southern Ireland becomes a republic on Easter Monday
- 1998 22 May: Electorate of both Irish states endorse Belfast Agreement's new
constitutional framework for Northern Ireland, north/south, and Irish/
British relations



Ireland

Introduction

At ten minutes past midday on Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, thirty members of James Connolly's Irish Citizen Army approached Dublin Castle, the imposing complex of buildings that housed the Irish executive and functioned as the administrative heart of British rule in Ireland. Despite their assortment of pistols, rifles, and shotguns, some onlookers did not regard them as much of a threat, mocking their military pretensions by shouting 'pop guns' as they passed.¹ Nor apparently did Constable James O'Brien, a veteran of the Dublin Metropolitan Police in his mid-forties, who stood alone, unarmed, as he manned the public entrance to the Castle. As the uniformed rebels made to push their way through the main gate, he stretched out his arm, blocking their entrance. From a ground floor window, close by the gate, Constable Peter Folan watched in disbelief as Seán Connolly, a well-known amateur actor who was normally to be found working as a clerk in the nearby City Hall, raised his rifle, shooting O'Brien in the head at point blank range. The first victim of the Easter Rising remained on his feet for several seconds, before falling quietly to the ground. The raiding party hesitated, perhaps shocked, before rushing through the gate towards the Upper Castle yard. A soldier caught in the open fled for cover as the advancing rebels fired their shotguns towards the window of a nearby guardroom where six sentries had gathered around a pot of stew.

The rebels quickly overwhelmed the soldiers, who they had unnerved by throwing an unexploded home-made bomb into the guardroom, and tied them up with their own puttees. Less than twenty-five yards away, the Under-Secretary for Ireland, Sir Matthew Nathan, had just begun a meeting with the army's chief intelligence officer, Major Ivon Price, and the Secretary of the Post Office, Arthur Norway, to discuss the suppression of the Volunteer movement, following the discovery of a German

attempt to smuggle rifles into Kerry. Hearing the shots, Price instantly grasped their significance: ‘They have commenced’.² Drawing his revolver, he bolted towards the Castle yard, firing in the direction of ‘half a dozen Volunteers in green coats, dashing about’. Remarkably, Price—soon to become a Companion of the Distinguished Service Order as a result of his valiant efforts—appears to have been the only armed soldier within Dublin Castle at that moment: the sentries had not been equipped with live ammunition for their rifles, while the nearest reinforcements consisted of a small force of twenty-five soldiers in the nearby Ship Street barracks on the other side of the Castle buildings.

What happened next remains unclear although almost everyone involved agreed that the Castle should have fallen: ‘They could have done it as easily as possible’, Price told the commission of inquiry into the Rising.³ ‘The Volunteers could have easily taken the Castle’, Constable Folan confirmed, ‘there was not a gun in it, and any ammunition to be found was blank’.⁴ The *Irish Times* attributed the Castle’s survival to the quick reactions of a plucky sentry who had promptly closed the heavy iron gates to the Castle yard.⁵ Others suggested that the rebels chose to retreat despite having breached the Castle’s defences. J. J. Foley, a postal clerk who watched the rebels enter the Castle yard, believed that they were startled by the loud bang of a slammed door.⁶ Helena Molony, one of two women among the Citizen Army raiders, blamed their failure on the confusion within their own ranks:

it appeared that the men behind Connolly did not really know they were to go through...there was hesitation on the part of the followers. Sean Connolly shouted ‘Get in, get in’. On the flash, the gates were closed. The sentry went into his box and began firing. It breaks my heart—and all our hearts—that we did not get in.⁷

Whatever the reason, the Castle survived but it endured the ignominy of remaining besieged by the rebel raiding party which occupied the City Hall and *Daily Express* buildings overlooking the Castle gate. Although two hundred soldiers from the Royal Irish Regiment and Royal Dublin Fusiliers were immediately despatched to relieve the Castle, they failed to dislodge the rebels who had barricaded the surrounding buildings and streets. It was not until almost two hours after the initial attack, when soldiers finally gained entry to the Castle grounds through the Ship Street entrance, that the seat of British power in Ireland was secured.

