

JÚLIA FODOR

## Competing Narratives of Irish Independence

The 1916 Easter Uprising was one of the most dramatic and pivotal times in Irish history. It was the forerunner to the independence of Ireland after 750 years of British rule, as well as a precursor to the disintegration of the British Empire. One of the smallest and much derided British colonies managed to achieve the inconceivable: against overwhelming odds, a small group of nationalists rose up in Ireland to throw off the shackles of the largest and strongest empire of the time, eventually leading up to Irish victory in the Irish War of Independence (aka the Anglo-Irish War) and securing Ireland's freedom in 1922.

Renegotiation of national historical narratives is always subject to much controversy. History is not an exact science. The dilemma of which declarations, wars, uprisings, or landmark events to commemorate, or actually celebrate, from a nation's past (together with their corresponding founding fathers, generals, heroes and heroines) will, without fault, turn out to be an interplay between competing visions in historiography. A famous Irish-American President, John F. Kennedy, once said that "a nation reveals itself by the events and people it chooses to commemorate because commemorations reveal what we believe today."<sup>1</sup> The present paper focuses on some of the most salient aspects involved in the rebranding of Irish national narratives of the 1916 Easter Rising between 1917 and 2016.

It is all too often the case that the 1916 Easter Rising is portrayed in an oversimplified manner as an Irish-British story: the Irish fighting for their national independence from the British Empire. The hasty focus is on Easter Monday with Patrick Pearse as the leader of the few hundred Volunteers reading out the Proclamation of the Irish Republic on the steps of the General Post Office in downtown Dublin, with the Irish tricolour flag being hoisted on top of the building. The typical and simplistic American cliché rendering of the Rising was once that of the good guy against the bad guy. The traditional British interpretation, on the other hand, used to be the polar opposite: 'the Irish stabbed the British in the back' while the British were fighting in the trenches on the continent against the evil Germans in the Great War. For over half a century the British media would refer to the Irish men and women of the Rising as "rats, vermin, and murder gangs,"<sup>2</sup> while

<sup>1</sup> J. F. KENNEDY: Remarks at Amherst College (October 26, 1963), [jfklibrary.org https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/amherst-college-19631026](https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/amherst-college-19631026) Accessed April 28, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> BBC: IRA Volunteers from the Easter Rising 1916 Interviewed in 1973. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=\\_4JvXQqW4NY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=_4JvXQqW4NY) Accessed April 28, 2023.

the Irish nationalists saw themselves as patriots starting an uprising that would with any luck turn into a war of independence against a foreign occupational army.

The Rising took the overwhelming majority of Dubliners by surprise. Though it had been planned in secret, the anticipation was that many would join the ranks of their fellow countrymen and women and fight against the British. Instead, the people of Dublin took a largely antagonistic line towards the Rising, to the point that, as the Volunteers were rounded up and marched through the centre of the city into custody (following their unconditional surrender to the British), bystanders would hurl insults at them calling them murderers and starvers of people, and on occasion even toss them with rubbish.<sup>3</sup> To be fair, there were sympathizers as well, but they were either much fewer in number or simply decided to keep their sympathy very toned down.

The British arrested some 3,509 persons and court-martialled 187, all in secret, without defence. 90 death sentences were passed and 14 were carried out at Kilmainham Prison the first two weeks of May, before the British government ordered General Maxwell to halt executions. The news of the executions of the leaders was getting out despite all attempts to the contrary, and caused the Irish to grow increasingly sympathetic towards the rising's leaders. As a result, within a year and a half of the Rising, the nation went from backing the middle-ground solution of Home Rule (Irish self-government for home affairs) to widespread support for Irish independence as a republic.

### *The First 5 years following 1916: Low key commemorations*

For 5 years following the 1916 Easter Rising, Ireland continued under British military occupation during which all public assemblies were forbidden under the Defence of the Realm Act. In fact, not until after the Irish War of Independence and the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921 were the Irish finally free to celebrate the Easter Rising out in the streets. The tricolour flags of the Rising were flying all over the country in an outburst of liberty and a spirit of celebration in April 1922. The ensuing Civil War of 1922–1923, however, permanently divided the ranks of the 1916 veterans, as well as the veterans of the War of Independence into two camps: 1) those who supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 (that provided a self-governing dominion status for the 26-county Free State of Ireland, (also called as the pro-Treatyites/nationalists/Free Staters/moderates) and 2) those who opposed dominion status and the partition of the country, and insisted on Ireland becoming a republic as proclaimed in 1916 and 1919 (the so-called anti-Treatyites/republicans/radicals).

