

Assignment 1 – HPHI 5912 – The Irish Question 1886 - 1998.

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Write a commentary on a primary source document relating to Ireland between 1880 and 1997

Introduction

Within this essay we will examine the proclamation made by the provisional government of the Irish Republic that was read on the steps of the Dublin General Post Office during the Easter uprising of 1916. This examination will look at the background to the uprising, who the key leaders of the uprising and signatories of the proclamation were, and an analysis of key sections of the proclamation itself.

Background to the Easter uprising 1916

Historically within the island of Ireland there has been conflict relating to its governance, and religious discord and mistrust between the predominantly protestant north of Ireland in Ulster and the predominantly Catholic south of Ireland. It is possible to trace roots of this mistrust back into the 17th Century with King James I planting presbyterian Scots into the Ulster region of Ireland to try and create a protestant strong hold within the island, and indeed could be traced further back to King Henry VIII declaring himself King of Ireland in 1540.¹

Indeed, it is also possible to find numerous uprisings and rebellions within the time period from Henry VIII taking the crown of Ireland in 1540 up to the Easter rising of 1916 with 14 separate uprisings taking place on Irish soil and others taking place in protest at British rule in Ireland in other provinces such as Newfoundland, New South Wales, and Canada.²

We can also link in the effects of the Irish famine that took place between 1739 and 1741. In episode 3 of the documentary series *The Story of Ireland*, Fergal Keane noted that 400,000 people died as a result of the Irish famine between 1739 and 1741.³ The subsequent famine between 1845 and 1852 created even greater number of deaths, with *History.com* noting that approximately 1 million people died with another 1 million leaving Ireland, with large numbers emigrating to North America.⁴ This second famine affected predominantly the Catholic

¹ History Ireland, *A Very British Problem: The Stuart Crown and the Plantation of Ireland* (2022) <<https://www.historyireland.com/a-very-british-problem-the-stuart-crown-and-the-plantation-of-ulster/>> [accessed 28 February 2022].

² Wikipedia, *List of Irish Uprisings* (2022) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Irish_uprisings> [accessed 28 February 2022].

³ Fergal Keane, *The Story of Ireland* [video]. 2011 <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?view=detail&mid=B9723995F0AC59C5F3B8B9723995F0AC59C5F3B8&q=BBC+STORY+OF+IRELAND+YOUTUBE&shtp=GetUrl&shid=224f0567-1ec6-49a7-aae3-26b523f110db&shk=QkJDJ3M6IFRoZSBTdG9yeSBvZiBJcmVsYW5kIDNvZjUgQWdlIG9mIFJldm9sdXRpb24%3D&shdk=RG9jdW1lbnRhcncgYWJvdXQgSXJlbGFuZCwgcHVibGlzaGVklGJ5IFwiQkJDXCi%3D&shk=hrjkm2Qx7keat3Vlj660zoPbjFrQ2Y3s8QL4AAAHNBQ%3D&form=VDSHOT&shth=OVP.S1Lt14_7WnBMR6A8tw_zGQIIes> [accessed 19 January 2022].

⁴ History.com, *Irish Potato Famine* (2017) <<https://www.history.com/topics/immigration/irish-potato-famine>> [accessed 28 February 2022].

southern part of Ireland rather than the predominantly protestant Ulster in the North. There are also indications that although Ireland was struggling to feed its own people, exports of food to the British mainland continued and may even have increased during the time period, which could only have increased the anti-British sentiment within southern Ireland.⁵

Ultimately this led to the formation of several nationalist groups who would plan and lead the Easter uprising of 1916.

Signatories to the proclamation

If we look at the proclamation that was read out, a copy of which is available as appendix one, we can see that there were seven signatories to the document. We will look at two of these signatories within this section.

