

Primary Source Document Analysis: **The Proclamation of the Irish Republic**

In this analysis document, I will examine The Proclamation of the Irish Republic as a primary source. This document was responsible for starting the Easter Rising of 1916 and became one of the most important documents in Irish history.

From the opening lines, it was clear that the proclamation was making a significant declaration of equality; as the initial words call for both Irishmen and women for support.¹ The proclamation calls for a new Irish government to be a 'representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women.'² Thus, if the rebels are successful, all women will be equal to their male counterparts and have the right to vote in Ireland.

It is unknown who the author of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic was; however, it is thought it may be the work of Patrick Pearse with the assistance of James Connolly. The text of the proclamation shows the influence of the men who created it. Patrick Pearse's influence can be seen in the invoking of 'dead generations' to rebel for freedom. James Connolly's influence can be viewed by the insistence that the 'ownership of Ireland' is 'the right of the people of Ireland'.³

The three most significant members of the Easter Rising rebels were Patrick Pearse, Thomas Clarke, and James Connolly.

Patrick Pearse was the president of the Provisional Government, and it was he who read out the proclamation during Easter Monday stationed outside the General Post Office. It was Pearse who gave the order to capitulate following the evacuation of the General Post Office. He had been a big campaigner for Home Rule and found himself frustrated by the delays in implementing Home Rule. He was one of the few founding members of the Irish Volunteers in November of 1913 and would go on to be the director of military operations. He was a part of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. He played a significant part in orchestrating the Easter Rising and would be killed on the 3rd of May by firing squad at Kilmainham Jail.

¹ CAIN, *Proclamation of the Irish Republic, 24 April 1916*, <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/pir24416.htm> [accessed 14th December 2022]

² CAIN

³ Patrick Geoghegan, *Trinity College Dublin*, 2016, https://www.tcd.ie/news_events/articles/the-proclamation--the-spirit-of-1916-captured-on-a-piece-of-paper/ [13th December 2022]

Thomas Clarke was a member of the Irish Volunteers and was instrumental in reviving the Irish Republic Brotherhood. He had been an Irish political prisoner in English prisons for fifteen years. He acted as the crucial link with the republican and Fenian organisations in America and was an important member of the Military Council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. The first signature of the proclamation was Thomas Clarke's, and he was positioned in the General Post Office. While he opposed the order to surrender, he was outnumbered. Just like Patrick Pearse, Thomas Clarke was killed on the 3rd of May by firing squad at Kilmainham Jail.

James Connolly was a socialist who established the Irish Socialist Republican Party in 1896 in Dublin and also printed The Workers' Republic newspaper. James Connolly was the head of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union in 1914 and lobbied against signing up to fight when World War One began in August of 1914. Connolly greatly opposed Home Rule and was the commander of the Irish Citizen Army. Connolly concurred that the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Citizen Army and the Irish Republican Brotherhood should join together and coordinate a group uprising. Connolly was the vice-president of the Provisional Government and had the role of:

‘commandant general of the of the Dublin division of the army of the Irish Republic, Connolly was in the GPO. He directed military operations even after being seriously wounded in the shoulder and ankle on Thursday 27th April’.

Connolly was killed on the 12th of May by firing squad in Kilmainham Jail.

The proclamation was witnessed and signed by seven men to establish the Irish Republic; these included Patrick Pearse, James Connolly, Thomas Clarke, Éamonn Ceannt, Joseph Plunkett, Thomas MacDonagh, and Seán MacDiarmada. They were all members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood's Military council and determined that they would establish the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic.⁴

It is widely accepted that Patrick Pearse wrote the proclamation as the handwritten copy was shown to the three men who printed the 2,500 copies of the document; one of the men, Liam O'Brien, recognised the handwriting as being that of Patrick Pearse, which he had previously seen. Liam O'Brien

⁴ National Library of Ireland, *Signatories of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic*, <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/signatories-of-the-proclamation-of-the-irish-republic-national-library-of-ireland/LQVhkGjJhbnNJA?hl=en> [12th December 2022]

also observed that the ‘manuscript was entirely legible, the script being upright and almost perfect, without any changes or corrections.’⁵

The proclamation was printed using an old Wharfedale Double-Crown printing machine and consisted of a single broadsheet measuring 76cm by 49cm approximately.

Christopher Brady printed the proclamation in Liberty Hall. When examining the document, it is apparent that the document was printed in two separate sections; the first half would be printed then the type would be reset by the typesetter in order to complete the last section. Sean T O’Kelly was the person who was in charge of the distribution of the proclamation throughout Dublin and would go on to be the President of Ireland from 1945 to 1959.⁶ Christopher Brady operated the machine for the printing duration, recounting that his job was incredibly hard and tiring.

