

The History of the Twentieth Century  
Episode 126  
“A Terrible Beauty Is Born I”  
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

*Too long a sacrifice  
Can make a stone of the heart.  
O when may it suffice?  
That is Heaven's part, our part  
To murmur name upon name,  
As a mother names her child  
When sleep at last has come  
On limbs that had run wild.  
What is it but nightfall?  
No, no, not night but death;  
Was it needless death after all?  
For England may keep faith  
For all that is done and said.  
We know their dream; enough  
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 Pearse  
Now and in time to be,  
Wherever green is worn,  
Are changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.*

William Butler Yeats. *Easter, 1916.*

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 126. A Terrible Beauty Is Born, part one.

The nation of Ireland has had a recurring role in this podcast ever since episode 10, which I believe is the first episode in which I spoke the name “Ireland” aloud. In that episode, I dubbed her “England’s first colony.” Since then, by my count, Ireland has received mention in eighteen additional episodes.

Sometimes, the reference is tangential, as when someone is born in Ireland. When the reference has been specifically about affairs on the island of Ireland, it is usually about Home Rule. It may seem as if we have been talking about Irish Home Rule forever, which gives you some idea of how the Irish were feeling during the decades this issue lay before the British Parliament. The First Home Rule bill was introduced in 1886, once the British Liberal Party embraced Irish Home Rule. The bill failed, split the Liberal Party, and led to a twenty-year period of Conservative majorities in Britain, interrupted only by one Liberal government that lasted a couple of years in the 1890s. That government introduced a Second Home Rule Bill, which actually passed the House of Commons, but was defeated in the House of Lords, a rare occurrence in modern British politics.

The Conservatives returned to power in 1895 and held it for over ten years. During this long drought, Home Rule seemed like a lost cause, and to the most ardent of Irish nationalists, armed revolt against British rule seemed the only remaining option.

Armed revolt, like Home Rule proposals, was nothing new in Ireland. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Ireland was nominally a separate kingdom with its own parliament in personal union with what was then called the United Kingdom of Great Britain, although the government in Westminster reserved to itself the final say over Irish affairs, so it would be wrong to think of Ireland as a fully separate and sovereign nation with a shared King.

During this era, control over the day-to-day affairs of the country was in the hands of a landed elite who were members of the Anglican Church of Ireland. They were virtually the only Irish eligible to vote or to hold government offices. The vast majority of Irish are Catholics, with a substantial minority of mostly Protestant Presbyterians in Ulster. Members of both of these communities were excluded, as were members of dissenting churches and non-Christians.

The example of the American Revolution inspired dreams of independence in Ireland, a country which arguably had less autonomy than the thirteen North American colonies had had before their revolution. These aspirations cut across sectarian lines, uniting Irish Catholics, Ulster Presbyterians, Methodists, and even a few liberal-minded Anglicans for the first time into a common Irish independence movement. This would also be the last time.

Then came the French Revolution and the wars that followed. With France now an enemy of Britain, the Irish revolutionaries reached out to the French and formed a plan in which the French would land some 15,000 soldiers in Ireland who would work in concert with the Irish to liberate the island. French ships were dispatched in late 1796 but the plan, and the French ships, ran afoul of some usually harsh storms and winter weather and the French expedition failed.

This led to a brutal crackdown, which led to a second uprising in 1798. This second uprising was doomed from the moment it began, because a number of last-minute defectors tipped off the authorities that it was about to begin. A small force of about 1,000 French soldiers actually landed on the island about two months later. In cooperation with Irish rebels, they managed to cause the British some headaches before this rebellion was also put down.

Even so, it was a shock to the British, and an encouragement to the Irish nationalists, that the rebels had gotten as far as they had. The prevailing view in London attributed the troubles in Ireland to the callous and incompetent rule of the Anglican elites. And the result of this thinking was the Act of Union in 1800, which we have already discussed. It ended the Irish Parliament and brought Ireland fully into union with England and Scotland as The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

But this did not end Irish aspirations for independence. There was a small uprising in Dublin in 1803, which was quickly put down. There was another, larger uprising by the Young Ireland movement in 1848, the year of revolution across Europe. This, too, was put down.

