Speech on Joseph Mary Plunkett, delivered at Stonyhurst College
Thursday, 29th September, 2016

As Ireland commemorates the centenary of the Easter Rising — the event that sparked a popular movement towards independence from the United Kingdom one hundred years ago this year — the tendency has been to focus, perhaps somewhat simplistically, on the history of the participants and of the event itself.

But in the Easter Rising we find that history was born in literature, and reality in text. With the Celtic Revival in its latter days by 1916, and the rediscovery of national heroes from ancient myth, such as Cuchulain, permeating the popular imagination, it should not seem too surprising that a headmaster, a university professor, and an assortment of poets saw themselves — and became — the champions of Irish freedom. As the historian Standish O'Grady prophetically declared in the late nineteenth century: 'We have now a literary movement, it is not very important; it will be followed by a political movement that will not be very important; then must come a military movement that will be important indeed.'[1]

The ideas crafted in the study took fire in the streets in 1916, and Joseph Mary Plunkett — poet, aesthete, military strategist, and rebel — offers a fascinating study of this nexus of thought and action. Plunkett is often mythologized as the hero who wed his sweetheart on the eve of his execution in May 1916, but I would like to broaden this narrative by framing this evening's talk around not one but three women who profoundly shaped Plunkett's life, and who are the subject of many poems he wrote, some of which I would like to share with you this evening.

Furthermore, scholars, journalists, and cultural commentators are often troubled by what they perceive as an uncomfortable literary and religious fervour motivating the actions of the Rising's leaders. I would like to put some context on that in Plunkett's case.

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[1] Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, p. 196.

Born into a wealthy family, Plunkett was the second eldest of seven children. His father was a Papal Count and Director of the National Museum, while his mother was something of a 'property developer,' owning numerous houses in Dublin city and beyond, living from their rents, and travelling abroad frequently.

Joseph developed TB as a child, and this left him with an eclectic sequence of schooling, with intermittent extended periods at home due to illness. He attended the Catholic University School in Dublin city centre, not far from his home; then, following a notion of his mother, a Marist school in Paris for a while; then Belvedere College, a well-known Jesuit school in Dublin; then St. George's College, Weybridge with his two brothers. The final stop was Stonyhurst — he was here between 1906 and 1908. Stonyhurst College ran a third-level style philosophy and liberal arts course for young men who were unable to attend Oxford or Cambridge due to their Catholicism — although it must be said that such restrictions had been lifted by Plunkett's time, and the course was eventually wound up in 1916. Joseph was almost 19 when he entered Stonyhurst — an age when many schoolboys, including those of you here this evening, would expect to have left the place. But nonetheless, we can ask, 'Did England's Jesuits take the boy and give Ireland the man?' Certainly, Stonyhurst offered Plunkett a level of personal and intellectual independence he had not enjoyed before. Its young men were offered a chance to participate in the College's Officer Training Corps, involving training in drilling and musketry. While Plunkett was not well enough to partake in this, he would have seen and heard of the goings-on from his fellow classmates. In this limited but interesting sense, we can see the coming together of intellectual and military activity in Joseph's life at an early age.

Back in Ireland, Plunkett's first collection of poetry appeared in 1911. It emphasises his enduring interest in his faith, and gave us the poem for which he is best remembered: *I See His Blood Upon the Rose*.

> I see his blood upon the rose
> And in the stars the glory of his eyes,
> His body gleams amid eternal snows
> His tears fall from the skies.

I see his face in every flower;
The thunder and the singing of the birds
Are but his voice — and carven by his power
Rocks are his written words.

All pathways by his feet are worn,
His strong heart stirs the ever-beating sea,
His crown of thorns is entwined with every thorn,
His cross is every tree.