When the pro-Treaty Free State forces, led by Michael Collins, Richard Mulcahy and W.T. Cosgrave, won the Civil War in 1923, it stands to reason that there was

<sup>3</sup> F. MCGARRY: *The Rising: Ireland Easter 1916*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

no eagerness to celebrate the Easter Rising and with it the proclamation of the republic, the very concepts which had brought on the bloody civil war, turning brother against his own brother. Thus, the Cosgrave government merely held a low-key commemoration at the graveside of the 1916 executed leaders in Arbour Hill, and a mass was said for their souls.<sup>4</sup> In stark contrast, the same government chose to honour with a large military parade the life and legacy of the two men, Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith, who spearheaded the Anglo-Irish Treaty negotiations and brought peace and freedom to Ireland (and who died just 2 weeks apart from each other in August 1922).<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the de Valera anti-Treatyites saw themselves as the only “true republicans,” and as such claimed to be the sole inheritors of 1916. They spoke of the Free State of Ireland as still unfree (!), since the country continued under the sovereignty of the British King and remained partitioned. It was during the 1925 Easter Rising commemoration at the Liam Lynch memorial that de Valera introduced the recurring historical theme – “they shall not have given their lives in vain” – into the Easter Rising narrative as a rallying cry to watch over and carry on the legacy of the 1916 dead.

### *16 years on: A watershed*

1932 became a watershed year with regard to the official political stance on 1916. That year the new Fianna Fail Party led by Eamon de Valera, the most recognized 1916 veteran and anti-treaty republican still alive, won the general election and formed government. For the first time in 16 years, the rising was given an official military parade and copies of the Proclamation of 1916 were to be seen posted all over the city of Dublin.<sup>6</sup> A powerfully symbolic statue of the dying Celtic hero Cú Chulainn was commissioned and placed inside the former headquarters of the rising, the GPO. Cosgrave, the former Prime Minister of Ireland (1922–1932) would not grace either of these state celebrations with his presence, further solidifying the existing deep division within Irish politics.

De Valera’s premiership ushered in an era in Ireland in which the 1916 Proclamation came to be seen as “the founding document of the independent Irish state, which the state looked to as a source of legitimacy,”<sup>7</sup> rather than the other seminal documents from those turbulent years, such as the Declaration of Independence issued by the revolutionary Irish Parliament (Dail Eireann) at its

<sup>4</sup> J. DORNEY: “Commemorating the Easter Rising Part I, 1917–1936”. [theirishstory.com](https://www.theirishstory.com/2016/01/29/commemorating-the-easter-rising-part-i-1917-1934/#.YCP8TmhKiCo) <https://www.theirishstory.com/2016/01/29/commemorating-the-easter-rising-part-i-1917-1934/#.YCP8TmhKiCo> January 29, 2016. Accessed April 28, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> A. DOLAN: *Commemorating the Irish Civil War. History and Memory, 1923–2000*, Dublin, University of Dublin, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> J. DORNEY: *The Civil War in Dublin: The Fight for the Irish Capital, 1922–1924*, Dublin, Merrion Press, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> F. MCGARRY: *op. cit.*

first meeting on January 21, 1919, or the Anglo-Irish Treaty on December 6, 1921 which ended the Irish War of Independence and thus Ireland's membership in the UK. The 1916 Easter Rising came to be "regarded as the foundational event of the Irish Republic"<sup>8</sup> in a day and age when Ireland was still officially called the Irish Free State, a British dominion and *not* a republic. It would take 5 more years and a new constitution in 1937 for Ireland to become a sovereign nation with an elected president as head of state, effectively a republic, but not officially. Ireland formally left the British Commonwealth and was established as a republic on Easter Monday 1949 (on the 33<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Easter Rising and the issuing of the Proclamation) under the terms of the Republic of Ireland Act 1948.

### *Celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary*

As the golden jubilee of the Rising approached, two international developments and an explosion took place in Dublin that were all intricately related to the big celebration about to take place. On June 28, 1963, the Free World's most powerful man, a man of Irish descent, US President John F. Kennedy became the first American President to visit Ireland, but also the first foreign head of state to honour the legacy of the executed leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising, laying a wreath at their mass grave at Arbour Hill, Dublin. But Kennedy's visit during the height of the Cold War era was more importantly seen as a defining moment in Ireland's slow trajectory of international recognition when neutral Ireland was seen as an outside spectator in the Free World's fight against the growing threat imposed by the Communist bloc.

The other event was the reinternment of the remains of Sir Roger Casement in Glasnevin Cemetery in 1965 (very close to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death and burial of Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa). Casement, born into an Ulster protestant family in Dublin, was a diplomat of the British Foreign Office who became disillusioned with imperialism and joined the Irish Republican cause smuggling guns into Ireland. He was put on trial in England, convicted and hanged for high treason in August 1916. The Irish request for his remains had been denied time and time again by the British Government in previous decades. In 1965, however, renewed negotiations took a turn and the British finally conceded on the condition that Casement's last wish of being buried in Northern Ireland be not honoured as that might spark off sectarian conflict in an already tense atmosphere there. The Irish government was pleased to oblige and give Casement a state funeral in the republican plot of Glasnevin Cemetery instead.

Nelson's Pillar had been one of Dublin's most iconic landmarks for 157 years when on the 8 of March 1966, a mere month before the jubilee celebrations were to

<sup>8</sup> D. FERRITER: "Eoin MacNeill: Revolutionary and Scholar". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIv3GFatSDw> 2013. Accessed April 28, 2023.

take place by its feet in front of the GPO on O'Connell Street, it was blown up. The statue of Nelson had long been resented by many people as far back as the 1880s! But by the time the Irish Free State was created, it had become a symbol reminding the Irish of their past British oppression and the regime change being an unfinished business. 17 years after the official enactment of Ireland as a republic there was still debate over the right course of action. All controversy was cut short when the explosion definitively declared to the world that Nelson had long overstayed his welcome. The jubilee military parade would not take place underneath one of the empire's enduring symbols.

