

## ‘The Irish Republic was proclaimed by poster’: the politics of commemorating the Easter Rising

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In a city beset by rumours, the leaders of the Easter Rising quickly began to consolidate their message. On the second day of the insurrection they issued *War News*, a four page news sheet priced at a penny: “‘War News’ is published today because a momentous thing has happened. ... The Irish Republic was proclaimed by poster, which was prominently displayed in Dublin’. *War News* also carried a report of the statement made by Patrick Pearse that morning which said:

The Irish Republic was proclaimed in Dublin on Easter Monday, 24<sup>th</sup> April, at 12 noon. Simultaneously with the issue of the proclamation of the Provisional Government the Dublin Division of the Army of the Republic, including the Irish Volunteers, Citizen Army, Hibernian Rifles, and other bodies, occupied dominating points in the city. The G.P.O was seized at 12 noon, the Castle was attacked at the same moment, and shortly afterwards the Four Courts were occupied.<sup>1</sup>

Two things are striking about this account of the events of Easter Monday. Firstly, there is a very clear attempt to specify the exact moment of origin - to convey a sense of absolute alignment - and, secondly, there is no reference to the Proclamation having been read aloud. The Irish Republic was proclaimed not by Pearse but by poster. Therefore, even though a considerable amount of attention was being paid to how the Easter Rising should be recorded and remembered, the most powerful feature of its subsequent commemorative ritual was overlooked. The true significance of the Easter Rising would only be understood in retrospect and, indeed, its complex meaning in Irish society owed as much to how it was commemorated as to the original event.

Also on 25 April James Stephens wrote: ‘On this day the rumours began, and I think it will be many a year before the rumours cease’.<sup>2</sup> Stephens’s contemporaneous account of his experiences during Easter week is suffused with the impossibility of

discovering anything truthful about the events unfolding in front of him. He met a man who ‘spat rumour as though his mouth were a machine gun or linotype machine’. This ‘wild individual’ believed everything he heard and transformed it ‘as by magic favourable to his hopes’.<sup>3</sup> Stephens anticipated that the Rising would be an unknowable event and this facilitated the myth-making which permeated the ways it was narrated, remembered and commemorated. The importance of the Rising in Irish life transcends the events of one week in April. Easter 1916 came to represent a moment of possibility against which all subsequent realities could be measured or on which they could be blamed. It has become a conduit for expressions of Irishness and for explorations of the nature of Irish society; a discursive space as well as a historical event.

### **‘Seething with rumour’**

The *Irish Times* was the only newspaper published in Dublin throughout Easter week 1916. Once martial law was introduced, censorship increased and facts were scarce. Railways and the post office service were suspended and local newspapers, being weekly, did not provide daily coverage of events in Dublin. Many reports characterised the rebellion as pro-German, Larkinite, or anti Home Rule: explaining, to some extent, the population’s initial antipathy towards the rebels. The *Wicklow People* reported that the Dublin outbreak was almost entirely the work of Larkin's Citizen Army and Sinn Féin volunteers: ‘With the Larkin Citizen Army, the spirit of syndicalism is abroad, hence Dublin suffered so severely by the destruction of our public and commercial buildings and the looting of shops.’<sup>4</sup> A sense of chaos was evident in other reports. By 6 May the *Leitrim Observer* stated that ‘within a mile radius of the city centre there is scarcely a house which cannot show its bullet-hole, its splintered chimney or its cracked slates as a memento of the rebels’ relentless guerrilla warfare’. Adding to this horror, it reported, was the fact that Dublin was beset with the imminence of famine.<sup>5</sup>

In more muted tones, the *Irish Times* conceded never having been published in stranger circumstances but welcomed the fact that the Royal Dublin Society’s Spring Show would open as planned.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the week it continued to print gardening tips, fashion intelligence and answers to readers’ queries regarding questions of morality,

legality and etiquette, reinforcing the sense that the Rising was an event that was happening parallel to real life. Onlookers remembered that in the immediate vicinity of the GPO there was a lively atmosphere underlined by the fact that the first victim of looters was Noblett's sweetshop. Fr Michael Curran, Secretary to the Archbishop of Dublin (who left an extensive record of his memories of that week) noted, 'I am sure that eye-witnesses that late afternoon and next day would say that what most impressed them, and impressed them most unfavourably, was the frivolity of the crowd, most of all women and children'.<sup>7</sup> John Ervine, who was manager of the Abbey Theatre, recalled the atmosphere on Sackville Street: 'We were all extraordinarily lacking in prescience. We thought of this thing as a kid's rebellion, a school-boys' escapade. "Silly young asses!" people were saying, "they'll only get into trouble".<sup>8</sup> Even for those participating in the Rising there were discordant moments. One man remembered that George Plunkett, who led a band of sixty insurrectionists from Kimmage, on boarding a tram, 'insisted on paying the conductor for tickets'.<sup>9</sup> On Wednesday 26 April the *Irish Times* reported briefly that peace reigned in the country. James Stephens wondered: 'Is the country so extraordinarily peaceful that it can be dismissed in three lines? There is either too much peace or too much reticence...'<sup>10</sup> It all added to the sense of other-worldliness: the Rising, even in Dublin, was an elsewhere event.

