

Saints or Sinners:

The religious beliefs of the executed rebel leaders and the shaping of public opinion in Ireland between the 1916 Easter Rising and the start of the 1919 Irish War of Independence.

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ABSTRACT

On Easter Monday 1916 rebellion against British rule broke out on the streets of Dublin. The rebellion was quashed within a week, and by 12 May 1916 fifteen men had been executed for their involvement. A sixteenth man was executed in London in August 1916. These men were all said to have been at least nominally Catholic at the time of their deaths, and the imagery of their sacrifice has been both emphasized and questioned in the years since 1916.

This study first considers what information about the religious beliefs of the executed men was in the public domain in the period between the Rising and the start of the Irish War of Independence in 1919. The image of the executed leaders during this time, as evidenced by Irish newspapers, is analysed to consider what the effect of this was on public opinion, who may have been putting this information into the public domain, why, and whether the effect on public opinion was as desired.

This dissertation concludes that in the immediate weeks following the Rising religious imagery surrounding the leaders was prevalent and served to link the leaders with the traditional image of Catholic martyrs in the public mind, sacrificing themselves for their God and their country. This was beneficial to the Catholic Church and helped to legitimise the republican cause. However, this could be seen to be following a natural shift in the public mood as much as shaping it. Moving through 1917 and 1918, the imagery of the martyrdom of the leaders helped to keep the public anti-British mood alive, again to the benefit of the republican movement and the Catholic Church. But the more moderate nationalist movement suffered as a result. Ultimately, the image of the leaders helped achieve the republican aim of a free Ireland, but at the cost of partition.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-------|---|
| BMH | Bureau of Military History |
| GL | Gaelic League |
| ICA | Irish Citizen Army |
| IPP | Irish Parliamentary Party |
| IRA | Irish Republican Army |
| IRB | Irish Republican Brotherhood |
| ITGWU | Irish Transport and General Workers Union |
| IV | Irish Volunteers |
| RIC | Royal Irish Constabulary |
| SF | Sinn Féin |
| UVF | Ulster Volunteer Force |

GLOSSARY

| | |
|---------------|---|
| Nationalism | A nation's wish and attempt to be politically independent; the desire for political independence in a country that is controlled by or part of another country. In the context of Irish history, often used to denote those seeking an independent, united Ireland by peaceful means. |
| Republicanism | Belief in or support for government by elected representatives of the people, rather than government by a king or queen. In the context of Irish history, often used to denote those prepared to use violence to achieve an independent, united Ireland. |
| Separatist | Someone who is a member of a particular race, religion, or other group within a country and who believes that this group should be independent and have their own government or in some way live apart from other people. |

PERSONAL STATEMENT

I, Sarah Williams, declare that this dissertation is my own, unaided work and that I have not submitted it, or any part of it, for a degree at The Open University or at any other university or institution.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Mike for his patience over the last two years, and for explaining how pre-decimal money worked! I would like to thank my father and Frank for giving me an interest in our family connections with Irish republicanism, and my mother and brother for their forbearance. I would also like to thank Beth for putting up with a lack of birthday celebrations this year, John W for the badge and all my work colleagues for listening! Lastly, I would like to thank my tutor, Dr Stuart Mitchell, for all his assistance.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

‘Oh! the pity of it all, and it was so mad and reckless without any prospect of any gain!’¹

Between 3 and 12 May 1916, fourteen men were shot in the Stonebreaker’s Yard of Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin, executed at the behest of the British Government. A fifteenth man was executed on 9 May 1916 at Cork Detention Barracks, and a sixteenth was hanged at Pentonville Prison, London, on 3 August 1916. All had been found guilty of treason; all but one had been convicted following hastily arranged courts martial. For these men, execution was the result of their participation in the planning and/or conduct of open rebellion against the British Crown in Ireland over the Easter week of 1916. Much has been written in respect of the Easter Rising of 1916 and the rebels who were executed; this dissertation focuses on the religious beliefs of the executed men and how information about this in the public domain affected public perceptions of the men and their cause at the time of the Rising, and in the years between the Rising and the start of the Irish War of Independence. The dissertation then goes on to ask who might have been putting this information into the public domain and why, and whether the impact on public opinion was as intended.

This dissertation considers the period from January 1916 to January 1919 – just before the Rising through to the start of the Irish War of Independence. Irish newspapers are the main primary sources considered; whilst these do occasionally include some reports from the English press this dissertation concentrates on public reaction in Ireland. The period has been chosen as it arguably represents the period when the leaders and consequences of the Rising were most in the public eye; the political and day-to-day ramifications of the Rising were still evident in everyday life under martial law and in the results of the general election of December 1918, and Irish and British thoughts had not yet turned to the IRA campaigns of the War of Independence. This is therefore an apt period in which

¹ *The Westmeath Examiner*, 20 May 1916, p.3.

to analyse the public perception of the leaders of the Rising, before the actions of the 1916 rebels were co-opted into new nationalist struggles.

There is a consensus amongst historians that in the short period between the surrender of the rebels and the execution of the rebel leaders, public opinion, certainly in Dublin, was, for the main, at best indifferent or, at worst, set against the rebels, sometimes quite violently so. However, as news of the executions began to filter into the public domain, sympathies changed.² Various factors have been suggested as contributing to this change including that some of the rebel leaders deliberately used the language of religion to help further the nationalist agenda before their deaths³. This dissertation aims to build on these hypotheses, to consider whether the rebel leaders were really seeking to use their deaths in this way, and whether they should be treated as one homogenous group for these purposes. This study considers whether other organisations, such as the Church, the press, or the various Irish political parties/groupings, were also seeking to make gains out of the public perception of the executed, what these organisations hoped to achieve, and whether the desired outcomes were realised.

Scholarly works concerning the Easter Rising initially followed a general pattern. In approximately the first fifty years following the Rising, there was what has been described as a ‘faith and fatherland’ approach; the rebel leaders had a sanctified image, portrayed as martyrs for the nationalist cause, regardless of their actual characters or deeds⁴. In the late 1960s/1970s, following the fiftieth anniversary commemorations, a revisionist view started to emerge in which scholars began to question whether the Rising might have been a mistake⁵. Although some of these writings were to an extent tempered by the increase in IRA activities in the 1970s, the idea of the executed leaders as saintly martyrs was beginning to be eroded. From the late 1990s into the 2000s the build-up to the centenary celebrations in 2016 precipitated some more detailed and more politically neutral works, together with a number of works in respect of under-represented groups, such as the involvement of women in the Rising⁶.

² E.g. Shane Hegarty and Fintan O’Toole (eds), *The Irish Times Book of the Rising*, (Dublin: Gill Books, 2006) pp.158–162, or Brian Barton, *The Secret Court Martial Records of the Easter Rising*, (Stroud: The History Press, 2015), p.27.

³ Fearghal McGarry, *The Rising: Easter 1916*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp.272-273.

⁴ Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916 The Irish Rebellion*, (London: Penguin, 2006), p.346.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.351.

⁶ For example, Ruth Taillon’s *When History Was Made: The Women of 1916*, (Tara Press, 2nd ed. 2018).

These more recent works offer insights into the public image of the executed leaders, and how this was formed and fostered. Various theories have been propounded as to how the public image of the leaders was inculcated, such as a deliberate attempt at manipulation of public opinion by the rebel leaders themselves, or a later appropriation of the public's sympathy for the rebels by the Catholic Church. The natural inclination of many in the general public to react against the British has also been highlighted, with these ingrained beliefs being reinforced by the manner of the trials of those executed, the 'drip feed' effect of the executions, the continuation of martial law, and the threat of conscription⁷. The Masses which were said for the executed leaders have been highlighted, along with the funerary cards and postcards of portraits of the fallen, and how these became a form of protest at a time when martial law prohibited demonstrations⁸. However, the secondary literature does not provide a detailed analysis of the religious beliefs of the executed leaders, how much of this information was in the public domain at the time, who was forming these images of the leaders in the public eye, and to what ends this was being employed. David W. Miller's work on the Catholic Church in Ireland touches upon some of these topics, but the scope of his work is too broad to encompass any detailed analysis of these specific themes⁹. McGarry's *The Rising: Easter 1916* refers to the rebels' own motives for highlighting their religious beliefs, and the effect of the conditions of their detention and their stoicism in the face of death on the Irish public¹⁰. Charles Townshend provides a considered discussion of the historiography of religion and Irish identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including discussions of the identification of 'Irishness' with Catholicism¹¹. Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid has provided a study of the agencies founded to help support the families of those involved, and how these organisations channelled public sentiment into the 'wider nationalist project'¹². Piaris F. MacLochlainn has collected together some of the writings and letters of the executed men, as have the various works in the *16 Lives* series¹³. This dissertation will seek to build upon these existing works by explicitly considering the extent to which public opinion was shaped by tales of the piety of the leaders, whether

⁷ McGarry, *The Rising: Easter 1916*, p.269; David W. Miller, *Church, State and Nation in Ireland 1898 - 1921*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd, 1973), p.347.

⁸ Miller, *Church, State and Nation in Ireland*, p.342; Hegarty and O'Toole, *The Irish Times Book of the Rising*, p.201.

⁹ Miller, *Church, State and Nation in Ireland*.

¹⁰ McGarry, *The Rising: Easter 1916*, pp.273-276.

¹¹ Charles Townshend, 'Religion, War, and Identity in Ireland', *The Journal of Modern History* 76.4 (2004), pp. 882-902.

¹² Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid, 'The Irish National Aid Association and the Radicalization of Public Opinion in Ireland', *The Historical Journal*, 55.3 (2012), 705-729, p.728.

¹³ Piaras F. MacLochlainn, *Last Words, Letters and Statements of the Leaders Executed after the Rising at Easter 1916* (Dublin: Stationary Office, 1990); *The 16 Lives* series Eds Lorcan Collins and Ruán O'Donnell, (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 2015).

any groups were intentionally doing this, what this achieved and whether this was what was intended.

The main primary sources analysed for these purposes have been a range of Irish newspapers published between 1 January 1916 and 31 January 1919, obtained from the Irish Newspaper Archive online database, or accessed via ProQuest (for the *The Irish Times* and *The Weekly Irish Times*). A combination of these two databases has provided a range of newspaper titles from across the island of Ireland, from the *Belfast Newsletter* in the north, to the *Killarney Echo and South Kerry Chronicle* in the south, and titles with a wide array of political viewpoints; for example, from the mid-1870s the *Freemans Journal* had been the unofficial newspaper of the moderate nationalist Irish Parliamentary Party, while *An Claidheamh Soluis* ('The Sword of Light'), edited for a while by Eoin MacNeill, a key player in the Volunteer movement, was the weekly newspaper of the Gaelic League (formed in the 1890s to revive Irish culture and the Irish Language)¹⁴. In many instances it has been difficult to assess the possible partiality of the specific journalist or author, as there was frequently no author's name specified; in these cases it has only been possible to consider the general leaning of the paper itself. This is particularly the case for the many syndicated articles used by several different publications, which also presented some difficulties when trying to calculate the exact date of an article.

