

Pearse, Patrick Henry

by J. J. Lee

Pearse, Patrick Henry (1879–1916), writer, educationalist, and revolutionary, was born 10 November 1879 at the family home, 27 Great Brunswick Street (latterly Pearse St.) Dublin, the elder son and second of the four children of James Pearse, stone carver and monumental sculptor, originally of London, and his second wife, Margaret (qv), a shop assistant, daughter of Patrick Brady, coal factor, of Dublin.

**Education and formative influences** He was educated at Mrs Murphy's private school, 1887–91, and the CBS, Westland Row, 1891–6. Already convinced of the centrality of the Irish language to a distinctive Irish identity, he joined the Gaelic League in 1896. His father's commercial success allowed him to enrol for a BA (RUI) in Irish, English, and French at UCD, while also taking law courses at King's Inns and TCD, 1898–1901. Despite devoting much time to Gaelic League work, he achieved good results in both degrees, reflecting his feel for language and his intense work ethic. Though called to the bar (1901), he would take only one case.

Pearse's vaunting ambition from an early age found expression not only in his founding the New Ireland Literary Society in 1897, but in his publication in 1898 of the three papers he delivered to the society, 'Gaelic prose literature', 'The intellectual future of the Gael', and 'The folk songs of Ireland' – the first two before he was yet 18 – as *Three lectures on Gaelic topics*. Impressive in the range of their vocabulary and in the intensity of his reading for his age and his curriculum-constricted education, they provide a rich repository for students of his later years, revealing many of the personality traits of the adult Pearse, however much his views on specific issues might change. Here can be found already the pronounced tendency to speak in absolutes and superlatives, the axiomatic certainty reflected in the use of words like 'undoubtedly' ('among modern nations those which have contributed most to the intellectual welfare of mankind are undoubtedly Italy, England and Germany') (*Collected works: songs*, 222); the tendency to sanctify the cause of the moment and invoke the blessing of the Deity (as in the climactic exhortation to save the Irish folk song – 'The cause is a holy one – God grant it may succeed!') (ibid, 215); the insistence on the glories of ancient Irish literature (ibid, *Literature*, passim); the emphasis on love of nature (ibid, 226 ff); the affirmation that 'every great movement that has ever been carried out on this earth has been carried out simply and solely by enthusiasts' (ibid, 195–6); the place of Ireland in civilisation, which ought to be 'fascinating not only to men and women of Gaelic race, but to all who have at heart the great causes of civilisation, education and progress' (ibid, 218).

Not the least of his enthusiasms was hero-worship, 'in its highest form . . . a soul-lifting and an ennobling thing' (ibid, 218). Although his great-aunt Margaret had

inculcated in him in childhood particular admiration for Irish heroes, he now ranged as widely as his education permitted, in wondering: 'What would the world be without its heroes? Greece without her Hercules and her Achilles, Rome without her Romulus and her Camillus, England without her Arthur and her Richard, Ireland without her Cuchulainn (qv) and her Fionn (qv), Christianity without its Loyolas and its Xaviers' (ibid, 228). Pearse was already a visionary, but in what he dismissed as the political wasteland of 1897 it was in cultural rather than political terms he expounded his vision of a distinctive Irish future: 'The morning will come, and its dawn is not far off. But it will be a morning different from the morning we have looked for. The Gael is not like other men; the spade, and the loom, and the sword are not for him. But a destiny more glorious than that of Rome, more glorious than that of Britain awaits him; to become the saviour of idealism in modern intellectual and social life, the regenerator and rejuvenator of the literature of the world, the instructor of the nations, the preacher of the gospel of nature-worship, hero-worship, God-worship.' (ibid, 221). Aware of John Henry Newman's (qv) vision of a future Ireland as a centre of world scholarship, he salutes the Gael as '*the* idealist amongst the nations: he loves . . . painting, sculpture, music, oratory, drama, learning, all those things which delight and ravish the human soul. What the Greek was to the ancient world the Gael will be to the modern; and in no point will the parallel prove more true than in the fervent and noble love of learning' (ibid, 230). Anticipating the charge that all this 'is a mere ideal picture', he retorted that he intended it to be, because 'if you wish to accomplish anything great place an ideal before you, and endeavour to live up to that ideal' (ibid, 233).

Pearse's correspondence as secretary of the publications committee of the Gaelic League from June 1900 conveys utter commitment as well as an imaginative approach towards promoting the language, and an inclusive attitude towards the use of the different dialects, which earned him the hostility of those who championed the superiority of their own versions. His work rate made him indispensable to the League, and helped win him the editorship of its bilingual weekly newspaper, *An Claidheamh Soluis* (The sword of light) in 1903. During his editorship (1903–09), he acted on the belief that 'The Gaelic League stands for the intellectual independence of Ireland' (Ó Buachalla, *Letters*, xvii), by striving to make it the cutting edge of 'native thought' (Edwards, 65). An innovative editor, though so expansionist that he had to be quickly reined in for fear of bankrupting the League, his range of interests left him writing most of the paper himself, to a remarkably high level.

