

Rebellion in Wartime Ireland – Easter 1916

By

David Hennessy

For many in Ireland, as well as those who look to Ireland as the mother country, Easter 1916 is a date that has symbolic significance, however how many people have a good understanding of these events? I venture to say ‘very little do’, save to say the folklore they have grown up with and the stories of Patrick Pearse, Thomas Clarke, James Connolly and other leaders from that period. In this article, I hope to bring a better understanding of how people from this period viewed what was happening in Ireland from ordinary people to Augustine Birrell who was Ireland’s Chief Secretary, and how these events impacted on them.

Easter Monday, 24 April 1916 is commonly seen the beginning of the Easter Rising. Following the scuttling of the German vessel the *Aud*, the previous weekend, which had been expected to land over twenty thousand German guns,¹ the Rising was doomed to fail. This was only the beginning of the story. By Easter Monday, news of the sinking appeared in the *Freeman’s Journal* in a minor headline that stated ‘Irish Sensation, Seizure on Kerry Strand, Boat with Arms and Ammunition, Serious Charge against men arrested’. One of these was Sir Roger Casement. Casement who had been a former member of the British Consulate Service lived in Germany following the outbreak of war in 1914.² While in Germany, Casement had tried in vain to raise an ‘Irish Brigade’, which was hoped would be made up of Irish prisoners of war. However, by the spring of 1915, despite the appeals from Casement, the number of those who enlisted was small.³ However, this did not stop him from wanting to deliver arms for the impending Rising. By early April 1916, Casement accepted that the impending Rising was doomed to failure, so much so, that Casement tried in vain to communicate with the leaders in a bid to stop it. He was never allowed.⁴ By the following Wednesday, 26 April, the *Cork Examiner* released a report from the Press Bureau for 10.25 p.m. from the Secretary of the Admiralty stating that:

.... during the period between p.m. April 20 and p.m. April 21 an attempt to land arms and ammunition in Ireland was made by a vessel under the guise of a neutral merchant ship, but in reality a German auxiliary, in conjunction with a German submarine. The auxiliary sank and a number of prisoners were made, among whom was Sir Roger Casement.⁵

Moreover, the Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland stated that:

It is clear that the leaders of the movement expected the arrival of the ship, since emissaries of the Irish Volunteers were sent to meet it. The vessel, however, and Sir Roger Casement, appear to have arrived a little sooner than was expected.⁶

The commission also stated, following the news of the capture of the ship all proposed arrangements for the Irish Volunteers⁷ for the following Sunday, April 23, were cancelled. ‘McNeill, [*sic*] Chief of Staff’, signed this order. This must be seen as particularly important as the MacNeill stated in the report is none other than Eoin MacNeill, leader of the Irish Volunteers, and the editor of the *Irish Volunteer*. The previous day, Easter Sunday 23 April, Dublin Castle received reports of a robbery in which 250 lbs of gelnignite were stolen and stored at Liberty Hall.⁸ By this time, events had overtaken the authorities who believed:

¹ Lee, *Ireland 1912 -1985, Politics and Society*, p.24.

² Reinhard R. Doerries, *Prelude to the Easter Rising, Sir Roger Casement in Imperial Germany*, (Frank Cass, London, 2000), p. 9.

³ Doerries, *Prelude to the Easter Rising*, p.13.

⁴ Roger Sawyer, *Casement The Flawed Hero*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1984), p.161.

⁵ *Cork Examiner*, 26 April 1916.

⁶ Public Record Office, Kew, PRO 30/67/31

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

That the proper course was to arrest all the leaders of the movement, there being by this time clear evidence of their 'hostile association,' but it was agreed that before this could be safely done military preparations sufficient to overawe armed opposition should be secured.⁹