In 1858, the Irish Republican Brotherhood formed. This was a secret fraternity in Ireland with a parallel, more open, organization in the U.S. among Irish immigrants and their descendants. They are sometimes known as the “Fenians,” although I’m told the term “Fenian” can also be taken as derogatory, so I’m going to avoid using it. I’ll just stick to IRB, for “Irish Republican Brotherhood.” And this name isn’t entirely accurate either, because I’m going to be using it as an umbrella term that will include some groups who identified themselves differently, but it’ll have to do. Because of the closed and secretive nature of these organizations, they’re all small groups, staunch and loyal in their convictions, but it’s sometimes difficult to trace who’s involved in what.

In 1867, the IRB tried another uprising, with fighting against police and soldiers breaking out simultaneously in Dublin, Cork, and Limerick, but these outbreaks failed to trigger the hoped-for general revolt.

But the IRB soldiered on. The chastened organization declared that it would not resort to violence again...at least not until there was widespread support for it among the Irish public. The next thirty years would in fact see the IRB working with more mainstream political organizations like the Irish Parliamentary Party in support of more measured steps, like land reform and home rule. But the organization never lost sight of the goal of an independent Irish republic. To them, these smaller reforms were just stepping stones to the big reform: independence.

And indeed, disillusionment with fighting for reform through the democratic political process set in after 1893, when that second Home Rule bill actually passed the House of Commons, only to be vetoed by the House of Lords, followed by ten years of Conservative majorities, during which time the subject of Home Rule was seldom even brought up in the British Parliament.

The American branch of the IRB never did lose its taste for radical action and it had sponsored a bombing campaign in England in the years 1881-85 in places like ships, police stations, government buildings, and Underground stations. One of these was an attempt to blow up London Bridge in 1883. It was doomed from the start because the Metropolitan Police's Special Irish Branch had planted an informant among the bombers. Failure led to the arrest of the then 25-year old Thomas Clarke, who was part of the bombing ring. Clarke, who was known to the authorities as "Henry Wilson," was convicted and sentenced to life in prison for his role in the attempted bombing. This Henry Wilson, or Thomas Clarke, by the way, should not be confused with the British Army General Henry Wilson, who has come up in this podcast a few times, especially since that Henry Wilson will eventually be assassinated by the Irish Republican Army. I'm glad we cleared that up.

This Thomas Clarke—and I'm going to stop calling him Henry Wilson now, although not everyone else will—this Thomas Clarke was sentenced to life in prison. But a decade later, there was a campaign in Ireland for clemency for the handful of IRB radicals still in British prisons, including Clarke, and they were released in 1898. Clarke moved to Brooklyn, New York, where he married and lived for nine years, becoming involved with IRB sympathizers in the US. But in 1907, he returned to Dublin at the American branch's behest, to help revive the organization in Ireland.

By this time, the IRB in Ireland was recruiting a new generation of volunteers and regaining some of its old strength. The new members embraced the now 50-year old Clarke and put him on their Supreme Council. The younger radicals looked up to Clarke as a sort of elder statesman of the movement, the man who had already sacrificed much for the cause to which they themselves were newly committed.

Clarke was also known to the police, so it would do the IRB no good for him to be too visible a figurehead for the group. So he did not appear at rallies or give speeches. Instead, he ran a tobacconist's shop. It was a little place, as such shops often were at the time. You walked in the front door to the tinkling sound of a bell and took a step or two and there you were at the counter, where Clarke was waiting on the other side, a slender, balding man with wire-frame spectacles and a gray walrus mustache, ready to provide you with the finest of Irish tobaccos. On your side of the counter there some Irish newspapers and magazines in racks on the walls or lying folded on the counter in front of you, and maybe there's enough space on the customer side of the counter for six of you, provided none of you are any heftier than Mr. Clarke himself is.

And this humble tobacconist's shop became the nerve center of the IRB.

The revitalization of the Irish IRB actually began in Belfast, and was the work of two Belfast men. One was Denis McCullough, son of a pub owner who had been an IRB man in his own day, and Bulmer Hobson, an Irish Quaker who would ultimately leave the Society of Friends once the IRB got into gun running. But I'm getting ahead of myself. These two began the IRB revival in Belfast. They discouraged young men from joining the British Army and welcomed them into the IRB instead. Hobson moved to Dublin in 1908 and there he joined up with Tom Clarke and Sean McDermott, the son of a farmer and another ardent nationalist. Clarke, Hobson, and McDermott would become key leaders in the revived IRB.