The raid on the Castle encapsulates much of the drama, horror, and confusion of a week that would culminate in the destruction of much of central Dublin. Like the Rising, it exemplified both the remarkable audacity—or absurdity—of the rebels' ambitions and what many would come to regard as the complacent ineptitude of the British administration. The notion that a tiny band of poorly armed rebels could penetrate the heart of the British establishment in Ireland must have seemed unthinkable, to supporters and opponents of the union alike, until they actually did so. Indeed, the most likely reason why the Castle did not fall was that the rebels (who had orders to occupy City Hall rather than the Castle) had not considered it a realistic possibility; after breaching the Castle's defences, they appeared unsure what to do next. We don't know for certain why the organizers of the rebellion did not make more of an effort to capture the most valuable strategic and symbolic target in the country, but in this respect the attack also exemplified the wider Rising which prioritized heroic gestures over practical objectives and was beset by a string of missed opportunities and unforeseen disasters.

It was not only in its audacity that the attack represented a shocking assault on the establishment. The working-class rebels who attacked the Castle belonged to a revolutionary socialist militia, dedicated to the overthrow not merely of British rule but the capitalist order; even more unsettling for some, their numbers included two female combatants, symbolizing the Citizen Army's rejection of the prevailing social as well as economic values. Perhaps most shocking of all, they were prepared to kill their own compatriots to achieve their aims. Although the Easter Rising is usually seen as a chivalrous affair, particularly in contrast to the ruthless guerrilla war that followed, Constable O'Brien—like other men, women, and at least one child who were deliberately shot that day—was unarmed. Like many of those killed by republicans in the struggle for independence, he was an Irishman and probably a Catholic and a nationalist.

The assault on the Castle also demonstrated the tremendous power of political violence, even when deployed on a small scale in a militarily ineffective way by an unrepresentative minority. Arthur Norway, a persistent critic of his administration's reluctance to suppress the separatist movement, had few doubts about the significance of what he had witnessed that afternoon. Describing Britain's humiliating failure to prevent the Rising as an episode 'more disgraceful than can easily be found in its great history', he placed the blame squarely on the Irish

Chief Secretary, Augustine Birrell, and his subordinate, Nathan, whose credibility had been as thoroughly shattered as the Castle's aura of invincibility. Nor were they the principal political casualties of the rebellion. Norway later recalled how, as he observed the 'strange and awful scene' from the darkness of the Castle yard amidst the awesome roar of rifles, machine guns, and bombs as British army soldiers fought to retake City Hall, he had

turned to the Attorney General, and said, 'This seems to be the death knell of Home Rule'. Now he was a sane and moderate Nationalist. But he said thoughtfully, 'Upon my soul, I don't know are we fit for it after all'. And then, after a little interval, 'The man I am sorry for is John Redmond'.⁸

The raid on Dublin Castle is famous, as are many of the pivotal events of Easter week which have formed the subject of movies, fiction, ballads, poems, school-lessons, commemorations, and endless public and political controversy: few events in Irish history have been so remembered, re-enacted, and re-imagined. Biographies have been devoted to the leading figures, and the rebellion has formed the subject of political, military, diplomatic, and local studies, including Charles Townshend's recent and authoritative *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion*. The focus of this book, however, is different. It tells the story of the Rising from within and below, describing the events of this period from the perspective of those who lived through it, particularly the men and women from ordinary backgrounds who have remained unknown figures. It draws on a vast range of first-person narratives, many previously unpublished, to convey the experience of revolution—what it actually felt like—and to address a range of basic questions which continue to divide historians. What led people from ordinary backgrounds to fight for Irish freedom? What did they think they could achieve given the strength of the forces arrayed against them? What kind of a republic were they willing to kill and die for?