The current Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, recently observed that 'Each of the leading figures had a personal story of faith which accompanied them along their journey.'[2] In this regard, it is curious to observe the reticence among historians and commentators of the Rising to acknowledge or dwell upon this fact.[3] And yet the first words of the Proclamation of the Republic, the foundation text of Ireland's independence, invoke the Almighty: 'In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.' Even the indefatigable Scot, James Connolly, prominent trade union activist, socialist, leader of the Rising, and atheist, was a deathbed convert to the Catholic Church. And Thomas MacDonagh, another signatory of the Proclamation and Plunkett's closest friend, was a one-time seminarian.[4]

By far the most prominent poet and revolutionary to invoke faith and fatherland in the cause of Irish freedom is Patrick Pearse, effective leader of the Rising and announcer of the Proclamation upon the steps of the General Post Office in central Dublin on that Easter Monday morning. Pearse was a schoolteacher, poet, and dramatist whose writings blended the sacrificial motifs of Christianity with his advocacy of Irish separatism. He foreshadowed the sacrificial aspect of his own death in his poetry long before his execution, lending a visionary aspect to popular memory of him, and a prophetic quality to his cause. Indeed, his early biographers produced accounts of his

[2] *The End of All Things Earthly*, p. 9.
[3] *The End of All Things Earthly*, pp. 12–3.
[4] *The End of All Things Earthly*, p. 69.

life that were almost hagiographic, and schoolchildren across the nation, from the earliest days of independence, were presented, whether in history books or in English or Irish lessons based on his verse, with the portrait of a heroic role-model, an exemplary Irish man of faith, courage, and learning, and something of a martyr.[5] I don't think we can view Pearse's faith and courage as insincere: he really was deeply affected by his religious commitments and by what he perceived to be Ireland's political needs, as were all the revolutionaries. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the profound symbolism of the timing of the event itself. Originally scheduled for Easter Sunday, the commemoration of the rising of Christ and the central feast in the Church's calendar, this was the day, in the minds of the Rising's organisers, that Ireland too was to rise again. As you might expect for a movement so immersed in religious symbolism, this raises some important and troubling questions about the morality of the Rising, and I hope to return to these later. For now, let us turn once more to young Joseph Mary Plunkett.

He has been immortalised in popular Irish history as the man who married his sweetheart, Grace Gifford, on the eve of his execution. But for many years the object of his affections was one Columba O'Carroll — Grace Gifford came much later. Plunkett first met Columba O'Carroll in 1910 when she was 17 and he was 22. Thus began a 5 year story of unrequited love. Columba became a muse for much of Plunkett's poetry. The word *columba* is the Latin for a dove, and references to doves pattern many of his poems during the years of their courtship. He even founded a printing press in her honour in 1912 — the Columba Press — which allowed him more control over the production of his poetry.

But another woman features strongly in his verse — a woman who was to make substantial demands from him. *The Little Black Rose Shall be Red at Last* is dedicated to one Caitlín ní hUllacháin. Contrasting with the blood-stained rose we encountered in his other poem, it is Ireland that is mythologized here, not only as a rose, but as a woman. Cathleen is the Poor Old Woman, the *Sean Bhean Bhocht* in Irish/Gaelic, the allegorical personification for Ireland in folk tradition.[6] Plunkett does not portray

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[5] *The End of All Things Earthly*, p. 18.
[6] http://songsandstories.net/myblog/illuminations-maud-gonne-she-had-the-walk-of-a-queen-a-story-from-this-months-issue-of-the-ohio-irish-american-news/

Cathleen as a *Sean Bhean Bhocht*, however, but as a beautiful young woman with whom he is deeply in love. Cathleen was a well-known figure in the popular imagination by Plunkett's time. W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory wrote a play bearing her name some years previously, in which Cathleen, the poor old woman of tradition, has lost her fields and shows up at a wedding urging the groom to fight for her cause. His decision to fight and die for her brings about her transformation into a young woman once more. Ireland, old and weak, is made young and vital again through Cathleen's freedom.[7]

We find motifs of love, sacrifice, and ultimately death, as captured by Yeats and Gregory's play, present in Plunkett's poem too. 'Because we share our sorrows and our joys / And all your dear and intimate thoughts are mine / We shall not fear the trumpets and the noise / Of battle, for we know our dreams divine.' Considering the events of Easter 1916 that followed, the clamour of battle Plunkett alludes to here suggests an appreciable level of determination on his part to engage in violence for Cathleen's cause. As Yeats' play shows, Cathleen sets the bar high; violence and death are expected from her suitors. These sentiments are confirmed in the poem's concluding lines which reveal Plunkett prepared to spill his own blood for her, and consequently for Ireland: 'Praise God if this my blood fulfils the doom / When you, dark rose, shall redden into bloom.'