By 1911, the IRB could boast about 2,000 members across Ireland. This is not a very big number on an island of 4.4 million people, but the IRB was a secretive group that screened its members carefully, and so these 2,000 could safely be called the most committed nationalists on the island. Still, no matter how brave a face you put on it, they were only .05% of the population. How much can they do?

[music: "Give Me Your Hand"]

We've already covered the story of the ups and downs of the Home Rule campaign for Ireland. The Asquith government had had to press for the end of the Lords' Veto in 1911 before turning to Home Rule. But the prospect of Home Rule was anathema—almost literally anathema—among Ulster Protestants, largely Presbyterians of Scottish ancestry who saw Home Rule as a threat. It replaced rule by a British Protestant government they identified with with rule by an Irish Catholic government in Dublin they saw as likely to be neglectful or even openly hostile to their own interests. The Ulster Volunteer Force, or UVF, was born, and by April 1914, it was smuggling tens of thousands of guns and much ammunition into Ulster and threatening violence before acquiescence in any attempt to impose Irish rule on them. They had no small amount of support in the British Army.

And no one in Ireland was happier about the emergence of the UVF than Tom Clarke. The creation and arming of the Ulster Volunteers was a powerful recruitment tool for the IRB. The argument went that no matter what the politicians and the moderates promised, the British would never peacefully surrender control over the destiny of Ireland to the Irish, and the IRB was therefore the only alternative.

John Redmond, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, spent 1912 and 1913 attempting to reassure the Irish public that the UVF was an insignificant splinter group which could safely be ignored, and that Irish Home Rule was now on the way. But tensions were rising steadily in Ireland over this Home Rule Bill during this period. A medieval history professor at University College Dublin, named Eóin MacNeill, published a well-received article in which he argued that Home Rule supporters needed to form their own volunteer force as a counterweight to the UVF. Clarke and the other leaders of the IRB fully supported this idea, but understood that the new

force, dubbed the Irish Volunteers, could recruit more members and act more freely if it were billed as a separate organization and kept the IRB at arm's length, at least publicly.

The Irish Volunteers were officially announced on November 25, 1913, as a broad-based national organization of Irish patriots of all political persuasions, with Professor MacNeill as its titular leader, although Bulmer Hobson did a lot of the organizing work in the background. Having MacNeill as their chief was helpful because he was not himself an IRB member, so it helped support the image of the Volunteers as a separate, apolitical force. Its stated goal was to "secure the rights and liberties common to all the people of Ireland."

Over the next six months, the Volunteers recruited 150,000 members, and during this time, John Redmond became increasingly alarmed by all this growth. Most of those joining the Volunteers were supporters of Redmond's Irish Parliamentary Party, but Redmond himself knew full well that the leaders were much more radical than his people, and that they had ties to the IRB. So in June 1914, Redmond made a public demand that the Provisional Committee of the Irish Volunteers accept 25 Irish Parliamentary Party members, giving the moderates effective control over the organization. The Committee went along with this demand, notably with the approval of Bulmer Hobson. To IRB leaders like Tom Clarke though, Hobson's choice was tantamount to treason, and that would be the end of Hobson's role in the leadership of the IRB, although he remained involved with them and with the Volunteers.

We see in this split two different visions. Hobson and those like him wanted a broad-based movement that embraced a spectrum of Irish opinion meant to defend the rights of Ireland over the long haul. Those like Clarke and MacDermott were revolutionaries more in the mold of Russia's Lenin. They didn't trust the Irish public and reserved to themselves the right to decide Ireland's future. And they feared Home Rule every bit as much as the Ulstermen did. To them, Home Rule was a pleasant seduction that would lull the Irish public into complacency until Irish culture was entirely eradicated, and Ireland became nothing more than West Britain.

The sudden outbreak of the Great War, just a few weeks later, changed the political scene in Ireland all over again. Young Irish men volunteered for the British Army and cheering crowds saw them off to the recruiting stations while waving the Union Jack. Even bands of the Irish Volunteers showed up to shake the hands and clap the backs of their own members who went off to fight the Kaiser.

