

Collins, Michael

by M. A. Hopkinson

Collins, Michael (1890–1922), revolutionary leader, chairman of the Irish provisional government, and commander-in-chief of the provisional government army, was born 16 October 1890 at Woodfield, Sam's Cross, west Co. Cork, last born of three sons and five daughters of Michael Collins, tenant farmer (aged 75 at Collins's birth), and Mary Anne Collins (née O'Brien), who continued to work on the family farm after being widowed, dying of cancer in 1907. Educated at Lisavaird and Clonakilty national schools, he left school aged 15 and moved to London to work as a clerk, first in West Kensington post office savings bank, then at a stockbroker's in the City (1910), and subsequently at the Board of Trade (1914). Before leaving London, he was employed by the Guaranty Trust Co. during 1915. He became an enthusiastic participant in GAA and Gaelic League activities, both as a player and as an administrator, and was sworn into the IRB in 1909. In 1914 he joined the Irish Volunteers, and was appointed treasurer of the IRB for southern England. His London experience in the enclosed exile nationalist community was more important than has often been allowed: he became an avid reader of popular fiction, notably Conan Doyle, and through his employment he accumulated invaluable administrative experience. Old London friends were to be key contacts later in his intelligence network.

**Insurrection and politics** Collins returned to Ireland in January 1916 and became a financial adviser to Count Plunkett (qv). He played a backroom role in the GPO as ADC to Joseph Plunkett (qv) during the Easter rising; he was strongly critical of the sacrificial philosophy and tactics of Pearse (qv), but admired the dedication and ruthlessness of IRB leaders such as Tom Clarke (qv) and Seán Mac Diarmada (qv). He was not court-martialled after the rising but was interned till December 1916 in Frongoch, north Wales, where he became a dominant figure in what has been described as the 'university of revolution', leading discussions on military tactics, confronting authority over prison conditions and participating in Irish-language classes, although he had no official rank. On release, through his contacts with Kathleen Clarke (qv), widow of Tom Clarke, he took up work in the Irish National Aid and Volunteer Dependents' Fund and was instrumental in rebuilding the IRB; these two organisations became the basis for Collins's rise to dominance within advanced nationalist ranks. For all the importance he attached to secret society links, he well understood the need to become involved in public organisations, and played a significant part in persuading the imprisoned Joe McGuinness (qv) to stand in the Longford South by-election of May 1917. Collins's prominence was publicly demonstrated for the first time in September 1917 by his brief, intransigent address at the funeral of Thomas Ashe (qv). After shots were fired over the graveside he declared: 'Nothing additional remains to be said. That volley which we have just

heard is the only speech which it is proper to make above the grave of a dead Fenian’.

Collins was elected to the Sinn Féin executive in October 1917 only narrowly, but was a more central figure in the reorganised Volunteers, becoming adjutant-general in March 1918 when Richard Mulcahy (qv) was regarded as the safer choice to be chief of staff. During 1917–18 Collins built up his intelligence service, taking advantage of the long-term alienation from Dublin Castle of the catholic professional middle class; a number of employees in the public service became key recruits to his intelligence system. His agents extended to the DMP and the Castle itself, and enabled him to give advance warning of the arrests connected with the ‘German plot’ in May 1918. Unlike Collins, the majority of the Sinn Féin leadership chose the option of winning publicity through imprisonment, which meant that Collins was a major influence in Dublin among advanced nationalists at the time of the December 1918 general election. Together with Diarmuid O’Hegarty (qv) and Harry Boland (qv), he chose many Sinn Féin candidates, and was himself returned unopposed for Cork South.

