



BA Celtic Studies Level 6

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Course Module: (HPPH6902), Centre for Humanities and Social Sciences

Assignment One: Document Analysis (50% weighting) Write a 2500 word commentary on a primary source document related to Ireland between 1880-1997.

'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.'

So begins the third paragraph and core message on the single printed sheet of paper upon which the 'Proclamation of the Irish Republic' was conveyed to its audience on the entrance to the General Post Office, Dublin by one of its signatories, Patrick Pearse, at 12.45 pm on Easter Monday, 24th April 1916. Perhaps it should be immediately suggested that although there had been some detailed strategic planning into the possibility of the campaign, the eventual doomed nature of the enterprise was foreshadowed by the fact that the document itself had been patched together with insufficient typeface for the press, with a dual run of print per half page, and some improvising of the letter 'F' into 'E', as insufficient Es were available to produce the text.¹ It could equally be suggested that as with the type, so it was with the military resources that eventually took to the field on that day and subsequently, later heavily outgunned by British regiments, who after some initial surprise became freely available even though World War One was raging, and with the devastating access to field artillery brought to bear in the heart of Dublin's historic and architecturally renowned city centre.

¹ <https://www.dublincity.ie/library/blog/printing-1916-proclamation-transcript>

But for all that, the somewhat grandiose message could be viewed as impressive for reasons representing a shift away from the colonial parliamentary and monarchical hegemony which had clearly failed with reference to the nineteenth century famines and acts of desperation by emigration, the latter referred to directly in the document as 'exiled children' (paragraph two). Instead, we see a vision of the possibility of a reborn society on the horizon. Within this there is a reflection of the unjust position in regard to suffrage: in the new republic. . . '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,' (paragraph five). This could have been emphasised in view of the fact that the British system was becoming viewed increasingly as outdated, representative of the 19th century. Suffrage bills in Parliament had failed with the consequence of 'suffragists' becoming involved in increasing violence resulting in prison sentences and hunger strikes, foreshadowing situations in Northern Ireland during the later 'Troubles', involving IRA members and their perceived martyrdom during internment.

Certainly, the message of inclusivity seems to emerge as a major prospect within the paragraphs as an idealised vision, a reflection of the new century and aspirations anticipated by the signatories. These signatories, obviously well versed in rhetoric, could not overlook the perennial problem associated with religious tensions blighting the history of both islands, and sectarianism as a spectre if not openly expressed, then lurking behind social inequality:

'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' (paragraph four).

In view of later objection by the Protestant communities in Ulster, and the establishing of an independent Northern Ireland under the Government of Ireland Act of 1920, then this aspiration towards a single republican identity for 'every' citizen might be viewed as optimistic, or even utopian. However, the crucial factor here might be that if the Provisional Government had not issued the proclamation with its heavy emphasis on a totality of citizenship, then the notion of a separate Irish republic would probably have been seen as a betrayal by the rank and file, having a limited currency and value from the world outside. In an uncertain post-war Ireland with its institutions not fully matured rubbing alongside the prospect of a Protestant province and the conflicting historical problems of Londonderry, a walled city heavy with symbolism of non-conformism to an external Catholic culture, then this all-embracing republican idealisation would seem to be the only way forward, at least in theory.

It is, perhaps, in hindsight all too easy to level criticism at the bombastic, Edwardian tone of some of the proclamation's language. There is almost a hint of make-believe here and there. For instance, on the evidence of the reported events immediately preceding the 24th April, the phrase following referring to the 'gallant allies in Europe', has a particularly hollow ring to it, but also an element of premonition of the resultant isolation:

'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'.

'On her own strength' was, for what it was worth, the actuality of the events which played out during the following week. In reality, planned support from outside Ireland did not materialise. The fiasco which resulted is narrated briefly by the author Jerome Ann de Wiel (1916, *The Long Revolution*). A gun-running mission had been planned as an armament support to anticipated initial action. However, the end result was to be a rather downgraded situation of a shipment of older Russian firearms loaded onto a disguised vessel sent from Lubeck with a destination at Tralee Bay, there to be reconnoitred by an Irish pilot. The third element of the plan was to be the arrival by German submarine of the Irish nationalist and conspirator, Sir Roger Casement. But as the events unravelled into a kind of bleak farce, in reality the expedition had become exposed in advance by virtue of the work undertaken by Captain Reginald Hall and his team of codebreakers at the Admiralty, London, and, resulting in ineffective rebel organization and co-operation, the cargo remained onboard and later intercepted on the return journey to Germany. In the meantime Casement had been taken into custody on arrival and promptly conveyed to London for interrogation, and in a kind of final twist of fate, offered to use his self-confessed influence to attempt intercession in the anticipated rebellion, directly with Dublin, probably with one eye on self redemption, acting as a kind of 'go-between'. This was dismissed by Hall, the rebellion left to emerge.

The fact that any British intervention did not initially take place seems paradoxical when reflecting upon the sentence following that which is quoted at the head of this commentary:

'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.'