In the House of Commons Prime Minister Asquith conceded that the breakdown in the postal service and telecommunications was a cause of 'anxiety and embarrassment' as MPs struggled to debate an event about which so little was known.<sup>11</sup> The *Mirror* described Dublin as 'seething with rumours' while the *Times* noted that: 'Those who are in a position to know the facts keep their secrets, while those who perhaps are not so reliably informed, being Irishmen, are not wanting in communicativeness.'<sup>12</sup> It carried early reports that James Connolly had been shot dead and Patrick Pearse shot in the leg.<sup>13</sup> The *Washington Post* reported that a force of at least 10,000 rebels was involved in Dublin and neighbouring Irish counties and that 'John (or Eoin) MacNeill, leader of the Irish Volunteers..., has been shot, but whether in the fighting with the British troops or after arrest is not known here.'<sup>14</sup> Communication among the rebels was also difficult. The countermanding order led to confusion across the country and reduced the number who

turned out on Easter Monday. Information was conveyed inconsistently among the members of the Volunteers, Citizen Army and Cumann na mBan. One man recalled that 'quite a number of Volunteers who paraded had no idea where they were going or what was to take place'.<sup>15</sup>

Clair Wills has noted the way in which the sense of time was very imprecise for those who participated in the Rising. As a result signature moments such as the hoisting of the flag; the reading of the Proclamation and Pearse's table-top speech in the GPO on 25 April provided temporal bearings within narrative accounts of the week.<sup>16</sup> However, this was more true for those who heard of events rather than those who bore witness. A visual representation of Pearse's speech was recreated in a sketch by Charles Saurin while he was in Frongogh prison camp. The drawing represents an imagined moment as Saurin had not been in the GPO at the time of the speech.<sup>17</sup> Significantly, also, the most famous poetic rendering of the Rising, Yeats's *Easter 1916*, was the creation of someone who was not there. In Lady Gregory's autobiography, she remembers Yeats's comments on her chapter on the Rising, "You have given us the most important part of history -- its lies . . . I don't believe that events have been shaped so much by the facts as by the lies that people believed about them".<sup>18</sup>

Of the flags above the GPO, Fr Michael Curran recorded: 'It was either during my absence in the Pro-Cathedral or while I was at lunch in the Gresham (I think it was the latter) that the flags were hoisted on the G.P.O. As far as I remember there were only two.'<sup>19</sup> When the Republic was being proclaimed many Dubliners were thinking about lunch. James Stephens wrote of Easter Monday afternoon: 'I went to my office at the usual hour, . . . Peace was in the building, and if attendants had any knowledge of rumours of war they did not mention it to me. At one o'clock I went to lunch'.<sup>20</sup> The hour, which in retrospect would seem so pivotal was, for Stephens, entirely unremarkable. Mary Louisa Norway, wife of Arthur, Secretary of the Irish Post Office, remembered of that morning, 'I did some sewing and wrote letters etc., and when [my son Nevil] came in about 12.30 I said I wanted a walk before lunch'.<sup>21</sup>

Even those who witnessed it did not appreciate the significance of the moment when Pearse read the Proclamation. The writer Stephen McKenna would later record that he felt sad for Pearse because the response from the crowd was chilling. There were no wild hurrahs, no scenes reminiscent of the excitement which had gripped the French mob before they stormed the Bastille. The Irish simply listened and shrugged their shoulders, or sniggered a little and then glanced round to see if the police were coming.<sup>22</sup> Other accounts in the following decades confirmed the muted atmosphere on Sackville Street. William Fallon remembered:

There was very little noise in the street – practically silent. The crowd numbered about 200 and I'm sure that many of them didn't recognise the significance of what Pearse was saying. His voice didn't carry too well and it was difficult to hear him.

'He had the document of the Proclamation in his hand, standing between the columns of the G. P. O., in the middle, on what I judged to be a chair.

'But there was no reaction...when he had finished the crowd melted...'<sup>23</sup>

Geraldine Plunkett, who had just married Thomas Dillon, recalled watching the scene from the Imperial Hotel on Sackville Street. A sudden hush fell over the street as Pearse began to read the Proclamation of the Republic: 'Slowly the crowd broke up. Some strolled across to the Pillar, where they idly read the Proclamation; others just stood and stared up at the unfamiliar flags. Quite a few, bored with the whole affair, simply turned and wandered away.'<sup>24</sup> However, as early as 1 May 1916 the event had been transformed in the *Chicago Tribune* to one in which huge crowds of civilians thronged the streets while Pearse read the Proclamation, 'attired in some sort of fantastic uniform, with golden tassels and a sword'. When he had finished, the *Tribune* reported, 'thundering shouts rent the air, lasting for many minutes. The cries were taken up all along Sackville Street and the adjoining thoroughfares'.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, most newspapers reporting in the immediate aftermath carried no reference to the reading of the Proclamation. The *Daily Express* was typical in noting

simply that that copies of the 'Rebel Proclamation' were handed at the General Post Office to passers-by.<sup>26</sup> One thousand copies had been printed in Liberty Hall on Easter Monday morning by Christopher Brady, Michael Molloy and Liam O Briain. These were posted on walls across the city and given out to newsboys for distribution; at least one of whom sold his copies and returned to the GPO 'holding his cap by the peak and the back, full of silver coins, mostly 2/- and 2/6d pieces'.<sup>27</sup> It was the physicality of the Proclamation rather than its performance which mattered most on Easter Monday. Yet even the physical document proved somewhat elusive. Seán T O'Kelly, who was Staff Captain to Pearse, attempted to save the Proclamation for posterity and posted three copies in British Government official envelopes obtained from the GPO. He sent a copy to Curran, the Archbishop's Secretary; one to Philis Ryan, his fiancée and the third copy to his mother. The envelopes were not posted at the GPO yet only one (to his mother) was delivered successfully.<sup>28</sup>