Instead of the arrest and internment, expected for the following day, events as already stated had overtaken the authorities. Instead of the Rising being 'carefully planned' as stated in the Royal Commission Report, Lee has argued that 'the Easter Rising went off at half-cock'.¹⁰ This was certainly the case in Cork City and County. Writing on his own experiences during the Rising, the future T.D. for Cork, Seamus Fitzgerald, described that the only action the Irish Volunteers took during the Rising was to secure the headquarters of the Irish Volunteers in Cork City. Many of those who were to guard the headquarters came from Cobh. [Cobh itself is situated on the mouth of Cork harbour several miles from Cork City]. On the night of the Easter Monday [24 April 1916], those who were ordered to guard the headquarters were all sent home. However, instead of going back to their homes, they were told to stay in safe houses that had been previously prepared. Over the next few days, members of the Cobh Volunteers continued to ask for further instructions. These never came. Finally, on 3 May, Fitzgerald was arrested and held in the Cork Military Detention barracks before being transferred to Richmond barracks in Dublin. Several days later, Fitzgerald like many others was transferred to Frongoch internment camp in North Wales, where he remained until his release in August 1916.¹¹ Not everyone experienced the Rising as those in Cork. The radical republican publication, *Irish War News*, appearing on the streets of Dublin one day after the Rising began, Tuesday 25 April, stated:

At the moment of writing this report, (9.30 a.m., Tuesday) the Republican forces hold all their positions and the British forces have nowhere broken through. There has been heavy and continuous fighting for nearly 24 hours, the casualties of the enemy being much more numerous than those on the Republican side. The Republican forces everywhere are fighting with splendid gallantry. The populace of Dublin are plainly with the Republic, and the officers and men are everywhere cheered as they march through the streets. The whole centre of the city is in the hands of the Republic, whose flag flies from the G.P.O.¹²

As news of the Rising spread, members of the Royal Munster Fusiliers fighting on the western front received the news from the German army. The information was fed to the battalion using two placards with the words: 'Irishmen! Heavy uproar in Ireland: English guns are firing at your wives and children!'¹³ However, in Ireland the Rising had yet to be reported. By Thursday 27 April, the news of the Rising finally began to appear in the *Cork Examiner* under the headline 'Dublin (official) Liberty Hall Shelled by British Gunboat, Situation Well in Hand'.¹⁴ The following day, Friday 28 April, the *Cork Examiner* expressed its disgust at the Rising:

The mad project which apparently originated at Liberty Hall, which has so often been the storm centre from which trouble has issued, has succeeded in spreading consternation all over the country and has cut off all communication from outside, with the Irish capital, which so far as food and coal are concerned must be reduced to the extremity of a beleaguered city. The lot of the poor there, bad at most times, must be little better than that of world famous victims of the war.¹⁵

One day later, Saturday 29 April, the *Cork Examiner* reported that the situation in Dublin and throughout the rest of the country had not changed. By now, the Rising had come to an end. In another

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Lee, *Ireland 1912 -1985, Politics and Society*, p.24.

¹¹ CAI/PR/6/42(5) Seamus Fitzgerald papers.

¹² *Irish War News*, 25 April 1916.

¹³ Captain McCance, *History of the Royal Munster Fusiliers*, vol.2, p.197.

¹⁴ *Cork Examiner*, 27 April 1916.

¹⁵ *Cork Examiner*, 28 April 1916.

report, which, appeared in the *Cork Examiner* for that day, was the resolution by Cork County Council dissociating itself from the 'bloody and bitter work that had been raging'.¹⁶ The Council of the Cork Incorporated Chamber of Commerce and Shipping stated in a resolution immediately following the Rising:

That we desire to place on record our abhorrence of the scenes of bloodshed, and the consequent destruction of life and property. That once law has been vindicated by the punishment of the ringleaders of the rebellion, we desire to urge upon the authorities the wisdom and desirability of treating with clemency the remaining prisoners who the great majority of cases have been fooled into joining this mad enterprise.¹⁷

By the start of May, the *Cork Examiner* carried news from the previous weekend that the Rising had finally come to an end. On 3 May, the Prime Minister, Mr. Asquith, recounted that some of the signatories to the Republican Proclamation had been tried and shot early that morning,¹⁸ to which the radical Nationalist M.P. Lawrence Ginnell replied 'Hunnish',¹⁹ [this been a referral to alleged German atrocities in Belgium]. However, the real drama began when Augustine Birrell the Chief Secretary for Ireland rose to speak, giving his general description of the days during the Rising. Birrell finally accepted that he and his officials did not have a true estimate of the Sinn Féin movement.²⁰ This was reinforced by the Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland the following July when the Commission stated:

By the middle of 1915 it was obvious to the Military authorities that their efforts in favour of recruiting were being frustrated by the hostile activities of the Sinn Féin supporters, and they made representations to the Government to that effect. The general danger of the situation was clearly pointed out to the Irish Government by the Military authorities, on their own initiative, in February last, but the warning fell on unheeding ears.²¹

