



Left: Special Section of Old 'A' Company, 4th Battalion, Dublin Brigade, Irish Volunteers, top row: Sean Treacy, Padraig O Broinn, Gabriel Murray, Brian McCormack, Seán O Broinn and Henry S Murray. Bottom Row: Gerald Murray, Fred Schweppe, Pat Mason, Ed McNamara, Louis McDermott and Denis R Dunne. IRISH MILITARY ARCHIVES



Planning the Rebellion



RICHARD MCELLIGOTT PHOTOGRAPHED BY MARK CONDREN

Just what the overall aims of the IRB's Military Council were are not clear, but their mistakes in the planning meant the 1916 Rising was unlikely to succeed, writes **Dr Richard McElligott**

THE 1916 Rising was the most serious revolt to British rule in Ireland in over a century. It represented an unprecedented explosion of violence for a society that had been remarkably peaceful since the bloodletting of the 1798 rebellion.

Militarily, the Rising was an utter failure. Considering what transpired, the events of Easter week seemed to be the consummation of Patrick Pearse's rhetoric:

an epic blood-sacrifice given on the altar of Irish nationalism which would one day inspire the next generation to wage a full blown national war of liberation. Yet this perception of 1916 is coloured by how events subsequently transpired rather than what may have initially been planned or desired.

What were the original intentions of the Rising's leaders before Eoin MacNeill's fateful intervention on the eve of the rebellion? Was 1916 meant to be a simple blood-sacrifice or a viable hammer blow to British control in Ireland? Was it orchestrated as a localised revolt or

was Dublin the planned centrepiece of a national insurrection?

Like so much else about the Irish revolutionary period, the answers are never straightforward.

The genesis of the 1916 Rising can be traced to a conference organised among Irish separatists which took place on 9 September 1914 in Dublin. Thomas Clarke chaired the proceedings which decided to use the opportunity the Great War presented to mount a rebellion against British rule. When the Volunteers acrimoniously split later that month, the IRB looked to the faction that remained loyal to MacNeill to provide the army for this rebellion.

However there was intense disagreement among the Irish Volunteers' leaders as to how the force should be utilised. Pearse, its Director of Military Organisation, argued that this smaller body would be much more militarily valuable than the large, unwieldy and loosely held together organisation it had split from. He believed that 150 Dublin-based companies; 'small, compact, perfectly disciplined, and determinedly separatist would be ready to act with tremendous effect if war brings us the moment' and if

ÓGLAIGH NA hÉIREANN
1915-21

MEMBERSHIP CARD

ÓGLAIGH NA hÉIREANN
(The Irish Volunteers)

Name: P. Galligan
Address: 4, Bonmahon Rd
Regiment: Company 12
Battalion: 1 Section 2
No.:
Date of Enrolment:
Enrolled by:

Subscription	Rate	Cashier	Date
			29/10/15
			17/11/15

Left and far right: A membership card for The Irish Volunteers (Oglaigh na hÉireann) from 1915.

IRISH MILITARY ARCHIVES

Inset: Patrick Pearse identified the vital strategic importance of Dublin as the epicentre for any new armed action.



Irish Volunteers officers at a training camp in summer, 1915. Left to right: Terence MacSwiney, Richard Mulcahy, Michael O'Buachalla, John Brennan, JJ O'Connell, Peter Paul Galligan, Mick Spillane, Dick Fitzgerald, Gardner and Mick Cremen.

IRISH MILITARY ARCHIVES

supplied with adequate weapons the Dublin men 'would rise tomorrow if we gave the word'.

For MacNeill and JJ O'Connell (its Chief of Inspection), the Irish Volunteers were essentially a defensive rather than a revolutionary force which should only be utilised to resist the possible introduction of conscription in Ireland by means of engaging in a guerrilla campaign against British forces there. If it then proved opportune, an independence struggle could be launched through a combined strategy of guerrilla warfare and mass public resistance. O'Connell, in particular, was a strong advocate of training the Volunteers to be an effective guerrilla army.