Dick Humphreys, a former pupil at St Enda's who was a twenty-year old rebel in 1916, wrote later that Pearse's eyes lit up with intense joy when told that the posters were attracting attention and excitement. However, Oscar Traynor, as a Volunteer, spent the best part of Easter week in the GPO without, he said, ever seeing the Proclamation.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, Kathleen Murphy, a member of Cumann na mBan, along with six other young women from Belfast, was one of the first people to see a copy having been shown it by James Connolly in Liberty Hall. The intention was to send a copy north and, as Murphy was the tallest of the girls, she remembered that Connolly had suggested that she should be the person to carry it concealed under her blouse: 'I folded the Proclamation and fitted it under my blouse. I can't now recollect what happened to [it]. I was speaking to Mr. Connolly again before we left Liberty Hall. Perhaps Mr. Connolly may have taken the Proclamation from me as the carrying of it would mean so much danger. My mind is blank on what happened to the Proclamation'.<sup>30</sup> For the original document the signatures of the leaders were appended on a separate piece of paper. The compositor Michael Molloy recalled:

I took this with me and put it in my pocket and had it on my person when I was later a prisoner in Richmond barracks. Realising how dangerous it would be if the document containing actual signatures of the Proclamation was found, I destroyed it by chewing it up into small pieces and spitting it out on the floor. Actually the suggestion came from a fellow-prisoner. When he saw that I was beginning to tear this document he advised me that the best thing to do was to chew it up into small bits.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, for some of those intimately involved in the Rising, the Proclamation was, by turns absent, lost, chewed up and spat on the floor. Nonetheless it acted, as intended, as notice that something significant had changed. Its reproduction would be central to the structure and symbolism of all subsequent commemorations.

In the memory, too, the hour at which the Republic had been proclaimed became almost immediately a point of synchronicity. The *Times* repeated the version of events promoted in *War News* and reported: ‘At the stroke of 12 separate bodies of rebels seized three important points in the heart of the city.’<sup>32</sup> Dick Humphreys, who recorded his account on toilet paper while in Wakefield Prison in May 1916, remembered that at noon on Easter Monday:

Suddenly through the lovely summer-like air of that fatal bank holiday two shots ring out reverberatingly. Then follows a machine-gun-like succession of reports, and finally an immense explosion. People stop on the footpaths and look questionably at one another. A very few straightaway realise what has happened, and become the centres of chattering crowds. All at once one notices that a great silence, terrible in its unnaturalness, has fallen on the city.<sup>33</sup>

Solemnity was written into the event which, for Stephen McKenna, had unfolded amid shrugs and sniggers. A moment of origin had been agreed although, unlike Bastille Day, the date of Easter Monday was ever-changing. Fittingly, therefore, like most commemorations, that of the Easter Rising has always been, to some degree, a collision between that which is fixed and that which is fluid. As early as May 1916 the ritualistic

markers of future commemorations were already being established. However, twelve months later there was no certainty the Easter Rising would be commemorated at all.

### **‘The copy is more valuable than the original’**

Helena Molony, a member of the Citizen Army, was released from Aylesbury Jail on Christmas Eve 1916. With Jinny Shanahan and Winnie Carney she decided to ‘have a demonstration to commemorate the rebellion’ on its first anniversary. They agreed the central features would be to ‘beflag all the positions that had been occupied in the 1916 Rising...and to get out the proclamation, and to proclaim it again, and to try to establish the position that the fight was not over and that the Republic still lives’.<sup>34</sup> Making three flags, and with the assistance of a Glaswegian sailor called Moran and Baby Murray, a Fianna boy, they managed to raise the tricolor onto a large flagstaff at the GPO. Their efforts were so successful that it took the authorities until 6pm to take it down, by which point a large crowd had gathered. The *Irish Times* reported that the anniversary was marked in Dublin by a good deal of excitement and gatherings which together made up ‘a very considerable aggregation of persons’. The considerable excitement had been generated simply by Molony’s plan surreptitiously to hoist the flag over the GPO:

The crowd in Sackville Street grew in numbers during the morning, and at noon another incident attracted wide notice. A man walked along the parapet and raised the flag once more on the staff. This was the signal for an outburst of cheering, and various other demonstrations of approval on a wide scale...When excitement had somewhat subsided a police constable, by use of a ladder, climbed on to the parapet, and after a good deal of work removed the staff from its position. ...The crowd afterwards made their way by Lower Abbey Street to Liberty Hall, with a good deal of cheering and waving of small *Sinn Fein* flags. A number of persons in the crowds which gathered in Sackville street during the day wore black bands, surmounted with ribbons of the *Sinn Féin* colours on their arms, while groups of girls, with paper flags and coloured papers in their hair, paraded Sackville street. ... As usual a good deal of disturbances, and some damage to windows in Middle Abbey street, was caused by youths, who rushed about shouting, while the



newsboys added to the commotion constantly by the combined, raucous and senseless clamour.<sup>35</sup>

The *Irish Times* deftly undermined the legitimacy of the event for its readers with reference to rowdy youths and news-boys. It instantly read a pattern into this first anniversary with the dismissive, weary ‘as usual’. However, the demonstration had the benefit of being both a re-enactment and heavy with symbolism. The crowd mimicked the flag hoisting with their personal emblems which continued the traditions of earlier nationalists and prefigured the importance of flags and emblems in future commemorations of the Rising.

Molony and her fellow-organisers also ordered facsimiles of the Proclamation using some of the type-setting from the original which was retrieved from Liberty Hall. The plan to distribute them was abandoned because an order came, it was assumed from the IRB, that there was to be no demonstration and that flags were not to be flown.<sup>36</sup> Molony and Shanahan succeeded nevertheless in creating their own demonstration without the sanction of the Trade Union men whom she said, ‘did not want the Citizen Army men there at all’. They displayed a calico scroll outside Liberty Hall which said ‘James Connolly Murdered – May 12<sup>th</sup>, 1916’.<sup>37</sup>

Helena Molony told the Bureau of Military History, not without good reason, that this first celebration ‘established the 1916 Commemoration’.<sup>38</sup> The central features had been identified: the Proclamation, flags and emblems would become part of the battle for legitimacy not just between Republicans and the state, but among Republicans themselves; and women would adopt the mantle of guardians of the ideals of the Rising. Moreover, on the first anniversary, the elements of the original Proclamation had been combined with new typeset to create a replica document. Molony recalled being told by a representative of the National Library that there were more extant copies of the 1916 Proclamation than of the 1917 one. He told her: ‘The copy is more valuable than the original. We have three copies of the 1917 proclamation and fifteen of the original.’<sup>39</sup> Only an expert eye could see the difference. Claims of authenticity would be central to the politics of all subsequent commemorations of the Rising.

