

What did Patrick Pearse contribute to the 1916 Easter Rising?

Patrick Pearse is an ideological martyr for the Irish Republic: Whilst reminiscing upon his civil service life, Conor Cruise O'Brien referred to Pearse and James Connolly as the "*the martyred heroes of the 1916 Easter Rising*".¹ Rightly or wrongly, it was these martyrs that shaped the Irish nation throughout the twentieth century. Pearse is seen as a man of freedom as much as Daniel O'Connell or Hugh O'Neill; their motives seen as the same. As a result of his participation in the 1916 rising, his input into Irish nationalism has been great. What we shall look at here is a wider analysis of his work in literature and within the Irish Republican Brotherhood framework. What Pearse contributed to nationalism is as important as what he contributed to the rising itself. The framework of literary nationalism and Pearse ideals prior to the rebellion is thus important in determining his contribution and ultimately understanding why Pearse is the Thomas Jefferson of Irish historiography.

In politics Patrick's father was a convinced Home Ruler, but had a mentality unmistakably that of an English radical. His one literary work was a pamphlet entitled *England's duty to Ireland* as it appears to an Englishman. It was published in 1886 as a reply to Thomas Maguire's anti-Home Rule and anti-clerical leanings. Pearse's pamphlet shows remarkably wide reading for a man who must have had relatively little formal education. He quotes Caius Gracchus, Tiberius Sempronius, Polybius, Addison and Thomas D'Arcy Magee, to assert the thesis that "*you ought not to force a mode of government upon an unwilling people. And you cannot for ever do so, whether you ought to or not*". What he writes is largely a 'Patriot' document that would not have been out of tune with the earlier writings Swift or Molyneux. Like Swift and Molyneux, Patrick Pearse's arguments became more nationalist and more in tune with modern Republicanism. Similarly, the writings Molyneux and Swift have underlying values that are not dissimilar to that of American patriotism/nationalism. In the words of Molyneux; "*liberty seems the independent right of all mankind*",² as echoed by the Declaration of Independence; "*We hold these truths to be self-evident... [That people] are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights*". Thirty years before the rising therefore, Pearse's background showed signs of the continuation of the Patriot movement that had existed amongst the mainly the protestant movement toward the conclusion of the eighteenth century. Pearse's writings had some thirty years to develop before the rising and it was during this time that Pearse's contributions become more ideologically republican. The *Poblacht na h-Eireann*, for example, brings together his continued work over the period. It is in the Proclamation of the Irish Republic that blends not only his 'patriotism' but also the blurred historical facts that ensure within all bands of militant nationalism worldwide.

The Proclamation is an excellent document and stories of how Pearse wept as he read it aloud at the GPO are, to be sure, well documented in school

¹ Conor Cruise O'Brien *The Roots of My Preoccupations* (dated. July 1994) available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/flashbks/ireland/cruis794.htm>

² James Lydon *The Making of Ireland* (1998), p.229

textbooks. What Pearse's document does is identify the Easter Rising as part of a larger struggle for independence. "*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*". The rebellions of 1848 and 1798 are thus indicated to have derived from the same struggle, despite the participants being quite different. Pearse's history does not make clear which risings he includes in this description, does he include 1803 or the O'Neill revolt? It is true that all of these risings were not necessarily with the cause of "*national freedom*" but nonetheless, Pearse delivered this message into the minds of Republicans and the document is as much the birth of modern Ireland as the Declaration of Independence is to the US. Indeed, the link to the US is further exemplified by the mention of "*exiled children in America*" in its first sentence. What Pearse suggests to be at the root of a national identity in the Proclamation is exactly how he taught his pupils at St. Edna's. The child was to be taught that the Irish separatist tradition began in 1169 and embraced the supporters of Edward Bruce, Art MacMurrough, Shane O'Neill, and just about everyone else who had ever taken up arms in Ireland. This is scarcely the view of a modern historical scholar but it was logically the view of a man who saw no incompatibility between the roles of educationalist and propagandist. They were not just pupils of Gaelic. From at least 1910, they were students of physical force nationalism. Pearse's views were that of "*a mélange of Gaelic Catholicism, mythical history [and] oratorical drive*".³ The Proclamation was therefore the embodiment of what this 'Englishman' thought was to be an Irish Nationalist. He was it.

Pearse, like so many of the young men of his time, came to nationalism through the Gaelic League. His love of Irish was apparently first stimulated at an early age by a relative of his mother who was well versed in Gaelic history and legend. The youthful Pearse studied Irish through the grammar and texts of the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, and later at the classes held by Canon O'Leary in Dame Street. As an adult he widened his knowledge by regular visits to the Connacht Gaeltacht. Pearse's Irish was largely self-taught, and although many of his works were to be written in that medium, expert opinion can always detect that he was not a native speaker. But his writings were suffused by a tremendous love of the language and of Irish speakers to whom it was the medium of story telling and reminiscence: a modern *bard*. This quality of Gaeltacht sympathy is seen most clearly in the simpler and less rhetorical of Pearse's writings such as *Brigid of the Songs*. He like so many others in the IRB brought the Republicanism that emerged from Wolfe Tone, varied by the Gaelic revival, to the 1916 rising. It was this blend of Gaeltacht worship and liberal socialist Catholicism that existed well beyond the rising and was typified and embodied within the Irish Constitution as lay down by De Valera. Pearse saw the concept of "*political independence as secondary to cultural autonomy*".⁴ Pearse thus contributed the distinct ideals of cultural autonomy to the cause of the rising.

