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**The Easter Rising: Powerful and Useless**

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[SEPTEMBER 29, 2016 ISSUE](http://www.nybooks.com/issues/2016/09/29/)

***[Ireland’s Exiled Children: America and the Easter Rising](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0190224282?ie=UTF8&tag=thneyoreofbo-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0190224282" \t "_blank)***

by Robert Schmuhl

Oxford University Press, 210 pp., $29.95

***“The Bomb, Bhadralok, Bhagavad Gita, and Dan Breen: Terrorism in Bengal and Its Relation to the European Experience”***

by Michael Silvestri

*Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (January 2009)

[***One Bold Deed of Open Treason: The Berlin Diary of Roger Casement 1914–1916***](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/178537057X?ie=UTF8&tag=thneyoreofbo-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=178537057X)******

edited by Angus Mitchell

Merrion, 280 pp., $75.00; $21.50 (paper)

[***The Rising: Ireland: Easter 1916***](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0192801864?ie=UTF8&tag=thneyoreofbo-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0192801864)******

by Fearghal McGarry

Oxford University Press, 371 pp., $29.95

[***Éamon de Valera: A Will to Power***](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0674660382?ie=UTF8&tag=thneyoreofbo-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0674660382)******

by Ronan Fanning

Harvard University Press, 308 pp., $29.95

[***Bitter Freedom: Ireland in a Revolutionary World***](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1631491954?ie=UTF8&tag=thneyoreofbo-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1631491954)******

by Maurice Walsh

Liveright, 525 pp., $35.00

[***The Seven: The Lives and Legacies of the Founding Fathers of the Irish Republic***](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1780748655?ie=UTF8&tag=thneyoreofbo-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1780748655)******

by Ruth Dudley Edwards

Oneworld, 408 pp., $24.99

[***Children of the Rising: The Untold Story of the Young Lives Lost During Easter 1916***](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1473617057?ie=UTF8&tag=thneyoreofbo-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1473617057)******

by Joe Duffy

Hachette Ireland, 263 pp., £19.99

On April 18, 1930, sixty-four militants from the Jugantar party in Bengal seized buildings in the eastern port city of Chittagong. They captured weapons at the police armory. They cut off telegraph communications and derailed a train. They controlled Chittagong for four days until they were routed with heavy casualties by reinforcements from the British army’s occupying forces. The survivors fled to the forests. The leader of the uprising, Surjya Sen, held out until 1933, when he was captured. He was hanged in 1934, becoming a martyr to the cause of Indian independence.

The Chittagong armory raid, as it is generally called, had some peculiar features. The rebels were not Christians but their attempted uprising was very self-consciously staged at Easter. They called themselves the Indian Republican Army: IRA for short. And they envisaged their action as an imaginative, rather than a merely military, intervention, aimed not just at the British authorities but at mainstream, nonviolent Indian nationalism. “They thought,” wrote one of the revolutionaries, “their short but heroic legend would be blazoned forth all over the land and inspire new generations to fight for the freedom of their motherland.” Chittagong’s Easter Rising was, in other words, not merely inspired by the one in Dublin fourteen years earlier. It was a direct attempt to emulate it. The mythology of the original Easter Rising had taken root in Bengal.

A revolutionary leaflet of 1929, “The Youths of Bengal,” urged Bengalis to emulate the martyrdom of the teacher and poet Patrick Pearse, who was court-martialed and executed by a firing squad in 1916. The pamphlet argued that “Pearse died and by so dying he roused in the heart of the nation an indomitable desire for armed revolution. Who will deny this truth?” The Indian Republican Army was modeled on the Irish Republican Army. *My Fight for Irish Freedom*, a racy memoir by Dan Breen, who renewed the IRA’s guerrilla war on the British administration in 1919, was translated into Hindi, Punjabi, and Tamil (and banned in all three languages as well as in English). The district magistrate in Chittagong called Breen’s account “a text book for the revolutionaries of India.”

In January 1921, the historian William Edward Dodd recorded a long conversation with his friend Woodrow Wilson, who was just about to leave the White House on the expiration of his second term as president. Dodd found Wilson “a broken man,” brooding and bitter. The cause of his depression was the rejection in the US of his great plan for international order after the catastrophe of World War I. The Senate had rejected the Treaty of Versailles and US participation in the League of Nations. And as Robert Schmuhl puts it in his fine new study, *Ireland’s Exiled Children: America and the Easter Rising*, “the American Irish played a critical role in the campaign against the treaty.” The Friends of Irish Freedom had dogged Wilson on his tour across the US to drum up support for Versailles and the League, printing a million hostile pamphlets and running anti-Versailles newspaper advertisements in the cities where he spoke.