With a keen appreciation of the reading market, he was impatient with the purists whose priority was linguistic correctness rather than spreading the word. For all his idealisation of folk culture, he was an active moderniser, insisting that 'a living modern literature *cannot* (and if it could, should not) be built up on the folktale'. Irish literature must of course 'get into contact on the one hand with its own past' but 'on the other with the mind of contemporary Europe – this is the twentieth century, and no literature can take root in the twentieth century which is not of the twentieth century' (*An Claidheamh Soluis*, 26 May 1906).

Pearse practised what he preached, writing several short stories in Irish, of which the best-known was perhaps 'Íosagán', and the best perhaps 'An dearg-daol'. Though of uneven literary quality, his stories helped pioneer modern prose writing in Irish by breaking away from stylised inherited conventions, in that they were partly based on the life and language of Connemara, especially the area around Rosmuc. Here he acquired a cottage in 1907, and here he would spend as much time as he could salvage from the press of affairs in Dublin.

**Educationist** To promote the role of Irish as a modern language he took an active part in the dispute over the demand that Irish be made mandatory as a matriculation subject for entry to the newly established NUI. Education remained his abiding passion. If only, he felt, the education system could be inspired with a true love of learning, if only the child could be made the centre of education, a soul might come into Ireland. Nor did he compromise politically at the expense of his educational ideals. He supported the Irish council bill of 1907, which even John Redmond (qv) rejected as a poor substitute for home rule, because it would extend more native control over education. Within education his passion was Irish language teaching through bilingual techniques. Scouring the international horizon in search of the best bilingual pedagogy, his visit to Belgian schools in 1905 to observe bilingual teaching methods provided him with material for numerous enthusiastic reports in *An Claidheamh Soluis*.

Excited by this concrete Belgian example, he turned towards establishing his own school from 1906, which he eventually realised with the opening of St Enda's in Cullenswood House on Oakley Road in 1908. St Enda's proved a remarkable experiment, above all because of the inspirational personality of Pearse himself and his commitment to a child centred approach to education to which many of the pupils responded enthusiastically. Although Pearse retained his schoolboy emphasis on the importance of heroic inspiration for inculcating idealism in the young, he advertised St Enda's as offering a modern education, including 'special attention to science and "modern" subjects generally, while not neglecting the classical side' (Edwards, 129). As Pearse explained to an enquiring parent in 1910, St Enda's 'was founded . . . with the object of providing a secondary education distinctively Irish in complexion, bilingual in method, and of a high modern type generally, for Irish catholic boys . . . what I mean by an Irish school is a school that takes Ireland for granted. You need not praise the Irish language – simply speak it; you need not denounce English games – play Irish ones; you need not ignore foreign history, foreign literatures – deal with them from the Irish point of view. An Irish school need no more be a purely Irish-speaking school than an Irish nation need be a purely Irish speaking nation; but an Irish school, like an Irish nation, must be permeated through and through by Irish culture, the repository of which is the Irish language.' 'Nature-Study', he went on, 'forms an essential part of the work . . . in an attempt to inspire a real interest in and love of beautiful things. Practical gardening and elementary agriculture are taught as part of this scheme' (Pearse to Mrs Humphreys, 10 May 1910, *Letters*, 152–3). In his mind respect for nature fostered kindness to animals

and to children, St Enda's being noted for a reluctance to use corporal punishment in the common British and Irish manner.

His wider reading, once he escaped the strait-jacket of the examination-obsessed school curriculum against which he protested so passionately in *The murder machine* (1912), led him to reconsider his earlier antagonism towards modern European literature. By 1913 he had broadened and deepened his schoolboy sense of literary appreciation – reflected at its most uncomprehending in his initially dismissive attitude towards W. B. Yeats (qv) – as his sensibilities developed beyond the confines of his education. What was striking was less the narrowness of his original sympathies than his interest in literature at all, and then his developing an awareness of its riches to the extent of inviting Yeats himself to talk at St Enda's. Although continuing to insist on the role of literature in fostering national consciousness, he came to accept that much of the best literature was not explicitly didactic at all, and that it was the first duty of the artist to probe the subject-matter unflinchingly from an artistic perspective. This shift in his viewpoint allowed him to come to revere Ibsen, and revise his view of John Millington Synge (qv), overcoming his earlier revulsion at what he saw as the gratuitous romanticisation of violence in the 'Playboy of the western world'.

