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Poblacht na hÉireann: The Provisional Government of the Irish Republic to the People of
Ireland

Read from the steps of the GPO (General Post Office) in Dublin on the 24th April 1916, effectively marking the beginning of the Easter Rising,¹ this *Poblacht na hÉireann* (Proclamation of the Republic) encapsulates the fight of a people for ‘ownership’ of their land. This poster is so iconic because of its efficacy in starting a revolution of thought and governance, which ended in Catholic Emancipation and an independent Irish Free State.² Whether this was the intention of Patrick Pearse, when he read its words aloud, is widely debated. Nonetheless, through the language of nationhood, a united identity, and legitimate cause - this proclamation announced the death of suppression disguised under Marxist, communal ownership and the rise of an authoritative, independent nation. Proceeded by centuries of cultural and economic repression under British rule and then, more immediately, heightening religious dissonance between Catholics and Protestants: a rebellion was arguably inevitable. However, the radical shift that this, and earlier rebellions, such as the Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmet insurrections,³ called for could only really be achieved through gradual change in Parliament with the likes of Éamon de Valera.⁴ Yet, the extent to which such change, being enacted successfully, was buoyed up by the impact of this proclamation will be determined through a close examination of the text in its wider context.

Opening with the Irish language, it is immediately clear that this proclamation is announcing a cultural revolution. Educated by the Irish Christian Brothers, Pearse, one of the main contributors to the drafting of this text, saw the Irish language as integral to salvaging Irish culture;⁵ this is likely the reason for the title of the *Poblacht* being in Irish. However, as the headline progresses, despite a shift in language as the words become English, it becomes apparent that this is not a new fight. The address, ‘The Provisional Government of the Irish Republic to the People of Ireland’, almost mimics that of the earlier revolutionary proclamation delivered by Robert Emmet on 23rd July 1803: ‘The Provisional Government to the People of

¹ Shane Mawe, ‘Among the Nations: Poblacht na hÉireann’, *Trinity College Dublin*, Available at < <https://www.tcd.ie/library/1916/among-the-nations-poblacht-na-heireann/> > [Accessed 11 May 2021].

² History.com Editors, ‘Irish Free State declared’, *HISTORY*, Available at < <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/irish-free-state-declared> > [Accessed 11 May 2021].

³ Jim Smyth, ‘Wolfe Tone's Library: The United Irishmen and "Enlightenment"’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 45.3 (2012), 424, Available at < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41342521?seq=1> > [Accessed 13 May 2021].

⁴ History.com Editors, ‘Irish Free State declared’, *HISTORY*.

⁵ Sean Farrell Moran, ‘Patrick Pearse and the European Revolt Against Reason’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 4 (1989).

Ireland'.⁶ Employing the noun 'Government' Emmet added a legitimate air to the second United Irishmen revolt and it is unsurprising that Pearse would wish to do the same for the Easter Rising. Yet, who they are both addressing indicates more than just a passing resemblance, but a conscious attempt made by Pearse to connect the two events through this proclamation. The 1803 and 1916 rebellions were both very similar in their ideological ambition and enactment, from their inception to denouement. The plan in 1803 was to capture Dublin Castle, the symbol of British hegemony over the Irish. Similarly, in 1916, rebels intended to capture significant buildings in Dublin city centre and set up barricades around the area to slow British Army manoeuvrings. However, in reality both failed to execute their plans effectively: in 1803 the majority of the fighting occurred on Thomas Street, with the rebels being unable to secure the Castle, and in 1916, they only managed to take the GPO in Dublin before their insurrection was crudely put down in the following days.⁷ Both attempted to establish an independent Ireland, but such honourable, nationalistic intentions quickly devolved into violence. Despite this, Emmet's rebellion was iconic and Pearse evidently desired for his to reach the same notorious heights. This romanticisation of historical violence is a typical trope employed by Pearse, demonstrated by his address to 'IRISHMEN AND IRISHWOMEN' as they are united by a shared identity: suggesting that the only difference in his audience is gender. This idea is reinforced by the later address to a 'whole nation and all of its parts'. The disputes between nationalists and unionists are diminished when Pearse juxtaposes this idea of unity against an 'alien government', in reference to the British who control Ireland. Two nations theory is a well-grounded argument, suggesting that Ulster Protestants have a unique identity to the rest of the Irish nation: Pearse's presupposition of one united nation clearly rejects this. However, this unification is not merely intended to be evocative, as it pits Ireland against Britain, but a declaration of united suffrage. It is one of the first 'Government's to guarantee 'equal rights and opportunities', as British law still regarded women as diminutive subjects compared to men – particularly with voting rights. Women were not given the vote until 1928 in the United Kingdom,⁸ and the 'Provisional Government' are in no uncertain terms promising it in 1916. Nonetheless, such lofty aims seem to pose as

