

FOREWORD

America's loss was to be Ireland's gain. For if Michael Collins had taken his brother Pat's advice, the Republic of Ireland might not exist today. Watching the storm clouds of World War I gather over Europe, Pat had written to Michael from Chicago urging his young brother to leave his job in a London financial institution and come to join him in America. Had they teamed up, one is tempted to speculate that one of the all-time great Pat-and-Mike success stories might have resulted. As it was, Pat became a captain of police in Chicago and Michael went on to destroy the Irish police force, the armed Royal Irish Constabulary (R.I.C.). In doing so he laid the foundations for today's unarmed Irish police, the *Garda Síochána* or Civic Guard.

In the early stages of World War I, the then twenty-six year-old Collins agonised over Pat's letters inviting him to America. He took long lonely walks through London's dockland, seeing the ships leave for the New World, wondering should he go himself. War meant conscription would come, bringing with it an

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unthinkable choice: to become a conscientious objector, a course repugnant to his warrior soul, or to don a British uniform and fight for the Crown.

Collins solved the problem in his own inimitable way. He put on an Irish uniform and went to fight for Ireland, in the 1916 Easter Rebellion in Dublin. He was captured and sent to Frongoch Internment Camp in Wales, the Republican University as it was known. It was here, in prison, that he began to think out a new philosophy of warfare and to re-organise the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the I.R.B., which later spearheaded the fight for Irish independence and led to the creation of modern Ireland. He was also the founder of modern urban guerilla warfare, the first freedom fighter, or urban terrorist. Mao Tse tSung studied his methods. And Yatzik Shamir, the former Prime Minister of Israel, was so impressed with Collins that not alone did he study him, he took the codename "Micail" for his Irgun unit during the Israeli war of independence against the British.

Before considering his career and writings, I must briefly diverge to look at Collins' origins and examine what led him to a London counting house in the first place. He was born, the youngest of eight children, on a ninety-acre farm, a good holding for Catholics of the time, near Clonakilty in West Cork in 1890, to a remarkable set of parents. His father was nearly forty years older than his mother, Marianne, and was in his seventy-sixth year when Michael arrived. Neither parent had much formal education but they both knew French, Latin, Greek, Irish and English. And, apart from being an expert farmer and veterinarian,

ARTICLES AND SPEECHES BY MICHAEL COLLINS

Michael senior was also noted for his knowledge of astronomy, mathematics, and for his skill as a builder. The Collins, or the O'Coileain as they were known in Irish, were once a very considerable Munster clan. And the family, both in Michael Collins' day and in our own, is recognised as being unusually intelligent and well-doing.

However Michael senior died when young Michael was six, leaving Marianne to run the farm and look after the eight children. One by one, all the children were forced to emigrate, until only Johnnie, who ran the farm after Marianne contracted cancer, and Michael, who was then fourteen, were left at home.

There was at the time a tradition of recruiting for the British postal service in the Clonakilty area. When a baby boy was born, the neighbours' first comment on looking into the pram was "musha 'tis the fine sorter he'll make". Collins attended a class in Clonakilty which prepared pupils for the post office exams, and, at the age of sixteen, crossed over to London to live with his sister Hannie and take up work as a boy clerk in Kensington Post Office Savings Bank.

Collins became very active in the Irish-Ireland life of London, joining the Gaelic League to learn Irish, and the Gaelic Athletic Association to play Gaelic football and hurling, one of the most skilful and dangerous stick games in the world. He was a natural athlete, a particularly fine hurler, with a cloud-burst temperament that meant he either initiated or was drawn to any fights that broke out on the field. His deep belief in these associations and commitment to Gaelic culture are clear in his essay "Freedom Within

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Grasp, For Ourselves to Achieve It". He found time too to continue his studies and to become a regular theatre goer, a particular fan of George Bernard Shaw. He was an omnivorous reader, mopping up anything he could find in the way of Irish nationalist literature and a variety of other authors including Conrad, Arnold Bennet, Chesterton, Hardy, Meredith, Swinburne as well as Irish literary figures such as Wilde, Yeats, Pádraic Colum and James Stephens.