Pearse exalted teaching as a vocation to a level of dedication that few could be expected to achieve. His published papers on education, collected in *The murder machine*, a searing indictment of the English educational system in Ireland, couched as usual in absolutes, consciously extolled the unique virtues of ancient Irish education as a way of boosting the long battered self-respect of Irish children. *The Irish Review* in February 1913 summarised his educational impact: 'He is an educationalist who is incidentally a poet and a playwright – but it is in the realm of educational ideas that Mr Pearse has made the most effective innovation. He has established a secondary school, in which Ireland is taken for granted, and in which, moreover, practical effect is given to ideas which correspond with the newest discoveries in the method of education' – which the writer identifies as those of Maria Montessori.

A leading authority on the history of education, and on Pearse, reinforces this verdict: 'his educational theories on freedom and inspiration in education, on individual differences, on nature study and school environment, on language teaching and bilingualism, and on the role and status of the teacher, place him securely within the 'New Education' movement. The principles on which he conducted St Enda's, the wide curriculum on offer, his concern for the individual student's needs, the environment of self-motivation and freedom which he created for his pupils' placed him in the front rank of innovative European thinkers on education of his time (Ó Buachalla, *Educationalist*, xxiv).

For all his occasional fulminations against the pretensions of the 'modern', Pearse preached simultaneously a commitment to what he saw as the best of the modern.

But that modern was to be honed to achieve the alleged ideals of the Gaelic past. As was his wont, once Pearse had adopted an ideal himself, he proceeded to attribute the reality to the ancient Gaels, living in his imagination of them. If the textbooks and the laboratories would inculcate knowledge, the sagas would teach character. With a keen sense of theatre, Pearse peopled his past with his ideal type characters, from Cuchulainn to Colum Cille (qv), acting as the stage director of Ancient Ireland, as well as paying close attention to the staging of school plays, either in St Enda's itself, or even the Abbey, where Yeats was supportive.

So strident is his invocation of the sagas, of the virtues above all of Cuchulainn, that the unwary can be led into thinking that Pearse dwelt in a perpetual Celtic mist. But the relationship between past and present in his mind was more complicated than that. He regularly invoked the past to legitimise his image of the future. But he ensured the past could be safely summoned to his side. For this past was not the historical past. It was an imaginary past reconstructed in the image of his ideal future. He himself would observe in 1913 that 'Cuchulainn may never have lived and there may never have been a boy corps at Eamhain' (Ó Buachalla, *Educationalist*, 361). Whether Cuchulainn ever existed was not the point. The point, a normal part of the reconstruction of self-respect for defeated peoples, was to endow Ireland with a noble past to enhance its self-respect in the present. Pearse found in the past whatever he needed for his own polemical purposes.

Pearse founded St Ita's School for girls along the same general lines as St Enda's in Cullenswood House in 1910, when he turned St Enda's into a boarding school by moving to the Hermitage in Rathfarnham. But it proved an ill-judged move in business terms. The flourishing family firm gradually fell into decay after his father died in 1900; Pearse's devoted younger sculptor brother, Willie (qv), possessed neither the business nor artistic acumen of his father, and the firm went out of business in 1910. As Pearse's educational vision took little account of his overstretched financial resources, he was forced to close St Ita's in 1912, the enlarged St Enda's itself increasingly undermining the precarious financial basis of the enterprise.

**Politics and political writings** The struggle to sustain St Enda's may have influenced whatever psychological factors drove Pearse towards an increasingly assertive expression of an Irish right to independence. More certainly, his attitude towards politics began to change as home rule became a possibility from 1911. Although a speech on Robert Emmet (qv) that year – Emmet had often visited the Hermitage – anticipated later impulses toward sacrificial rebellion, it is simply unhistorical to deduce from this that Easter 1916 had already sprung fully formed from his mind, and that his every subsequent activity constituted a straight line towards 1916. On the contrary, his move towards politics of any sort, even home rule, much less rebellion, was halting. His insurrectionary impulses could coexist with a range of policy positions. Now forced to consider the potential of a native parliament, his warning in March 1912 that there would be war in Ireland if the British

renege again on home rule can obscure the fact that he not only supported home rule, but explicitly avowed that he believed a good home rule act could be extracted. He even went so far as to rebuke William O'Brien (qv) for claiming that it would not be passed in the present parliament, insisting that 'it *must* be enacted' (Laegh Mac Riagabhra [Pearse] to O'Brien, 30 Mar. 1912, *Letters*, 259).

