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Fearghal McGarry, *The Rising: Ireland—Easter 1916*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010. Pp. xiii, 365. ISBN 978-0-19-280186-9.

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The Irish Rebellion of Easter 1916 has been examined many times, but Fearghal McGarry (Queen's University, Belfast) "tells the story of the Rising from within and below, describing the events of this period from the perspective of those who lived through it, particularly the men and women from ordinary backgrounds who have remained unknown figures" (4). To do this, he draws on the seventeen hundred contemporary witness statements, recently released by Dublin's Bureau of Military History, obtained from Sinn Fein, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, Cumann na mBan (the women's para-military organization), and the Irish Volunteers. While McGarry knows oral histories worry some academics, he maintains "the statements ... enhance our understanding of the motivations, mentality, and experiences of the evolutionary generation, preserving something of the texture and complexity of the past rarely recorded by conventional sources" (5).

McGarry thus recognizes the emotional intricacies of the rebellion, but adopts a rather dry, "door nameplate" approach to set the scene in Spring 1916. Consequently, readers will struggle to remember all the objectively catalogued pressure groups. Perhaps this is to be expected: as journalist Tom Geraghty has noted,

The pursuit of Irish history is a sometimes foggy affair, a meandering track that leads into a dark political wilderness and an ambiguous landscape that reflects a Gaelic language in which there is no simple word for "Yes" or "No" Irish history sanctifies two equally valid traditions. One is the physical force tradition ... and the other is the moral force tradition. The embodiment of the first in Irish culture invests violence with a respectability that is part of a martial culture. (The very word "Celt" comes from the Greek for "fighter.")¹

In 1916, British Anglo-Saxons found themselves pitted against such Celts, not an integrated force but an untidy mix of idealistic communists, hard republicans, ecclesiastic sectarians, and romantic revolutionaries, each pursuing a different objective against the harsh background of the Great War.

After McGarry's tedious scene setting, the book prompts avid reading, as individual eyewitnesses describe the often ludicrously chaotic stages of the Rising. For example, Volunteer J.J. Walsh noted that "At Bantry there was the unique spectacle of no less than three potential armies. At the entrance we met and addressed the O'Brienites. In the middle of the great square were a few Sinn Feiners, while at the other end we addressed the Redmonites. These groups would not work together as one body and it was the same in many parts of the country" (75). Public support, too, was rare. "The unfortunately named Patrick Looney recalled: 'I went to Beeing and put up notices and gave out leaflets explaining the objects of the Volunteers. A number of men joined nominally, but the people generally thought us mad.... The politicians gave the advice—"Take no notice of him, he's mad"' (55).

This widespread discord stemmed from the principal uncertainty: "If Ireland is viewed as forming an integral part of an imperfect but flexible and increasingly democratic constitutional arrangement, the actions of the Easter rebels appear unreasonable and reprehensible. Alternatively, for those who regard the union as an imperialist façade underpinned by the threat of military force, the rebellion represented a justifiable and admirable assertion of national sovereignty" (17–18). Similarly onerous uncertainties have prolonged

1. *The Irish War: The Hidden Conflict between the IRA and British Intelligence* (1998; rpt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Pr, 2000) xiv, 77.

many modern conflicts, most notably the latter stages of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and, more recently, NATO's increasingly questionable presence in Afghanistan and U.S. involvement in Somalia.²

McGarry proceeds chronologically: from a résumé of Irish history; to the first stirrings of dissent and the brief, euphoric rising itself; to failings and disillusionment; and, finally, to Britain's swift—but unwise—execution of the ringleaders. That action, paradoxically, prompted the hitherto indifferent public to call for a united Ireland. The book opens with an Introduction (1–7) illustrated by a helpful map of Ireland showing the four principal regions—Ulster, Connaught, Leinster, and Munster, with the counties in each: Donegal, Antrim, Tyrone, etc. Eight chapters describe each stage of The Rising. McGarry concludes with a Guide to Further Reading. The book also contains thirty-three pages of detailed source Notes and a comprehensive Index.