In the weeks that followed, Irish enthusiasm for the war only grew. The German invasion of Belgium and the stories of crimes against Belgian civilians that followed led many Irish to sympathize with the Belgians, Belgium being a small Catholic country being oppressed by a powerful Protestant nation to its east.

Furthermore, in those early days, the war was a boon for the Irish economy. Agriculture was still the most important sector of the Irish economy outside of industrial Belfast and Dublin, and with the arrival of the war and German commerce raiding, food prices rose, benefiting the Irish

farmer. And as for the cities, the demands of the British Army and Navy created new markets for Irish factories and jobs multiplied.

John Redmond of the Irish Parliamentary Party told the House of Commons that Britain could safely withdraw its garrisons from Ireland and send them to France. He pledged that the Irish Volunteers would take on the job of defending their native land. To Redmond, this was an opportunity for Irish Catholics and Protestants to band together for a higher cause and set aside the developing rift between them, which would in turn lead to a united Ireland better prepared to embrace Home Rule when it came into effect after the war.

Patriotism, prosperity...for the IRB radicals like Clarke and MacDermott, the Great War was a disaster. Watching the Irish public waving the Union flag and fully embracing the cause of England as their own represented their worst nightmares come to life. It must have seemed to them that the moment was all but past when Irish could be spurred into standing up for their national rights and that the Irish nation was well on its way to assimilation.

If there was any possibility of an uprising against British rule in Ireland, it was going to have to be soon. That's "soon" as in "before the end of the war." One advantage to an uprising during the war is that the British Army will be preoccupied by the situation on the Continent. And so, by September, the Supreme Council of the IRB had agreed to this in principle and also agreed to reach out to the Germans for assistance.

That same month, in a speech to a group of Irish Volunteers, John Redmond urged them to go "wherever the firing line extends," that is, by implication, to the Western Front. Irish continued to answer calls like this one, volunteering in the tens of thousands and making Great War the biggest conflict in Irish history.

That was the last straw for the old guard among the Volunteers. They reneged on the agreement of three months earlier and expelled Redmond's people from the Provisional Committee. Redmond retaliated by forming his own organization, the National Volunteers, and over 90% of the membership of the Irish Volunteers left to join the new moderate group.

This left a small remnant Irish Volunteer organization of only about ten thousand members, most of them Dubliners. But Clarke and MacDermott couldn't be happier. These ten thousand were the true believers, and the IRB was now in charge. The Volunteers reorganized into a more military organization, not to mention a more militant one, taking on staunch IRB members such as Patrick Pearse as Director of Organization and Thomas MacDonagh as Director of Training.

[music: "Give Me Your Hand"]

And now it is time for me to reintroduce Roger Casement. We've met him before on this podcast. He was the Irish-born British Foreign Office official who made a name for himself

investigating the abuses in the Congo, episode 14, and again investigating abuses against natives in the Amazon, episode 41.

Casement came from an Anglo-Irish family. He was born in Dublin, spent part of his childhood in Ulster and part in England, and ended up working for the Foreign Office. His humanitarian work had made him well known and highly regarded. He received a knighthood in 1911 for his work and became Sir Roger Casement.

I'll remind you as well that Roger Casement was gay, and that we know this in some detail because he kept a diary of his many encounters with young men, often poor men whom he paid for sex. His sexual orientation would have cost him his position and his reputation and quite possibly landed him in prison if it had become known, but Casement managed to keep it a close secret. If it weren't for the diary, we probably would never have known anything about it.

I find Roger Casement a fascinating figure, because I can't help but ask how his role as one who advocated for the victims in the Congo and exposed the excesses of imperialism was shaped by his experiences as an Irish man working in the British government bureaucracy and as a gay man forced by the society of the time to stay deep in the closet.

Casement's own father had been a career British Army officer and he had been raised Anglican, so you might question how "Irish" Roger Casement actually considered himself to be, but we begin to get an answer to this question in 1905, just after Casement finished his famous investigation in the Congo. He joined the Gaelic League, an organization dedicated to preserving and promoting the Irish language. Shortly after that, he joined the newly created political party Sinn Féin.