Ireland commemorated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Rising with a great number of programs. Church services and concerts, celebrations and commemorations were held all across the Republic. There was a dramatic re-enactment of the Easter Rising shown on television over eight days, titled *Insurrection*. The highlight was unquestionably Easter Sunday and the grand military parade on O'Connell Street marching down in front of the GPO, the former headquarters of the 1916 Easter Rising and the focal point of the uprising, the very place where the Irish Republic had been declared by Patrick Pearse. Some 600 veterans were still alive and were the guests of honour, many of them seated on the grandstand with the various state dignitaries. An estimated 200,000 family members and spectators were present outside the GPO.<sup>9</sup> The central message of President Eamon de Valera's speech was a call to action: "We cannot adequately honour the men of 1916 if we do not work and strive to bring about the Ireland of their desire." What the president did not realize at the time, but from hindsight became evident, was that Pearse's desired Ireland which was Catholic, Gaelic, rural, and self-sufficient was coming to its end as he was speaking! The young generations in Ireland had become far more keen on finding their new role models in England (the symbol of modernity, a new degree of individual freedom from tradition and expectations of their parents' generation), than in their Irish past with its heroes who fought against England. The Kerryman newspaper put it aptly saying that "Some of them are proud of the Rising, others would disown it if they could, and there are quite a number who are so indifferent that talk about it bores them. Nevertheless, the 1916 Rising is theirs."<sup>10</sup>

That same Easter Sunday in 1966 Eamon de Valera, a former 1916 commander of the Rising, laid a wreath at the courtyard of Kilmainham Gaol (prison) where the leaders of the Rising had been executed by firing squad, and officially opened the prison to the public as a museum and a monument for the struggle for Irish independence. On Easter Monday, the Garden of Remembrance with its cross-shaped water pool, next to Arbour Hill, the site where the 14 executed leaders of

<sup>9</sup> S. MAWE: *The Golden Jubilee in 1966*, <https://www.tcd.ie/library/1916/the-golden-jubilee-in-1966/> Accessed April 28, 2023.

<sup>10</sup> C.H. HIGGINS & C. O'DONNELL: "1966 and all that: the 50th anniversary commemorations". *History Ireland*, 2006 March/April <https://www.historyireland.com/20th-century-contemporary-history/1966-and-all-that-the-50th-anniversary-commemorations/> Accessed April 28, 2023.

the Rising were secretly buried in an unmarked mass grave by the British, was also opened by President de Valera. It was dedicated to all those who had given their lives for the cause of Irish freedom in six uprisings: from the Irish Rebellion of 1798, all the way to those who were killed during, or, as a consequence of, the Easter Rising and the Irish War of Independence (1919–1921).

### *Late 1960s: The First wave of revisionism*

In the late 1960s with the outbreak of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, on the heels of the black civil rights movement and the sexual revolution in America, a wave of revisionism swept through every field of life in the western countries, including Ireland. Revisionism called into question the basis upon which any and all sources previously seen as legitimate would prescribe individuals and communities specific labels, identities, and values, but also the narratives that would be imposed from above to interpret their own present and past.

When the Provisional IRA (the Provos) was formed in December 1969, they set out to end all forms of British rule in Northern Ireland, claiming their legitimacy from the 1916 Easter Rising. Civil rights for Catholics, suffering blatant and systemic discrimination in Northern Ireland, a part of the UK that had been run exclusively by and for Protestants, was ‘unfinished business’ that nobody seemed to care much about. South of the border, the successive governments in the Irish Republic did not seem to care about the human rights abuses against their people in the north beyond empty slogans. The English in Westminster certainly did not seem to bother, and nor did the Americans, who were busy challenging their own democratic deficits. The Provos, therefore, decided that - just as back in 1916 - only brute physical force could achieve the full liberation of Ireland from the British. Among Northern Catholics the “nationalist tradition, the heroic nature of the 1916 rising became part of a national self-image that justified the revolutionary means (violence) by which independence had been achieved.”<sup>11</sup> As a consequence for many people in the republic, but especially in the eyes of the power elites in the South, the “image of the 1916 freedom-fighter morphed into the hated figure of the IRA terrorist,”<sup>12</sup> who was always ready and more than willing to shed the blood of the enemy Brits in the North in order to achieve the reunification of the two Irelands.

Generations on both sides of the Irish border lived through part or all three decades of the Troubles, the Northern Irish sectarian violence between various

<sup>11</sup> P. O'BRIAN: “The Rising and Revisionism”. *socialistreview.com*, 2006, <http://socialistreview.org.uk/304/rising-and-revisionism> Accessed April 28, 2023.

<sup>12</sup> *Century Ireland*: (September 23, 2014) Home Rule, Violence & the Irish Question: The Prime Time Debate, [Video file] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=h8iVuX6Ec2A> Accessed April 28, 2023.

republican and loyalist paramilitary groups, as well as the RUC (Royal Irish Constabulary) and at times the British Army. The Troubles had impacted everyone's life in the North, but the ripple effects reached those living in the South and in Britain as well. The cry for peace and reconciliation by the various sides was as old as the sectarian conflict itself.