Chapter 1, “The Rising Generation: Separatism in Ireland” (8–43). After noting that “Between 1913 and 1923 a political revolution occurred in Ireland” (8), McGarry explains the main influences: sad, historic exploitation of mainly Catholic Ireland by latterly Protestant Britain; the largely agrarian Irish society; the arrogant, often thoughtless behaviour of British overlords; and the mood of self-righteous rebellion sweeping contemporary Europe. These influences spawned various pressure groupings: tribal, trade-unionist, political, sectarian, and nationalist. One eyewitness, Padraig O’Kelly, speaking about the Irish Republican Brotherhood, describes his generation’s experience of “natural graduation” from cultural nationalism to separatist violence: “One usually began by playing Gaelic Football or Hurling; from that the next step was the Gaelic League; from that again to the Sein Fein movement and later the Irish Volunteers. For relaxation we attended céilithe [Old Irish: “parties”] and the Irish Theatre. We bought nothing but the Irish-made goods.... With that background it was rather a natural progression to participation in the Rising” (25).

Chapter 2, “Arms in Irish Hands: Volunteering” (44–78). The term “volunteer” seems peculiar to the Irish struggle: all of the separatist groups adopted the term, and the volunteers saw themselves as the “minutemen” of Ireland—ready to overthrow the oppressor or respond to every cultural slight.³ Cumann na mBan drew in the women, against the wishes of many traditionalists and with varying success or satisfaction. Maire Fitzpatrick (who later set up her own branch) noted: “Sean got hold of a revolver and I was allowed to use it, until one day I shot a chicken belonging to Mum” (61). “Maeve Cavanagh ‘got tired’ of the organization as ‘they were only collecting money and such like activities’; later joining Connolly’s Citizen Army (where women were trained to shoot)” (65). Firearms were in short supply: Germany was the natural source of new weapons; the “American Connection”⁴ had yet to be exploited. Paradoxically, the very assertive, pro-British Ulster Volunteers were the first group to arm themselves (against the possible imposition of Home Rule by Britain) and became the “empowering model for Irish nationalism” (50).

Chapter 3, “The Soul of the Nation: War” (79–119). The Great War halted movement toward Home Rule, both providing an opportunity for mischief and uniting much of Ireland against the common enemy: Germany. Enlistment was brisk. Irish soldiers were escorted as they entrained for the Front—both Ulster Volunteers and (Irish) National Volunteers turned out with their respective bands (81). Propaganda reports of German atrocities in “Catholic Belgium” (82) encouraged pro-British sentiment, but this was subdued by the favoritism of Kitchener’s War Office toward the Ulster Volunteer Force (88). Consequently, “nationalist public opinion began to shift from strong pro-allyism, through disillusionment, to neutralism” but separatists were still regarded as an “ill-balanced lot of idealistic ‘rainbow chasers’” (89). This was a questionable basis for insurrection.

Chapter 4, “Walking on Air: The Rising in Dublin” (120–65). McGarry explains how uncertain support was matched by unclear strategy and largely amateur tactics. In essence 1,600 rebels occupied and fortified

2. Bronwyn E. Bruton, “Somalia: A New Approach,” Council on Foreign Relations Special Report No. 52 (March 2010) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1021.htm>.

3. This spirit lives on in the troubled North, where violence continues despite various social and political accords—see “Belfast Riots Morph for YouTube Generation,” *The Lede: Blogging the News with Robert Mackey* [NY Times] (14 Jul 2010) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1022.htm>; text only <www.miwsr.com/rd/1023.htm>.

4. Jack Holland, *The American Connection: U.S. Guns, Money, and Influence in Northern Ireland* (NY: Viking, 1987).

a ring of prominent buildings of questionable importance or military value: no arsenal, no barracks, no city hall. They then patiently awaited the arrival of a vastly superior British force, which soon crushed them. That said, in the minds of the rebels—and many of those who watched—it was a glorious event. One elderly rebel was prompted to fight because of his children: “I was never able to do much for them but isn’t this the grandest thing I could ever do for them” (125). Other elders offered their children: “Pat Fox thrust his young son—who was killed the following day—towards Frank Robbins as the rebels marched from Liberty Hall” (125). Two incidents exemplify the administrative difficulties facing the rebel leaders. “Charles Donnelly described how ‘a big burly man of the dock-labourer type came to the window and said he wanted to fight with Mister Connolly. After failing to master a rifle, he was given a pike and told to guard the main entrance of the GPO. Donnelly watched him die later that week: he seemed to have lost his head, as he was unarmed and moving along in a pugilistic attitude. He was riddled with bullets’” (150). The second incident concerned two foreign sailors: “motivated by the geopolitical intricacies of wartime Europe, (they) poked their heads through a window of the GPO to offer their services (but only until Thursday when their ship was due to disembark)” (150).