Yet, the Volunteers increasingly came under the influence of its more radical IRB members. Pearse's position allowed him to place trusted IRB men in key positions throughout the Volunteers leadership, bypassing MacNeill's official chain of command. Because of this, the guerrilla tactics promoted by O'Connell were increasingly spurned by the Rising's planners.

The separatist conference in September 1914 had established an advisory military

committee which asked Joseph Plunkett to draft an embryonic plan for a potential insurrection in Dublin. Quite why Plunkett was given this responsibility is hard to ascertain. He had a lifelong fascination with military tactics and history. But was this qualification enough to justify the faith placed in him? It seems to have been when one considers that the usually dispassionate James Connolly would later hail Plunkett 'a brilliant military man'.

Desperate to preserve maximum secrecy, Clarke disbanded the larger advisory committee and formed an IRB Military Council in the spring of 1915 to confine preparations to a small, trusted cohort. In September Clarke formally joined the Military Council, after which it quickly became the real power within both the IRB and the Irish Volunteers. By April 1916, the Council would consist of all seven signatories of the 1916 Proclamation. Given the clandestine nature of the Rising's final planning,

the Council left no written record of their deliberations and historians have therefore been forced to conjecture the objectives of their strategy. Similarly, although we know that a small number of copies of the physical battle plan for the original Easter Sunday rebellion existed, they were subsequently lost. However we know the Military Council sought to work from Plunkett's plan. This entailed seizing a ring of fortified positions in Dublin city which could be defended against a full-force British attack.

The GPO was chosen to be the central headquarters. Physically one of the most imposing buildings in the capital, it seemed to provide the perfect theatrical stage for the bloody drama about to be unleashed. Both Plunkett and Pearse concluded that the reason so many previous Irish rebellions had failed was that their conspirators had never comprehended the vital strategic importance of the capital. As the seat of British rule in Ireland, Dublin, they

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maintained, had to be the epicentre for any new armed action.

In this view they were both heavily influenced by their study of Robert Emmet's failed uprising of 1803 and at odds with the successful, and largely rural, war the IRA would fight from 1919. Yet it was only natural that the leaders of 1916 looked to Dublin, given that the Volunteers there were the strongest and most organised. They drew inspiration from the trench warfare of the Western Front which continually demonstrated the superiority of holding a defensive position. Given the military inexperience of the force asked to take on the might of the British army, it also made practical sense for the Volunteers to adopt a defensive posture.

So far so apparently logical, except that this original plan for the Easter Sunday rebellion (which assumed the rebels could rely on a far larger force than those actually mobilised) was inherently flawed. We know nothing about the reasoning for selecting the positions which were to be occupied and they were far too isolated from one another to provide mutual communication and reinforcement.

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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

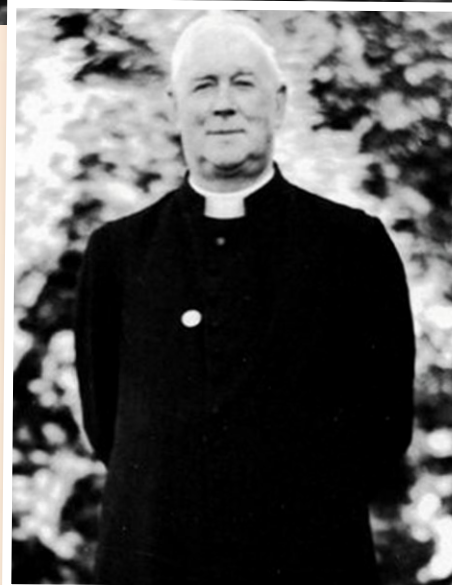


Why this County Down priest wrote 'The Foggy Dew'

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.

Dr Lucy Collins is a lecturer in English at University College Dublin (UCD). She is the curator of 'Reading 1916', a forthcoming exhibition at UCD Special Collections