



MICHAEL COLLINS

Irish Patriot. 1890-1922

Commander-in-Chief, Irish Free State Army.

THE EARLY YEARS

On 16 October 1890 Michael Collins was born near Sam's Cross, a tiny hamlet in West Cork, named after Sam Wallace, a local highwayman. Sam's Cross lies between Rosscarbery and Clonakilty. Here, in a picturesque valley between river and sea, the young Michael grew up.

As a lad, he spear-fished for salmon in the river and played among the cliffs above Black beach and at Clíodhna's Rock. But, as was typical of the times, Michael never learned to swim.

Michael's father, Michael John Collins was sixty years old when he married a local girl, Marianne O'Brien. Marianne was only twenty-three, but they were apparently happy and went on to have eight children. Michael, the youngest, was born when his father was seventy-five.

Michael's father was a farmer by trade, not rich, but living comfortably for the times on a holding of ninety acres. The farm was called Woodfield after a hill in the area. When Michael was six, his father died.

Michael attended national school at Lisavaid, and the schoolmaster there was to have a large influence on Michael's life. For this schoolmaster, Denis Lyons, was an active member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, a secret organisation dedicated to ousting the British from Ireland, by force if necessary. Lyons and the local blacksmith, James Santry, another Fenian, were Michael's first tutors in giving him a sense of pride of the Irish as a race. Throughout Michael Collins' brief life, Irishness was the thing that held the greatest meaning for him.

Big for his age, Michael had a keen mind as well as a fit, athletic body. He loved to read. His sister, Mary Ann, heightened his interest in the struggle for nationalism, and because of her, he devoured the writings of men such as poet and Nationalist, Thomas Davis. Worried that he might fall in with a bad sort, his mother sent him to Clonakilty to study for the Post Office examinations and to live with his sister Margaret. Here he worked briefly for his brother-in-law who owned the West Cork People, a newspaper of the area. Michael learned typesetting and wrote articles of local sporting events. After a year and a half, he went to London where he lived with his sister Hannie, in West Kensington and worked for the Postal Savings Bank in West Kensington. He was fifteen. Michael would spend the next nine years in London.

MICHAEL'S YEARS IN LONDON

He was active in the Gaelic Athletic League and in the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). Later, Michael Collins was to become first the secretary and then the president of the IRB.

THE RISING

In 1916, Michael returned to Dublin to take part in the planned insurrection. He received a Volunteer's uniform and as Captain he was second in command to Joseph Mary Plunkett in the General Post Office during Easter Week. Collins made no secret that he admired the realism of men like Sean Mac Diarmada more than the aesthetic Padraig Pearse. And though he played a minor part in the Rising, his sense of duty and clear-headedness were remembered.

Following the Rising, Michael, as a prisoner of war, was sent to Richmond Barracks and later to Frongoch internment camp in Wales. He returned home to Ireland in December 1916. But it was at Frongoch where Michael Collins' ability as an organizer became recognized. And immediately following his release, he rebuilt the IRB.

ORGANISATION

In 1917, he was elected to the Sinn Fein executive. During 1917 and 1918, his activities included: creating an intelligence network, organising a national loan to fund a rebellion, creating an assassination squad ("The Twelve Apostles") and an arms-smuggling operation.

By 1920, Michael Collins was wanted by the British and had a price of #10,000 stg. on his head.

In 1919, Michael Collins personally, with the help of his friend Harry Boland, another IRB man, went to Lincoln gaol in England to help Eamon de Valera escape. And, during the time de Valera was in America trying to raise money for Sinn Fein, Michael risked his life to regularly visit de Valera's wife Sinead and their children. Michael had a life-long love for older people and for children.

RETALIATION

In January 1919, the Anglo-Irish War began with the first shots being fired at Soloheadbeg.

Over the next year, the Royal Irish Constabulary became the target of a Sinn Fein terror campaign. Michael Collins orchestrated this campaign. He felt there would be much to gain by provoking England to war.