And now we come to the point where Collins' shadow begins to fall across contemporary Ireland. In or around 1914 he was sworn into the oath-bound secret society, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, by a fellow Corkman, Sam Maguire. The then political situation was that Ireland had lost its parliament under the Act of Union of 1800. Its culture, industry and population had suffered grievously as a result, the Great Famine is only one of the many ills on which we need not dwell here. But in 1914 Ireland seemed to be in a fair way of getting its own government back again. At Westminster the Irish Parliamentary Party, the constitutionalist wing of Irish nationalist self-assertion, had brought Home Rule to the Statute Book under the leadership of John Redmond. Ireland seemed to be on the verge of achieving its own parliament. But there was opposition.

In the north of the country, the Protestants of North-Eastern Ulster clung to their Scottish ancestry and British links. They wanted to remain in union with Westminster just exactly as do the unionists of today. More importantly, like today's unionists, they were backed to the point, and some would say beyond

the point, of treason in this attitude by the British Conservative Party. The Tories dealt a death blow to Home Rule, which had been passed by a democratically elected majority in the House of Commons, by two major acts of defiance of Parliament. One was their sponsorship of the illegal gun running at Larne which put teeth into the Protestants' resolution to resist. The second was their even more efficacious sponsorship of a move within the British Army to refuse to proceed against their rebellious co-religionists, known as the Curragh mutiny.

The Conservatives were not acting out of affection for the Ulster Protestants. But they used the Orangemen, as they were known after the Orange society to which so many of them belonged, as a weapon in domestic British politics to undermine the Liberal Government led by Prime Minister Asquith which had been driven to sponsor Home Rule through dependence on Irish Party support for its majority. The tactic, known as playing the Orange Card, was invented by Randolph Churchill, Winston's father. He coined the phrase "Ulster will fight and Ulster will be right". As his grandson, also called Randolph, wrote sixty years later: "that pithy phrase explains why Ulster is part of the United Kingdom today".

The I.R.B., or Fenian movement, distrusted British politics and politicians as a matter of dogma. The Fenians did not accept that Britain would ever confer Home Rule, or any form of independence on Ireland unless it were forced to, not by parliamentary methods, but by physical force. For those with a taste for symbolism I may digress to remark that

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the constitutionalist John Redmond is now seldom heard of in Ireland. Today Ireland's premier sporting trophy is the Sam Maguire Cup which is played for each year in the All-Ireland Football Final at Croke Park. And Northern Ireland is still something of a political football.

However to revert to Michael Collins. In his everyday working life Collins sought to broaden his range of experience by moving from the Post Office to a firm of stockbrokers, Horne and Co, from there to a clerkship in the Board of Trade and finally, perhaps because of his brother Pat's urgings, he moved, to gain a flavour of American business life, to the Guaranty Trust Company of New York's London Office where war found him.

He found his own war in Dublin in Easter 1916. It was a rebellion that should not have been allowed to happen. Had Home Rule for all Ireland not been aborted by the strength of the unionist/conservative alliance, there would have been no subsequent Anglo-Irish war, no civil war, no Partition and no I.R.A., or Northern Ireland problem today. But that searing week of flame and folly during Easter 1916 claimed the lives of some of the people Collins most admired: Tom Clarke, James Connolly, Sean Hurley, Seán MacDiarmada, Joseph Plunkett. To him their deaths were a debt owed, a charge against freedom, which England would repay. However, he would not present his bill for retribution by means of conventional warfare.

He still believed in fighting. In the parliamentary game as played at Westminster the rules were so arranged that the outnumbered Irish nationalists

always lost. Collins now understood also that static warfare, i.e. seizing a stronghold, be it a building such as Dublin's General Post Office in which he fought during the rebellion, or a mountain top, and then slugging it out with rifles and shot guns against an adversary who possessed heavy artillery, would continue to provide the Irish with heroes and martyrs—and the British with victories.

Instead Collins evolved a new concept of guerilla warfare based not on the capture of the enemy's bricks and mortar, but of its information. Traditionally, Dublin Castle, the seat of British administration in Ireland, had used a network of spies and informers to infiltrate and then snuff out movements directed at securing Irish independence. Collins perfected a system of spying on the spies. Every important branch of the Castle system, be it banking, policing, the railways, the postal service, was infiltrated by his agents. They were not highly trained, C.I.A.-style operatives, but ordinary men and women, people whom nobody had ever taken notice of before. Collins gave them a belief in themselves, a courage they did not know they possessed, and they in return gave him a complete picture of how their masters operated.