Only recently, with the release of the records of the Bureau of Military History, whose vast collection of witness statements form the spine of this study, has it become possible to address these questions in any great detail. Comprising over seventeen hundred first-person accounts detailing the revolutionary experiences of members of Sinn Féin, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, Cumann na mBan, and the Irish Volunteers, the Bureau forms one of the richest and—in relative terms—most comprehensive oral history archives devoted to any modern revolution. While the witness

statements do not, for the most part, fundamentally alter our knowledge of what occurred, they enhance our understanding of the motivations, mentality, and experiences of the revolutionary generation, preserving something of the texture and complexity of the past rarely recorded by conventional sources. The statements do not, for example, explain why the raid on Dublin Castle failed—Molony was mistaken in her recollection of a sentry firing shots while Constable Folan prudently chose to return to his work in the Castle library (pasting reports about separatists into books of press cuttings) after he was fired on—but they do tell us a great deal about the events that led up to the attack, what it felt like to be involved in it, and the atmosphere in the Castle and the General Post Office (GPO) in the days that followed.⁹ Although the statements were made long after the Rising, they illuminate the thinking of separatists before 1916, a period in which British rule or, at best, Home Rule within the union appeared to represent the only realistic futures and a popular revolution seemed a hopeless pipe dream. The Bureau's witness statements will settle few arguments. Individually, they are inconclusive, contradictory, and fragmentary; but, collectively, they offer an unrivalled insight into the process by which a nation and society was transformed by revolutionary violence.

Given its centrality to this study, a few points about the source—and the use made of it—are necessary. Established in 1947 by the Irish government, in collaboration with a committee of professional historians and former Irish Volunteers, the Bureau of Military History's investigators (predominantly senior army officers) were tasked with compiling detailed witness statements from participants in the Irish revolution. In some cases, these were written by the witnesses but, more frequently, they were formed into a coherent statement by the investigators before being submitted to the witness for verification and signed approval.¹⁰ By the time the Bureau was wound down a decade later, it had accumulated 1,773 witness statements (ranging widely in terms of length, accuracy, detail, and interest), 36,000 pages of evidence, and over 150,000 documents (not consulted for this study). In March 1959, to the dismay of the historians who had cooperated with the project, the collection was placed in eighty-three steel boxes in the strong room of government buildings, where it remained unavailable for public or scholarly scrutiny until its release, following the death of the last recipient of a military service pension, in March 2003.

Given their provenance, the statements of the Bureau of Military History form a problematic source. Many veterans—including Eamon de Valera, the head of the government that established the Bureau and the most prominent living rebel leader by the 1940s—refused to provide statements. Some chose not to participate because of their opposition to the State, others because of their unwillingness to betray confidences, their desire to forget the past, or (as perhaps in the case of de Valera) their reluctance to formally detail their role in it; others refused because of their distrust of the project or the government responsible for establishing it.¹¹ Many of those who did provide statements were selectively chosen. Relatively few female participants were interviewed, while constitutional nationalists, British officials, and unionists were generally (but not entirely) excluded from the Bureau's remit to record 'the history of the movement for Independence'.¹² Witnesses, who were subject to many pressures, discussed some aspects of the past less frankly than others. They were provided with questionnaires which effectively encouraged them to focus on particular aspects of the revolution while avoiding others, most notably the Irish Civil War of 1922–3. The statements describe not the events of 1913–21 but the witnesses' flawed memories of them from a remove of several decades; their recollections were inevitably distorted by subjectivity, the passage of time, the accumulation of subsequent knowledge, and the impact of later events including, most problematically, the Civil War which bitterly divided Irish revolutionaries for decades or, in many cases, lifetimes.

The Bureau's statements represent a heavily mediated form of oral history, recording those aspects of the past that interviewees were able or willing to recall, reflected through the lens of a state-sponsored historical project. Historians tend to regard oral sources either as a particularly suspect form of empirical evidence, which is nonetheless deemed capable of yielding valuable objective evidence when combined with supposedly more reliable sources such as state archives, or—more radically—as a unique form of source that can provide distinctive insights into mentalities and perceptions rather than objective realities.¹³ As oral historians point out, what is thought to have happened is often more significant than what actually occurred, while, for those who study historical memory, the selective nature of oral testimony—its distortions, confusions, and omissions—is more valuable than its accuracy.