Another point, which would have a major impact on Augustine Birrell's political career, was his statement to Sir Matthew Nathan, the Under Secretary for Ireland that he was leaving for London, but would return to Dublin by the end of the week following the arrest of Casement.²² However, he never returned to Dublin. Moreover, Birrell had made this statement prior to the Rising. In London, during the debate in the House of Commons on 3 May 1916 the issue of street fighting was addressed, the abhorrence which he felt is best summed up by Birrell when he stated:

It was not street fighting, for there was no street fighting but of house and roof occupation-and of the desperate folly displayed by the leaders and by their dupes, which has resulted in the deaths of officers and soldiers who never enlisted for such purposes as these.²³

Birrell also spoke on how the events of that Easter impacted on Ireland's support for the empire when he almost recalled the words of Sir Edward Grey in August 1914, when Grey stated 'that the only bright spot in the situation was the changed feeling in Ireland'.²⁴ However, the words from the Chief Secretary could not have been more different when he said that he believed 'that Ireland was to be the bright spot of the Empire in the hour of dire necessity'.²⁵ Considering Birrell's words, it would appear that he did not understand the enormity of the situation. Following the Chief Secretary's statement the concern about the executions of the leaders of the Rising became more apparent. The following day, Thursday 4 May, the editorial in the *Cork Examiner* attacked what it called 'men professing to be

¹⁶ *Cork Examiner*, 29 April 1916.

¹⁷ Thomas Anthony Linehan, *The Development of Cork's economy 1910-1939*, (MA Thesis University College Cork, 1984), pp 38-39.

¹⁸ *Hansard fifth Series*, Vol.82.col. 30, (3 May 1916).

¹⁹ *Ibid.* Vol.82.col.30, (3 May 1916).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Public Record Office, Kew, PRO 30/67/31, Midleton Papers, Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland.

²² Leon Ó Broin, *The Chief Secretary Augustine Birrell in Ireland*, (Chatto & Windus, London, 1969), p.172.

²³ *Hansard fifth Series*, Vol.82.col. 33, (3 May 1916).

²⁴ *Hansard fifth Series*, Vol. 65, col. 1828 (3 August 1914).

²⁵ *Hansard fifth Series*, Vol.82.col. 33, (3 May 1916).

Irishmen and acting in the name of Ireland'.²⁶ The editorial believed these men were influenced by the ballads and history of the early nineteenth century when Irish people were, as the paper suggested, living 'in a condition worse than the nigger slaves of the Southern States of America'.²⁷ While the editorial condemned the Rising the news on the destruction of Dublin was likened to a 'Belgian City'. However, another story suggested that many in Dublin had no idea what had happened a week earlier, begging the question why? It is best understood in terms of what the correspondent for the *Cork Examiner* suggested on 4 May:

In districts outside the areas of fighting no definite information was ascertainable until today. The isolation of these districts was absolute. For a full week Dublin knew nothing not only of the happenings in the great world but in its own heart. There was no tram service, no telegraph or telephone communication. No newspapers were printed in the city since Easter Monday the premises of three of them were in the hands of the insurgents or at their command - and none in from elsewhere until the close of the week when one or two persons here and there succeeded in obtaining copies of some Belfast and London newspapers.²⁸