It was the Irish that Wilson now blamed for the defeat of the treaty. Dodd recorded the outgoing president’s “insistence the Irish had wrecked his whole programme for adoption of the work at Paris…. ‘Oh the foolish Irish,’ he would say, ‘Would to God they might all have gone back home.’” In his self-pity, Wilson compared himself to the nineteenth-century British prime minister William Gladstone as another statesman whose great visions had been undermined by the petty but inescapable problem of Ireland: “You know how perfectly the Irish trouble defeated Gladstone in his life-work…. Wilson is another Gladstone and he feels it.”

It was the Easter Rising of 1916 that made the foolish Irish such profound trouble for the new Wilsonian world order. The 1,200 or so rebels who seized public buildings in Dublin during Easter week had the broad aim of forcing the claims of Irish independence onto the agenda for any European peace treaty that would end the war. The rebels themselves believed that that settlement would be imposed by a victorious Germany, which they hailed as the leader of their “gallant allies in Europe” in the proclamation of the Irish Republic that Pearse read outside the General Post Office on the early afternoon of Easter Monday.

That was conveniently forgotten after the US entered the war in 1917. By then, the executions by the British of fifteen leading rebels had not just radicalized mainstream nationalist opinion in Ireland. The executions had, in the words of the moderate nationalist Shane Leslie writing to the Irish parliamentary leader John Redmond from the US on May 15, 1916, sent a “wave of fury sweeping through Irish America.”

That fury might have been impotent—it did not, after all, prevent Wilson from committing the US to the war on the side of the British. It became powerful, however, precisely because Wilson himself made national self-determination the cornerstone of his proposed postwar order. Wilson proclaimed in February 1918:

National aspirations must be respected; peoples may now be dominated and governed only by their own consent. “Self-determination” is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of action, which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril.

Wilson was thinking of the peoples of the enemy empires, the small nations like Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina that had been dominated in particular by Austria-Hungary and the Ottomans.

But the newly radicalized separatists both in Ireland and in Irish America heard his words very differently. Were not the Irish a “people” with the right to be governed only by their own consent? To Wilson, the question was a mere irritant, the Irish themselves “untrustworthy and uncertain.” Though not known for his humor, he attempted an Irish joke at Versailles, telling the British prime minister David Lloyd George that the solution to the Irish question was to “give them Home Rule and reserve the moving-picture rights.” When the self-proclaimed Irish Republic sent an envoy, Sean T. O’Kelly, to Versailles, Wilson ignored him. He politely acknowledged a petition from a young Vietnamese representative, Nguyen Ai Quoc, later to be better known as Ho Chi Minh. O’Kelly’s stream of letters, on the other hand, got no reply at all. It never occurred to Wilson that this silly nuisance could have such consequences for his sweeping settlement of the world’s problems.

But the resurgence of militant Irish separatism after the Easter Rising would turn out to be no laughing matter for Wilson. It exposed the contradiction in all his grand plans: self-determination was only for the former subjects of the defeated powers. It was not for the present subjects of the victorious allies, not for the Irish or the Indians. This is what links the Chittagong raid of 1930 and Woodrow Wilson’s gloom in 1921: the Easter Rising had staked a claim that was incompatible with the settlement that was supposed to pacify the world after World War I. Against the new world order, it proposed an idea that was, and remains, fundamentally disorderly: that national self-determination is not granted from on high. It is not achieved by some slow process of proving oneself worthy of independence. It is enacted in a kind of sacred drama, a moment of reckless daring. It is the creation not of great-power statecraft but of “heroic legend” forged in glorious self-sacrifice. This remains an immensely attractive and deeply troubling idea.

The Easter Rising of 1916 presents us with problems of perspective: it seems at once very large and very small. Its resonances with other nations in the British Empire and its consequences for the Wilsonian vision give it an outsized significance. And yet it was a tiny, intimate, and marginal affair. It was staged by a minority of a minority of Irish nationalists, a secretive faction of extremists within a radical movement that was itself dwarfed by the mainstream of adherents to the moderate cause of Irish Home Rule within the United Kingdom and the British Empire. The uprising was a mere drop in the cascade of blood that was drowning Europe.

