



CNI

NEWS FOCUS - Dispelling the Myths While We Remember the Events of 1916

The calendars of the state and of our schools, popular events and television programmes, are revolving around events marking the centenary of the 1916 Rising., writes Patrick Comerford...

The Easter Rising began on Monday 24 April 1916, which was neither Easter Day nor in March. But this year's main centenary events are taking place on Easter Day, Sunday 29 March 2016. The most important day in the Christian calendar has been taken over so that on Easter Day most churchgoers in Dublin are not going to get to the church or cathedral of their choice in the city centre. Despite representations from the Churches, a lockdown in Dublin is going to keep people away from Christ Church Cathedral, Saint Patrick's Cathedral, Saint Mary's Pro-Cathedral,

and many more churches. But this is not the first time that the Christian message of Easter has been hijacked for political purposes.

Roots of nationalism

We revel in our myths, so who is going to point out that neither Sinn Féin nor the IRA took part in the events of Easter Week, or that Patrick Pearse did not lead the rising? The three organisations named in the Easter Proclamation are the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, and the IRA was not formed until 1917. Instead, modern Irish nationalism begins with the revival of the Irish language. The leading figures in that revival include Dr Douglas Hyde, the son of a Cork-born Church of Ireland rector, Canon Arthur Hyde, and Dr Eleanor Hull, who wrote hymns such as *Be thou my vision* – although it is often forgotten that she was born in England and died there too.

The new nationalism found its expressions in the Abbey Theatre, founded by Lady Gregory, WB Yeats and George Russell (AE), in the poetry of Yeats and the plays of Sean O'Casey – all members of the Church of Ireland.

Dispelling myths

Since 1916, the leaders of the Easter Rising have been transformed into either working class heroes or the personification of what it is to be Green, Gaelic, Catholic and Irish. But the truths of history are different.

Pádraig Pearse was born Patrick Henry Pearse, the son of James Pearse, a Birmingham Unitarian who came to Dublin with the Victorian arts-and-crafts movement. Pearse was never a member of Sinn Féin or the IRA, and despite romantic portrayals linking him to Connemara, his mother was born in Dublin.

Other myths surrounding Pearse include one that he was “President of the Provisional Government,” a post that was held instead by Thomas Clarke. Thomas Clarke was not born in Ireland but in an army barracks on the Isle of Wight, where his father was a soldier in the British Army. Thomas MacDonagh had a middle class education in Rockwell College, Co Tipperary, and was a lecturer in English in UCD. In 1912, he married Muriel Gifford, a member of a well-known Church of Ireland family in Dublin. Éamonn Ceannt, an accountant, was born Edward Thomas Kent, the son of an officer in the Royal Irish Constabulary.

James Connolly was born in Edinburgh, and spoke with a Scottish accent all his life. After joining the British Army at the age of 14, he spent seven years with the army in Ireland. In 1890, he married Lillie Reynolds, a member of the Church of Ireland who was born in Co Wicklow.

Joseph Mary Plunkett was the son of Count George Noble Plunkett, and his distant cousin, Sir Horace Curzon Plunkett, was a prominent lay member of the Church of Ireland and a Home Rule MP. The poet was educated by the Jesuits at Belvedere and Stonyhurst, a public school in Lancashire. Hours before his execution, he married Grace Gifford, who, like her sister Muriel MacDonagh, had been born into a Church of Ireland family.

So, two of the seven signatories were not born in Ireland, one was the son of an Englishman, one had served in the British army, one was the son of an RIC officer, one was born in a British army barracks, one was a titled aristocrat who went to an English public school, and at least three married women who were born into the Church of Ireland.

These backgrounds were similar to those of many prominent figures on the Republican side

after 1916. For example, Liam Mellows, later executed in 1922 during the Civil War, was born William Joseph Mellows in an army barracks in Manchester, and his father was born in a British army barracks in India.

While the Rising was being planned, Arthur Griffith and Sinn Féin favoured establishing a form of dual monarchy linking Ireland and Britain, similar to the dual monarchy in the Austro–Hungarian Empire, and Sinn Féin did not support the Rising.

Church of Ireland members

Many of the women who had prominent roles in the Rising were members of the Church of Ireland: Countess Markievicz, the suffragette and a leader of the Irish Citizen Army, was born Constance Georgine Gore–Booth in Buckingham Gate, London, the daughter of Sir Henry Gore–Booth of Lissadell House, Co Sligo. She and her younger sister, Eva Gore–Booth, were childhood friends of Yeats.

Dr Kathleen Lynn, a founding member of the Irish Citizen Army who commanded the rebel garrison in City Hall in Easter Week, remained a pious member of the Church of Ireland until her death in 1955.