### *The 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary (1991): Political Censorship of Nationalists*

By the time the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Easter Rising came around in 1991, with the Troubles still very much raging, there was a very different political and ideological climate in Dublin compared to that of 1966 (the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary). In fact, just two and a half months prior to the big anniversary date, on 7 February 1991, the Provisional IRA had attempted to assassinate John Major, the British Prime Minister, together with his cabinet in 10 Downing Street, London. The IRA had brought Ireland into disrepute yet again! The mere idea of people the world over mistakenly identifying the IRA with the Irish was sickening for the Irish establishment in Dublin!

The Dublin elites had long accepted the partition of Ireland into two states as a *fait accompli* that would never change. Therefore any effort by any group that would question the British presence in Northern Ireland was now seen as standing in the way of peace, as well as an obstacle to the modernisation of the North and the South. Virtually all anti-British sentiment was thus purged from the Irish media, creating "an anti-national bias greatly assisted by Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act, the most draconian piece of political censorship operating in Europe at the time."<sup>13</sup> The southern establishment was openly and unabashedly revising history and the national narrative by labelling as *persona non grata* all those who were "soft on violence, narrow minded and old-fashioned,"<sup>14</sup> and thus disqualifying anybody from political platforms and the national media who would dare to speak in any shape or form against the British.

In 1988, Professor Roy Foster published his popular revisionist take on Irish history, *Modern Ireland 1600–1972*, which for decades was considered standard history of modern Ireland. Foster's two most defining arguments with regard to the Easter Rising were, one, that the Rising was "an exercise in irrationality [...] because constitutional nationalism, as espoused by the Irish Home Rule Party, would have achieved the same outcome without the divisions (and violence) that ensued."<sup>15</sup> His second argument was the so-called "two nation strain" by which Foster elevated the Ulster Protestant community's experience to the same level of legitimacy and claim to nationhood on the island of Ireland as that of the "original," native Celtic nation

<sup>13</sup> R. BALLAGH: "1916–2006: Different atmosphere for 75th anniversary," April 20, 2006, *Anpoblacht.com*, <https://www.anpoblacht.com/print/15127> Accessed April 28, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> BALLAGH: *op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> O'BRIAN: *op. cit.*

of Ireland. He mainly achieved this feat by defining the year 1916 as the chief point of reference for national identity and for the formation of the two states in the case of both communities. For the Irish Republicans, the defining moment was the Easter Rising, while for the Ulster Loyalist community, it was the Battle of the Somme also in 1916 (July). This narrative of legitimacy came to dominate the rhetoric of establishment politicians, public officials and commentators who would argue against the nationalist interpretation of the Eastern Rising during the primetime debates on the Easter Rising in the months leading up to the centenary in 2016.

On 6 January 1990, the Irish government launched the Irish Presidency of the Council of Europe. That March Dublin was inaugurated as Europe's City of Culture. It naturally followed that Ireland, as far as its political elite was concerned, was bent on portraying itself as a genuinely modern and trustworthy European partner. Since the 1916 Rising became referred to as the IRA's source of hero worship and their point of reference for violence being the legitimate means to attain reunification, it all rendered a "nationalist celebration" of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary a politically incorrect item ridden with guilt, embarrassment and self-hatred,<sup>16</sup> that had to be toned down, at best, to a very low-key commemoration. Bringing an end to Northern Irish sectarian violence and redirecting, modernising the economies and every-day life of the island became the overarching theme. Anything helping Ireland to adjust to this new identity was approved, just as all things pointing towards a nationalist tradition were dismissed. Peace became the supreme value, rendering any form of violence and any narrative that would include the glorification of war, or any past Irish uprising, i.e. violence, an unacceptable and fanatical opinion.

### *The Good Friday Agreement (1998) and Reconciliation*

On April 10, 1998 the political climate would completely change with negotiations finally reaching a breakthrough in every major contentious issue and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement between the Irish and the British Governments, including most of the political parties in Northern Ireland. Three decades of violence had come to an end in which there were 16,200 bombings, and 36,900 shooting incidents with over 50,000 casualties and 3,254 people killed.<sup>17</sup> The peace agreement was a monumental watershed in the relationship between the loyalist (Protestant) and the nationalist (Catholic) communities. For the first time since Partition and the creation of the Northern Irish State in 1921, a perpetual arrangement of a power-sharing government was guaranteed with 1) a joint office of a First Minister and Deputy First Minister (one unionist, one nationalist) 2) half of the cabinet consisting of loyalist ministers and the other half of nationalist

<sup>16</sup> BALLAGH: *op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> CAIN (2004): Northern Ireland Society – Security and Defence, [cain.ulster.ac.uk](https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/ni/security.htm#05), <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/ni/security.htm#05> Accessed April 28, 2023.

ministers. The release of political prisoners was by far the most contentious issue. It was included in the deal in order to win the support of the wider republican and loyalist communities for the peace agreement. A complete restructuring of the Northern Irish police force (that had practically been a Loyalist force) was also agreed to, hiring Nationalist officers to gain the trust of and also to better serve the Northern Irish Catholic community.