It was not even the most violent event involving Irish people during Easter week of 1916. In the Dublin Rising, 485 people died. In the same week, around 570 Irish soldiers met horrific deaths in German gas attacks on the 16th Irish Division at Hulluch, on the Western Front, alone.

The rebels’ collective heroism was in reality somewhat limited. Their casualty rates in the fighting were very light: over six days they lost between seven and thirteen dead per day, far fewer than either the Crown forces or the civilians who made up the majority of those killed. Even the notorious executions of fifteen rebels, which inflamed Irish and Irish-American opinion, were not, from a British perspective, particularly harsh—shell-shocked “deserters” were being executed on a regular basis.

Yet the Rising acquired its imaginative potency not in spite of its small scale, but precisely because of it. Indeed, the great paradox of the Rising is that it became a big event by becoming ever smaller. Its power lay in its manufacture of highly individual and meaningful deaths during a period of mass, apparently meaningless, slaughter. It was handcrafted martyrdom in an age of industrial massacre.

The most effective of the ballads in which the Rising was memorialized in song, “The Foggy Dew,” written in 1919 by a Catholic parish priest, Charles O’Neill, evoked the “long-range guns” of the Great War and the mass deaths of Irish soldiers at Gallipoli:

*’Twas far better to die ’neath an Irish sky,
Than at Suvla or Sud el Bar.*

The very failure of the rebel plan to mobilize a mass army bestowed, in O’Neill’s religious evocation of holy war, a greater blessing on the “fearless men but few” who took on the might of empire. As in the myths of Thermopylae or the Alamo, the mere fact of being few could make military failure heroic.

Such is the glamour of the fearless few that it is hard to remember that the rebels were, in fact, supposed to be many. The most distinguished of the rebel leaders, Roger Casement, internationally renowned for his pioneering investigations into the abuses of indigenous peoples in the Congo and Peru, had traveled to Germany in November 1914 with the aim of forging an alliance with the Reich, recruiting Irish prisoners of war for a national army, and landing these well-armed troops with German officers to support a rising in Ireland.

Casement would become one of the martyrs of 1916 when he was hanged for high treason in Pentonville Prison in London, having been captured shortly after he landed on the Kerry coast from a German submarine. But his newly published diary, *One Bold Deed of Open Treason*, from the weeks leading up to the Rising, shows his horror at the thought that it would go ahead (as in fact it did) without serious German assistance or a real prospect of military success:

The whole thing appals me as a piece of the most ghastly folly—or rather one of the most criminal attempts ever perpetrated…it is a scheme that can only bring failure—and probably something far worse than failure—disaster…. The *right* thing to do even now is to stop the whole thing—to delay it, until we are sure of the condition of things in Ireland, of the means at the disposal of our friends there… [I became] bitterly angry when I thought of Ireland, of those poor boys on Easter Sunday & Easter Monday waiting for the…rifles *and* the [German] officers—who will not be there.

The failure to land German guns or to provide trained officers was exacerbated by the confusion that overtook the rebel leaders on Easter Saturday and Sunday. After Casement’s capture, Eoin MacNeill, the official head of the Irish Volunteers, who had been kept in the dark about the plans for an immediate Rising, countermanded orders for a general mobilization. The number of volunteers who actually turned out on Easter Monday was certainly fewer than a thousand, along with 219 men and women from the socialist Irish Citizen Army. Even with additional recruits during the week, the total rebel force, according to Fearghal McGarry’s authoritative account, never numbered more than 1,500.

This was indeed the “ghastly folly” that Casement had predicted—an operation large enough to cost hundreds of lives, leave thousands injured, and destroy much of the inner city of Dublin, but far too small to have the slightest hope of being anything but a gesture. Objectively, the Rising was thus on the worst possible scale. Imaginatively, however, the scale was perfect. Not only was it intimate and personal—it would, in the aftermath, be made ever more so.

