



UCD Professor Mary Daly in Dublin's City Hall. STEVE HUMPHREYS

After the shooting stopped...

Mary Daly on how Irish politics was transformed in the Rising's aftermath

IN the summer of 1916 it would have been foolhardy to predict that the Easter Rising had transformed the political future of Ireland. Admittedly, many people in Ireland and overseas were horrified by the executions, including some who had been very critical of the Rising when it happened, but there is a very big gulf between an emotional reaction, and generating a successful political and military campaign for independence.

The Rising succeeded in transforming the Irish political landscape, because over the next two or three years, events both in Ireland and internationally ended any prospect of a moderate Home Rule-style solution. By 1919, the legacy of 1916 had been transformed. It now included a mass political movement, and a campaign of guerrilla warfare that was very different to the battle fought in Easter week. International events were also important. US President Woodrow Wilson's commitment to national self-determination created expectations in Ireland and throughout Europe that full independence was both achievable, and a right.

In 1914 Home Rule was shelved for the duration of the war. However, in the summer of 1916 David Lloyd George reopened discussions with Edward Carson and John Redmond. These talks eventually

collapsed over partition; Lloyd George promised Redmond that any partition would be temporary, while giving Carson a commitment that it would be permanent.

There was a further attempt to reach agreement in 1917 when the Irish Convention — a gathering of over 100 delegates representing various strands of Irish society, though it was boycotted by Sinn Féin, met to devise a future form of government for Ireland. However, the Convention collapsed in April 1918 without reaching an agreement.

Britain's efforts to resolve the Irish question were prompted by the war. Britain's military campaign was increasingly dependent on the USA for essential supplies and financial support; the ultimate goal was to persuade the USA to enter the war on their side. But Irish-American opinion was strongly opposed to American intervention, so it was in Britain's interests to adopt a more conciliatory attitude towards Ireland.

The horrendous loss of life in the war left Britain with serious shortages of troops, and there were pressures to extend conscription to Ireland. So softening Irish opinion prior to conscription and placating Irish-America were the reasons why the thousands of men and women who were interned or convicted after the Rising — including many who had been given life sentences — were released by the summer of 1917.

British commentators labelled the 1916 Rising "the Sinn Féin rebellion". This was inaccurate, but Sinn Féin was a convenient label for a political movement that would include the veterans and aspirations of the Easter Rising. During 1917, victories in by-elections — for Count Plunkett, whose three sons had fought in the Rising, for political prisoner Joe McGuinness, and, most significantly, for Éamon de Valera and WT Cosgrave — reflected a wave of popular sympathy for the rebels.

These new MPs adopted the long-established Sinn Féin policy of declining to take their seats at Westminster. At the Sinn Féin convention in the autumn of 1917, control of Arthur Griffith's party passed to 1916 veterans and their supporters. Griffith had supported a dual-monarchy; the Rising had proclaimed a Republic. A compromise was agreed that would come back to haunt Griffith, de Valera and many others: their goal was to secure a Republic, and when that happened, the Irish people could decide on what form of government they wanted.

The Irish Party showed some signs of revival in late 1917 and early 1918, winning a number of by-elections, including the Waterford seat held by William Redmond (John's brother), who had died at the battle of Messines. Redmond's death in the spring of 1918, the collapse of the Irish Convention, and British legislation imposing conscription on Ireland

destroyed the party. The surviving MPs withdrew from Westminster — effectively adopting Sinn Féin's policy. The Sinn Féin leaders were re-arrested, accused of being involved in a "German plot"; in truth, they were arrested to weaken any campaign against conscription. Sinn Féin's success in securing the support of the Catholic hierarchy for the anti-conscription campaign radicalised Irish opinion.

The 1918 general election, the first time that all adult men and all women over the age of 30 were given a vote, was a landslide for Sinn Féin. It won 73 out of 105 seats. The convening of Dáil Éireann in January 1919 must be seen in the context of the settlements that were under way in post-war Europe. The Paris Peace Conference was applying the principal of national self-determination; setting boundaries for new nation states. But self-determination only applied to the defeated powers, so it did not extend to Ireland. Sinn Féin made unsuccessful efforts to have Ireland included in the post-war settlement, lobbying delegates to the Paris Conference. Éamon de Valera was despatched to America as part of this campaign; although he failed to gain the support of the 1920 Republican and Democratic conventions, the mass meetings that he addressed across the United States put pressure on Britain and helped to raise essential funding for Dáil Éireann.