In April 1919, some months after the establishment of the dáil government, he succeeded Eoin MacNeill (qv) as minister of finance and successfully organised the dáil loan. £380,000 was raised in Ireland by September 1920, which made it possible to establish the dáil government. Throughout the loan drive he kept in touch with local subscribers and ran the publicity. He also appears to have been president of the supreme council of the IRB in mid 1919, and was soon to be the IRA’s director of intelligence. Unsurprisingly this caused many problems with regard to overlapping authorities and much resentment of his supremacy. Cathal Brugha (qv) and Austin Stack (qv) were to be increasingly critical of what they regarded as interference in the running of their defence and home affairs departments. Such tensions were increased by Collins’s brusque and domineering personality; he inspired either devoted loyalty or bitter hostility among his contemporaries, none of whom could be indifferent to him. Cathal Brugha in particular developed a loathing of Collins. He was also intolerant of inefficiency and unpunctuality. He was impatient of what he regarded as the moderate and ineffective politicians within the movement, and the failure of other departments in the dáil government to establish viable administrations. He was particularly scathing about Stack’s administrative limitations, and was one of the few Irish revolutionary leaders to be at ease with a card-index system.

**Guerrilla war leader** Traditionally Collins has been depicted as the heroic leader of the IRA from the beginning of guerrilla warfare in January 1919, despite the facts that his role was that of an organiser rather than a fighter, and that he rarely journeyed outside Dublin. He advocated a cautious approach to any confrontation with British forces. To act on his intelligence information he established his notorious Squad, a group of gunmen, all IRB members; their first action was in July 1919. The Squad first eliminated the threat from the DMP by sundry assassinations and then

moved on to deal with British intelligence agents, most notably in the killing of twelve men and wounding of several more on Bloody Sunday, 21 November 1920. He was also active in extending his intelligence system through the provinces, although there his organisation was much less comprehensive. Through his IRB links he was able to provide a limited supply of arms from the USA and Europe, and masterminded and directed jail escapes, in particular that of Éamon de Valera (qv) from Lincoln jail in February 1919. It was Collins's men in the ports and on the ships who enabled de Valera to journey to the US in June 1919 and return to Ireland in December 1920. Whatever influence the IRA headquarters had in the provinces was largely brought about by Collins's personal contacts and energy, but it should be remembered how critical local initiative was in guerrilla warfare, and how resented was his refusal to grant requests for arms and ammunition.

He had a surer grasp of the limitations of his achievement than many of his biographers. His significance to a great extent lay in Dublin. The British obsession with Collins, and their failure to trace his movements, contributed to the Collins legend. He was able to cycle round Dublin and drink in various hotels in Parnell Square while billed as the most wanted man in the British empire. However, later attempts to arrest him may at times have been less than whole-hearted because of various peace initiatives. Between the arrest of Arthur Griffith (qv) (November 1920) and de Valera's return from the US (late December), Collins was acting president of the dáil government. In that December he was involved in protracted informal peace negotiations, centring on Archbishop Patrick Clune (qv) of Perth, Western Australia, which broke down on the British government's belated insistence that IRA arms be surrendered. In the first half of 1921 he became progressively more pessimistic about the war. The arrest of important intelligence agents, notably Ned Broy (qv), reduced the effectiveness of his information, and his offices were raided by British forces (April 1921). There was a feeling that the net was closing around him, and Mulcahy was to claim in a memoir that if it had not been for the truce there would have been need for another purge of British agents. Collins became extremely critical of the failings of inactive IRA units. It was his realistic appraisal of the military situation, and particularly the dire shortages of arms and ammunition, that explains his acceptance of the truce in early July 1921. Plans for massive shipments of arms from Italy and Germany did not materialise; the Cork IRA leadership later blamed Collins for the failure to bring to fruition negotiations in Italy for arms.

**Negotiator** After the truce, Collins was upset not to be chosen to accompany de Valera to London in July for the early stages of negotiations, but he was just as angry when, on de Valera's nomination, he was selected by the dáil (14 September) to negotiate with the British government at the forthcoming Anglo-Irish conference. In private correspondence he revealed his suspicions that he and Griffith had been 'set up' by de Valera to make a compromise the absent de Valera himself would not wish to make. He travelled to London on 9 October, a day after the other members of the delegation (Griffith, Robert Barton (qv), Edmund Duggan (qv), and George Gavan Duffy (qv)); he had stayed behind to celebrate his formal engagement to Kitty

Kiernan (qv), daughter of an hotelier in Longford town, on 8 October. In London he remained aloof from the other members of the negotiating team, staying separately with his personal entourage at 15 Cadogan Gardens.

