

In this commentary, I will analyse the primary source document entitled, 'The Provisional Government of the Irish Republic to the People of Ireland' from the year 1916. I will conduct this qualitative analysis in three sections. In the first part, I will provide an overview of the document, making references to its authorship, motive and intended audience, publication, and formatting and the seven signatories. In the second section of this document analysis, I will examine through a comparative means the independence proclamation written by Robert Emmett in 1803, from which this proclamation was modelled, and I will also briefly look at the Constitution of Ireland in 1919. In the third section, I will do an in-depth analysis of the historic documents' content, where I will pay special attention to the information that is contained within the document as well as, what the document conveys about the time period, what it meant to the people of Ireland, and the excluded items.

Standing tall in the metaphorical persona of an apostle, Patrick Pearse, the Commander in Chief of the Army of the Republic, and President of the Provisional Government, raised his voice in front of the General Post Office in Dublin shortly after midday on Easter Monday 1916, to declare with bold tenacity the emergence of an interim government and to usher his people into a guerrilla warfare battle for victory against their mother country Britain¹. The Proclamation of the Republic of Ireland is believed to have been authored by Pearse due to its stylistic and expressive language. Ideally, Pearse's profession as an orator and poet positioned him to be equipped for his new role as a rebel leader in the quest for Irish independence. However, the influences of the socialist mindset of his colleague and partner in the revolution, James Connolly are plainly highlighted by the declaration's concern for the social welfare and wellbeing of the common Irish people and the management of the national resources of the country. While most of the information pertaining to the uprising of 1916 was kept as a secret, historians believe that the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) along with the Irish Citizen Army (ICA) approved the final revision of the document on 17th April, 1916².

The Proclamation was a defiant call to arms against tyranny, persecution and injustice faced by the people of Ireland. While some have argued that the document in its nature is not political or sacred, but rather a romanticized visionary speech for a free Ireland, it is undoubtedly the case that the document has become the cornerstone and foundation of the Irish mentality and the pursuit of historians, amongst others in answering the Irish question.³ At the time of its construction, the majority of Europe was ruled by a monarchy, and the proclamation proved that the revolutionaries looked past the status quo and were willing to forge for themselves a new mentality. Opposition against British rule was a struggle that had been fostered within the veins of the Irish since the English set their eyes towards the neighbouring isle. Pearse grasped this knowledge, and in the construction of the proclamation makes references to the 'dead generations and the occurrence of rebellions over the span of three hundred years that birthed revolutionaries who desired a free Ireland but were crushed under the hand of Britain; only to spark again another set of

¹ Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 161

² n/a, 'The Proclamation and what it stands for', Independent.ie, 10 December 2015.

<<https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/1916/the-rising-explained/the-proclamation-and-what-it-stands-for-34267711.html>> [accessed 05 December 2022]

³ Eunan O'Hallpin, 'The Proclamation was a speech not by Pearse, not a constitution', The Irish Times, 28 March 2016. <<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/the-proclamation-was-a-speech-by-pearse-not-a-constitution-1.2589017>> [accessed 05 December 2022]

revolutionaries⁴. While the British pondered upon the Irish question, that is, the extent of which Home Rule should be given to Ireland, internal conflict between the interests of the Protestants and Catholics, discrimination by the crown against those of the Catholic faith and the ideologies of the Unionists and Nationalists sparked another question—the Ulster one— regarding partition within Ireland. Unionists desired to remain loyal to the British crown and refused the idea of Home Rule altogether. Instead, they suggested separation from the southern provinces, which in turn motivated Nationalists to use force in order to achieve a free Ireland. After years of oppression, Nationalists wanted a full victory for all of Ireland, and not a halfway win. Moreover, one of the main purposes of the 1916 uprising was ‘to enact a blood sacrifice to re-awaken Irishmen to their sense of nationality’⁵.

Pearse role in the uprising as a commander and as an orator is attached, in my opinion, to the significance of the siege on the Post Office. The commanding centre for the Irish rebels was the means by which Britain communicated with the Irish government and the British troops. Confiscating the building would delay the response time for British troops to request reinforcements from England. It was also where the revolutionary leaders communicated with their ‘gallant’ ally Germany, who they had hoped would be able to supply ammunition and a military army. By overtaking the location, it signalled the rise of a new national voice—an Irish voice— though it was often suppressed, that would direct its own endeavours and assert its place in the world apart from the crown.

As Pearse read the declaration that solemn afternoon, innocent onlookers stopped to listen, not fully grasping the significance of the Republic they had now entered into, the tribulations they would soon bear, or the hardships faced in printing the document. The historic document was recorded on two sheets of paper and passed to Thomas MacDonagh, one of the revolutionaries and signatories of the proclamation, for safe keeping. On the morning of Easter Sunday, MacDonagh gave the document to Connolly, who owned the printing company Workers Republic, to oversee its publication. Three men, Michael Molloy, Liam O’Brien and Christopher Brady, past employees of Connolly’s print shop were entrusted with the task of printing the text at Liberty Hall⁶.

