



# 1916 – How do we want to remember?

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From 24-29 April 1916, Irish Republicans staged an armed campaign to end British rule in Ireland, to which the British Army responded forcefully. As we observe the centenary of the Easter Rising, Brian Lennon SJ reflects, through the lens of a family connection, on the violent events of that week and their legacy: ‘I wish they had all stayed at home.’

My uncle Michael fought alongside Irish rebel [Éamon de Valera](#) against British forces at Boland’s Mill in Dublin in 1916. I don’t know how many people they killed. I wish they had stayed at home.

Before I expand on that cryptic comment, it is worth reminding ourselves of some of the context.

First, as always, I will be looking only at *some* of the context.

This is a salutary reminder that part of our bias depends on which bits of history we are told, or which bits we choose to learn.

The 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland was part of the wider European romantic nationalist movement. This was a response among lower middle-class Western Europeans to various forms of colonialism. It was deeply influenced by the revolutions in America in 1775 and France in 1789. It was a highly attractive ideology to an oppressed people.

That last sentence is of course loaded, and herein lies the Achilles heel of nationalism: who are ‘the people’? In reality they were the educated lower middle-class, kicking against vestiges of royalism or colonialism; they were not, actually, *all* the people. They were small groups who became aware of the injustice they were suffering at the hands of even smaller privileged classes. As a movement, they were divided between constitutional and violent approaches.

Photograph of O’Connell Street, Dublin, before the Easter Rising, by John L. Stoddard.



The tragedy of 1916 in Irish history is that the Rising was an aberration within nationalism. The 19<sup>th</sup> century had been dominated by constitutionalism: [Daniel O’Connell](#)’s mass movements for [Catholic Emancipation](#) and the Repeal of the [Act of Union](#) with Britain; [Charles Stewart Parnell](#)’s efforts to achieve Home Rule in cooperation with British Prime Minister, William Gladstone; [Michael Davitt](#)’s conversion from Fenianism and his

alliance with Parnell in the Land War; [Horace Plunkett](#)’s cooperative movement.

Not only were these movements constitutional and – mostly – non-violent, they were all ultimately successful (with the rider that success with political issues always raises new problems). Emancipation was passed. O’Connell may have failed with Repeal, but it was ultimately successful – on paper – when John Redmond persuaded the British Government to pass the [1914 Home Rule Act](#), although it was suspended until the end of World War I. The land problem was solved – looking at it within a nationalist framework – with the passing of [Wyndham’s Land Act](#) in 1903, which made it easier for tenants to purchase land.

There had been violent outbreaks in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were all abject failures, even that of the [Fenians in 1867](#). This was somewhat surprising because the Fenians had a large membership.

1916, too, was a failure, and the leaders of the Rising foresaw this. It is argued that it was ultimately successful because independence finally came in 1921, but this argument is a fallacy. The limited independence that came led immediately to a brutal civil war – a cycle almost always repeated after ‘successful’ independence struggles. And it did not lead to a united, independent Irish Republic, but one separated from the North East, dominated by the Catholic Church, and with little awareness that ‘the people’ should include more than a new small elite. ‘The people’ did not do well in Ireland in the long, dark period between 1920 and at least the late 1960s. Joe Lee in *Ireland, 1912-1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1989) has written a damning critique of the performance of the Irish Free State in comparison with other countries.

The real irony is that the civil war was not fought with the Unionists, but among Irish Republicans. The division with the Unionists was the blindingly obvious challenge to the thesis that there is one people, different from and separate from the people of Britain, a people geographically defined by the fact that they lived on the island of Ireland.

The Gaelic cultural nationalism, which was an important element in the nationalist movement as a whole, further emphasised the gulf with Unionists.

Finally, there was also the legacy. During the celebrations in Dublin on Easter Sunday this year to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Rising (the actual anniversary is 24 April), some commentators were surprised and disturbed by the sudden appearance of a column of people with black berets and sunglasses marching down O’Connell Street. What an intrusion on a friendly, family day to celebrate our freedom!

The intruders were dissident Republicans. They say they are fighting for Irish freedom. They want to break the link with Britain. They want Northern Ireland returned to its natural home. They are acting on behalf of ‘the people’ of Ireland. They see themselves as the remnant of the true Republicans who have been betrayed by Sinn Féin’s decision to give up the armed struggle and to enter a British parliament in Northern Ireland. In recent years they have killed a police officer, blown the legs off another,

and also killed two prison officers – colleagues of mine, as I work part-time in prisons.

So much to explain my lack of enthusiasm for my Uncle Michael’s decision to act on behalf of ‘the people’ of Ireland, without any permission from the people to do so. That lack of enthusiasm is enhanced by the number of times I have been privileged to sit and listen to people in pain from losing loved ones in the Troubles in Northern Ireland, pain that can last for decades.

