

**Address by guest speaker John Smyth at the 1916 commemoration in Ballon on 15<sup>th</sup> March 2016.**

At the outset I would like to heartily compliment and congratulate Ballon Improvement Group in organizing and providing this wonderful facility to commemorate the 1916 Rising. It is so fitting and so proper that we in Ballon, an area steeped in history, should play our role in recalling, celebrating and remembering those brave and steadfast men who heroically and proudly first flew the tricolour over the G.P.O. in Dublin in 1916; that was supremely historic and this gathering here today equally historic.

It is my privilege and pleasure to speak to you today to recall the historic events that led up to and culminated in the execution of those men who laid the foundations for Irish freedom. In taking a worthwhile or historical look at these events it is important to understand the events that led up to the Rising in 1916.

W.W.I. broke out on the 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1914 – with the result that Home Rule which was promised was put on hold. The I.R.B. saw the outbreak of war as an opportunity of following W. Tone’s advice that “England’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity”.

. So they availed of the Great War as they thought the British forces would be stretched when at war with Germany. The emergence of the Irish Volunteers had at least given them an army to rise with.

Consequently a land mark meeting was convened in the offices of Sean T. O’Kelly in the Gaelic League building at 25 Parnell Sq. when the Irish

Rep. Brotherhood decided that the moment of truth had arrived for the Rising. Arthur Griffith attended, as did Padraig Pearse who was director of organization in the Volunteers. Pearse was a hugely influential and inspiring man who played a pivotal role in organising the Rising. He was the son of an Irish mother and an English father. He trained as a barrister but spent most of his young life founding and teaching at his famous school at Scoil Eanna in Rathfarnham. Pearse was a romantic, charismatic and visionary leader, if not somewhat eccentric. He was steeped and immersed in patriotism and republicanism from an early age. So much so he later wrote “When I was a child of 10 I knelt down by my bedside one night and I promised my God that I would devote my life in an effort to free my country”. Pearse was a gifted orator, scholar, poet and writer, qualities which saw him appointed the first President of the Irish Republic. Pearse was the epitome of the ideal of blood sacrifice. In terms of nationalism and patriotism he was clearly the outstanding visionary figure of his generation. His famous and hauntingly brilliant oration at the grave of O’Donovan Rossa is a striking reminder of his stern qualities and oratorical skill when he said – “Life springs from death and from the graves of patriotic men and women spring living nations. The Defenders of the Realm have worked well – in secret and in the open. They think they have pacified Ireland. They think that they have purchased half of us and intimidated the other half. They think they have foreseen everything: but the fools, the fools, the fools! They have left us our Fenian Dead, and while Ireland hold these graves, Ireland unfree shall never be at peace” – so so prophetic.

Pearse was the epitome of Nationalistic hope and pride – in many ways you could say that he was shrouded in a dark green haze of romantic

Nationalism. He was both the embodiment and the exponent of Celtic idealism.

Before I go on to the main theme of the actual Rising it is important to provide the backdrop to the lead up to the Rising.

Much debate centered on the frenzied efforts to enact Home Rule which came to a sudden halt when Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914. Irish Nat. leader John Redmond instructed the Irish Volunteers to enlist, believing that Ireland's cause would be best served in the long run. It is estimated that over 200,000 Irish men fought for Britain in the Great War with 30,000 of them slaughtered. I will now outline for you a short chronological sequence of events which were defining and instrumental in the lead up to the Rising.

1. In April 1912 B.P.M. Herbert Asquith introduced the Third Home Rule Bill, which was passed by the Commons but rejected by the House of Lords, much to the disappointment of the Irish people.
2. Sir Ed. Carson and James Craig set up the Ulster Volunteer Force with the intention of defending Ulster against Home Rule.
3. Also in 1913 Jim Larkin called for a workers strike
4. Later in 1913 James Connolly, Jack White and Jim Larkin established the Irish Citizen Army – also the Irish Volunteers were founded to secure the rights and liberties of all Irish people.
5. On April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1914 Countess Constance Markievicz and others set up Cumann Na mBan as a women's Volunteer Force to augment the Volunteers.
6. On 24<sup>th</sup> April a shipment of 25,000 rifles and 3 million rounds of ammunition is landed at Larne for the U.F.V., which the authorities ignored.

