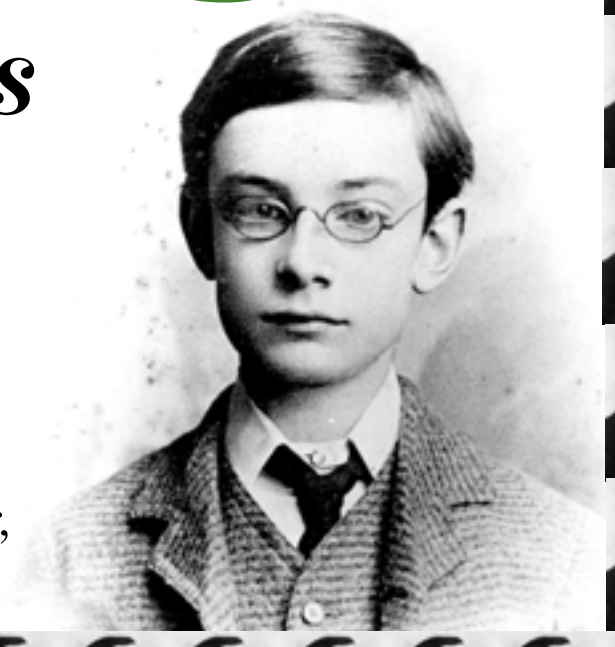
PATRICK PEARSE

The many faces of an unlikely revolutionary



Regina Uí Chollatáin profiles Patrick Pearse — the son, the poet, the teacher, the barrister, the political activist…

SNAPSHOT

PATRICK HENRY PEARSE

Born: Dublin, 10 Nov 1879

Educated: Westland Row CBS, UCD, King's Inns

Career: lawyer (from 1901), headmaster, St Enda's (from 1908)

Affiliation: Irish Volunteers, IRB

Died: Kilmainham, 3 May 1916

The young Patrick Pearse as teacher and barrister (above); and UCD's Regina Uí Chollatáin (left) at the Pearse Museum in St Enda's Park, Dublin (below)

STEVE HUMPHREYS

'I HAVE just done one of the hardest tasks I have ever had to do. I have had to condemn to death one of the finest characters I have ever come across. There must be something very wrong in the state of things that makes a man like that a Rebel.' Major-General Charles Blackader, President of the Courts-Martial gave this account of Patrick Pearse while dining with Elizabeth, Countess of Fingall, in 1916.

Pearse's poems 'To My Mother', 'To My Brother', 'A Mother Speaks' and 'The Wayfarer' written from his cell in Arbour Hill and Kilmainham were to be given to his family along with his final letter to his mother penned just before his execution on 3 May.

Signing the letter simply 'Your son, Pat', he stated that the rebels would be judged harshly but that they would be praised in time. Patrick Pearse's signature is well recognised in the context of the 1916 Proclamation and his lifelong tendency to sign with his academic qualifications BA BL. The simplicity of this signature to his mother is a statement in itself on Pearse the man or, as he was fondly referred to in the West of Ireland, 'Fear Bhaile Átha Cliath' [the Dublin man].

While he is remembered for political writings and events, Pearse, the man, is more difficult to categorise; he was Irish and English, Victorian and modernist, respectable and revolutionary; in practical terms he was also a son, a brother, a poet, an Irish language enthusiast, a barrister, an educationalist, and a political activist.

Born on 10 November 1879, turning 21 at the turn of the 20th century, he bore the classic traits of middle-class Victorian life. Strength of character prevailed alongside an often reckless pursuit of traditional values and sometimes over-zealous ambition to free Ireland. Growing up in working-class surroundings of Great Brunswick Street [now Pearse Street], his mixed parentage was more a source of confusion than comfort as demonstrated in the letter to himself on 11 May 1912 in his journal *An Barr Buadh*.

His father James Pearse was a stonemason with English ancestry spanning 400 years. His mother Margaret Brady, hailed from a traditional Catholic farming background with roots in Meath and Cavan. Patrick was the second of four children, and his final words in his final letter indicate a loving, close-knit family, "Wow-Wow, Willie, Mary Brigid and Mother, goodbye. I have not words to tell of my love of you... I will call to you in my heart at the last moment."

His Gaelic nationalist sentiment was evident from a young age and his interest in Irish language developed at school. Accounts from his peers in school allude to an aloof and unapproachable young boy. JA Duffy, who sat beside him for four years in Westland Row, said that he knew nothing of him. Others refer to his choice to be alone reading rather than joining in games.

How then did this young misfit play a significant role in the formation of 20th century Ireland? His stamp on education at many levels, his role in creating a modern Irish literature embracing European literature, and his endeavour to reinstate the Irish language are all commendable achievements in their own right.

In his statement to the Court Martial on 2 May 1916 he stated: "When I was a child of ten I went down on my bare knees by my bedside one night and promised God that I should devote my life to an effort to free my country."

Whether this can be judged as the last testament of a man condemned to death for a cause he was prepared to die for, or the honest ramblings of an Irish patriot, the ideal of pursuing cultural and political nationalism was evidently deep rooted from an early age.

When Pearse finished post-primary exams in 1896 he was appointed an assistant teacher. With his classmate Eamon O'Neill he founded the New Ireland Literary Society and became involved with the Gaelic League, joining the Executive committee from 1898. As editor of its newspaper *An Claidheamh Soluis* from 1903-09 he left his mark on the language movement's campaigns.

He was steadfast in promoting a national education system using examples from the US, Denmark, Germany, Wales and Hungary. In 1906 he published a series of articles entitled 'Belgium and its Schools' and he wrote more than 70 book reviews. Séamas Ó Buachalla credits Pearse with moulding public opinion and educating League members in a national philosophy in education. His strength of character in the debate on the provision of fees for the teaching of Irish is noteworthy but his main victory was the role he played in the campaign for essential Irish in 1908-09 for matriculation in the new National University.

At a time when the education system was examination-focused and basically colonial in approach, Pearse set up his own project, St Enda's school, which he guided from 1908-16. He was the driving force, too, for St Ita's school for girls. His confidence in the approach to Irish language, culture and history was quoted in the *Gaelic American* in 1914, stating that "the whole experiment of Irishising education in Ireland must stand or fall with St Enda's".

HE presented his own theories on education in 1916 in the *Murder Machine* series and this vision of vernacular education and its relation to literacy compares with the child-centred models of contemporaries Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner. Using Eoin MacNeill's comparison of the English education system in Ireland to the systems of slave education, the *Murder Machine* generated stark theories providing controversial argument for a national education. In 1939 Desmond Ryan credited Pearse with being "the educationalist of the movement... since he was by nature, a born teacher".

In a literary context Pearse was criticised for attempting to impose the European short story model on modern Irish language literature. He published ten short stories in Irish, the first, 'An Sagart' [The Priest], in *An Claidheamh Soluis*, February 1905. The theme of a later story, 'Na Bóithre' [The Roads] challenges the restraints experienced by a girl in a rural environment expected to stay at home while her parents and brother go out to a party. Through these he pioneered the use of new literary styles and forms in Irish.

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On the revolutionary road

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.

Patrick Pearse, 'The Coming Revolution', November 1913

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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.

BY 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 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.

> *"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"*

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

PATRICK 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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