Although he was still only sporadically active in politics, the calls on Pearse's time were increasing sufficiently to begin diverting his attention from his schools, leading him to warn himself in May 1912 to 'devote your attention to Sgoil Éanna and to Sgoil Íde and disregard political affairs' (Laegh Mac Riagabhra to Pearse, 11 May 1912, *Letters*, 265). Instead it was his own injunction he disregarded, drifting further into politics, initially supporting home rule, and then, as unionist forces in Ulster increasingly barred the way, towards the idea of rebellion. The pledge of Ulster unionists to resist home rule, by rebellion if necessary, in the Solemn League and Covenant of September 1912, proved intoxicating for Pearse. This crucial change in his thinking, which gradually took clearer shape in the light of unfolding events during 1913–14, was induced by his realisation of, and excitement at, the importance of the unionist initiative in challenging British authority as the ultimate determinant of the framework within which Irish public life could be conducted.

Nevertheless, while he had by 1913 begun contemplating the possibility of rebellion, he was still struggling to reconcile his gradualist approach of 1912 with his perception of the growing improbability of home rule. The contradictory impulses can be gleaned from his behaviour throughout the year when he continued to retain hope of home rule while moving, should it founder, to contemplate the alternative of rebellion. This dual track approach was also in accord with his own instinct to strive for unity among disputatious ideologues, though he could propound his own views vigorously. His earlier response to the incessant conflicts in the Gaelic League had been to insist that fostering the language itself was much the most important national objective, and that internal squabbles simply subverted that prime purpose (Edwards, 36). As his entry into politics exposed him to the ferocious faction fighting along the spectrum of nationalist movements, he proposed in June 1913 that 'we take *service* as our touchstone, and reject all other touchstones; and that, without bothering our heads about sorting out, segregating and labelling Irishmen and Irishwomen according to their opinions, we agree to accept as fellow-nationalists all who specifically or virtually recognise this Irish nation as an entity and, being part of it, owe it and give it their *service*' (*Collected works. Political writings*, 144). In January 1914, in 'The psychology of a Volunteer', he reiterated this plea for unity: 'I challenge again the Irish psychology of the man who sets up the Gael and the Palesman as opposing forces, with conflicting outlooks. We are all Irish, Leinster-reared or Connacht-reared . . . and he who would segregate Irish history and Irish men into two sections – Irish-speaking and English-speaking – is not helping toward achieving Ireland a Nation' (*Collected works. Political writings*, 105–6).

Reading Pearse poses demanding challenges. His style lent itself to ringing declamations, whose apparent finality leaves him particularly vulnerable to being taken out of context. But the martial vigour of Pearse's prose, and his apparently growing impatience for rebellion, can disguise the functional purpose of much of his writing.

As so much of this is heavily tactical, interpretation of his motives on many issues must be necessarily speculative. The written word must be constantly tested against his actual behaviour. Much of his writing, while ostensibly pronouncing immutable truths, was intended for particular audiences. As he came to the conclusion throughout 1913 that a willingness to take up arms might be necessary, he sought to establish relations with the main existing organisation committed to the idea of rebellion, the IRB, whose leadership, particularly Tom Clarke (qv), Seán Mac Diarmada (qv), and Bulmer Hobson (qv), would have to be convinced that his prominent support for home rule did not denote lack of true revolutionary fibre. If he wielded a powerful pen, he had neither an organisation behind him, nor a track record of revolutionary ardour. On the other hand, if the IRB had both, they lacked an inspiring voice, whether on paper or platform. Yet, when he claimed in 1915 that he had begun in June 1913 the notable series of articles, 'From a hermitage', in *Irish Freedom*, an IRB paper, 'with the deliberate intention, by argument, invective, and satire, of goading those who shared my political views to commit themselves definitely to an armed movement' (*Collected works. Political writings*, 142), he characteristically overlooked that it was rather the other way round, that it was he who had to persuade them of the genuineness of his commitment. It was they who had to be convinced that he had now moved far enough towards them to allow him become one of them.

In seeking to convince them Pearse embarked on a strident campaign of persuasion, while at the same time striving to keep options open in case home rule might actually emerge. Yet the metallic certainty of Pearse's hortatory rhetoric can conceal the degree of uncertainty, or at least flexibility, in his thinking. His invocation in June 1913 of Theobald Wolfe Tone's (qv) example, 'to set our faces towards the path that lies before us' (*Collected works. Political writings*, 57), seems clearly to indicate he had now fully adopted the revolutionary route; he seemed to confirm this with a reference to the 'very passionate assertion of nationality' which 'this generation of Irishmen will be called upon to make in the near future'. This surely reads like a call to imminent rebellion – until he qualifies it immediately with the observation that this 'must depend upon many things, more especially upon the passage or non-passage of the present Home Rule bill' (*Collected works. Political writings*, 147). If it passed, 'the assertion of which I speak will be made by the creation of what we may call a Gaelic party within the Home Rule Parliament, with a strong following behind it in the country' (*Collected works. Political writings*, 155). However martial his rhetoric, he was still groping his way along a two-stage path, imagining independence emerging through home rule rather than as an alternative to it.