7. In stark contrast, three months later on 26<sup>th</sup> July 1914 The Irish Volunteers unloaded a shipment of 900 rifles and 45,000 rounds of ammunition shipped from Germany aboard Erskine Childers yacht the Ashgard. As the volunteers moved the weapons the British Army fired and killed three men.
8. Then on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914 Britain declares war on Germany.
9. On Sept 9<sup>th</sup> 1914 a meeting held at the Gaelic League H.Q. between the Irish Republican Brotherhood and other extreme republicans where the decision was made to stage an uprising while Britain was at war.
10. Also at this time i.e. Sept 1914, 17,000 leave the volunteers and form the National Volunteers or the Redmondites to fight for Britain in the Great War – only 11,000 remain as Irish Volunteers under Eoin MacNeill.
11. In 1916 The Military Council of the I.R.B. is formed.
12. In Jan 1916 The Rising is confirmed for Easter, while James Connolly joins the Irish Republican Brotherhood Military Council, thus ensuing that they will be involved in the Rising.
13. On April 20<sup>th</sup> 1916, The Aud sails into Tralee Bay laden with 20,000 German rifles for the rising – the captain waits in vain for the signal from land. Roger Casement, who was instrumental in getting the arms was arrested at Banna Strand while the Aud is captured by the British Navy. Casement is later court marshalled and hanged.
14. On 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1916 The Aud is scuttled by its captain after which Eoin MacNeill as Chief of Staff of the Irish Volunteers issues an order to call off the Rising. The Irish Republican Brotherhood decided to postpone the Rising for 24 hours. In the meantime hundred of copies of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic are printed in Liberty Hall.

On the following day 24<sup>th</sup> April 1916 at 12 noon The Rising begins in Dublin.

So that ladies and gentlemen was the genesis and fundamental backdrop to the Rising in 1916. It is fair to conclude then that the lead up to and the Rising itself was shrouded in poor organisation, lack of planning, lack of money and above all a lack of military fire power and weaponry. The capture of the Aud was significant. The Volunteers were poorly prepared and poorly armed. However they persisted and took over several important buildings in Dublin such as Jacobs Factory, The College of Surgeons, City Hall, Boland's Bakery, and of course the G.P.O. which was the H.Q. for the Volunteers.

On Easter Monday 24<sup>th</sup> April 1916, Padraig Pearse read the Proclamation outside the G.P.O. and declared Ireland a free independent Republic much to the amusement and bewilderment of the local onlookers.

Mention of the Proclamation – It is clear that Pearse was the mastermind of this historic document which still is the cornerstone of our democracy and indeed of our constitution – what a brave and bold exclamation “The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, cherishing all the children of the nation equally.

Thomas Clarke was a highly significant player in masterminding The Rising which explains why his name takes pride of place on the document.

The Proclamation was signed by Thomas J. Clarke, Sean Mac Diarmada, Thomas MacDonagh, P.H. Pearse, Eamonn Ceannt, James Connolly and

Joseph Plunkett. These 7 men knew in their heart of hearts that they were signing their own death warrants but their single-mindedness, their conviction, heroism and their utter motivation in striking a powerful blow for the cause of Irish Freedom overrode all personal concern and L & G that is precisely why we are gathered here today at this historic and lovely function, and even lovelier gardens to celebrate and to remember – this is our Garden of Remembrance.

It also has to be said that the volunteers and the Rising did not have the general support or back up of the majority of Dublin or Irish people, so at the outset it was doomed to fail. It is difficult to believe that the volunteers were so poorly armed that they did not even have one machine gun among them, instead relying on rifles and sniper fire. Contrast that against the might of the British military with 15,000 heavily armed troops, with machine guns and cannons and then the battle vaporizes into a David and Goliath affair. And so it turned out. Pearse, Connolly and the other leaders, against overwhelming and insurmountable odds lasted and defended their positions bravely for 5 long, bloody and destructive days after which they surrendered.

The 5 days of the rising left 600 people dead, 2,500 injured and the entire centre city of Dublin flattened and devastated with damage estimated to be at 3m stg. Which begs the question was that a reasonable or costly price to pay for our freedom?

