

Michael Collins: patriot hero or counterrevolutionary?

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Michael Collins is a Fine Gael hero. Each year young Fine Gael members from across the country travel to Béal na Bláth in County Cork where Collins was killed by republican forces on August 22 1922 during the Civil War. The annual commemoration for Collins features Fine Gael luminaries or those who share their outlook. In 2018, for example, the current Minister for Agriculture, Michael Creed, got carried away with himself and referred to the site of Collins' execution as a 'Gaelic Calvary'.¹ Having recovered from this emotional spasm, he went on, like most of his Fine Gael predecessors, to make a banal speech about current Irish political life, laced with odd quotes from Collins himself. Fine Gael's cult of Collins also includes the current Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, who once praised Enda Kenny as the embodiment of Collins 'realism and idealism'.²

At first sight there is something strange here because Fine Gael's main policy has been to oppose republican violence. While Fianna Fail has never lacked in ambition to crush, intern and even hang militant republicans on occasion, they have usually been outshone by Fine Gael. It brands itself as the party of law and order and it is not just the run of the mill 'we will crack down on crime' stuff. The party's main target has always been 'subversion' and the primary culprit has been republicans. To take just one example: in the 1970s, the Fine Gael-Labour government established a 'heavy gang' in the police to beat confessions out of republicans. Their justification was that the 'subversives' were undermining the security of the state because they engaged in armed struggle in the North.

Yet Michael Collins is famed precisely because, as a guerrilla leader, he was willing to resort to the most ruthless tactics to defeat the British army and

its auxiliary forces in Ireland. One of the most famous episodes of the Irish War of Independence was the elimination of The Cairo Gang. This was an elite unit who were formed by British military intelligence with the aim of assassinating republican leaders. They arrived in Ireland in September 1920 and within weeks shot dead a republican activist from Limerick, John Lynch, as he lay in his bed. They also came close to killing Dan Breen and Sean Tracy, the instigators of the Soloheadbeg attack that set off the War of Independence. Michael Collins had established his own squad of armed operatives within the republican forces and gave the orders for the execution of the Cairo Gang. One of his biographers, James MacKay takes up the story.

In the space of several minutes, nineteen officers were shot. Not all of them belonged to the Cairo Gang.... All of the victims were still abed at the time of the assault, some in the arms of wives and sweethearts. A few were dragged out and put against the wall, but most were shot where they lay³

The British army's response was to send lorry loads of Auxiliaries to open fire on a packed stadium in Croke Park and murder thirteen spectators and the Tipperary goalkeeper. As the war between republican forces and the British empire escalated in 1921, both sides resorted to executions and reprisal executions. In response to the execution of six IRA volunteers, for example, when a Mrs Lindsay gave away the location of their ambush, the IRA executed her husband. Tim Pat Coogan, tells of how his father was ordered by Collins to execute two young girls for consorting with British soldiers and passing on information to them. Fortunately for them the elder Coogan disobeyed orders.⁴

The point of these examples is not to portray Collins as a 'blood thirsty terrorist', as contemporary political

commentators might do today. Despite its liberal veneer, the British empire had colonized the world through systematic violence and held populations in thrall with the threat of that violence. The republican tradition, which stretched back to the Fenian brotherhood, concluded that the only way it could be defeated was through armed struggle. Once battle is joined, the reality of war is an escalating series of actions that involve execution of informers and cold-blooded killing. There is quite simply no clean gentlemanly war that is played according to the rules of latter day ideologues. This rather simple point is not meant to glorify Collins or any other guerrilla but rather to contest claims made by the Southern political establishment that there was a fundamental difference in methods deployed by the 'Old IRA' and the 'Provisional IRA' While there were differences in scale and political context, no serious reading of the history of Ireland's 'War of Independence' will establish a major difference between the military methods that Michael Collins deployed and those of the Army Council of the modern IRA. Yet Fine Gael want to celebrate the figure of Michael Collins whose primary contribution lay in his organizational ability to lead a 'subversive' guerrilla force. Let's look a little closer at this contradiction.