A significant addition to these provisions was made in 2004 when Irish citizenship and an Irish passport became available upon request (!) to all Northern Irish citizens just as if they had been born in the Republic of Ireland. This was a hugely significant gesture for all those Catholic Irish people who overnight went from the majority to minority after the 1921 Partition and found themselves citizens of a different country from their compatriots without moving anywhere! Even though the reunification of Ireland would continue to remain a dream, Irish citizenship now bridged that void by restoring the spiritual fabric between Irish people in the North and in the South (– in a manner similar to Hungarian citizenship made available to ethnic Hungarians living in any of the seven neighbouring countries within the Carpathian Basin starting in 2010).

The major plank in the eye of the revisionist establishment in Dublin had been removed,<sup>18</sup> peace had been agreed to and most of the paramilitary groups ceased their campaign of violence. The Celtic Tiger was also “alive and well” – a reference to the Irish economy experiencing an unprecedented double-digit growth through foreign investment pouring into the country. With historical hindsight, it is easy to “predict” what nobody could know at the time, whether real peace would come to Northern Ireland, how long the peace would last and if some sort of reconciliation between the different communities and political and economic interest groups would actually transpire. Therefore, it is of little wonder that when it came to commemorating / celebrating the anniversary of the declaration of Irish national independence from the British, Irish politicians felt (and perhaps still do) as if they were treading on eggshells. The highly fragile peace settlement in the North might break under the weight of any wrong step. No wonder that those who comprehend what was at stake feel a sense of urgent responsibility for intervening in any intelligent way they could in the shaping and communication of “things,” in order to keep the peace at ALL costs. However, the “all costs” bit, as a number of cultural nationalist historians and commentators would have us believe, seems to be leading the nation of Ireland (as it would any other nation that has lost its own language in favour of its formal imperial ruler’s language) down the path of losing their national identity. This is how Irish cultural (national) survival has been pitted against the cause of peace, i.e. the physical survival and well-being of the people (and of economic growth) on both sides of the Irish border. To the cultural nationalists, this might have seemed like a real catch 22. They warned, however, that the “debates are purely politically motivated to side-track the conversation from

<sup>18</sup> *Century Ireland: op. cit.*

focusing on issues that would both truly honour the 1916 martyrs, as well as serve the highest interest of the people of Ireland here and now: implementing the 1916 Proclamation!”<sup>19</sup> In their view that is the real and direct challenge to the status quo!

*2010s: Symbolic gestures of reconciliation*

In the 2010s, in a gesture of reconciliation, a series of historic state visits were exchanged between the British, the Irish and Northern Irish Heads of State/Government. In May 2011, Queen Elizabeth II and her husband, Prince Philip, accompanied by British PM David Cameron accepted the invitation of the President of Ireland, Mary McAleese. Queen Elizabeth II was the first British Monarch to pay a visit to the independent Republic of Ireland. The last time a British Monarch had set foot in Ireland took place in colonial times, exactly 100 years earlier in 1911, when King George V, the Queen’s grandfather had stayed in Ireland for a few days. Among the many symbolic gestures on the part of the Queen at the state banquet given in her honour, she opened her speech by saying her first sentence in Gaelic Irish. Perhaps the most significant was her visit to the Garden of Remembrance where she laid a wreath and bowed her head to pay her respects to the 14 executed leaders of the Irish Easter Uprising whose bodies were secretly dumped, bare naked, wrapped with barbed wire, by British army personnel in a mass grave in that very spot back in 1916.

Another historic first visit was that of Irish President Michael D. Higgins to the UK in 2014. Mr Higgins became the first Irish President to speak before the British Houses of Parliament. These events, in the words of the Speaker of the House, John Bercow, “would have been very difficult to imagine a few decades ago. It is a telling testament to the extraordinary transformation of the relationship between and within these islands in our lifetimes.”<sup>20</sup> President Higgins was honoured with a state banquet at Windsor Castle. The guest list included a highly controversial name from Northern Ireland’s paramilitary past, that of Martin McGuinness.

McGuinness was invited as the Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, despite his deeply tarnished past (in Unionist eyes) as the former IRA deputy during the early years of the Troubles. Family members of IRA victims came out to protest his presence at Windsor Castle holding placards calling for justice. Back home in Northern Ireland many republicans were also offended by his presence in the Queen’s home. McGuinness was drinking a toast to the same person to whom not so long before he would be unwilling to swear an oath of allegiance as a Sinn Féin Member of Parliament from Northern Ireland elected into Westminster Parliament, thus never taking his seat in the House of Commons?! True, two years prior to the

<sup>19</sup> *Century Ireland*: @35:00

<sup>20</sup> UK Parliament, (April 9, 2014), Irish President, Michael D. Higgins, addresses Parliament. [Video file]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELGlc3uYhJI> Accessed April 28, 2023.