‘He found it hard to ink the type evenly and the rollers refused to maintain an even pressure, with the result that nearly all copies show much smudging in parts and faint printing in other parts.’⁷

Originally, Brady attempted to print the entire document at once; however, he found that it was not feasible due to too little type available, and printing had to be split into two separate parts. When the British army went into Liberty Hall, they found that the second half of the proclamation was still inside the press on the 27th of April 1916.

The printing of the document began around noon on Sunday, the 23rd of April and was finished around 1:00 am on Monday Morning,⁸ just in time for Easter of 1916. When all the copies of the proclamation were finished, they were taken to the General Post Office by Helena Molony, the Secretary of the Irish Women’s Workers’ Union; this would be the focal point for the 1916 Rising.

The proclamation document was read out by Patrick Pearse outside the General Post Office in Dublin during Easter Monday on the 24th of April 1916 at 12:45 pm.⁹ The reading of the Proclamation formed the basis of the Easter

⁵ Dr Mary Clark, 2016

⁶ National Library of Ireland

⁷ University College Cork, University College Cork Library, <https://libguides.ucc.ie/1916Proclamation> [accessed 16th December 2022]

⁸ University College Cork

⁹ National Museum of Ireland, *The Proclamation of the Irish Republic*, <https://www.museum.ie/en-IE/Collections-Research/Collection/Resilience/Artefact/Test-3/fb71e3dc-2e95-4406-bc46-87d8d6b0ae5d> [12th December 2022]

Rising, which transpired on Easter Monday and continued for six tumultuous days. When the document was read aloud standing outside of the GPO to a 'Sparse and almost completely uncomprehending audience'.¹⁰ The most common reactions went from sympathy to confusion and, surprisingly, hostility towards the rebels. The proclamation appeals to God, the 'Dead generations' which sustained the 'old tradition of nationhood', and also calls on a maternal Ireland. The Proclamation goes on to point to the active voice in the document as the Easter Rising leadership itself.¹¹

Although it is uncertain about the amount of copies that were created, it is believed that 2,500 copies were distributed.¹²

The Irish Rebellion of 1803 greatly influenced The Proclamation of the Irish Republic. Patrick Pearse was infatuated with Robert Emmet's case. Pearse was so immersed in Robert Emmett that William Butler Yeats commented Pearse was 'half-cracked and wanting to be hanged; suffering from Emmet delusions the same way some people think they are Napoleon or God.'¹³ Robert Emmet had composed his own proclamation stating a Provisional Government, which was read out to the crowd that had assembled to fight with him in July of 1803. It failed. Patrick Geoghegan argues that:

'The decision to draft a new Proclamation of the Provisional Government was a conscious attempt to imitate Emmet. History was repeating itself: the first time as farce, the second time as tragedy'.¹⁴

A further proclamation was made in 1867; this one was more similar to the most well-known proclamation of 1916 with regards to tone, duration and is the example upon which the proclamation in 1916 was based on. The proclamation in 1867 targeted itself to the world population, while the proclamation in 1916 was targeted solely to the Irish people. The 1867 proclamation was inscribed by 'The Provisional Government'; similarly, the 1916 proclamation was just inscribed as 'on behalf of the Provisional Government'. The similarities between the proclamations of 1867 and 1916

¹⁰ Catherine Frost, 'Summoning Sovereignty: Constituent Power and Poetic Prophecy in Ireland's 1916 Proclamation of the Republic', *Constellations*, Vol.24, No. 1 (2017) 76-86 (p.78)

¹¹ Catherine Frost, 'Summoning Sovereignty: Constituent Power and Poetic Prophecy in Ireland's 1916 Proclamation of the Republic', p.79

¹² Dr Mary Clark, 'Printing the 1916 Proclamation - Transcript', Dublin City Council, 27th June 2016. <https://www.dublincity.ie/library/blog/printing-1916-proclamation-transcript> [14th December 2022]

¹³ Dictionary Of Irish Biography, Emmet, Robert, (2011) <https://www.dib.ie/biography/emmet-robert-a2921> [14th December 2022]

¹⁴ Geoghegan, 2016

were created on purpose, as both arose from the Irish Republican Brotherhood campaign.

Historian Catherine Frost argues that the main model for speeches regarding the finding of self-governance is a performative one. These speeches are inspired by the American Declaration of Independence. Frost states that:

‘Yet performative speech requires quite formal conditions, including an authorised speaker and receptive audience - difficult requirements to meet under the fluid conditions of founding, and conditions absent in the Irish case.’¹⁵

The Proclamation utilises figurative language instead of formalism and draws on remembrance and inventiveness instead of representative power.

