

## Patrick Pearse: saint or sinner?

Taken from '1916, Interpreting the Rising' by D. George Boyce, *The making of modern Irish history. Revisionism & the revisionist controversy*, Routledge, 0-41512-171-X. pp 163-9, and

T. G. McMahon's review of Elaine Sisson, *Pearse's Patriots: St. Enda's and the Cult of Boyhood*, Cork University Press, 978-1-85918-325-0 at <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.cgi?path=25481127398649>

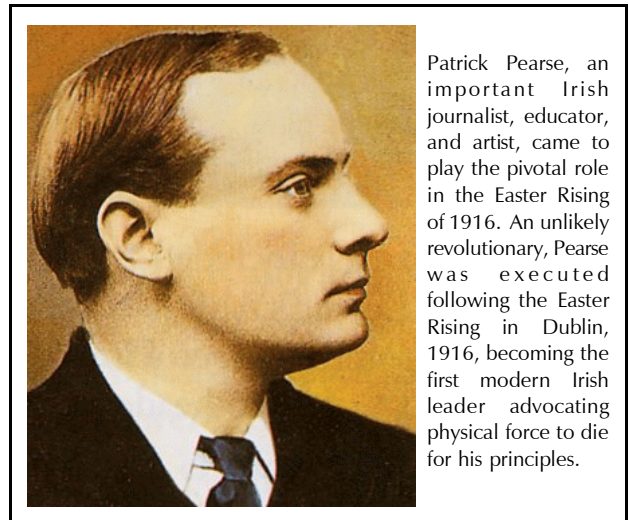
In 1966, at a conference held in a Belfast hotel to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 rising, one of the participants criticised Professor J.C. Beckett for having devoted only one page of his 496-pages-long book *The Making of Modern Ireland* to Patrick Pearse. Since the book surveyed Irish history from 1603 to 1923, this may seem unreasonable; and it is true to say that Patrick Pearse and the 1916 Rising have had many pages devoted to them in the last twenty-five years. But the incident, small in itself, epitomises the difficulty in placing the rising in its appropriate context in the history of modern Ireland. And this is because it has several resonances, including the aims and intentions of its leaders, such as Patrick Pearse, its unlikely leader.

### 1. Nationalist interpretations of the leaders of 1916

It is very often the case that in the interpretation of an historical event those who get their explanation in first influence subsequent generations, if only because they set the agenda for future debate. The Easter Rising of 1916 did not undergo this kind of treatment. That the rising was an important episode could not be doubted. But professional historians very largely ignored it, and it was left to those whose purpose was to eulogise the heroes of the rising to write interesting, if sketchy, lives of the leading participants.

### 2. Professional historians - limited change, 1966

Professional historians began to lead discussion the fiftieth anniversary of the Rising with the publication of *Leaders and men of the Easter Rising: Dublin 1916*. The book did not, however, free itself from the more traditional interpretations of 1916.



David Thornley quoted the judgement made by L.N. le Roux in his 1932 biography of Pearse that Patrick Pearse 'possessed all the qualities which go to the making of a saint... . It would not be astonishing if Pearse were canonised some day', adding that it was 'not merely difficult but almost blasphemous to discern a human being of flesh and blood'.

### 3. Full-scale revisionism: judging Pearse's high standards again his own life, 1970/80s

This eulogising of the Pearse and other leaders did not survive the publication of a series of biographies in the 1970s and 80s, helped by the unearthing of new material, the reinterpretation by a younger generation of works already available, and a revulsion from the violence, especially republican violence, of conflict in the Northern Ireland. These studies enabled advances to be made where they were most needed: in unlocking the minds of the rebels and revealing the kind of political and social system they wished to establish in Ireland.

#### Judging Pearse

In the case of Patrick Pearse, Ruth Dudley Edwards's 1977 biography (*Patrick Pearse: The triumph of failure*) started out by declaring that 'the Irish have always tended to impose on their patriots, posthumously if necessary, impossibly high standards'. Dudley Edwards perhaps over-compensated for the hitherto high standards imposed on Pearse. The flawed man was stripped bare in his mysterious cloak of heroism.

#### Pearse's vision

But she also laid bare his vision of what the rising would do for - or perhaps to - Ireland. A Home Rule Ireland would not be the Ireland that he dreamed of: not Gaelic, not a model to the world of what his nation should be. Pearse's model was one that stressed economic self-sufficiency (Ireland would be capable of supporting twenty million people), but also sought to change the very nature of the Irish people: they would become different, they would become loving, caring and they would be busily absorbed in helping each other, intensely communal, very

self-conscious, and, above all, totally insular, that is, cut off from the horror of the modern world. Human nature would be different - or at least the Irish part of it would.