Life

Michael Collins was born in West Cork in 1890 to a seventy five year old father, Michael John. The father's age was a reflection of the changes in the Irish land system that had occurred after the agitation of the Land League. As the Irish peasantry were transformed into a small farmer class, property ownership and marriage became intimately interlinked. Marriage was often postponed until the land was passed on and those who did not inherit were encouraged to emigrate or remain celibate. The transfer of land from an absentee landlord class to a new small proprietor class laid the basis for a certain conservatism expressed in the domination of Irish politics by the Home Rule Party. Running alongside this transfer, there were also evocative memories and hatred of landlordism and, by extension, the empire. Collins must have heard regular stories from his two uncles, Pat and Tom, who were jailed for a year in Cork for tackling a few squires who thought they could trample through their land in search of a fox.

Collins's father was a fervent admirer of a neighbouring Rosscarbery man, Jeremiah O' Donovan Rossa, a key activist of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and an advocate of bombing of English cities as a means to national liberation.

From this background, Collins developed a raw nationalist anger that was wholly directed at the England. It was a form of pure republicanism that spoke of an Irish spirit that transcended any class divisions within either Britain or Ireland. Sometimes it could lead to a more critical anti-imperialist position which expressed a sympathy for the plight for workers and the poor; a journey that Liam Mellows, for example, took in his *Jail Journal*. But this was not always the case, as the outlook of Michael Collins testifies. His was a republicanism that focused solely on national sovereignty and the need to revive a Gaelic culture.

In 1906, Collins moved to London. Like other young aspiring young men, he had taken an exam to gain employment in one of the many wings of the British state, in his case working as a clerk in the postal system. He joined a number of Irish cultural organisations, including the GAA and the Gaelic League and then made his way into Sinn Fein in 1908. Although founded by a right-wing leader, Arthur Griffith, Sinn Fein used some left wing rhetoric in this period. In Dublin, the party attracted some labour leaders – before Griffith revealed his true colours when he attacked the Irish Transport Union during the great Lock-Out of 1913. After joining Sinn Fein, Collins had a mild flirtation with left wing ideas when he suggested that the party was 'flaunting before greedy capitalists the prospect of cheap Irish labour and cheap Irish land'.⁵ But this type of 'radical rhetoric' was a flash in the pan. His main critique of the Home Rule party was that it was not doing enough to encourage Irish capital to invest in Irish industry to make the country more profitable. Collins's path was always that of the straight and narrow of Irish nationalism. In 1909, he was sworn into the Irish Republican Brotherhood, an oath bound secret society with about one hundred members scattered across London.

Throughout this period, Collins was known as a likable, jovial, hard drinking republican. He was a committee man, with no particular outstanding political talents. P. S. O'Hegarty, a fellow republican, noted that

‘everybody in Sinn Fein knew him, and everybody liked him, but he was not a leader’.⁶ Collins’ life, however, changed when Britain entered WW1 and began moves to impose conscription. Rather than fight a war for empire, he decided to move back to Ireland.

His IRB connections led him to work for the Plunkett family and through these he came to be involved in the 1916 rebellion. He fought as a soldier but came to a different conclusion from that of Pádraig Pearse. Pearse’s approach was to make a stand against the empire in the city centre and focus on one decisive battle. In its aftermath, however, Collins’ came to regard this as a mistake and advocated a classic guerrilla strategy of not engaging superior forces in a major battle.

After the 1916 Rebellion, Collins’ was interned in Frongoch, the British camp which housed the 1916 rebels. It was there that his talents as a ‘committee man’ came to the fore as he rose to prominence within the prison population. After his release he went on to help organise a successful bye election campaign of Count Plunkett and steadily rose up the ranks of the republican leadership. His real talent, however, came to the fore in his ability to conduct a highly effective military campaign against the British. But his pure nationalism and his overwhelming focus on the military aspects of the revolutionary process also proved his undoing.

The Irish ‘War of Independence’ was in reality a revolutionary process in which the mass of the population helped to break the British state machinery by mass boycotts, strikes, and support for the tens of thousands who joined the IRA. At the core of this revolutionary process was the militancy of the poor and workers’ action – such as those in Limerick where workers rose up to form a soviet, or where a general strike forced the British into granting political status. But once workers and small farmers came to the fore of the national struggle, they also brought with them their desire for social change. They wanted to break up the big estates of the landlords and divide out the land. They wanted employers subjected to the will and control of their workforce.