The simplest way of searching the databases was to search for the leaders' names, but for some it was necessary to search under both English and Gaelic versions of the names or sometimes a combination of the two (for example, 'John McDermott' becomes 'Seán MacDiarmada' in Irish Gaelic). This, combined with some difficulties with the quality of scans in the Irish Newspaper Archive, may mean that some references were missed; although the archive is excellent in respect of the extent of its collection, the quality of the scans is lacking in places (possibly the quality of the original material rather than the quality of the scanning) and this does have consequences for the efficacy of the search engine; for example, letters such as 'o' and 'c' are frequently mistaken, which can influence the search results obtained. However, the newspaper articles are displayed either on their own or within the broader context of the page and edition in which they appear, and the databases

¹⁴ The National Library of Ireland Blog Archive The Freeman's Journal <[The Freeman's Journal | National Library of Ireland \(nli.ie\)](#)> [1 April 2024]; F. S. L. Lyons, 'Dillon, Redmond, and the Irish Home Rulers' and Donal McCartney, 'Hyde, D. P. Morgan, and Irish Ireland' in *Leaders and Men of the Easter Rising: Dublin 1916* ed F.X. Martin, (London: Methuen, 1967), pp 34 and 47.

have allowed a wide range of Irish newspapers from the period to be considered to provide an invaluable source for the political and social views that made the most impact at the time, as well as a day-to-day record of events¹⁵.

The newspaper sources have been supplemented by the writings of the executed leaders, including work published by some before the Rising, and examples of the letters sent by the executed to family and friends in the days before their executions. Evidence collected by the Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland (which reported in 1916) has also been considered, along with some of the statements and evidence gathered by the Bureau of Military History ('BMH'). As with the newspapers, these sources are not unproblematic, for example it was necessary to consider that the evidence gathered for the Royal Commission was collected by state employed officials for the purposes of a government enquiry at a time when many of those involved in the Rising were still interned and the leaders had only recently been killed; consideration was given to how truthful deponents may have been, and the extent to which there may have been a selection process in what made its way to the official records. In the case of the statements collected by the BMH, work on these started in 1947, some thirty years after the events described, and they may suffer from flaws in deponents' recollections, their desire to justify actions, or a desire to 'correct' the record. Nonetheless, the combination of this evidence with the newspaper sources has provided insight into public attitudes towards the leaders between 1916 and 1919.

Throughout this dissertation reference is made to 'the public domain' and 'public opinion'. A greater consideration of what is meant by 'public opinion' is considered in Chapter Four. 'Public domain' is a phrase which has legal connotations in respect of copyrighted works, but for the purposes of this dissertation the phrase is being given its ordinary meaning of information which is available to everyone to see or use without paying¹⁶. Although this is not an entirely accurate definition for this dissertation, in that newspapers had a cover price and so were not free to everyone, it remains a useful characterisation when the cost of a newspaper in comparison to wages is considered; for example, in April 1916 the *Anglo-Celt* was published every Saturday and priced at one penny, whilst on the eve of

¹⁵ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 7th Ed, (Oxford: Routledge, 2022), pp 81-82.

¹⁶ *Cambridge Dictionary* <[PUBLIC DOMAIN | English meaning - Cambridge Dictionary](#)> [20 January 2024].

the First World War the average weekly wage of an unskilled labourer in Ireland was around £1.00 per week (being 240 pennies)¹⁷. Couple this with the newspaper reading practices of the time, which often involved a newspaper being bought by one person, perhaps once a week, but being read by many more, and the general nub of this definition remains relevant.¹⁸

Chapter Three examines what is known of the religious beliefs of the executed leaders, what the primary sources tell us of the extent to which this was in the public domain during our period, and who may have put it there. Chapter Four questions what is meant by ‘public opinion’, and why particular people or organisations may have wanted to shape it. Chapter Five analyses what the evidence reveals as to how the religious beliefs of the executed leaders shaped public opinion in Ireland, and whether the effect of this shaping of public opinion was as intended. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to enter into a detailed discussion of the history of nationalism or republicanism in Ireland or the political situation in Ireland in 1916, but it is necessary to place the Rising in context and so Chapter Two provides a brief background to, and summary of, the events of the Easter Rising.

¹⁷ Mary E. Daly, ‘Social Structure of the Dublin Working Class, 1871-1911’, *Irish Historical Studies* 23.90 (Nov 1982), p. 130.

¹⁸ James Thompson, *British Political Culture and the Idea of ‘Public Opinion’, 1867 – 1914*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp.63, 109, 112.

CHAPTER II: BACKGROUND

“ ... Ireland for several years past has been administered on the principle that it was safer and more expedient to leave law in abeyance ...”.¹

At the outbreak of the Great War, Ireland was governed by Britain through an executive government consisting of three officers. Eligible Irish citizens took part in British Parliamentary elections, and in the general election of 1910 the moderate nationalist Irish Parliamentary Party (‘IPP’), headed by John Redmond, gained 74 MPs, who were crucial in propping up the Liberal government of Herbert Asquith.² This was done in return for a Liberal promise of ‘Home Rule’, a scheme designed to keep Ireland within the British Empire but grant the country internal autonomy. The issue of Home Rule for decades spawned both conflict and controversy. Since 1886 there were various attempts to get a Home Rule Bill on to the statute books; this was eventually achieved in 1914, but the Act was suspended due to the outbreak of the Great War. While moderate nationalists supported Home Rule, both Unionists and ‘Irish Ireland’ nationalists (who believed that all traces of British culture should be purged and that Irish language, culture and mores should be revived) opposed it³. In 1912 the Ulster Volunteer Force (‘UVF’) was formed in the north of Ireland to prevent, by force if necessary, the extension of Home Rule to Ulster; by 1914 the UVF had armed themselves by running guns into Larne⁴.

By the start of 1916 there were various nationalist groups other than the IPP active in Ireland, in particular, the Irish Citizen Army (‘ICA’), the Irish Republican Brotherhood (‘IRB’), and the Irish Volunteers (‘IV’). The ICA was founded in November 1913 as the militia of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (‘ITGWU’), originally intended to protect striking workers from attack in clashes with the police⁵. It was led by James Connolly (one of those executed) and on Easter Monday 1916 some 150-200 of its members stood with him at Liberty Hall in Dublin to take part in the

¹ Report of the Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland, p.12.

² Statistics obtained from Wikipedia <[December 1910 United Kingdom general election - Wikipedia](#)> [21 March 2024].

³ David W. Miller, *Church, State and Nation in Ireland 1898 – 1921*, (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan Ltd, 1973) p.41.

⁴ Shane Hegarty and Fintan O’Toole (eds), *The Irish Times Book of the Rising*, (Dublin: Gill Books, 2006) p.2.

⁵ Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916 The Irish Rebellion*, (London: Penguin, 2006), pp.41 and 49 – 50; Brian Barton, *The Secret Court Martial Records of the Easter Rising*, (Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2015), p.327.

rebellion⁶. The IRB grew from the Fenian movement of the 1850s (an Irish revolutionary movement which formed to overthrow British rule in Ireland). It was the small number of men on its military council who were the main driving force behind the Rising; initially Patrick Pearse, Joseph Plunkett and Eamonn Ceannt, later joined by Seán MacDermott and Thomas Clarke, and then James Connolly and Thomas MacDonagh (most of whom held senior positions in the command structure of the IV and all of whom were among those executed in May 1916)⁷. The Fenians and, later, Sinn Féin ('SF'), were proponents of the 'physical force movement'; that Irish independence could only be brought about by the use of physical force, as opposed to the constitutional movement advocated by the IPP.

The IV were formed in November 1913 by Eoin MacNeill, in response to the formation of the UVF in the north, and with the intention of defending Home Rule⁸. In 1914 John Redmond, concerned at the growing size of the IV and the IPP's lack of influence over it, issued an ultimatum to force the IV's founders to allow him to nominate half the members of the ruling committee. All but nine members of the IV's committee members agreed⁹. The issue of Irish support for the British war effort, particularly the issue of conscription, was a controversial topic that remained in the forefront of Irish minds throughout the First World War. The fear of conscription, especially among young, unemployed, rural labourers, was seized upon by many nationalists to foster anti-British sentiment.¹⁰ From the start of the war, Redmond had pledged Irish support for the war and when, in September 1914, Redmond in a speech asked the IV to fight on England's behalf, the Volunteer movement split, with the majority of members staying with Redmond and forming the National Volunteers, whilst approximately 12,000 men stayed with MacNeill in the IV¹¹. By the time of the Rising many of Redmond's National Volunteers were fighting for the British on the western front.

⁶ Barton, *Secret Court Martial Records*, p.332.

⁷ Hegarty and O'Toole, *The Irish Times Book of the Rising*, pp. 32-33; Kevin B. Nowlan, 'Tom Clarke, MacDermott, and the I.R.B.' in *Leaders and Men of the Easter Rising: Dublin 1916* ed F.X. Martin, (London: Methuen, 1967), p116.

⁸ Hegarty and O'Toole, *The Irish Times Book of the Rising*, p.32.

⁹ T. Desmond Williams, 'Eoin MacNeill and the Irish Volunteers' in Martin, *Leaders and Men of the Easter Rising*, pp.144-145.

¹⁰ Townshend, *Easter 1916 The Irish Rebellion*, pp.76-78; Barton, *The Secret Court Martial Records*, pp.106-107.

¹¹ Figures differ e.g. both 10,000 and 13,500 are quoted in *The Irish Times Book of the Rising*, eds Shane Hegarty and Fintan O'Toole, pp. 5 and 32, whilst 11,000 is quoted in Miller, *Church, State and Nation in Ireland*, p.309.

In 1905 SF grew from the loose knit nationalist organisation ‘Cumann na nGael’ (formed around 1900 at the suggestion of Arthur Griffith), Griffith’s ‘National Council’, and the separatist Dungannon Clubs¹². Griffith, an ardent republican and separatist, was convinced that Ireland’s salvation would come from Ireland itself, and advocated abstention from the Westminster Parliament, passive resistance, and the promotion of Irish industry and commerce, and Irish art, literature, music, language and tradition to enhance the Irish nation¹³. In 1914, Griffith was invited to join the military council of the IRB, but declined. The IRB promised to keep Griffith aware of developments, but kept from him all knowledge of the proposed Rising¹⁴. However, by the time of the Rising, through the activities of Griffith and his organisation, the name of SF was so identified with separatist nationalism that the Rising became almost universally known as the ‘Sinn Féin Rising’, despite the group not having been involved and not, at that time, being a major force in Irish politics¹⁵. The British largely referred to all nationalists as ‘Sinn Feiners’. As a result, SF rose in prominence during the period considered in this dissertation, ultimately spelling the end of the IPP following the 1918 general election¹⁶.

By the start of 1916, the military council of the IRB had resolved that there should be a Rising before the end of the War – “*England’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity*”.¹⁷ They decided in mid-January that the Rising should take place on Easter Sunday; orders were later passed to key Volunteers that the men were to commence ‘manoeuvres’ at noon. The military council was extremely secretive and only a small number of trusted confidantes were aware of the full plans. Eoin MacNeill, at the head of the IV, was not told of the plans and, when he learned of them, he issued a countermanding order on Saturday, 22 April 1916 rescinding all orders for Easter Sunday and cancelling all IV movements.¹⁸ This led to a far smaller turnout of men, and meant that the Rising was largely (although not entirely) restricted to Dublin. Combined with the earlier failure of Roger Casement (who was later executed) to land German arms, this practically guaranteed the failure of the Rising as a

¹² Seán Ó Lúing, ‘Arthur Griffith and Sinn Fein’, in Martin, *Leaders and Men of the Easter Rising*, pp.58–59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp.57–58.

¹⁴ Ó Lúing in Martin, *Leaders and Men of the Easter Rising*, pp.62–64.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.63, and Hegarty and O’Toole, *The Irish Times Book of the Rising*, p.202.