In December 1913, the same month in which he was finally admitted to the IRB, he made the type of ringing declaration of the right to rebellion that appears to leave no doubt of his commitment to insurrection as the only route to independence: 'unarmed men cannot make good their claim to anything which armed men choose to deny them . . . surely it is a sin against national faith to expect national freedom without adopting the necessary means to win and keep it. And I know of no other way than the way of the sword: history records no other, reason and experience suggest no other'. That appears to demolish the two-stage interpretation – until he immediately proceeds, in characteristic fashion, to the qualification 'when I say the sword I do not mean necessarily the actual use of the sword: I mean readiness and ability to use the sword'.

A month later, he expresses this two-stage approach in more concrete terms, arguing that an armed Volunteer movement 'would make home rule, now about to be abandoned in deference to an armed Ulster, almost a certainty', while adding 'should home rule miscarry, it would give us a policy to fall back upon' (*Collected works. Political writings*, 203). Nor did the potential uses of home rule vanish from his mind even while he was planning rebellion. As late as May 1915, one of his hypothetical cases of 'Why we want recruits' was if a tory or coalition government, then imminent, were to 'repudiate the Home Rule Act' (*Collected works. Political writings*, 123). This too could be read tactically. But even as late as his penultimate pamphlet, *The spiritual nation*, published in February 1916, Pearse did not shrink from reaffirming his earlier belief in the stepping stone approach in the then circumstances. In vigorously defending Thomas Davis (qv) against the charge that he was not a separatist, he drew the analogy with himself: 'The fact that he would have accepted and worked on Repeal in no wise derogates from his status as a separatist, any more than the fact that many of us would have accepted home rule (or even devolution) and worked on with it derogates from our status as separatists. Home rule to us would have been a means to an end: Repeal to Davis would have been a means to an end' (*Collected works. Political writings*, 319).

**Revolutionary** In 1913 however, as he strove to convince the IRB leaders of the genuineness of his revolutionary aspirations, he embarked on a publication campaign which could at times strike strident notes. A classic example was *The coming revolution* in November 1913, in which he announced the shift from cultural to political in his priorities, now disingenuously presenting his Gaelic League years as having been intended from the beginning as merely an apprenticeship for the political struggle. In order to dispel the image of him as a 'harmless' cultural nationalist, he virtually set about reinventing himself in a manner likely to appeal to the 'hard men' of the IRB. He exulted at the sight of arms in Orange hands, taking up the theme of Eoin MacNeill's (qv) phrase that 'the North began' when the UVF began to challenge the monopoly of British gun power in Ireland earlier in the year. But he went far beyond MacNeill in extolling bloodshed as a spiritual value in itself, in some of the most sanguinary phrases in his entire work: 'I am glad that the Orangemen have armed, for it is a goodly thing to see arms in Irish hands. I should like to see



the A.O.H. armed. I should like to see the Transport Workers armed. I should like to see any and every body of Irish citizens armed. We must accustom ourselves to the thought of arms, to the sight of arms, to the use of arms. We may make mistakes in the beginning and shoot the wrong people; but bloodshed is a cleansing and a sanctifying thing, and the nation which regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood. There are many things more horrible than bloodshed; and slavery is one of them' (*Collected works. Political writings*, 98). If the conclusion here echoes standard 'western' ideology, the spiritual value attributed to bloodshed as a value in itself reflects a distinctly minority rhetorical tradition.

Pearse's heightened political profile throughout 1913 enabled him to seize the opening offered by the broader nationalist response to the UVF. He acquired his first organisational foothold on becoming director of organisation of the Irish Volunteers established under the leadership of Eoin MacNeill in November 1913. Though heavily infiltrated by the IRB, the Volunteers were intended to reinforce the campaign for home rule, not to subvert it. However, his acceptance into the IRB in December marked a significant shift in his perception of the possibilities of political action. Henceforth, open though he would remain to alternative scenarios, his propensity for highly charged rhetoric became ever more pronounced, culminating in his inspirational address over the Fenian grave of Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa (qv) in August 1915.

Nevertheless joining the IRB, however important in institutional terms, was not a crossing of an ideological Rubicon. It was still the growing financial plight of St Enda's that dominated Pearse's purpose when he went on a fundraising trip to America from March to June 1914. The American visit may have proved conducive to the drift of his thinking towards rebellion, and he honed his rhetoric in America to appeal to insurrectionary impulses among his potential donors. But when he returned from America it was still with the intention of returning in 1914–15 to continue his fundraising for St Enda's.