The first person to look at on the signatory list is Patrick Pearse. Pearse co-founded the Irish Volunteers, which eventually became the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), and is credited by the Irish government website as being the author of the proclamation document.⁶ Pearse is also credited as being the president of the provisional government of the Irish republic as well as being in command of the republican rebels at the General Post Office in Dublin.⁷ From this we can see that key figures who would have been directly involved in the planning of the Easter uprising were also present on the ground when it actually took place. It would be possible to draw a conclusion from this that the IRB was actually a small organisation that perhaps lacked for sufficient membership and leadership to be able to keep the key leaders away from actual violence. However, if we look at the IRB as a whole and very specifically at Patrick Pearse it is possible to see that there was a desire to see bloodshed.

Charles Townshend, in his book *Political Violence in Ireland*, noted that the IRB “spurned mere words in favour of violence”⁸, whilst *Britannica.com* note specifically that Pearse “came to believe that the blood of martyrs would be required to liberate Ireland”.⁹ Townshend also quotes Pearse as stating, in relation to the First World War that

It is good for such things to be done. The old heart of the earth needed to be warmed with the red wine of the battlefields. Such august homage was never before offered to God as this, the homage of millions of lives given gladly for the love of country.¹⁰

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Gov.ie, *The Executed Leaders of the 1916 Rising* (2018) < <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/583995-the-executed-leaders-of-the-1916-rising/> > [accessed 28 February 2022].

⁷ 1916rising.com, *Executed leaders of the 1916 rebellion* <<https://www.1916rising.com/cms/history/leaders-soldiers-and-poets/leaders-of-the-1916-rebellion/>> [accessed 28 February 2022].

⁸ Oxford.universitypressscholarship.com, *Political Violence in Ireland: Government and Resistance since 1848* – Charles Townshend (2011) < <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198200840.001.0001/acprof-9780198200840-chapter-1> > [accessed 28 February 2022].

⁹ Britannica.com, *Patrick Pearse* (2021) < <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Patrick-Henry-Pearse> > [accessed 28 February 2022].

¹⁰ Oxford.universitypressscholarship.com, *Political Violence in Ireland: Government and Resistance since 1848* – Charles Townshend (2011) < <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198200840.001.0001/acprof-9780198200840-chapter-1> > [accessed 28 February 2022].

We can even see from Bulmer Hobson, a leader of the on the supreme council of the IRB, who stated that Pearse had theories relating to “the necessity for having a periodic bloodbath in order to keep the spirit, the nationalist spirit alive”.¹¹

From this it is possible to question what the exact motive was for the Easter uprising. Was it to actually liberate Ireland from British control, or was it to create a bloody spectacle that would raise the profile of the nationalist cause? This is also questioned by Townshend who, when quoting James Stephens, states that “their sole aim was to make such a row that the Irish question would take the status of an international one”.¹²

The second person that we will look at is James Connolly. Connolly was not Irish by birth, having been born in Edinburgh, but moved to Dublin in 1896. The Irish government website notes that Connolly was “A firm believer in the perils of sectarian division” and “campaigns tirelessly against religious bigotry”.¹³ As a founder of the Irish Socialist Republican Party¹⁴, it is possible to believe that Connolly became involved in the Easter uprising with the intention of creating a better balance for the people and workers of Ireland, rather than to specifically create bloodshed. Indeed, Townshend notes that Connolly went as far as responding to the comments made by Pearse when writing in the Workers Republic, a publication put out by the Socialist party in Ireland that stated

We do not think that the old heart of the earth needs to be warmed with the red wine of millions of lives, we think anyone who does is a blithering idiot. We are sick of such teaching and the world is sick of such teaching.¹⁵

From looking at this it must be questioned as to what the power dynamics within the IRB were in the lead up to the Easter 1916 uprising.

Executions

All seven signatories to the proclamation were executed by the British in the weeks following their surrender on the 29 April. It is interesting to note that Bulmer Hobson stated that

If the English had not executed them, it would have been a complete fiasco, The whole people of Ireland were against anything of the sort. Actually, when the men surrendered after the fighting in '16 they had to be protected by the British troops against the Dublin mob”¹⁶

¹¹ RTE.ie, *A Volunteers memories 1963* (2022) < <https://www.rte.ie/archives/2018/1115/1011084-bulmer-hobson/> > [accessed 28 February 2022].

