

A Document Analysis of the Easter Rising Irish Rebel Proclamation

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This analysis will be focused on the Irish rebel's proclamation of the Irish Republic¹ from the Easter rising of 1916, which is an immensely important document in Irish history. The proclamation was in effect a declaration of independence from Britain and was written and signed by 7 men calling themselves 'The Provisional Government of The Irish Republic'. It was signed by Thomas J. Clarke, Sean mac Diarmada, Thomas MacDonagh, P. H. Pearse, Eamonn Ceannt, James Connelly and Joseph Plunkett. All seven of these men were to be later executed following the unsuccessful uprising.

The armed rebellion was undertaken by several different groups working together, the Irish Republican brotherhood or The Feinans were the masterminds of the revolt and were a secretive organization desiring independence. The Irish Volunteers also took part, who were an armed group that contained I.R.B members. The volunteers 'formation was triggered by the establishment of the Ulster Volunteer Force.'² These two organizations were augmented by the smaller Irish Citizen army led by socialist James Connely and an even smaller Sinn Fein contingent. Their grievances stemmed from a long and as yet unsuccessful struggle with the British government and Unionists to achieve Irish home rule that had spanned decades. The goal of home rule for the Irish had been proposed and rejected, firstly by the House of Commons in 1886 and then the second home rule bill was defeated in the House of Lords after making it through the House of Commons in 1893. Finally, in 1914 home rule for the Irish was in the final stages of being agreed, with 'fierce Ulster resistance, backed up by the Tory party.'³ The bill failed to materialize, however, as the outbreak of the First World War ensured the shelving of proposals until after wartime had passed. Certain factions of incensed nationalists decided to take matters into their own hands and the result was the armed revolt known as the Easter rising in 1916.

The text was printed in Liberty Hall on Easter Sunday,⁴ apparently in a hurry, possibly due to last minute changes of plan. A possible 'figure of 2500 has been suggested for the number of copies produced.'⁵ 'The printed copies were sent to General Headquarters in the G.P.O. and from there distributed to different areas'⁶ as well as being displayed around the city.

The Proclamation was read aloud by one of the nationalists I.R.B leaders Patrick Pearse at the General Post Office, one of the buildings they had taken control of and were using as a headquarters in Dublin on 24th of April 1916. This signaled the commencement of the Easter Rising.

¹ National Museum Of Ireland, '*Proclamation Of The Irish Republic*' <<https://www.museum.ie/en-IE/Collections-Research/Collection/Resilience/Artefact/Test-3/fb71e3dc-2e95-4406-bc46-87d8d6b0ae5d?msclid=0bd17bb8b01711eca03d6e4f106cb8de>> [Accessed 30/3/22].

² F. McGarry, '*The Easter Rising*' <<https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/irishhistorylive/IrishHistoryResources/Articlesandlecturesbyourteachingstaff/TheEasterRising/?msclid=a841be54b03411ec9e055f4fea62991b>> [Accessed 30/3/22].

³ Oxford Reference, '*Irish Home Rule*' <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100011936?msclid=9c22f718b03f11ecb1bff8eb81d4a4a4>> [Accessed 30/3/22].

⁴ National Museum Of Ireland '*Proclamation Of The Irish Republic*'

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

The document is addressed to the people of Ireland and this is accomplished with the use of both the Irish and English languages. At the very top of the proclamation the words ‘*Poblacht na hEireann*’ appear in Irish with ‘To the people of Ireland’ in English lower down. These are the only words that appear in Irish, the rest of the document is written in English.

Although the piece addresses the people of Ireland directly, the proclamation as a whole is also quite obviously intended for the British government and public, indeed, the world. The bilingual address sandwiches the words ‘The Provisional Government of the Irish Republic’ in large bold lettering as a heading so that the reader is left in no uncertainty as to who the documents authors are and what they are striving to be.

The first line is an even more direct call to the people, again in bold print, ‘Irishmen and Irishwomen.’ This is notable for its call to the women of Ireland at a time when women weren’t even permissible to vote. ‘Over 280 women played an active role in the rising’⁷ with some being given prominent leadership roles.⁸ Among the most notorious was Constance Markievicz who was sentenced to death as a result of the unrest but was spared on account of her being a woman.⁹

The text continues in a patriotic tone, ‘In the name of God’ as if to insinuate the uprising is approved by God and done in his name. It mentions ‘dead generations’ in reference to past rebellions that had failed in the same cause as their own. The rebels speak for Ireland as if they are the country’s personification and urge ‘its children’ meaning the people of Ireland to ‘strike for her freedom’ through them. In other words, to rise up with the rebels for independence. At the time of the rising, it wasn’t popular with the public so perhaps this was also intended as a rousing speech which is indicated by the use of language.

