

The Road to the Rising Part 1

An Uneasy Relationship with the Neighbouring Island

The story of the Irish struggle for Independence can be told over many epochs and yet a single week in Easter in the early part of the 20th Century commands the imagination of so many, whether they were born and bred on these shores or on shores far far away. The roots to this seminal event can be traced to several historical processes

1. The birth of Irish Republicanism as an ideology advocated by the United Irishmen in the 1790s based on the philosopher's Thomas Payne's ideals.
2. The 1801 Act of Union, which saw Ireland's last vestige of independence, a legislative parliament with no executive function, assumed into Westminster.
3. The Famine of the 1840s, a natural disaster compounded by British economic policy, which exported large amounts of food during a time of widespread starvation.
4. The foundation of the Irish Republican Brotherhood in 1858, a militant group who believed in separatism from Britain to be achieved by any means necessary.
5. The Land War of the late 1870s, a violent farming based agitation against predominately, British landlords.
6. The 1880s Gaelic cultural revival and the rise of trade unionism in the slums of Dublin. These collective processes created a simmering resentment in Ireland to British administration.

The Home Ruler and The Radical

Constitutional nationalism was still the preferred route for many in the country to achieve some modicum of independence though it was failing to produce dividends. Charles Parnell's Irish Parliamentary Party had petitioned William Gladstone's Liberal Government to establish Home Rule. The First Home Rule Bill of 1886 gave little independence, no control over trade, coinage, foreign policy or the police force and all final executive decisions resided with the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. Even though it was highly limited in nature, the Bill was still unable to pass the House of Commons. A second Home Rule Bill in 1893 passed the Commons but was rejected by the House of Lords. Another Home Rule Bill would not be put forward for two decades. In the interim, a new political force formed in Dublin in 1905. An amalgamation of the Republican Dungannon Clubs and Arthur Griffith's Cumann na nGaedheal, the Sinn Féin ("Ourselves Alone") Party was set up as a separatist Nationalist political force.

The Sinn Féin Party started off as a minority movement that advocated complete separatism from Britain. The Party itself was not inherently republican. Its founder, Arthur Griffith, famously advocated a dual monarchy with Britain similar to Austria and Hungary. The party's significance would not be fully realised till the 1918 elections after the Rising. However, it would become the political party most associated with the Volunteers of the Rising as it was the only mainstream nationalist political force that promoted separatism with Britain.

In 1909, a Republican scout movement, Na Fianna Éireann was established by Countess Markievicz and Bulmer Hobson. This organisation began military drills with young people, training them for possible participation in any later insurrection. At this time, organisations that were set up during the cultural revival such as the Gaelic Athletics Association (GAA) and the Gaelic League had begun to be infiltrated by a new revitalised Irish Republican Brotherhood led by Thomas Clarke, Sean MacDiarmada and Bulmer Hobson, leading them to become recruitment grounds and increasingly, politicised.

Ulster Says No

By April of 1912, Herbert Asquith had introduced a third Home Rule Bill. On this occasion it was passed by the House of Commons but defeated once again, in the House of Lords, this time the British Government forced the bill through with the Parliament Act. The reality of devolved government in this country prompted an immediate reaction from the Irish Unionists. On the 28th of September 1912, half a million men and women signed the Ulster Covenant, a document that made clear that any attempt of introducing Home Rule to Ulster would be met with insubordination by the signed populace. This Covenant would be enforced by a new organisation founded by Sir Edward Carson and James Craig, the Ulster Volunteer Force, a treasonable paramilitary organisation, which intended to use arms against both Britain and Ireland should Home Rule be granted.