Sinn Féin, means something like "We Ourselves" in Irish, and it is going to develop into an important political party later on and for the rest of the century, but for now let me just say this about Sinn Féin: in 1905 it was more radical than the Irish Parliamentary Party but not so radical as the IRB. Sinn Féin supporters dismissed Home Rule as either inadequate or impossible to achieve, due to the opposition in the House of Lords. The Sinn Féin of this era wanted to revert to the pre-1801 arrangement, where Britain and Ireland were separate kingdoms in personal union. Their model was the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They wanted Ireland to have the same degree of autonomy and self-government within the British Empire that Hungary enjoyed within the Austrian one.

Casement signed on to the Irish Volunteers from the beginning, and had some contact with the leadership of the IRB, although they for their part were understandably suspicious of this retired Sir Flunky-of-the-British-Government, whose loyalty they doubted, should it come to open insurrection.

It turned out they had nothing to worry about. Casement was in the United States to drum up money and support for the Irish Volunteers when the Great War began. At once he became the



unofficial, self-appointed foreign minister of Revolutionary Ireland. He made contact with Count Bernstorff, who was the German ambassador to the United States, not to mention the senior German diplomatic official in the Western Hemisphere. Casement wrote up a proposal, which Bernstorff dutifully forwarded to Berlin.

Casement's report suggested that Ireland, Egypt, and India were the most vulnerable points in the British Empire, and therefore the places where Germans should focus their efforts. You know from earlier episodes that the Germans were already thinking along these lines, but they liked what Casement had to say. He proposed that Germany assist an Irish rising by providing soldiers and weapons. Irish prisoners of war held by Germany could be organized to fight the British, and Irish in the United States could be transported to Ireland in German ships. The German government was interested enough to invite Casement to come to Berlin. He traveled incognito from New York to Christiania, the capital of Norway, and thence to Germany. The British were aware of his movements and tried to grab him during his stopover in Norway, but failed.

In November 1914, at Casement's urging, the German government issued a public statement in support of Irish independence, and Casement's optimism now knew no bounds. He spoke to the Germans of landing thousands of soldiers and supplies in west Ireland, at Limerick, of U-boats in the Irish Sea to harry British attempts to send reinforcements. The volunteers in Dublin would rise up and between the two forces in Limerick and in Dublin, they would seize the island. The French had almost managed this in 1798, with fewer soldiers and less powerful weapons, Casement argued. This time, it could be done.

Roger Casement was not a soldier and did not see the multitude of problems in his proposal, but the Germans did. The prospect of sneaking shiploads of soldiers and weapons into Ireland through the Royal Navy blockade was unlikely in the extreme. Casement's personal efforts to recruit Irish POWs to return to Ireland and fight for independence were scorned by most of them. He was only able to recruit about 56 out of 2,000 prisoners. An angry Casement would dismiss the rest as "cads and cowards." Apparently he didn't understand selection bias.

Still, though the Germans were leery of the Irish radicals, thinking them too small and too badly organized to have a realistic chance of success, they weren't about to cut them off either. Even a failed Irish uprising would draw British soldiers and resources away from the Western Front, which could only benefit Germany. So the Germans were willing to discuss at least token contributions of arms and ammunition. Casement was disappointed with these offers, but the IRB in Dublin was determined to go ahead with their plans in any case. Sometime around the end of 1915, the Supreme Council of the Volunteers decided the Rising would begin at Easter. Easter would fall unusually late in the year 1916, on April 23.

[music: "Give Me Your Hand"]

Back in April 1914, before the war broke out, when the Ulster Volunteers were smuggling in guns, the Irish Volunteers made attempts to do the same, but they had only managed to gather

about a thousand rifles. Once the war began, it became easier to buy, smuggle, or steal weapons. But then came the split with John Redmond and when most of the volunteers left, so did most of the weapons. By early 1916, the Irish Volunteers held fewer than four thousand firearms, a mixed bag of rifles, shotguns, and handguns.

That meant it was essential in order for the uprising to have any chance of success that the Germans supply arms. The Germans were more open to this idea, arming the Irish Volunteers, than they were to suggestions that they commit German soldiers or naval vessels to the uprising. It was far easier and cheaper simply to part with a few rifles. What firearms the Volunteers already had were in Dublin, and a great deal of planning went into the uprising in that city, all of which took place in the strictest of secrecy. IRB members who worked for the Post Office were interviewed and information collected on manholes and underground conduits throughout the city. That's because in the UK, the Post Office operated all telegraph and telephone services. Weapons were prepositioned at supply dumps where the Volunteers could easily lay hands on them once the Rising began.

