

MICHAEL COLLINS

In the struggle for Ireland's independence, a new warrior entered the fight by the name of Michael Collins. He was a brilliant organizer, with a quick, shrewd mind and a talent for getting business done.

Michael was born on October 16, 1890. His father was 60 years old when he married 23-year-old Marianne O'Brien and they went on to have eight children together. Michael, the youngest, was born when his father was 75 years old. The young Collins worked as a clerk, secretary and accountant. Those skills would prove useful to him later as he managed the finances of the Irish Army. He was fiercely passionate about his country and he quickly climbed the ranks in the freedom movement.

As a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), he joined those who revolted in the Easter Uprising of 1916 and was arrested with them. One of the lucky ones who escaped execution, he took up the battle for independence as soon as he was released from prison. The newly formed Irish Republican Army (IRA) became Collins' primary weapon in his assault against the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC). "The Big Fellow" as he was called, thought nothing of ordering the execution of RIC intelligence officers if they refused to heed his warnings and desert their post.

In spite of his tactics, Collins had the support of the non-violent Sinn Féin members, including its founder, Arthur Griffith. The Sinn Féin party won the election of 1918 - truly a moment that marked Ireland's long overdue separation from Great Britain. They were able to write their own agenda and announced the separation of Britain and Ireland. Ireland now had its own parliament in Dublin, called Dáil Éireann, which means Irish Assembly, and Eamon de Valera, a rebel from the Easter Uprising, became President. Of course, Britain was not about to take Ireland's independence lying down and the War of Independence began.

The War of Independence began in Tipperary when a couple of constables (policemen) from the RIC were shot by the Irish Volunteers. Although it is believed that Michael Collins did not order the Volunteers to do this, it is believed he supported their actions. This began the executions of British figures of authority at the hands of the IRA. Considering the brutality of the RIC, as well as their auxiliary force known as the Black and Tans, Collins and his followers suffered no attacks of conscience over their killings. Between the RIC, the Black and Tans, and the British army, British troops numbered approximately 40,000. The IRA only had about 3,000-5,000 members. Although Collins was criticized for his terroristic tactics, he believed he was evening the odds the only way he could.

On November 21, 1920, 14 British officers, all believed to be covert British intelligence, were executed by an armed IRA detail dispatched by Michael Collins. Some of the British were killed in front of their wives, a fact that did not sit well at all with IRA critics. Collins defended his actions by stating that those officers were plotting the death of IRA members; he just happened to get them first. The killing was not over. The Black and Tans retaliated by firing into a crowd at an all Ireland Gaelic football game in Croke Park killing 11 innocent spectators and one of the players and wounding 60 others. The day became known as "Bloody Sunday." In the days that followed, the violence escalated as the IRA carried out more attacks against the Black and Tans. In Cork, 11 British officers were killed

by an IRA ambush. In retaliation, the Black and Tans burnt the city center of Cork and cut the hoses of the firemen trying to put out the fire.

By the time 1921 rolled around, Michael Collins could see that the IRA was losing. They could not hold out much longer. Fortunately, the British did not know how close they were to "winning" the battle when they invited the Irish to England to "negotiate" a treaty. Knowing that neither a republic nor a united Ireland could be won at such conference, Eamon de Valera refused to go, so he sent Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith. Collins reluctantly agreed to go. Once he got to the meeting, he realized the British were not in a bartering mood. After all of the centuries of bloodshed between them, Britain still wanted things their way. Ireland could become independent, but on British terms. They insisted that Ireland be called a "free state," not a republic, and that the six Ulster counties be allowed to opt out and remain part of Britain. Britain knew the Protestant majority of Ulster was not interested in becoming minority members of an Irish Catholic republic. Collins knew that that his forces were severely weakened and he felt he had no choice but to accept the "deal," flawed though it was, or return home and continue with a battle they would eventually lose. He signed the agreement saying, "I have signed my death warrant."

The treaty passed the Irish parliament by a narrow margin. De Valera walked away in tears and gave up his presidency and Arthur Griffith took his place. A Provisional Government was formed in January 1922 and Michael Collins was elected Chairman. The IRA saw Collins as a traitor to their cause since he did not insist on unity and surrendered part of Ireland to the British. In hopes of still achieving their goal of complete freedom, the IRA decided to continue fighting. They took up arms with each other. They split into pro-treaty and anti-treaty forces. Those who had wanted to continue fighting until all of Ireland was free now considered themselves adversaries of the "traitors" who had given the six counties to Britain. Collins' own IRA was now his enemy. Strangely enough, Collins and his new pro-treaty followers were supported by the British! They were even supplying Collins' men with guns, which were being used against his old IRA comrades. In July of 1922, the Provisional Government appointed Collins as the Commander-in-Chief of the National Army.

In August of 1922, Collins went on a mission to visit troops in his home county of Cork. He was warned not to go, but he told his companion "they wouldn't shoot me in my own county." Those words were prophetic in that on August 22, 1922, he was shot once in the head during an ambush and died. He was 32 years old. It was thought that the anti-treaty members shot him, but some say it may have been his own men. To this day, there is controversy about what actually happened.

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

Submitted by: Anne Foody
Irish Historian, Division #87
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Michael Collins Websites of Interest: www2.cruzio.com/~sbarrett/mcollins.htm
www.michaelcollins.com
www.irelandseye.com
www.irishclans.com

Must see: Michael Collins – the movie – 1996 Warner Bros. and Geffen Pictures



MICHAEL COLLINS – 1922

His dreams inspired hope.

His words ignited passion.

His courage

forged a nation's destiny.