⁶ 'Emmet's Proclamation 1803', *No Other Law*, Available at < <http://www.noootherlaw.com/archive/1803-proclamation.html> > [Accessed 14 May 2021].

⁷ James Heaney, 'Chesterton, Pearse, and the Blood Sacrifice Theory of the 1916 Rising', *An Irish Quarterly Review*, 103.411 (2014), 314, Available at < <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/pdf/24347780.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A6dcfd2243afe63c3f1e073d1d37ec4fa> > [Accessed 2 June 2021].

⁸ UK Parliament, *Women get the vote*, Available at < <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/overview/thevote/> > [Accessed 30 May 2021].

picturesque rationalism in answer to Pearse's earlier utilitarian Romanticism, as he echoes the Victorian Romantic genre when looking at past failed rebellions in order to provoke a passionate response in the proclamation's audience for this cause. By almost mythologising Emmet's rebellion, Pearse and other co-ordinators are able to ignore the realistic threats, such as being out armed by the British, and alternatively present this Rising as a natural ideological progression from the earlier rebellion.

In the midst of the Great War everything was against the Easter Rising, including most of Dublin, and yet Pearse stood at the vanguard of it, with this *Poblacht* in hand, and declared that a fight for freedom had begun. The three organisations named in the proclamation, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), Irish Volunteers (IV), and the Irish Citizen Army, are more commonly referred to as Fenians and journalist Fergal Keane posits that they understood the power of 'revolutionary gesture' through these rebellions.⁹ It is perhaps this which underpins the idea that Pearse's revolution, given its lofty aims was like the Wolfe Tone and Emmett rebellions which preceded it, as the tactics changed but the moralistic, nationalistic and egalitarian aims remained the same. Learning from one another's tactical failings, it is clear that there was a seemingly natural progression from one to the other. However, whereas Emmett targeted a symbol of functioning power by attacking the Castle, Pearse's besieging of the GPO in Dublin and subsequent delivery from its steps accurately depicts how ill-conceived this take over was. Moreover, with central members of other groups like the IV's founder Eoin MacNeill's expressed disinclination to be involved with even the planning of the Rising,¹⁰ largely due to the realistic military enterprise facing them, it appears that the rebellion was likely to fail from the outset. Yeats interacts with this idea when also portraying *Cuchulain* as a beggar.¹¹ The implication being that in the 1916 Rising the insurgents' deaths were meaningless, like beggars', but he respects their honesty; Yeats respects their bravery. Despite being out-armed even with their rifles, shotguns, grenades, revolvers and some Mauser C96 semi-automatic pistols, and far fewer Volunteers mobilising following MacNeill's counter-instruction: believing in a free Ireland, about 1200 rebels rallied and began on Monday 24th April.¹² In actuality, this is a little misleading, with the British looking away to the East, fighting

⁹ Fergal Keane, *The Fenian Dynamiters*, online podcast, BBC Radio 4, 8 October 2013, Available at < <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03c3cn4> > [Accessed 2 June 2021].

¹⁰ Francis X Martin, *Leaders and men of the Easter Rising: Dublin 1916. Thomas Davis lectures* (Michigan: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 147-148.

¹¹ William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), p.62.