Events closer to home gradually brought a shift of approach. The Curragh mutiny in March 1914, and the Ulster unionist gun-running at Larne in April, made partition in some shape highly likely, given superior unionist gun power. Redmond seized control of the Volunteers in June, marginalising the potential rebels. Events now moved quickly beyond Irish control. If the UVF provided focus, the Bachelor's Walk killing of civilians by the British army, following the landing of the relatively small number of guns for the Volunteers from the Howth gun-running in July, roused Pearse to a pitch of excitement at the thought of blood spilt – however involuntarily – for Ireland. Then when the British decision to declare war on Germany on 4 August seemed to offer a fresh opportunity to foment rebellion, Pearse was seized with excitement at the beckoning prospects: 'A European war has brought about a crisis which may contain, as yet hidden within it, the moment for which the generations have been waiting' (*Collected works. Political writings*, 87). Redmond's call to join the British army split the Volunteers. Pearse remained with the small minority

of about 12,000 under Eoin MacNeill who retained the title of Irish Volunteers, while about 170,000 joined Redmond's new National Volunteers. This might have seemed a decisive defeat for the minority, but in fact it strengthened their position. If the Volunteers who followed MacNeill left Pearse with far fewer numbers to organise, these were also far more committed to the idea of rebellion. The figures are deceptive. There was no correlation between numbers and energy. Indeed, fewer than 30,000 of the National Volunteers appear to have actually joined the British army as Redmond's recommended route to home rule, and the organisation virtually imploded.

Pearse, whose platform persona concealed his formidable skills as a committee man, quickly used the new opportunities opened by the war, which made plausible the prospect of substantial aid from Germany, to improve his position. In October 1914 he was appointed press secretary of the Irish Volunteers, a useful position for enhancing his profile. In December he became director of military organisation, enhancing his value for the IRB, for it would be through his ability to mobilise the Volunteers that the much smaller IRB could hope to mount a credible insurrection. In March 1915 he presided over a meeting of the four commandants of the Dublin Volunteer battalions to discuss a possible rising in September. His appointment as director of military organisation in the three-man military committee that the IRB itself established in May 1915 confirmed that he had made himself a pivotal figure in the planning process. It was a meteoric rise. A member for only a year and a half, he had enjoyed virtually vertical ascent in an organisation that had hesitated to admit him at all.

When the rebellion, which the IRB decided in September 1914 to mount before the war ended, might actually occur, depended heavily on the supply of guns – as well on the war not ending before they got around to a rising. Pearse now focused on getting guns. While Easter 1916 would be heavily invested with resurrectionary symbolism, the contemplated September 1915 rising might have occurred had the tentative plans for securing German guns materialised at that stage. The protracted search for arms obliges revision of the image of Easter 1916 as simply a blood sacrifice. There are passages in Pearse glorifying both blood and sacrifice, not least with regard to the world war. When he wrote in December 1915 that 'War is a terrible thing, but war is not an evil thing. It is the things that make war necessary that are evil' (*Collected works. Political writings*, 216), he was simply reiterating the standard position of the belligerents. But in his intoxication with the idea of bloodshed for love of 'fatherland' in general, he went beyond conventional war rhetoric in actually celebrating the bloodshed: 'It is good for the world that such things should be done. The old heart of the earth needed to be warmed with the red wine of the battlefields. Such august homage was never offered to God as this, the homage of lives given gladly for love of country'. There was one conspicuous exception to this celebration of the purifying power of bloodshed. He bitterly denounced Redmond for sacrificing the blood of allegedly 50,000 Irish war dead.

The passages in Pearse that exalt the idea of sacrificial bloodshed have made it tempting, and easy, to depict him as hysterically blood-crazy. That dimension is there. But the publication of his *Letters* in 1980 by Séamas Ó Buachalla compelled attention to a very different side of his personality. As F. S. L. Lyons (qv) put it in his foreword:

‘Here it is enough to point to their most outstanding feature . . . the rigorous exclusion of the poet and dreamer from a scene dominated by the able organiser . . . future biographers will have to weigh this pragmatic correspondence against the flamboyance, sometimes even the barely suppressed hysteria of Pearse's published writings from 1914 onwards. In doing so, perhaps they will come at last to a balanced view’ (Ó Buachalla, *Letters*, foreword, vii, ix).