The west of Ireland was another story. The Volunteers had few supporters and no weapons in the rural parts of the country, but they clung to the belief that if they began a rising in Dublin, patriotic Irish elsewhere would be moved to join in. If the British were sufficiently distracted by the fighting in the capital, that would create an opportunity for the Germans to land more weapons in the west, and the British Army advancing toward Dublin would suddenly find hordes of Irish rebels at their backs. They would be encircled and trapped between the Dublin fighters and the rural fighters.

This sounded convincing to the IRB leaders anyway, and they tried again to persuade the Germans to send soldiers. Even just a small number of trained fighters who could help organize the Irish Volunteers and show them how to fight. They also requested a U-boat patrol the approaches to Dublin, ready to sink any transports carrying British reinforcements to the battle in Ireland. The odds of the Germans doing either of these things are approximately zero, but the IRB leaders will expect them all the same, right up until the Rising begins. And even afterward, they're going to be looking for that U-boat.

In those early weeks of 1916, plans were laid. There were furtive meetings, secret discussions, and preparations laid and then cover stories given to account for them. In an environment like this, rumors were bound to fly, and they did. Over in Britain, as you know, volunteers for the Army were in short supply and the Government was moving toward conscription. The idea of conscription was deeply unpopular in Ireland for a variety of reasons, beginning with the troubled relationship Ireland has with the rest of the United Kingdom. And like Britons and like Europeans in general, the Irish were taking note of how long and how bloody the war was turning out to be, with no end in sight and increasing numbers of wounded and disabled young men returning from the front lines.

And add to all that, our old friend selection bias, in that the young men most loyal to Britain and staunchest in their belief in the rightness of the cause have already volunteered and are already at the front, or else casualties, or else POWs mocking Roger Casement, while the more skeptical Irish are still home in Ireland and hale and hearty. Also, the war, and the soaring prices it brought for imported food in Britain were good news for Irish farmers, typically the poorest of Irish, who were now suddenly seeing a degree of prosperity Irish farmers haven't seen since, well, ever, really. But again, it's human labor that keeps the farms running, and the labor of healthy young men in particular, so conscription would run a very real risk of taking away the beer keg just as the party's getting started.

We know that the Government in Westminster is fully aware of the special difficulties conscription in Ireland poses, and that's why the conscription bill working its way through Parliament grants Ireland a special exemption. You might think most Irish would be pleased that the Government was taking Ireland's special circumstances into account. But on the other hand, most Irish also couldn't help but think that if the shortage of recruits is getting so bad that the British are willing to force their own sons into the trenches, surely it's only a matter of time that they begin sending Ireland's along with them.

Fears of conscription aided the nationalist cause, but there was a rumor that had the IRB extremists in a tizzy in early 1916. That rumor held that the British government, which had already approved Home Rule and then suspended it for the duration of the war, was about to suspend the suspension, as it were, and implement Home Rule right now, this year. There was in fact nothing to this rumor, but it did worry the IRB, who feared such a move would cost the radicals support.

There was also a rumor of a pending British crackdown on the Volunteers. In this telling, the British meant to provoke some sort of confrontation in the hope of luring the Volunteers into a violent response, and then using that response as an excuse to crack down on the lot of them and confiscate their weapons. This rumor was particularly useful to the leaders of the planned rising, because it allowed them to issue orders regarding the moving and storage of weapons in preparation for the Rising and then justify all this activity as purely defensive moves meant to guard against a potential British seizure.

And speaking of preparations for the Rising, remember that the committee that officially oversees the Irish Volunteers still has many moderates on it, like Bulmer Hobson, the son of Irish Quakers, and the titular Chief-of-Staff is still Eóin MacNeill, the medievalist scholar. They and moderates like them were being quietly kept out of the loop as preparations were being made. This is not to say that they had no inkling that something was going on. Quite the contrary. They were both pretty sure something was going on. In February, MacNeill met with Patrick Pearse and some of the other IRB types and questioned them bluntly about their activities. Pearse swore his loyalty to MacNeill and acted hurt that MacNeill would think otherwise. In April, just days before the Rising, when Hobson brought up a resolution at the governing committee meeting

proposing that no major orders could be issued to the Volunteers until they had been reviewed and approved by Chief-of-Staff MacNeill, the motion carried. Even Pearse voted for it. The radicals then carried on with their preparations as if nothing had happened.