¹² John Dorney, 'The Weapons of 1916', *Independent.ie*, Available at < <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/1916/the-rising-explained/the-weapons-of-1916-34505344.html> > [Accessed 8 June 2021].

in World War I, there were far less soldiers in Dublin and so the opportunity to dominate was not as small as imagined. Heightening the unpatriotic tone, the insurgents intended to get armaments from the Germans. Their supplies were unfortunately bombed by the British, and Pearse is clearly unwilling to forget this aggravation, whilst betraying the extent of his romantic sympathies, when insinuating the Germans as he thanks the 'gallant allies in Europe'. Whether it was this in particular which riled the British is unknown, but the consequent gunfire destroyed Dublin's landscape and took 260 civilians with it.¹³ Despite such violence, what is also apparent is that Pearse's romanticisation of the fight for 'freedom' was not merely disillusionment with reality, but a new reality shared by all leaders of previous rebellions. Despite the likelihood that their revolts would fail, it is as if there is a collective greater purpose: that they are attempting to enact later great transformation by putting an idea of a free Ireland into people's hearts, rather than a memory of a failed violent deposition.

The ideology of revolt is largely the same, stemming from the same dissident factors. Alluding to previous tragedies when mentioning Ireland's 'dead... exiled generations', there is an implied defence of the revolt as the Irish Famine and the issues of land and tenure are brought into sharp focus. Agrarian reform, particularly with the rise of Marxism in the 1860s was needed after Britain's neglect of Ireland as it suffered under the potato famine. By employing the adjective 'exiled', an image of legal banishment is fashioned; however, through the personification of the *patria* in 'her exiled children' it becomes apparent that it is the land which can no longer sustain life. Yet, the implied connotation is that it is not because the land dislikes *her* inhabitants, but because the despotic 'alien[s]' in charge, the British, have made life untenable on the land. Such an inference is supported demographically, as in an 1841 census the Irish population was 8.2 million and by 1851 it was at 6.5 million.¹⁴ Interestingly these dates overlap with that of the Great Famine, occurring from 1845-1852.¹⁵ The first larger population is indicative of improvement, agrarian change, medical coverage, and Enlightenment, whereas the latter suggests death from starvation, fear and departure to escape such shortages. Sir Charles Trevelyan, as Assistant Secretary to the Treasury, was instrumental in this anti-Irish

¹³ Rosemary Collins, 'Easter Rising and The Sherwood Foresters', *Radcliffe on Trent and the First World War*, Available at < <http://www.radcliffeontrentww1.org.uk/easter-uprising-and-sherwood-foresters/> > [Accessed 8 June 2021].

¹⁴ C.O. Gràda, 'The Population of Ireland 1700-1900: A Survey', *Annales de Démographie Historique*, (1979), 283, Available at < https://www.persee.fr/doc/adh_0066-2062_1979_num_1979_1_1425 > [Accessed 2 June 2021].

¹⁵ Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1994), p. xv.

genocide by neglecting the populous. Cecil Woodham-Smith's charge of 'insensitiveness',¹⁶ therefore, is not only completely deserved but seconded by this proclamation. By remarking that the 'government has not extinguished' the Irish, Pearse is subtly alluding to an attempt, the famine, made by the British to 'extinguish' the Irish: if not the people than their spirit. However, by employing the violent verb 'extinguished' it becomes clear that it was Irish lives under threat and through repetition of the verb Pearse highlights how great the efforts were to violently crush them. Nonetheless, Queen Victoria's glut is pit against David Lloyd George's later progressive governance as he attempted to resolve the conflicts of agrarian rights by breaking up large estates and giving poor tenant farmers the opportunity to own land. Consequently, Pearse does not demonise the British for their sins of the past, however he is unrelenting in his desire for them to pay for their 'inhumanity' and 'cowardice'.

Religious conflicts and the war for hegemony over Ireland filled the insurgency discourse in 1798, 1803 and 1916. Pearse effectively depicts how these issues have been interwoven in the tapestry of Irish 'trouble', eclipsing time by remaining unsettled disputes, as evidenced by echoing the sentiments of earlier scholar Thomas Paine. Writing in 1787, just prior to Wolfe Tone's uprising, the suspicion that 'England governs Ireland for the purpose of keeping her low' is expressed.¹⁷ Pearse also refers to Ireland as 'her', however, not just with the intention of creating a link but to depict this 'Provisional Government' as the chosen successive custodians of the land. Moreover, he reinforces this notion with imagery of a mother and 'her children': to present an unconditional love between Irish citizens and the land. Such romantic language is used in this proclamation to bridge the social and spiritual tensions of the audience, ultimately uniting them under the 'Most High God'. Moreover, the underlying tone of the text possesses an Irish mythological flair. Pearse's father, being self-educated, endeared Patrick to the cause of Irish liberty at an early age.¹⁸ This interest was shaped by a combined fascination with Gaelic folk heroes, particularly *Cú Chulainn*, and previous republican movements.¹⁹ *Cú Chulainn* was an ancient, heroic warrior and his defence of Ulster, great patriotism, depth of feeling: both passionate and sorrowful, allows him to be used as a quixotic symbol of Ireland