The text then reveals that the Irish Republican Brotherhood has organized what is unfolding and has trained men secretly in a revolutionary cause, it also acknowledges the involvement of the Irish volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army. The proclamation declares that Ireland, again speaking for the country as a whole, has ‘resolutely waited for the right moment’ and ‘now seizes that moment’. Here the rebels talk of the delays in the implementation of home rule and the right moment was now here with Britain’s attention elsewhere with the outbreak of World War One. ‘Supported by her exiled children in America’ referring to Feinian wings within the migrant Irish populace of the United States and ‘gallant allies in Europe’ which is a direct acknowledgement of German support for the rising. The Germans did in fact send a ship stocked with weapons and ammunition, but it was discovered¹⁰ along with Roger Casement who was involved in the rising and had been arranging the shipment¹¹. This set back ‘ended any possibility of a national rising’¹² as it left the rebels without the sufficient

⁷ M. McAuliffe & L. Gillis ‘*Richmond Barracks 1916: We Were There 77 Women Of the Easter Rising*’ (Dublin: Dublin City Council 2016) p.26.

⁸ Ibid P.27.

⁹ T. Garner, ‘*Battlefield Dublin: The Easter Rising 1916*’

<https://www.academia.edu/33498743/Battlefield_Dublin_The_Easter_Rising_1916?msclid=f22e8b20b05711ec917d31aabb7e0613> [Accessed 29/03/22] p.70.

¹⁰ C. Townshend, ‘Making Sense Of Easter 1916’ <<https://www.historyireland.com/making-sense-of-easter-1916/?msclid=5b4344fdb01e11ecb5c3479e7376159a>> [Accessed 29/3/22].

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² F. McGarry, ‘*The Easter Rising*’, Vi, The Failure Of The Rising.

arms to do so. The sentence following this ‘but relying in the first, on her own strength’ is a possible hint to this setback.

The third paragraph of the document gets to the crux of the matter and seems to speak directly to the British. It lays out the Nationalists demands, but more than this, it sets out what they believe is their right and entitlement taken from them since the act of union in 1801.¹³ The paragraph opens thus, ‘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’ declaring to the world these believed rights and in no uncertain terms. The next line talks of ‘long usurpation’ insinuating their right was wrongly taken by a ‘foreign people and government.’ The rebels then display their resoluteness to the cause by saying the right ‘will never be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people’, a warning that whatever the outcome of events, this is an issue that will never settle for nationalists unless they were all slaughtered. This paragraph also speaks of past uprisings saying ‘six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms’ again reiterating that this has happened before, is happening right now and will happen again. The Proclamation itself also has similarities to the 1803 rising of Robert Emmet.¹⁴ The insurgents then announce that they ‘proclaim the Irish republic as a sovereign independent state’ to return power to the people of Ireland and away from the British. Once again, the sincerity of the words is backed up by a pledge of their lives and that of others to the cause.

The next paragraph shifts its focus again and is directed towards the people of Ireland once more. The first line again calls on both Irishmen and Irishwomen stating the new republic is both ‘entitled to’ and ‘claims’ their ‘allegiance.’ The Proclamation is quite evidently written in a way as to rouse the Irish people to armed action and generate as much support as possible. The subsequent part of the piece, still aimed at the people of Ireland, promises what can be offered as reward if they seize their moment. ‘Religious and civil liberty’ are guaranteed as well as ‘equal rights’ and ‘equal opportunities to all.’ It also reaches out to the people of Ulster and rests the blame for their differences firmly at the door of the British for nurturing and manipulating these for their own intents and purposes. This can be seen when they state that they will be ‘oblivious of the differences that have been carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from a majority in the past’.