Chapter 5, “Glorious Forever: The Fall of the Republic” (166–209). The Easter Rising caught the British by surprise: only 400 of Dublin’s 2,400 soldiers were available for duty; leading figures were absent; and a “let sleeping dogs lie” attitude to the rabble-rousers prevailed. McGarry describes how the surprisingly prompt, effective British response to the rising was greatly assisted by both the rebels’ military shortcomings and the still-ambivalent attitude of the populace. “One Volunteer—recalling the ‘very hostile’ reception his men had received since Monday—wryly noted the local response when a British machine-gun corps paused for rest: ‘within a few minutes every man had a cup of tea. Upper Leeson Street was loyal to the Empire’” (169). The rebels enjoyed some initial success: the British infantry “‘did not seem to know what their objective was, or where they were going,’ a Volunteer from Robert’s Yard stated, ‘Those that came in our direction were completely wiped out. The bridge and Northumberland Road were strewn with dead and wounded’” (171). Both sides have been accused of atrocities. Most rebels and many of the young British soldiers were enduring their baptism of fire, but six days after the Rising began, British might prevailed and the newly proclaimed Irish Republic fell.

Chapter 6, “Charlie Weston, Are You Gone Mad? The Rising in Provincial Ireland” (210–46). The uncertain impetus (see Patrick Looney’s statement above), questionable strategy, and fragmented rebel organization in Dublin prevailed throughout Ireland. The ambivalence of the general public and the lack of German enthusiasm offered little succor to the rising, but McGarry believes the rebels planned “to trap the British forces between the five thousand-strong rebel force in Dublin and the Volunteers who would converge on the capital from the country” (212). This strategy unrealistically hinged on the notion that the combined efforts of German U-Boats and Irish Volunteers could prevent reinforcements arriving from Britain (212).

Chapter 7, “A Good End: Punishment” (247–76). McGarry explains how disorderly the surrender was: the British escorted rebel leader Pearce’s surrender order to outlying garrisons. Many rebels wished to fight on; others, as yet untouched by the conflict, felt humiliated. Most of the rebel leaders accurately foresaw their fate. Talking of imprisonment, one leader, Creannt, told his men “You men will get a double journey, but we the leaders will get a single journey” (249). Despite this, “Eamon Price felt ‘really proud of my Volunteers’ as they marched in formation, executing ‘a series of parade-ground manoeuvres’ before laying down their arms” (251). British observers were also impressed. Many Irish soldiers openly expressed sympathy with the rebels’ objectives; but their imprisonment was rudimentary and often disturbed by the sound of gunshots at dawn. Some women shared this hardship; others were not taken seriously and were released during the surrender. Male pride and defiance continued up to execution. The officer in charge of a firing squad reported that “all who were executed (by his squad) died bravely. MacDonagh indeed came down the stairs whistling” but the medical officer present noted that “the rifles of the firing party were waving like a field of corn.” The British commander, General Maxwell, in one of his few farsighted decisions, ordered that the corpses be buried in quicklime in a mass grave at Arbour Hill, still a lonely, comparatively neglected spot (276).

Chapter 8, “The Beginning of Ireland: Aftermath” (277–93). John H. Michaelis, an American commanding officer during the Korean War told his men “You’re not here to die for your country; you’re here to make those so-and-sos die for theirs!” The connection between such deaths and long-term national benefit is often tenuous, but the 1916 executions accelerated the move toward Irish Independence. The Easter Rising had brought “crime, horror and destruction” and the leaders were often viewed as “criminals, traitors, fanatics, or, at best, dangerously misguided fools” (278), but attitudes quickly changed after their executions, as may be seen in W.B. Yeats’s “Easter 1916” (completed on 25 September 1916): “To know they dreamed and are dead;/ And what if excess of love/ Bewildered them till they died?/ I write it out in a verse—/ MacDonagh and MacBride,/ And Connolly and Pearce/ Now and time to be/ Whenever green is worn,/ Are changed, changed utterly:/ A terrible beauty is born” (283).

McGarry points out that “the Easter rising ... brought republicanism from the margins to the mainstream of Irish Nationalism” (287) and illuminated “the integrity and idealism of a generation of Irish men and women who struggled to realize a vision of Ireland different to the one in which they had been born” (293). His very readable narrative captures the varied emotions which swirled through the Rising and led to its tragic but glorious climax. The wealth of individual experience it draws upon is the book’s main strength, but readers will also find a clear chronology and a good introduction to the *dramatis personae*.