A Fruitful Failure: The Literature on Ireland between the Easter Rising and the War of Independence, 1916-1919

By
Will Everett

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I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work.
Abstract

The literature on Irish history between the end of the Easter Rising in 1916 and the start of the Irish War of Independence in 1919 exists mainly within the literature on Ireland from the Rising to the end of the Irish Civil War in 1923. Despite this, three distinct threads of analysis emerge from the literature on the post-Rising, pre-War of Independence period: the initial mixed reactions of the Irish public to the Rising, the effects of the British response to the Rising on a shift in Irish public opinion in favor of Irish nationalism and Irish independence, and the rise of independent parliamentary and paramilitary organizations in Ireland, whose goal was to create an Irish state independent from British rule.
The literature on Irish history between the Easter Rising of April 1916 and the start of the Irish War of Independence in January 1919 exists almost entirely within the larger body of literature focused on the period from the Rising to the end of the Irish Civil War in 1923. Monographs devoted solely to the historical analysis of this earlier period are virtually nonexistent because the period from April 1916 to January 1919 is primarily viewed by Irish historians as one link in an unbroken chain of events leading from the Rising to the end of the Irish Civil War. However, the enduring significance of the Easter Rising and its aftermath ensure the inclusion of the post-Rising, pre-War of Independence period in many comprehensive histories. Even after the passage of an entire century, the Rising remains an object of intense historical study and of immense cultural significance to the Irish people—a fascination that springs from the Rising’s immediate aftermath.

The concept that the Easter Rising of 1916 led to a shift in Irish public opinion towards a more sympathetic view of Irish nationalism is supported by the bulk of the literature. This shift is divided into three distinct phases: initial negative reactions to the Rising by the public, the execution and imprisonment of many prominent Irish nationalist leaders by the British government, and growing public support for Irish political self-determination through both parliamentary and violent means. Additionally, these three trends have been affected by a shift in the study of Irish history that took place in the 1960s. This shift emerged from a desire to demythologize the claims of historical continuity made by loyalists and republicans alike, who both used the events of the Rising and the years that followed as justification for their violence against one another.

In the literature on Irish history between April 1916 and January 1919, the instigating action of this period is the Rising. Throughout Irish history, various movements in opposition to
British political dominance of Ireland have risen and fallen—some rooted in the use of physical force to drive out the British, and others rooted in the use of parliamentary politics to achieve “Home Rule”, which would create a separate Irish parliament to legislate for Ireland in place of the British Parliament at Westminster.¹ Those who advocated the violent overthrow of British rule in Ireland saw their chance to act in 1916, with the British government’s preoccupation with the ongoing First World War presenting an opportunity for the militant Irish Volunteers to proclaim the formation of an Irish republic completely independent from Great Britain. On April 24, 1916—Easter Monday—the Rising began. It was an abject failure in terms directly achieving the goal of Irish independence; the rebels were only able to hold out for a little over a week against the British Army troops sent to quash the rebellion, and the Rising did not spread throughout Ireland as its leaders had hoped, instead remaining almost entirely isolated to the greater Dublin area. The leaders of the Rising were arrested only five days after it began, but their arrests would lead Ireland down a path to its irrevocable independence from Britain.

The literature on the period of time from April 1916 to January 1919 that Irish historian and journalist Tim Pat Coogan refers to as “the post-Rising period” exists only within the larger literature centered around the time from the end of the Rising to the culmination of the Irish Civil War in 1923.² The first major trend in the part of the literature that analyzes the road from the

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¹ Overview from Tim Pat Coogan, 1916: One Hundred Years of Irish Independence; From the Easter Rising to the Present (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015); and Lawrence J. McCaffrey, The Irish Question: Two Centuries of Conflict, 2nd ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995).