Both methods have been applied to these sources. On some issues, the statements provide just as reliable an insight as conventional sources such as police and press reports, which are obviously subject to their own particular distortions. In the absence of any substantial written records of the military plans for the Rising or the inner workings of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the witness statements constitute some of the most useful evidence we have. But they also provide a valuable, if necessarily subjective, guide to mentalities. Although the reality of the separatist perceptions of Ireland under the union outlined in this book might justifiably be disputed by historians, these perceptions nonetheless constituted the basis for their politicization and actions. While conscious of both the problems and opportunities posed by oral sources, I have generally not drawn attention to them in the narrative that follows. Despite occasionally highlighting inaccurate, implausible, or illogical assertions and, more often, silently discarding unreliable evidence, my aim has been to use this unique source to allow those who fought for a new Ireland to tell their story in their own words.

I

The Rising Generation

Separatism in Ireland

Between 1913 and 1923 a political revolution occurred in Ireland. The violent events of this decade—which included international war, rebellion, guerrilla warfare, partition, secession, and civil war—shaped modern-day Ireland. At the heart of this process was the Easter Rising: before it, the great majority of Irish Catholics backed the moderate constitutional nationalism of the Irish Parliamentary Party; after it, popular support shifted decisively towards Sinn Féin and its more radical goal of a republic. The outcome of the insurrectionary struggle for independence was dominion government for the twenty-six southern counties, and devolved British rule in the north-east of the country, a settlement which armed republican groups continue to contest to this day. Almost a century later, there is general agreement about the events of this revolution but still little consensus on their interpretation. The Easter Rising, the most controversial event in Ireland's modern history, remains central to arguments about the nature and legitimacy of the struggle for independence.

Even now, there is a remarkable degree of uncertainty about fundamental aspects of the Rising. Did the rebels think they had any chance of success? Were they trying to seize power or engaging in a symbolic act of blood sacrifice? What sort of republic did they wish to bring about? The wider impact of the Rising also provokes debate: why did the actions of a small number of unrepresentative individuals have such a profound influence? Fewer than two thousand separatists fought in the rebellion, which most Irish people initially regarded as a reckless fiasco. Yet, by January 1919, a revolutionary government had secured a democratic mandate to establish the republic that the rebels had died to proclaim.

The Easter Rising's place in the broader context of Irish history is no less disputed. Did it represent an unpredictable deviation from the course of Irish politics since the Act of Union? Since its emergence in the 1820s, Irish nationalism had been dominated by constitutional politicians. In contrast, the separatist tradition, while sometimes enjoying a good deal of public sympathy (particularly in retrospect), consistently failed to mobilize support in an effective military or political form. Moreover, by the early twentieth century, Ireland was becoming a more modern, prosperous, and stable society as the historic grievances of nationalists—the demands for religious equality, land ownership, and self-government—were gradually redressed. In 1885, when W. E. Gladstone, the Liberal Prime Minister, announced his conversion to Home Rule, many nationalists assumed that they would see peaceful self-government within their own lifetimes. Although Home Rule for Ireland was enacted at Westminster in September 1914, that alternative future was destroyed—along with much of the centre of Dublin—in April 1916.

The impact of the Easter Rising on subsequent political events remains equally controversial. How responsible were the rebels for the violence which would become such an enduring feature of Irish political life throughout the twentieth century? Since 1916, every republican movement—including the War of Independence-era Volunteers, the anti-treaty IRA of the Civil War, the Provisional IRA during the Troubles, and present-day dissident paramilitaries—have justified their violence by recourse to the spiritual and ideological legacy of the Easter Rising.

I

This book will address all of these questions from an unusual angle: the ideas and experiences of the largely unknown individuals who participated in the Irish revolution at its grassroots. Before doing so, it is necessary to sketch out the broader historical context. Where does the history of the struggle for Irish independence begin? For traditional republicans, like the nineteenth-century revolutionary John O'Leary, the story of Irish freedom stretches back over eight hundred years to Strongbow's invasion of Ireland in 1169: 'If the English had not come to Ireland, and if they had not stayed there and done all the evil so many of them now allow they have been doing all along, then there would have been no Fenianism'.¹

