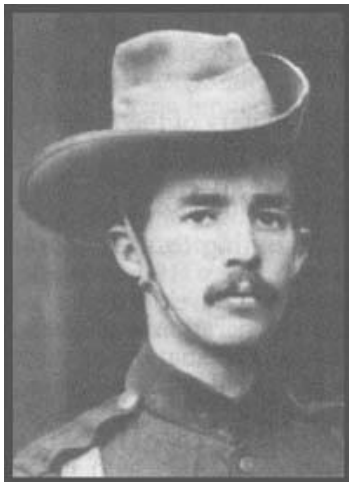


Erskine Childers: Patriot or Traitor?

(This is the second of a two-part series of articles on Erskine Childers.)

The Irish Volunteers drilled for almost two years with the "Howth Guns" brought into the country by the Englishman Erskine Childers before a shot was fired. When that happened, during the Easter Rebellion of April 16, 1916, Mr. Childers was serving with distinction in the British Royal Navy. But on hearing the news of the Rising, he wrote a cousin cheering the rebels and blaming Great Britain for its years of denying freedom to the Irish.



Although many an Irishman, hopeful for Home Rule after the war, cheered the British victory over the fool hardy school teacher Padric Pearse and the poet Joseph Mary Plunkett at the General Post Office on O'Connell Street, Dublin, their sentiments changed quickly owing to Britain's harsh treatment of the captured rebels. One by one, fifteen men were executed between May 3 and May 12, 1916 by British military firing squads for their treasonous act of proclaiming the Irish Republic. The rest of the captured rebels were sentenced to life imprisonment in British goals.

Soon pictures of the fifteen "martyrs" could be seen in every pub and shop window. Wartime patriotic displays of the Union Jack were taken down even though there were many Irishmen serving in British and Irish units in France. The slain rebels soon became eulogized in song and story, thereby serving to galvanize a rebellious spirit which bore fruit with the Sinn Fein party's winning more seats in Parliament than the Unionist Party. Rebel Irish Volunteer units began to raid the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) for arms. Once tolerated and even accepted in the local community, the members of the local RIC were finding themselves boycotted in the local pubs and towns. In the Fall of 1918 the Sinn Fein party won the general election in Ireland by a huge majority, but refused to go to London to sit in the Parliament at Westminster. Instead they formed their own parliament, the Dail, and the "Troubles" began.

Slowly at first, but after the war on the continent ended, Great Britain replied to the Irish uprising by recruiting a special force made up of unemployed British World War I veterans. These men were sent to Ireland to provide peace and security. Officially termed Auxiliaries, they soon became known as the **Black and Tans** because of their uniform, which consisted of dark blue RIC tunics and khaki trousers.

Following his discharge from the Royal Navy, Erskine Childers emigrated to Ireland, and became an Irish citizen. He was elected to the Dail and became Minister for Publicity. A prolific writer, he served as editor of [The Irish Bulletin](#), a newspaper which reported the British atrocities being committed in Ireland by the Black and Tans in such a way as to hold the people of Great Britain responsible. Two of the now famous revolutionaries whom Childers worked with were Michael Collins, who provided him with a small revolver, and Eamon DeValera, who transformed Childers' Home Rule philosophy into a quest for a full Irish Republic. In Britain's eyes, Childers was now considered a traitor.

The revolt, known as the "Troubles" dragged on for over two years until Great Britain, led by the Colonial Minister Winston Churchill, realized the futility and cost of its efforts to control Ireland. In 1920 Britain lost 282 men and in the first half of 1921, 1086. In July they offered to negotiate a peace. A truce was declared and a peace delegation led by Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins went to London. Mr. Childers, because of his knowledge of the workings of Parliament and the high esteem with which he was regarded by the leaders of the revolt, accompanied them as the delegation's secretary. Eamon DeValera, as President of the Republic, did not attend the negotiations.

In December 1921, urged on by a pragmatic Michael Collins, the delegation signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty, later approved by the Dail, which created the Irish Free State out of the 26 southern counties. Ulster was not part of the negotiations because the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 gave Ulster its own parliament. Ulster was also represented in the House of Commons as a separate political entity. Despite this political reality at the time of the signing, it was agreed that the boundary between the Free-State and the six northern counties would be determined by a Commission. This gave the Rebels hope for more territory based on religious lines. In addition, the Treaty provided that the Irish Free State Prime Minister would be required to take an oath of loyalty to Great Britain. Mr. Collins and Mr. Griffith felt they had gotten the best that could be gotten at the time. They also hoped to work for more autonomy within the framework of this new Irish Free State, hoping to eventually become an independent Republic except for a small part of Ulster.

However, in a land of absolutes where people are nurtured on songs and stories of glorious times long past, where the official language is not spoken by the majority, and where poets and school teachers lead revolutions, those who had worked and fought together would now become bitter enemies. DeValera refused to accept either the terms of the Treaty or even its subsequent acceptance by the Dail. He wanted nothing less than the

Republic proclaimed by Pearse from the steps of the General Post Office in 1916. Childers, who once argued for peaceful Home Rule legislation in 1912, now wanted only the ideal Republic and sided with DeValera. As DeValera's propagandist, Childers justified the actions of the Republicans, who were known as IRA irregulars then and simply IRA today. Their actions included the assassinations of Dail members, judges and Free State police.

This violence by the Republicans produced in turn strong reactions from the new Free State Provisional government. In their efforts to maintain control, and to provide a stable government and sound economy for the new country, they retaliated against the Republicans with military courts martial and firing squad executions.

Believed to be the inspiration behind the Republican terrorist tactics, Childers was widely hunted by the Free State soldiers and had to travel secretly. However, after being so long on the run, he got careless and was captured by the Free Staters at his old home on the way to meet with DeValera in Dublin. He was summarily court martialed, one of the first to be sentenced to death by a firing squad for treason. Ironically, he received the death sentence not because of his political leanings but because he was captured with a revolver in his possession, the same one that had been given to him by Michael Collins during the "Troubles."

Mr. Childers faced his executioners with honor. He shook each soldier's hand, and noted that he still loved his native England, although the British press, when reporting on his death, considered him a traitor.

With the light of history behind us, we should consider Erskine Childers as an Irish patriot, albeit a misguided one, who' fought for something that was not practical at the time. It is one of history's tragedies that he was not pragmatic enough to realize it. His leader, Eamon DeValera, even though he was arrested by the Free State in 1923, went on to serve as the President of the Republic. Mr. Childers' son Erskine was elected President of the Republic in 1973. The *Asgard*, used to deliver the first rifles to the Irish Volunteers in 1914, is on display in the courtyard of the old Kilmainham Jail, and today the *Asgard* 11 plies the waters around Ireland and Great Britain under full sail as a sail training vessel for young mariners.

Although Childers' execution was immediately denounced, it did not stop such executions. After several more executions, the folly of the armed clashes between Treatyites and Republicans gave way to political rhetoric. Unfortunately, Erskine Childers did not see his dream of an Irish Republic realized.

(written by James Conroy)

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