### **‘In the Easter Lily it is raised again’**

The Easter Rising was itself a commemorative event. In his writings Patrick Pearse had located himself within Ireland’s mythical, nationalist and religious traditions and the Proclamation explicitly set the Rising within a longer sequence of rebellions. Moreover, each commemoration of Easter 1916 carries echoes of previous demonstrations and anniversaries so that they can be understood better as palimpsest than replica. This is why the Irish public’s relationship with the Easter Rising can be so vivid; it is part of an ongoing, multi-layered negotiation with the present through the past. The significance of the Rising lies more in its symbolic capital than in the literal interpretation of events. Therefore it is appropriate that it has been most effectively remembered through metaphorical representations and these have proved themselves to be very resilient.

Ribbons and colours had been effectively employed by nineteenth-century Irish nationalists to circumvent the fact that the flying of flags and banners was illegal. The Rising too was remembered in furtive as well as formal ways through the distribution of Mass cards, the singing of songs and the wearing of certain colours. It was, indeed, in a symbolic representation that memory of the Rising would find its most resilient form: the Easter lily. The lily was adopted as a badge of the Rising by Cumann na mBan in the 1920s. It was regarded as a less compromised symbol than the tricolour which had been debased by its association with the partitioned state.<sup>40</sup> Cumann na mBan publicity material explained that the men of 1916 had ‘raised the banner of complete separation from England, and the wisdom of their demand united all the people of Ireland. That banner has been basely lowered. In the Easter Lily it is raised again.’<sup>41</sup>

Therefore the lily was worn in opposition to the state and as an alternative to its flag. Moreover, the sale of the lily represented an important source of income for republicans which was not curtailed until 1962 when the Street and House to House Collections Act was passed south of the border. It required that vendors obtain a permit from the Chief Superintendent of the locality and the refusal of republicans to apply for permits (from a state they did not recognise) meant that the government could have those who sold the Easter lily arrested without having banned the sale of the lily itself.<sup>42</sup> There was,

however, little public sympathy for this policy as Proinsias Mac Aonghusa explained in March 1964: ‘The public does not support the physical force movement: it gives less support to efforts to harass Republicans on minor matters’.<sup>43</sup>

The Irish government attempted to supplant the lily in 1966 by devising a new logo for the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising and ran a public competition for the design of a commemorative badge. The winning motif, ‘An Claidheamh Soluis’ (the Sword of Light), was chosen because it symbolised ‘intuitive knowledge, education and progress’ and, in fact, bore a marked resemblance to a stylised lily.<sup>44</sup> However, the Easter lily was not so easily expunged. The sisters and niece of Seán MacDiarmada, in refusing to attend the official commemoration for their brother to be held in his home town of Kiltyclogher, explained in a letter to the Minister of Defence:

We believe that it is hypocritical for that Government to attempt to do honour to Sean Mac Diarmada while at the same time announcing a ban on the historic Easter Lily, the emblem of Easter week 1916. Sean died for a 32 –County republic which has yet to be achieved.<sup>45</sup>

In Northern Ireland the Prime Minister’s Secretary made enquiries regarding reports that the Easter lily had been banned south of the border. The Ministry of Home Affairs, Brian McConnell clarified the position and reported:

the Easter Lily is really the symbol of the Easter Week Rebellion and is usually worn by people attending a commemoration service such as those held every year at Milltown Cemetery and at other towns in the North. Under our law if they wish to take up street collections they would require a permit under the Street Collection Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1927 and the Police of course would refuse such permits. However, the house-to-house collections only refer in Northern Ireland to house-to-house charitable collections and if the organizers here wish to hold house-to-house collections they would not be committing any offence.<sup>46</sup>

The idea of banning the lily as an emblem of republicanism had been considered by the Northern Ireland government in 1928 but a draft order was abandoned due to the difficulty in defining the emblem the government intended to prohibit.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless it was made clear that the public sale, distribution or wearing of the lily was prejudicial to the preservation of the peace and the police had the authority to remove offending items.<sup>48</sup> Both jurisdictions had attempted to limit the visibility and use of the Easter lily and, as a result, both had enhanced its symbolic power. It continued to represent the importance of unofficial commemorative practices to the memory of the Easter Rising.

The hoisting of flags above the GPO on Easter Monday 1916 had provided concrete evidence to those in Dublin that rebels had taken over the city centre and that their intentions were serious. The Irish flag had also been central to commemoration of the Rising on its first anniversary. Fr Michael Curran recorded of April 1917 that numerous Requiem Masses were held nationwide and that, 'Republican flags were hoisted at different places throughout the country and hauled down by the military. In one case, the flag was fired on.'<sup>49</sup>

In Northern Ireland the tricolour continued to function as a potent and defiant symbol of nationalist memory and identity, particularly when connected to commemorations of the Rising. It was not within the power of the devolved government in Northern Ireland to ban a foreign flag outright but its display was heavily policed.<sup>50</sup> The Flags and Emblems (Display) Act (Northern Ireland) of 1954 had been designed to protect the Union flag by making it an offence to interfere with its display, and gave the police the power to remove any non-Union flag judged to threaten the maintenance of peace. Objection to the appearance of a tricolour in the Sinn Féin offices on Divis Street in 1964 became the spark for serious clashes between the RUC and Republicans. In 1966 the flying of the Irish flag was one of the most contentious aspects of the jubilee commemorations in Northern Ireland. The Loyal Orange Lodge in Magherafelt was representative of other Lodges in passing a resolution stating that, while they had no desire to oppose peaceful and limited

celebrations in the district, they did wish ‘to place on record our determination to oppose the flying of the Tricolour or provocative parades headed by the Tricolour, during the Easter Rising (1916) celebrations’.<sup>51</sup>