With the benefit of hindsight, the efforts of MacNeill and Hobson to figure out what was going on within the Volunteers look pretty halfhearted. The most charitable explanations are either they didn't realize how big and dramatic an operation was being planned or else didn't realize how little time they had left to put a stop to it. For their part, the radicals from the IRB appeared to have no qualms about deceiving and manipulating the moderates of the Irish Volunteers nor of taking the rank and file members into armed revolt against the British government without their knowledge or consent.

On the British side, the highest ranking official in charge of Ireland was the 65-year old barrister and Liberal MP, Augustine Birrell. He had held this position for nine years and had earned praise for introducing liberal reforms to Ireland. At this stage of his career, he was largely concerned with preparing Ireland for Home Rule, and he worked closely with John Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party toward this end. As a member of the Cabinet, he spent most of his time in London and the actual day-to-day British administration in Dublin was overseen by the Under-Secretary for Ireland, the 53-year old career civil servant Sir Matthew Nathan, who directed government operations from Dublin Castle.

Nathan was disturbed by the activities of the Irish Volunteers, and in particular how many of its members also held day jobs within the Civil Service of his own administration. John Redmond advised him not to worry about any of that. Most Irish were content with British rule, he was told, and all that needed to be done with this small minority of the disaffected was to wait for them to dwindle away. The new commander-in-chief of the British Home Forces, Sir John French, who you'll recall was until recently commanding the BEF in France, fretted over rumors of armed insurrection and even offered a cavalry brigade to bolster defenses in Ireland, but Birrell and Nathan assured him that matters were well in hand.

In fact, matters are not well in hand, and the storm is about to break. But we'll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening. I'd also like to thank Leslie for making a donation and thank you André for becoming a patron of the podcast. If you'd like to become a patron, or make a one-time contribution, visit the podcast website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com), where you will find a lovely PayPal button and an equally lovely Patreon button. Patrons get various benefits, and you can click on that button to see what they are. If there's a benefit you're looking for but you don't see it, let me know. I'm easy. Maybe we can work it out.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue the story of the Easter Rising, and the British response. That's next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The Irish radicals worked hard to keep their plans a secret, but as we've seen, it wasn't entirely unknown that something was up. It's rather surprising that the British government was caught as flatfooted as it was. The British government of this era has quite a lot of skilled intelligence officials at its disposal. We've seen many examples in this podcast of the British having the edge over their enemies in intelligence gathering, and we're going to see even more. So what went wrong in this instance? Scotland Yard was able to infiltrate an informant into Tom Clarke's small team of extremists tasked with blowing up London Bridge 33 years ago. Why were the authorities in Ireland in 1916 unable to keep better tabs on an organization with thousands of members, including many who worked for those very same authorities?

The answer seems to be that it was less a failure of intelligence than a failure of policy. The Liberal government in London had on its hands a delicate situation in Ireland, which it very much wished to ignore, for the sake of focusing its attention on other policies that were higher priorities. The Asquith Government depended on Irish Parliamentary Party votes to stay in power, and any attempt to push back too hard against either the Irish nationalists or the Ulster unionists had the potential to bring down the government. And so it seems the Government favored a policy of passing Home Rule and then studiously looking the other way and hoping it would all get sorted out in the end, somehow. In doing so, they played right into the hands of the radicals.

Or to put it another way, let me quote some of the conclusions from the Royal Commission tasked with investigating the causes of the rebellion in Ireland, which handed in their report on June 26.

“[T]he general conclusion we draw from the evidence before us is that the main cause of the rebellion appears to be that lawlessness was allowed to grow up unchecked, and that Ireland for several years past has been administered on the principle that it was safer and more expedient to leave law in abeyance if collision with any faction of the Irish people could thereby be avoided... We are also of opinion that on the outbreak of war all drilling and manœuvring by unrecognised bodies of men, whether armed or unarmed, should have been strictly prohibited, and that as soon as it became known to the Irish Government that the Irish Volunteers and the Citizen Army were under the control of men prepared to assist [His] Majesty's enemies if the opportunity should be offered to them, all drilling and open carrying of arms by these bodies of men should have been forcibly suppressed.”

[music: Closing War Theme]