By mid-1919, the IRB had infiltrated the leadership of the Volunteers and were directing its pace on the violence. Michael Collins had been made President of the IRB Supreme Council. At the same time, he was Minister for Finance in the Dail government and the commander of the IRA. In June of that year, de Valera left for America and Michael Collins became acting President after Arthur Griffith's arrest in December 1920.

Although Collins and de Valera co-operated, there were differences between them. After the Easter Rising, de Valera had not rejoined the IRB. Cathal Brugha, de Valera's Minister for Defence in the Dail, resented Collins' popularity and his influence over the Volunteers. In an effort to assert control, Brugha had the Volunteers declared the Army of the Irish Republic (IRA).

A NEW MENACE

Britain responded with violence. Special forces were sent over to impose curfews and martial law on the Irish. These forces became known as the Black and Tans after a popular Limerick hunt group, and because of their dark green and khaki uniforms. Another force of veterans from the Great War, called the Auxiliaries, joined them. Thus began a pattern of assassination and reprisal. The IRA employed guerilla tactics, using 'flying columns' to attack British troops. Their knowledge of the countryside made up for their lack of arms. The initial distaste for the killing of RIC men by the IRA gave way to outrage at the savageness of the Crown forces. The reprisals had the effect of identifying the British as the oppressors of the Irish people.

On 21 November 1920 Michael Collins' squad assassinated 14 British officers, effectively destroying the British Secret Service in Ireland. In reprisal, the Black and Tans fired on a crowd watching a football match at Croke Park. Twelve people were killed, including one of

the team players. The day became known as Bloody Sunday. News of this and other horrors became known throughout the world.

LOVE TRIANGLE

During this period, Micheal, who in the 1918 general election had been elected to Parliament representing South Cork, and Harry Boland the MP for Roscommon, each vied for the affections of a Longford girl, Catherine Brigid, or more commonly, Kitty Kiernan. From the latter half of 1921 until his death, Michael and Kitty exchanged more than 300 letters. By year's end, Michael had succeeded in winning the fair Kitty and they became engaged.

In May of 1921, the IRA set ablaze the Dublin Custom House, but Crown forces arrived in time to capture nearly the entire Dublin IRA Brigade. After this action, the IRA were desperately short of men and weapons, but at the same time, the British were completely demoralised with public opinion increasingly against continued repression. The commander of His Majesty's Crown forces in Ireland advised David Lloyd George to 'go all out or get out.'

This began the treaty talks

THE TREATY TALKS

On 12 July 1921, the day after a truce was signed, de Valera led a delegation to London for exploratory talks with the British Prime Minister. These talks broke down after irreconcilable differences developed over the issue of an Irish Republic--a concession Lloyd George was not about to give.

In September of that year, de Valera was elected President of the Irish Republic and he offered to negotiate as representative of a sovereign state. Lloyd George refused. He would allow peace talks only with a view of how Ireland might reconcile their national aspirations within a framework of the community of nations known as the British Empire.

Knowing that neither a Republic nor a united Ireland could be won at such a conference, de Valera refused to attend. Instead, he sent Arthur Griffith and Micheal Collins. Neither Griffith nor Collins wanted to go. Michael Collins declared that he was a soldier, not a politician, but the issue went to the Cabinet and was decided by de Valera's casting vote.

De Valera was the most experienced negotiator, but he chose instead, to send others to parley against the far more experienced British team. They were no match for the cunning Lloyd George, who was called the "Welsh Wizard." One historian called it the worst single decision of de Valera's life.

Still, under tremendous pressure, the Irish delegation, with Collins and Griffith as chief negotiators, pressed for a united Ireland. Differences within the Irish delegation added to the

difficulty, but Britain's refusal to consider anything less than dominion status, excluding Ulster created additional conflict. Michael Collins knew that a Republic that included Ulster was not possible under the present conditions, but he hoped for a boundary commission that would redraw the border to include much of Catholic Fermanagh and Tyrone in the newly created Free State. This left the problem of the Oath of Allegiance.

