



Irish Ideologies: An historical analysis of words

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Whether from a politician hoping to gain a vote, or from a company hoping to make a sale, we are surrounded by persuasive words every single day. They can transfer information, instil feelings into us and draw emotions out of us. They are sometimes even powerful enough to cause action. Therefore, speeches and literature are of great importance to the historian in offering a window into the feelings and experiences of both the speaker and the listener.

Within this research study, I have chosen to take a micro-historical approach. Micro-history is the research of a small unit of study. In this essay, I analyse the words and phrases of two key documents: The Irish Proclamation (Section 1) and Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant and the Ulster Women's Declaration (Section 2). This analysis will explore wider questions about Ireland, and specifically the experiences of Irish ideologies, in the 1910s. Nationalism and Unionism in Ireland often seem powerful enough to be living organisms – but they are not. They are ideologies survived solely through individuals who endorse them. Therefore, it is intuitive that through unpicking these documents to analyse individual experiences, we can evaluate the wider ideologies to which they are linked.

Section 1: The Irish Proclamation

The Irish Proclamation has had a lasting legacy over the past century. It was read aloud by Patrick / Pádraig Pearse outside of the General Post Office (G.P.O.) in Dublin. This act on Easter Monday signalled the beginning of the Easter Rising, an armed insurrection by Irish Republicans against British rule. Although there is not a known composition date, it was printed just ahead of the Rising; a witness, Michael J. Molloy, stated that it 'was not printed until about midnight on Easter Sunday night'.¹ The author is also unknown, but Pearse – a skilled orator and avid poet – is a likely candidate. In a sense, however, the words belong to each of the seven Rising leaders who signed the Proclamation in a show of support.

The impact of Pearse reading the speech on the contemporary audience has likely been overstated; for example, many did not even remember where he stood as he read it. An eyewitness to the speech, Geraldine Dillon, said 'I think ... Pearse came out of the G.P.O. and read the Proclamation right in the middle of the street'.² The most common memory placed

¹ Bureau of Military History (BMH), 1913-1921, Statement by Witness. Document No. W.S. 716 Witness: Michael J. Molloy, Identity: Member of 'E' Company, 2nd Battalion, Dublin Brigade Irish Vol's 1914, pp. 4-5.

² BMH, 1913-1921, Statement by Witness. Document No. W.S. 358 Witness: Mrs. Geraldine Dillon, Identity: Sister of Joseph Mary Plunkett, executed 1916, p. 17.

Pearse ‘on the steps of the G.P.O.’, despite the building having no steps.³ The audience was compiled of both listeners and readers, as newsboys were instructed to distribute copies of the Proclamation to the general public, in hopes to increase support.⁴

Part i: POBLACHT NA hÉIREANN

This Gaelic title translates as ‘The Republic of Ireland’. Although the rest of the document has been written in English, this Gaelic opening line displays Pearse’s sentiment from his graveside oration at Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa’s funeral: An independent Ireland should be ‘not free merely, but Gaelic as well; not Gaelic merely, but free as well’.⁵ The rest of the document has been written in English, which allowed greater accessibility to a wider audience. The document therefore portrays Pearse’s sentiment of a linguistically differentiated Ireland through the opening words, without hindering the message getting across to the masses in Dublin.

The sub-heading of the document ‘The Provisional Government of the Irish Republic to the People of Ireland’ is almost word-for-word how Robert Emmet addressed his Proclamation in 1803, ‘The Provisional Government to the People of Ireland’. Being modelled on Emmet’s Proclamation, the 1916 Proclamation was able to present nationalism as an ideology with a long history. The intention here was that the Rising would not seem sudden and new but would instead be seen as a seed that had been gestating for centuries. The contemporary audience, however, did not seem to pick up on the notion that a long-awaited Revolution was coming to fruition. Onlookers watching the marching rebels assumed it was simply one of the usual training routes, whilst post office staff and customers were slow to respond to orders within the G.P.O., uncertain of what was happening.⁶

Part ii: Mythology, Spirituality and Religion

³ Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916*, (London, 2015), p. 160.

