

The Nature of the 1916 Easter Rising and the Centennial Anniversary

by **Robert Harris** (April 2016)

A relatively small number of undeniably brave fighters, led by Padraig [Patrick] Pearse, took by force the possession of several landmark sites in Dublin City, as well as two other areas of Ireland: Athenry (Galway), and Enniscorthy (Wexford), on Easter Monday 1916. They also successfully fought a small battle in Ashbourne (Meath). They declared, with the reading of the Proclamation of the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic, on the steps of the GPO (General Post Office) at O'Connell Street (Dublin's main thoroughfare), an independent Irish nation, free of the shackles of the British Empire.

Although the Rebellion would be put down within days by the British Army, the 1916 Easter Rising is seen as the most pivotal moment in the ancient quest for Irish independence, because it inspired the 1919-21 War of Independence, which would lead to the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, and for this reason it is celebrated like no other event in the Republic of Ireland today.

Many modern nation-states have come into existence through violent conflict. Such facts are an inconvenience for the staunch democrat who places the uncoerced wishes of the People as sovereign, and as the only legitimate expression of power. If the State comes into existence in an undemocratic fashion, does that mean that the entire edifice of such a nation is illegitimate, as some anarcho-libertarians might suggest? Perhaps not, but the shift in status from illegitimacy to legitimacy is a difficult step which many nation-states fail to achieve successfully. If a fledging nation-state manages to become a true democracy, how can it reconcile itself with a founding all too often drenched in the blood of prospective citizens? Ireland's path to independence presents with many of these quandaries.

What mandate did the rebels of 1916 possess?

Today a variety of Irish Nationalist/Republican groups claim a direct link with the 1916 Rising. Sinn Féin/Provisional IRA have held a variety of events and rallies, both North and South, to [Easter Monday lecture](#) at the Mansion House, which housed the first revolutionary parliament, Higgins would go even further. He beseeched the Irish people to retrieve the idealism at the heart of 1916, and stated that there “has been a great deal of critical reassessment of aspects of the Rising, and in particular of the myths of the redemptive violence that were at the heart, not just of Irish Nationalism, but also of nationalist imperialism.” He cited the British recruitment drives of the era:

“In the context of 1916, this imperial triumphalism can, for example, be traced to the (British Army) recruitment campaigns of the time, which evoked mythology, masculinity and religion, and glorified the Irish blood as having ‘reddened the earth of every continent’.”

Higgins’ argued that the triumphalism of British imperialism during the era has not been sufficiently re-evaluated, in contrast to the critical focus on the redemptive violence of Irish Republicanism. This is quite absurd. Perhaps there is less comment today on empty imperialist sloganeering etc., because few would endorse such perspectives, whilst deep exhortations of the nationalist variety continue unabated.

The army recruitment campaigns were aimed primarily at a reluctant Catholic majority grouping of the Irish populace, after bringing conscription to Ireland was resisted. In truth however, few would have bought into any such propaganda. Most appeared to join the War due to severe economic hardship.

Higgins presents an absurd apologia, which conflates the recruitment propaganda of the British Army to challenge a war of aggression in Europe, with the long-standing cultured mythology of violence to save Ireland’s sole, imagery of which is also brought out in the Proclamation, where, for example, the “dead generations” somehow summon the Rebels to reaffirm Ireland’s spirit.

Higgins’ criticism of British imperialism fits neatly within the context of his broader perspective on world affairs. This politician possesses extremist stances, which can be categorised as an unapologetic revolutionary leftism. For example, he strongly supported oppressive terror-supporting revolutionary Daniel Ortega, shortly after 9/11 he subtly justified the attack as a reaction to US

foreign policy when up to 55,000 were thought to have died, and described a speaker noting the [Third Geneva Convention](#) affirms the status of lawful non-state combatants. Such belligerents are to be afforded protections as prisoners of war, unless they do conduct themselves as terrorists. Terrorists tend to commit atrocities, often of a more indiscriminate nature to instil widespread fear, against soft targets, attempting to extract political concessions. By contrast, lawful belligerents must properly declare themselves to be combatants to the opposing forces on the battlefield, which brings considerably greater risk, and must be mindful of the normative standards of warfare.

The Proclamation calls on its followers not to disgrace the movement with acts of criminality or inhumanity. The town of Enniscorthy was held without significant casualties for four days after meeting little resistance from the authorities. The two committed socialist leaders, James Connolly and Constance Markievicz, breached these standards – in Connolly’s case by ordering the murder of a disarmed policeman which was refused. Markievicz is perhaps the sole leader of the Rebellion to have [Richard Mulcahy](#) refused to attend a celebration of his victory over the RIC at Ashbourne, in which nine members of the police force were killed. Perhaps there will be a time when the current political elites will mark the 1916 Rising with a similar degree of decency and sensitivity, without allowing it to be turned into a white-wash of the identity of old Irish Republicanism, without belittling the efforts of successive generations as somehow being inauthentic to the ideals of the Proclamation, or into an apologetic retrospective legitimisation that does not freely and fully acknowledge the moral complexities of the event itself.

Robert Harris contributes articles to several websites on contentious political issues (not to be confused with the popular English novelist (1957-) of the same name). He also blogs at [here](#).

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