A reworded oath might pass a Dail vote, Collins concluded, and though opposed by de Valera, would pave the way for future concessions once a British troop withdrawal was effected. Reluctantly, the delegation signed. Michael Collins knew it would be received badly in Dublin, but he decided that a step toward Irish independence was preferable to an all-out war that would ensure more bloodshed. Michael Collins spoke prophetically when, after signing the treaty he said, "...I tell you, I have signed my death warrant."

The vote in favor of accepting the treaty was 64 to 57. Two days later, de Valera resigned his presidency and Arthur Griffith was elected in his place. A provisional government was formed in January 1922. Michael Collins was elected Chairman. Dublin Castle was surrendered to Michael Collins.

CIVIL WAR!

Across the country, the IRA split into pro-Treaty or anti-Treaty forces. Many followed Collins, accepting that the Treaty gave the country the freedom to win freedom. Richard Mulcahy, the Minister of Defence, transformed these loyal troops into the Free State Army, while the anti-Treaty forces became known as the Irregulars.

Collins made every effort to avoid a civil war. He drafted a new constitution which he hoped would be acceptable to the Republicans. The rebels had been Collins' comrades-in-arms and he desperately wanted to avoid such a tragedy, but his efforts failed. In a move to dislodge Republican troops who had taken over the building, on June 28th, Collins ordered the shelling of the Four Courts.

In a controversial move, he armed both pro- and anti-Treaty IRA members in the North to defend the Catholic population, but by resorting to violence against the Treaty terms in the North, he legitimised armed resistance in the South. On 6 July 1922, the Provisional Government appointed a Council of War and Collins became Commander-in-Chief of the national Army.

Opponents of the Treaty rallied to the cause. Fighting broke out in Dublin and Cathal Brugha was killed. The ten-month civil war had begun. The first phase was bloody and brief. By August, the better-equipped government forces had driven the Irregulars out of the main cities and towns, but the Republicans controlled much of the country area to the south and west.

On 12 August 1922, Arthur Griffith died of a massive hemorrhage. He had never recovered from the strain of the Treaty negotiations.

BEAL NA MBLATH

Eight days later, though ill with the stomach trouble that had plagued him for several months and suffering from a bad cold, Michael Collins left on a mission to visit troops in his home county of Cork. Warned not to go, he told his companion, "They wouldn't shoot me in my own county." As before, the words proved prophetic. Depressed and ill, he set out, some say, to try to end the fighting. At any rate, he visited several anti-Treaty men as well as inspecting various barracks. On the last day of his life, 22 August 1922, he set out from Cork in a convoy that passed through Bandon, Clonakilty, and Rosscarbery on its way to Skibbereen. He stopped at Woodfield, and there in the Four Alls, the pub situated across the road from the house where his mother had been born, he stood his family and escort to the local brew-- Clonakilty Wrastler. On the return trip they again passed through Bandon. Collins had only twenty minutes more to live. Around eight o'clock, his convoy was ambushed at a place known as Beal na mBlath--the mouth of flowers. Only one man was killed--Michael Collins. It is thought that Irregulars did the shooting, but some say that it might have been his own men.

To this day, there is controversy about what actually happened.

Stunned that anything could have happened to 'the Big Fellow' whose fame was, by now, legendary, Collins' men brought his body back to Cork where it was shipped to Dublin. His body lay in state for three days in the rotunda. The Belfast-born painter, Sir John Lavery, painted Collins in death, as he had in life. Tens of thousands filed past his casket to pay their respects, and even more lined the Dublin streets as the cortege made its way to Glasnevin for the burial.

There have been many famous Irish patriots before him, and a few since, but none conjures up as much emotion and mystery as the man who, in a span of six short years, brought a country from bondage to a position where she could win her freedom. There are few left alive who remember Michael Collins, but his shape looms large on the Irish horizon.