Because of Griffith's poor health, Collins was at times effectively head of the delegation. The British government were soon aware that he and Griffith were the vital men to deal with, and increasingly Lloyd George and his close colleagues met with them alone. During the negotiations, Collins was in close touch with a political and literary set that included the society portrait-painter Sir John Lavery (qv) and his wife Hazel (qv) and the writer J. M. Barrie; this has led republican or anti-treaty critics to claim that his judgment was affected by social lionisation. Others believe that Collins in London, maturing as a statesman, came to see the virtues of dominion status. It is more realistic, however, and more in accordance with his behaviour after the treaty, to argue that he acted as a pragmatist, aware that a settlement based on dominion status was the maximum that could be extracted from a British government. He had become increasingly irritated by de Valera's belief that his 'external association' ideas could be incorporated in a settlement.

During the negotiations, British ministers saw that Collins was more flexible than his hard-line reputation had suggested; he refused to accompany the rest of the delegation when a final attempt was made to press de Valera's favoured option. On the last day of the conference (5 December), Lloyd George had a meeting with Collins alone, appearing flexible over the wording of the oath to the crown and holding out prospects for major changes in the boundaries of Northern Ireland resulting from the boundary commission. It is very doubtful, however, whether such assurances had any effect on the hard-bitten Collins. He signed the treaty realising that it would soon bring about the removal of the British military presence from the south and west of Ireland. He accepted the boundary commission only as a means of preventing the northern issue from blocking a settlement between the British and Irish governments.

Collins was aware that he would have major problems in reconciling republican opinion, and particularly the army, to the treaty. He had been the crucial signatory to the treaty and without his support it is extremely doubtful that the settlement could have proved viable. Many within the army declared: 'What is good enough for Mick, is good enough for me', and thanks to Collins most of the IRA GHQ and around one-quarter of the whole army supported the treaty. He used his powers of persuasion and offered jobs, not always successfully, to win the backing of old colleagues. Two key IRA leaders in the provinces, Michael Brennan (qv) in Clare and Seán Mac Eoin (qv) in Athlone, were swayed by their loyalty to both Collins and the IRB to support the treaty.

**Provisional government** During the dáil treaty debates, Collins showed considerable ability as a political communicator and had to suffer vilification and abuse from Cathal Brugha and Countess Markievicz (qv). Under the terms of

the treaty, he became chairman of the provisional government (elected on 14 January by the Southern Irish parliament) and also minister for finance, a position he continued to hold under the authority of Dáil Éireann. The remainder of his life was spent trying to reconcile his acceptance of the treaty with his republican principles. Before the election and publication of the Free State constitution in June 1922, he sought to appease the republican opposition and to avoid confrontation, at the expense of testing British government patience to the limit. He therefore used his IRB influence to prevent any final split within the army, and was chairman of the committee that drew up a republican constitution. On 20 May the Collins–de Valera pact made provision for the establishment of a joint pro- and anti-treaty Sinn Féin panel to fight the election and for a coalition government. As a consequence of this apparent contradiction of the treaty terms, Collins and Griffith were summoned to London to face Lloyd George's wrath in late May. Reluctantly Collins had to accept that the constitution be made to conform to the treaty. Meanwhile the meeting of the IRA convention on 26 March, explicitly repudiating dáil or provisional-government control, had made clear the split within the army, and the need for a speedy build-up of the provisional government's army.