Their task was easier said than done since they had insufficient print materials and the press was in poor condition. To solve this, the men borrowed materials from another establishment run by William West. This resulted in various formatting discrepancies on the original document. Those inconsistencies are evident in the variations of the font size prominent with the letter ‘e’⁷. For example, in the title of the proclamation, the letter ‘e’ found in the word ‘the’ in the sentence ‘To The People of Ireland’, is actually a letter ‘f’ with the bottom stroke added after with wax. In total, the proclamation went through the press three times in order to print the title, first three paragraphs and the latter ones⁸. At the bottom of the declaration are the names of seven signatories: Thomas Clarke, Sean Mac Diarmada, Thomas MacDonagh, Patrick Pearse, Eamonn Ceannt, James Connolly and Joseph Plunkett. Along with the print version of their names, the first six

⁴ Townshend, *Easter 1916*, p. xx

⁵ Patrick Buckland, *Irish Unionism 2: Ulster Unionism and the Origins of Northern Ireland 1886-1922* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1973), p. 104

⁶ Townshend, *Easter 1916*, p. 138

⁷ Joseph Connell Jr., ‘Proclamation of the Irish Republic’, *History Ireland*, 19.1 (2011), 66 (p. 66) <: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41000275>> [accessed 05 December 2022]

⁸ Connell Jr., ‘Proclamation of the Irish Republic’, *History Ireland*, p. 66

men signed, in handwriting, the bottom left of the original document before it was passed through the press. Plunkett was the only one who signed the proclamation on the day that it was printed⁹.

Pearse was largely inspired by the writings of Robert Emmett, who in 1803, led a rebellion in Dublin proclaiming the Irish republic. Emmett gave an oration of the document on the Docks with plans to overtake the Dublin castle and the viceroy¹⁰. Though his plans were thwarted, the inspiration for his rebellion against British rule stirred the hearts of future revolutionaries who wanted to nationalize Ireland. Examples of Emmett's influence include the adaptation of the phrase, 'The Provisional Government', which Pearse used as the title of the 1916 uprising as a means of asserting his claim to Irish nationhood and resurrecting the revolutionary spirit of the land¹¹. Pearse follows the structural layout that was written by Emmett; a title clearly highlighting the theme of the document, an appeal to the people of Ireland to stand with the revolution, the planning of the rebellion and people involved, and the rights of the new sovereign state. Both documents seek to secure the interests of the people of Ireland, the ownership of land, the handling of its national resources, and the condemnation of British oppression. Both men understood the stakes of their actions and the consequences that would follow after their rebellion. There a pledge of allegiance found in both proclamations with a solemn vow pledging their lives and the lives of their comrades to their cause. Ironically, the 1803 proclamation expands this further by declaring a reluctance to abandon the post until independence is acknowledged, but inevitably, Emmett failed to keep his word.

One of the key differences between the 1803 and 1916 proclamation is that the 1803 document was more than just a call to arms. The document has the formations of a constitution as it covers the handling of prisoners of war, the political agenda and reformatory structure of Ireland and the handling of land. The 1916 proclamation visualizes the factors that would constitute a Republic, such as the rights of all its citizens irrespective of religion and gender, the condemnation of foreign leadership and establishment of a governing body, but it does not explicitly state the way in which such affairs are to be handled. Three years following this proclamation, the Dáil Eireann government issued the Declaration of Independence. While the execution of the motives behind the 1916 and 1919 documents differs, both presents a similar discourse with references to the number of years the Irish people have fought for freedom from the oppressive foreign rulership, the promotion of 'equal rights and equal opportunity for every citizen' and the request for international peace as other free nations acknowledged Ireland as an independent state¹². With regards to the 1803 and 1919 documents, it appears that the proclamation falls in alignment with the declaration in terms of its structural content. Perhaps Pearse understood that overruling British authority would not be an easy feat and that his attempt would be overthrown. Nevertheless, he sought after the cause with the hopes that Irishmen would be infuriated by the suppressing of another attempt at independence; and with vigour, pursue it at all stakes.