Plunkett began to get involved in the Irish Volunteer Army around 1913. Founded by Eoin MacNeill and Eamon de Valera in response to the establishment of the Ulster

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http://natalieharrower.com/dublinbylamplight/theatre/bcharacter-development/

[7] *The Little Black Rose Shall be Red at Last*
(To Caitlín ní hUllacháin)
Because we share our sorrows and our joys
And all your dear and intimate thoughts are mine
We shall not fear the trumpets and the noise
Of battle, for we know our dreams divine,
And when my heart is pillowed on your heart
And ebb and flowing of their passionate flood
Shall beat in concord love through every part
Of brain and body — when at last the blood
O'er leaps the final barrier to find
Only one source wherein to spend its strength
And we two lovers, long but one in mind
And soul, are made one only flesh at length;
Praise God if this my blood fulfils the doom
When you, dark rose, shall redden into bloom.

Volunteers in 1912, its stated aim was ‘to serve and maintain the rights and liberties common to the people of Ireland.’ The Volunteers were, in effect, something of an independent military force operating within the country. MacNeill was professor of Medieval History at University College, Dublin, and de Valera was a mathematics teacher at the Jesuit Belvedere College, so the Volunteers would not have seemed like a disreputable organisation, even if at that point most Irish Catholic people were on the side of a constitutional Home Rule nationalist agenda represented by the dominant Irish Parliamentary Party and its leader, John Redmond. By 1914, the Irish Volunteers had a membership of close to 200,000 people, most of whom would join the British Army to fight in the Great War. But that choice — to follow John Redmond’s call to go to the Western Front, fight for the freedom of small nations, and hope to be rewarded after the war by the entry into force of the Home Rule Bill passed in 1914, *or* to remain at home and fight for Irish independence — dramatically split the Volunteers. The majority went to fight in Flanders, leaving a smaller force of around 15,000 nationalist members remaining in Ireland by 1916. Plunkett was, of course, if I may use the term, a ‘Remainer’.

Plunkett’s literary activity continued to develop in parallel with his growing political commitment. In 1913, he bought — with substantial assistance from his wealthy mother — an arts journal called the *Irish Review*, which had fallen into debt and whose owners were looking to sell out. As Plunkett become more involved in politics, the subheading of the *Review* soon changed from ‘Irish Culture, Art, and Science,’ to ‘Irish Politics, Literature, and Art.’ Where Irish literature had once been the journal’s primary interest, Irish politics was now its focal point. As might be expected, this politicization of a primarily literary publication had consequences. The *Review*’s increasing concerns with Volunteer matters and its promotion of a separatist politics led to its readership plummeting, since many of its readers were civil servants who could not risk being associated with the publication any longer.

This deterioration in itself says something about the support for separatist politics among Ireland’s middle classes. W.B. Yeats famously attacked the Irish middle class for its caution and apathy, witheringly accusing them of fumbling in the ‘greasy till,’ of adding ‘the halfpence to the pence / And prayer to shivering prayer’ until they had ‘dried the marrow from the bone.’ (*September 1913*). For Yeats, romantic Ireland was

'dead and gone,' and the country was now dominated by pragmatic, self-interested people without a vision. Yeats was taken by surprise by the passionate, romantic tragedy of the 1916 Rising, and it is in his poem *Easter 1916* that he talks of how 'All's changed, changed utterly / A terrible beauty is born.'

But whatever about Yeats' 1913 critique of the unromantic middle classes, it must be said most of the leaders of the revolution were themselves middle-class and well-to-do. Aren't they always, I hear some of you muse.[8] There was a school headmaster — Patrick Pearse, a university don — Eoin MacNeill, the son of a Papal Count — Joseph Mary Plunkett.