The reporter was also concerned about the thousands of people who lived within walking distance of O'Connell Street and yet had no idea what was happening. This led to 'blood curling stories'²⁹ of varying exaggeration that never remained the same. Another more important aspect leading to the lack of understanding of what had happened that Easter week is the eyewitness accounts as related in the *Cork Examiner*. One of these came from a Post Office clerk who recounted that the attack occurred at 12.15 p.m. when members of the Volunteers rushed into the public office and 'held up' the clerks, while others smashed windows before replacing the Union Jack with a Green flag.³⁰ Another eyewitness was an English visitor who claimed that 'the invasion of the rebel army, did not take the population by storm',³¹ his reason being, that many people in Dublin had seen it all before due to the several 'dress rehearsals' that James Connolly had undertaken prior to the Rising.³² This only added to the fair - like day that it all seemed. Following the initial outbreak, the rebels barricaded the post office. Any police that were on duty dispersed due to being outnumbered by the insurgents. By dusk, the first attack by the army occurred, these were the Lancers [a mounted regiment], but the eyewitness could not say if anyone had been killed or wounded, indeed the only serious casualty was a horse, shot by the insurgents. Later that night a mob was seen to loot several shops and set them on fire but this was extinguished very quickly. By the time the English eyewitness had gone to bed, events had quietened down. The following day, Tuesday 25 April, the eyewitness reported that when he left his hotel, many of the streets had been barricaded; one of these was Abbey Street where the contents of a bicycle shop were used to build a barricade of bicycles and crates.³³ Other parts of Dublin had also been taken over. These included, Stephen's Green Park, where insurgents dug trenches, but this was one place the eyewitness did not go. The following day, 5 May, the editorial in the *Cork Examiner* carried the resignation of Augustine Birrell, who had been Ireland's Chief Secretary since January 1907. The editorial believed that Ireland had lost someone who not only concerned himself with Irish politics but also was a friend to Ireland and her people.³⁴ Birrell, however, did make enemies. These enemies, the editorial believed, did not attack Birrell for what he was, more for what he did. His stance on Irish Home Rule, he believed, was good for Ireland as much as it was to 'twenty or thirty Self-governing Legislatures under the allegiance to the Crown'.³⁵ The same day, 5 May, the *Freeman's Journal*, editorial spoke of what it called the hundreds of lives that had been sacrificed, many of who were 'youths of high principle, bravery, and character, gulled and bewitched by the vain promises and delusive lies of those who led them down to destruction'.³⁶ One who believed that the Rising was

²⁶ *Cork Examiner*, 4 May 1916.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4 May 1916.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Cork Examiner*, 5 May 1916.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5 May 1916.

³⁶ *Freeman's Journal*, 5 May 1916.

likely was the Most. Rev. Dr. Crozier, the Protestant Primate of Ireland, speaking in Portadown over a week earlier, suggested:

The events in the South of Ireland should be a tremendous warning to those of the North, to see that nothing was done to kindle similar fires in Ulster. England must now learn something of the character and conduct of the men, to whom it was proposed to hand over Ireland. The Government must put down sedition and the spoilt child must be put in its proper place.³⁷

One day later, 6 May, a week after the Rising had ended, the *Cork Examiner* again returned to the Rising in Dublin. This time it also attacked the stance taken by Sir Edward Carson who, two years earlier [in March 1914] had almost brought Ireland to the brink of Civil War. The editorial believed this war would have dragged England in if it were not for a 'mere stroke of the proverbial luck'.³⁸ Indeed, Cork had raised over 3,000 men in 1914 to defend empire against what the paper called 'wanton and aggressive revolt'.³⁹ The editorial also concerned itself with those who had taken up arms in Dublin, suggesting that no matter what people had thought of their actions, one could not doubt their courage. The editorial also called on the government to support the call for clemency if only for those who were led and not the leaders.⁴⁰

As the events of Easter began to calm down, new reports from different parts of the country began to circulate. Instead of carrying any real news of the Rising in Galway, the *Cork Examiner* on 6 May simply reported 'Galway peaceable: Troops withdrawn'.⁴¹ In a correspondence to *The Saturday Review* in July 1916, Lees Knowles Bart., C.V.O. [an English tourist] gave his experiences of the Rising in Galway.⁴² Knowles described the upheaval of being cut off from the outside world. His description begins on the Thursday before Easter, when he and his wife were staying in the Railway Hotel Galway because of an accident on the mail train.⁴³ Following the outbreak of the Rising on Easter Monday the only opportunity to obtain news was from the 'a few sheets which were printed locally, or letters, until after martial law had been declared on Monday May 1, and even then our English letters were censored each way'.⁴⁴ These were not the only problems Knowles and his wife had to suffer others included the cutting of telegraph wires,⁴⁵ this only added to the sense of isolation. Much more was to come before Knowles and wife could return to Dublin. By the following Wednesday the Rising was in full swing. Galway would not suffer the same fate as Dublin and the destruction of the city. A reason given by Knowles as to why Galway did not suffer:

Was, I believe the promptitude of the naval, military, and police authorities, especially the County and District Inspectors, and a war-vessel in the bay firing in broad daylight at two o' clock on the Wednesday afternoon upwards of half-dozen shells towards the disaffected village of Castlegar.⁴⁶

Two days later, on Monday 8 May, the *Cork Examiner* continued to carry news of those who had taken part in the Rising. By now many of the leaders had been shot, though some were still alive. One of these was James Connolly who was in hospital with a broken leg and other injuries. Another was

³⁷ Ibid., 5 May 1916.