⁴ BMH, 1913-1921, 1913-1921, Statement by Witness. Document No. W.S. 824, Witness: Charles Donnelly, Identity: Member of I.R.B. Dublin, 1913 - ; Member of ‘E’ Company, 4th Battalion, Dublin Brigade, 1913 - ., p.6.

⁵ P.H. Pearse, *Collected Works of Padraic H. Pearse Political Writings and Speeches* (Dublin: Phoenix Publishing, 1917), p. 135.

⁶ Townshend, *Easter*, p. 158.

The Proclamation attempted to increase support by emphasising a connection to history. This is not only done through its modelling after Emmet's proclamation, but also achieved through its words. The phrase:

‘having patiently perfected her discipline, having resolutely waited for the right moment to reveal itself, she now seized that moment’

displays that Irish rebels chose to act in 1916 as Britain was pre-occupied with World War One, believing England's difficulty to be Ireland's opportunity.⁷ ‘Her old tradition of nationhood’ delineates Ireland's roots as its own nation, portraying that the Rising was not taking Ireland, but rather, justifies it as taking *back* Ireland to its former freedoms. A link to history is additionally shown in the statement ‘six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted [their right to national freedom and sovereignty]’. These ‘six times’ refer to six rebellions – 1641, 1689, 1798, 1803, 1848 and 1867. However, not all these rebellions were carried out with the aim of independence from England. Even though phrase is pure mythology, the implied message that the rebellion was part of a long tradition increases legitimisation of its actions.

Spiritual elements have also been included in the text, such as the invoking of ‘dead generations’. This is persuasive through bringing weight to the Rising as something destined to happen and through carrying emotional resonance. The vague phrase ‘dead generations’ allows individuals to imagine the support of those of whom they personally knew or admired.

Religious elements also play a role through phrases such as ‘in the name of God’ and ‘under the protection of the Most High God’. God blessing the rebellion depicts it as God's will, and so justifies it as a holy act, incentivising Irish people to support it. This use of language effectively justifies violence as something desirable, and even admirable.

Part iii: Violence as a means to Inclusivity

Violence is justified through the Proclamation by being presented as the road to inclusivity. The new National Government would allow ‘suffrages to all her men and women’. It is highly significant that women would have a role in electing and participating in Government considering that women did not get the vote in the United Kingdom until 1918. From the opening line, which addresses ‘Irishmen and Irishwomen’ the thought of gender equality is conveyed. It is a formal recognition of women as equal in an Irish Republic. In her

⁷ Jude Collins, ‘The Proclamation of the Irish Republic, its meaning – by Ciaran Mc (Part 4 of Easter Rising series)’, *Jude Collins*, 7 January 2016, < [The Proclamation of the Irish Republic, its meaning' – by Ciaran Mc \(Part 4 of Easter Rising series\) - Jude Collins](#)> [accessed 9 August 2021].

memoirs, Kathleen Clarke wrote that “When [the Proclamation] was signed, it represented the views of all except one, who thought equal opportunities should not be given to women” (however, which signatory held that view remains unknown).⁸

Women’s equality was not only in word, but also in action, through female participation in the Rising such as with the group Cumann na mBan. Not only did this seemingly inclusive future promote an independent Ireland over the status quo of British sovereignty, but it also advanced Sinn Féin over the less progressive Irish Parliamentary Party (the leading nationalist force in Irish politics at the time), who did not support women’s suffrage. The Rising would go on to establish Sinn Féin as the leading nationalist party, who were both progressive and willing to act. Amongst other factors, including the sympathy which arose from the execution of the Rising’s leaders by the British government and the conscription crisis of early 1918, this led to Sinn Féin’s success in the 1918 election.

Overall, the Proclamation of the 1916 Rising may not have massively impacted the contemporary audience listening to Pearse on Easter Monday. However, due to its mass printing, it was able to be distributed after the rebellion, and its words went on to commemorate the executed leaders and signify the fight for an Independent Ireland.

