

# IRISH INDEPENDENCE 1918-1923

## Email Responses to Matthews Presentation

### Response from Geoff Kennedy

Having read Matthew's introduction as well as doing some background reading, it does seem that Irish independence does raise the 'what if' question leading to the issue of whether it was inevitable. In particular, if home rule had been granted earlier, whether Ireland would still be part of the UK. Although, 'what if' questions can be dismissed as pointless, here it does, I think, lead to a better understanding of what happened.

Had Gladstone or Asquith succeeded, where would Ireland be now? Also, if the Easter Rising had been dealt with differently and conscription not introduced? Or, if, as subsequently in Ulster, the British Government had been prepared to fight the IRA to a standstill and/or to face down Ulster Protestants over home rule?

It comes down, I think, to the view of Ireland held by many in the British establishment, which ended up, ironically, in losing what chance there might have been of keeping Ireland in the UK. It was for centuries treated like a colony with the Irish oppressed and their religion frowned upon. This significant part of the establishment were not prepared to make the necessary concessions and their view of the Irish came through in times of adversity, resisting any attempts at home rule and supporting insurrection in Ulster- they did not consider the Irish to be really British; for example, 'British' political parties did not operate as they did in the rest of the UK. They wanted domination, not partnership, but, in the end, were not prepared to pay the price of maintaining it. In particular, the Conservative Party leadership's support for illegality and insurrection including the Curragh mutiny, combined with the intransigence of Protestant Ulsterdom give independence an air of inevitability, even though I know nothing is actually inevitable in the unfolding of history. Does it have any lessons for Scotland, bearing in mind its very different history?

Still, even post-Brexit, we can travel to Ireland without a passport (well, post- covid, anyway) and there is still a lot of interaction between British and Irish, so perhaps it did not work out too badly for us, but a divided Ireland is the price. I watched a very good programme on Northern Ireland by Fergal Keane a year or two ago and was interested in his observation that, whilst growing up in Eire, he felt that nobody around him seemed interested in or cared about the North. I look forward to a good discussion.

### Response from Stephen Gill

Thank you, Matthew, for a detailed and illuminating summary of the tangled events of the years from 1916-1924. While I had a general awareness of the civil war and the eventual founding of the Irish Free State, what really came as new to me was that in effect there were parallel sources of authority in Ireland for a prolonged period prior to the eventual establishment of the Irish republic.

It is very hard not to look at the events of the time without the awareness of the subsequent century of conflict, troubles and friction on the island of Ireland which persists to this day. In that sense, as Geoff has commented, it hard not to think about the counterfactuals, - what if other decisions had been made, paths taken etc.

However, for me the critical event that put Ireland on the path to civil war, the partition of the Ireland by a (reluctant) UK government and the subsequent hundred years of troubles was the resorting to arms in 1914 by the Ulster Unionists, aided and abetted by the Conservative party in the UK, to undermine the Home Rule plans of the Liberal government under Asquith. An interesting counterfactual is to consider what might have happened had the Great war not intervened in July/Aug 1914, given the government faced overt mutiny by the Army, supported by Tory Unionists and conceivably civil war would have been launched not to create an Irish state but to crush the Home Rule movement.

It is difficult as I see it, not to view the Curragh incident and the other tensions in Ulster as creating disillusion with the idea of Home Rule, undermining the Irish national party, who broadly sought greater devolution and self-government rather than separation from Britain, and giving the revolutionaries seeking independence for in Ireland a rationale, purpose and support (active or tacit).

(Parallels with Scotland and Brexit in 2021 are perhaps hard to ignore, though that is a very un-historical thought!)

I look forward to the discussion on Monday

### **Reply from Matthew Stephens**

Thanks for your notes, and yes, the scenarios of “what might have been” and missed opportunities also occurred to me whilst working on this. Certainly the history of Ireland seems to demonstrate Britain’s lack of understanding of the Irish people. The hard-line approach of Lord French and Winston Churchill only seemed to make matters worse. In the end, rather like the more moderate SDLP of recent times, the Irish Party were electorally swept aside by Sinn Fein.

In another parallel, it was interesting to note that, like so many other periods of unrest, the past was never written or talked about for decades (e.g. as in post war Germany). What struck me was the way the heroic image of the old IRA of this era (which permeated Ireland in 1966 for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1916 Rising) has had to be revised to reflect for instance, what actually happened in the killing fields near Cork.

It was also interesting to note how the crisis spilt over into some of our recent discussions e.g. Treaty of Versailles, Asquith and even the early use of guerrilla war tactics was an indirect link to Lawrence of Arabia.

In a relatively short period of time there were so many twists and turns which led to such terrible acts of violence and reprisals, that one is left feeling that there must have been a better way of achieving the end result.

I look forward to the discussion on Monday.

### **Response for Phil Hammond**

Thank you for your comprehensive notes Matthew and your comments Geoff and Stephen.

I have been reading Simon Schama's A History of Britain, Vol 3 ( Interestingly introduced as 'Fate of Empire' ) and also Andrew Marr's The Making of Modern Britain.

An interesting, in fact critical observation in Marr's book for me, reads as follows:

For Britain the lesson of the Irish Revolt and War was simply that no Empire can hold peoples down unless it is prepared to be ruthless and not ignore public opinion. Britain could only have held Ireland at heavy cost, one that it was not prepared to pay. India, Egypt and the sub Saharan African colonies were much further away but the same would eventually apply to them.

Britain did not bestride the World after the first German War in the same that America did after the second. Lloyd George and the many other senior politicians failed to understand that democracy and empire are opposing ideas and cannot live together. Britain was on the way to being modern, but remained in many ways an inefficient and old fashioned country, yearning for some kind of Roman Imperial past and confused about the future.

On a lighter note, Geoff's comments that you can travel to Ireland without a passport highlights that there is a lot of interaction between the British and the Irish. This reminded me of time spent working in Ireland in the past, in particular with Guinness Ireland both in The Republic and in The North. I remember flying into Dublin and then driving to St James's Gate, the brewery in Dublin and sometimes down to the brewery in Kilkenny in the south. A longer journey when I often did not arrive much before midnight.

There were rewards! In Kilkenny at the St Francis's Brewery the working day ended quite early with a beer tasting session in the old church crypt! Guinness were always excellent hosts!