³⁸ *Cork Examiner*, 6 May 1916.

³⁹ Ibid., 6 May 1916.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Sir. Lees Knowles, Bart. C.V.O. 'Irish Impressions', *Saturday Review*, (Tillotson & Son, Ltd, London, 1918), p 3.

⁴³ Knowles, 'Irish Impression', p.3.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Countess Markievicz who had her death sentence reduced to penal servitude.⁴⁷ While the *Cork Examiner* called for clemency for those who had taken part in the Rising this belief was not universal. The Council of the Dublin Chamber of Commerce now passed the following resolution condemning the Rising and the role of the Irish administration with the following words:

The Council of the Dublin Chamber of Commerce desire to place on record their considered opinion that the outbreaks which have occurred in the Metropolis and throughout the country would have been impossible but for the gross and unpardonable laxity, long continued, of the administration of the Irish Government.⁴⁸

While the Dublin Chamber of Commerce had blamed Dublin Castle for the Rising, another concern was the call for an official inquiry. During questions in the House of Commons that day the Cork MP, William O' Brien asked Prime Minister Asquith could he give the names of those who would conduct the proposed Royal Commission Inquiry on the Rising. Asquith replied he could not until the following day.⁴⁹ The names of those who did conduct the inquiry were Hardinge of Penshurst, Montague Shearman, and Mackenzie Dalzell Chalmers.⁵⁰ O'Brien was not the only Irish MP to inquire as to the government's intentions in Ireland. In a private notice to the Prime Minister, John Redmond asked:

Was the Prime Minister aware of the deep upset caused by the executions with the most of the Irish population, who until now did not support the rebels, and will he not take "the precedent of General Botha in South Africa". [This was based on clemency after a Rising which had occurred in South Africa].⁵¹

Instead of accepting Redmond's pleas, the Prime Minister stated that the government supported the actions of General Maxwell, whom the government believed also wanted the end to the executions.⁵² [General Maxwell had a dual role. One was his role as the Commander in Chief of the forces in Ireland. The second was in his role as competent military authority under the Defence of the Realm Act].⁵³ The following day, 9 May, William O' Brien had now taken up the cause of prisoners in Cork Gaol. During questions for that day O' Brien by private notice asked Asquith was he aware of the treatment of several hundred men that had been arrested and imprisoned in Cork Gaol. Many of those who had been arrested came from several counties in Munster, namely Tipperary, Kerry and Cork.⁵⁴ however the Prime Minister said he did not know anything about the issue that O'Brien asked about.⁵⁵

⁴⁷ *Cork Examiner*, 8 May 1916.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 8 May 1916.

⁴⁹ *Hansard fifth Series*, Vol.82.col. 281. (8 May 1916).

⁵⁰ Public Record Office, Kew, London, PRO 30/67/31

⁵¹ *Hansard fifth Series*, Vol.82.col. 283, (8 May 1916).

⁵² *Hansard fifth Series*, Vol.82.col. 284, (8 May 1916).

⁵³ *Irish Independent*, 1 August 1916.

⁵⁴ *Hansard fifth Series*, Vol.82.col.450, (9 May 1916).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. 82. col. 450, (9 May 1916).

By now, the numbers of the crown forces who had been killed, wounded or missing was finally released:

	Killed	Wounded	Missing
		Military Officers	
	17	46	0
		Other Ranks	
	86	311	9
		Royal Irish Constabulary	
	12	23	0
		Dublin Metropolitan Police	
	3	3	0
		Royal Navy	
	1	2	0
		Local Volunteers	
	5	3	0
Total	124	388	9 ⁵⁶

The following day, 10 May, as the executions continued unabated, the revulsion that had overtaken many sectors of Irish society following the outbreak of the Rising took an unexpected turn. By now much of the country began to accept that no matter who called for clemency, this was to fall on government's deaf ears. This did not stop the call. During a meeting of the Cork Harbour Commissioners on 10 May, the board forwarded the following resolution to the Lord Lieutenant, John Redmond, Sir Edward Carson, and two Cork MPs, Maurice Healy and William O'Brien:

