

March home:
British troops
leaving Dublin
Castle in 1922



PHOTOS: NATIONAL LIBRARY OF IRELAND

A bastion of British power surrendered



Anthony Nolan

The handover of Dublin Castle and the exodus of Crown forces was a powerful sign of Britain’s diminishing control over Ireland

The Treaty

1921-2021

Irish Independent



Farewell: Soldiers of the British Army shake hands with an Irish representative as they depart

There is no doubting the significance of the handover for Collins personally, given his role in the efforts to free Ireland from British rule. “I am as happy a man as there is in Ireland,” he would later write to his fiancée Kitty Kiernan following the exchange of the castle.

With his only previous visit to the castle taking place as the disguised driver of a coal cart, the significance of the events that transpired that day was not lost on Collins. He now found himself the figurative custodian of the castle on behalf of the Irish people.

While there is no doubt that the handover of Dublin Castle was the most symbolically important element of the transition of power, it would be remiss not to discuss the logistics of the mass exodus of Crown forces. Far from a minor undertaking, the evacuation of British forces involved high levels of planning under a committee chaired by Winston Churchill, then secretary of state for the colonies. This was a particularly delicate aspect of the treaty because it stated that the complete removal of troops could occur only when the Free State had come into existence in December 1922 and after its constitution had been ratified by Westminster.

DWINDLING FORCES

Yet apart from this legal grandstanding, most British troops had left the country within six months of the treaty being signed. By the end of March 1922, there were no troops left in Connacht and Cork was the only county in Munster with a British garrison. By May, this too was evacuated, as was the garrison in the Curragh. Only 5,000 British troops remained in Ireland, all situated in Dublin.

The final departure of British troops came in mid-December with the departing soldiers being paraded by the Legion of Ex-Servicemen (later the British Legion) outside the ruins of Liberty Hall, who in turn were being discreetly protected by the Dublin Metropolitan Police and the Free State Army. The evacuation also led to the disbanding of the Royal Irish Constabulary with the freshly established Civic Guard taking over policing duties.

Originally built in the 1200s to protect the city from Norman attacks, Dublin Castle evolved throughout the centuries to become the stronghold of British control and influence over the island. Yet, following the events of January 16, 1922, “the power that it enshrined was surrendered yesterday to Ireland’s men”, to quote the *Freeman’s Journal’s* report the following day. This ceremony, coupled with the promptly executed large-scale exodus of Crown forces from the 26 counties, was a clear symbol of Britain’s diminishing control over its neighbouring island.

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‘Members of the Provisional Government received the surrender of Dublin Castle at 1.45pm today. It is now in the hands of the Irish nation’

‘No more eloquent symbol of Ireland’s triumph and freedom could be provided’

Irish Independent

From the *Irish Independent*, January 17, 1922

Perhaps the most historic and certainly the most significant event in Irish history for hundreds of years was enacted yesterday, when Michael Collins and the other members of the Provisional Government entered Dublin Castle and took over control amid the enthusiastic plaudits of Dublin’s citizens.

The long-impregnable institution of bitter memory for the Irish people — the nerve centre of many campaigns of oppression — thus passes at last into the service of the nation. No more eloquent symbol of Ireland’s triumph and freedom could be provided.

Mr Collins and his colleagues were received by Lord FitzAlan, who declared them duly installed as the Provisional Government. Tonight two of the Ministers — Messrs Duggan and O’Higgins — leave for London to complete, in consultation with the British Cabinet Committee, the details in connection with the handing over of the services.

Today the Irish Government will issue a statement of its intentions and policy. In an order in the native language last night it directs the law courts, judges, public bodies, officials and functionaries of all kinds to continue their duties till it decides otherwise.

Long before 11am, crowds thronged the Dame Street approaches of the gloomy building to witness the outward signs of the handing over of the castle to the Irish nation.

With tense vision, the people watched the movement of troops, officials and vehicles coming and going. There was a general air of breaking up about the place. Lorries laden with documents, bedding, accoutrements etc were constantly passing and re-passing.

In the Lower Castle Yard were groups of journalists representing newspapers in all parts of the world, with the usual small army of photographers. The coming of the Provisional Government was eagerly awaited as much by the remnants of the forces and families of the resident officials as by the public.

While baggage of all descriptions was being carted away, workmen were busily engaged on the walls and parapets removing the last vestiges of the barbed wire and canvas structures which surrounded the portions of the courtyard where military evolutions or the escorting or prisoners have hitherto been taking place.

The flagstaff over Birmingham Tower was bare, and the union jack was not even hoisted on the arrival in the afternoon of Lord FitzAlan.

RIC and Dublin Metropolitan Police officials looked on at the preparations for handing over with fascinated interest, if not with a sense of bewilderment.

As the forenoon wore on, the crowds outside swelled to enormous dimensions. At one o’clock the historic spectacle was witnessed in front of the viceregal apartments of the posting of the last guard.

The soldiers, to the number of 30, carrying rifles and Lewis guns, marched from Ship Street Barracks to the Upper Castle Yard, where the parade took place.

In the waiting period prior to the arrival of the members of the Provisional Government and the viceroy, the utmost good humour prevailed, not only within the castle gates but among the waiting crowds outside.

Promptly at 1.30 the Provisional Government entered the castle. It was a thrilling moment. The huge crowds of Dublin citizens raised most enthusiastic cheers as the motors containing the members of the new government drove along.

Crown forces about on duty stood to attention, whilst other members of the forces present as spectators joined the cheering. Mr Collins, in the first car with Mr Hogan and Mr O’Higgins, smiled broadly and agreeably as he passed along.

The huge staff of the castle were all obviously most eager to get a glimpse of Mr Collins. As the ministers left the taxis, one could hear on all sides the question: “Which is Collins?”

Through the windows Mr Collins could be seen smiling and looking absolutely self-possessed as he met the viceroy. The formality of taking over control was begun.

Outside, a few Volunteer officers passed from the Lower Yard to the Upper Yard quietly and unnoticed. They were obviously on duty and had business to transact in some department or other.

Their presence brought home the significance of the occasion in a most striking manner. It was, perhaps, the first time an officer of the Irish Army ever entered the castle, except as a prisoner or in disguise.

About 2.30 o’clock the Provisional Government left the castle in their motors. They were loudly cheered by the crowd.

King George has telegraphed to the viceroy his gratification at bearing of the successful establishment of the Provisional Government.



Historic moment: Michael Collins and fellow members of the Provisional Government leave Dublin Castle after its formal handover by Lord FitzAlan