The Dáil set out to establish an

1916





1919



Left: Firemen survey a ruined Dublin building in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising. IRISH INDEPENDENT/NPA

Above: Sinn Féin leaders at the first Dáil Éireann in 1919 and (below) Dublin children with toy weapons in the year after the War of Independence in 1922. GETTY IMAGES

1922



alternative government for Ireland — with Dáil courts, an alternative local government system and economic ministries. The military campaign — which is generally seen as beginning with the Soloheadbeg ambush, which coincided with the first meeting of Dáil Éireann, was designed to break down British government in Ireland. It targeted Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) barracks, because they were the most obvious evidence of British presence, and the barracks also held guns.

Homes of the Anglo-Irish gentry were also targeted — because they too held guns, but also because they were seen as symbols of British presence in Ireland, and potential sources of British intelligence. Pent-up land hunger — purchase and distribution came to a halt during the war — was also a factor in the targeting of ‘Big Houses’. The decentralised, guerrilla warfare gave scope for local feuds, venting of sectarian pressures, opportunistic land seizures and some atrocities.

Throughout 1919, Britain was preoccupied with the Paris Peace Conference, and it devoted little attention to Ireland. It refused to recognise the Volunteers/IRA campaign as a war, describing the combatants as a “murder gang”, claiming that suppression was a matter for the police, not for an army. As increasing numbers of RIC men resigned rather than face attacks and possible

death, they were replaced by former members of the British army — Auxiliaries and Black and Tans. Lack of training and discipline, plus the fact that their attackers were dressed in civilian clothing, prompted a disregard for normal rules of war.

Incidents such as the burning of Balbriggan and Cork city, the callous murder of innocent civilians and raids on houses served to further alienate Irish nationalist opinion. The Dáil had a very sophisticated publicity unit, and stories of British atrocities in Ireland were widely covered in the British and international press — increasing the pressure on Britain to reach a solution to the Irish question.

The 1920 Government of Ireland Act, passed by a parliament that included no sitting Irish nationalist MPs, established two Home Rule parliaments in Ireland — one in Belfast responsible for six counties, and another in Dublin.

The Belfast parliament duly opened in the summer of 1921, but the limited powers offered by Home Rule fell far short of the wishes of Dáil Éireann. However, compromise was inevitable. Dáil Éireann could never have secured a military victory over British forces in Ireland

— especially if Britain had mounted a full military campaign. But it did make the price of a British victory too high.

The Anglo-Irish Treaty signed on December 6, 1921 granted Ireland Dominion status — a status equivalent to Canada.

This was not a Republic: the king — represented by a governor-general — was head of state; elected politicians had to take an oath of allegiance to the crown; and Britain retained three naval bases in Ireland. Northern Ireland remained as a distinct entity, though a boundary commission would be established to review the extent of its territory.

The Treaty split Sinn Féin and the IRA; the divisions were almost entirely because of the oath, and the failure to achieve a Republic, not about Northern Ireland, and the ensuing civil war resulted in 927 deaths and bitter divisions among families and former friends.

Yet Dominion status gave Ireland a seat at the League of Nations; and the possibility to remove all residual constitutional links with Britain, which would not have been possible under Home Rule.

On Easter Monday 1949 — a symbolic date chosen because it was the

“*The 1918 general election, the first time that all adult men and all women over the age of 30 were given a vote, was a landslide for Sinn Féin, which won 73 out of 105 seats*”

anniversary of the 1916 Rising — Ireland became a Republic.

The legacy of 1916 is complex. Ireland can be included among those new nation states that were created in the immediate aftermath of World War I, but it is unique among them — the only one to survive over the past century as an independent democracy.

This democratic legacy reflects the successful transition from the military campaign of Easter 1916 into the Sinn Féin party with its commitment to electoral politics. The strength of Irish electoral politics in 1917 and later owes much to O’Connell, Parnell and the Irish Party.

While the Rising can be seen as a continuation of a tradition that includes 1798, 1848 and the Fenians, it should also be seen as a response to Ulster Unionist paramilitarism and the erosion of normal political negotiation to resolve Irish self-government, plus the impact on Ireland of the Great War. The 1916 Rising did not create partition; that was effectively determined by the summer of 1914.

The complex legacy of 1916 is evident in the continuing debate over its significance — 100 years after it happened.

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