Section 2: Ulster’s Solemn League and Covenant and the Ulster Women’s Declaration

The Ulster Solemn League and Covenant was a mass petition protesting the passing of the third Home Rule Bill in 1912, signed by 237,368 Ulster men.⁹ Its twin document, the Ulster Women’s Declaration, was signed by 234,406 women.¹⁰ The language used within the two documents will be considered together in this study, however, it is important to consider why there were indeed two documents rather than one. What this fact can tell us of the role of women within 1910s unionist communities in Ireland has been a subject of considerable historical debate. Pamela McKane has presented a convincing argument that this gender segregation reduces women to a passive role, as the Covenant is an agreement between men and God, whilst the Declaration is a show of support from women to men.¹¹ However, the

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Turner Jacobs, “‘To associate ourselves with the men of Ulster:’ A Gendered History of Ulster’s Solemn League and Covenant and the Ulster Women’s Declaration, 1910-1920’, *Voces Novae*, 4: 8 (2018), p. 151.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Pamela McKane, “‘No idle sightseers’: The Ulster Women’s Unionist Council and the Ulster Crisis (1912-1914)’, *A Journal of Irish Studies*, 8 (2018) pp. 344-345

separation of documents links to a wider question of gendered division of labour – fighting was in the masculine sphere and was therefore not something that women were expected to do. It would be false to assume women played a solely passive role – after all, they did come out in great numbers to sign the Declaration, an act which is intrinsically not passive. Despite the considerable strength of the Ulster Women’s Unionist Council (with 40,000-50,000 members in its first few months), the Declaration was drafted by men, chiefly Thomas Sinclair.¹²

Part i: Covenant

Religious motivation is apparent throughout the document. Intrinsically, the Covenant links to religion as covenants are traditionally between religious followers and God. Religious services were held on ‘Ulster Day’ – the day of signing – to invoke divine aid and add to the religious fervour, and the signing often took place within churches. This capitalised on the strength of Protestant communities (as some may have felt a societal and familial pressure to sign) and increased support through being linked to faith – Unionism and Protestantism’s tie encouraged faithful Protestants to be Unionists also.

Throughout the documents, statements such as ‘humbly relying on God’, ‘in sure confidence that God will defend the right’ and ‘Praying that from this calamity God will save Ireland’ reinforces this idea. Unionists would have been incentivised to sign through such phrases as they produced hopefulness that God was on their side, as well as a sense of religious duty. Furthermore, it links to one of their key reasons for opposition – religion – as will be examined in Part ii.

Part ii: Reasons for Opposition

The documents not only show how many Ulster Unionists opposed Home Rule, but also displays their reasons for opposing. Within this study I have chosen to focus upon the two most significant factors: religion and economy.

A key concern was that Home Rule would be ‘subversive of... religious freedom’. Ulster Unionists worried that their religious position would be under threat by a majority Catholic Home Rule government. They were concerned that ‘Home Rule’ would be ‘Rome Rule’ if the Bill allowed the Roman Catholic Church to gain political power over Ireland. The introduction of *Ne Temere*, a decree issued in 1906 that stated that mixed marriages would not

¹² Ciara Elizabeth Stewart, *Irish Women and Political Petitioning, c. 1870-1917*, Durham thesis, Durham University, September 2020, p. 235.

be valid in Roman Catholic eyes, seemed to confirm these fears. This worsened when a Belfast Catholic, Alexander McCann, left his Presbyterian wife and took their children with him.¹³ Protestants were a religious minority on the island of Ireland, and therefore opposed Home Rule because they were concerned that their lives and freedoms would be restricted by the Roman Catholic Church.

The first reason noted on the documents – economic factors – was perhaps the most significant to the contemporary audience. There was a fear that Home Rule would be ‘disastrous to the material well-being of Ulster’. From shipbuilding to shirt-making, North-East Ulster’s urban economy was booming in economic prosperity in the 1910s.¹⁴ Ulster Unionists believed that trade in Belfast and its environs had flourished due to its Union with Britain (something which they therefore did not want to lose). Furthermore, they were concerned that an overwhelmingly agricultural Ireland would not be sympathetic to Ulster’s industrial and commercial interests.