¹⁶ F.X. Martin, ‘1916 – Revolution or Evolution?’, in Martin, *Leaders and Men of the Easter Rising*, pp.240–241.

¹⁷ James Connolly as quoted in Barton, *Secret Court Martial Records*, p.328.

¹⁸ *1916 Rebellion Handbook* (Mourne River Press, 1998) p.3.

viable rebellion. The military council decided to continue nonetheless, and gave orders for the Rising to start on Easter Monday.

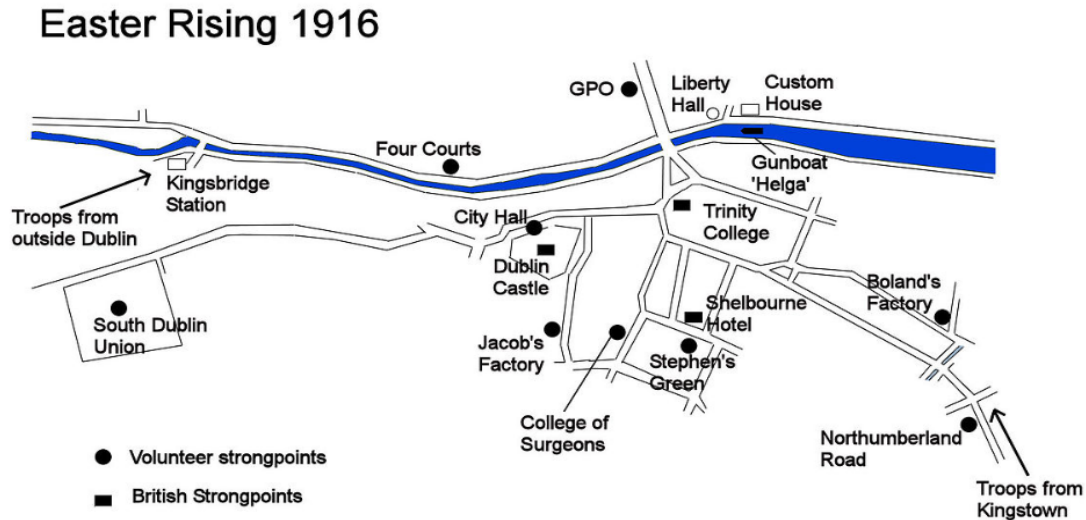


Figure 1: Map of Dublin during the Rising, Source: [File:Easter rising 1916.jpg - Wikipedia](#)

The military council of the IRB had a simple basic plan for the Rising; the IV would capture government officials, disrupt administration, transport and communications, take control of key locations in Dublin, and hold these positions for as long as possible. The military council hoped that during this time Volunteers would rise throughout the country, take over British barracks, subdue British forces and join the rebels in Dublin. It was anticipated that Germany would send assistance, although this hope was forlorn after Casement's arrest¹⁹. At noon on Easter Monday, Volunteers moved through Dublin, and seized strategic points around the city such as the GPO, Liberty Hall, Four Courts, Boland's Factory, St Stephen's Green, the Jacob's Factory, the South Dublin Union, and the Jameson's distillery on Marrowbone Lane. Oddly, the rebels failed to take Dublin Castle, the seat of British rule in Dublin, despite having the potential opportunity to do so.

¹⁹ Hegarty and O'Toole, *The Irish Times Book of the Rising*, p.8.

Shortly after noon on Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, Patrick Pearse, a member of the IRB's military council, stood on the steps of the GPO and read the 'Proclamation of the Irish Republic' on behalf of the provisional Irish Government declaring, amongst other matters, '*the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland*'. This proclamation was signed by Pearse, Thomas Clarke, Seán MacDermott, Thomas MacDonagh, Eamonn Ceannt, James Connolly and Joseph Plunkett (all of whom were executed within a few weeks)²⁰. By Tuesday, 25 April 1916, British troops had begun to arrive from Belfast and the Curragh (the British Army barracks around 30 miles outside Dublin). Reinforcements started arriving from England on Wednesday, 26 April 1916²¹. Overnight the gunboat *Helga* was positioned on the River Liffey and at 8am began shelling Liberty Hall. It soon became clear to Pearse that surrender was necessary; reports told of Pearse seeing the bodies of three elderly men lying on the ground with white flags in their hands, and deciding that surrender was necessary to save the lives of civilians²². Whether this happened or not, Pearse gave the prevention of the '*further slaughter of Dublin civilians*' as the first reason for surrender in the general order that he gave to Volunteer Commandants to lay down arms²³. Pearse eventually agreed an unconditional surrender on Saturday, 29 April 1916. This was not initially accepted by some of the other leaders, MacDonagh, for example, was so shocked that he insisted on speaking directly to the British commander to verify the orders, but by late evening on Sunday, 30 April 1916, all the rebels in Dublin had surrendered.²⁴ The Rising, which had lasted just under a week, was over; some 450 people were dead (the majority being innocent civilians), and damage to more than 200 buildings in Dublin, at an estimated value of £3million, had been caused.²⁵ Although the Rising was over, the repercussions were only just beginning.

These repercussions included a marked and rapid shift in public attitude towards the rebel leaders and their methods and goals, in which the portrayal of the religious beliefs of the leaders

²⁰ Hegarty and O'Toole, *The Irish Times Book of the Rising*, p98.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp.59 and 77.

²² *Ibid.*, p.133.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 129, 133 and 135.

²⁴ Hegarty and O'Toole, *The Irish Times Book of the Rising*, p151; Barton, *Secret Court Martial Records*, p.137.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.136 and 154.

played an important part. In the next chapter, the religious beliefs of the executed are considered, along with the extent to which this was known by the general public, and who was putting this information into the public domain.

CHAPTER III: THE FAITH OF THE EXECUTED

'LATEST NEWS

Casement Dies a Catholic'¹

This chapter will first briefly explore what is known of the religious beliefs of the executed leaders, followed in the second section by an analysis of the primary sources, newspapers from across the island of Ireland, along with, to a lesser extent, the evidence gathered by the 1916 Royal Commission and the Bureau of Military History, to evaluate the extent to which information in respect of the beliefs of the executed rebels was available to the public during the period covered by this dissertation. The last section of the chapter assesses who was controlling this flow of information into the public domain.

The faith of the executed leaders

Much has been written about the leaders of the Rising, including a series of biographies written to coincide with the 2016 centenary². The consensus of these works is that the executed leaders were all at least 'nominally' Catholic, with the exception of Sir Roger Casement who, as was proclaimed in the headline at the start of this chapter, converted to Catholicism on the eve of his execution³. Patrick Pearse and his brother, William, were educated by the Christian Brothers, a community within the Catholic Church founded in Ireland in the early 1800s to teach disadvantaged youth. Eamonn Ceannt was another of the executed leaders to be educated by the Christian Brothers, as were Sean Heuston, Edward Daly, Michael O'Hanrahan, John MacBride, and Con Colbert⁴. Patrick Pearse's writings, both political and poetic, are littered with religious imagery; for example, he wrote of national freedom '*like a divine religion*', bearing the marks of '*unity, of sanctity, of catholicity, of apostolic*

¹ *Anglo-Celt*, 5 August 1916, p.8.

² The *16 Lives* series Eds Lorcan Collins and Ruán O'Donnell, (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 2015).

³ David W. Miller, *Church, State and Nation in Ireland 1898 – 1921*, (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan Ltd, 1973), p.340.

⁴ Florence O'Donoghue, 'Ceannt, Devoy, O'Rahilly, and the Military Plan' and F.X. Martin, '1916 – Revolution or Evolution?' in *Leaders and Men of the Easter Rising: Dublin 1916* ed F.X. Martin, (London: Methuen, 1967), pp 195 and 249; Brian Barton, *The Secret Court Martial Records of the Easter Rising*, (Stroud: The History Press, 2015), pp 161, 183 and 210.

*succession*⁵. His writings include various references to the necessity of a ‘blood sacrifice’ to save Ireland; he joined his Catholic belief in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross with his nationalist tendencies to form the idea that lives would need to be sacrificed to create a free Ireland⁶. Joseph Plunkett was born into a Catholic family and his father was a Papal count (a noble title bestowed by the Pope as a personal distinction)⁷. Thomas MacDonagh studied for the priesthood at the Catholic Rockwell College, although he later became a teacher⁸. Michael Mallin was a member of a Working Men’s Temperance Committee (the temperance movement consisted of religious or political organisations dedicated to abstinence from alcoholic spirits, or complete abstinence from alcohol)⁹. Thomas Clarke, a seasoned Fenian, was said to have lost his religious faith whilst in prison in England in the late 1800s, and his close friend Sean MacDermott showed antipathy towards the Church due to clerical opposition to the republican movement.¹⁰ James Connolly was also believed to have turned away from the Church throughout his life. However, all three were said to have made their peace with God and their faith by the time of their deaths. Patrick Pearse, Ceannt and Plunkett were known to be particularly devout¹¹.

What was in the public domain at the time of the Rising, and during the period between the Rising and the Irish War of Independence?

At the time of the Rising in 1916, anyone living in an area with an active IV presence or a nationalist leaning newspaper might have been aware of some of the leaders, and there were some newspaper reports of IV activities in the months immediately leading up to the Rising, but otherwise the names of many of the leaders were relatively unfamiliar to the Irish general public outside of SF or nationalist circles.¹² James Connolly was known to some for his involvement in the 1913 Dublin lockout (a bitter industrial dispute which saw hundreds of Dublin employers locking some 20,000 workers out of

⁵ Padraic H. Pearse, *Ghosts in The Collected Works of Padraic H Pearse Political Writings and Speeches*, (Éire-Gael Society, 2013), p.120.

⁶ Barton, *The Secret Court Martial Records*, p.111.

⁷ Shane Hegarty and Fintan O’Toole (eds), *The Irish Times Book of the Rising*, (Dublin: Gill Books, 2006), p.49.

⁸ Donagh MacDonagh, ‘Plunkett and MacDonagh’ in *Leaders and Men of the Easter Rising* ed F.X. Martin, p.171.

⁹ Barton, *The Secret Court Martial Records*, p.273; Berridge, Virginia, ‘*Temperance Its history and impact on current and future alcohol policy*’, a report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2005.

¹⁰ Barton, *The Secret Court Martial Records*, pp.148 and 309.

¹¹ Miller, *Church State and Nation in Ireland 1898 – 1921*, p.341.

¹² e.g. reports in *The Dundalk Democrat*, 6 May 1916, p.4, or *Western People*, 13 May 1916, p.9; e.g. *The Liberator (Tralee)*, 29 February 1916, p.1, or *The Kerryman*, 4 March 1916, p.2.

employment, sometimes for up to six months, until they gave up membership of the ITGWU), while Patrick Pearse had published pamphlets and essays, such as 'The Murder Machine' in 1912 or 'Peace and The Gael' from 1915, and his views on education and the importance of the Irish language had been published in newspapers¹³. But it is difficult to say that these relatively niche publications would have registered significantly with readers who were not already of a socialist or nationalist persuasion. In the period between the surrender of the rebels and the first executions (only three days), there was a limited amount of news coming out of Dublin due to censorship and damage done to newspaper offices in the city, and what limited information there was tended to be more matter-of-fact in nature.¹⁴ But in the time between the executions (which, with the exception of Casement, took place between 3 and 12 May 1916) and the start of the Irish War of Independence in January 1919, the names of the leaders were increasingly linked in the press with piety, a deep love of Ireland, and heroic sacrifice and martyrdom.