Windsor visit McGuinness had already met the Queen when she visited Northern Ireland in 2012. Since he was the democratically elected Deputy First Minister of the Northern Irish Assembly in Belfast, it was his duty to receive the Queen alongside with the First Minister, Peter Robinson. That landmark handshake of the British Queen and a diehard republican, a former paramilitary commander, who had been fighting against everything the Queen was symbolizing, became another symbolic act. However, while back in 2012 McGuinness was not seen as a sell-out by republicans for shaking hands with the Queen since his paramilitary past was by then an open secret, and because he had the tenacity to greet the Queen in Irish Gaelic, instead of English, in 2014, his toasting the queen in Windsor was an entirely different level of cosying up to the British, and became a thing too much to stomach for his voting base back in Northern Ireland. Gerry Adams, the leader of Sinn Féin, the party that McGuinness belonged to, had a short, but carefully crafted message for those disillusioned by McGuinness' visit to London:

This decision may cause difficulty for some Irish republicans in light of ongoing difficulties in the north (of Ireland) but I would appeal to them to view this positively in the context of republican and democratic objectives and the interests of unity and peace on this island. While Martin McGuinness's involvement in President Higgins's state visit may not be welcome by opponents of change, it is yet another example of Sinn Fein's commitment to an inclusive future, based on tolerance and equality.<sup>21</sup>

### *Centenary 2016: Revising history and toning down the rhetoric*

As Ireland was approaching the centenary of the 1916 Eastern Rising, despite a decade and a half of peace on the island, numerous historians and public figures were concerned that large-scale celebrations might destabilise the delicate political settlement in the North. They dusted off the revisionist take on the Rising and called into question whether celebrating 1916 and the violence it entailed would be morally right, to begin with. They raised questions and hosted public debates on prime time television and throughout colleges and universities in Ireland that put the above issues in an even more politically correct context than it had been back on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1991. Were the rebels on the right side of history?<sup>22</sup> The wording of the question itself suggested that there IS a right side of history, and by sheer logic, if we are not on that side, then we must be on the ... wrong side! Also, to use the term "rebel" instead of other alternatives such as the fairly neutral term "leaders" is

<sup>21</sup> "Martin McGuinness to attend state banquet hosted by the Queen," *Belfast Telegraph*, April 5, 2014, [belfasttelegraph.co.uk](https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/martin-mcguinness-to-attend-state-banquet-hosted-by-the-queen-30158647.html). <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/martin-mcguinness-to-attend-state-banquet-hosted-by-the-queen-30158647.html> Accessed April 28, 2023.

<sup>22</sup> *Century Ireland: op. cit.*

quite telling. “Was the rising justified? Did they have the right to use violence? Can violence be ever justified? Was warfare, and all the death, destruction and bloodshed that it brings, the only way to achieve independence?” Formulating questions can be the most subtle and politically correct way of actually rebranding the narrative, albeit in an apparently unbiased manner, with the audience all too likely not even realizing that the choice of words in the questions and the premises included therein are meant to “guide” and direct them towards a certain interpretation, and thus prevent them from reaching other potential interpretations.

Heather Humphreys, Ireland’s culture minister (2014–2016), who headed the 2016 program, grew up by the border, an experience which had made her very aware of the sensitivities still defining in the North. She worked hard to strike a balance by addressing unionist sensitivities as the preparations of the Centenary of the 1916 Eastern Rising were underway so that no one would be offended.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, the Irish government had decided to refer to the centenary year events as commemorations rather than celebration of 100 years of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic. So “what’s in a name?” – we might ask echoing Shakespeare! Is commemorating the declaration of independence much different from celebrating it? Could the Irish help those coming from different traditions (especially loyalist Protestants in Northern Ireland) feel safer (and sensitivities do matter) if the Irish government in the Republic decided to “tone down the rhetoric,” celebrate in essence and in deed, but not so much in words?

Perhaps, the most telling embodiment of the sensitive and inclusive approach of the Irish government to 1916 republican-nationalist, home-rule-nationalist and loyalist traditions came in the form of the Remembrance Wall in Dublin’s Glasnevin Cemetery. This latest national monument was especially made for the centenary and was unveiled by local school children amidst an inter-faith service on Sunday morning, 3 April, 2016. The reflective black granite walls are engraved with the names of all those who died in the 1916 Rising: 58 Irish Volunteers, 262 Dublin civilians, 13 policemen, and 107 British soldiers.<sup>24</sup> Relatives of the Irish Volunteers had not been consulted by officials, but decided to express their dismay at the stunning insult of engraving the names of victims and perpetrators side by side, thus equating the memory and sacrifice of those who gave their lives for the freedom and independence of Ireland with those who fought and died to keep Ireland and the Irish under British Empire’s oppression. While the Glasnevin Remembrance Wall is reminiscent of the Vietnam Veterans War Memorial and the 9/11 Memorial at Ground Zero in New York City in several ways, it is unconscionable that these American war memorials would have the names of Viet Cong soldiers or Al-Qaeda

<sup>23</sup> TheJournal.ie, “The government, Sinn Féin and the battle for 2016 ... It starts today,” August 1, 2015, <https://www.thejournal.ie/government-sinn-fein-2016-rossa-2239622-Aug2015> Accessed April 28, 2023.

<sup>24</sup> RTE: “1916 ‘Remembrance Wall’ unveiled at Glasnevin Cemetery,” April 3, 2016, <https://www.rte.ie/news/2016/0403/779141-1916-events> Accessed April 28, 2023.

terrorists inscribed (honoured) alongside the names of their victims! Reconciliation is a worthwhile purpose, however, rewriting history by engraving the narrative that all deaths are to be deemed equally is a dangerous slippery slope.