¹⁶ Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger - Ireland 1845-49* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1962), p.60.

¹⁷ Ann Thomson, 'Thomas Paine and the United Irishmen', *Études irlandaises* (1991), 110, Available from < https://www.persee.fr/doc/irlan_0183-973x_1991_num_16_1_996 > [Accessed 4 June 2021].

¹⁸ Brian Crowley, 'The strange thing I am: his father's son?', *History Ireland*, (2006), Available from < <https://www.historyireland.com/20th-century-contemporary-history/the-strange-thing-i-am-his-fathers-son/> > [Accessed 6 June 2021].

¹⁹ Angus Mitchell, 'Robert Emmet and 1916', *History Ireland*, (2003), Available from < <https://www.historyireland.com/20th-century-contemporary-history/robert-emmet-and-1916/> > [Accessed 6 June 2021].

and 'her' history.²⁰ It is clear through the subtle allusion 'her old tradition' that Pearse is not only promising a Gaelic revival in this new republic but aggrandising himself by carving out a new identity in this proclamation: that of the brave warrior *Cú Chulainn*. It is interesting that Pearse uses the adjective 'old'. Clearly, he is further emphasising the British attempt to eradicate, in addition to, the Irish populous, their culture. Compared with contemporary scholars, particularly W.B. Yeats, Pearse was not unusual in his romanticisation of the present by harking back to Irish mythological tales. In Yeats' play *The Death of Cuchulain* from 1939, he furthers the idea of *Cú Chulainn* being emblematic of Ireland when imagining *Cuchulain* as a 'harlot'.²¹ Buoyed up by a tradition of other Irish poets using the imagery, the 'harlot' symbolises Irish defilement under the British and the intentional choice of a Gaelic figure is in itself a rebellion against this.

Pearse also presents himself to be a Christ-like figure, making this proclamation one of sacrificial intent. Nearing the end, there is a call to the 'children' of Ireland to 'sacrifice themselves' for the 'common good'. The implication of inherent and unavoidable 'sacrifice' hints at there being little chance of success in the Rising. Nonetheless, the collective noun 'children' reinforces idea of unified cause. However, as children are impressionable and often innocently do as they are asked, there is a naïve connotation which suggests that the only IRB members to take part were unthinking sheep who bought into the romantic façade that Pearse painted over the realities of war. Yet, this was likely an unintentional implication, alternatively Pearse is calling on the idea of Christianity unity. Through extended Christian metaphors, as the audience are called to receive their 'blessing' from the 'supreme' God' by becoming 'worthy' in 'sacrifice', clearly Pearse is merging nationalistic ideas with Christian ideals. In 1972, Francis Shaw argued that it was 'aggressively unorthodox' to mar Christ by paralleling him with patriots fighting for the cause.²² Therefore, Pearse is likely using intentionally provocative language, despite being a Catholic, in the knowledge that death is almost promised in this fight; so, through such 'sacrifice' they may put the cause into people's hearts. Leading Irwin Thompson in 1967 to thereby introduce the question of whether the Rising was death by suicide or martyrdom.²³ Aged only thirty-six, born in 1879 and dying on 3rd May 1916 in

²⁰ Matt Davis, *Cú Chulainn: Irish mythology's Incredible Hulk*, *Big Think*, (2019), Available from < <https://bigthink.com/culture-religion/cu-chulainn?rebelltitem=2#rebelltitem2> > [Accessed 6 June 2021].

²¹ William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), p.62.

²² Daire Keogh, 'The canon of Irish history: a challenge', *Studies*, 61: 242 (Summer, 1972), pp. 113-52.

