

“The Struggle for Irish Independence, 1921”¹

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Introduction

In 1921 Irish republican revolutionaries debated whether to accept an offer from England to have an independent state in three-quarters of the country (the south), leaving the northern quarter under English rule. The soldier Michael Collins and the politician Eamon de Valera are the two most well-known figures in this debate. The issue in a nutshell was whether to fight on for total independence against difficult odds, or to accept the partition of the country. This debate hinged on the pros and cons of a compromise outcome to a revolutionary/colonial situation.

That the stakes were high had been realized by both sides. As early as December 16, Cathal Brugha of the anti-treaty forces confessed: “I am afraid this thing which has happened within the last fortnight makes a fight inevitable.” And Liam de Roiste, of the pro-treaty group acknowledged on December 22, “There is a danger of fratricidal strife, or at least bewildering confusion, on an issue which many of us cannot understand.”²

Background

While it is possible to trace the complexities of modern Irish history to the era of

¹ Thanks to Robert Foran for his insightful comments on this case study.

² All the quotes in this case are taken from the Treaty debates, and are grouped together in a museum exhibit on Irish history at the Kilmainham Gaol [Jail] in Dublin. They have been most graciously reproduced and sent to us by the museum

the Norman Conquests, the seventeenth century is the better point of departure. It was in that turbulent century that English governments, both monarchical and revolutionary, initiated the large-scale settlement of English and Scotsmen in the greater Dublin area, in the midlands and south (counties Cork, Kerry, Tipperary, Limerick, Galway, and Mayo), and particularly in the northern counties of Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry, Tyrone, Cavan, Monaghan, and Donegal (the first six of these constitute today's Ulster). Prior to this migration, London's policies that discriminated against the Irish (many of whose large landowners, we should recall, were, like the English gentry of the time, of Anglo-Norman descent) were mitigated by the fact that the on-site representatives of the Crown were few (thereby encouraging intermarriage) and also because religion had yet to become the basis of distinction between rulers and ruled, in spite of both Henry VIII's and Elizabeth I's efforts to make it such. When Ireland was flooded by waves of proud Protestant settlers in the seventeenth century, not only was the country effectively divided into two nations of Catholics and Protestants, but into Protestant landowners and Catholic tenants. By century's end, "Irish" Protestants owned more than eighty percent of the country's surface.

At the beginning of the next century, London protected the multi-fold interests of their "Irish" co-religionists by barring Catholics from everything from holding public office to purchasing land from Protestants. However, to the degree that Irish Protestants benefited from the political disenfranchisement of Irish Catholics, the English Crown and the country's merchants profited economically from the colonial status of both populations. All Irish manufactures and agricultural products (primarily linen and cattle)

that could compete with England's own output were denied access to both the English and foreign markets by numerous acts of Parliament. The nationalism to which these economic sanctions gave rise was distinctly Protestant in leadership (Irish Catholic nationalism, as we shall see, would emerge in the second half of the nineteenth century) and, like its American counterpart, spurred talk of political independence. Home Rule (as independence is frequently referred to in the Irish context) was too risky a prospect in a country in which the majority of its inhabitants were politically ignored and economically strapped: instead, Protestant Irish elites settled for a legislative body acting within the Empire and whose decisions were scrutinized by London. Still, some Irish Protestants, inspired by the example of the French Revolution, thought the fight for an independent Ireland a noble one, regardless of the religious composition of the Irish people. Such was Wolfe Tone whose United Irishmen movement sought to unite Catholics and [Protestant] Dissenters against British colonial rule and Catholic disenfranchisement. Following the movement's defeat by combined Protestant Irish and English forces, the English government, by bribery and double-talk, coaxed the Irish Parliament to agree to an Act of Union which politically joined Ireland to England. In essence, this measure rendered the potentially revolutionary Irish Catholic majority a minority constituency within the larger political realm of the British Isles.