The Rising, that had set Ireland on the course of war and eventual freedom from 750 years of British rule, has been consequently called wrong and unnecessary, but perhaps the most stunning indictment has been made by leading history professor, Paul Bew, at Queen's University, that it was undemocratic because the decision for the rising was made by an "unelected group to destroy the democratic leadership of Irish nationalism."<sup>25</sup> The best people to make such momentous decisions in their country are always those who live there – so goes his argument-, and they voted for the Irish Parliamentary Party and their policy of Home Rule – which was on the statute books by 1914! Easter 1916 and its aftermath was, therefore, "the displacement of the democratically elected Irish leadership by the insurrectionists"! Perhaps a question to ask Professor Bew would be if the Act of Union (1801) came about in a democratic manner? Or is it all right to use a different definition of what qualifies as a democratic process when applied to 1801 than for measuring the democratic quotient represented by the 1916 "rebels" who wanted to undo the 1801 Act of Union?! Majority electoral support, as we understand it today, would have been impossible, since women did not have the vote yet (so half the population was disenfranchised to begin with), just as the poorest of the working class, represented by James Connolly and his Citizens' Army, did not have the right to vote either. The Irish could not have dreamt of openly setting up a convention to freely discuss or debate the future constitutional standing of their nation as the Americans had done 150 years earlier! But the British subjects in America had the Atlantic Ocean between themselves and England, whereas Ireland was right next door. Any striving for independence had to be organized in a secretive fashion. Two and a half years after the Uprising the people of Ireland actually democratically backed up and voted for the very aims of the Easter Uprising at the general election of 1918 where more Irish men and women could exercise their right to vote than ever before. They gave Sinn Féin candidates a landslide victory and a huge majority within Irish parliamentary parties contesting the election rather than those representing home rule for Ireland (the IPP of John Redmond and John Dillon), which was considered a done deal.

Among the few exceptions to the "toning down of the rhetoric on 1916" was the party Sinn Féin, that called on the Irish people to commemorate those who fought for Irish freedom, celebrating their spirit and vision and committing to the values of the Proclamation to build a New Republic of equals and bring an end to partition. Another exception was Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland (2011–2017) Enda Kenny speaking at the launch of "Ireland 2016" when he said:

<sup>25</sup> H. McDONALD & R. WALKER: "New film may give IRA dissidents ammunition," April 12, 2009, *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/apr/12/northern-ireland-easter-rising-film> Accessed April 28, 2023.

Easter 1916 was a moment when Irish nationalism joined forces with a revolutionary cultural and language movement to forge an irresistible campaign towards self-determination. It is important that the Irish people have the opportunity to come together to celebrate and have pride in Ireland's independence and to honour those who gave their lives so that the dream of self-determination could become a reality.<sup>26</sup>

These patriotic few words would not be echoed, however, in the official commemoration launch video of 2016, titled "Ireland Inspires 2016" and released by Enda Kenny's administration. Oddly enough the video does not even as much as mention the Easter Rising or the signatories of the Proclamation, though it shows the General Post Office, which was the headquarter of the Easter Rising and the scene where the Proclamation was originally read out by Patrick Pearse, for a combined of 2 seconds (!) out of the total 1.5 minutes. The rest of the video shows pictures of recent British, Irish heads of state and Northern Irish political leaders appearing together at various highly symbolic state visits – with the caption: "Reconcile our different journeys," followed by images of Ireland building a future where they "present (their) our best to the world," and "(Let's) build a new legacy."<sup>27</sup> University College Dublin history professor, Diarmid Ferriter, a member of the government advisory panel on the centenary, commented to the Irish Times that the commemoration video was nothing but "embarrassing unhistorical sh\*t."<sup>28</sup> Ferriter claimed to have been left in the dark about the launch video and was, therefore, unable to advise the government or the producers of the film. His comments to the Irish Times did have their desired effect as the much-criticized video was removed the following day, with the official website displaying the notification: "The website is temporarily undergoing maintenance, and will be back up and running as soon."<sup>29</sup> The video never saw the light of day again on the official website.

Former Irish Taoiseach, John Bruton (1994–1997) from the Fine Gael party re-entered the limelight with a very different take on the Easter Rising's legacy. In 2016 he shared that in his view the 1916 circumstances did not meet the criteria of a "just war." Bruton essentially claimed that "using violence to obtain home rule for Ireland in 1916 was both wrong and unnecessary as Ireland had already been promised home rule in 1914."<sup>30</sup> In a speech, he described the Easter Rising as

<sup>26</sup> Decadeofcentenaries.com, March 31, 2015, Launch of "Ireland 2016" centenary programme. <https://www.decadeofcentenaries.com/31-march-2015-taoiseach-and-tanaiste-join-minister-humphreys-and-minister-of-state-o-riordain-to-announce-ireland-2016-centenary-programme-national-museum-of-ireland-collins-barracks-dublin-7/> Accessed April 28, 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Thejournal.ie: (November 20, 2014) "That 2016 video everyone hated has been obliterated from the face of the planet," <https://www.thejournal.ie/2016-video-scrubbed-1790699-Nov2014> Accessed April 28, 2023.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> J. BRUTON: His full speech denouncing the Easter Rising, March 28, 2016, *newsletter.co.uk*. <https://>

“completely unnecessary” and wrong (!) because it had “damaged the Irish psyche” by introducing a “culture of violence and hero worship” which led directly to the Troubles that would go on afflicting Northern-Ireland for three long decades.<sup>31</sup> Bruton laid the blame on the 1916 rebels’ impatience and glorification of war for not giving the democratic process of home rule a fair chance, which in his estimation would have led to Irish independence eventually. The fact that Irish Independence was born out of war and violence, which always bring hell, and can never be glorious or heroic, has turned 1916 into an anathema, a source of embarrassment for most in the Irish political establishment.