In the first six months of 1922 Collins put a high priority on the northern question. He was publicly associated with two pacts (21 January, 30 March) with James Craig (qv), the Northern Ireland premier. These attempted to settle limited security and judicial issues and appeared to recognise implicitly the northern government within the six counties and to remove the boycott of northern goods. Secretly, however, Collins was promoting from January a joint IRA northern offensive with the twin aims of undermining the northern government and retaining IRA unity. The offensive, culminating in botched actions in May, proved a sorry failure and helped to intensify British suspicion of his motives. Meanwhile, rather than accommodating differences, the two pacts and Collins's offensive policy exacerbated divisions between the northern and southern governments and between the majority and minority communities within the north. It remains unclear whether the primary motivation for Collins's northern policy was the desire to reconcile IRA divisions by focusing on the six counties, or a genuine commitment to bring down the northern government.

A day before the election of 16 June 1922 (in which he headed the poll with 17,106 first preferences in the eight-seat Cork Mid, North, South, South-East, and West constituency) Collins appeared to repudiate his agreement with de Valera by urging the electorate to vote in accordance with their preferred views. He was no doubt aware that any hope of reconciliation had long since passed. The election's confirmation of firm majority support for the treaty appeared to vindicate Collins's support of the settlement. On 22 June Sir Henry Wilson (qv), ex-chief of the imperial general staff and arch-unionist, was assassinated in central London. Some oral evidence suggests that Collins may have given the orders to the two London IRB men who carried out the shooting; if so, it would demonstrate how close he remained to his secret-society roots. The British government sought to place

responsibility for the assassination on the republican IRA and insisted that Collins end its occupation of the Four Courts, which had begun on 14 April: failing that, the British made provision themselves to deal with the situation. Aware of a split within republican military ranks, Collins may have hoped that fighting would be brief and limited to Dublin. He had little cause for confidence in the hastily recruited provisional-government army. Faced with an impossible dilemma, and with the greatest reluctance, he ordered the bombardment of the Four Courts on 28 June.

**Civil war and death** During the early weeks of the ensuing civil war, Collins was in poor health and increasingly at odds with his political colleagues. He became commander-in-chief of the Free State army and gave up his chairmanship of the provisional government. Nevertheless he kept a close eye on political developments and was consulted regularly. There is no evidence that he had any thought of establishing a military dictatorship. Regretfully he had to abandon his aggressive northern strategy, ordering northern divisions of the IRA to leave their localities and be billeted in the Curragh. His conduct of the war was characteristically efficient and imaginative (e.g. the amphibious attack on Cork city). By early August, when the republicans had evacuated virtually all their urban strongholds and the provisional-government army had landed at various points on the coast, Collins embarked on a military tour of inspection of Munster, which was interrupted by the death of Griffith (12 August). It is clear that the purpose of his fateful journey was connected with his search for some kind of accommodation with the republican opposition, and he was arranging meetings with intermediaries. He had been opposed to any attempt to steamroller the opposition and had been against the introduction of a harsh censorship. On 22 August he was killed during a confused ambush in the remote valley of Béal na mBlath, close to his birthplace. The security of the new state appeared to have reached its greatest crisis.

Since then controversy has raged over responsibility for Collins's death, and the alleged involvement of British or provisional government intelligence. The prevailing consensus, however, points more to a single republican bullet than to an elaborate conspiracy. But his death was a prime factor in turning the civil war from a half-hearted affair to something resembling a national vendetta. Many within the Free State army, who had supported the treaty only out of loyalty to Collins, became progressively alienated from the new leadership; this would culminate in the army mutiny of 1924.

