



Face of rebellion paid price for beliefs

It was not by chance that Pádraig Pearse was the first rebel court-martialled and killed, writes

Ruán O'Donnell

PÁDRAIG PEARSE was, for many contemporaries in Ireland and the US, the public face of the 1916 Rising.

A minor celebrity due to his prominence in Irish language activism and progressive education, Pearse was a frequent participant in political affairs from 1911. His role as president of the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic ensured close attention from his enemies in the aftermath of Easter Week.

It was no coincidence that Pearse was the first to be court-martialled in Richmond Barracks and to be shot by firing squad in Kilmainham Prison.

Behind closed doors, his revolutionary acumen had warranted his position as Director of Military Operations for the Irish Volunteers, which he helped found in late 1913.

Amid great secrecy, he was from May 1915 a member of the Military Committee of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) which fomented the revolt.

A private, reserved, and serious man, his character was subjected to posthumous vilification by those he surpassed in achievement in life. Hailed, with few exceptions, by persons privy to his dynamic manoeuvres during the advent and course of the Rising, the potency of his radical legacy unnerved conservative sections of the Irish establishment during the 'Long War' of 1968-1998.

Born in Dublin in 1879, Pearse was raised in an unconventional lower middle-class household. Living within earshot of some of the most deprived tenement slums in Dublin, a profitable stone-carv-

ing business ensured he was insulated from the privations endured by near neighbours.

The family home in Great Brunswick St faced into the campus of Trinity College Dublin, bastion of Ireland's pro-imperial hierarchy, which he challenged in adulthood. By no means oblivious to the phenomenon of living in a capital without a parliament since 1801, the influences of his well-read and philosophical English father and Fenian-linked Irish mother were clear from an early age.

Attending the Christian Brothers School in Westland Row gave Pearse an exceptionally high standard of Irish for a Dubliner, enabling him to rise quickly to the Gaelic League's highest levels at a time of rapid expansion. His acute sense of Irishness and innate hostility to 'anglicisation' drove him inexorably towards political militancy.

Pearse's activist mentality manifested in virtually all his endeavours. With degrees in Arts from University College Dublin and Law from Trinity, Pearse was already a published essayist and had attended international Celtic conferences. He retained links to the student world and agitated for the increased status of the national language.

From 1903, Gaelic League duties brought him to Connacht where he acquired a small property at Rosmuc in Galway. Cultural contacts made across the island, and his familiarity with the far reaches of the country, later benefitted his political advocacy.

Initially, Pearse envisioned bilingual education as a means to restore Irish primacy, and in September 1908 he founded St Enda's College where the 'Direct Method' of teaching promised results.

He later stated: "We are convinced that we are training useful citizens for a free Ireland". The boys were, however, regarded in Westminster as mere subjects of a crown which many in Ireland regarded as alien, sectarian, undemocratic, and remote.

Whereas Home Rule offered material advances on the road to self-determination, the supremacist tendencies of Britain's 'empire loyalists' and their Irish allies threatened constitutional mayhem. Pearse famously welcomed Home Rule at a colossal rally in O'Connell St in March 1912 when the Irish Parliamentary Party was on the cusp of victory.

Primarily interested in refocusing educational policy to meet what he regarded as Irish interests, Pearse warned: "If we are cheated once more there will be red war in Ireland."

The reaction of those hostile to the limited form of self-rule envisaged spurred the IRB to proactivity.

In the midst of the socially destructive Lockout of 1913, republicans cultivated nationalists and selected militants, not least Pearse, in order to found the Irish Volunteers (Óglaigh na hÉireann) on November 25. This mass-recruited counterweight to the Ulster Volunteer Force provided the conspiring IRB with a front group capable of waging unilateral insurrection, despite the fact that the majority of its membership had no such ambitions.

Involved in co-opting Eoin MacNeill as nominal chief-of-staff, Pearse played a significant role in developing the organisation. A lecture tour of the US in the spring of 1914 enabled him to raise modest funds for St Enda's and considerable sums for the arms-buying accounts of the Irish Volunteers.

By then a member of the IRB, his appeal to the key Clan na Gael 'Fenian' leaders in the US proved invaluable. John Devoy and Joe McGarrity in the US endorsed the IRB plan to revolt in Ireland when the armed might of Britain was concentrated, after August 1914, on the Western Front.

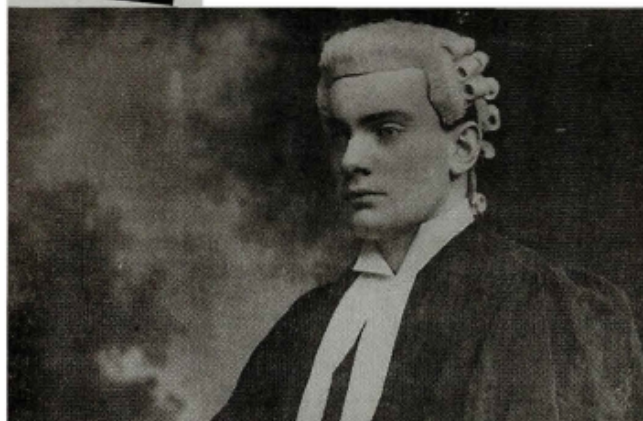
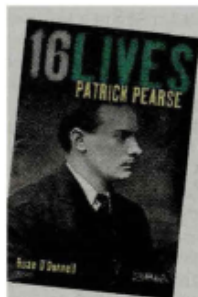
In August 1915, Pearse's incendiary speech at the grave of O'Donovan Rossa virtually declared war on Britain. As the Rising approached, he personally briefed county-level Irish Volunteer commandants who had not heeded John Red-

mond's call to fight for the empire.

Arguably the most important man to combine Irish Volunteer and IRB leadership positions, Pearse drafted progressive segments of the 1916 Proclamation which he signed and read on Easter Monday, April 24, to declare the Irish Republic.

Among the most famous casualties of the Rising, Pearse correctly predicted that the struggle for independence would greatly intensify in its aftermath. His contribution to the evolution of modern Ireland is simply immense.

■ Ruán O'Donnell is author of 'Patrick Pearse' in the **16 Lives** biography series, which he edited for **O'Brien Press**. He works at University of Limerick's history department.



Pádraig Pearse had a law degree from Trinity College Dublin and used links to the student world to elevate the status of the Irish language.