Many on the nationalist side of Irish politics, among them de Valera’s grandson, Eamon O Cuív, have argued that Ireland’s weakened sense of nationhood would not have withstood the Anglicization of Ireland much longer. And even though freedom is never free, and at times people have had to pay the highest price to attain it, since the stabilization of the Free State of Ireland there has been no other nation in all of Europe more stable and posing absolutely no threat to any other state than that of Ireland.

There is no other European state whose army has only been involved in peacekeeping operations since 1923. So the record of the Irish people has been one of a nation that abhors violence. We as a nation can be very, very proud of that!<sup>32</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In the republican nationalist tradition, the 1916 Easter Rising was a heroic stance of a few hundred brave Irish men and women who were willing to lay down their lives to free their country of foreign oppression. For many, however, who belong to the more moderate home rule tradition “using violence to obtain home rule for Ireland in 1916 was both wrong and unnecessary as Ireland had already been promised home rule in 1914.”<sup>33</sup> Among Northern Irish Catholics “the heroic nature of the 1916 rising became part of a national self-image that justified the revolutionary means and violence by which independence had been achieved.”<sup>34</sup> As a consequence, in the eyes of a lot of people on both sides of the border, the “image of the 1916 freedom-fighter morphed into the hated figure of the IRA terrorist,”<sup>35</sup> who was always ready and more than willing to shed the blood of the enemy Brits in the North in order

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[www.newsletter.co.uk/news/john-bruton-his-full-speech-denouncing-easter-rising-1254637](http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/john-bruton-his-full-speech-denouncing-easter-rising-1254637)  
Accessed April 28, 2023.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Century Ireland: op. cit.*

<sup>33</sup> BRUTON: *op. cit.*

<sup>34</sup> O’BRIAN: *op. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> *Century Ireland: op. cit.*

to achieve the reunification of the two Irelands. Though the major plank in the eye of the revisionist establishment in Dublin had been removed with the Good Friday Agreement,<sup>36</sup> still Northern-Irish unionist and British sensitivities had ultimately driven the Irish government to tone down the language and the preparations for the Centenary events. The general attitude of Enda Kenny's Fine Gael government could best be described by neutrality, inclusivity, political correctness, and a commitment to reconciliation between the various traditions and persuasions of the people of Ireland, North and South.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

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*Abstract*

*The present paper focuses on some of the most salient aspects involved in the rebranding of Irish national narratives of the 1916 Easter Rising between 1916 and 2016. In the Irish Republican nationalist tradition, the 1916 Easter Rising was a heroic stance of a few hundred brave men and women which came to be “regarded as the foundational event of the Irish Republic.”<sup>37</sup> In the 1970s, however, the Southern establishment took to revising the national narrative. By the time the centenary came around in 2016, the Rising that had set Ireland on the course of war and eventual freedom from 750 years of British rule, was seen by many as essentially misguided, or outright wrong, unnecessary, and undemocratic. Perhaps, the most telling embodiment of the sensitive and inclusive approach of the Irish government to “all the different traditions” within North and South came in the form of the Remembrance Wall in Dublin’s Glasnevin Cemetery.*

**Keywords:** 1916 Easter Uprising, commemorations, public memorials, violence, reconciliation, historical narratives

*Rezümé*

*Az ír függetlenség versengő narratívái*

*A jelen tanulmány az 1916-os húsvéti felkelés ír nemzeti narratíváinak 1916 és 2016 közötti újragondolásában szerepet játszó néhány kiemelkedő szempontra összpontosít. Az ír republikánus nacionalista hagyomány szerint az 1916-os húsvéti felkelés néhány száz bátor férfi és nő hősiessége volt, amelyet „az Ír Köztársaság alapító eseményének tekintettek.” Az 1970-es években azonban a déli establishment nekilátott a nemzeti narratíva újírásához. Mire azonban 2016-ban elérkezett a századik évforduló, a felkelést, amely Írországot a 750 évig tartó brit uralom alóli végleges szabadság útjára terelte, sokan alapvetően elhibázottnak, vagy egyenesen helytelennek, szükségtelennek és antidemokratikusnak tekintették. Az ír kormány az északon és délen belüli „különböző hagyományok” iránti érzékeny és befogadó hozzáállásának talán legbeszédesebb megtestesítője a dublini Glasnevin temetőben található emlékfal volt.*

**Kulcsszavak:** 1916-os húsvéti felkelés, erőszak, megbékélés, történelmi narratívák, nyilvános emlékművek

<sup>37</sup> FERRITER: 2013.