

## The many faces of an unlikely revolutionary

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Pearse is credited with a complete overhaul of Irish language publications and his four editorials in *An Claidheamh Soluis* in May-June 1906 focus on the need to use the European model in literary themes, style and form to progress from the folktale. These essays are among the first and most insightful treatises on literary criticism in modern Irish language literature. In short the first decade of the 20th century was a period of vigorous campaign and industry for Pearse, be it in an educational, literary or journalistic capacity.

**B**Y 1912 Pearse's leaning towards political nationalism took precedence over cultural promotion. 'The Coming Revolution' (November 1913) and 'The Psychology of a Volunteer' (January 1914) in *An Claidheamh Soluis* are examples of this mindset. His political involvement in the Irish Volunteers was now to the fore and his graveside eulogy at O'Donovan Rossa's funeral in August 1915 was hailed as one of his most powerful public orations, not least because of the links it summoned in the minds of those present between O'Donovan Rossa's death and the graves of dead Fenians before him. The funeral provided the platform



*Ireland unarmed will attain just as much freedom as it is convenient for England to give her; Ireland armed will attain ultimately just as much freedom as she wants*

for a public statement for the rebels, which was published in full in *The Freeman's Journal*. Its impact was widely felt by those who agreed that Ireland was ready for a revolution and by those who didn't.

His educational and political writings at this time indicate a definite drive to promote Gaelicism and nationalism in all aspects of Irish life. The four pamphlets penned by Pearse at the end of 1915 sealed the nationalist ideal proclaiming, among other arguments, that the ghosts of the 'four evangelists', Lalor, Mitchel, Tone and Davis needed to be laid to rest. He termed the pamphlets *Ghosts, The Separatist Idea, The Spiritual Nation, and The Sovereign People* as "the four gospels of the new testament of Irish nationality".

Pearse's role in the Rising from initiation to surrender was fearless and determined. Desmond Fitzgerald recounts his time with Pearse in the GPO saying that the natural gravity in Pearse's face conveyed a sense of great tragedy and accounts of the Rising attest that Pearse was aware of the sacrifice involved. In a period of high nationalism Pearse was one of its most articulate exponents. His reputation became bound to the fortunes of republicanism and nationalism in 20th century Ireland but his was the life that was most documented in the articles in the organ of the Gaelic League, *An Claidheamh Soluis*. In this forum he was acknowledged for his role in the language movement and society, as opposed to his role in the Revolution alone.

Patrick Pearse was not a one-dimensional figure. The multi-dimensional legacy he left may well be the best way now to lay his own ghost to rest.

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PEARSE AND THE MARTYRDOM COMPLEX RICHARD McELLIGOTT

## More of an orator than a military leader

**P**ATRICK PEARSE was an unlikely revolutionary leader. However the emergence of the Ulster Volunteers and its implications for nationalist politics began to awaken his zeal. Pearse described his satisfaction that the "Orangemen had armed, because it is a goodly thing to see arms in Irish hands."

The outbreak of the First World War turned him down the road of revolutionary nationalism. Like many of his generation across Europe, Pearse began to glorify the ideal of a blood sacrifice in pursuit of a nobler cause, most notably when he wrote "the old heart of the earth needed to be warmed by the red wine of the battlefields".

Having joined the Irish Volunteers, Pearse was sworn into the IRB in December 1913. Following the larger split in the Volunteers, he began to develop plans for a series of resistance activities which the Irish Volunteers should engage in if circumstances dictated.

These efforts secured him the key position of Director of Military Organisation for the Volunteers in December 1914. The following May Pearse was one of three men appointed to the IRB's newly created Military Council, which was tasked with planning a rebellion against British rule using the Irish Volunteers.

Working in secret throughout the



autumn of 1915, the Military Council perfected its plans for revolt. Pearse's adulation of Robert Emmet's failed uprising in 1803 had a significant influence on the planners who, like Emmet, saw Dublin as the focal point for a new rebellion. By now Pearse had truly developed a martyrdom complex and was convinced that Irish nationalism needed a sacrificial gesture in order to prompt it into a full scale war of independence against British rule.

With the addition of James Connolly in January 1916, the Military Council now consisted of all seven signatures of the Proclamation.

That document was mainly Pearse's composition, and its reference to "the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood" echoed his conviction that each generation

needed to justify itself in arms.

Events had doomed the rebellion to certain failure but Pearse still led a detachment of Irish Volunteers into the GPO on Easter Monday. Though the figurehead of the rebellion, he was no military leader and his talents lay in oration. While the fighting raged it was Connolly who physically directed the battle. Within the walls of the GPO, Pearse confined himself to discussion about the justification for the Rising with his co-conspirators and morale boosting speeches to keep the beleaguered rebels fighting.

Forced to evacuate their position on Friday afternoon, Pearse and his command made a chaotic retreat to Moore Street. By Saturday, with British forces bearing down, the situation was hopeless. There are reports that after witnessing three elderly men being cut down by the crossfire, Pearse notified his men of his intention to surrender. At approximately 3.45pm, he drafted a general to "lay down arms" so as "to prevent the further slaughter of Dublin citizens, and in the hope of saving the lives of our followers".

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