These social aspects of the revolution were, however, viewed by Collins as at best a side show and at worst as a nuisance. He was both a military fighter and, politically, pro-capitalist. The paucity of his vision is summed up by his concept of a free Ireland. It should be Gaelic and

‘de-Anglicised’ but:

The keynote to the economic revival must be development of Irish resources by Irish capital for the benefit of the Irish consumer in such a way that the people have steady work at just remuneration and their own share of control.⁷

Once the revolution was confined in Collins’ eyes to a purely military campaign against the British, the empire could deploy overwhelming resources to box in and contain the rebellion. And it was that narrowing of the struggle down to an armed conflict that ultimately led Collins to back the Treaty.

Support for the Treaty came primarily from Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins, the key figures in the delegation sent to London for the negotiations. In their different ways, they represented the main strands of counter-revolutionary thought that would later prevail in Ireland. Griffith was the more militant of the two, opposing for example a move by Collins to establish an electoral truce with the anti-Treatyite De Valera faction before the Civil War began. He failed to see that Collins was biding his time to accumulate enough military firepower to crush his opponents. Griffith had always advocated ‘dual monarchy’ and so had little difficulty with the oath. His concern was to build up Irish capitalism and he wanted both a connection with the British Empire and a degree of independence to support its growth. Dominion status within a wider empire would give him the opportunity to develop a tooth-and-claw version of Irish capitalism.

Michael Collins typified the military wing of Irish republicanism. His ideas on the type of post-independence Ireland were very vague, combining a desire for more co-operatives with distaste for state socialism and strikes. He looked at the balance of military forces after the British had increased the level of repression from 1921 onwards and thought there was no option but to settle. Justifying the Treaty later, he noted that ‘we had an average of one round of ammunition for each weapon we had... The fighting area in Cork was becoming daily more circumscribed, and they could not carry on much longer’.⁸ Collins’ exclusive focus on the military side meant that, ironically, the former gunman became the most enthusiastic advocate for a settlement. It was a path trodden by other IRA leaders afterwards.

As a negotiator, he was absolutely no match for the



experience of the Lloyd George. While in London, he allowed himself to be patronised and flattered as the romantic Irish man by some upper class circles. He became friendly with such upper class thugs as Lord Birkenhead. And while De Valera was certainly a more Machiavellian character hoping to control negotiations from afar, Collins committed the cardinal error of not bouncing any proposals that emerged from negotiations back against a leadership that stood outside the charmed circles of British diplomacy.

Back in Ireland the Treaty debate soon focussed on the issue of the oath and the much more serious issue of partition went into the background. Yet behind the symbols, there was an important point at issue. The anti-Treatyites sensed their former comrades were accepting a dependency relationship with their imperial foes. Although they articulated their opposition with reference to a mythical, abstract republic, they were not entirely wrong. Griffith and Collins' endorsement of the Treaty did in fact lead into a greater entanglement with their former imperial masters. This became abundantly clear when they agreed to work closely with the British to crush their former republican comrades. They claimed

that they were merely restoring law and order, but it was an order where the poor knew their place and where there would be no more talk of land redistribution or better conditions for workers. With the first shot of the Civil War, the Irish counter-revolution had begun.

At 4.15 a.m. on the night of 27 June 1922, the Irish Civil War started. Anti-Treatyite forces had previously occupied the Four Courts but, after the assassination of Sir Henry Wilson in London, the British government demanded that action be taken against them. Ironically, Wilson's assassins were not anti-Treatyites but were working for Michael Collins. Even before the assassination, Churchill had been bombarding Collins with letters demanding a crackdown on social anarchy. 'Rich and poor turned out of their homes at two hours' notice... The cattle are killed, the lonely white peacocks hunted to death... some of the scenes are like those of the French revolution',⁹ Churchill declared. Wilson's assassination became an excuse to intensify the pressure and on 24 June 1924, the British government drew up its own plans to attack the republicans in the Four Courts. A proclamation justifying the attacks was written and ships were dispatched to Dublin to take prisoners away but then, suddenly, the operation was halted. Instead, talks began between British military authorities, Griffith and Emmet Dalton, a major general in the Free State Army, about supplying artillery so that the Provisional Government itself could carry out the attacks. It was only after two 18-pounder field guns were supplied by the British Army that the attack began. Afterwards, Churchill wrote back to Collins, 'If I refrain from congratulation, it is only because I do not wish to embarrass you. The archives of the Four Courts may be scattered but the title deeds of Ireland are *safe*.'¹⁰