The IRA in Belfast saw the commemoration as ‘a golden opportunity to drive a coach and four’ through the Flags and Emblems Act and from January until April had devoted all their energies to preparing for the commemorations.<sup>52</sup> Liam McMillen, Organising Secretary on the commemoration committee, recalled that the services of every member of Cumann na mBan and dozens of other women were enlisted to make thousands of tricolour flags and bunting which were distributed throughout all the nationalist areas of Belfast.<sup>53</sup> As a result these areas were festooned in green, white and orange and the Flags and Emblems Act was virtually unenforceable. The commemoration in Belfast in 1966 showed just how effective a flag could be in signaling opposition to the power of the state. Material symbols elicited a strong emotional response both from those who identified with them and from those who saw them as a direct challenge to their own identity. Where there were incidents of unrest during the Easter commemorations in Belfast in 1966 they were linked to the public display of lilies and other emblems. Three young girls, wearing tricolour emblems, were chased by a crowd attending a march organized by Ian Paisley and the windows were stoned and shattered in the house in which one girl sought refuge.<sup>54</sup> One young man had to be rescued by police when he was attacked by crowds waiting the parade to pass. He was reported to have been wearing a tricolour ribbon and an Easter lily on his coat and that he was

set upon by a crowd of women who battered him with their umbrellas and several men tried to pull him to the ground. The police officer pulled him free and ran with him up Howard street. When the officer realised he was being followed by a large section of the crowd some of whom were crying ‘Kill him, kill him’ he turned and ran back through the crowd dragging the young man with him into the safe neutrality of a Chinese restaurant.<sup>55</sup>

Nationalist identity did not find easy accommodation within Northern Ireland and, in 1966, the tricolour and lily were interpreted as a rejection of the state and a threat to

Unionist hegemony. The Easter Rising preceded partition and northern nationalists were ever alert to any attempt to exclude them from this history and resolute in their remembrance.

### **Challenging Authority**

Commemorations are part of the process of stabilizing historical events that represent moments of rupture. They take an event which may have been violent or catastrophic and ritualize it into a force for social cohesion. However, the instability of the original event can reverberate (often inaudibly) in each act of remembrance. Large scale commemorations do not entirely neutralize all other renditions of an event: covert, illicit, defiant memories continue to exist and to offer receptacles of resistance to formalized social memory. Commemorations of significant historical events retain the potential to challenge authority so no political party could afford to ignore the Easter Rising.

In the Irish Free State Easter commemorations offered an opportunity for the government to assert its legitimacy and for republican groups to register their opposition to the partitioned settlement. Civil war politics were as important as the original event in shaping subsequent commemorations of Easter 1916. The first formal military commemoration of the Rising took place in 1924 under the Cumann na nGaedheal government but, although invitations were issued to all the relatives of the executed leaders, due to the divisive politics of the civil war, only Michael Mallin's widow attended.<sup>56</sup> On the tenth anniversary Eamon de Valera and Seán Lemass participated in an unofficial commemoration which was organised by anti-treaty republicans in Glasnevin cemetery. When de Valera, as Taoiseach, unveiled the statue of Cúchulainn in the GPO in 1935 members of the Cumann na nGaedheal opposition party were not invited to the event. The same year, an estimated one thousand people marched to Glasnevin cemetery for an alternative commemoration which was addressed by the Chief of Staff of the IRA, Maurice Twomey.<sup>57</sup> However, by the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Rising in 1941 the southern state was strong enough to chart its own foreign policy during the Second World War. The 1916 commemoration was used to demonstrate the strength of this independence with a display in Dublin which included 20,000 members of the Defence

Forces, aeroplanes, the nursing service and fire-fighters. In 1966 the official commemoration was deployed to lend legitimacy to the economic policy of modernisation and to celebrate the successes of the independent state. In contrast to the Rising itself, its fiftieth anniversary, viewed as a success as it unfolded, was reread in increasingly critical terms in the light of subsequent events.<sup>58</sup>

In Northern Ireland Easter 1916 represented a different form of threat to those in authority and was seen as alien to the state. Commemorations of the Rising consistently attracted more legal controls than any other event or assembly. Individual Easter commemorations were banned under Section 4 of the Special Powers Act from 1926, with the number prohibited increasing until an outright ban was imposed on all commemorations across Northern Ireland during Easter week in 1936.<sup>59</sup> This ban was renewed annually until 1949, when commemorations were assessed on an individual basis. Parades attracted groups from across the nationalist spectrum such as the Irish National Foresters, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and certain trade unionists.<sup>60</sup> However, events in the late 1960s transformed the context for commemorations of the Rising and they became overwhelmingly Republican events.

The fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising has been given a pivotal place in the history of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The future Ulster Unionist leader David Trimble credited it with starting ‘the destabilisation of Ulster’.<sup>61</sup> Instability did not begin or end with nationalist plans to commemorate the Easter Rising. Economic and social change in Northern Ireland, and moderate attempts at political reform, led to a certain volatility within the society. However, tensions were high in anticipation of the anniversary and an upcoming general election was moved forward, Prime Minister O’Neill stated, in order to avoid clashing with the commemoration.<sup>62</sup> A special security committee had been set up in Stormont at the beginning of April 1966, all police leave was cancelled over the Easter period with the RUC and British Army were described as being in a state of ‘instant readiness’.<sup>63</sup> Security information suggested that the IRA was planning a new campaign in 1966 and Loyalist agitation had reached such a level that by the summer of that year intelligence reports assessed the threat from ‘extremist Protestant

groups' to be greater than that of Republicans.<sup>64</sup> The anniversary of the Rising, however, passed off with little disruption. Only one parade was banned (in the Loup, Co Derry). The main trouble occurred as a result of clashes between nationalists and those taking part in a counter-march through Belfast city centre organized by Rev Ian Paisley; it began with a service in the Ulster Hall offered in thanksgiving for the defeat of the 1916 Rising. A large police presence kept the marchers apart but there were several skirmishes and six people were detained by the RUC.<sup>65</sup>

Terence O'Neill described 1966 as 'not a very easy year'.<sup>66</sup> He expressed his frustration at Catholics in Belfast who had 'insist[ed] on celebrating the Dublin rebellion' and recorded, 'It was 1966 which made 1968 inevitable and was bound to put the whole future of Northern Ireland in the melting pot.'<sup>67</sup> This statement gave too much power to the anniversary of the Rising. In a healthy society commemorations offer a safe space for public debate but in an already fractured society the past has the capacity to explode into the present. Nevertheless, the proximity of the jubilee of the Rising to the outbreak of Troubles compounded the sense that commemorations of 1916 were potentially dangerous events. Between 1972 and 2006 the military parade in Dublin, which had been central to commemorations of the Rising, was suspended and until the ninetieth anniversary the Irish government staged low-key official ceremonies. Republicans across Ireland continued to hold annual commemorative events and, as with the earliest anniversaries, legitimacy was claimed through Easter ancestry.

### **'If the men they killed in '16 were alive today they'd be up here with us'**

The flag bearing the words 'Irish Republic' which had been hoisted over the GPO on Easter Monday 1916 was handed back to the Irish people by the British Ambassador in a private ceremony in April 1966. Taoiseach Seán Lemass said at its arrival in the National Museum, 'I hope [this flag] will be preserved as one of the most important relics of that important event in Irish history and as a source of inspiration for all who come to this museum.'<sup>68</sup> There had been some concern over whether or not the correct flag had been nominated for return as the British Museum had been displaying a tricolour which had, in



fact, originated in Limerick. However, the flag was verified as genuine and it took its place among the original artifacts of the Easter week 1916.<sup>69</sup>

More problematic was determining the authentic legacy of the Rising. The Republic had been declared but not achieved on Easter Monday and it was into this aspiration and ambiguity that a great deal of tension was generated. Commemorations became contests over who qualified as the Rising's rightful heirs. Frank Robbins, who had been a Sergeant in the Citizen Army during Easter week, believed that as early as 1918 'the majority of the men...in no way resembled or held the outlook which was dominant up to 1916 and which was responsible for the great deeds performed during Easter Week by the Irish Citizen Army'. He recalled that it was to demonstrate this that the Socialist Party of Ireland in 1919 decided to have a Connolly commemoration in the Mansion House on the anniversary of his birth, 5<sup>th</sup> June.<sup>70</sup> Across the political spectrum anniversaries were represented as opportunities to recommit to the ideals of the Easter leaders. These could be understood in terms of revival, reinterpretation or as purely rhetorical gestures.

Burial places were also used to assert an unbroken line between the actions of the living and the aspirations of the dead and graves played a central part in commemorations of the Easter Rising. Patrick Pearse had a very clear understanding of the power of the graveside oration, and it was through similar rituals that others would avow themselves his successors. Historically funerals had provided a legal way of holding mass political gatherings and graveyards continued to serve a similar function. In Northern Ireland when parades were banned in either Belfast or Derry large numbers of people gathered instead in Milltown and Brandywell cemeteries.<sup>71</sup> Graveyards were vital to the claims of those who rejected official, state commemorations and operated as spaces in which the dead were used to bestow legitimacy to whichever version of republicanism was assembled.

The group most consistent in its observations was the National Graves Association (NGA) which was founded in 1926 with the aim of recording, renovating and preserving patriot graves. It provided an umbrella structure for republicans, many of

whom were former and serving members of the IRA. The primary work of the NGA concerned the Republican plot in Glasnevin, a cemetery which had long operated as a commemorative site of opposition to state nationalism.<sup>72</sup> The plot in Glasnevin held the bodies of the ‘unknown soldiers’ of the Rising, who had been buried before their relatives could be found to claim them. It contained sixteen of the sixty-four rebels killed in action during Easter Week. The plot was refurbished for the fiftieth-anniversary of the Rising and the unveiling ceremony was attended by 2,500 people.<sup>73</sup> The memorial asserts an unbroken line of Republicanism and contains the dates 1798, 1803, 1848, 1867, 1882 and 1916 with the inscription ‘We know their dreams. They dreamed and are dead.’ Joseph Clarke, who had fought during the Rising at Mount Street Bridge and was one of the founding members of the National Graves Association, was at the commemoration in Glasnevin cemetery on Easter Sunday 1966 having turned down invitations to the official ceremony at the GPO and was certain, ‘If the men they killed in ’16 were alive today they’d be up here with us. Our parade is much closer to what they fought for than the [official] one in O’Connell street.’<sup>74</sup>

The authority to interpret the wishes of the Easter rebels was also asserted by their relatives. The blood or marriage line held a potentially powerful challenge to the politicians who claimed to act in the name of the men and women of 1916. Women were particularly vocal as keepers of the true legacy of dead and saw themselves as unwavering and unchanging in this service. The obituary notice for Margaret Pearse, mother of Patrick and Willie, who died in 1932 observed that ‘In one sense it was always Nineteen Sixteen with her’.<sup>75</sup> Kathleen Clarke was a particularly formidable advocate on behalf of the legacy of her husband Tom, having been a founding member of the National Graves Association and a trustee of the Wolfe Tone Memorial Fund. She thought Patrick Pearse beneath contempt for signing himself President of the Republic when the honour clearly belonged to her husband: ‘Surely Pearse should have been satisfied with the honour of Commander-in-Chief when he knew as much about commanding as my dog’.<sup>76</sup> Clarke’s offer to serve on the commemoration committee for the fiftieth anniversary of the Rising was declined by Seán Lemass who said the inclusion of close relatives might detract from the tribute being prepared for the 1916 leaders.<sup>77</sup> The sisters of Seán