That this board having already expressed the condemnation of the late Rising in Dublin, now recognising that enough has been done to punish the action of the leaders of the unfortunate rebellion call upon the Government in the most confident manner to immediately cease with further executions which we believe, will if continued hoard memories in the future that may be the cause of untold consequences to the Country.⁵⁷

The following day, 11 May, the calls for clemency finally reached the ears of the government. During questions in the House of Commons, John Dillon demanded from the Prime Minister the reason why prisoners were continuing to be shot, some of whom had been shot without facing trial. The reason for

⁵⁶ *Hansard fifth Series*, Vol.82.col.455, (9 May 1916).

⁵⁷ Cork Harbour Commissioners, Vol. 47. October 1915 to July 1916.

Dillon's question may depend on the executions by Captain Colthurst of three civilians. Asquith, however, could or would not disclose the facts.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Dillon firmly believed that Asquith did not know what the military were doing in Dublin.⁵⁹ Another concern for the government was the growing discontent because of the executions. Dillon pointed this out when he stated:

At this moment, you are doing everything conceivable to madden the Irish people and to spread insurrection - perhaps not insurrection, because if you disarm the country there cannot be insurrection - but to spread disaffection and bitterness from one end of the country to the other.⁶⁰

Two days earlier, on 11 May, Lees Knowles who had been confined to Galway for the duration of the Rising returned to Dublin, this time staying at the Shelbourne Hotel. Before they could return to Dublin, Knowles and his wife required a passport, a requirement needed on entering Dublin following the Rising.⁶¹ Knowles also likens Dublin to the centre of Ypres, the Belgian city that had been bombarded by the German army. Furthermore, if Knowles is to be believed, there were some people who were still not sure of what had happened, as can be seen from the following statement attributed to Knowles.

An Irishman asked the question: Was it the British, or was it the Sinn Feiners, [*sic*] who had won? An Irishwoman remarked that all was going on well till the soldiers arrived and disturbed the minds of the people.⁶²

One week later, on 18 May, Maurice Healy asked the Prime Minister could he give the number of volunteers in Cork Goal until 9 May, what treatment had these prisoners had, (by military order), had they been removed from the jail to another, had they been tried, were their relatives aware of their movement, did they have access to church services and the right to visits from the prison chaplain. And as the National volunteers was not an illegal organisation prior to 24 April why did those who were arrested not receive visits from relatives, and finally did prisoners have the right to exercise? The answer was the official response that an inquiry was reviewing this.⁶³ In spite of this reply, Mary MacSwiney [sister of the future Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney, who later died on hunger strike in Brixton Prison, London in 1920], in a telegram to William O' Brien said that Asquith's statement was untrue.⁶⁴

Twelve days later, on 30 May, in a correspondence to William O' Brien a 'well-wisher' asked him to discontinue with 'Sinn Féin questions in Parliament'.⁶⁵ This was for the sake of the party and not to be seen as 'champion defender or sympathiser' with those 'who have done such irreparable injury to the cause of our most unfortunate country & disgraced the name of Irishmen'.⁶⁶ Three days later, on 2 June, the *Freeman's Journal* who attacked the Rising as 'a reckless and barren waste of life, courage, property',⁶⁷ on 5 May now proclaimed its support for those who the paper called 'innocent prisoners',⁶⁸ who had been 'tricked into the streets of Dublin with his rifle in the belief that he was going out for peaceful Easter manoeuvres'.⁶⁹ Four days later, on 6 June, Lord Kitchener died at sea. Kitchener, born in Ballylongford Co. Kerry in 1850, was en route to Russia in his appointed role as Secretary of State for War, a position he held since August 1914.⁷⁰ Another Irishman to drown that day was Sergeant Matthew McLoughlin, a member of Scotland Yard's criminal investigation department who was travelling with Kitchener.⁷¹ The *Cork Examiner's* editorial for the following day, 7 June, could not

⁵⁸ *Freeman's Journal*, 13 May 1916.

⁵⁹ *Cork Examiner*, 12 May 1916.

⁶⁰ *Freeman's Journal*, 13 May 1916.