By late 1914, the *Irish Review* was in significant financial difficulty. Not only that, but spies from Dublin Castle, the seat of British administration in Ireland, were posing as poets and calling at the Plunketts' Dublin homes, where the family were based, and from where Volunteer activity was taking place. The October 1914 edition was the last. Following the split in the Irish Volunteers earlier that year, with most of its membership siding with the constitutional nationalist John Redmond, and going off to war in Europe, Plunkett used the *Review* to rally the remaining separatist members, publishing 'Twenty Plain Facts for Irishmen.' The 'Facts' make clear the group's official line on Redmondite constitutional nationalism and those men who had left to fight for the Crown in Europe's trenches: 'The Irish Volunteers have been organised, first, to secure the rights and liberties of all the people of Ireland and then to maintain those rights and liberties. No body, committee, or person has any right to use or to promise to use the efforts of the Irish Volunteers for any purpose other than the securing and the maintenance of the rights and liberties of the people of Ireland.' Needless to say, following this publication, all copies of the *Review* were seized, bringing its run to an end.

Following the split, Plunkett joined what remained of the Irish Volunteers, becoming its Director of Military Operations. By Christmas of 1914, the organisation's Military Council had settled on a date for its planned insurrection, and preparations began. Plunkett was sent to Germany in 1915 in search of arms and support. Because he was

[8] E.g. Karl Marx, whose father was a lawyer and owner of a number of vineyards, and whose family enjoyed a rather comfortable existence.

increasingly weakened by TB, he seemed the least likely instigator of violence among the leaders, and it was hoped that authorities would turn a blind eye to him, assuming he was travelling in order to recuperate. His diaries capture the colour of his circuitous travels. In Florence, he records his visit to one of Michelangelo's most famous creations: 'Yesterday I went out to have a look at David and then came back and read 66 of his songs. He was some writer as well as some fighter. I wonder which chilled me?' David, of course, is the author of the Psalms, the 66 'songs' that Plunkett says he read. David was also King of Israel. A poet and a warrior, he must have been a fascinating figure to Plunkett who aspired to being, and eventually became, both himself.

Plunkett's success in Germany was mixed: he secured an agreement for delivery of a cargo of arms to Ireland around the date of Easter 1916, but his attempts to form an Irish Brigade from Irish Prisoners of War in German camps met with little interest — another hint that all-out insurrection did not enjoy widespread popular support.

He was sent to the United States later that year to inform the Volunteers' Irish–American contacts of their plans, but not before Columba, the object of his ongoing devotion, met him to say that their courtship was at an end. Columba had lost her brother in Gallipoli that summer, and her father did not approve of their match, what with Joseph vigorously plotting military activity and slowly perishing of tuberculosis. Plunkett spent his time in America struggling to deal with this rejection. His papers include three letters to her which he never sent. Written over the space of a week, thousands of miles from her, they trace his struggles to move on from her unrequited affections. The first records: 'New York. Tuesday, September 7th 1915. […] I can speak the truth and say that man is God's expression; art, poetry, life is man's expression and you are my expression.'[9] Just as humankind is God's creation, Columba is Plunkett's creation, as in an artist's sculpture or a poet's verse. It seems that while Columba's beauty and perfection had always been real to Plunkett, her *person* became real to him mainly through his poetry. His love for her seems to be that towards an idea or projection, an artist's expression, rather than a love for the woman in herself. The lines offer a fascinating glimpse into the nature of the

[9] O Brolchain, p. 327.

relationship between the two and, perhaps, hint at somewhat adolescent foundations, at least on Plunkett's side. The second letter sees him engage in his own interior struggles with moving on: 'I can't just "be myself",' he writes; 'Nobody can be themselves. They don't. There is only one way to be oneself and that is to be nothing.'[10] Again, these lines hint at a certain immaturity in the nature of the relationship. But the melodrama and self-absorption also convey a certain nobility and sincerity: Columba was his everything, and her absence marks a new void in his existence. The third letter is notably more matter-of-fact: 'September 13th New York, USA. […] It was my misfortune, it is my despair that the only hope for me lay beyond your understanding, buried in what was to you a foreign tongue. Only in my poems is there anything worthy of your love, and even the celestial glories of which I have written I seem to have obscured with my own murky personality. But I can at least praise God that I have seen his glory in you and have not kept silence.'[11] I think these lines hint most strongly of all at the communications problems that plagued their relationship. Plunkett's verse remained a 'foreign tongue' to his beloved Columba. She remained his muse, and not his soul-mate, so to speak.