April/May 1916

At the start of the Great War the British government introduced censorship across Britain as part of the Defence of the Realm Act, restricting what the press could print. Following the Rising, these measures were enhanced in Ireland, and a role of press censor was created specifically for Ireland, to prohibit the press from publishing any reports of seditious speeches, or that could discourage recruitment, prejudice the successful operation of Crown forces, or might cause or spread 'disaffection'.¹⁵ However, the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, signed by seven of the executed leaders and read by Patrick Pearse outside the GPO on Easter Monday, was widely reported in various Irish newspapers. About 2,500 copies of the Proclamation had been printed on the presses in Liberty Hall the day before the Rising, and copies were posted in the street or left for onlookers to take away with them¹⁶. Almost the first words of the Proclamation are that it is proclaimed '*in the name of God*', and the final paragraph places '*the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, whose*

¹³ Colm Murphy, 'Rival Imagined Communities in the Dublin Lockout of 1913', *History Workshop Journal*, 86 (Autumn 2018), 184-204; e.g. *The Kerryman*, 4 March 1916, p.7 and *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 11 March 1916, p.8.

¹⁴ Mark O'Brien, 'Fighting and Writing: Journalists and the 1916 Easter Rising', *Media History*, 24 3-4 (2018), p.356.

¹⁵ Christopher Doughan, 'Censorship and Suppression of the Irish Provincial Press, 1914 - 1921', *Media history*, 24.3-4 (2018), p.364-378.

¹⁶ Hegarty and O'Toole, *The Irish Times Book of the 1916 Rising*, p. 204.

blessing we invoke on our arms'. So, one of the earliest pieces of writing emerging from the Rising immediately links the endeavours of the rebels to religion, notably calling on God to bless any violent element to the enterprise. The Proclamation appeared in full in many papers, such as *The Irish Examiner* and *The Westmeath Examiner*, although some papers were critical of it, for example the *Belfast Newsletter* described the Proclamation as a '*bombastic statement*'. Such language was typical of many of the Irish newspapers at this stage of the Rising; the rebels' actions were foolish, they were 'dupes', and the Proclamation was '*windy nonsense – something more like the bogus promises of the English Liberals*'¹⁷. Although the writers of the Proclamation were linking the Rising to religion at the outset, this may not have had an immediate effect, and there was little consideration of the specific religious beliefs of the leaders of the Rising in these very early reports.

However, from 3 May 1916, as news of the first executions started to appear in the newspapers, the language and tone started to change and the religious piety of the executed men became more central to the news reports. The first three leaders to be executed, at Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin, in the early hours of 3 May 1916, were Patrick Pearse, Thomas Clarke and Thomas MacDonagh. The initial reports of the executions were matter-of-fact:

*"Three signatories of the notice proclaiming the Irish Republic, P.H. Pearse, T. Macdonagh, and T.J. Clarke, have been tried by Field General Court Martial and sentenced to death. The sentences having been duly confirmed, the three above-mentioned men were shot this (Wednesday) morning."*¹⁸

But by 13 May 1916 some newspapers were carrying stories of *Poets as Rebels*, and by 27 May 1916 the text of the final letter written by Pearse to his mother on the eve of his execution, described as a '*touching goodbye*', had been published, confirming that he had received Holy Communion and asked that God bless his '*dear mother*' and remember all that she '*has so bravely suffered*'¹⁹. Similar shifts in language and emphasis can be seen in reports of the deaths of Thomas Clarke and Thomas MacDonagh during May 1916. After the executions, reports were circulated of how Clarke

¹⁷ *The Belfast Newsletter*, 2 May 1916, p.5 and *The Irish Examiner*, 3 May 1916, p.6; *The Sunday Independent*, 7 May 1916, p.1; *The Roscommon Herald*, 6 May 1916, p.3.

¹⁸ *The Evening Herald*, 3 May 1916, p.1.

¹⁹ e.g. *Leinster Leader*, 13 May 1916, p.5; *The Liberator (Tralee)*, 18 May 1916, p.5 and *The Sligo Champion*, 27 May 1916, p.4, although the letter was published in several newspapers over the next few weeks.

surrendered after trying to agree terms for his followers²⁰. Following the last of the executions on 12 May 1916, brief biographies of the leaders start appearing in the papers; on 13 May 1916 *The Donegal News* referred to Clarke's history of having been in prison for 15 years for a previous 'dynamite conspiracy', but described him as a '*mild-mannered and inoffensive man*' (in the same article Pearse is described as a '*well-educated and in many respects a brilliant man*', and Thomas MacDonagh as a poet)²¹. *The Leinster Leader* of 13 May 1916 describes MacDonagh as a poet – '*No one who met him failed to be attracted by his cheerful dark face.*'. The same article described Pearse as '*sentimental rather than hot-headed in his patriotism*' and referred to his book of 'charming' short stories entitled '*Little Jesus*'. It referred to Clarke as one of the older generation of Fenians who, after a period of penal servitude, ran a newsagent's and tobacconist's shop²². *The Anglo-Celt* on 13 May 1916 published a poem by MacDonagh in which he wrote of his soul mingling '*with God's very breath*'²³. The same edition ran a story referring to MacDonagh's sister being a nun. In *The Kilkenny People* of 13 May 1916, a police constable imprisoned by the rebels is reported to be telling his story of the siege at the Jacob's factory. He described Thomas MacDonagh as apologising that he had to detain them, and commented that the imprisoned police officers recited the Rosary, and that the Volunteer guards in the corridors '*joined in, kneeling beside their rifles.*'²⁴. So, even for leaders whose religious devotion is not as evident as the likes of Patrick Pearse, within a few weeks of the Rising their names are being linked with acts of devotion and Irish nationalist tradition.

In the morning of 4 May 1916 Edward Daly, William Pearse, Michael O'Hanrahan and Joseph Plunkett were shot at Kilmainham Gaol. Again, initial reports were largely factual: '*it was officially announced yesterday that four more rebel leaders ... had been convicted and shot on yesterday morning.*'; the fact of the sentence having been carried out was often given in the same announcement as the fact of the conviction and death sentence²⁵. On 13 May 1916 the *Anglo-Celt* published a poem by Plunkett entitled 'The Spark': "*Because I know the spark of God has no eclipse*"²⁶. By 17 May

²⁰ e.g. 'The Police Officer's Story' in *The Liberator (Tralee)*, 9 May 1916, p.3 or *The Kerryman*, 13 May 1916, p.3.

²¹ *The Donegal News*, 13 May 1916, p.1.

²² *The Leinster Leader*, 13 May 1916, p.6.

²³ p.4.

²⁴ *The Kilkenny People*, 13 May 1916, p.3.

²⁵ *The Nenagh Guardian*, 29 April 1916, p.5.

²⁶ p.4.

1916 questions were being asked in the House of Commons as to what justification there was for executing William Pearse as his role was subordinate and it appeared that he was executed on the basis of his relationship with his brother²⁷. John MacBride was executed on 5 May 1916. Little was said of his religion at the time of his execution, although in the 13 May 1916 edition of the *Kilkenny People*, a report from “An Irish Correspondent” from the *Daily Chronicle* was printed, in which MacBride is also linked to recitations of the Rosary. The *Mayo News* of the same date reported that MacBride had been educated by the Christian Brothers.²⁸ Again, the executed men are being associated with acts of devotion, even if they are not specifically cited as being involved themselves.²⁹

On 8 May 1916, Seán Heuston, Michael Mallin, Eamonn Ceannt and Con Colbert were executed. Factual reports of the deaths of Heuston and Mallin were widespread, simply stating ‘Four More Shot’, whilst listing their names along with those of Ceannt and Colbert. At this time Heuston’s name was given only as ‘J. J. Heuston’, and in some reports Mallin’s name was given as ‘Michael Mallon’. All four are described as having taken “*a very prominent part in the rebellion*”³⁰. Little was said of Colbert at the time of his execution beyond the fact of it, but on 29 May 1916 various papers carried a report apparently of his last moments, when it was said that he died ‘*joking the men who were preparing him for death*’³¹. This was soon refuted by the priest who attended Colbert at his execution:

²⁷ *The Kerry News*, 17 May 1916, p.3.

²⁸ p.4.

²⁹ *Kilkenny People*, 13 May 1916, p.3.

³⁰ E.g. *Kerry News*, 10 May 1916, p.3 or *Belfast Newsletter*, 9 May 1916, p.5; *Liberator (Tralee)*, 20 June 1916, p.1.

³¹ E.g. *Irish Examiner*, 29 May 1916, p.4.

“There was no joking, nor even the semblance of it. Poor Colbert was far too beautiful and too reverent a character to joke with anyone in such a solemn hour. I know well where his heart was then. It was very near to God, and to the friends he loved.”³².

On 13 May 1916, the *Nenagh News* reported on a statement from John Redmond in the Commons that the continuing executions were causing ‘bitter exasperation’ among sections of the Irish public who had no sympathy with the rebellion, and stated that *“The first intimation that sentence of death on Eamonn Ceannt had been carried out was a prayer in a city church, and the intimation that a Mass had been offered up for the repose of his soul”³³*. This is an interesting example of the juxtaposition of the condemnation of the British handling of the situation – the secrecy and lack of respect for the dead – alongside a religious element, to foster a sympathetic public reaction.



Con Colbert

Figure 2: Con Colbert, Source: [con colbert](http://concolbert.com) | [Today In Irish History](http://TodayInIrishHistory.com)

On 9 May 1916 Thomas Kent was executed at Cork Detention Barracks. Kent’s case does not fit the same pattern as the rebels executed up to this point; he was not involved in the Rising in Dublin, but was a member of the IV and fervent anti-recruitment campaigner based in County Cork. Although he was charged with aiding an armed rebellion and waging war against the King, he was arrested and put on trial as a result of a Royal Irish Constabulary (‘RIC’) raid for arms on his family home, during which an RIC member, Head Constable Rowe, was shot and killed³⁴. This was sometimes described by the newspapers in neutral terms (*‘a police officer was shot dead’*), while some papers described Kent as a *‘murderer’*, and others proclaimed that the officer had met his death at the hands of his own colleagues³⁵. On 19 May 1916 the *Derry Journal* reported that a question had been asked in the House of Commons as to whether Kent had been denied a Christian burial, and on 27 May 1916 the *Anglo-Celt* reported that the Catholic Bishop and Mayor of Cork had applied to the authorities for Kent’s

³² E.g. *Evening Herald*, 1 June 1916, p.1.

³³ *Nenagh News*, 13 May 1916, p.3.

³⁴ Barton, *The Secret Court Martial Records*, pp.287 and 295.

³⁵ e.g. *Freemans Journal*, 11 May 1916, p.3, *Donegal News*, 13 May 1916, p.1, or *Liberator (Tralee)*, 4 July 1916, p.1.

body so that it could be interred in consecrated ground, but that this request was refused³⁶. It is interesting to note that the press reports of the executions say little about the final resting place of the deceased leaders, despite the fact that they were not interred in consecrated ground, instead being buried in quicklime, without coffins, in Arbour Hill Detention Barracks on the orders of General Maxwell, who commented that the graves would otherwise become martyrs' shrines due to '*Irish sentimentality*'³⁷. The only context in which this was mentioned in press reports tended to be when this was raised in parliamentary questions, suggesting that the censors may have prevented this information from being highlighted.