A secretary in Military Intelligence saw to it that Collins had a copy of the Colonel's orders to the Captain before the officer received the originals. A railway porter carried dispatches, the docker smuggled in revolvers, the detective told him who the informers were—and the Squad used the revolvers to deal with them. The Squad was his particular brainchild. For the first time in her history the Irish had a team of

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assassins trained to eliminate informers. I once handled the weapons used by the Squad, parabellums, '45s, Colt revolvers, and it was quite a chilling moment to be told: "Each of those revolvers killed at least six men". I later realised of course that, in the scale of modern warfare, the totals were tiny. Collins was careful about wasting human life. He struck selectively, to achieve the maximum political and psychological advantage. As he said himself, "England could always replace a detective. But the man can not step into the dead man's shoes—and his knowledge." He thus demoralised the hitherto invincible Royal Irish Constabulary, the armed police force which operated from fortified barracks and held Ireland for the Crown.

Action was not confined to Dublin. Generalised warfare broke out all over the country as the British introduced new men and new methods in a vain effort to counter the guerilla tactics of Collins' Active Service Units and the Flying Columns of Volunteers, which lived on the run, eating and sleeping where they could.

Held back from making a full scale use of their Army by the force of world opinion, largely Irish-American opinion, the British tried to fight a "police war" carried on by hastily formed forces of ex-service men and officers troubled by little discipline and less conscience. The Black and Tans and the Auxiliaries wrote new chapters of horror in the bloodstained story of the Anglo-Irish relationship. Reprisals for the activities of Collins and his colleagues included the burning of homes and creameries, random murder

and the widespread use of torture. Through it all Collins lived a "life on the bicycle". The most wanted man in Europe, he smiled his way through a hundred hold-ups never wearing a disguise, never missing an appointment, never certain where he would spend the night.

One of his central ideas was derived from G.K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*. He was given the book by Joseph Plunkett, his immediate superior in 1916. Plunkett, who was dying of tuberculosis, took part in the fighting and was married in his cell, ten minutes before facing a firing squad. Obviously any relic of such a figure would be prized by his lieutenant. And Collins prized in particular the advice of the Chief Anarchist in the Chesterton book: "if you don't seem to be hiding nobody hunts you out". Accordingly, Collins never seemed to be hiding. He always wore good suits, neatly pressed. And time after time, this young businessman was passed through police cordons unsearched, with his pockets stuffed with incriminating documents. It seems to be an iron law with policemen both in Collins' time and ours, that terrorists are not expected to wear pin-striped suits and clean collars and ties.

He had a network of safe houses and secret rooms where he transacted business. One room I examined was reached by pulling a lever which caused the bottom half of a kitchen dresser to swing upwards on hinges. Collins used to work in the house, until it was raided and then slip into the secret room and work away until the soldiers surrounding the house moved out of the garden. None of them ever realised that

there was an unaccounted for window in the back wall of the house.

In addition to his campaign of warfare Collins ran a national loan which was banned by the British so that its advertisement or sale became illegal. Yet the loan was fully subscribed and every subscriber got a receipt. He was President of the omnipresent I.R.B. which regarded him as the real President of the Irish Republic, and Minister for Finance in the *Sinn Féin* Cabinet. In addition, he was Director of Intelligence of the Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.). Any one of those jobs would have consumed the energy of an ordinary man, but Collins combined them all efficiently and effectively.

He combined a mind like a laser beam with a hawk-like eye for detail. Nothing escaped his attention. Everything attracted his interest. Shaw's latest play, the way the Swiss organised a Citizen Army, Benjamin Franklin's proposals for dealing with loyalists, or the latest edition of *Popular Mechanics*. An article in this journal in November of 1920 led to the first use in warfare of the Thomson gun. Collins saw the article on the recently invented weapon and had enquiries made about "this splendid thing"¹, which led to the Irish-American leader Joseph McGarrity of Philadelphia buying five hundred of the weapons. Two Irish-American ex-officers were sent to Ireland to train the I.R.A. in the use of the weapons. Only a handful got through the American customs, but these were duly used in a number of Dublin ambushes.

Collins was tough and abrasive with his male, and sometimes female, colleagues. But he was gentle and

playful with children and old people. Throughout the eighteen months that Eamon de Valera was in America, on a propaganda and fund-raising mission, which lasted most of the Anglo-Irish war, Collins risked his life to call each week to his absent chief's family, bringing them money and companionship.