Although the English Crown's formal authority within Ireland can be dated to King Henry II's expedition in 1171–2 (undertaken in response to Strongbow's success), few historians would take such claims seriously, both because there was as yet no real concept of an Irish national identity in the twelfth century, and because the Anglo-Norman invasion formed part of a much longer and more complex history of mutual interaction and colonization between the hybrid peoples of the two islands and continental Europe. The story of Ireland as a centuries-long struggle for the freedom of a Gaelic, Catholic people from English oppression was a later construct, rooted in the emergence of modern forms of nationalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a reality that did nothing to undermine the appeal of this compelling narrative, as exemplified by the ballad which prefaces this book, for modern nationalists.²

For many nationalists, the formative era in the struggle for Irish freedom was the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century period of Reformation, plantation, and Counter-Reformation: a brutal and catastrophic era of colonization, dispossession, repression, and exile.³ The historical basis for seeing this period as the point of origin for centuries of subsequent conflict between both Ireland and England and Catholic and Protestant communities within Ireland is considerably stronger. The late fifteenth century witnessed efforts by King Henry VII to secure the English State's incomplete control over Ireland, most notably Poynings' Law (1494), which subordinated the Irish parliament to English authority in order to better secure the English Crown against rival claimants. The Reformation, which divided sixteenth-century Europe into rival Protestant and Catholic states, had a profound impact on Ireland due to the failure of Protestantism to root itself in Ireland as successfully as it had in England. Although Henry VIII was declared supreme head of the Church of Ireland in 1536 and king of Ireland in 1541, the Gaelic Irish and Old English population remained largely Catholic. The failure of the Reformation in Ireland would become inextricably bound up with the subsequent development of modern Irish nationalism.

The Elizabethan era saw greater efforts to consolidate Protestantism and English rule, and further rebellions by the Gaelic aristocracy (which won international support from the Catholic kingdom of Spain). The policy of plantation, begun under Tudor rule and intensified during the reign of James I (1603–25), would leave a lasting mark on Ireland: the colonization of the native Irish population and the appropriation of its land by

English and Scottish Protestant settlers was intended to reinforce English domination, convert the Catholic population, and bring the benefits of Protestant civilization to the barbarous natives, enriching the colonizers and stimulating economic growth in the process. However, the vulnerability of the plantations was demonstrated in 1641 when the Gaelic Irish and Old English rebelled, resulting in the sectarian massacre of four thousand Protestant settlers and counter-reprisals against Catholics. The rebellion marked the beginning of an extended period of civil war in Ireland, a conflict bound up with wider violent struggles within Britain and continental Europe.

The suppression of the Confederate Catholics of Ireland (who established a provisional executive in Kilkenny in 1642 to assert their rights as subjects of Charles I) during Oliver Cromwell's notorious nine-month campaign was characterized by unprecedented ruthlessness: war, famine, and disease killed around one-fifth of the Irish population during the Cromwellian reconquest of 1649–52.⁴ It also resulted in a transformation in Irish landownership which would persist into the late nineteenth century.⁵ Although many individual plantations failed, the lasting legacy of the policy was the creation of a permanent population of lowland Scottish Protestants in Ulster. Throughout this traumatic period of conflict, it was religion—rather than nationality or ethnicity—that provided the vital context, even if the subsequent collective memory of this period would come to form an essential part of the story of Ireland for later nationalists and unionists. In the late seventeenth century, the politics of religion would again provide the impetus for violent conflict, most notably at the iconic Battle of the Boyne in 1690 (commemorated to this day by Northern Irish unionists) when William III defeated the deposed Catholic monarch James II. The outcome of the Williamite War confirmed the Protestant dominance of Irish society established by the Restoration.⁶