Seán MacDiarmada (John MacDermott) and James Connolly were executed on 12 May 1916, the last of the leaders involved in action in Dublin during Easter week to be executed. Both signed the Proclamation of the Irish Republic. Their death sentences and deaths were announced at the same time; '*Sentenced on Tuesday and Executed*' read the strapline in the *Kerry Weekly Reporter*³⁸. Little appears to have been known about MacDiarmada at this time, while Connolly is one of the few leaders of the Rising who may already have been known to some of the Irish public due to his involvement with the labour movement and the Dublin lockout. Although his Catholic faith had lapsed by the time of the Rising, the *Irish Independent* of 13 May 1916 reported that "*It is stated he resumed his communion with the Catholic Church, after a long period of professed agnosticism*", again implicitly linking the executed men, and so the republican movement, with religious devotion³⁹.

June – December 1916

Martial law was declared in Dublin the day after the Rising started, and was extended to the whole country the following day.⁴⁰ This restricted day-to-day life in the country, including prohibiting public demonstrations. But the British government could not ban attendance at Mass, and June 1916 saw the start of the 'Month's Minds', when Mass is celebrated for the soul of a deceased a month after the

³⁶ *Derry Journal*, 19 May 1916, p.8; *Anglo-Celt*, 27 May 1916, p.8.

³⁷ Hegarty and O'Toole, *The Irish Times Book of the Rising*, pp. 193-195.

³⁸ 20 May 1916, p.5.

³⁹ p.5.

⁴⁰ Fergal McGarry, *The Rising: Easter 1916*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.167.

death⁴¹. Reporting of these Masses became common, with emphasis on the numbers in attendance, the sympathetic treatment of family members and, in several cases, the nationalist sentiments on display amongst the congregation. On 5 June 1916 it was reported in *The Freemans Journal* that a Mass was said for the souls of Patrick Pearse and his brother at the Church of the Annunciation, Rathfarnham, and that there was a ‘*huge congregation*’, with the church being ‘*inadequate to afford them accommodation.*’. The widowed mother of the two men and other family members were ‘*respectfully and sympathetically saluted by the crowds*’⁴². An advert appeared in the *Freeman’s Journal* in July 1916 for a mass to be said in Kingstown for the repose of MacBride’s soul⁴³. A mass at St Saviour’s was later described as having an ‘*immense congregation*’, and nationalist songs were sung outside the church⁴⁴. By 20 June 1916, the same reports of the Month’s Mind mass for MacBride also referred to a mass for Ceannt and Mallin at St Mary of the Angels, again with ‘*immense congregations*’ and nationalist songs sung outside the church. By 13 June 1916 the *Freemans Journal* reported that a requiem mass for Connolly at the Capuchin Church had attracted a ‘*large and devout congregation*’, while the *Cork Examiner* of 13 June 1916 reported scenes outside Dublin Cathedral when a Republican flag was waved and a large crowd cheered following a requiem mass for Séan MacDiarmada. Similar reports appeared in the *Liberator (Tralee)* and *Kerry News*⁴⁵. By July it was being reported that a priest had attended to Kent before and at his execution, and that ‘*the whole countryside attended*’ a solemn requiem mass in Dungarvan⁴⁶. These month’s mind requiem Masses served to remind the public of the link between the Catholic religion and the leaders, and so Catholicism and republicanism, and the sacrifice that the leaders had made for Ireland.

Reports of the requiem Masses were not the only articles in the press in the latter half of 1916 which would have served to influence public opinion using the religious beliefs of the leaders. By early June 1916 reports began to appear of questions being asked of the government in the House of Commons, particularly in respect of the treatment of the rebel leaders before their executions⁴⁷. By 5

⁴¹ Miller, *Church, State and Nation in Ireland*, p.342; Hegarty and O’Toole, *The Irish Times Book of the Rising*, p.201.

⁴² *The Freemans Journal*, 5 June 1916, p.7.

⁴³ *Freemans Journal*, 16 July 1917, p.1.

⁴⁴ *Liberator (Tralee)*, 20 June 1916, p.1.

⁴⁵ *Freemans Journal*, 13 June 1916, p.6; *Cork Examiner*, 13 June 1916, p.3; *Liberator (Tralee)*, 13 June 1916, p.3, *Kerry News*, 14 June 1916, p.3.

⁴⁶ *Liberator (Tralee)*, 4 July 1916, p.3; *Southern Star*, 8 July 1916, p.3.

⁴⁷ *The Roscommon Herald*, 3 June 1916, p.2.

August 1916 the *Roscommon Herald* was reporting that MacBride's "last act was to send his rosary beads to his mother"⁴⁸. Throughout July - October 1916 *The Freemans Journal* was running *Interesting Articles on the Poetry of Thomas MacDonagh*, and advertising books of his poetry and political works for sale⁴⁹. On 15 July 1916 *The Liberator (Tralee)* published a letter from a member of the public who knew MacDonagh and was writing in response to an article about him in the paper. The writer, T. Woulfe, referred to MacDonagh's time at Rockwell College, and that he was a member of the Holy Ghost Order (a Catholic missionary congregation)⁵⁰. A death notice in the *Sunday Independent* of 4 June 1916 stated that Edward Daly 'fought and died for his country'.⁵¹ A report in the *Southern Star* from 10 June 1916 mentioned the intellectual traits of the Pearse brothers and MacDonagh, referring to their time teaching at St Enda's school (an Irish-speaking secondary education establishment set up by Patrick Pearse to inculcate in its pupils a devotion to Ireland)⁵². Moving on through 1916, some newspapers were publishing poetry and prose by members of the public in tribute to the leaders, such as a piece written by Bryan O'Hara in *The Kerryman* on 19 August 1916, in which he likened Patrick Pearse and the other 'Irish Martyrs' to saints, or a poem by Annie M. Laracy in *The Kilkenny People* on 30 December 1916, again calling the executed leaders 'martyrs'⁵³.

Like that of Thomas Kent, the execution of Roger Casement stands out as not having been part of the series of executions that took place at Kilmainham Gaol in the immediate aftermath of the Rising. However, unlike Kent, Casement's execution, which took place at Pentonville Prison, London, on 3 August 1916, attracted a great deal of press attention. As the quote which opened this chapter illustrates, much of that attention was focused on his religion, especially when it emerged that Casement, a Protestant from a family of 'pronounced Unionists' was receiving instruction in the Catholic faith whilst in prison⁵⁴. Throughout July and August 1916 several Irish newspapers ran headlines that Casement was to become a Catholic or that he had become a Catholic. After the

⁴⁸ *Roscommon Herald*, 5 August 1916, p.8.

⁴⁹ E.g. *The Freemans Journal*, 1 August 1916, p.1.

⁵⁰ *The Liberator (Tralee)*, 15 July 1916, p.3.

⁵¹ p.2.

⁵² Shane Leslie in *The Southern Star*, 10 June 1916, p.2; Barton, *The Secret Court Martial Records*, p.110.

⁵³ *The Kerryman*, 19 August 1916, p.3 and *The Kilkenny People*, 30 December 1916 p.5.

⁵⁴ *Ulster Herald*, 29 April 1916, p.4.

execution it was widely reported that he had converted to Catholicity, that a Catholic priest had ministered to him during his last moments, and that his last words had been ‘*Lord Jesus, receive my soul*’⁵⁵. In the *Anglo-Celt* of 5 August 1916 it was commented that, according to the “*saintly priests who attended*” Casement, he died “*a splendid Catholic death*”⁵⁶. Throughout 1916 reports were continually reinforcing the link between the Rising (and its leaders) and the Catholic faith, the justness of their cause, and their calm and stoicism in the face of death, and implicitly comparing this with the treatment meted out to them (and the rest of the Irish population) by the British.

From 1917 to early 1919

From 1917 the nature of the reports referring to the executed did not lessen in intensity in respect of their religious beliefs, but the frequency with which reports appeared in the Irish press did diminish. Many of the leaders had local Sinn Féin clubs, hurling or football teams named after them, but beyond these references, the number of articles concerning the executed leaders dropped significantly⁵⁷. Take as an example Eamonn Ceannt (and allowing for the possibility that some articles may have been missed from online search results due to possible mis-spelling of his name or blurred letters), by 1917, beyond mention of items belonging to him being sold as part of a fund-raising sale at the Mansion House in April, there are very few mentions of him by name in the papers⁵⁸. In January 1917, the *Meath Chronicle* ran an article (taken from the *Catholic Bulletin*) in which photographs of the widows and children of the executed men or men killed in action are reproduced. The purpose of the article is stated as being “*to use our influence in helping to make provision for the education of the innocent children thus left to the care and sympathy of nationalist Ireland*”, and it is stated that “*Thousands upon thousands of our young readers have banded themselves in a league of prayer for their future welfare*”. The article refers to the families being assured of the “*nation’s respect and affection and lasting care*”, and claims that “*all, save the dastard, must appreciate the passionate love of freedom which is strong enough to prevail over such sacred parental ties as hallow the Catholic homes of*

⁵⁵ e.g. *Liberator (Tralee)*, 1 July 1916, p.2 or *Evening Herald*, 6 July 1916, p.4; *Liberator (Tralee)*, 3 August 1916, p.3; *Freemans Journal*, 4 August 1916, p.5.

⁵⁶ p.8.

⁵⁷ e.g.: The Con Colbert Hurling Club beat the Hearts of Steel 2-3 – 2-1 in the Junior Hurling League on 21 October 2017 (*Freemans Journal*, 22 October 2017, p.7); The Michael O’Hanrahan Sinn Féin Club of Logan met for the first time on 29 June 1917 (*Roscommon Herald*, 14 July 2017, p.13).

⁵⁸ e.g. *Evening Herald*, 20 April 1917, p.1.

Ireland". The religious beliefs of some of the men involved in the Rising are highlighted; in Ceannt's case parts of a letter he wrote "*an hour before his death*" are quoted: "*I knew no fear, no panic, and shrank from no risk ... I hope to see God's face, even for a moment, in the morning. His will be done.*" Of his wife and children, he wrote "*God is their only shield now that I am removed*". The same article refers to some of the final words written by Michael Mallin to his wife: "*God and His blessed Mother take you and my dear ones in his care. ... God bless you*"⁵⁹. The *Butte Independent* of 26 May 1917 ran an article entitled "*Last Messages of Eamonn Ceannt to Ireland, to his Wife and to his Son*", taken from letters written by Ceannt in Kilmainham Gaol and saved "*by the Sister-in-Law of the Late Patriot*". In his last message to his wife, written "*an hour before his sacrifice*", he states:

*"You will be, you are, the wife of one of the leaders of the "Revolution". ... I have one hour to live, then in God's judgment, and through His infinite mercy, a place near your poor Grannie and my father and mother, and you and all the fine old Irish Catholics who went through the scourge of similar misfortune from this Vale of Tears into the Promised Land."*⁶⁰

Thus, the men's devotion to their country, their God and their families was being intrinsically linked in the minds of the readers.

To take another example, considering press reports that mention Joseph Plunkett, the *Ulster Herald* of 26 May 1917 published a report from the *Batley Reporter* on a requiem mass held at Birstall for the "*sixteen Irishmen who were killed in Dublin in Easter Week last year*"⁶¹. The paper reported that the service was:

"the first of its kind to be held in England, Scotland and Wales ... similar services are taking place in Ireland, the United States, and Australia ... it attracted very great attention and interest in the Irish community, particularly among the younger people."

The sermon at the requiem mass is detailed:

⁵⁹ *Meath Chronicle*, 20 January 1917, p.9.

⁶⁰ pp.1 and 5.