The power of the Rising, the force that made it resonate in world history, came through the kind of repeated distillation that makes a spirit increasingly potent. And like good Irish whiskey, it was triple distilled. The first distillation was to strain out the awkward impurity of civilian deaths. Fifty-four percent of the fatalities were noncombatant civilians, yet they seemed to disappear from the public memory of the event with astonishing rapidity. One of the great works of art to emerge from the Rising, Sean O’Casey’s play *The Plough and the Stars*, points toward the reason for this oblivion: many of these civilians were impoverished denizens of Dublin’s notorious slums and thus people of no account.

Many of them were, indeed, children. Only very recently has the popular broadcaster Joe Duffy—tellingly, perhaps, not a professional historian—managed to track down and name the forty children who died in the Rising. Many of these children, strikingly, came from families with one or more members who were fighting in the British army in the Great War.

John Foster, whose two-year-old son Sean was the youngest victim of the Rising, was himself already dead, killed in action in northern France. Eleanor Warbrook, aged fifteen, was shot in the face by a rebel when she accosted one of his colleagues in protest at the Rising. Her seventeen-year-old brother John had died in the Royal Navy just four months previously. Christy Hickey, who was sixteen years old, was murdered, along with his father, by British troops during the Rising; his first cousin died in British uniform in France on the same day. This overlap may have made it easier to subsume the most poignant of the civilian deaths into the general slaughter of the war and therefore to deny them any place in public memory.

The second distillation was done by the British. The executions of fifteen chosen leaders, one by one, gave the Rising a precise and intensely personal meaning. It moved quickly from the wide shot of ghastly folly to the close-up of individual martyrdom. And even within that elite group of the dead, memory focused more tightly on the seven men who had actually signed the proclamation of the republic. There was something about the alliteration of “seven signatories” that served as a kind of mnemonic. Except for Casement, who was already famous, those who were executed but who had not signed the proclamation—men like Michael Mallin, Ned Daly, and Michael O’Hanrahan—were reduced in retrospect to bit parts in the drama.

The greatest evocation of the Rising, W.B. Yeats’s *Easter, 1916*, continued this process of distillation. He reduces the Rising to the literal intimacy of personal acquaintance—its opening words are “I have met them.” It becomes a list of names, a tiny band of rebel martyrs:

*I write it out in a verse—
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse….*

Yeats even further reduces these dead men to lovable boys, imagining their names being murmured as a mother murmurs the name of a wild child on whom “sleep at last has come.”

The final distillation was to remove the impurities and complexities from the signers themselves. As Ruth Dudley Edwards shows in her highly entertaining and engagingly irreverent *The Seven*, they were a complex and diverse bunch, politically and psychologically. Pearse arrived at an almost blasphemous homoerotic identification of himself with Christ. Dudley Edwards writes, justifiably, that “delight in the faces and bodies of male children and adolescents along with suppressed desire ran and would continue to run throughout Pearse’s literary writings.” James Connolly was a tough Marxist agitator whose earlier career had included, among other episodes, a long spell in the British army and being fired from the Singer sewing machine factory in Elizabeth, New Jersey, for stirring trouble.

Joseph Plunkett was a Catholic mystic, educated at an English public school, who suggested while in the General Post Office during the Rising that Ireland should become a monarchy under the Kaiser’s youngest son, Prince Joachim Franz Humbert of Prussia. Thomas Clarke, the old Fenian who was the driving force behind the Rising, had the old Fenian skepticism about the Catholic Church and passed it on to his protégé, Sean MacDermott. Thomas MacDonagh, a fine poet, said of himself and his wife Muriel that “neither of us ever go to Church or Chapel” and rejected any “form of dogmatic creed.”

In death, these quirks were ironed out and the signatories became Catholic martyrs. As Fearghal McGarry notes:

The complexities…were obscured by the heroic narrative that emerged. Tom Clarke’s anti-clericalism, MacDonagh’s religious scepticism, and MacDermott’s bitter diatribe against the political influence of the Catholic church would go unnoticed.

Even the Marxist Connolly died a good Catholic, receiving Communion and asking his Protestant wife to convert to the Roman faith. (Casement, a Protestant, also converted before he was hanged.)

It is important to remember that this whole process of distillation wasn’t really planned. Pearse certainly had a mystical desire for martyrdom, but the forces that transformed the Rising from ghastly folly to luminous religious drama of sacrificial death were far beyond his control. Had the Rising actually broken out on a larger scale and become much bloodier, had the British refrained from executing the leaders, it would not have been possible for the event to be so personal and for those leaders to be reconfigured, not as mad radicals but as a communion of saints. Herein, perhaps, lies the answer to the question of why the Rising could be so potent and yet have been so hard to reproduce in other countries: its transformative effects were too deeply rooted in the historical accidents that turned it from a real mess into a radiant metaphor.