² Ibid., 39. The Irish Civil War took place after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921, which ended the Irish War of Independence and allowed for the creation of an ‘Irish Free State’, which would possess more political and economic autonomy than before but remain part of the British Empire as a Dominion. See Coogan’s 1916 also for a more detailed history of the Irish Civil War, which has not been discussed at length in this review to preserve its primary focus. The biographical information on Coogan is drawn from Tim Pat Coogan, “Biography,” Tim Pat Coogan: Irish Author and Broadcaster, accessed October 23, 2018, http://www.timpatcoogan.com/bio.htm.
Rising to the War of Independence is the immediate reactions of the Irish public to the Rising, which were mixed. Biographer and gender historian Jacqueline Van Voris noted in her 1967 biography of famed female Irish nationalist and Rising participant Constance Markievicz, entitled *Constance Markievicz: In the Cause of Ireland*, that many Irish citizens had a hostile attitude towards the rebels, even as soon as immediately after their surrender to the British forces.\(^3\) Van Voris describes how after Markievicz surrendered her defensive position at the College of Surgeons and began marching with her troops to captivity at Dublin Castle, men and women lining the streets “jeered the insurgents to jail.”\(^4\) The main argument of Van Voris’ book centers around the significance of Markievicz as a revolutionary figure in Irish history, but the argument of this particular section is best summed up by her description of the Irish crowds hurling insults at the rebels who had just been prepared to die for them. The Irish public viewed the rebellion with anything from casual annoyance due to its effect on everyday activities, to sheer disgust at the loss of life it caused. The British perspective, Van Voris contends, is best summed up by the words of Lord Wimborne, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, who wrote in a letter to another British government official that the Rising was “‘nothing else than to create a diversion in favour of the enemy [Germany] and detain three or four divisions here to deal with it’.”\(^5\) The horror and anger felt by many Irish citizens, especially in Dublin, is also thoroughly discussed in Richard M. Kain’s 1962 book *Dublin In the Age of William Butler Yeats and James Joyce*. Kain, a literary analyst and English professor, highlights the significance of Dublin as a center of Irish


\(^5\) Ibid., 198.
literary culture in the era of the Rising and beyond.\textsuperscript{6} However, the section on the immediate public reaction to the Rising is particularly illuminating. Kain asserts that “in general, Dubliners had not approved of the Rising,” because many of their family members were fighting abroad in the British Army.\textsuperscript{7} However, Irish public opinion would quickly turn against the British government in the coming days, due to numerous hostile actions that would alienate the Irish public.

The second main analytical thread present in the literature is the impact of the British response to the Easter Rising on Irish public opinion of the so-called “Irish Question.”\textsuperscript{8} After the leaders of the Rising surrendered to the British, fifteen of them were then summarily executed over the weeks that followed, along with the mass imprisonment of thousands of other Irish nationalists, many of whom had no connection whatsoever to the Rising. These executions, the result of court-martials in a British military trial rather than a civilian court, turned the public from anger and dismay regarding the devastation caused to civilian lives and property by the rebels to outrage towards the vengeful attitude of the British government towards these captured Irish patriots. In *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* (2006), Charles Townshend, an Irish historian, contends that the rash of executions of Rising participants in the weeks following the Rising did


\textsuperscript{7} Kain, *Dublin*, 126.

\textsuperscript{8} The ‘Irish Question’ was the catch-all term for the issue of Irish governance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See McCaffrey, *The Irish Question*. 
not have the support of the public, and instead alienated the Irish population.\textsuperscript{9} The executions took place so soon after the Rising that they gave the impression of being motivated by British vengeance rather than a sense of justice, and the fact that these executions were the result of sentences from British military court-martials rather than Irish civil courts further reinforced the perception of the sentences as the judgement of a foreign power on the people of a sovereign nation. Another example of this analytical thread comes from historian Thomas E. Hachey’s 1977 book \textit{Britain and Irish Separatism: From the Fenians to the Free State; 1867/1922}.\textsuperscript{10} Hachey devotes an entire chapter to the post-Rising period from 1916 to 1918, and contends that failed attempts at negotiating Home Rule by British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, coupled with the executions and “persistent rumors that conscription would soon be applied to all Ireland” further served to drive a wedge between the British government and their Irish subjects.\textsuperscript{11} The shift in Irish public opinion as a result of the British response to the Rising was to bear fateful fruit for the future of Ireland, as exemplified by the post-Rising rise of Sinn Féin and the IRA.

The final prominent analytical thread in the literature is the rise of parliamentary and paramilitary organizations, whose ascendance represented the swing of Irish public opinion towards independence and away from Britain. As the surviving leaders of the Rising were released from prison, they quickly rose to positions of power in the newly-renamed Irish


\textsuperscript{10} Biographical information on Hachey is from UKnowledge, “Perspectives on Irish Nationalism,” University of Kentucky Press, accessed October 23, 2018, \url{https://uknowledge.uky.edu/upk_political_history/6/}.