The first issue that is highlighted in the proclamation is that of Home Rule and the sovereignty of the Irish people. The document states, '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'¹³. During

⁹ Townshend, *Easter 1916*, p. 161

¹⁰ John W. Burke, Robert Emmett, *Life of Robert Emmett: The Celebrated Irish Patriot and Martyr with his Speeches* (Charlestown: Courtenay and Wienges, 1893), p. 74-93

¹¹ Townshend, *Easter 1916*, p. xx

¹² Michael Hopkinson, *The Irish War for Independence* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 2004), p. 207

¹³ Hopkinson, *The Irish War*, p. 204

this time period, British rulership in Ireland was founded upon the oppression of Irishmen and the infringement of the right to own property and access to government jobs. Moreover, the basis for this was founded upon the discrimination of the religious majority— Catholicism. The biased influence of Britain and the reluctance to incorporate the Catholics due to cultural differences disguised as indifference caused a bitter discord and, in some instances, violence between the British-Irish religious and political groups¹⁴. The original intention for the Home Rule in Ireland was to secure the liberty of the Irish people through the establishment of an Irish parliament in Westminster, and a means by which they would be able to make their present circumstances palatable¹⁵. However, the severity of the oppression faced by Catholics, along with the unwillingness of Ulster unionists to sever ties with Britain as they believed themselves to be a part of Britain and therefore entitled to an inheritance that could only be guaranteed by remaining in connection with the mother country, made that desire virtually impossible¹⁶. By placing this in the proclamation, the IRB and ICA were exchanging their fates with that of freemen and affirms the right of the Irish people, through the provisional government, to secure that right. While I personally do not think that accurately captured the interest of all of Ireland, I concur that it served as a means by which the oppressed would be liberated.

Furthermore, the proclamation guarantees the '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 all of 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'¹⁷. At the beginning of the document, it is address 'Irishmen and Irishwomen', which alludes to the rights of women being prominent in the upcoming government. Adult suffrage, which is defined as the right to vote, would be one of the key areas that the rebels sought to advance the nation towards. This is due to the fact that women partook in the Irish war for independence and therefore proved their right to be able to be a part of the decision-making process of the country. Additionally, the bitterness of Britain's enforced division even resulted in Catholic children being marginalized and restricted from accessing different forms of education. By steering Ireland forward, religio-political differences would have to be overlooked in order to foster equality that would develop the new Republic.

As the new territory emerged, controversy surrounding its affiliation are present in the document's reference to the 'gallant ally in Europe'. Although they are unnamed, it is Germany that the proclamation refers to. During this period, World War I ensued between the British and the Germans and the association of the Irish rebels with the mother country's foe stained them with treason. The Irish rebels believed that if Germany was successful in the war, then an association would guarantee international recognition and peace. In calling the Germans their ally, Ireland was suggesting treason, revolt, and rebellion against the Empire. In addition to this, the proclamation mentions that Ireland will 'rely upon its own strength first', which I think was a farfetched idea as the countermanding order passed by Irish Volunteer leader, Eoin McNeil, and the lack of an army would

¹⁴ Townshend, *Easter 1916*, p. 26

¹⁵ Townshend, *Easter 1916*, p. 31

¹⁶ Thomas Hennessy, *A History of Northern Ireland 1920-1996* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1997), p. 2-3

¹⁷ Hopkinson, *The Irish War*, p. 205

not guarantee their success¹⁸. Also, questions can be raised pertaining whether the Provisional Government's would be able to lead the Republic as controversy concerning the true leader of the uprising surfaced. While many hold Pearse as the mastermind behind the rebellion, given his interest in highlighting the concerns of the Irish people, others have suggested otherwise. This is due to the order of the names of the signatories since Thomas Clarke is placed first and Pearse fourth. Clarke's widow suggested that he was to be the President and not Pearse, but no evidence is available to support this claim and it has since been disputed¹⁹.

Other questions can be raised about the unity of the land, as the Sein Fein, whose electoral manifesto was published in 1918, did not partake in the rebellion because they thought that the use of force to achieve independence was unnecessary. Though this view changed after the rebels were executed, the question still remains as to how their loyalty to the Provisional Government would be have dealt. The Proclamation also excludes any mention of the Gaelic language, which was dear to Pearse's heart, from its agenda. The Irish language was suppressed by the British and Pearse avidly campaigned to ensure that the language was 'kept alive' in the land. Aside from the title, 'Poblacht Na Heireann', no other mention is made of the language²⁰. I think that quite possibly, Pearse felt the need to mention the more pressing issues of the land at that time and that he thought it would be understood that the emergence of the Irish nationhood would include the Gaelic language.

In conclusion, the Proclamation of the Irish Republic is a historic, visionary and cornerstone document of Ireland. I have analysed the document in order to provide to an overview, comparative and historical analysis of the document. In doing so, I have made mention of its approach to the Protestant-Catholic debate, the Irish question of Home Rule, the international treatment that Ireland sought to foster with Germany and the excluded Sein Fein and Gaelic language. In my view, there is no other way to understand the struggle for independence within Irish History without examining The Proclamation of the Republic.

¹⁸Maureen Buckley, 'Irish Easter Rising of 1916', *Social Science*, 31.1 (1956), 49-55 (p. 53)
<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4188442>> [accessed 05 December 2022]

¹⁹Townshend, *Easter 1916*, p. 161

²⁰Townshend, *Easter 1916*, pp. 12-13

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