⁶¹ p.6.

“In their last moments upon earth they were consoled and strengthened by the Sacraments of the Church. They met their death with firm faith and unbroken spirit. They passed away with the love of God in their hearts and the sweet name of Jesus and Mary upon their lips.”

This is part of a pattern of reporting of requiem masses around the first- and second-year anniversaries of the Rising, again linking the Rising and its leaders with the Catholic faith, and emphasizing their sacrifice for a righteous cause. On 12 May 1917 the *Liberator (Tralee)* reported a fitting celebration of the anniversary of the death of Con Colbert, when ‘*prayers were offered for the repose of his soul.*’⁶² The *Freemans Journal* of 14 May 1917 reported a High Mass celebrated at Tallaght “*for the repose of the souls of Messrs James Connolly, Michael Mallin, and J. J Heuston*” where “*A large congregation was present*”.⁶³ The *Liberator (Tralee)* reported the same mass on 15 May 1917, stating that returning from that mass, “*about 40 men and girls, walking in procession and carrying Republican colours, were met ... by a large number of police ... who proceeded to disperse them. A scuffle ensued ... No arrests were made.*”⁶⁴ On 4 May 1918 the *Freemans Journal* reported on anniversary masses in Ranelagh for the Pearse brothers and Thomas MacDonagh: “*There was a large attendance of the relatives and friends of deceased present in the church*”⁶⁵. The *Derry Journal* of 3 September 1917 reported on a requiem mass in the parish church of Gortahork for the soul of Roger Casement, where “*many members of that large congregation who had known the dead Irishman in life were moved to tears*”.⁶⁶

On 3 May 1918 the *Derry Journal* commented:

*“To-day is the second anniversary of the execution by the British military authorities of Patrick H. Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, and Thomas Clarke ... Catholics will, no doubt, remember in their prayers these men who gave their lives for a noble ideal.”*⁶⁷

⁶² p.3.

⁶³ p.6.

⁶⁴ p.1.

⁶⁵ p.3.

⁶⁶ p.2.

⁶⁷ p.2.

On 7 April 1917 the *Butte Independent* published an invitation to all Irish Societies to join a parade and exercises planned by the Pearse and Connolly Independence Club to “*COMMEMORATE [the] MARTYRDOM OF IRISH PATRIOTS*”⁶⁸.

Links between religion and the executed between 1917 and early 1919 were not exclusively limited to memorial masses. In some instances, letters, articles, and poems from supporters were published in the press, often referencing the leaders’ piety, or linking them to the Catholic religion. For example, in the *Meath Chronicle* on 30 March 1918, ‘F.D.’ wrote of Con Colbert and Sean Heuston as ‘*martyrs*’, so linking them to Catholic tradition.⁶⁹ The *Liberator (Tralee)* in its edition of 20 October 1917 reported on a lecture given by the Countess Markievicz (the most prominent woman involved in the Rising) on James Connolly’s work for Ireland, during which she stated that Connolly “*had gained his crown of martyrdom for Ireland ... those who escaped ... should try and spread his gospel through the length and breadth of Ireland*”.⁷⁰

There are also various instances of the poetry written by the executed men being published, as well as adverts for volumes of their works that had been posthumously published or re-issued. For example, the *Waterford News and Star* of 21 December 1917 ran an advert:

“*THE Very Thing for Xmas Presents – Republican Handkerchiefs and Magnificent Tri-Colour Brooches, 2s. 6d each. Also great selection of Books suitable for Presents, including collected works of P. H Pearse, 7s 6d. nett. ... Literature in Ireland, by Thomas McDonagh, and Works of Michael O’Hanrahan, Joseph Plunkett etc., etc. ...*”⁷¹

On various dates in 1918 the *Killarney Echo and South Kerry Chronicle* ran advertisements for the Sinn Fein Shop:

⁶⁸ p.1.

⁶⁹ p.1.

⁷⁰ *Liberator (Tralee)*, 20 October 1917, p. 3.

⁷¹ p.1.

*“Sinn Fein LITERATURE AND Sinn Fein NOVELTIES TO BE HAD AT THE Sinn Fein SHOP KILLARNEY. Large Pictures of Rebel Leaders 1s. Post Cards of Rebel Leaders, 1d & 2d. ... Pearse Brothers Memory Cards with Photos 3d. ... P. H. Pearse, a sketch of his life 3d. ... Poems by Thos. MacDonagh, 4s 6d. ... A Swordsman of the Brigade, by M. O’Hanrahan, 3s. 6d. Literature in Ireland, by Thos. MacDonagh, 6s. ... Poems by Joseph Mary Plunkett 3s 6d. ... Speeches from the Dock 2s.”*⁷²

On 29 December 1917 the *Fermanagh Herald* published a ‘remarkable’ poem by Roger Casement that had previously appeared in *The Catholic Press* in Sydney, Australia. The poem ends “*Lost youth and love, not lest, are hid with Christ*”⁷³. The same article also printed a poem by Thomas MacDonagh.

Thus, in the weeks immediately after the Rising, the language being used to put information before the public in the newspapers very quickly changed; after an initial short period of neutral facts tinged with disapproval, views in respect of the Rising and the executed soon turned to sympathy and/or praise, with emphasis on their devotion to their families, God and their country. The newspaper reports were explicitly linking the executed, and therefore their republican cause, to the Catholic faith with its tradition of heroic martyrs. These ideas were kept in the public eye throughout the period 1916 to early 1919 through repeated reports of memorial Masses, charitable endeavours, and the writings of the leaders.

Who was putting this information into the public domain?

Whilst it can be seen that there was a significant amount of material in the public domain in respect of the executed leaders and their religious beliefs, the newspaper sources are not always so clear as to who was responsible for putting it there. However, there is one ‘usual suspect’ that should always be considered when examining any aspect of life in Ireland at this time, the Catholic Church – “*No one can visit Ireland without being impressed by the intensity of Catholic belief there*”⁷⁴. A significant proportion of the information put into the public domain during the period considered came from

⁷² e.g. 30 March 1918, p.2, 6 April 1918, p.2, 25 May 1918, p.2, 10 August 1918, p.2.

⁷³ p.3.

⁷⁴ Louis Paul-Dubois as quoted in Miller, *Church, State and Nation in Ireland*, p.1.

Church sources, particularly the priests who attended the rebel leaders just before their executions, or via the *Catholic Bulletin* (a Catholic and nationalist publication which published between 1911 and 1939)⁷⁵. These reports indicate that the lower clergy who, after all, were in more regular daily contact with the congregations in their churches, were generally more in tune with public opinion than the hierarchy (although this was not exclusively the case, as public correspondence between Sir John Maxwell, the commander-in-chief of troops in Ireland and the main architect of Britain's response to the Rising, and the Bishop of Limerick illustrates. Maxwell had asked the Bishop to take steps to prevent priests from mixing themselves with organisations '*that are a danger to the realm*'. The Bishop's response was that he regarded Maxwell's action:

'with horror ... it has outraged the conscience of the country ... an abuse of power, as fatuous as it is arbitrary ... your regime has been one of the worst and blackest chapters in the history of the misgovernment of the country').⁷⁶

However, during the period covered by this dissertation the Catholic Church was not the only source of information in the public domain. It has been suggested by some historians that the rebel leaders themselves influenced what was known of their religious or political views and tried to control their legacies.⁷⁷ This can undoubtedly be seen in the case of Patrick Pearse, who had written and published various poems, plays and other works showing his political and religious views in the years before the Rising. For example, his essay *Ghosts*, first published in 1915, likened national freedom to "*a divine religion*" and referred to Irish nationality as being an "*ancient spiritual tradition, one of the oldest and most august traditions in the world*".⁷⁸ In his play, *The Singer*, Pearse's idea of the patriot-martyr and the blood sacrifice is set out: "*One man can free a people as one Man redeemed the world. I will take no pike, I will go into battle with bare hands.*"⁷⁹ His writings whilst in Arbour Hill Detention Barracks (before he was moved to Kilmainham Gaol) continued these themes, and specifically compared his death to the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross in what appears an apparent

⁷⁵ Oxford Reference <[Catholic Bulletin - Oxford Reference](#)> [27 May 2024].

⁷⁶ Reported in e.g. *The Westmeath Independent*, 3 June 1916, p.5.

⁷⁷ See, for example, McGarry, *The Rising: Easter 1916*, pp.272-273.

⁷⁸ Padraic H. Pearse, *Collected Works of Padraic H. Pearse: Political Writings and Speeches*, (Dublin: The Éire-Gael Society, 2013), pp.120-122.

⁷⁹ Fr Francis Shaw, 'The Canon of Irish History – A Challenge', *Studies (Dublin)*, 61.242 (1972), p.123.

attempt to shape his own legacy. For example, in his poem *A Mother Speaks*, which was published in several newspapers, he referred to his mother suffering the death of her first-born son “*amid the scorn of men for whom he died*”, specifically likening her to the Virgin Mary: “... *Dear Mary ... Receive my first-born son into thy arms, who also hath gone out to die for men ... Dear Mary, I have shared thy sorrow, and soon shall share thy joy.*”⁸⁰

But this desire to shape their own legacies is not so apparent for all the executed rebels. Con Colbert, for example, had written poetry during his lifetime, but was not a published author. The eleven letters that he wrote whilst in Kilmainham Gaol which have since been published were all personal letters to his family and friends. These letters appear to be quite heartfelt notes to the people he cared for, largely expressing his desire that God would help him to ‘die well’, his hopes that his family and friends would pray for him, his assurance that he would pray for them, and his request that he be forgiven anything that he owed.⁸¹ There is nothing to suggest that these were written by him knowing that they would later be published, nor that he was writing them with a view to shaping the way that the general public or posterity viewed him.⁸² It therefore cannot be said that all the executed rebels had their legacy in mind.

To an extent, in the immediate aftermath of the Rising, the degree to which any rebel leaders trying to shape their own legacy could get their wish was in the hands of journalists and, more importantly, of editors of the Irish newspapers. Newspapers with a nationalist or republican agenda, such as the *Freemans Journal*, were encouraging and perpetuating the view of the rebel leaders as martyrs, for example through their coverage of the months mind Masses but, as discussed above, the frequency with which this was done appeared to diminish between 1917 and early 1919.

⁸⁰ *E.g. The Meath Chronicle*, 3 June 1916, p.1. p.22.

⁸¹ Piaras F. Mac Lochlainn, *Last Words*, (Dublin: The Office of Public Works, 2005), pp. 146–150; The *16 Lives* series Eds Lorcan Collins and Ruán O’Donnell, (Dublin: The O’Brien Press, 2015), pp. 205–210.

⁸² Indeed, the author is aware that Colbert wrote a twelfth letter, from Kilmainham Gaol, that has never been published. This was written to an uncle on his mother’s side and is currently held in a family archive; unfortunately, it has not been possible to obtain permission to append a copy of it to this dissertation before the deadline for submission.

There is also evidence of the memory of the executed leaders and their religious beliefs specifically being used by politicians or those in the nationalist/republican movement to garner support against the continuing arrests of ‘Sinn Feiners’ in the period between the Rising and the War of Independence. The *Nationalist and Leinster Times* of 29 September 1917, for example, described a SF demonstration in Carlow where an ‘immense’ crowd of people assembled to ‘*protest against the cruel and inhuman treatment of their fellow countrymen by the Government*’. The memories of the executed leaders were invoked to support recruitment:

*“James Connolly’s last word was a fervent prayer for the shooting party ... They had all read that touching letter that Pearse addressed to his mother ... They remembered Sean McDermot’s letter ... where he referred to walking out to be executed as part of the ordinary day’s work (loud cheers) ... Mr O’Sullivan appealed to those who had not joined a Sinn Fein Club to do so at once”*⁸³.