There was a final act of reduction: the gradual absorption of the sacred drama of Easter 1916 into humdrum electoral politics. One of the ironies that surrounds the Rising is that the British state actually created the circumstances in which it could be retrospectively validated.

The enormous difference between Ireland after the Rising and India at the time of the Chittagong armory raid is that the Irish could vote in a free election. By another accident of history, the radicalization of public opinion in nationalist Ireland coincided precisely with a vast expansion of the electorate. At the end of World War I, and partly as a consequence of the mass mobilizations of the war years, the Representation of the People Act gave the vote to all men over the age of twenty-one and to all women over thirty. The formation of new public opinions happened to coincide with a huge amplification of public opinion itself through democratic politics.

The Sinn Féin party that emerged as the voice of militant nationalism after the Rising was able to win a majority of Irish seats in the 1918 Westminster election and use this electoral mandate to withdraw from Westminster and establish its own Dáil Éireann (parliament of Ireland) in Dublin. This victory was paradoxical. On the one hand, it cast a glow of democratic legitimacy back onto the Rising, suggesting that it was not a putsch but an expression of the popular will. On the other, this very claim conceded that legitimacy ultimately resides not in the sacramental power of martyrdom, but in the hard grind of electoral politics.

This ambivalence has never been entirely resolved in the Irish nationalist tradition, but it was most fully embodied in the career of a single figure, Éamon de Valera. Again through pure accident, de Valera was the only rebel commander in the Rising not to be executed by the British—he was spared for a no more profound reason than the decision to halt the killings before his turn came to face the firing squad. He was low down on the list for execution because, as Ronan Fanning contends in his sharp new biography of de Valera, “he was unknown” and a “political nobody.”

But mere survival made him, as Maurice Walsh puts it in *Bitter Freedom*, his vivid and absorbing history of the turbulent years after the Rising, “a living relic of the dead martyrs.” That aura clung to de Valera throughout a spectacularly successful political career that ended only in 1973 when he finished his final term as president of Ireland, a title he was first given (wrongly) in 1919 when he embarked on an extensive tour of the United States to stir up Irish-American opinion and put pressure on Wilson to recognize Ireland as one of the small nations with a right to self-determination.

Initially, being the living representative of the dead martyrs meant insisting on the inviolable purity of the republic they had supposedly established by their sacrifice. After the violent guerrilla war between the IRA and the Crown that lasted from 1919 to 1921, de Valera opposed the compromise solution in which all but the six Protestant-dominated northeastern counties became an autonomous Irish Free State, still within the British Commonwealth. When he plunged the country into a vicious civil war by opposing the peace treaty with the British, he did so on the basis that the mandate of the martyrs gave him a status that outweighed the views of the majority in Dáil Éireann:

Whenever I wanted to know what the Irish people wanted I had only to examine my own heart…. I, therefore, am holding to this policy [of rejecting compromise], first of all, because if I was the only man in Ireland left of those of 1916—as I was Senior Officer left—I will go down in that creed to my grave…. I hope when I die I will get a Fenian grave.

Yet de Valera gradually came to accept that political legitimacy could not, after all, be founded on a personal communion with the ghosts of the martyred dead. After his defeat in the civil war, he returned to democratic politics and proved himself a brilliant electoral campaigner and a wily, subtle, and supremely skillful politician. Just as he embodied the Rising, he also came to embody its submergence in the ordinary life of democratic government.

Hence, in the end, the odd legacy of the 1916 Rising. It proved to be both startlingly powerful and, as an example, largely useless. For all that they idolized the martyrs, those who followed them in militant Irish nationalism did not attempt to stage their sacred drama ever again. The Chittagong revival of the Easter Rising is a footnote in Indian history. Indian independence was achieved through radically different means. In Ireland itself, the claim to derive political legitimacy from the Rising alone, rather than from democratic politics, is made only by a dwindling band of fanatics. The temptation to short-circuit history through acts of heroic violence may never disappear. But to evoke Easter 1916 as a sanction for such acts is to miss the improbable, extraordinary, and highly qualified nature of its success.