³ K Theodore Hoppen *Ireland Since 1800 Conflict and Conformity* (1999), p.148

⁴ R F Foster *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (1989), P.455

In the period before the outbreak of the First World War the I.R.B. came increasingly under the control of a generation of young, vigorous men. To no single figure can the inspiration of 1916 be ascribed. As late as 1913, Pearse was not an active participant in the IRB. He was still largely isolated for his non-constitutionalism. Nonetheless, at the time his writings reflected an urge for revolution and identified that the Irish should practice "*chivalry and self sacrifice*" in the cause of an independent Irish Republic.⁵ It was as a result of this ideology that the IRB "[summoned Ireland's] *children to her flag and strikes for her freedom*" to stand up against the "*alien government*" as stipulated in the Proclamation. As Alvin Jackson has noted, the martyrs of the 1916 rising were "*more anxious that a rising should take place than it should be successful*" and that Pearse was "*primarily interested in framing their declaration of a republic with a credible show of force*".⁶ As European war approached and progressed, the language of Pearse and his fellow revolutionaries became more extreme calling for "*blood sacrifice*" and that by the rising itself Pearse had given up "*any hope of military success*".⁷ The importance of Pearse to the rebels and to the rising was thus its existence. It was clear that the IRB and Pearse could not achieve military success over the British military forces but, nonetheless, the existence of the rising demonstrated a show of force to demonstrate a culture's right to self-determination and national independence.

Pearse also took the post of military leadership in both the IRB and the Volunteers, thus unionising two distinct revolutionary forces. No other IRB man held such a prominent dual rank as Pearse but to both bodies' he was their own and they followed him accordingly. As orator and 'mythical' historian Pearse was further in a position to rally the volunteers into a 'blood sacrifice'. Poetically, he could speak to educated and uneducated alike demonstrating a sense of Gaelic Irishness that most in Ireland did not possess and that Pearse had assumed. Never has the notion that a man was 'more Irish than the Irish' been more true than that of Pearse. What he perceived to be Irishness were the qualities he and his supporters held but the majority of the public did not. Nevertheless, the support was ideological and inspirational too and Pearse had the ability to send troops to their deaths for ideological success. His notion that a need for bloodshed was required is well demonstrated in his writing and speaking. This decision was a "*tactical response to the realisation that a successful rising was unlikely*".⁸ The volunteers were well aware of this too, and their ability to hold out with such a small amount of resources was heroic. Despite its military futility, in historical terms, it was a success. It was the embodiment of the Fenian ideology that an "*independent Irish Republic [was] 'virtually' established in the hearts of men*" in the words of Roy Foster.⁹ It was thus the right of the Irish to protect their nation state. By this notion, the very existence of the rising was Pearse's contribution and, as signatory of the

⁵ Ruth Dudley Edwards *Patrick Pearse: The Triumph of Failure*. (Swords, Co. Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1990.) cited in J L O'Fionnain Murphy *Pearse, Patrick [Padraig MacPiarais] (1879-1916)* at <http://www.vms.utexas.edu/~jdana/pearsehist.html>

⁶ Alvin Jackson *Ireland 1798-1998* (Oxford 2000), p.202

⁷ Hoppen, p.148-9

⁸ S L Connolly (ed.) *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (Oxford 1999), p.437

⁹ Foster, p.391

Proclamation, Britain was reminded; “*Ireland unfree shall never be at peace*”.¹⁰ As a result, the rising and the Proclamation would ultimately give cause for a certain degree of political autonomy sanctioned by the British Government. With hindsight, this meant full independence by 1937. As Yeats noted, a terrible beauty was born.

Pearse gave Ireland her first President, albeit of an un-elected provisional body. Most notably however, he was the commander-in-chief of the forces of the ‘Irish Republic’ at the rising. As President he could physically achieve little more than ‘symbol’ status but as commander he had slightly more potential. Unfortunately, knowing nothing of military leadership his decision process and those of his colleagues were poor. “A minority of a minority” made the decision for the rising and participants were forced into action with little or no notice due to the poor leadership style of Pearse.¹¹ The history hour and the poetry was where Pearse excelled. There were no detailed plans of how weapons would be distributed to the various IRB units across Dublin. Pearse was not important in “*military terms*” but because “*he boasted morale... offering rousing addresses*”; the Second Manifesto was a document that displayed such characteristics.¹² Perhaps this was due to Pearse’s comprehension of the futility of the situation – his goal was not immediate success but the beginning of success; a continuity of the risings that sparked and demonstrated a desire for independence. In military terms, his leadership was unmistakably haphazard but as ‘Leader’, as president, he was a morale booster and poetic propagandist.

Contributions that can be attributed to Pearse vary. Women’s suffrage as evident in the Proclamation is generally attributed to Connolly. Furthermore, although being the author of the *Poblacht na h-Eireann*, much of its content and wording comes from Thomas MacDonagh and Connolly. Moreover, the military importance of Pearse has been played down suggesting that again Connolly facilitated this important role. What Pearse contributed to the Rising therefore was not military leadership or even the Proclamation, wholly. He contributed a ‘Leader’. That is, a man that could be followed because of his passion, his respectability and his cultural autonomy. He was as Irish as the Gaelic League had identified it and was a symbol of Gaelic independence. He saw the importance of self-sacrifice and is thus not only a hero of the rising, but a true Republican martyr.

[Words 1989]

¹⁰ Connolly, p.437

¹¹ Foster, p.477

¹² Jackson, p.205

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