Having seen examples of the nature and volume of material in respect of the religious views of the executed leaders that was available in the public domain, and having identified the Catholic Church, the press, political parties, and some of the rebel leaders themselves as amongst those who were disseminating this information, the next chapter moves on to consider what public opinion actually is, and why these groups may have been seeking to shape it.

⁸³ p.3.

CHAPTER IV: PUBLIC OPINION

“Ireland will erect statues to her most recent rebels because they failed.”¹

The first section of this chapter seeks to establish what is meant by ‘public opinion’, including who should be included in the term ‘the public’, where public opinion can be found, and why it is so important in the political sphere. The second section of this chapter will explore why the groups identified in Chapter Three may have been trying to shape public opinion, before Chapter Five evaluates whether this was achieved.

What is ‘Public Opinion’?

In the 1880s the writer George Carslake Thompson wrote that the key characteristics of ‘genuine’ public opinion were ‘volume, persistence, rationality and earnestness’, but that there was also a qualitative element: “*a few men who hold a definite opinion earnestly and on rational grounds will outweigh a greater number who merely entertain a slight preference which they cannot explain for something vague and general*”². In the 1890s the Liberal Prime Minister, William Gladstone, wrote of the instruments by which British freedom was ‘developed and confirmed’ as being ‘Petition, Press, and Platform’, being the generally accepted view of the time that this was where public opinion was to be found.³ These ideas persisted into the twentieth century and, while in the modern day it may be difficult to entirely agree with the premise that the views of ‘*a few men who hold a definite opinion earnestly and on rational grounds*’ should outweigh the views of others, these ideas are still a useful basis for a definition of public opinion for the purposes of this dissertation: for a view to be taken as indicative of the view of the mass of the general public, it should be held by a sufficient number of people, it should be more than just a passing fad or fancy, it should have some rational basis, and newspapers can be a good indication of it – sometimes as the maker of public opinion, and sometimes as the mirror.

¹ Ernest Townley, correspondent of the London *Daily Express*, as published in the *Roscommon Herald*, 20 May 1916, p.1.

² James Thompson, *British Political Culture and the Idea of ‘Public Opinion’, 1867 – 1914*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp.92 and 244.

³ *Ibid*, pp. 86 – 87.

Building upon this idea of public opinion as a view which is held by sufficient numbers of the public, it is necessary to consider who constitutes ‘the public’, and how many people might need to hold that view to make it representative of public opinion. At the time that Carslake Thompson and Gladstone were writing, and extending into the time period covered by this dissertation, ‘the public’ could hold different meanings for different groups and in different contexts. In some contexts, the concept of ‘public opinion’ was interchangeable with the views of the electorate which, during this period, did not include women or men who did not meet certain property ownership criteria. ‘The public’ in the phrase ‘public opinion’, as well as being restricted by class and gender, was also restricted by literacy, education and respectability, and was reserved for those who could display ‘character’.⁴ However, this does not mean that certain groups were always ignored when consideration was being given to public opinion. In many instances, ‘the public’ was equated with a group of consumers (including women and people of various classes, except the ‘underclass’); the distinction between consumers and, say, employers or producers, could be as significant as class distinctions.⁵ This is where it becomes clear that who constitutes ‘the public’ can be seen as a fluid concept depending upon the specific circumstances; the man on the Clapham omnibus was a stereotyped creation of who constituted ‘the public’, but if, say, he was on the side of the employers in a labour dispute his status could change. Trying to pinpoint how many people may need to hold a view in order to be considered as representative of the public is more nebulous; this again depends upon circumstances – sometimes a majority is required, but sometimes simply the loudest voices may win out.

Important distinctions should be made between ‘the public’ and a crowd or mob. Referring back to the definition of public opinion as requiring rational thought, a mob or crowd was consistently viewed as being unable to meet this requirement; crowds were seen as being susceptible to irrational, emotional outbursts, which precluded them from being truly representative of public opinion.⁶ Thus, when considering public opinion in respect of the Rising, we should approach with caution whether or not the mobs of Dublin citizens (often the poor ‘separation’ women from the Dublin slums, whose husbands were fighting for the British in the trenches and who were reliant upon ‘separation’ payments

⁴ Thompson, *British Political Culture and the Idea of ‘Public Opinion’*, pp.4 and 31.

⁵ *Ibid*, p.35.

⁶ David Morgan-Owen, ‘Strategy, rationality and the idea of public opinion in Britain, 1870 – 1914’, *Historical Research*, 94.264 (2021), p.399.

from the government) who were said to have insulted and attacked the surrendering Volunteers, or, indeed, the crowds who were said to have cheered for them, were representative of public opinion⁷. The women, many of whom were from the ‘underclass’ of Dublin, would not have been seen as representative of public opinion at the time; whilst now we would not discount their views on the basis of their class status, consideration should be given to whether their anger at the rebels was a knee-jerk reaction to their immediate circumstances, or part of wider and more lasting public opinion. For the purposes of this study, whilst the immediate response of the crowds who encountered the rebels during the Easter Rising is useful as evidence of the initial differing reactions to the Rising and a perceived change in mood, this dissertation is concerned with the more enduring reaction of the public as a whole throughout the period 1916 to 1919.

Why were particular groups seeking to shape public opinion?

The importance of the Catholic Church in all aspects of Irish life, including politics, nationalism, republicanism and rebellion, has been much debated over the years since the Easter Rising. David W. Miller’s 1973 work, *Church, State and Nation in Ireland 1898 – 1921* posits that in Ireland from around the 1840s onwards, the ‘State’ was the human community of peoples of the entire British Isles, whilst the ‘Nation’ was the people of Ireland (although it remains unclear whether the Nation considered the Protestant minority to be part of that community), and both needed the Church to reinforce their claims to legitimacy. According to Miller, the Church exploited this to win protection for its own interests, thus creating a situation whereby the Nation’s representatives (which, up to the 1918 election, was largely the IPP) would defend the Church’s interests (particularly in respect of education), in return for which the Church hierarchy in Ireland would sanction the Nation’s aspirations to supplant the State, so long as those aspirations were ‘constitutional’ and the Nation did not advocate physical force⁸. In respect of the Church’s response to the Rising, Miller notes the difficulty in which the Catholic Church found itself; according to Catholic morality an armed insurrection against an incumbent government was morally wrong. In the few days immediately after the Rising the public mood seemed set against the rebels, but within a few weeks the public mood had shifted and, in

⁷ e.g. BMH witness statement 318 as quoted in Ruan O’Donnell and Michael O hAodha (eds), *Voices from the Easter Rising* (Dublin: Merrion Press, 2016), p.146.

⁸ David W. Miller, *Church, State and Nation in Ireland 1898 – 1921*, (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan Ltd, 1973) pp.2–6.

particular, the younger generation of the Nation seemed to support it and could be lost to Church influence if the Rising was condemned outright. Whilst some few individual clergy publicly expressed views deploring the Rising whilst it was ongoing or in the first few days after it ended, the Church collectively took some time to make up its mind.⁹ By the autumn of 1916 the Church was beginning to see that support of the Nation's younger generation (in the form of the Sinn Féin movement) would be necessary in order to secure continued support for the Church's own interests, and clergy were therefore finding ways around the link between SF and the physical force movement, and ignoring the thorny question of whether or not the Rising was theologically justifiable.¹⁰

Writing more recently (in 2016), Oliver P. Rafferty has argued that in the period before the Rising, the Church saw its duty as being to support the government as a manifestation of divine will, unless the state actively sought to undermine the Church's position. The experience of the French Revolution had illustrated that armed rebellion could be disastrous for established churches. The Church's dilemma was that in the nineteenth century, Irish nationalism had become inextricably linked with Catholicism, but there were significant numbers of the Church's adherents who espoused physical force as the only way to achieve nationalist aims. The Church did not want to completely oppose the political demands of the Irish people and risk losing influence over them, but could not totally ignore Catholic doctrine. This led to a situation whereby the bishops tended to abide by the Church's teachings in respect of the use of physical force, while the lower clergy did not feel themselves to be so constrained.¹¹ Rafferty suggests that a factor in the Church's inability to steer its followers away from political violence was its inability to be in the vanguard of changing political philosophy; whilst political ideas changed, Catholic principles were supposed to be timeless, yet the Church needed to change its stance in order to keep up-to-date with the public will.¹²

The evidence set out in Chapter Three appears to broadly support these theories. The early newspaper reports, such as those relating to the demeanour of Con Colbert before his execution, could

⁹ Miller, *Church, State and Nation in Ireland*, pp. 322–330.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 346–348.

¹¹ Oliver P. Rafferty, *Violence, Politics and Catholicism in Ireland*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2016), pp. 11–18.

¹² *Ibid*, p.40.

be interpreted as a genuine desire on the part of those members of the lower ranking clergy who administered to the rebel leaders in jail to set the record straight in respect of the rebels' final moments, and although this may have helped to steer public opinion, even these early reports were largely 'latching on' to an anti-British and anti-military change in mood which had already occurred. By the time of the later reports of memorial masses and of the Church's desire to see to the welfare of the wives and children of the dead, the Church is following a much more reactive approach, rather than a proactive steering of opinion. This is consistent with the idea that in times when the Church found it difficult to steer public opinion, it at least needed to remain relevant and in tune with the public in order to retain its influence and protect its interests.

A similar view, that of steering rather than leading, could, and has, been taken of the press. If we accept that *'the average reader chooses his newspaper not because he wants to be converted, but because his self love is flattered by seeing his formed ideas reflected in its columns'*, then the ability of the press to steer public opinion lessens; all that the press can do is cement already held beliefs¹³. The information in the press in respect of the religious beliefs of the executed leaders supported opinions already held by many in Ireland intrinsically linking Catholicism with republicanism, and viewing English rule as brutal and oppressive¹⁴. However, it is also arguable that in a country often split on sectarian lines, the press was seeking to do more than simply follow. In his 2018 article *Writing and Fighting*, Mark O'Brien comments that *"The idea of individual journalists expressing an opinion, in print, contrary to their paper's position on any given issue was simply not possible"*.¹⁵ However, whilst individual journalists may not have had a significant impact on public opinion, editorial teams were much better placed to make sure that the public were reading what the editors or backers of the papers wanted them to read. The republican movement through the republican or nationalist leaning press, were using the faith of the executed leaders to remind the public of the righteousness of the nationalist cause, and to perpetuate the deep sense of anger displayed by the public towards British rule following the executions, deportations and martial law, in order to further strengthen the nationalist cause. It is reasonable to assume that the IPP and other nationalist parties would have hoped that this would benefit them, especially coming up to the 1918 general election. However, it is

¹³ Thompson, *British Political Culture and the Idea of 'Public Opinion'*, p.97.

¹⁴ e.g. Charles Townsend, 'Religion, War and Identity in Ireland', *The Journal of Modern History*, 76.4 (2004), p.886.

¹⁵ Mark O'Brien, 'Fighting and Writing: Journalists and the 1916 Easter Rising', *Media History*, 24 3-4 (2018), p.351.

difficult to directly link the IPP to any attempts to shape public opinion through the press reports, although Redmond and his second-in-command John Dillon's questions in Parliament on the fate of the leaders and martial law were widely reported. Unfortunately for them, these reports began to show a lack of unity within the IPP as Dillon began to increasingly speak out against the British government's response to the Rising, as he saw this '*manufacturing Sinn Feiners on every side*'¹⁶.