Apart from the Emancipation Act of 1829 that, thanks to the agitation of Daniel O'Connell, won (select) Catholics the right to elect representatives and to sit in Westminster, the first half of the nineteenth century is known primarily for the Great Famine. Claiming the lives of roughly a million Irish men and women between 1845 and 1851, forcing another million to emigrate in the same period (mainly to American urban

centers), and facilitating the eviction of countless Catholic peasants who lacked the means to make rent payments, the famine put the land question at the forefront of Catholic Irish nationalism. The population fell from 8,175,124 in 1841 to 6,552,385 in 1851 and 4,704,750 in 1891. Accordingly, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (founded in 1858 whose members were known as *Fenians*) and the Land League founded twenty years later by Michael Davitt, agitated for more than fair rents, but for Catholic ownership of the land Catholics tilled. Of course, once this goal was put on the nationalist agenda, it was only a matter of time before nationalists generally (like Protestant Charles Stewart Parnell) would demand its complement, Home Rule. In any event, to the first of these plights the British government responded with the Land Act of 1881 that protected peasants (Catholic in the main) from arbitrary evictions, while to the second it enacted the Land Purchase Act. This last measure undeniably changed the face of land ownership in Ireland; from only three percent in 1870, the percentage of Irish farmers who owned their land climbed to twelve percent in 1895, thirty percent in 1905, and to roughly two-thirds at the close of the First World War. Finally, to commemorate Wolfe Tone's United Irishmen movement, Arthur Griffith, founder-editor of the *United Irishman*, gave Irish nationalism a new direction in 1898 with the slogan Sinn Fein. Meaning "ourselves" in Gaelic, Griffith used it to advocate semi-independence on the Hungarian model of the *Ausgleich* or Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the near future, Sinn Fein would come to mean Irish independence at all costs.

The implications of these and related developments were not lost on the Protestants of Ulster who traditionally constituted on the order of fifty to sixty percent of the region's total population. In their eyes, Home Rule was the slope that would take

them from regional dominance to national dependence in no time at all. This prospect was wholly unacceptable to Ulstermen: the political settlement they wanted was to remain united with England. Consequently, in 1905 they formed the Ulster Unionist Council and its military wing, the Ulster Volunteers, both of which were later headed by Protestant nationalists Edward Carson and James Craig. Police aggression against striking Dublin transit workers in 1913 pushed southern nationalists to respond in kind with the creation of the Irish Volunteers in 1914: in 1919, this military organization became the Irish Republican Army. The more militant members of both the Volunteers and the Irish Republican Brotherhood attempted to establish a politically independent Ireland in 1916, by laying siege of downtown Dublin for nearly a week. The uprising was scheduled to occur all over the country on that Easter Sunday. However, promised arms and support from Germany and the U.S. never materialized. This caused many local rebel leaders to tell their militias that this was not the right moment to rise. The Easter Uprising, as this event is known, did not reflect the political aspirations of the majority of Irish men and women, especially among the poor of Dublin, for many of whom the only source of income came from British unemployment benefits (the dole) or the wages of Irish soldiers fighting for England in World War 1. But the British government's execution of roughly a score of the "rebel" leaders and the arrest of some 3,000 sympathizers pushed many Catholic skeptics into the camp of the more radical nationalists. The election of Eamon de Valera (the only Easter Uprising commandant whose execution was stayed) as head of both Sinn Fein and the Irish Volunteers signaled this new militant nationalist turn.

The British government took a carrot and stick approach to these developments. On the one hand, Prime Minister David Lloyd George opened discussions on the political

future of Ireland in 1916 with the country's constitutional leaders: while on the other, he suppressed republican literature and jailed republican leaders like Griffith and de Valera. Insult was added to injury when the English Parliament passed the Conscription Act in 1918 which would have pressed young Irishmen into English trenches on the continent. Popular protest forced the British government to rescind the measure. Taking advantage of the nationalist momentum, Sinn Fein again declared Irish independence and formed its own Irish Parliament or *Dail Eireann* in January of the following year. As one can well imagine, until a new home bill was drafted by Lloyd George's cabinet in 1920 and meetings convened in the following year between the British government and now Ireland's popular leaders, the country was marred by violent clashes between the IRA, the Royal Irish Constabulary, and the Ulster Volunteers.

Formal proceedings began in July 1921 and continued with intermissions until the treaty was signed at 2:30 a.m. on December 6 [the text is contained in Appendix 2]. On the Irish side, the principal (that is, the signatories of the treaty) negotiators were Sinn Fein founder Arthur Griffith, Michael Collins, George Gavan Duffy, Eamonn Duggan, and Robert Barton. Representing the British Government were Prime Minister David Lloyd George, Lord Birkenhead, Austen Chamberlain, Winston Churchill, Sir Gordon Hewart, Sir Lamington Worthington-Evans, and Sir Hamar Greenwood. In essence, the new home bill recognized two Irelands – one comprising six Ulster counties, the other, the remaining twenty-six – for which it proposed two separate Parliaments. However, the stipulation that indeed made this home bill different from earlier ones was that the two Irelands should remain within the British Empire. In other words, like Canada, South Africa, and Australia, Ireland would have “dominion” status within the English Commonwealth. This

requirement was a blow to die-hard republicans, for in a delicate – and controversial – compromise, it upheld a crucial goal of the Ulster Unionists.