The evidence for interpreting the rising as solely a blood-sacrifice in Pearse's mind has been regularly cited, above all the climactic quote from MacDara, in his 1915 play, ‘The singer’: ‘One man can save a people, as one man redeemed the world. I will take no pike. I will go into battle with bare hands. I will stand up before the Gall as Christ hung naked before men on the tree!’ This capacity for self-identification with Christ on the cross provides a striking insight into one part of Pearse's psychology. It would partly resurface at his trial. But it has to be set against other more prosaic evidence. For Pearse was desperately trying for two years to get as many weapons as possible ‘to act with tremendous effect’, as he told his American contacts in October 1914 (Pearse to J. McGarrity, 19 Oct. 1914, *Letters*, 332). Even the commitment to rebellion has to be set against a much less quoted but quite explicit defence of Thomas Davis in February 1916 against the criticism that he was not committed to revolt: ‘That Davis would have achieved Irish nationhood by peaceful means if he could, is undoubted. Let it not be a reproach against Davis. Obviously if a nation can obtain its freedom without bloodshed, it is its duty so to obtain it. Those of us who believe that, in the circumstances of Ireland, it is not possible to obtain our freedom without bloodshed, will admit thus much. If England, after due pressure, were to say to us, “Here, take Ireland”, no one would be so foolish as to answer, “No, we’d rather fight you for it”. But things like that do not happen. One must fight, or at least be ready to fight’ (‘The spiritual nation’ *Collected works. Political writings*, 323–4).

Pearse's sacrificial impulses, however powerful, were not his sole driving force towards rebellion. A blood-sacrifice rising did not require the elaborate planning necessary to give it military credibility. Pearse the dreamer might hang as MacDara on his cross, but the Pearse of the military council of the IRB worked on the ground. The main IRB reason, with Pearse to the fore, for dissuading James Connolly (qv) from rising in January 1916 with his tiny Citizen Army was precisely because such a rising would have been pure blood-sacrifice, and they needed to wait until the planned arrival of the guns from Germany at Easter to mount a serious revolt.

That the Easter rising was obviously doomed has led to an understandable fascination with the blood-sacrifice passages in Pearse, to the relative neglect of other emphases. Those passages form a legitimate part of any critique. But interpreting everything said and done over previous years through the distorting prism of the Easter rising exposes the danger of reading history backwards, the negation of thinking historically. The prism is distorting because it is so easy to forget that neither Pearse nor anyone else planned the actual rising that occurred. It was the rising no one planned. It cannot be made the basis for inferences about intentions. Historians are not at liberty to scour earlier sources for premonitory signs for a type of rising none foresaw, exhuming every word pointing in one direction only, and dismissing the rest.

**The Rising** The military council of the IRB planned a rising to begin on Easter Sunday, 23 April, under cover of a mobilisation order by Pearse for Volunteer manoeuvres, which the IRB intended to turn into rebellion. About ten times as many Volunteers were to be involved, with far greater firepower, as was in fact the case on Easter Monday. The intended rising, if still highly likely to be crushed, was to have been a far more formidable military effort than the actual rising.

A sequence of unforeseen events at the last moment subverted the plans. The decisive one was the confusion that resulted in the *Aud*, the ship carrying 20,000 rifles from Germany, being captured by the British navy off the coast of Kerry on Good Friday. This led Eoin MacNeill, the head of the Volunteers, who had been kept in the dark about the plans for a rising, to publish a countermand in the *Sunday Independent*, throwing the plans into chaos. It was only when the plans imploded that the leaders sought to salvage what they could by mounting a rising on Easter Monday, 24 April. We do not know what transpired at the crisis meeting of the leaders on Sunday morning following the publication of MacNeill's cancellation order, but Tom Clarke seems to have been the only one who wanted to proceed on Sunday.

Pearse was chosen as the president of the republic they intended to proclaim. How that happened remains unclear. Clarke, the senior figure among them, was the first signatory of the proclamation of the republic, and the presumptive president. Pearse's appointment may have been due to the belief that public relations would be crucial during a rising whose duration, even then, no one could foresee, and that Pearse was the supreme communicator among the signatories, whereas Clarke's talents lay more in conspiracy than in communication. The following day, Pearse duly read out the proclamation of the republic after the rebels seized the General Post Office, which became their HQ. Mainly his own composition, the proclamation stands as the final published statement of his ideals. Part of it was no more than war propaganda. The reference to the support of 'gallant allies in Europe', was natural in the light of the promised guns from Germany, even if they would now never arrive. But at his trial, Pearse exposed the hollowness of that piece of propaganda when emphasising its purely functional purpose, for 'Germany is no

more to me than England is' (Edwards, 318). To him 'German domination was as odious as British' (ibid, 223). Phrases to the effect that the rebels were 'striking in full confidence of victory', after 'patiently waiting for the right moment to reveal itself', were also patently war propaganda.