But the kind of insidious intention here was to just let the events unfold in order to expose the level of insurrection and the strength of the enemy and their locations. It was, in a way, similar to the letting of the disease manifest itself, as would a carbuncle, to be lanced by the reaction of the means necessary to get rid of the infection. If British soldiers' lives were to be sacrificed, as they were, then this seemed to be the price in exchange for the summary arrests and executions of the rebel principals, in particular the signatories of the Proclamation.

Retrospectively, prior to events of 1916, the signatories had been active in the single-minded objective of establishing Ireland as a major separate political and cultural identity, as a proud nation with a history of achievement in literature and language, and in the case of Patrick Pearse, a significant role in the furtherance of this through establishment of various educational initiatives. His association with the Gaelic League, in particular, campaigning for an 'Irish Ireland' educational ethos had more than just Catholic support, also permeating Protestant younger generation activists, all consciously expressing reaction against the general consensus of an imposition of a kind of intellectual slavery, 'bowed down before the mysterious cultural forces of anglicization.'² In some contrast, James Connolly had a background firmly established in the Irish labour movement. He had risen to prominence during an industrial dispute, the so-called 'Dublin Lockout' of 1913 and in October 1914. He had subsequently attained the position of General Secretary of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union but also, perhaps controversially, commander of the Irish Citizen Army (ICA). This had been organized into something resembling a private militia. However, with a figure of approximately 220 members in 1912, whether it should have been designated 'army' is doubtful :

' Connolly became increasingly committed to fomenting an insurrection against British rule in Ireland; he had gradually changed from labour organiser and agitator into military commandant and theorist. In mid-January 1916 he reached agreement with the Irish Republican Brotherhood Military Council to co-operate in an insurrection the following Easter. He joined the Council, and on the day before the Rising its members appointed him vice-president of the Irish Republic and Commandant-General, Dublin Division, Irish Army.'³

What is perhaps surprising in reviewing these actions from a temporal distance is the apparent *ad hoc* nature of these seemingly at short notice. Furthermore, the whole organizational progress of the operation had almost failed before its launch due to a range of factors. A major difference of strategy had developed between the Council, Tom Clarke in particular, and the president of the Irish Volunteers, Eon

² Owen McGee, *The IRB The Irish Republican Brotherhood from the Land League to Sinn Fein* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), pp.276-277.

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/easterrising/profiles>.

MacNeill, a more cautious actor in the drama (not included as a signatory). In any case, when MacNeill had become aware of the inadequacy of the rebels strategy, his attitude of allowing a rebellion to proceed (under the guise of training manoeuvres) was to change radically to that of denial and countermanding the modified Easter Monday plan. He had subsequently been condemned as a traitor by Clarke; he had 'denied them their cover for a nationwide rising.'⁴

With the benefit of hindsight, it is perhaps too easy to dismiss the Proclamation on its face value as unrealistic in the face of the potential might of the British armed services, waiting, as it were, in the wings. 'The Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, having patiently perfected her discipline', was, on the day, ironically optimistic, and the whole 'tone' of the document has an air of romantic aspiration, possibly a reflection of the literary and poetic attainment and cultural interests of some of the signatories. These had in the course of the campaign been assigned senior military status and responsibilities. But leading up to the day, the strategy of taking over by force of arms the centre of Dublin, although considered a major tactical objective, unless solidly supported by successful national uprising, did not seem to suggest the folly of the risk of subsequently being penned in from external resources, and indeed the forces that did manage to take to the field in the provinces were themselves eventually faced by a larger professional force, with the freedom of choice as to when, where and how entering the logistics. With little apparent hope of revolutionary insurgents mounting a second, counter-offensive subsequently at the rear of British military reaction in Dublin, or in any major frontal attack elsewhere in the country, the surrender of Pearse and the provisional government was almost a foregone conclusion.⁵ The stratagem of confronting the British head on was later seen as compromising by the great survivor of the Rising, Michael Collins, when directing the campaigns of the independence war of 1919. The Proclamation's claim in paragraph two relating to secrecy, discipline and 'the right moment' were to be more successfully delivered within the tactical scenario of such guerrilla warfare implemented by Collins.

In the final analysis, it might even be reasonable to suggest that the whole affair, including the document, was to be as much a kind of 'martyrs charter' as a *bona fide* Irish Bill of Rights.⁶ After all, it was the principal signatory of the Proclamation, Thomas Clarke, who, in a way, hinted at this when he stated the following, before being led out to execution after surrender:

⁴ Laffan, p.39

⁵ Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916*, 'The National rising', *The Irish Rebellion*

⁶ See Smith, 2002 for a concise summary of the aftermath and change in public opinion in relation to the rebels' action and the destruction caused, from condemnation to sympathy and more admiration following summary executions.

"My comrades and I believe we have struck the first successful blow for freedom, and so sure as we are going out this morning so sure will freedom come as a direct result of our action...In this belief, we die happy."⁷

⁷ Michael T. Foy, *Tom Clarke: The True Leader of the Easter Rising*. p. 241.

Bibliography and Reference Sources

The Proclamation:

POBLACHT NA hÉIREANN

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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