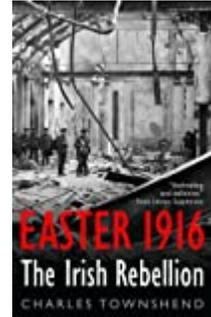




**Charles Townsend.** *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2006. xvii + 442 pp. \$28.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-704-6.



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### **A Mixed Irish Blessing at Easter**

Charles Townsend, professor of history at the University of Keele, has written a well-researched, detailed account of one of the most significant events in Irish history, the Easter Rebellion of 1916. Using a number of recently released participants' accounts of the armed rising in Dublin and several other locations across Ireland, Townsend provides an in-depth account of the Easter week events of 1916, and also sets them in their historical context as well.

As is well known to even the most casual student of Irish history (to say nothing of observers of today's Irish politics), a long tradition of resistance and rebellion to English/British oppression exists in the Emerald Isle. Townsend provides a cursory overview of previous acts of violence in the modern era by Irish rebels, though a more detailed look at this backdrop would certainly have been useful. He also notes that although previous nationalist movements such as that led by Daniel O'Connell and Charles Stewart Parnell failed to achieve either Home Rule or independence for the Irish, nevertheless, by the end of the nineteenth century, "out of the debris of the great nationalist mobilization of the 1880s was emerg-

ing another basis for revolutionary action" (p. 6). As Townsend demonstrates, however, this new movement was far more culturally based than one which relied only on politics or violence, as had been the case in the past. It was, rather, an Irish identity based on "national consciousness," and "the key to this was language" (p. 6). A Gaelic revival of the 1880s, in the form of the Gaelic Athletic Association, "to revive traditional Irish sports" (p. 7) was strongly linked to separatism, as was the Gaelic League (1893), an association for cultural identification through a stress on language. In addition, cultural nationalism around the turn of the century was also influenced by the centennial of the island's 1798 Rebellion, opposition to the Boer War in Ireland, and the rise of Sinn Fein ("ourselves alone"), led by Arthur Griffith, a party whose very name stressed "not looking outside Ireland for the accomplishment of their aims" (p. 11).

In the course of describing the cultural and political developments leading up to the military action in Ireland in 1916, Townsend provides excellent portraits of the leaders on both sides of the brief conflict. The nationalists who organized the rebellion included many with ex-

perience in political agitation. Thomas Clarke had been imprisoned for fifteen years over his attempt at bombings in England in 1883; James Connolly was a British army deserter who founded the Irish Citizen Army in 1913; Sean MacDermott was an Irish Republican Brotherhood military committee member by 1915; and Joseph Plunkett was not only a cultural nationalist, but also attempted to procure German arms for his Irish cause along with Sir Roger Casement, the most internationally high-profile nationalist. The Rising's central nationalist figure was Patrick Pearse, trained as a barrister, but prominent in literary and educational pursuits associated with the emerging Irish cultural nationalism by the early 1900s. This activity led to much more militant leanings for the popular Pearse, who was instrumental in planning the 1916 rebellion, and, in its midst, became Commander-in-Chief of the Army of the Irish Republic in Dublin as the fighting raged during Easter Week.

Townsend, however, also points out that the would-be revolutionaries who began the Easter Rising were not without their opponents. In fact, not only did the British and Irish Protestants stand in the way of a free and united Irish nation, so too did other Irishmen who favored Home Rule and accommodation. This resistance came most notably in the form of John Redmond, a Nationalist MP from County Wexford who sought Home Rule and tried to achieve this by having the Irish demonstrate their willingness to play nice with the British. By this, he meant support for the British war effort beginning in 1914 in the form of enlistments. While Redmond was no unionist, he was certainly much more conservative in his politics and constitutional position than those who eventually sought to uncouple Ireland from Britain through violence.

The rebels themselves had a different notion of what the Great War could mean for their cause. "England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity" was a common expression in the war's first few weeks, and it is no coincidence that the rising was planned to take advantage of Britain's distracting military commitment in Europe. Yet what emerges from Townsend's very detailed account of the months leading up to the rising on Easter Monday is a story of inertia and incompetence, a rebellion that seemed to have a life of its own that was beyond the control of the insurgents, but also beyond the understanding of those charged with its repression—at least at first. The Rebellion was initially planned for Easter Sunday, but due to a conflict within the leadership of the nationalists, Eoin MacNeill of the Irish Volunteers, who did not support the plans for rebellion, spread the word around much of the country that the rising had been called off.

This created a host of organizational, logistical, and mobilization problems, all of which seem to have sucked much of the life out of the insurrection, which the rest of the organizers managed to start the next day, April 24. Townsend's account of the actual events shows almost complete confusion among the officers and rank and file who turned out with a hodge-podge of weapons and equipment to take over Dublin (and notably the General Post Office there, now the symbol of the 1916 events). Where men had guns, they had little ammunition; where they had bullets, they had little food. There was little coordination among the units spread out over the city, particularly once British troops effectively ended communications and the ability of the Irish to reinforce their separated positions. The rising had the look of an impromptu affair, not well-coordinated or thought out. In the end, only about twelve hundred men mobilized for the rising, ensuring that it would ultimately be suppressed.

Despite what even the Irish leaders must have known was inevitable, the disorganized British response to the rising meant that, for the first few days of the violence, many of those crown units haphazardly thrown into the fray were significantly bloodied. In fact, the British response looks in retrospect to have been absurdly slapdash, partially due to their astonishing unpreparedness for the rebellion, as Townsend aptly portrays. Nevertheless, within days, British officials understood the seriousness of what was transpiring in Dublin and moved in to crush it by April 30, an effort commanded by Gen. John Maxwell. What to do after the rebels surrendered became a subsequent quandary for British officials, both civil and military. Martial law was declared quite quickly, which not only affected all of the Irish in the city (even those who wanted nothing to do with what they considered to be a foolhardy enterprise), but drove many to resent the British and transfer their sympathies—if not their allegiance—to the rebels. This was particularly true, Townsend concludes, by the execution of sixteen of the rebel leaders, including Pearse. Although many soldiers and some civilians had been killed and property damage was significant, martial law and the shootings of rebel leaders was perceived by a large segment of the populace as unwarranted and heavy-handed, and it ultimately proved instrumental in driving many of the Irish into the camp of the nationalists. "It was a shift that would have epochal consequences," Townsend observes, concluding that while the 1916 rising failed, it created enough support for an Irish Republic that eventually the British were forced to yield this question (p. 305).

*Easter 1916* is a detailed analysis of the Irish rising

based on sound research, and it is written with capable prose. The amount of detail in the descriptions of the actual conflict in Dublin, however, make it difficult to follow the action, even with several maps. The narrative seems to jump from scene to scene all over the city, which makes the progress of the rising and its suppression murky at times. More significantly, the story Townsend tells is more from the side of the nationalist rebels than their British foes, and the perspective of the Irish Protestants is largely missing.

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