**Myth and legacy** There has been considerable debate over the consequences of Collins's death for the long-term development of the new state; this involves consideration of Collins's political potential. For many, his departure left an enormous gap that was never filled, and the inward-looking petit-bourgeois character of the Free State had much to do with the loss of his leadership. It is true that the pro-treaty side lost its only popular figure – W. T. Cosgrave (qv) had none of his charisma, Kevin O'Higgins (qv) none of his popularity. Certainly the recovery of de Valera's political fortunes and the subsequent dominance of Fianna Fáil had much

to do with the loss of Collins. Collins had also shown both administrative talent and considerable effectiveness as a public communicator and platform speaker. It is likely that he would have placed a much higher priority on the northern question than his political colleagues did; northern unionists had every reason to breathe more easily after his death. His secret-society methods would have continued to impose considerable strains on Anglo–Irish relations. While he had no ambition to become an Irish Mussolini, there is little evidence that he had any great breadth of economic and social vision. As demonstrated by his *The path to freedom* (Dublin, 1922), the published collection of his speeches, he had a limited Gaelic-revivalist philosophy and was strongly anti-socialist. As minister of finance, he allowed his civil service to achieve a control that resembled that of the Whitehall treasury. The bureaucratic conservatism of the Free State, therefore, arguably owed much to Collins.

For long de Valera's dominance of Irish politics prevented the establishment of a full-blown Collins myth. From the early 1960s, however, a Collins legend grew to rival that connected with C. S. Parnell (qv). The centenary of his birth coincided with the publication of several biographies, and in 1996 the release of Neil Jordan's film *Michael Collins* occasioned intense debate and drew large audiences. His early death and the fact that so many questions remain unanswered guarantee the retention of interest. Much curiosity in the more permissive environment of late twentieth-century Irish society centred on his relationship with women and with drink. During the treaty negotiations he became engaged to Kitty Kiernan, but he also had relationships with Lady Lavery and Moya Llewelyn Davies, daughter of a Parnellite MP and wife of a leading British civil servant. Many colleagues swore that Collins drank only the occasional sherry, yet this does not tally with much contemporary testimony. The obsession with such issues may have revealed more about Irish society in the mid twentieth century than it ever did about Michael Collins. The leading Dublin Castle official Mark Sturgis (qv) provided a useful corrective to much of the romanticisation when he described him as resembling a prosperous cattle-dealer, fond of bad jokes. Nonetheless Collins does fit the bill as the archetypal Irish national hero – convivial and back-slapping, plain-speaking and direct, sociable and outgoing. All this contrasts vividly with the austere de Valera and even the enigmatic Parnell. Study of Collins's career has led some to depict him as an unswerving idealist, so reclaiming him for the republican pantheon; others see him as one of the first twentieth-century examples of freedom fighter (or terrorist) turned statesman. He justified his use of physical force by saying that it was always against definite, prescribed targets. While he went through an anti-clerical phase, he remained a practising catholic, frequently visiting Brompton Oratory alone, or attending mass at Maiden Lane church off the Strand, during the treaty negotiations. Through all the speculation, hero-worshipping, and revisionism, Collins can still be regarded as the essential man in the winning of a large measure of Irish independence.

Collins's papers are to be found in the NLI, NAI (Dublin), Kilmainham Museum, Dublin, and in private collections. A posthumous portrait (1923) by Leo Whelan (qv) hangs in Leinster House; Sir John Lavery's depiction of Collins lying in state (1922)

is in Dublin City Gallery the Hugh Lane, which also has a marble bust by Seamus Murphy (qv). Bronze busts by F. W. Doyle-Jones (1923) and Albert Power (qv) (1936), along with Theodore Spicer-Simson's plasticine medallion and bronze cast (1922), are in the NGI. Sir Bernard Partridge's pen-and-ink sketch of Collins with Sir James Craig for *Punch* (1922) is in the National Portrait Gallery, London.

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Margery Forester, *Michael Collins: the lost leader* (1971); Leon Ó Broin, *Michael Collins* (1980); R. Ormond and M. Rogers (ed.), *Dictionary of British portraiture*, iv (1981), 22; Michael Hopkinson, *Green against green: the Irish civil war* (1988); Joseph Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985* (1989); Tim Pat Coogan, *Michael Collins. A biography* (1990); Michael Hopkinson (ed.), *The last days of Dublin Castle: the Mark Sturgis diaries* (1999); id., *The Irish war of independence* (2004); Peter Hart, *Mick: the real Michael Collins* (2005)