

Planning the Rebellion

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While the GPO was seized, other key buildings such as Trinity College and Dublin Castle, the very centre of British rule in Ireland, were seemingly omitted from the original plans. It also appears that the Military Council had chosen its positions with the extremely naive assumption that the British would not respond by using their key advantage: artillery. Most damningly of all, in the weeks before the Rising the Irish Volunteers undertook no systematic reconnaissance of the buildings they would garrison. The 1916 rebels therefore failed to grasp the one advantage available to them: local knowledge.

Given the glaring defects outlined above, many have been inclined to argue that the Rising was always intended to be what it became, a bloody protest inspired by Pearse's martyrdom complex. Yet this reading of history is based on the distortion caused by the events that ensued rather than what may originally have been intended.

As detailed elsewhere in this magazine, Pearse and the Military Council sought desperately to secure large quantities of modern military grade weapons and explosives from Germany to give the Volunteers at least a fighting chance. The intended rebellion would also have involved at least three times as many Volunteers as those who were eventually mustered. Pearse may have dreamt of martyrdom, but there is little evidence that the other members of the Military Council shared his enthusiasm for death. One must be careful of confusing willingness to die with self-sacrifice. Connolly held out hope that a revolt in Dublin would spark a national revolution. In 1915 he stated: 'You never know if the time for revolution is ripe until you try.'

THIS brings us to another vexed question about the intentions of the leaders: whether the original revolt was meant to be confined to Dublin or was to form an integral part of a national insurrection. Most of those who claim to have seen the original plan for the aborted Easter Sunday rebellion asserted that it did not extend outside the capital. The Military Council appeared to leave the provincial Volunteers to their own devices, seemingly allowing them the liberty to react, rather than asking them to work in concert with events unfolding in Dublin.

However one veteran, Liam Ó Briain, was convinced its leaders had originally planned a national rebellion. From interviews conducted with survivors, Ó Briain claimed that the Military Council had organised for the planned German arms shipment to be transported from Kerry to Athenry, which would become an 'all Ireland base' to arm the provincial Volunteers. It appeared the River Shannon was envisioned to act as a bulwark behind which Volunteers from Ulster and provincial Leinster could withdraw.

Ó Briain also claimed that the Dublin rebels were never intended to be left cooped up in the city, surrounded and overwhelmed. He asserted that if, after a couple of days the tide turned against them, the original plan was for the Dublin Volunteers to disengage from the capital and make a fighting retreat westward to link up with their comrades behind the Shannon. Yet it remains impossible to verify Ó Briain's claims. After all, the Rising launched on Easter Monday was, by necessity, a different animal from that which had originally been envisioned.

Dr Richard McElligott lectures in Modern Irish History in UCD. His study of the role of the GAA in the 1916 Rising is included in Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh (ed.), 'The GAA and Revolution in Ireland: 1913-1923' published by the Collins Press



UCD's Dr Lucy Collins in the Garden of Remembrance in Dublin. MARK CONDREN

OPENING SESSION OF DÁIL ÉIREANN IN THE MANSION HOUSE, DUBLIN, JANUARY 1919

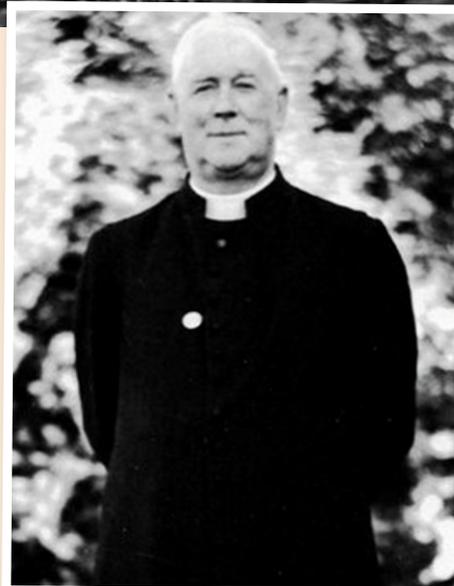


Why this County Down priest wrote 'The Foggy Dew'

The Foggy Dew was written by Canon Charles O'Neill, parish priest of Kilcoo, Co Down. He attended the historic opening session of the First Dail in the Mansion House in January 1919.

As ceann comhairle Cathal Brugha called out the names of the TDs, 34 (including Eamon De Valera, Constance Markievicz and Terence MacSwiney) were marked absent as they were still in British jails. Each name was answered by "faoi ghlas ag na Gaill", or "locked up by the foreigner." The Canon was reputedly so moved by this scene that he wrote 'The Foggy Dew' in tribute to the 1916 rebels.

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Canon Charles O'Neill (above) wrote 'The Foggy Dew' reputedly after attending the historic opening session of Dáil Éireann.

'The Foggy Dew'

Canon Charles O'Neill

As down the glen one Easter morn to a city fair rode I

There armed lines of marching men in squadrons passed me by

No fife did hum nor battle drum did sound its dread tattoo

But the Angelus bell o'er the Liffey swell rang out through the foggy dew

Right proudly high over Dublin town they hung out the flag of war

'Twas better to die 'neath an Irish sky than at Suwla or Sedd El Bahr

And from the plains of Royal Meath strong men came hurrying through

While Britannia's Huns, with their long-range guns sailed in through the foggy dew

'Twas Britannia bade our Wild Geese go that small nations might be free

But their lonely graves are by Suwla's waves or the shore of the Great North Sea

Oh, had they died by Pearse's side or fought with Cathal Brugha

Their names we will keep where the Fenians sleep 'neath the shroud of the foggy dew

But the bravest fell, and the requiem bell rang mournfully and clear

For those who died that Eastertide in the springing of the year

And the world did gaze, in deep amaze, at those fearless men, but few

Who bore the fight that freedom's light might shine through the foggy dew

Ah, back through the glen I rode again and my heart with grief was sore

For I parted then with valiant men whom I never shall see more

But to and fro in my dreams I go and I'd kneel and pray for you,

For slavery fled, O glorious dead, When you fell in the foggy dew

AN ASSESSMENT DR LUCY COLLINS

The power of song to capture, as well as to instil, political conviction is clear in 'The Foggy Dew'. Set to the tune of an existing lament, this text expresses personal grief for the dead revolutionaries of 1916 by situating them in a long verse tradition of devotion to beloved and country. The 'strong men' of Meath are pitted here against the British long-range guns, showing mechanised warfare to be morally defeated by the integrity of individual action.

Written just three years after the Rising, the song articulates a vision for the rebels' lasting renown, in keeping with the deification of key revolutionary figures by this time.

Easter imagery combines religious and natural force in support of the song's argument: that the heroes of 1916 will live again through the sacrificial power of their actions, while those who fought in the Great War will remain buried in foreign fields, forever lost in the anonymity of false allegiance.

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