Eventually the war effort that Collins had spearheaded drove the British to a conference table and a settlement as foreseeable as it was unpalatable to many Irishmen and women, a partitioned Irish Free State that would owe allegiance to the Crown. It was a deal which had been foreshadowed to de Valera in four days of talks between himself and Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, in London during July 1921. But de Valera did not want to be the man who faced up to the implications of that deal. Instead he repaid the kindness Collins had shown his family in Machiavellian fashion. He stayed away himself from the opprobrious negotiations but manipulated Collins into going to London as part of the delegation which signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 6th, 1921, the constitutional foundation document of modern Ireland. Collins, who took the leading part in the Treaty's negotiation, faced one of the most powerful British delegations ever assembled. Winston Churchill only ranked fourth on the team which was led by Lloyd George and included the Lord Chancellor, Lord Birkenhead and the leader of the Conservative Party Austen Chamberlain. Subsequently Collins became Chairman of the Executive Council (in effect the Government) of the Irish Free State which emerged, and, later, Commander-in-Chief of the Army.

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The Treaty did not yield the Republic he had hoped for but it provided what Collins prophetically termed a "stepping stone" to today's Irish Republic. All the other stepping stones to the tragedy of today's Northern Ireland situation were part of that negotiation too. In a very real sense Collins' premature death was caused by the forces which still rage about the North-Eastern corner of the land and people he fought for. The story of his life explains present day news from Belfast. He was forced into an impossible, janus-faced policy. On the one hand, as head of the infant Provisional Government of Southern Ireland, he argued fiercely for the Treaty's potential for democracy and freedom as we can read in many of his articles and speeches. He engaged in civil war to defend it against de Valera and his former comrades in the I.R.A.

On the other hand, the plight of the Catholics in Northern Ireland, subject to pogrom and prejudice, drove him to arm secretly the I.R.A. in the North. He did everything in his power to destabilise the northern state. He organised burnings, raids, kidnappings; and once, when some of his followers faced execution, he sent two former members of the Squad over to England to shoot the British executioners who were detailed to hang them. At the last moment the I.R.A. men were reprieved. So were the hangmen.

One of the great questions of Irish history is: If Collins had lived longer would he have brought fire or prosperity to his country? Or would he have died of drink or disillusionment at the effects of the civil war which broke out over the terms of the Treaty? Certainly he had more business acumen and vision than

any of his contemporaries. He foresaw a role for Ireland in Europe long before the E.U. was ever heard of. He preaches in one essay that Ireland should study the lessons of German scientific advancement, Danish agriculture, and bring them back home to develop a distinctive Irish economy and culture of its own. He loved the Irish language, but not merely as a medium of expression. As we learn in "Distinctive Culture, Ancient Irish Civilization" he saw in the language a method of thinking and ultimately of acting, more suited to Ireland than the Anglo-Saxon inheritance. He believed in personal initiative, writing in "Building Up Ireland, Resources To Be Developed"

Millionaires can spend their surplus wealth bestowing libraries broadcast upon the world. But who will say that the benefits accruing could be compared with those arising from a condition of things in which the people themselves everywhere, in the city, town, and village were prosperous enough to buy their own books and to put together their own local libraries in which they could take a personal interest and acquire knowledge in proportion to that interest.

Tragically we will never know how this marvellous man might have developed. For as the German poet Heine once remarked, the Irish always pull down a noble stag. Our Irish Siegfried kept his appointment in Samarra a couple of months short of his thirty-second birthday in a remote Cork valley known in Irish as Beál na mBláth, the Mouth of Flowers. He died during

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the Civil War not far from where he was born, in an ambush laid by a former comrade in arms, a man who during the Anglo-Irish War had undergone sadistic tortures at the hands of British Intelligence Officers rather than betray his boyhood friend, Michael Collins.

Collins' career is a paradigm of the tragedy of modern Ireland, the suffering, the waste of talent, the hope, the bedevilling effects of history and nomenclature whereby one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. Like Prometheus, Collins stole fire. Like Prometheus he paid for his feat and much of what he set about doing remains undone. But his name burns brightly wherever the Irish meet. Michael Collins was the man who made modern Ireland possible.

Tim Pat Coogan

¹ Described by Sean Cronin, *The McGarrity Papers*, Anvil Books, Tralee, Co. Kerry, 1978, p. 98.