#### Ideology & real life

Ruth Dudley Edwards' method was to test Pearse's ideology against his own life; to explain the personal and psychological reasons why, in the end, self-immolation was his only choice. Death compensated for failure in life: failure on personal, family and financial grounds. This was perhaps reductionist; Pearse was deeply influenced by the Romantic and cultural mood of his time, and it is possible to imagine even a successful Pearse deciding that the European World, the bourgeois civilisation that war was now putting to the test, was a weary and profoundly unspiritual place.

Pearse was deeply influenced by two, apparently contradictory, themes. The Roman Catholic religion; and the pagan tradition embedded in ancient Irish sagas and popularised in the historical works of Standish O'Grady. Pearse could think and act upon, two contradictory impulses because he welded them together in his desire for martyrdom. It was this that inspired his notion that immortality, not death, would be his reward, just as it was the reward of the pagan heroes of the pre-Christian world, and, at the same moment, the reward of the martyred Christ. Pearse was no born soldier, he did not translate his bloody words into murderous deeds. His words applied to himself; his blood would be the red wine of the battlefields.

#### 'Unconscious homosexual'

Pearse was an 'unconscious homosexual' who had no any romantic involvement with women. Some suggest that he was romantically involved with a young lady, Eveleen Nicholls, who had been recently elected to the *Coiste Gnotha* and who had a reputation in Gaelic League for her academic achievements and devotion to the Irish language. She died in tragic circumstances, while swimming in the seas off the Blasket Islands.

Eveleen's brother said that Pearse had proposed to her, and that Eveleen had declined as 'she did not want to abandon her mother to the problems...in her home'. Desmond Ryan, Pearse's young protégé, was convinced of Pearse's emotional involvement by his tears at Eveleen's funeral, and Pearse later wrote a lament, entitled '*A Chinn Aluinn*' (O Lovely Head) that began 'O lovely head of the woman that I loved'.

Nevertheless, Edwards maintains that Eveleen was just his 'admired friend', and that 'the only basis for marriage with Eveleen would have been mutual respect, not sexual attraction'. As for the tears at the funeral, there were many others crying, and Pearse's grief was not great enough to affect his work in any way. Finally, the poem 'was apparently not written until nearly five years after her death, and Pearse, where his poetry dealt with specific episodes...wrote during or immediately after the occasion concerned... the poem was an exercise in a common romantic convention, by which the death of the beloved provided a vehicle for morbid reflections'.

#### Pearse's influence

According to Professor George Boyce, 'Ruth Dudley Edwards was right in assessing the long-term influence of Pearse upon Irish nationalist thinking. He forged a link between the prophets of Irish nationality, Tone, Davis, Mitchel, Lalor and Parnell (whose ideas bore only the most superficial resemblance to each other) and created a kind of legal justification for what he planned to do'. Those who survived him 'would have a standard work on nationalism by which they could check their own consciences'. This was to get to the heart of the idea and purpose of the rising: that it would not stop at 1916,. Rather it would be an event that would work its magic on future generations, now and in time to come.

#### 4. New perspectives, 2004

In the early twenty-first century, the application of gender theory refocused on Pearse's role as an educator whose ideas had a wide appeal. When Pearse founded an Irish language school for boys in 1908 his aim was to create a modern, Irish male citizen from the ancient models of masculinity.

In *Pearse's Patriots: St. Enda's and the Cult of Boyhood* (2004), Elaine Sisson explores how the idea of a modern Irish boyhood was, indeed, created at St. Enda's through Christian iconography and mythology as well as a modern preoccupation with patriotism, Gaelic games, theatre and juvenile literature.

According to Professor McMahon, 'some readers, especially those wed to the image of the saintly martyr of 1916, may shy away from her frank discussion of Pearse's sexuality and its relationship to his art... . But as Sisson persuasively argues, there is a difference between impulse and action.'

For Sisson, it was 'the sublimation of Pearse's sexuality that produced such a remarkable interweaving of discourses on aesthetics, martyrdom, masculinity and nationhood'. In numerous plays, stories, and poems, Pearse the artist fixated on the figure of the fair-haired macaomh (literally 'youth'), who sacrificed for others or inspired them to act. Meanwhile, through stagecraft, Pearse the educator encouraged his students to embody these same boys, figuratively at least - a message which was not lost on the students themselves or on their audiences.