It would of course be facile to blame Michael and his colleagues for all the island’s troubles. But it is important to identify the dangers of romantic nationalism, especially when it is tied to violence, when it lacks an effective socialist strand, and when it is blind about large sections of the people who actually inhabit the island. The violence made the Civil War much more likely. [James Connolly](#), one of the executed leaders of the Rising, was a committed socialist and worked heroically during the much more historically important 1913 [Dublin Workers’ Lockout](#), but once he threw his lot in with the nationalists, socialism was likely to take a back seat. Unionists figured so little in the consciousness of Southern Nationalists that the North was mentioned only occasionally in the [1921 Treaty](#) debate.

None of this means that I cannot empathise with the rebels. I was reared on a staple of Irish nationalism. In that history we Irish always lost. There were two main reasons: informers, and the split. There was also the incredible evil of the English: on the one occasion we won (I can’t remember which battle) the English came back at night while we were celebrating and took the town back: try matching that for perfidy.

I looked up to Michael as one of those heroes who fought and gained ‘our’ freedom. It took many years before I realised that I was one of the privileged few who had gained from the Rising: my father became a senior civil servant, Michael himself became a judge. The rest of the ‘people’ did not fare as well.

It also took many years – longer than I like to remember – before I realised that 1916 was not only about the Rising: there was a wider war, and part of that was the Somme. For Unionists in Northern Ireland the memory of the sacrifices made in that

battle remain potent. One of the good things of the huge development in history since my school days is that nationalists too have learnt that over 50,000 Catholics took part in World War I, a number vastly greater than that of the rebels in Dublin. But they were written out of history.

As it happens I wish they, too, and all their British fellow soldiers, and the Germans they were fighting, had also stayed at home. The bloodiness of World War I and its suffering was vast.

So, if they all stayed at home what would happen about injustice? And there can be no doubt about the depth of injustice: that of British imperialism, and of the many Unionists who, as a remnant of that imperialism, imposed their own laager mentality on Catholics within Northern Ireland, at great cost not only to those who were oppressed, but also to themselves. Was not violence inevitable in response to this oppression? Quite likely the answer is 'yes'. That makes the reaction of Michael and his rebel colleagues easy to understand. It does not make it a good thing. Nor does it make it something that we should honour.

Colonialism nearly always leaves a deep residue of communal resentment behind. One of the reasons that communal resentment is so effective is that so often it remains unexamined. Some years ago I gave a talk on the Troubles to a group of 16-18 year olds. I focused on the idea of a double minority: Catholics are a minority within Northern Ireland, Protestants within the island as a whole. As a result each acts with a not surprising insecurity. At least one young gentleman was unimpressed at my remarks. When I pressed him as to why, he responded that I knew exactly what he meant. I did, but I wanted him to say it. Eventually he did: 'They took our land'. I asked him where the field was. At first he did not understand my question. Then he lifted his thumb over his shoulder to point out the window, opened his mouth, then closed it, and finally expressed the opinion that I was talking nonsense – his actual words were less polite.

That story is informative: what I did to the young man was harsh. I challenged his basic view of the world. In particular I asked him to be specific about his grievance: who had done what to wrong him? Had the conversation continued I would also have asked: what person or group would have to take what action

to right the wrong that was done? In a different context, that of Manhattan, that might mean trying to undo the wrongs done to Native Americans by restoring the land to prairies and re-introducing buffalo. The point is not that this would be impossible, which it obviously would be, but to press the questions: what *is* possible? And what are you going to do about what is clearly not possible?

These questions are best pursued, not in short class periods, but in longer, intense dialogues between opposing groups. Such dialogue works – for those who take part. That has been the experience of myself and others who have run hundreds of such dialogues with deeply divided Republicans and Loyalists in Northern Ireland over the past 20 years. Even the most ideologically divided can reach a new understanding once the life stories of themselves and others are heard and respected.

Dialogue will not solve the problems of the world: it would have been no use to Jews, homosexuals and others dealing with Hitler. And, yes, there is an argument for the rare use of violence. But simplistic violence, which nearly always kills foot soldiers and makes precious little impact on the interests of the powerful, always creates far more problems than it solves. It is very difficult to tackle great injustices, but the task would be easier if those tempted by violence were to join others in thinking out effective non-violent strategies.

Michael showed me a letter before his death in which he stated his refusal to take part in the civil war on the grounds that he would not take up arms against his Irish brothers. With the passage of a century it seems to me a pity that he took up arms against his British brothers and sisters – many of whom, of course, were Irish.

I hope that he and all those he fought against, together with the millions who fought each other in the Great War – the 'war to end all wars' – are now at peace.

If they are it will only be by being together with the Lord.

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