Although a tradition of sectarian conflict can be traced back to the early modern period, the vital context for modern Irish separatism was provided by the 1798 rebellion and the Act of Union that followed. The 1790s, as Thomas Bartlett has observed, formed 'the crucible of modern Ireland when separatism, republicanism, unionism and Orangeism captured the Irish political agenda for generations to come'.⁷ While Ireland had become a more stable political entity in the eighteenth century, its stability rested on inequality, as was illustrated by the infamous penal laws which (however sporadically and selectively) repressed Catholic worship and excluded Catholics from

political and administrative offices, land ownership, education, and professions such as the law and army. In response to the growing power of propertied Catholics, the military demands of the State, and more relaxed Protestant attitudes, a series of Catholic Relief Acts had begun to dismantle the penal laws by the end of the century but the Catholic majority continued to be denied political equality by the Irish parliament. Despite this, later nationalists would regard 'Grattan's parliament' (1782–1800) as a kind of golden age of self-government, largely due to their admiration of its supposed achievements of legislative independence and protectionist prosperity, and their perception that it had come about as a result of agitation by a largely Protestant patriot Volunteer force. In reality, the parliament was an exclusively Protestant assembly whose independence from Britain was illusory: its legislation could be vetoed from London and real power continued to reside in the British-appointed Irish executive at Dublin Castle, which was accountable to the British government rather than the Irish parliament.

Partly in response to these limitations, the Society of United Irishmen was founded in Belfast in 1791 by William Drennan, a physician and poet; Wolfe Tone, a Trinity College-educated barrister; and Thomas Russell, librarian of Belfast's radical Linen Hall Library, to campaign for parliamentary reform and an end to English control of Irish affairs. The formation of the United Irishmen is regarded as the birth of modern Irish republicanism, and later generations of republicans would make much of the fact that its Belfast membership was dominated by Presbyterians who, like Catholics, were excluded from patronage and power. In Dublin, the movement attracted middle-class Catholics and Protestants in roughly equal numbers. Influenced by the democratic and republican ideals of the American and French revolutions, the United Irishmen developed in an increasingly radical direction, demanding universal male suffrage and Catholic emancipation (even if some of its leading figures remained privately concerned by the prospect). Following its suppression by the authorities, the society reorganized itself as a secret oath-bound organization dedicated to achieving an Irish republic by armed insurrection. Up to fifty thousand rebels rose in 1798 in a series of uprisings which were ruthlessly crushed by the authorities, resulting in the death of around thirty thousand people. A further abortive rebellion, led by Robert Emmet, occurred in Dublin in 1803.

For later separatists, the achievement of a movement of Catholics, Protestants, and Presbyterians in uniting against British rule in the progressive

cause of a democratic, secular, republic would remain an essential cornerstone of Irish republicanism. The stirring rhetoric of Wolfe Tone would inspire republicans throughout the next two centuries:

To subvert the tyranny of our execrable government, to break the connection with England, the never-failing source of all our political evils, and to assert the independence of my country—these were my objects. To unite the whole people of Ireland, to abolish the memory of all past dissensions, and to substitute the common name of Irishman in place of the denominations of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter—these were my means.⁸

But, as ever, the reality was rather more complex. The 1798 rebellion was the result of an uneasy alliance between an enlightened middle-class movement and the Defenders, an agrarian secret society whose Catholic membership was more attuned to social and economic grievances and sectarian communal animosities than progressive political ideology. Consequently, the insurrection of 1798 resulted not only in fighting between the Crown forces (aided by loyalist yeomanry) and rebels, but sectarian massacres such as the burning of over a hundred Protestants in a barn in Scullabogue in County Wexford. Such atrocities, and the publicity they received, hastened the decline of the Protestant patriot tradition and radical Presbyterian support for republicanism.

The insurrection resulted in the Act of Union, which came into effect on 1 January 1801, as the British government moved decisively to secure its grip over an assertive, unstable, and politically discredited dependency at a time of international crisis. The act created a new state: the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The Irish Commons and Lords were replaced by the presence of one hundred Irish MPs and thirty-two peers at Westminster. The Anglican Churches of England and Ireland were united, the latter remaining the established church of a predominantly Catholic country, and taxation and financial harmony gradually followed. Despite the Act of Union, the geographical, religious, economic, and political distinctiveness of Ireland (which, in 1800, contained a population half that of Great Britain) ensured that genuine unity remained elusive, a reality reflected by the continued existence of a directly appointed Irish executive at Dublin Castle.

Perhaps most important was the measure excluded from the Act of Union. Underpinning the logic of the union was the belief (encouraged by the British government) that it would allow for a resolution of the