While Columba was Plunkett's beloved throughout much of his life, he is best remembered for his marriage to Grace Gifford on the night before his execution in May 1916. Grace was one of 12 children from a strongly unionist family. Her mother was Anglican and her father Catholic. Grace was baptised into the Catholic Church shortly before Plunkett's death, and he actually wrote a poem to mark the occasion. She made a living by drawing caricatures of prominent Dubliners. The final edition of the *Irish Review* in October 1914 featured a cartoon by her, so we can reasonably assume that the two knew one another in some capacity since then at least. Things obviously moved rather quickly. In September 1915, Plunkett, as we have seen, was rueing the departure of Columba from his life. By December, he had proposed to Grace. Their engagement was announced and their wedding was to take place some months later — on Easter Sunday, 1916. Unfortunately, as you might expect, their marriage happened under poignantly different circumstances.

[10] O Brolchain, p. 328.
[11] O Brolchain, p. 331.

By any immediate estimation of the events, the Rising itself was a failure. On Good Friday, 21st April, a shipment of 20,000 rifles and ammunition from Germany was scuttled off the coast of Cork, in the south of Ireland. Some of the organisers expected arrests to follow, thus putting an end to the whole thing, but this didn't happen. So on Easter Sunday, the leaders met and decided to go ahead with the Rising one day later, in spite of setbacks. That night, Plunkett wrote to his fiancée: 'My dearest heart, Keep your spirits and trust in Providence. Everything is bully. I have only a minute. I am going into the nursing home to-night to sleep. I am keeping as well as anything but I need a rest. Take care of your old, cold sweetheart. All my love forever, Joe.'[12] Plunkett's words to Grace on the eve of the Rising express his love, idealism, hope, and resolve. But they are also unsettling. A 28-year-old Director of Military Operations spending the night before his planned insurrection in a nursing home? Plunkett had had TB since childhood, and now his health was deteriorating. Earlier in the year, he had had surgery on a tubercular abscess on his neck and doctors had given him months to live. He spent the weeks leading up to the Rising convalescing in a nursing home in north Dublin city. Given his prognosis, it is worth questioning the extent to which Plunkett's actions in these months were motivated, at least somewhat, by a sense of recklessness.

Nevertheless, on Easter Monday, 24th April 1916, Plunkett was brought from the nursing home by helpers. Poor Grace had spent the night at a nearby hotel in central Dublin in the hope that, should the opportunity arise, the two of them would get to church to get married. However, Joseph by now had now arrived at the General Post Office in the city centre, the focal point of the Rising's events, from where the Proclamation was read by Patrick Pearse. James Connolly's son, Roddy, later recalled the curious arrangements inside the GPO: 'I had never seen Joe Plunkett and there he was gorgeously apparelled in his uniform with a long sword and a silk scarf around his neck. […] Someone procured a mattress and put it in front of the stamp counter and he lay down on it. I thought he was rather out of place, lying on a mattress in the middle of a revolution.'[13] The incongruity of a poet on a mattress in a post office directing a revolution has something of the futility and tragi-comedy of a play by Samuel Beckett, and yet these were the conditions under which the republic was born.

[12] O Brolchain, p. 375.
[13] O Brolchain, p. 381.

Plunkett's health waxed and waned over the days that followed. In later accounts, some men recalled him on active duty, while others recalled him on a mattress too weak to get up. He obviously cut a striking figure amid the gunfire and debris of those days. One Volunteer later wrote of him: 'Joe Plunkett moved amongst us all the time, his eloquent comforting words at odds with his bizarre, eccentric appearance, his sabre and his jewelled fingers. [...] Most of us by now knew that he'd risen from his deathbed to lead us.'[14] These words really capture the symbolic significance of the Rising's historical moment, and Joseph Plunkett's almost unintentionally symbolic circumstances — a leader rising from his deathbed, a Saviour rising from his crucifixion, a nation being resurrected.