Part iii: All means necessary

Arguably the most significant words to take from the documents are these following statements: ‘using all means which may be found necessary’ and ‘uncompromising opposition’. The Covenant and the Declaration established Ulster Unionists as a distinct people, and placed pressure on the British government to find a suitable solution to the Irish question. The Ulster Unionist Council formed a secret committee to fight against the imposition of Home Rule. Following the signing, the Council set up the Ulster Volunteer Force (U.V.F.) consisting of the men who had signed the Covenant – by pledging their opposition against Home Rule, they pledged military defiance.¹⁵

Violence, however, did not exist in threat alone – it had already happened. On 29 June 1912, a Presbyterian Sunday School excursion (of mostly women and children) was attacked by a member of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (an Irish Catholic male organization).¹⁶ This led to significant backlash from the loyalist community, who sought retribution and revenge from the affray, particularly amongst shipyard workers (many of whom had children who were

¹³ Raymond M. Lee, ‘Intermarriage, Conflict and Social Control in Ireland: The Decree “*Ne temere*”’, *The Economic and Social Review*, 17: 1 (1985), p. 16.

¹⁴ Eds. Liam Kennedy and Philip Ollerenshaw, *An Economic History of Ulster, 1810-1939*, (Manchester, 1985), p. 133.

¹⁵ Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon, ‘Neglected Intelligence: How the British Government Failed to Quell the Ulster Volunteer Force, 1912-1914’, *Journal of Intelligence History*, 6, (2006), p. 2.

¹⁶ Paul Bew, ‘Ideology and the Irish Question: Ulster Unionism and Irish Nationalism 1912-1916’ (Oxford, 1998), p.59.

at the excursion). The intimidation and assaults from these workers resulted in about 2,000 Catholics leaving their employment at the shipyards in July.¹⁷ The Solemn League and Covenant, signed only a few weeks later, was driven by the need for an outlet of Ulster Unionist discontent and for leadership of Carson and Craig to keep the situation under control. It was a method for Ulster Unionists to avoid riotous behaviour in order to not alienate English support.

The crisis continued to escalate with various gun-runnings organised in the province. The Larne gun-running of April 1914 was highly successful, and U.V.F. support through funding meant the movement had enough money to purchase 30,000 rifles and 3 million rounds of ammunition from Germany.¹⁸ A newspaper report from the time claims that the gun-running was so successful and intimidating that local authorities refrained from interference, as it would have been ‘an attempt at the utterly impossible’.¹⁹ Ulster Unionists followed through on the threat of ‘all means necessary’ and ‘uncompromising opposition’ as detailed in the Covenant and Declaration through the U.V.F.’s more streamlined leadership.

Overall, the words within the Covenant and the Declaration convey the fears of Ulster Unionists and urged their support towards Carson and Craig’s leadership, which was found both in their signatures and in their willingness to take up arms.

Conclusion

These documents, the Irish Proclamation and Ulster’s Solemn League and Covenant and the Ulster Women’s Declaration, have proved rich sources to the Irish micro-historian, in displaying aspects of Nationalism and Unionism as ideologies. This research study has proven the value and potential of analysing words and phrases of key pieces of literature to explore wider society.

As I carried out my research, I discovered that there is currently a lack of collective online archives of key Irish speeches from this period. To attempt to remedy this, I have developed a website of my research of these two documents, amongst other pieces of speech and literature. I hope that this will be a useful and accessible tool for those interested in Irish history.

The website can be found here: <https://worldchangingwords.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/>

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Iain McLean and Tom Lubbock, ‘The curious incident of the guns in the night time: Curragh, Larne and the Ulster Constitution’, in Iain McLean, *What’s Wrong with the British Constitution?* (Oxford, 2009), p. 9.

¹⁹ ‘Larne Gun-Running’, Report from *The Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 25th April 1914, Library Ireland < <https://www.libraryireland.com/articles/UVF/Larne-Gun-Running-1.php> > [accessed 18/08/2021]

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