The Debates

On December 14, 1921, Arthur Griffith opened the treaty debates in the following way:

I want you to understand that the difference between us and the members of the Cabinet at home in the end was not the vital difference between the Republic and the Crown. It was a difference of degree of recognition of the Crown ... and on that small difference to ask the people of Ireland to go back to war is a thing I will never do.

Liam Mellows responded on December 17:

Irish independence existed since 21st January 1919, and it is not today we ask for the Republic. We are defending it. Now to me at least it has been an actual thing, not something to be visualised. I hope before God I am prepared to go down in this struggle rather than surrender this principle.

On December 19, Austin Stack spoke against the treaty, declaring “I am for what is Ireland’s right, full independence and nothing short of it.” Eamon de Valera, future president of the Republic of Ireland, added:

I am against this Treaty because it does not reconcile Irish national aspirations with association with the British Government.... I am against this Treaty because it will not end the centuries of conflict between the two nations of Great Britain and Ireland.... The Irish people would not want me to save them materially at the expense of their national honour.

Michael Collins, the most famous underground military leader, spoke to the question of national honor in reply:

deputies have spoken about whether dead men would approve of it, and they have spoken of whether children yet unborn will approve of it, but few of them have spoken as to whether the living approve of it.... There is no man here who has more regard for the dead men than I have. I don't think it is fair to be quoting them against us. I think the decision ought to be a clear decision on the documents as they are before us – on the Treaty as it is before us.

On this point, Collins argued, “In my opinion it gives us freedom, not the ultimate freedom that all nations desire and develop to, but freedom to achieve it,” and Kevin O’Higgins added, “Yes, if we go into the Empire we go in, not sliding in, attempting to throw dust in our people’s eyes, but we go in with our heads up.” Sean MacKeon agreed on the pragmatics and vision of accepting the treaty:

I hold that this Treaty between the two nations gives us not shadows but real substances, and for that reason I am ready to support it. Furthermore, this Treaty gives Ireland the chance for the first time in 700 years to develop her own life in her own way, to develop Ireland for all, every man and woman, without distinction of creed or class or politics.

One woman who disagreed with this assessment was Mrs. Thomas Clarke, who told the deputies on December 22: “It is to me a simple question of right and wrong. To my mind it is a surrender of all our national ideals.” For Sean Ruttledge, speaking a day earlier, it was equally a matter of never compromising his principles: “No matter how I struggle with my conscience, it would not let me do that – to deviate from the straight uncompromising path of an Irish Republican.”

Gavan Duffy replied to this [on December 21]: “I am going to recommend this Treaty to you very reluctantly, but very sincerely, because I see no alternative.... We lost the Republic of Ireland in order to save the people of Ireland.” This was also the view of Richard Mulcahey on December 22, who noted: “I see no solid spot of ground upon

which the Irish people can put its political feet but upon this Treaty.” The day before, W. T. Cosgrave summoned the very dead who had been invoked against the treaty, judging: “Now this Treaty ... represents work that has been done in five years; greater than was accomplished by Emmet, O’Connell, Mitchel, Davis, Smith O’Brien, and Parnell, down even to Mr. Redmond with a united country behind him.”

The debates continued into January, sounding the same themes. On January 4, Liam Mellows argued against: “There was no question of making a bargain over this thing, over the honour of Ireland, because I hold that the honour of Ireland is too sacred a thing to make a bargain over.” The same day, Mrs. Margaret Pearse, mother of the slain independence fighter, Patrick Pearse, returned to the memory of those who had fallen in the struggle for independence: “But even the Black-and-Tans [a paramilitary organization that terrorized the catholic population]alone would not frighten me as much as if I accepted that Treaty; because I feel in my heart ... that the ghosts of my sons would haunt me.” Arthur Griffith, speaking for the Treaty three days later [January 7, 1922], also based his case on history and the present generation:

I am told that the people of Ireland elected us to get a Republic. They elected us in 1918 to get rid of the Parliamentary party; they elected us in 1921 as a gesture ... of defiance to the Black-and-Tans; they elected us, not as doctrinaire Republicans, but as men looking for freedom and independence.