The Provisional Government prosecuted the Civil War with an extraordinary ferocity, because they wanted to finish it as rapidly as possible lest the British be tempted to get involved. They feared that if the British intervened, republicans would unite in opposition and matters would then spill out of control. Kevin O'Higgins, who was set to become the strong man of the Free State regime, put it succinctly 'What lies ahead? A social revolution? Reoccupation by the British with the goodwill of the world ... These possibilities, none of which are attractive, are not mutually exclusive.'¹¹

To gain advantage, the Free State took two measures which were to prove decisive. First, even before the

attack on the Four Courts, they started to take weaponry from the British. Between 31 January and 26 June 1922, the British government supplied them with 11,900 rifles, 79 Lewis machine guns, 4,200 revolvers and 3,504 grenades. In August, another eight 18-pounder artillery pieces arrived and by 2 September, total British weaponry amounted to 27,400 rifles, 246 Lewis guns, 6,600 revolvers and 5 Vickers guns. Second, the Provisional Government began a huge recruitment campaign to their army and money appeared to be no problem, as they were effectively bankrolled by the British state. At the start of the Civil War, the National Army had 8,000 troops, by November this number had grown to 30,000 and by the end of the ten-month war, to 50,000 soldiers. This gave the Provisional Government overwhelming superiority over their republican opponents who had an estimated 13,000 soldiers. The new recruits to the National Army were not particularly motivated by any political ideals but were often attracted by the prospect of pay and excitement.

During the course of the Civil War, the Provisional Government transformed itself into a brutal, authoritarian regime which brushed aside all considerations of human rights, to inflict terror on their opponents. It introduced emergency legislation to set up military courts. These were given powers to impose the death penalty on anyone who took up arms against the state. It decreed that for every republican outrage, three republicans would be executed. Seventy-seven republicans were eventually executed – more than three times the number of IRA volunteers executed by the British before the truce. After Sean Hales, a pro-Treaty TD, was killed by the anti-Treaty forces, four leading republicans were executed. Liam Mellows, Rory O'Connor, Joe McKelvey and Dick Barrett had been imprisoned at the time Hales was murdered and the emergency legislation passed. It made little difference because the Free State was determined to demoralise its enemies with sheer terror. The Provisional Government also used death squads to eliminate their opponents. A Criminal Investigation Unit, headed by Joseph McGrath, abducted and killed over twenty anti-Treatyite volunteers in Dublin while in other areas, most notably in Sligo, prisoners were murdered after capture. Kerry saw the worst of the brutality and in a horrific incident in Ballyseedy, nine republicans were tied to a landmine that was then detonated. This act was a reprisal

for the killing of five Free State soldiers in a nearby village, but more revenge was to follow. Of the 32 anti-Treatyites killed in Kerry in March 1923, only five died in combat. The Civil War was an extremely brutal and bloody affair and both sides engaged in horrific killings. The republicans thought they could win by fighting hardest, but in the terror stakes they were no match for the state forces.

Collins's own death symbolised the over-confidence of a military man. He decided to undertake a tour of West Cork to inspect Free State forces. Yet this was the very area, where the anti-Treatyite forces remained strong. His death left behind an enduring myth of the lost leader – the strong man who could have united Irish society by harsh discipline. The reality, however, was that his legacy was one of state brutality aided by his former imperial foes. It is that legacy – rather than his record as a republican fighter – that Fine Gaelers admire today.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.finegael.ie/beal-na-blath-oration-minister-michael-creed/>
- 2 <https://www.thejournal.ie/leo-varadkar-monty-python-2045634-Apr2015/>
- 3 J. Mackay, *Michael Collins: A Life*, Mainstream Pub, 1997
- 4 T. P. Coogan, *Michael Collins: A Biography*, 1990 p.173
- 5 P. Hart, *Mick: The Real Michael Collins* Macmillan 2005 p 30
- 6 bid
- 7 M. Collins, *Path to Freedom* <http://www.generalmichaelcollins.com/on-line-books/the-path-to-freedom-index/chapter-5-building-up-ireland/>
- 8 F. Costello, *The Irish Revolution and Its Aftermath*, p 278
- 9 C. Townsend, *The Republic: The Fight for Irish Independence*, London Allen Lane p 404
- 10 M. Hopkinson, *Green Against Green: the Irish Civil War*, Gill 2004 p.126
- 11 M. Regan, *The Irish Counter Revolution 1921-1936*, Dublin Gill and MacMillan 2001, p.72