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“A Terrible Beauty is Born”: A Panel on the 1916 Easter Rising

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Abstract

On Wednesday, April 20, 2016, Gettysburg College students and faculty gathered in Penn Hall Lyceum to acknowledge the centennial of the Easter Rising. On April 24, 1916, the day after Easter Sunday, an armed rebellion led by Irish Republicans seized the General Post Office and other major buildings in the center of Dublin, and declared a “Republic of Ireland.” Approximately 1,600 members of the Irish Volunteers and Irish Citizen Army participated in the six-day rebellion. The Rising was an act to overthrow the British government in Ireland and provoke a full-out revolution. After a week, however, British forces squashed the rebellion and arrested 3,000 people. The following month, fifteen leaders of the Rising were executed. While the Rising did not initially gain support from the Irish public, the ensuing brutality administered by the British in the aftermath of the rebellion spawned public dissent and fueled political unrest and further violence. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Easter Rising, Republic of Ireland, Rebellion, Irish Republicans

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

“A Terrible Beauty is Born”: A Panel on the 1916 Easter Rising

April 27, 2016

By Meg Sutter '16

On Wednesday, April 20, 2016, Gettysburg College students and faculty gathered in Penn Hall Lyceum to acknowledge the centennial of the Easter Rising. On April 24, 1916, the day after Easter Sunday, an armed rebellion led by Irish Republicans seized the General Post Office and other major buildings in the center of Dublin, and declared a “Republic of Ireland.” Approximately 1,600 members of the Irish Volunteers and Irish Citizen Army participated in the six-day rebellion. The Rising was an act to overthrow the British government in Ireland and provoke a full-out revolution. After a week, however, British forces squashed the rebellion and arrested 3,000 people. The following month, fifteen leaders of the Rising were executed. While the Rising did not initially gain support from the Irish public, the ensuing brutality administered by the British in the aftermath of the rebellion spawned public dissent and fueled political unrest and further violence.

Three Gettysburg College faculty members, Benjamin Luley, Ian Isherwood, and Robert Bohrer, presented at the Wednesday night panel. Vice Provost Jack Ryan gave opening remarks and introduced the panel.



Members of the faculty panel. Photography by the author.

Dr. Luley, a visiting assistant professor in Classics and Anthropology, gave a unique lecture on the Celtic cultural attitudes at the time of the rebellion. Ancient Celtic identity was used to create modern Celtic identity and was prominently utilized by the leaders of the Rising to distinguish themselves from British culture. We get the word “Celt” from the ancient peoples living in Eastern Europe who the Greeks called *Keltoi* and the Romans called *Gauls*. Over time, with the expansion of the Roman Empire, Celtic culture was threatened and further eroded by the authority of the British, French, and Castilian governments. Between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries there was a Celtic Revival movement that became increasingly interested in ancient Celtic culture. Many today might often think of Ireland and possibly Scotland as the only Celtic nations, but there are seven recognized countries today that identify as Celtic, including Ireland (Eire), Scotland (Alba), Wales (Cymru), Cornwall (Kernow), Isle of Mann (Ellan Mannin), Brittany (Breizh), and Galicia (Galiza). These regions resisted the governmental regimes that contested their Celtic cultural identity. The Celtic nations believe their identity, derived from their ancient past and constructed around similar language, religion, mythology, and art, was separate from British, French, and Spanish identity. In particular, Dr. Luley talked about Irish peoples’ use of ancient mythology and texts including the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, “The Cattle Raid of Cooley,” from the Ulster Cycle. Irish Republicans believe the hero Cú Chulainn, embodies Irish nationalism as “unbowed and unbroken.” A statue of Cú Chulainn by Oliver Sheppard stands in the General Post Office in commemoration of the Easter Rising. Interestingly, Protestants in Northern Ireland have also used Cú Chulainn to symbolize the unionist cause because Cú Chulainn was from Ulster and defended Ulster from attacks by Queen Medb and three southern provinces of Ireland. Dr. Luley also brought up the Easter Rising’s context in light of the American Civil War. Some members of the 69th New York Infantry, part of the Irish Brigade, were members of the Fenian Brotherhood, an Irish Republican group founded in 1858 in the United States. This Brotherhood was the American counterpart to the Irish Republican Brotherhood founded in the same year in Ireland, which later led the Easter Rising rebellion.

Dr. Isherwood, a historian and assistant director of the Civil War Institute, continued the narrative of the Easter Rising in the context of the Great War, which occurred simultaneously. Dr. Isherwood placed the Rising in the light of the “Home Rule” crisis that occurred early in the 1910s. Many Irish republicans hoped home rule would eventually bring independence from Britain, while unionists did not want home rule. Home Rule became law in 1914, but its implementation was disrupted by the beginning of World War I. Irish loyalists enlisted in the British army to show their support for union, while Irish nationalists joined in the hopes that they would be rewarded with independence. During the war, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, a group of activists who did not believe that home rule would permit enough freedom, planned the Easter Rising, which resulted in about 450 people dead and 2,000 wounded. Dr. Isherwood asked hard questions about the meaning of the failed rebellion: “Was the Rising a necessary catalyst for independence? How do we see those who initiated the violence? Were they heroes or extremists or both? Was the violence justified, particularly, if there were other means of accomplishing political goals?” As he posed these questions, Dr. Isherwood expressed hope that we ourselves will ask similar questions about violence in our modern world.

Dr. Bohrer, associate provost and a faculty member in the Political Science department, discussed the legacies of the Easter Rising and its immediate aftermath. The Rising was one of many events in the “Physical Force Tradition” of Irish history, in which proponents of interdependence employed violence to push for autonomy and rights. The Rising was followed by further violence including the Anglo-Irish War of Independence in 1919-1921, and the Irish Civil War in 1922-1923. It is also directly linked to the IRA and the Troubles of 1969-1998. Today there remain remnants of ongoing dissent in Ireland. Much of this dates back to the process of Irish

independence. During the Elections of 1918, the Irish Republican political party Sinn Fein won a landslide victory. In January 1919, they declared an independent Republic of Ireland and formed their own Irish government which broke away from Britain. The resulting Anglo-Irish War saw much violence on the part of the Royal Irish Constabulary and the Black and Tans as they searched houses, issued arrests, and delivered beatings upon Irish civilians to subdue the nation. The Irish Republican Army also retaliated against them in their attempts to free Ireland. There was a political shift that occurred among the Irish during this violent period from a moderate stance to support for independence because of the heavy and brutal suppression by British forces.

The panel was cosponsored by the Civil War Institute, Civil War Club, and the Civil War Era Studies Department. At Gettysburg College, our students are no strangers to considering issues of violence in history and memory. This panel brought up ways in which studying another nation's revolution, civil war, and state formation can inform the way in which we see our own history. As we consider issues of identity, the very mixed nature of political struggle, and the lasting legacy of issues of violence in our current world, the commemoration of the Easter Rising is a moment for reflection and reevaluation of the ways in which historians consider the contested nature of the past. As students of history, the panel gave us much food for thought on the way in which we study conflict.

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