MacDiarmada made clear their disdain for the state and refused to participate in the official commemoration, attending instead that organised by the National Graves Association. Nevertheless relatives of the leaders of the Rising were invited each year to official commemorations and, on guest lists, formed something of an aristocracy for the new state and embodied the living link with the Easter martyrs. Yeats anticipated something of the conflicted position they would hold within Irish society when he said of his fellow Free State Senators: 'hot and vague, always disturbed, always hating something or other . . . [they] had . . . signed the death-warrant[s] of their dearest friend[s] . . . Yet their descendants, if they grow rich enough for the travel and leisure that make a finished man, will constitute our ruling class, and date their origin from the Post Office as American families date theirs from the Mayflower.'

## **Conclusion**

When Tom Clarke was asked, 'Why a Republic?' he is reported to have replied, 'You must have something striking in order to appeal to the imagination of the world.'<sup>78</sup> It was clearly understood by those who organized it that the Easter Rising would be most effective as an idea rather than reality. Its success, although not initially apparent, would be evident not in its certainties but in its adaptability in the nation's memory. Some of the structures of commemoration were established early: the use of flags and emblems as a way of both asserting and challenging authority; factions arguing over the true legacy of the event and the oppositional voices of relatives. These have become part of the choreography of remembrance. Launching a programme of events for the centenary the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, described Easter 1916 as 'one of those seminal weeks when the fault lines of history shifted'.<sup>79</sup> This too has echoes of the early propaganda of the rebels which declared that a break with the past had occurred at exactly 12 noon on 24 April 1916. This sense of rupture in the imaginative horizon has become an accepted part of the narrative of the Easter Rising. The moment when Pearse read the Proclamation aloud has been imbued, in retrospect, with the power to change what was thought possible. The Easter Rising in Irish life, therefore, carries the weight of great hope and extreme disillusionment. Its commemorations have, at times, been exceedingly contentious and,

by the ninetieth anniversary, heavily commodified. The anticipation surrounding the centenary suggests that a great deal is expected still, emotionally and politically, of the Easter Rising. The danger, however, with an event into which so much has been read is that by 2016 it will have almost no meaning at all.

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<sup>1</sup> *War News*, 25 April 1916.

<sup>2</sup> J. Stephens, *The Insurrection in Dublin*, third edition (Dublin: Mausal and Company, 1965), p.7.

<sup>3</sup> Stephens, *Insurrection*, p.32.

<sup>4</sup> *Wicklow People*, 29 April 1916.

<sup>5</sup> *Leitrim Observer*, 6 May 1916.

<sup>6</sup> *Irish Times*, 25 April 1916.

<sup>7</sup> Bureau of Military History, Witness Statement (hereafter BMH WS) 687, Michael Curran, Secretary to the Archbishop of Dublin in 1916, p.47.

<sup>8</sup> K. Jeffery, *The GPO and the Easter Rising* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), pp.171-2.

<sup>9</sup> F. McGarry, *The Rising: Ireland Easter 1916* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p.131.

<sup>10</sup> Stephens, *Insurrection*, p.37.

<sup>11</sup> *Times*, 27 April 1916.

<sup>12</sup> *Mirror*, 12 May 1916; *Times*, 2 May 1916.

<sup>13</sup> *Times*, 1 May 1916.

<sup>14</sup> *Washington Post*, 27 April 1916.

<sup>15</sup> McGarry, *The Rising*, p.130.

<sup>16</sup> C. Wills, *Dublin 1916: the Siege of the GPO* (London: Profile Books, 2009), p.44.

<sup>17</sup> Wills, *Dublin 1916*, p.53.

<sup>18</sup> In G. Higgins, *Heroic Revivals from Carlyle to Yeats* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), p. 134.

<sup>19</sup> BMH, Curran, p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> Stephens, *Insurrection*, p.15.

<sup>21</sup> Jeffery, *The GPO*, p.66.

<sup>22</sup> M. Caulfield, *The Easter Rebellion* (London: Four Square, 1965), p. 100.

<sup>23</sup> *Sunday Press*, 14 April 1963.

<sup>24</sup> *Evening Herald*, 6 May 1964

<sup>25</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, 1 May 1916.

<sup>26</sup> *Daily Express*, 6 May 1916.

<sup>27</sup> BMH WS 824, Charles Donnelly, Member of "E" Company 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the IRB in 1916, pp.6-7.

<sup>28</sup> J. O'Connor, *The 1916 Proclamation* (Dublin: Anvil Books, 1986), pp. 31-2.

<sup>29</sup> BMH, Donnelly, pp.6-7.