Such manipulation of the religious beliefs of the leaders was not limited to republicans or nationalists. Unionists also hoped to use the same images to further their cause, supporting arguments that to give in to republicanism or nationalism and to accept any form of Home Rule would be tantamount to allowing the country to become Catholic. The strong association between the Rising and Catholicism helped the Unionist argument that 'Home Rule is Rome Rule' and should be vehemently opposed, and that the separation of Ulster from the rest of the country would be preferable to Catholic rule¹⁷.

As illustrated above, some of the leaders, such as Patrick Pearse, had evidently left written works designed to further the republican cause. He and some of the other leaders (such as James Connolly) were reliant on British soldiers to pass on the works that they wrote whilst in Kilmainham Gaol to family and supporters (although Connolly asked his daughter, Nora, to smuggle out a draft of his speech from his court martial)¹⁸. They were then equally reliant on family and supporters to disseminate those works to the wider public, whether via the newspapers or through other means. Pearse's view was that his own generation had lost the right to national freedom by its decadence and servility, and that this could only be rejuvenated by a blood sacrifice. For him, the right to freedom could only be won by arms, and he saw his sacrifice as being necessary to redeem his generation and allow the next generation to win the ultimate goal of full Irish freedom¹⁹.

So, the Catholic Church was encouraging stories of the piety of the executed leaders so that it could be seen to be keeping pace with public opinion, and thus maintain its influence and relevance.

¹⁶ F.S.L. Lyons, 'Dillon, Redmond and the Irish Home Rulers' in *Leaders and Men of the Easter Rising: Dublin 1916* ed F.X. Martin, (London: Methuen, 1967), p.34.

¹⁷ Miller, *Church, State and Nation in Ireland*, pp.268 and 293-307.

¹⁸ Barton, *Secret Court Martial Records*, p.341.

¹⁹ David Thornley, 'Patrick Pearse – The Evolution of a Republican' in *Leaders and Men of the Easter Rising* ed. Martin, pp.155-162.

The press was doing much the same, whilst the more nationalist press was, as part of the general nationalist or republican movement, using the religious imagery around the executed to create greater awareness of and sympathy for the cause of nationalism. Some of the leaders themselves had deliberately left works that used religious imagery to link the rebellion with devotion to God, family and country, and so further the republican cause, with the ultimate goal of a free Ireland. But to what extent was any of this achieved?

CHAPTER V: EFFECT

“People will say hard things of us now, but later on they will praise us.”¹

This chapter will consider what impact the information that was in the public domain had on the shaping of public opinion in Ireland, and to what extent this impact was as desired.

How was Irish public opinion shaped by information about the religious beliefs of the executed leaders?

The evidence discussed above shows that between Easter 1916 and early 1919 there was a significant amount of information in the public domain in respect of the religious beliefs of the executed leaders. There was considerably more in the public domain in 1916 in the immediate weeks and months after the Rising, when the traditionally accepted link between Catholicism and nationalism / republicanism was reinforced by references to the executed rebels as martyrs for Ireland, and by the emphasis, in particular, on their religious devotion, particularly in the hours before their deaths. These references in the press tailed off from 1917 onwards, but were still emphasized at key points, such as the annual anniversaries of the Rising, the Masses held during anniversaries of the executions, and during fund raising activities. It is arguable that in their use of the images of the leaders, the press, the Church and political groupings such as SF or the IPP were simply following a shift in public opinion which had already become more sympathetic towards the leaders and their cause, had turned against British rule, and was increasingly looking for a degree of Irish autonomy. But it is also the case that these press reports helped to stoke the fire of public opinion; the strong religious imagery kept the anti-British nationalist sentiment alive and helped to strengthen it throughout the period between the Rising and the War of Independence.

¹ Patrick Pearse in a letter to his mother dated 3 May 1916, as published in Piaras F. MacLochlainn, *Last Words, Letters and Statements of the Leaders Executed after the Rising at Easter 1916* (Dublin: Stationary Office, 1990), p.33.

Was this what was intended?

In the short term, this strategy appears to have been successful to an extent for all players, except the IPP. The Catholic Church's hierarchy had done some damage to the standing of the Church by its hesitancy in deciding whether it supported or condemned the Rising, and those individual clergy who had come out against the Rising in its immediate aftermath had not helped the Church's position². However, by emphasizing the apparently staunchly held Catholic beliefs of the leaders, the views of some of the lower clergy and the popularity of memorial masses, combined with the Church's support for SF over the issue of conscription in the run up to the 1918 election, helped to improve the lot of the Church by the time of the War of Independence³. The republican movement was benefitting from the sympathy that the reports about the leaders was garnering and the way that the reporting of the executions, the demeanour and faith of the leaders, and the memorial Masses, were keeping the republican cause firmly in the public eye. This is perhaps most apparent in the 1918 general election results, when SF, campaigning on a militant republican platform (although it is not clear to what extent the public were fully aware of this) won 73 seats. What is equally clear is that the IPP, still pushing for Home Rule, were no longer a force in Irish politics, keeping only 7 seats⁴. The IPP's support for Home Rule and their seeming support for conscription (or, at least, for Irishmen to join the British army) and the linking of republicanism and nationalism with SF sounded the death knell for them after this election.

In the longer term, the portrayals of the executed rebels and the continuing effect that this had on fomenting republican or nationalist sympathies fed in to the political and social climate in Ireland that, ultimately, enabled the Irish War of Independence to take place. The overwhelming success of SF at the 1918 election, with their openly militant views and their policy of abstention from attending Westminster, meant that the 73 SF MPs elected in 1918 (or at least those of them that were not in English prisons or in exile at the time), rather than taking their seats at Westminster, formed an independent parliament of Ireland, the Dáil Éireann, from 21 January 1919. This attempt to establish an independent state structure was soon accompanied by the guerilla warfare of the War of

² David W. Miller, *Church, State and Nation in Ireland 1898 – 1921*, (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan Ltd, 1973), pp.340-342

³ *Ibid.*, pp.450–451.

⁴ Statistics obtained from Wikipedia: [1918 United Kingdom general election - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1918_United_Kingdom_general_election)

Independence, followed by the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, which in turn led to the Irish Civil War.⁵ Arguably, therefore, the hopes of the rebel leaders and wider republican movement were achieved, as the public perceptions of the piety of the leaders formed a link in the chain of events which, much further down the line, led to an Irish Republic. From the Church's point of view, linking itself so intimately to the Rising helped to reconnect it with the new generation of nationalists in SF, so continuing its predominant position over Irish political and social affairs. However, this success comes with a major caveat; the partition of Ireland and, certainly from the Church's perspective, the abandonment of Catholics in Ulster and loss of influence in the North.

⁵ Charles Townsend, *Easter 1916 The Irish Rebellion*, (London: Penguin, 2005), p.344.

CONCLUSION

“While there have been improvements since it was first established, the southern state is not the Republic proclaimed in 1916”.¹

The religious beliefs of the executed leaders have been considered in various scholarly works since the rebellion, as has the public reaction to the Rising. Early works, up to around the time of the fiftieth anniversary, were largely looking at the leaders as modern-day martyrs – pious, devout and wholly committed to their cause. During the 1960s and 1970s, revisionist works started to question this, asking whether the Rising had really achieved anything beyond a tragic loss of life, damage to the city of Dublin and a legacy of violence. The actions and beliefs of the martyred leaders were more critically analysed, and more calculated motives were attributed to them. The centenary celebrations and their build up brought a more nuanced look at the Rising and its long-term effect. This dissertation has sought to build on these works by analysing the newspapers of the time in order to assess what information about the leaders and their religious beliefs was available to the public, and how this was used to shape public opinion.

During the Rising and in the few days immediately after it, initial public reaction to the Rising and its leaders was mixed; a small number of, one would suspect, already partisan nationalist members of the public were supportive of the rebels, whilst some sections of the public (often the poorest, ‘separation’ women from the Dublin slums) were openly hostile, and many were simply indifferent or, at most, mildly curious. But as the British response to the Rising – martial law, executions, censorship, random arrests, and deportations – became apparent, the public mood began to shift. This was partly a natural reaction to the measures that the British had put in place following the rebellion, in circumstances where many Irishmen and women had a widely held belief that Ireland had been subjected to centuries of oppressive foreign rule at the hands of the British. But it was also as a result of these beliefs being honed and strengthened by the imagery of the executed rebels as Catholic martyrs dying for their faith and their country that was put into the public domain through the newspapers, enabling the wider nationalist movement to concentrate the minds of the public, certainly

¹ Gerry Adams at the 2016 centenary commemoration in Belfast as quoted on the BBC: < [Easter Rising 1916: Parade being held in west Belfast - BBC News](#) > [27 May 2024]

in the south, to the achievement of an independent Ireland.

The images of the executed rebels were a powerful tool, particularly for the Church and for the nationalist/republican movement (albeit that the Church was perhaps a little late to realise this). The portraits of the executed men as brave and pious martyrs who fought and died for their country, for their families and for God, illustrated to the public the justness of the republican cause and, conversely, how unfair, brutal and disproportionate was the British response. The failure of the IPP to support the Rising, combined with their support for Home Rule and their perceived support for conscription, compared with the SF doctrine of opposition to Home Rule at any cost, made the IPP's losses in the 1918 election almost inevitable in an environment where the general public was being regularly reminded of the martyr status of the executed leaders. Whilst by 1918 the stories of the leaders were perhaps not as frequently to be found in the papers as they had been in 1916, the memorial masses around the anniversaries of their deaths (which, it must be recalled, went all the way through to August in the case of Roger Casement), the advertisements for portraits and postcards, the references to the leaders in connection with fund raising, and the day-to-day reminders of their names in the names of SF Clubs and football and hurling teams, all combined to keep the images of the leaders in the public mind.

As well as benefitting SF and the republican/nationalist movements, this benefited the Catholic Church, which had not had a consistent line in respect of its response to the Rising and so had seemed out of step with public opinion. The portrayal of the leaders as martyrs for their faith and for their country, and the continued stories of their deep devotion and the way in which the clergy ministered to them before their deaths, kept the Church relevant and so able to retain its influence over its congregation. However, in the case of the Church perhaps more than any other organisation, it can be seen that it is not so easy to say whether the images of the leaders were helping to create public opinion, or whether they were being used more to strengthen and extend already held beliefs. The information put into the public domain in the weeks immediately after the Rising by those few members of the lower clergy who attended to the leaders in prison was powerful and influential. The information put into the public domain later, such as that regarding the Masses said for the souls of the departed, was much more in tune with changes in public opinion that were already in evidence, rather than shaping that opinion.

It would appear that some of the executed leaders, such as Patrick Pearse, were able to ensure through their writings that the image of them left behind after their deaths helped achieve their ultimate republican goal – an independent Ireland, although other groups, such as Unionists, used those same images for their own purposes. Some of the leaders, such as Con Colbert, also helped achieve this, but arguably without the deliberate calculation that can be seen in Pearse’s works. However, although the use of the religious beliefs of the executed assisted SF, the republican movement and the Catholic Church, the ultimate price that was paid was the partitioning of the island of Ireland; this, and the ongoing legacy of the leaders, remain controversial issues to this day.



Figure 3: Friends of Sinn Féin 2016 Commemorative Badge

Source: Personal collection

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