

The Rising: Ireland: Easter 1916

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In the middle of the First World War during Easter week 1916, Irish separatists staged an armed insurrection against the British government, an event which is popularly recognised as the foundation date of independent Ireland. The centenary of the Easter Rising was marked in 2016 with public lectures, documentaries, television adaptations, theatrical productions, re-enactments, exhibits, parades, art installations, school visits, conferences, heritage walks, and thousands of assorted community events. While some cultural commentators began to complain of '1916 fatigue' even before the centenary year began, the Easter Rising commemorations clearly demonstrated a seemingly insatiable demand in Ireland for accessible scholarship about the revolutionary period in general, and the Easter Rising in particular.

The enduring appeal of the Rising can be attributed in part to its planners, who deliberately staged a theatrical spectacle in order to capture international attention. The rebellion occurred within a narrow time (one week) and space (Dublin's city centre). The main stage was the General Post Office, an impressive neoclassical building located on Dublin's main thoroughfare (Sackville Street, now called O'Connell Street). It concluded with the execution of 15 rebel leaders, which shocked Irish public opinion. Although the rebellion failed militarily, its political success would have surprised even the most optimistic insurgent strategist. The Irish public rallied to the independence movement, which essentially overthrew the Irish political establishment in little over two years. From 1919 to 1921, Irish republicans undertook an armed insurgency which forced the British government to concede a significant advance on Home Rule. However, that final settlement (the Anglo-Irish Treaty) was only fully accepted after a bitter civil war between militant republicans and moderate Irish nationalists. The victory of the latter established the Irish Free State, a dominion within the British Empire, which was later reconstituted as the Republic of Ireland.

The legacy of internecine conflict remains visible in contemporary Irish politics, with the state's two major political parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, tracing their lineage to the Civil War split. The partition of the island in 1922 produced the problematic state of Northern Ireland, which experienced a low-intensity civil war from 1969 to 1998. With such a contested conclusion to the Irish Revolution, perhaps it was natural that the Easter Rising was chosen to act as independent Ireland's symbolic foundation event. Leaders associated with the state's three major political parties had all participated in the rebellion. The 1916 insurrection had been a relatively brief affair fought in the open, unlike the more troubling guerrilla conflicts of the Irish War

of Independence and Irish Civil War.

Annual commemorations of the Easter Rising became increasingly elaborate in the 1930s and 1940s. The 50th anniversary in 1966 was extravagant, with a week-long celebration receiving continuous coverage on the new national television network.⁽¹⁾ The outbreak of the Northern Ireland 'Troubles' in 1969 made public celebrations of an armed rebellion against the British state much more problematic. The Irish government abandoned its annual Easter Rising military parade in 1972, and commemorations of the rebellion (both official and unofficial) became much more muted, in case they were seen to legitimize republican violence in Northern Ireland. However, the Northern Ireland Peace Process in the 1990s normalized Anglo-Irish relations, which in turn encouraged public re-engagement with the 1916 Rising. The state's resumption of the Easter Rising parade drew massive crowds to O'Connell Street in 2006, while Queen Elizabeth's successful state visit to Ireland in 2011 reassured uneasy observers that the Irish public could be trusted to deal with their troubled past in a peaceful and largely positive manner.

Despite some misgivings within 'official' Ireland, the centenary year of 2016 passed off without major incident, and has been viewed by many as an unqualified success. Particular attention was paid to recovered 'lost' histories of the Rising, such as the role played by women in the rebellion, and the deaths of 40 children during the Dublin fighting.⁽²⁾ Historians managed to meet public demand by producing 200 individual books on the revolutionary period in the past three years. Among the most appealing is Fearghal McGarry's, *The Rising, Ireland: Easter 1916*. Oxford University Press beat the rush by publishing the first edition in 2010, and has recently released a 2016 edition, augmented by a new introduction.

Professor of History at Queen's University Belfast, McGarry is best known for his trilogy about Irish involvement in the Spanish Civil War, which included the acclaimed biography, *Eoin O'Duffy, A Self-Made Hero*. Here, McGarry sets out to tell 'the story of the Rising from within and below, describing the events of the period from the perspective of those who lived through it' (p. 4). He has done so after trawling through thousands of pages of witness testimony deposited in the Military Archive's Bureau of Military History. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Irish state undertook a remarkable oral history project to document the Irish Revolution. Over 1,700 republican activists were interviewed or invited to submit statements about their subversive activity (Owing to the lingering tensions surrounding the Irish Civil War, the Bureau limited the statements largely to pre-1922 events). Hundreds of individual witness statements deal with the events before and during the Easter Rising, and are deployed to great effect in *The Rising*.