Mary MacSwiney had the last word, against the Treaty, on January 9:

I maintain that the Free State ... must not use the flag of the Irish Republic.... Every honest Republican would resent any act of the Free State to use that flag until they have got the sanction of the Irish people to do what they are doing; and if they get that, those of us who are Republicans still

will use our flag with a black band until the Dominion status is changed into a Republic.

Outcome

The vote was close: 64 voted in favor of the treaty, and 57 opposed it. This would have dramatic consequences for the independence movement, which soon deteriorated into a bitter, if short-lived, civil war.

Only a minority of the Irish people rejected the treaty on republican grounds: by and large, the majority were willing to accept the settlement provided that it ended the bloodshed. De Valera, leader of the Irish government who did not attend the talks after July, stood against public opinion and objected to the treaty on two counts: one, that the delegates had not conferred with him before signing it: and two, that the treaty required that every member of the Irish government pledge allegiance to the British Crown (“that I will be faithful to H.M. King George V, his heirs and successors by law”). Though his own treaty proposal – known as “document no. 2 – really only differed from the original by the removal of the oath, de Valera used this point to resign as President to reign in late January, found an anti-treaty party – *Cumann na Poblachta* (League of the Republic) – in March, and began a speaking tour in which he repeated that it would become necessary to shed the blood of Irish traitors in order to secure Irish independence. De Valera’s words and actions encouraged anti-Provisional Government (headed by Michael Collins) activities. Thus, in April, the anti-treaty faction of the IRA occupied Dublin’s Four Courts, Fowler Hall, the Masonic Hall, Kilmainham Jail, and the Kildare Street Club. The June 16 election results which gave the Collins/Griffith party fifty-eight seats to *Cumann na Poblachta*’s thirty-six spurred Collins to take military action against the occupation

carried out by the anti-treaty faction. On June 28 he ordered the bombardment of Four Courts. Two days later, a white flag emerged from one of the blown out walls. Revenge, however, would soon be taken on Collins: within the year he would lose his life in an ambush. Eamon de Valera became president of Ireland shortly after.

Ireland would remain divided into Northern Ireland, attached to Great Britain, and the Republic of Ireland, the independent fruit of the treaty negotiated. The centuries-long struggle for full independence and a united Ireland continues to this day, having passed through the violent decades of the 1960s and 1970s when the IRA battled the English at home and abroad, to the current negotiations among the government of England, the Ulster Protestants, and Sinn Fein.

Appendix

Timeline of Irish History

17 th century	Protestants from England and Scotland start to settle in large numbers in Ireland.
1800	The Act of Union dissolves the Dublin Parliament and joins Ireland politically to England.
1829	The Emancipation Act gives limited political representation to Irish Catholics in England's parliament.
1845-51	The Great Famine kills one million people, forces the emigration of one million more, and makes large numbers of Catholic peasants landless.
1858	The Irish Republican Brotherhood – the Fenians – is formed to advance the land rights of Catholic peasants.
1881	The Land Act protects peasants from arbitrary evictions.
1898	Arthur Griffith coins the phrase “Sinn Fein” (Ourselves) to frame the struggle for independence.
1905	Ulster Protestants organize the Unionist Council and Ulster Volunteers to oppose Home Rule and remain part of the British Empire.
1914	Catholics in the south form the Irish Volunteers to counter Protestant and British armed units; in 1919 they become known as the Irish Republican Army
1916	The Easter Uprising in Dublin by nationalists against the British ends with executions of all rebel leaders except Eamon de Valera, who becomes head of Sinn Fein and the Irish Volunteers.
1918-19	Sinn Fein declares Irish independence and sets up a parliament, the Dail Eirann, in January 1919. Violence mounts on all sides.
1921	Negotiations for independence begin in July and conclude with the signing of the draft treaty on December 6.
1921-22	The treaty is debated by the Irish parliament and narrowly passed by a vote of 64 to 57, in January 1922.

1922-23

Civil war breaks out between partisans of the treaty, led by Michael Collins, and opponents, led by Eamon de Valera. Collins is killed in an ambush in 1923. De Valera becomes president of a divided Ireland.