The document next seeks to emphasize the temporary nature of their so-called provisional government which has been self ‘constituted.’ The whole of this section of the text is used as a reassurance to the Irish people that their intentions are genuine, sincere and without malice. The signatories of the proclamation promise the ‘establishment of a permanent National Government’ once the rebellion is won and showing a commitment and respect to women that is once more ahead of its time, they promise females the vote in equality and parity to men. This is displayed in the line of text that begins, ‘elected by the suffrages of all her men and women’ in reference to the ‘permanent National Government.’

¹³ Legislation.gov.uk, ‘*Act Of Union (Ireland)*’ <<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/aip/Geo3/40/38?msclid=c51c403cb06d11ecbe96384d1298327f>> [Accessed 29/3/22].

¹⁴ A. Mitchell, ‘*Robert Emmet And 1916*’ <<https://www.historyireland.com/robert-emmet-and-1916/?msclid=74991032b07711ec8f5fe4ce4e5b65f9>> [Accessed 30/3/22].

In the final section, the self-proclaimed provisional government further seeks to justify its actions to the Irish people through the use of God. They 'place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the 'Most High God' and 'invoke' 'his blessing', legitimizing their activities by implying a divine right and morality to the events about to unfold. Furthermore, the provisional government warns of 'dishonour' being brought to their cause if anybody's actions exhibit 'cowardice, inhumanity, or rapine.' This can also be viewed as another jibe at the British's actions during the years that they have ruled. Finally, the document ends with another rallying call to the 'Irish nation', stating that it 'must' through its 'valour and 'discipline' 'prove itself worthy'. The document also ends with another display of the rebel's willingness to die for their cause 'the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good.' This line hints at martyrdom as dying for the 'common good', in this case and in their view the divine and honourable right to rule their own country, is something to be celebrated. The text ends with 'signed on behalf of the provisional government' followed by the names of the seven signatories.

Inevitably, the rising failed to achieve its immediate military objectives and the rebellion failed. Predictably in the end, the military might of the British was too much for such a small band of insurgents with small arms. Heavy shelling of the G.P.O and Liberty Hall signaled the end for the rebels and Pearse surrendered 'at 3.30pm on Saturday 29th April.'¹⁵ The loss of life amongst both sides was substantial but it was civilians who bore the brunt of the casualties:

Between 450-485 people were killed and over 2,000 were wounded. Of those casualties four percent were policemen, 16 per cent were rebels, 26 per cent British soldiers, and 54 per cent were civilians. The high civilian cost angered Dubliners who initially berated the rebels.¹⁶

At the time of the risings the public reaction to the armed rebellion was not a positive one. People were angry at the loss of life and the damage to their city, parts of which were ruined along with some of their businesses. The goals of the 'Provisional Government' also lay in ruins along with the aims of the proclamations text, for Ireland to rise up and take its country back from the British. The response of the Irish press towards the rebels 'was also hostile'.¹⁷

The actions of the British government would however sway public opinion considerably. The rebels were militarily court marshalled with closed trials as Britain was currently at war. Fifteen of the most prominent members were sentenced to death and executed in quick succession, including the seven signatories of The Proclamation, in the immediate aftermath.¹⁸ The British insensitivity and brutality in their response turned the 'vilified rebels into political martyrs.'¹⁹

¹⁵ T. Garner 'Battlefield Dublin: The Easter Rising 1916' p.75.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ F. McGarry, 'The Easter Rising' Vi, The Failure Of The Rising.

¹⁸ Britannica Encyclopedia, 'Easter Rising' <<https://www.britannica.com/event/Easter-Rising>> [Accessed 29/03/22].

¹⁹ T. Garner 'Battlefield Dublin: The Easter Rising 1916' p.75.

Within months nationalist opinion in Ireland was transformed, largely in response to what was perceived as Britain's vindictiveness in executing the rebel leaders, imprisoning several thousand men, and enforcing martial law.²⁰

As a result of the rebel's martyrdom, The Proclamation itself is also held in high esteem by the Irish people. It is now one of the powerful symbols of the fight to establish their republic and is almost regarded in a mythical or legendary status. Had the British handled events differently in the aftermath of the rising the proclamation may well have faded away into history books as well as the rebels themselves. Instead, the rising was a catalyst for the Irish war of independence and eventual breakaway from the United Kingdom with the rousing words of The Proclamation fulfilled and set in the hearts of Irish people forever.

²⁰ F. McGarry, '*The Easter Rising*' Vi, *The Failure Of The Rising*.

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