McGarry uses the veterans' testimony to explore the radical trajectory of the independence movement, asks why ordinary men and women fought in the Rising, and view events through the eyes of participants. He has constructed a complex and compelling narrative, rich with social and cultural insights. Evocative testimony paints vivid portraits of the motivated and often practical activists who participated in the insurrection. As the narrative moves to the fighting of Easter Week, veterans relate tales of daring, cowardice, pettiness, and nobility, capturing also the carnivalesque atmosphere of a city besieged. There is something haunting in testimony about the final moments of the rebellion. Huddling insurgents await their fate with mounting despair, often sheltering near terrified civilians caught in the crossfire. This historical moment is a lived experience, giving the veterans' voices a texture often lacking in scholastic treatments of the period.

The Rising benefits from McGarry's superior writing and story-telling skills. Synthesising thousands of pages of testimony, he manages to remain concise and focused. His brevity pushes the text along at a rattling pace, keeping a firm grip on the reader. Yet, McGarry also pauses at critical moments to reflect on what we have just experienced. The tone is honest and fair, willing to prescribe empathy or scepticism as required. The overall effect gives *The Rising* a remarkable accessibility, as the book pulls off the rare feat of being both scholarly and readable.

While the events of Easter week have been well-covered in recent literature, the growth of radical separatism prior to 1916 has not. It is in these discussions that *The Rising* makes its most significant contributions to Irish revolutionary scholarship. McGarry provides a layered view of Irish nationalism at the eve of the First

World War. Rather than reducing it to a simple binary between non-violent constitutionalism and physical-force republicanism, McGarry instead shows the interconnections and overlaps between these two wings of nationalism prior to 1914. Voters viewed constitutionalism pragmatically, as the most likely means to achieve self-government. However, Irish faith in British parliamentary democracy was shattered by the Home Rule Crisis of 1913–14. Ulster Unionists derailed the Irish Home Rule Bill by threatening armed insurrection via their militia, the Ulster Volunteer Force. This remarkable step towards civil war was supported by much of the British political and military elite. The Irish Party offered no effective response, creating an opening for the marginalized Irish separatists to form their own militia, the Irish Volunteers. *The Rising* captures the heady months prior to the outbreak of the First World War, as the Irish Volunteer movement swept the south. European militarism, which fuelled the catastrophic First World War, found its Irish manifestations among the tens of thousands of nationalists (and unionists) marching and drilling in crowded urban centres and lonely hinterlands across the island. This reshaping of the Irish political landscape was halted by the outbreak of the First World War. John Redmond's Irish Party supported the war, splitting the Irish Volunteer organization, with most members following Redmond's lead. Militant republicans found themselves with a much reduced organization, albeit one with an ideological coherent rank-and-file firmly opposed to Irish participation in the war.

McGarry then leads his readers into the critical year of 1915, a period usually bypassed by Irish historians. The author explains the different motivations which drove thousands of Irish men and women to join a subversive movement working against the popular war effort. Most held a separatist worldview which opposed British military endeavours; yet they also were subjected to the same martial pressures as other young men in Europe, including the 130,000 Irishmen who enlisted in the British Army. The initially successful mobilization of the Irish public for a patriotic imperial war caused anxiety and depression among advanced nationalists, many of whom feared they were witnessing the death of Irish separatism. Most rank-and-file Irish Volunteers prepared for armed resistance, but believed it would only occur if the government introduced conscription or tried to disarm the Volunteer organization. Few seemed to have anticipated Irish Volunteer leaders initiating a rebellion without any reasonable hope for success. As McGarry shows, this led to utter confusion and indecision within Volunteer units across the country just prior to the Rising, owing to a split in the national leadership about the decision to launch the rebellion. Ultimately, most outside of Dublin sat out the Rising, with the notable exceptions of Volunteers in counties Wexford, Galway, and Meath.

This essential context allows *The Rising* to question the motivations of the rebel leaders. McGarry disregards the simplistic 'blood sacrifice' thesis of the Rising, and adapts a more sophisticated 'protest by arms' model, which was particularly relevant to the First World War environment. McGarry writes (p. 101): 'If a single belief united the organizers it was not blood sacrifice but the conviction that action was preferable to inaction; that the potential advantages of defeat – the reassertion of separatist credibility, the long-term survival of the physical-force tradition, the possibility of inspiring popular support and of destroying Home Rule – outweighed the advantages of inaction. The Rising represented a last throw of the dice: in a phrase used at the time, 'the last fight' before the extinction of Irish nationality'.