Indeed, the first informal meeting to form the Irish Citizen Army took place in Trinity College Dublin in the rooms of the Revd Robert Malcolm Gwynn. He attended Saint Bartholomew's Church, Ballsbridge, until his death in 1962, and is buried in Whitechurch Churchyard. One of his brothers, Brian Gwynn, was father-in-law of the late Archbishop George Simms. Through their mother, the Gwynns were grandsons of William Smith O'Brien, the exiled 1848 revolutionary.

In 1914, members of the Church of Ireland were among the most prominent organisers of the Howth gunrunning. Erskine Childers, a cousin of the Bartons of Glendalough House, sailed the *Asgard* into Howth. The organisers included his wife Molly Childers, Sir Roger Casement, Alice Stopford Green and Mary Spring Rice – all Church of Ireland members, as were many of those waiting for them on the pier, including Countess Markievicz, Douglas Hyde and Darrell Figgis.

Edward Conor Marshal O'Brien (1880–1952), skipper of the *Kelpie*, one of the yachts involved in the gunrunnings, was a member of the Church of Ireland from Limerick and a first cousin of the Gwynn brothers.

The equally dramatic Kilcoole gunrunning in Co Wicklow was organised by the skipper of the Chotah and the King's Surgeon in Ireland, Sir Thomas Myles (1857– 1937), who was baptised in Saint Michael's Church of Ireland parish church in Limerick. He was the son-in-law of the Revd George Ayres (1825–1881), as a Church of England clergyman, and his brother, the Very Revd Edward Albert Myles (1865–1951), was Dean of Dromore. Sir Thomas Myles was knighted at King Edward VII's coronation and after World War I began he joined the Royal Army Medical Corps and became an honorary surgeon to the King in Ireland.

More than 15 deaths

In the weeks to come, considerable attention will focus on the 15 leaders of the Rising who were executed. However, research by Glasnevin Cemetery shows that 485 people were killed in the Easter Rising. The majority of these casualties were civilians, with 184 killed in Easter week. A quarter of those who were killed were soldiers (107), many of them Irish, while the rebel forces accounted for 16 per cent of deaths (58). Four per cent of the casualties were among the police (13). Almost one in five of those killed was under the age of 19. The RTÉ broadcaster Joe

Duffy tells the story of the 40 children killed in the Rising in his book, *Children of the Rising*.

If the myths surrounding 1916 are in danger of writing members of the Church of Ireland and their roles out of history, then we must also remember that more Irish soldiers – Catholic and Protestant – died at the Gallipoli landings in 1915 or at the Somme in 1916 than died in the Easter Rising.

After 1916, Irish identity was so changed for ever and violently that the lines by Yeats about the leaders of the Rising speak too of the whole island:

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

Sinn Féin was not involved in the Rising. Indeed, the party was in such disarray at the time that it was insolvent and unable to pay the rent on its Harcourt Street premises. Its leader, Arthur Griffith, was then a monarchist, advocating a dual monarchy for Britain and Ireland.

It was not until late in 1916 that Éamon de Valera joined Sinn Féin, and the party almost split between its monarchist and republican wings at its 1917 Ard Fheis until a compromise motion was tabled favouring the establishment of an

independent Ireland, leaving the people to decide between a monarchy and a republic.

Like so many empires, Griffith's idealised Austro-Hungarian Empire, came to an end with World War I. The world was so changed and transformed that Yeats could open his poem *The Second Coming* with these lines:

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and
everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

'No petty people'

When the Treaty was signed in December 1921, Archbishop JAF Gregg of Dublin said in a sermon: "It concerns us all to offer the Irish Free State our loyalty. I believe there is a genuine desire on the part of those who have long differed from us politically to welcome our co-operation. We should be wrong politically and religiously to reject such advances."

In 1922, after many Protestants were forced from their homes and some had been murdered in Co

Cork, a delegation of southern members of the General Synod met Michael Collins and WT Cosgrave, and asked whether the government was “desirous of retaining” the Protestant community. The new government readily gave the assurances sought.

A few years later, describing himself as a “typical” member of a proud minority, WB Yeats declared in the new Senate: “We ... are no petty people. We are one of the great stocks of Europe. We are the people of Burke; we are the people of Grattan; we are the people of Swift, the people of Emmet, the people of Parnell. We have created the most of the modern literature of this country.”

In the decade that followed, Douglas Hyde became the first President of Ireland under the 1937 Constitution.

This feature was first published in the ‘Church Review’ (Dublin and Glendalough) in March 2016. Since publication, arrangements have been made to facilitate services taking place in both Christ Church Cathedral and St Patrick’s Cathedral on Easter Day 2016. Canon Patrick Comerford lectures in the Church of Ireland Theological Institute.

Canon Comerford also gave a lecture on the subject in St Mary's Cathedral, Limerick, on February 20 2016. It is available at: <http://www.patrickcomerford.com/2016/02/1916-finding-voice-for-church-of-ireland.html>

GET CNI HEADLINES EACH DAY

Facebook and Twitter

Click on logo at CNI Home page

www.churchnewsireland.org

+ Please share CNI with your friends

www.churchnewsireland.org