⁶¹ Knowles, *Irish Impressions*, p.5.

⁶² Knowles, *Irish Impressions*, p.6.

⁶³ *Hansard fifth Series*, Vol.82, col.1621, (18 May 1916).

⁶⁴ UC/WOB/PP/AS/89/ William O' Brien papers.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Freeman's Journal*, 5 May 1916.

⁶⁸ *Freeman's Journal*, 2 June 1916.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 2 June 1916.

⁷⁰ *Freeman's Journal*, 7 June 1916.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 7 June 1916.

believe that Kitchener had died, saying that his death and that of members of the crew, 'comes as a strange epilogue to the recent naval losses in the North Sea'. The editorial could give no other details on the sinking of the ship, but speculated that the reason may have been a torpedo or a mine.⁷²

This would not be the only news of Irish interest. Another, story again had its origin from Easter 1916, was the murder of Francis Sheehy-Skeffington [who was doing his best to prevent looting],⁷³ and two others, namely Dixon and McIntyre, editors of the *Eye Opener* and *The Spark*.⁷⁴ What made this execution different from the others was the way in which it was carried out. This would lead to the court-martial of Captain Bowen-Colthurst of the Royal Irish Rifles. The trial, which began on Tuesday 6 June, centred more on the mental condition of Captain Colthurst than on the killings.⁷⁵ Several weeks earlier, during questions in the House of Commons, T.M. Healy, asked the Prime Minister Mr. Asquith could he explain the reasons why the men were shot. Asquith replied that 'an inquiry would begin the following day 23 May 1916'.⁷⁶ This was not the end of the matter. One week later, another Irish MP asked the Prime Minister could he state the number of deaths at Portobello Barracks. Again, Asquith stated that as far as his information was concerned three men were the only people who were shot, and that the officer allegedly responsible would be court-martialled.⁷⁷ Another accusation of murder made against Captain Colthurst was of shooting a boy of 17 years one day earlier but he was never charged.⁷⁸ However, the most telling aspect of the trial was the evidence of another officer, Lieutenant Dobbin, who stated that Bowen-Colthurst said that he decided that he was taking 'these prisoners out and I am going to shoot them because I think it is the right thing to do'.⁷⁹ In spite of this no action was taken against Bowen-Colthurst who continued his duties without any threat of complaint from his fellow officers. However, Major Sir Francis Fletcher Vane of the Royal Munster Fusiliers and second in command of Portobello barracks did do his best to bring Colthurst to justice.⁸⁰ Following the intervention from Vane who had now pressured the government and military to act, Britain's Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener sent a telegram leading to the court-martial. General Sir John Maxwell, Commander-in-Chief in Ireland, disregarded this, instead dismissing Major Vane from the military.⁸¹ Finally, on 17 October 1916, the Simon Commission Report was released on the shooting at Portobello Barracks. The report, instead of accepting Captain Bowen – Colthurst's account of the events, stated 'that the shooting of unarmed and unresisting civilians without trial constitutes the offence of murder, whether martial law has been proclaimed or not'.⁸² Nevertheless, following the decision of the court that found Captain Bowen-Colthurst guilty, outside intervention decided that he might have been guilty but insane. Following this verdict, the accused was held at Broadmoor [a prison for the criminally insane], where he continued to hold his rank of captain until his release in 1922.⁸³ Strangely, though within weeks of the Rising in Dublin another blood letting fiasco would dominate the newspapers and minds of many people not only in Ireland but in Europe also what is now called-The Somme. One of the greatest and bloodiest battles of what was known until then as – The Great War.

⁷² *Cork Examiner*, 7 June 1916.

⁷³ Ó Broin, *The Chief Secretary Augustine Birrell in Ireland*, p. 185.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Hansard fifth Series*, Vol.82.col. 1806, (22 May 1916).

⁷⁷ *Hansard fifth Series*, Vol.82.col. 2534, (30 May 1916).

⁷⁸ <http://www.wcml.org.uk/people/hss> (taken from Hanna Sheehy Skeffington's book, 'British Militarism As I Have Known It, Donnelly Press, New York, 1917).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Irish Independent*, 17 October 1916.

⁸³ *Irish Times*, 24 April 2000. (taken from <http://homepage.tinet.ie/~irishhistory/An%20Irishman.htm>).