In the aftermath of the forced surrender of the leaders of the Rising – British P.M. Herbert Asquith acted swiftly, instructing Sir Gen. John Maxwell to deal with the leaders and organisers in the most severe and extreme manner possible, i.e. that they all be executed. In all 16 men were court marshalled and executed. All 16 of the executed were charged

and convicted of treason, when in actual fact as they saw it their only crime was to rise up and revolt to gain freedom and end British rule in Ireland.

The court marshalls of each of the executed took place in private in the most covert, secret and unfair manner as seen when the British Gov. released documents 85 years later in 2001. At any rate the summary executions brought widespread worldwide condemnation, particularly from America and the general Irish public, who belatedly took the side of the rebels cause and the push for freedom. So much so that the 1000's of Irish men who were imprisoned in English jails were released. Among those released were two men who were later to play highly significant roles in Irish history – namely Eamon DeValera and Michael Collins. Here it is worth recalling the last lines of the Proclamation “In this supreme hour the Irish nation must by its valour and discipline, and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called”.

Perhaps W.B. Yeats summed up the events rather well when, in his poem Easter 1916 he spoke for a lot of feelings with the lines –

“Was it needless death after all?  
For Ireland may keep faith . . . .  
MacDonagh and MacBride  
And Connolly and Pearse  
Now and in time to be,  
Wherever green is worn,  
Are changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born”

And perhaps that terrible beauty remains just that.

We are gathered here today to celebrate what was a seismic and defining moment in our all so troubled history, to celebrate and recall the sacrifices, the heroism and the very lives of those men who, so selflessly and freely gave their young lives for the noble cause of Irish freedom. Or as Pearse himself so succinctly and proudly said **“Holy and noble causes are served by men who are themselves holy and noble”**. In his prophetic poem ‘The Mother’, Pearse tenderly and thoughtfully put himself in his mother’s position with these moving lines –  
I do not grudge them: Lord I do not grudge my two strong sons that I have seen go out to break their strength and die, they and a few, in bloody protest for a glorious thing.

Apart from the 7 signatories, 9 other men also were condemned to an early grave, among them Padraig Pearse’s brother Willie, and Carlow man Michael O’Hanrahan. O’Hanrahan was a quartermaster of the Volunteers whose family moved from Wexford to Carlow where they worked as cork makers for Corcoran’s Mineral Waters. Similar to the others O’Hanrahan was executed by firing squad in Kilmainham Jail on 4<sup>th</sup> May 1916.

As well as the obvious human sacrifice and suffering, the condemned men were subjected to inhuman conditions while awaiting their death sentence in the bowls of Kilmainham and Arbour Hill jails.

One of the more poignant events of the period was the wedding of Joseph Plunkett to Grace Gifford in his tiny cell in Kilmainham Jail shortly before he was executed. The wedding took place in darkness apart from one candle held by a soldier. Two soldiers carrying rifles acted as witnesses. Joseph Plunkett was brought to the small chapel in the jail in

handcuffs which were removed for 5 minutes for the ceremony and replaced immediately afterwards. Plunkett was executed on the following morning at 3.30a.m. on Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> May after telling a Capuchin priest, Fr. Albert, that he was dying for the Glory of God and the Honour of Ireland. What a horror of a honeymoon for his hours old bride Grace. The forlorn desolation and poignancy of the situation is superbly captured in the lines from the ballad “Oh Grace just hold me in your arms and let this moment linger. They will take me out at dawn and I will die. With all my love, I place this wedding ring upon your finger. There won’t be time to share our love for we must say goodbye”.

Another inglorious battle – another gallant defeat – another chapter in the turbulent, troubled and bloody history of Ireland. Did the 1916 leaders die in vain? Unlikely. They won the support of the majority of the Irish people; they planted the seeds of success for liberty. While the 1916 leaders lost the battle what was to follow was a long hard and bloody battle in the War of Independence which culminated in the historic and defining signing of the Anglo Irish Treaty between David Lloyd George and the Irish delegation led by Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith – The Irish Free State was apparently born. But worse was to follow – The Civic War – The horrific sight of Irishmen fighting Irishmen, brother fighting brother – But that is a debate for another day.

Today, as I mentioned at the outset is our reflection, our remembrance and our tribute to those brave and heroic men who willingly and freely gave their lives in the noble cause of Irish freedom. Let us salute those men, those forefathers and architects who framed the course of our history and who played a defining role in the Ireland that we live in today. **Thank you. John Smyth copyright 2016**