Republican Army (IRA) and the rapidly-growing republican political party Sinn Féin (Irish for ‘we ourselves’). Michael Collins, one of the surviving signatories of the Easter Proclamation, became leader of the IRA, and carried out a brutal campaign of assassinations and bombings against British government officials in the years following the Rising, and fellow signatory Éamon de Valera winning a Parliament seat as a Sinn Féin candidate. However, the British reaction to the actions of the IRA was just as harsh as the reaction to the Rising, with the introduction of martial law in Ireland in late 1916, and an attempt to institute conscription in Ireland in 1918. The latter of these two initiatives was particularly damaging, since it led to the recently-elected Irish members of Parliament deserting the British House of Commons in favor of creating their own independent Dáil (parliament) to legislate, as Irish historian Lawrence J. McCaffrey terms it, “in the name of the Irish Republic.”

This new legislative body sought to establish itself as a legitimate governing force in an Irish nation that would be separate from Great Britain. On January 19, 1919, the Democratic Programme of this new legislatng body was presented. It essentially restated the Proclamation that had been read on the steps of the GPO nearly two and a half years earlier, stating that “the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland” was undeniable. This declaration, coupled with more frequent attacks on British troops and members of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) by the IRA, drew Britain and Ireland into open war over the fate of Ireland. A prime example of this thread comes from Irish historian Alan J. Ward’s 2003 book The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism, which argues that the British characterization of the Rising as a Sinn Féin rebellion helped to

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13 Parts of the Democratic Programme of the first Dáil are transcribed in Coogan, 1916: One Hundred Years of Irish Independence, 48-50.
swell the ranks of the once-small republican party.\textsuperscript{14} Ward’s analysis of the failure of British parliamentary politics in Ireland as an instigating force in the failure of Irish “constitutional nationalism” explains the rise of Sinn Féin as partly due to the failure of the Irish Parliamentary Party to achieve any tangible progress towards Home Rule.\textsuperscript{15} However, the successes of Sinn Féin as the parliamentary arm of revolutionary Irish republicanism were also mirrored in the rise of the IRA, the militant wing of revolutionary Irish republicanism. In his 1966 work \textit{Ireland Since the Rising}, Tim Pat Coogan directly links the rise of Michael Collins, a signatory of the 1916 Proclamation and eventual leader of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), the precursor to the IRA, to the rise of the IRB/IRA. Since Collins was able to elude a campaign of coordinated arrests of Irish nationalists on May 18, 1918, “on the grounds of frustrating what proved to be a mythical German plot,” Coogan explains, Collins was able to consolidate his influence over the IRB through its reorganization under his leadership.\textsuperscript{16} Nearly half a century later, Coogan would reinforce the parallelism of the IRA and Sinn Féin, detailing how the IRA emerged as “that group of armed individuals sworn to defend a state that had not as yet come into being,” and that the one of the first IRA attacks on RIC personnel took place “even as the Dáil was meeting.”\textsuperscript{17} As these two organizations grew, so, too, did public support for Irish independence.

\textsuperscript{14} Alan J. Ward, \textit{The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism} (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2003), 121. Biographical information from back cover.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{17} Coogan, \textit{1916}, 51.
Overall, the literature on Ireland on the period from the end of the Easter Rising to the start of the War of Independence has only undergone one major shift: what Irish historian Guy Beiner calls “critical demystification of 1916” in his essay “Making Sense of Memory.”18 As the conflict between republicans and loyalists intensified in the 1960s, the demythologization of 1916, which “justified many acts of violence” for the various paramilitary groups on both sides, became a matter of great practical importance, Beiner asserts.19 However, despite this shift in analytical perspective, the three main analytical threads of the literature—the initial reactions of the public to the Rising, the effects of the British response on Irish public opinion, and the rise of Irish parliamentary and paramilitary groups striving for independence—have remained largely unchanged throughout the years, and enable Irish historians to paint a picture of a deeply troubled time in Irish history with remarkable clarity. As the shroud of mythologization is thrown from Irish history, more works on the post-Rising, pre-War of Independence period will certainly emerge, and the overgrown path that led Ireland to its independence will be cleared of the brush that has so long obscured it in Irish historiography.


19 Ibid., 16.
Bibliography


Coogan, Tim Pat. 1916: One Hundred Years of Irish Independence; From the Easter Rising to the Present. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015.