<sup>30</sup> BMH WS 180, Kathleen Murphy, member of Cumann na mBan, p.5

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- <sup>31</sup> BMH WS 716, Michael Molloy, Compositor in the office of *The Irish Republic* and member of “E” Company 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion; one of the printers of the Proclamation, p. 5.
- <sup>32</sup> *Times*, 1 May 1916.
- <sup>33</sup> Jeffrey, *The GPO*, p.141.
- <sup>34</sup> BMH WS 391, Helena Molony, Secretary Inghini na hEireann, 1907 - 1914; member Cumann na mBan, p.42.
- <sup>35</sup> *Irish Times*, 10 April 1917.
- <sup>36</sup> BMH, Molony, p. 46
- <sup>37</sup> BHM, Molony, p.47.
- <sup>38</sup> BMH, Molony, p.48.
- <sup>39</sup> BMH, Molony, p. 44.
- <sup>40</sup> S. Swan, *Official Irish Republicanism, 1962-1972* (Lulu.com, 2007), p. 122.
- <sup>41</sup> *Honesty*, 19 April 1930, in E. Morris, *Our Own Devices: National Symbols and Political Conflict in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005), p. 46.
- <sup>42</sup> National Archives of Ireland Department of the Taoiseach (hereafter NAI DT), 98/6/495, ‘Review of Unlawful and Allied Organisations: December 1, 1964, to November 21, 1966’, Report from the Commissioner, An Garda Síochána, November 1966.
- <sup>43</sup> *Sunday Independent*, 29 March 1964.
- <sup>44</sup> *Cuimhneachán 1916-1966* (Dublin: Department of External Affairs, 1966), p. 93.
- <sup>45</sup> Military Archives Cathal Brugha Barracks, Department of Defence, 48151/3 (118), Margaret McDermott, Rose Mc Dermott and K.B. Keany to Minister of Defence, 2 April 1966.
- <sup>46</sup> Public Records of Northern Ireland (hereafter PRONI), HA/32/2/19 (24), Ministry of Home Affairs to the Prime Minister’s Office, 31 March 1966.
- <sup>47</sup> L. K. Donohue, ‘Regulating Northern Ireland: The Special Powers Acts, 1922-1972’, *Historical Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (1998), p.1096.
- <sup>48</sup> Donohue, *Regulating Northern Ireland*, p. 1096.
- <sup>49</sup> BMH, Curran, pp. 195-6.
- <sup>50</sup> Donohue, ‘Regulating Northern Ireland’, p. 1108.
- <sup>51</sup> PRONI, HA/32/2/8 (16), Magherafelt District Loyal Orange Lodge No 3 to Brian McConnell, 21 February 1966.
- <sup>52</sup> Liam McMillen, ‘The Role of the IRA’ in D. Ó h-Agáin, *Liam McMillen: Separatist Socialist Republican* (Dublin: REPSOL Pamphlet no. 21, 1976), p. 6.
- <sup>53</sup> McMillen, ‘The Role of the IRA’, p. 6.
- <sup>54</sup> *Irish Times*, 18 April 1966.
- <sup>55</sup> *Irish Times*, 18 April 1966.
- <sup>56</sup> D. Fitzpatrick, ‘Commemoration in the Irish Free State: a chronicle of embarrassment’, in I. McBride, *History and Memory in Modern Ireland* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.196.
- <sup>57</sup> Y. Whelan, *Reinventing Modern Dublin: Streetscape, Iconography and the Politics of Identity* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2003), pp. 166-7.

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- <sup>58</sup> For a discussion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising see R. Higgins, *Transforming 1916: meaning, memory and the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2012).
- <sup>59</sup> Donohue, 'Regulating Northern Ireland', p. 1096.
- <sup>60</sup> N. Jarman, 'Commemorating 1916, Celebrating Difference: Parading and Painting in Belfast', in A. Forty and S. Küchler (eds.), *The Art of Forgetting* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 188.
- <sup>61</sup> D. Trimble, *The Easter Rebellion of 1916* (Lurgan: Ulster Society Publications, 1992), p. 33.
- <sup>62</sup> See C. O'Donnell, 'Pragmatism Versus Unity: The Stormont Government and the 1966 Easter Commemoration', in M. Daly and M. O'Callaghan, *1916 in 1966: Commemorating the Easter Rising* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy), pp. 241-242.
- <sup>63</sup> *Irish Times*, 8 April 1966.
- <sup>64</sup> PRONI, CAB9B/300/1, RUC Inspector General to J.E. Greeves at Home Affairs, 22 June 1966 in M. O'Callaghan and C. O'Donnell, 'The Northern Ireland Government, the "Paisleyite Movement" and Ulster Unionism in 1966', *Irish Political Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2, June 2006, p. 210
- <sup>65</sup> *Irish Times*, 18 April 1966.
- <sup>66</sup> *Times*, 28 April 1967, in T. O'Neill, *Ulster at the Crossroads* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 125.
- <sup>67</sup> T. O'Neill, *The Autobiography of Terence O'Neill* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1972), pp 78 and 87.
- <sup>68</sup> *Irish Press*, 13 April 1966.
- <sup>69</sup> NAI DT, 97/6/532. *Irish Press*, 13 April 1966.
- <sup>70</sup> BMH WS 586, Frank Robbins, Sergeant in the Irish Citizen Army, 1916, pp. 158-159.
- <sup>71</sup> N. Jarman and D. Bryan, 'Green Parades in an Orange State: Nationalist and Republican Commemorations and Demonstrations from Partition to the Troubles, 1920-70', in T.G. Fraser (ed.), *The Irish Parading Tradition: Following the Drum*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 98.
- <sup>72</sup> N. Johnson, *Ireland, the Great War and the Geography of Remembrance* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp .153-61.
- <sup>73</sup> NAI DT, 98/6/495, 'Review of Unlawful and Allied Organisations'.
- <sup>74</sup> *Irish Times*, 11 April 1966.
- <sup>75</sup> M. McCarthy, *Ireland's 1916 Rising: Explorations of History-Making, Commemoration & Heritage in Modern Times* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), p. 142.
- <sup>76</sup> NAI DT, 97/6/469, Kathleen Clarke to Éamon Martin, 29 March 1965.
- <sup>77</sup> NAI DT, 97/6/469, Seán Lemass to Kathleen Clarke, 14 May 1965.
- <sup>78</sup> Quoted in McGarry, *The Rising*, p.154.
- <sup>79</sup> 2016 Commemoration Launch, speech by Taoiseach Enda Kenny, TD. Published on 13 November 2014.