The book enters more familiar territory when it moves onto the events of 'Easter Week'. McGarry engages with one of the most contested issues about the insurrection: civilian losses. Dublin civilians accounted for over half of the rebellion's 485 fatalities, with many victims coming from the impoverished labouring class. Historians such as David Fitzpatrick have argued that the Rising planners deliberately positioned their strongholds within civilian population centres, to maximize the human carnage so as to increase the event's public impact. McGarry, however, convincingly argues that the rebels tried to avoid civilian casualties, and fought according to the rules of war when possible, in order to better appeal to international sympathy. While explaining the combat confusion which added to the casualties, McGarry also criticizes the rebels' decision to fight within an urban centre, to which he attributes the high civilian death toll. This discussion would have benefited from consideration of two additional factors. Like all First World War combatants, the rebels underestimated the firepower of modern weaponry, which proved far more devastating than anticipated. We should also not overlook the British Army's role in causing casualties: British artillery

destroyed the city centre, setting fires that swept through both rebel positions and the densely populated streets surrounding them. The book provides only cursory coverage of the North King Street ‘Massacre’, when British troops killed 15 male civilians uninvolved in the fighting, who were found in a series of connected homes near where British troops had taken heavy casualties from the rebels. Publicity of those killings helped turn public opinion towards the republicans, and also foreshadowed both the likelihood and impact of Crown force reprisals in the ensuing Irish War of Independence (1919–21). The inadequate interrogation of state violence is not unique to *The Rising*, as it remains a major deficiency in the scholarship of the Irish Revolutionary period.

While McGarry engages with some of the contested questions surrounding the Easter Rising, readers cannot always discern where precisely he stands on certain issues. A similar pattern is apparent in the 2016 edition’s new introduction, which covers additions to the field since 2010. McGarry avoids commenting on the merit of the works cited in his literature review, thereby limiting its impact. When discussing recent Irish revolution literature, historian Brian Hanley has noted the tendency of what can be called ‘post-revisionist’ historians to sidestep major academic disputes.⁽³⁾ Though charged debates remain an uncomfortable feature of Irish Revolutionary scholarship, sometimes they cannot be avoided. As one of the top historians working in this field, McGarry’s opinions carry weight.

My only serious critique of the book is its over-reliance on the Bureau of Military History witness statements. Like all specialists in this field, McGarry is well aware of the strengths and limitations of this source material, which he acknowledges in the text. Yet, there is persistent danger that his approach privileges veteran testimony over other sources. For example, McGarry uses isolated Bureau statements to argue that a low number of Cork Volunteers turned out during the Easter Sunday mobilisation. This conclusion challenges Gerry White’s and Brendan O’Shea’s estimated Cork turnout figures of 70 per cent.⁽⁴⁾ Those numbers come from republican historian Florence O’Donoghue’s carefully tabulated individual company returns, compiled after extensive correspondence and consultations with surviving veterans in the 1950s.⁽⁵⁾ First-hand accounts such as the Bureau statements often seem authoritative, but they must be read critically and weighed with other material. This point is especially relevant for War of Independence historians who eagerly anticipate the release of thousands of IRA pension files in the coming years.

Despite such misgivings, it is hard to object to a work offering such a wealth of thought-provoking material. McGarry easily organises rich evidence, offers insightful analysis, and writes a compelling narrative. For this reader, *The Rising* has joined Charles Townshend’s *Easter 1916* and Clair Wills’ *Dublin 1916* as essential to anyone interested in the Easter Rising. I would also bracket it with Lucy McDiarmid’s [*At Home in the Revolution: What Women Said and Did in 1916*](#) [2](Royal Irish Academy, 2015) as an outstanding example of strong scholarship which is accessible to general readers.⁽⁶⁾

Notes

1. For two fine treatments of the 1966 ‘Golden Jubilee’, see *1916 in 1966 – Commemorating the Easter Rising*, ed. Mary Daly and Margaret O’Callaghan (Dublin, 2007), and Roisin Higgins, *Transforming 1916: Meaning, Memory and the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Easter Rising* (Cork, 2012).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See Mary McAuliffe and Liz Gillis, *Richmond Barracks 1916: We Were There: 77 Women of the Easter Rising*, (Dublin, 2016); and Joe Duffy, *Children of the Rising: The Untold Story of the Young Lives Lost During Easter 1916* (Dublin, 2016).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Brian Hanley, ‘Moderates and peacemakers’, *Irish Economic and Social History*, 43, 1 (December 1916), pp. 113–30.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Gerry White and Brendan O’Shea, *Baptised in Blood: The Formation of the Cork Brigade of the Irish Volunteers, 1913–1916* (Cork, 2005).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See the O’Donoghue Papers, MS 31, 439, National Library of Ireland.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916* (Lanham, 2006) and Clair Wills, *Dublin 1916* (Cambridge, 2009) as essential to anyone interested in the Easter Rising. I would also bracket it with Lucy McDiarmid, [*At Home in the Revolution: What Women Said and Did in 1916*](#) [2](Dublin, 2015).[Back to \(6\)](#)

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