

1916. Easter. The Rising. We all know the story. But do we? What drove those remarkable men and women to take on such an enormous task when all the circumstances would have discouraged most revolutionaries? So why did they do it – and on that particular Monday?

This choice of Easter for the 1916 Rising had its origins in the preceding years. Padraig Pearse, who read out the Proclamation and was one of those who signed it, had shown great personal interest in the Gospels' account of the death of Christ. His sister Mary later wrote that Pearse's greatest devotion was "to Christ and the crucifix."¹

You can't miss it when you examine his own writing. Pearse was an educator, a poet and a playwright. At the end of his best-known play, *The Singer*, the hero, MacDara, goes out to fight the foreigner – against innumerable odds - with these words: "One man can free a people as one Man redeemed the world."²

Another signatory of the Proclamation, Thomas McDonagh, prepared a speech in his own hand-writing for his court-martial. He saw himself as part of "a small section of the great, unnumbered company of martyrs, whose Captain is the Christ who died on Calvary."³

Even James Connolly, not previously known as a religious man, wrote in February 1916, "Without the slightest trace of irreverence, but in all due humility and awe, we recognise that of us, as of mankind before Calvary, it may truly be said 'without the shedding of blood there is no redemption'"⁴, quoting a significant New Testament passage⁵ about the death of Christ.

But then, as you read further, you begin to see that these revolutionaries had more on their mind than just the Passion of Christ. They speak of other symbols of ancient Ireland like Cuchulain and Caitilín ni hUllacháin.

In 1908 Pearse had founded St. Enda's School in the Dublin suburbs. One of the first things to be seen was a large mural of the young Cuchulain taking his weapons; in the same hall, there was also Beatrice Elvery's painting of Christ as a boy, with arms outstretched in the cruciform position.⁶

As early as April 1902 W.B. Yeats' play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* had fired the imagination of Irish nationalists, even on its opening night. It enacted the myth of Ireland being re-juvenated by the sacrifice of young men. Thirty-six years later the impact of this play still troubled Yeats who wrote, shortly before his death:

I lie awake night after night
And never get the answers right
Did that play of mine send out

¹ M. Pearse, *The Home Life of Padraig Pearse* (Dublin and Belfast 1934), 141

² A. Martin, *Studies*, Spring 1966, 41

³ T. McDonagh, South Dublin Libraries

http://source.southdublinlibraries.ie/bitstream/10599/9773/16/ThomasMacDonaghSpeech_transcribed.pdf

⁴ C.D. Graves, *The Life and Times of James Connolly* (London: 1961), 318-319

⁵ Hebrews 9:22

⁶ E. O'Brien, in *Ireland at War and Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press 2011), 19

Certain men the English shot?⁷

So it looks like this sacrifice element of the Rising was an acting out of the pagan idea of “sacrifice for the land” which harks back to pre-Christian Ireland and was brought into the early 20th century Irish nationalism mainly through the literary revival, much of which was far from Christian and invoked the pagan gods. Nevertheless, Pearse also used the illustration of Christ’s sacrifice probably because it was the tradition with which he was most familiar since childhood.

Indeed Pearse’s basic idea was a pagan one of blood sacrifice, whoever’s blood that might be. In his last address to his pupils at St Enda’s School in Rathfarnham he returned to one of his favourite themes: “It had taken the blood of the Son of God to redeem the world. It would take the blood of the sons of Ireland to redeem Ireland.”⁸

Fifty years after the Rising, Augustine Martin summed up the era: “...Yeats and most sensitive Irishmen, realised that what they had witnessed in the Dublin streets had been as much a ritual as a battle. And in their subsequent poetry we see that the sacrificial aspect of the Rising is recognized. Pearse’s doctrine of a blood sacrifice is a recurrent symbol.”⁹

“‘Elsewhere Easter is celebrated as the Feast of the Resurrection’, remarked Terence de Vere White: ‘In Dublin it is celebrated as the Feast of the Insurrection.’”¹⁰ This year as we commemorate 100th anniversary of the birth of our modern Irish nation, let’s first of all take the time to celebrate the Real Rising – the rising of Jesus from the dead. It was different. Here’s how different it was:

- Supremely, Christ **rose again** from the dead! If he had just died and that was the end of it we would never have known whether his sacrifice for us had worked. By gloriously coming back to life his claims to offer forgiveness were vindicated.
- Because he has done the dying for us he is now free to give **forgiveness** to all-comers who turn themselves in for his amnesty.
- Also Christ **wasn’t** saying, “I’ll die - so you can rise”. He died **and** rose again so we could have a guarantee of our own personal rising again when the time comes.
- Christ was a **perfect** sacrifice. Otherwise it wouldn’t have worked and we’d be in real trouble by now.
- Christ was offering a much more powerful freedom – **internal** freedom inside in your heart and head, including freedom from hatred.
- It didn’t **finish** with the Resurrection. Then he gave his Spirit (not a mythical, mystic force) who is well capable of delivering on his promise to make us new people.

Because of the **Real** Easter Rising – of Jesus from the dead - each of us can personally benefit, in this life and the next . What a great way to celebrate the birth of the nation!

⁷ (Martin 1966), 47

⁸ P.H. Pearse *The Story of a Success, Being a Record of St Enda’s College September 1908 to Easter 1916*, ed. Desmond Ryan (Dublin and London: Maunsel, 1917), 98

⁹ (Martin 1966), 38-39

¹⁰ C. Cruise O’Brien *States of Ireland* (London: Hutchinson, 1973), 308