²³ William Irwin Thompson, *The Imagination of an Insurrection, Dublin, Easter 1916* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 118.

Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin, Pearse may have been somewhat unwitting to the violent potential of this rebellion, yet given the previously violent failed attempts in 1798 and 1803 it is unlikely.²⁴ Yet, casting such a vitriolic diatribe at the British by means of attack – incurred an obvious threat to life. So obvious in fact, that fifteen men were taken to Kilmainham Gaol and shot by the British to mark their victory at the end of the Rising. Although public mood had been against the insurgents, the unwarranted murder of the defenceless James Connolly on 12th May 1916 and the sheer number of targeted individuals over the two-day period shifted the support to the Irish nationalists.²⁵ In part, the mass killed were regarded as martyrs because of the way that they died, but also how fully they lived for their cause. As G. K. Chesterton determines the bounds of martyrdom in *Orthodoxy*: ‘he must desire life like water and yet drink death like wine’ –²⁶ it becomes apparent that Pearse and the other rebels had the desire to live but believed that their cause was worth facing death. On the other hand, Thompson proposed an underlying suicidal intent present in this proclamation – largely due to the inflammatory nature of its words - when stating that ‘death was not the cost but the reward of sacrifice’ for Pearse. Yet, James Heaney argues that Pearse was neither exclusively pursuing ‘blood sacrifice’ or ‘military success’. Through faith, or as Heaney suggests ‘messianic delusions’,²⁷ Pearse hoped that like Christ’s crucifixion and the birth of Christianity – this Rising would lead to something greater, making all uncertain outcomes worth such ‘sacrifice’.

Upon barren and fallow land grew a revolutionary spirit. This Georgian-era ideological fight for Irish independence has eclipsed time, remaining in the hearts of ‘her children’. Reflected in the Neoclassical architecture of Dublin, despite British efforts to destroy it, it remains an unchanging fixture in the landscape. The 1916 Easter Rising became a focal point for the War of Independence, 1919-1922, and Civil War, 1922-1923. Yet, it was the provocative words of this proclamation which catalysed it to the vanguard of this war. A land marked by unrest, Pearse once said that ‘an Ireland unfree shall never be at peace’.²⁸ So, his authorial purpose becomes clear: this proclamation is not announcing a battle but rallying his audience for a war that has not yet been won.

²⁴ History.com Editors, ‘Easter Rising’, *HISTORY*, (2009), Available at < <https://www.history.com/topics/british-history/easter-rising> > [Accessed 8 June 2021].

²⁵ History.com Editors, ‘Easter Rising’, *HISTORY*.

²⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Random House, 2001), p. 94.

²⁷ James Heaney, ‘Chesterton, Pearse, and the Blood Sacrifice Theory of the 1916 Rising’, 314-315.

²⁸ Ruán O’Donnell, *16 Lives: Patrick Pearse* (Dublin: The O’Brien Press, 2016), p.121.

POBLACHT NA H EIREANN.
THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT
OF THE
IRISH REPUBLIC.
TO THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND.

IRISHMEN AND IRISHWOMEN: In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.

Having organised and trained her manhood through her secret revolutionary organisation, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and through her open military organisations, the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, having patiently perfected her discipline, having resolutely waited for the right moment to reveal itself, she now seizes that moment, and, supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe, but relying in the first on her own strength, she strikes in full confidence of victory.

We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible. The long usurpation of that right by a foreign people and government has not extinguished the right, nor can it ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people. In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty: six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms. Standing on that fundamental right and again asserting it in arms in the face of the world, we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State, and we pledge our lives and the lives of our comrades-in-arms to the cause of its freedom, of its welfare, and of its exaltation among the nations.

The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.

Until our arms have brought the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women, the Provisional Government, hereby constituted, will administer the civil and military affairs of the Republic in trust for the people.

We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, Whose blessing we invoke upon our arms, and we pray that no one who serves that cause will dishonour it by cowardice, inhumanity, or rapine. 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.

Signed on Behalf of the Provisional Government,

THOMAS J. CLARKE.

SEAN Mac DIARMADA.

THOMAS MacDONAGH.

P. H. PEARSE.

EAMONN CEANNT.

JAMES CONNOLLY.

JOSEPH PLUNKETT.

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