¹² Oxford.universitypressscholarship.com, *Political Violence in Ireland: Government and Resistance since 1848* – Charles Townshend (2011) <

<https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198200840.001.0001/acprof-9780198200840-chapter-6> > [accessed 28 February 2022].

¹³ Gov.ie, *The Executed Leaders of the 1916 Rising* (2018) < <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/583995-the-executed-leaders-of-the-1916-rising/> > [accessed 28 February 2022].

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Oxford.universitypressscholarship.com, *Political Violence in Ireland: Government and Resistance since 1848* – Charles Townshend (2011) <

<https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198200840.001.0001/acprof-9780198200840-chapter-6> > [accessed 28 February 2022].

¹⁶ RTE.ie, *A Volunteers memories 1963* (2022) < <https://www.rte.ie/archives/2018/1115/1011084-bulmer-hobson/> > [accessed 28 February 2022].

However, with the imposition of martial law, the seven along with the other leaders of the insurrection were tried under court martial and executed, thus creating the martyrdom that Pearse believed would set Ireland free.

Content and making of the proclamation

The proclamation of the Irish Republic was read out by Patrick Pearse on the steps of the Dublin General Post Office on April 24 1916. However, it was also published in physical form within 'Irish War News'.¹⁷ The National Army Museum states that the newssheet was only published once and contained the "proclamation of the establishment of the Irish republic and optimistic reports regarding the rebels military situation"¹⁸ It is interesting to note that the museum states that it was issued by "Sinn Feiners"¹⁹ and also titles the uprising as the "Sinn Fein revolt".²⁰ It can be surmised that by publishing the proclamation in physical form, the leaders of the uprising hoped to reach a wider audience with the proclamation than could be achieved by verbally reading the statement out from the steps of the General Post Office.

The content of the proclamation has many interesting and noteworthy sections, some of which will now be examined.

The proclamation starts by addressing it to "The People of Ireland"²¹ and includes "Irishmen and Irishwomen"²². In this way, the proclamation attempts to be all encompassing of the Irish people and does not make any distinction between southern Irish or those in Ulster. It is questionable though as to whether those in Ulster who were descended from plantation immigrants to Ireland would actually be viewed as Irish or alien immigrants. The proclamation goes further with attempts to be all encompassing with the paragraph that states,

The Irish Republic is entitled to and herby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees 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 to the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.²³

In this we can see that the proclamation is guaranteeing equal rights to all citizens. This in itself is a step beyond what was available to people within the Britain at the time. We can look, as an example to women's voting rights which did not pass into law until 1918 with the Representation of the People Act which eventually gave women over the age of thirty the right to vote, and the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 that lowered that age to 21 and actually gave

¹⁷ National Army Museum, *The Sinn Fein Revolt in Dublin* < <https://collection.nam.ac.uk/detail.php?acc=1961-12-594-1> > [accessed 28 February 2022].

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ CAIN archive, *Proclamation of the Irish Republic, 24 April 1914* (2022) < <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/pir24416.htm> > [accessed 2 March 2022].

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

voting rights equal to men.²⁴ The stark contrast that is presented in this way allows the provisional government to portray itself as the ‘good guys’, a concept that is reinforced with the use of the terms “differences carefully fostered by an alien government”.²⁵ This also alludes to the British government not being viewed as legitimate within Ireland by the provisional government. However, it is still not clear as to the intent relating to descendants from those planted into Ulster. Although the text refers to “cherishing all the children of the nation equally”²⁶, did they genuinely view those descendants as children of the nation, or as alien immigrants?

The next section to examine states that the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the main organisers and instigators of the Easter uprising, and the Irish nation as a whole, have been “supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe”.²⁷

In this, the provisional government are making reference to the Irish who emigrated to North America following the famine who provided funds, with James Connolly having lived in North America for a period of time. However, of greater significance is the reference to the “gallant allies in Europe”.²⁸ In this the leaders make reference to the German nation who were at the time directly involved in war with Britain. Roger Casement, who although not a signatory to the proclamation, was still executed for his role in the uprising, was, along with Joseph Plunkett, involved in the procurement of weapons from Germany. Plunkett himself allowed weapons to be distributed from his farm in 1914.²⁹ It is difficult to understand how referring to Germany as gallant allies could do anything other than increase tensions between the rebels and the British government, and indeed it may have been a contributing factor to the initial lack of support from the Irish public that was shown to the rebel leaders following their surrender.