If the abrupt change of plans affected the war propaganda sections of the proclamation, the bulk of the text, the core justification of Ireland's right to independence, and the outline of the basic values of the republic, were timeless arguments. The commitment to 'equal rights and equal opportunities' for all may have been influenced by the socialist James Connolly. If so Connolly was pushing an open door. There was no necessary contradiction between the thinking of Pearse and Connolly at this level. The opening salutation, 'Irishmen and Irishwomen', expressed Pearse's life-long commitment to equality for women, as did the promise of universal suffrage 'for all her men and women'. The manner in which Pearse came more specifically under Connolly's influence was in formulating the last of the four underlying propositions of the proclamation, contained in *The sovereign people*, his final pamphlet, published on 31 March (*Collected works. Political writings*, 337): '(1) The end of freedom is human happiness. (2) The end of national freedom is individual freedom; therefore individual happiness. (3) National freedom implies national sovereignty. (4) National sovereignty implies control of all the moral and material resources of the nation.'

The proclamation was hopelessly out of touch with reality in its view of Ulster unionist resistance to home rule, which Pearse romanticised just as he did so much else in Irish history. The issue is brushed aside, enveloped in the guarantee that the republic was committed to 'cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past'. The rebels might be 'oblivious of the differences', unionists were not. The proclamation contains no trace of blood-sacrifice doctrine. When it speaks of 'having waited patiently for the right moment to reveal itself' for the rebellion, the 'right moment' purported to be for 'victory'. That the proclamation committed the rebels to Ireland's 'exaltation among the nations' is quintessential Pearse.

**President** Whatever the motives behind his selection as president, Pearse seemed intoxicated with the sense of having achieved this unique status. It was as if he indeed now incarnated Ireland, as broodingly intimated in his poem 'Mise Éire'. He issued bulletins redolent of his preeminence. Typical war bulletins, they exuded expectations of victory even in the face of inevitable defeat, announcing imminent success until close to the end. Even at the end Pearse eschewed the sacrificial theme, claiming the rebels would have won but for MacNeill's countermanding order. Nevertheless he also characteristically exonerated MacNeill from blame, acknowledging that he too had acted in the best interests of Ireland, thus facilitating a subsequent closing of Volunteer ranks. It must be doubtful if Clarke, bitterly critical of MacNeill during the week, could have employed so conciliatory a tone.

**Death** Clarke too might have been slower to contemplate surrender. After he had hesitated about surrendering initially, the sight of the shedding of innocent blood seems to have revolted Pearse as much as the rhetoric of blood had excited him. Earlier in the week, however appalled by the looting, he refused to follow his own injunction to shoot captured looters. Now, after seeing three civilians with a white flag shot down, Pearse surrendered, in the hope of saving civilians and his followers, on 29 April. Sentenced to death on 2 May after a trial in which his bearing won the admiration of the presiding English officer, he played out his presidential role to the full, summoning shades of MacDara in proposing himself as the sole sacrifice. He was executed at 3.30 a.m. on 3 May. He used the short respite to snatch a final propaganda victory in composing a poem to the beauty of nature and farewell letters to his brother Willie, himself shortly to be executed, and to his mother, all of which would contribute to the beatific public profile he would soon come to enjoy.

**Legacy** The task of rescuing Pearse from the clutches of his idolaters and demonisers continues. 'The balanced view', for which F. S. L. Lyons argued, has yet to fully emerge. As an interim verdict on Pearse's political significance, it may be surmised that there would have been a rising without him. But in terms of public image there could not have been *The Rising* without him. It may even be ventured, remembering that Pearse republished in 1916 *The murder machine*, and *An mháthair agus sgéalta eile*, as if intent on reasserting the continuing centrality of education, and of the Irish language, to his thinking, that in the longer run his cultural legacy will prove at least as significant as his political.

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NLI, Pearse papers and letters (MS 5049), Seán T. O'Kelly papers (MSS 8469, 10,192), J. J. Doyle papers (letters from Pearse); *Collected works of Pádraic H. Pearse. Songs of the Irish rebels. Specimens from an Irish anthology. Some aspects of Irish literature. Three lectures on Gaelic topics* [1917] (repr. 1924); *Collected works of Pádraic H. Pearse. Political writings and speeches* (1922; 1966); Raymond J. Porter, *P. H. Pearse* (1973); Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Patrick Pearse: the triumph of failure* (1977); Cathal Ó Háinle (ed.), *Gearrscéalta an Phiarsaigh* (1979); Séamas Ó Buachalla (ed.), *The letters of P. H. Pearse* (1980), with a foreword by F. S. L. Lyons; Séamas Ó Buachalla (ed.), *A significant Irish educationalist: the educational writings of P. H. Pearse* (1980); Brian P. Murphy, *Patrick Pearse and the lost republican ideal* (1991); Liam de Paor, *On the Easter proclamation and other declarations* (1997); Elaine Sisson, *Pearse's patriots: St Enda's and the cult of boyhood* (2004); Regina Uí Chollatáin, *An Claidheamh Soluis agus Fáinne an Lae 1899–1932; Anailís ar phríomhnuachtán Gaeilge ré na hAthbheochana* (2004)