The closing lines of the Proclamation states:

‘In this supreme hour the Irish nation must, by its valour and discipline and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called’¹⁶

These closing lines are similar to the opening of the proclamation, however, now with distinct directions. The proclamation strengthens its point by using an appeal to the past and asserts a ‘fundamental right’ of national freedom together with possession over the country's rights not terminated by external possession. It is notable that right is not accomplished utilising colonial practices either.¹⁷

In comparison, the proclamation differs from similar documents that assert their freedom, such as the American Declaration of Independence. In the proclamation, there is no reference to the failing of representation or rather imperial mistreatment; also, the catalogue of injustices that feature very noticeably in the American Declaration of Independence is apparent by its absence. ‘The document instead emphasises the irrelevance of oppression to the proclamation’s cause, except insofar as it highlights commitment and endurance’.¹⁸

¹⁵ Catherine Frost, ‘Summoning Sovereignty: Constituent Power and Poetic Prophecy in Ireland’s 1916 Proclamation of the Republic’, p.76

¹⁶ *ibid*, p.79

¹⁷ *ibid*, p.79

¹⁸ *ibid*, p.79

The proclamation was also a very controversial document. One of the most controversial lines was 'And supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe'. They are referring to the German Empire, which at the time was sending guns and ammunition to the Easter rising rebels. During this time, World War One was raging on, and Germany was the enemy that Britain was fighting against. The British government viewed this line of the proclamation, about gallant allies, as treasonous. This is argued as the primary reason for the military wanting to execute and eliminate as many Irish rebels as they could. The British prime ministers, Herbert Henry Asquith and David Lloyd George went on to say they deeply regretted relocating the military into Ireland to quash the rising as the executions of the rebels made the Irish and British population more sympathetic to the plight of the Irish rebels and ultimately to the purpose of creating an Irish Republic.¹⁹ This turned the rebels into Irish martyrs.

According to The Irish Times, 'The 1916 Proclamation is one of the most quoted documents in Irish History.'²⁰ Original copies of the proclamation are highly valued and sold expensively; in 2020, a copy successfully sold for £165,802 by Whyte's Auctioneers.²¹ They state that:

'This is the document that launched an uprising that changed Ireland forever. Comparable to the Declaration of the United States of America, it is an historic relic of immense importance'.²²

This shows how well-regarded and significant this document is today to the people of Ireland and to the history of Ireland.

Sadly today, it is estimated that only fifty to sixty copies still exist from 1916 and around thirty of these copies are held in public institutions; thus making this document incredibly rare. Copies of the Proclamation can be viewed in Leinster House in Dublin; this is a copy formerly owned by Sean T O'Kelly, in Dublin's General Post Office, Trinity College's, National Museum of Ireland

¹⁹ Darragh Murphy, 'The 1916 Proclamation: controversial document that declared an Irish republic', *The Irish Times*, 23rd September 2015, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/the-1916-proclamation-controversial-document-that-declared-an-irish-republic-1.2362874> [14th December 2022]

²⁰ Murphy, 2015

²¹ Rachael O'Connor, 'Ultra-rare copy of 1916 Irish Proclamation of Independence sells for almost 200,000 euros', *The Irish Post*, 27th July 2020, <https://www.irishpost.com/news/ultra-rare-copy-of-1916-irish-proclamation-of-independence-sells-for-almost-e200000-189884> [14th December 2022]

²² Whyte's auctioneers, *Whyte's*, 2016, <https://www.whytes.ie/art/1916-24-april-the-proclamation-of-the-irish-republic-an-original-example-of-this-iconic-irish-historical-document/150511/?SearchString=&LotNumSearch=&GuidePrice=&OrderBy=&ArtistID=&ArrangeBy=list&NumPerPage=15&offset=176#detTabs1> [14th December 2022]

and also worldwide museums. The Proclamation of the Irish Republic is read out every year by an Officer of the Irish Defence Forces at the General Post Office on the morning of Easter Sunday. The reading of the proclamation is a significant event that is attended by the 'President of Ireland, An Taoiseach, Minister of Defence, the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Representatives of the Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces General Staff.'²³ The proclamation has become a crucial part of Irish History.

To conclude, the proclamation embodies the earliest formal declaration of the Irish Republic as an autonomous, self-governing country. Not only was the document a Proclamation of independence, additionally it was a declaration of rights. Furthermore, the seven men who signed the proclamation declared:

'by force of arms and by pledging their own lives and of their comrades-in-arms to the cause of Irish freedom and the right of its people to a government of their own.'²⁴

In the proclamation, Patrick Pearse laid out the values and principles upon which the Irish Republic would be founded and to which Irish people could unite in the fight for self-rule and autonomy.

²³ Defence Forces, *Óglaigh na hÉireann (Irish Defence Forces)*, <https://www.military.ie/en/public-information/defence-forces-ceremonial/1916-commemoration/> [14th December 2022]

²⁴ Peter O'Rourke, 'The 1916 Proclamation', An Phoblacht, 12th April 2020, <https://www.anphoblacht.com/contents/27788> [15th December 2022]

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