The next statement that will be examined reads

Until our arms have brought the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent 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.³⁰

Within this we can see that the authors of the proclamation are recognising that all the people of Ireland should elect their government, but that in the absence of this, they will claim the right to be the government, albeit on a provisional basis.

²⁴ Parliament.UK, *Women get the vote* (2022) < <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/overview/thevote/#:~:text=Representation%20of%20the%20People%20Act,a%20property%20qualification%20to%20vote>. > [accessed 2 March 2022].

²⁵ CAIN archive, *Proclamation of the Irish Republic, 24 April 1914* (2022) < <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/pir24416.htm> > [accessed 2 March 2022].

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ 1916rising.com, *Executed leaders of the 1916 rebellion* < <https://www.1916rising.com/cms/history/leaders-soldiers-and-poets/leaders-of-the-1916-rebellion/> > [accessed 02 March 2022].

³⁰ CAIN archive, *Proclamation of the Irish Republic, 24 April 1914* (2022) < <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/pir24416.htm> > [accessed 2 March 2022].

It can be questioned as to what extent the leadership of the IRB could legitimately claim the right to form a provisional government, even noting the fact that they were holding the “affairs of the republic in trust”.³¹ Given that the IRB was a secret society, and indeed this is even acknowledged at the start of the second paragraph of the proclamation, and as such members needed to be sworn into the organisation, it could be questioned as to what extent they truly represented the will of the Irish people, and whether they had a proper mandate to conduct an armed uprising in the name of the Irish people. It also indicates the expectation, possibly even the desire if we consider the previously mentioned comments from Pearse relating to martyrdom, that violent conflict would be required to achieve the aims of the leaders, rather than negotiating a settlement with the British government. It is perhaps understandable considering the previous discord that was created following attempts to negotiate home rule for Ireland.

This desire is perhaps reinforced with the comment in the proclamation that the Irish people should have “the readiness to sacrifice themselves for the common good”.³² In this we can perhaps again see the bloodlust and desire for martyrdom that has previously been examined in relation to Patrick Pearse in in comments about Pearse from Bulmer Hobson.

The final sections to be examined relate to the invocation of God within the proclamation. In the opening statement the leaders use the term “In the name of God”³³, and in the last paragraph use the phrase “under the protection of the Most High God Whose blessing we invoke upon our arms”.³⁴ Considering that Ireland is a deeply religious nation, it is perhaps not surprising that the leaders chose to invoke God in this way, as it also suggests a supreme authorisation for the actions that were taken. However, a simple examination of the ten commandments from the Bible would reveal that within the commandments we are told that we “shalt not kill”.³⁵ It is difficult to reconcile the invocation of God to provide a blessing for an armed uprising, orchestrated by people who have demonstrated by their words, a desire to see bloodshed, and that bloodshed would be a good thing, with a direct commandment from God via Moses on mount Sinai, to not kill.

Conclusions

Within the proclamation from the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic, read out by Patrick Pearse on the steps of the General Post Office in Dublin, we can find many statements that would suggest to us that the leaders of the uprising had the best interests of the people at heart, that would have set their liberties above and beyond that which they had at the time under the British government, and that through the frustrations of history, felt that this was the best way to achieve the stated ideal of a united Ireland.

However, we can also question the overall motives and desires that may have underpinned the uprising, if we examine the past history and statements made by some of the leadership of the uprising and the signatories to the proclamation itself.

³¹ CAIN archive, *Proclamation of the Irish Republic, 24 April 1914* (2022) < <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/pir24416.htm> > [accessed 2 March 2022].

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ *The Holy Bible* Exodus 20.13, King James Version, Oxford University press.

Word count: 2519

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Appendix One – Proclamation of the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic

Accessed via the CAIN archive, *Proclamation of the Irish Republic*, 24 April 1914 (2022)
<<https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/pir24416.htm>