But by Saturday of Easter Week, it was all over. Patrick Pearse surrendered and the men were brought to a nearby army barracks for detention, court martial, and sentencing. The leaders, including Plunkett, were sentenced to death, and executed, over the days that followed. Following sentencing, Plunkett was transferred to Kilmainham Gaol. Little is known of the intervening days, but we do know that the following Wednesday, a forlorn Grace, his tragic bride, went to buy a wedding ring. Late that night, close to midnight, Joseph and Grace were married in the Gaol chapel. A few hours later, in the early hours of the morning, Grace, who was staying nearby, was woken and told that she could go to visit her husband. They were given ten minutes together. Grace later described the encounter: 'We who had never had enough time to say what we wanted to each other found that in that last ten minutes we couldn't talk at all.'[15] Their first and last moments as husband and wife were silence, each other's company. Joseph Plunkett was executed later that day. In the end, one might say that Grace Gifford was robbed of her husband, because Cathleen ní Houlihan's cruel and demanding desires were met: 'Praise God if this my blood fulfils the doom / When you, dark rose, shall redden into bloom.'

This blend of love, violence, and death has understandably troubled many historians and scholars of the Easter Rising. Like other leaders of the Rising, Plunkett, the mastermind behind its military planning, was a paradoxical mix of dreamer and pragmatist. And the Rising was paradoxically successful. Its immediate failures in a

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[14] O Brolchain, pp. 387-8.
[15] O Brolchain, p. 406.

short time became the seeds of victory. Initial reaction among Dubliners was one of bewilderment and hostility towards the participants. But circumstances conspired to turn public sentiment in their favour. The romantic heroism of men such as Plunkett, newly-wed and dead, softened attitudes. And these softened attitudes gave rise to hostility to the British administration which spent a leisurely two weeks periodically executing rebels. This newfound hostility manifested itself in the growth of a young separatist party known as Sinn Fein, and the attendant waning of John Redmond's Irish Parliamentary Party. Redmond himself died in early 1918, and, in the midst of revolution at home and war abroad, it is easy to forget his achievement of Home Rule for Ireland. But unfortunately for Redmond and his legacy, Home Rule was, increasingly, too little too late. Later that year, Sinn Fein won a landslide victory in the general election to the British Parliament. But they did not take their seats, instead convening the First Dáil, or Parliament, in Dublin, and officially declaring the Irish Republic. This led to the War of Independence in 1919, which culminated in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, and the foundation of the Irish Free State. The Treaty was a sort of half-in, half-out affair that did not grant Ireland outright independence. Nor did it apply to the whole island, its north-easternmost portion remaining staunchly unionist. Dissatisfaction with the outcome of the Treaty in turn led to a year-long Civil War between 1922–23, and the rise to power of the anti-treaty side under the leadership of Eamon de Valera, one of the signatories and participants in the Easter Rising alongside Plunkett, whose American citizenship saved him from the executioner's bullets. De Valera gradually dismantled the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which led to the passing of the Republic of Ireland Act, 1948, officially establishing Ireland's independence and sovereignty. You could say, then, that modern Ireland has a number of birthdays, of which 1916 is only the first.

So even as the TB-stricken man on the mattress became a Founding Father of the Republic, the combination of God and guns, so evident in Plunkett's writings, and even more so in someone like Patrick Pearse's, has raised questions. From a Rising, to a War of Independence, to a Civil War, to decades of bloodshed in Northern Ireland, more than a few historians and commentators have worriedly observed that the official valorization of the Easter Rising and the official hagiography of its leaders has, in effect, implicitly sanctioned decades of violence.

In a lecture delivered on Radio Éireann on the 50th anniversary of the Rising in 1966, Prof. Francis Xavier Martin concluded with the troubling possibility that 'the traditional conditions required for a lawful revolt seem at first sight, and ever at second, to be absent in 1916,' the primary one being that 'the government must be a tyranny.'[16] In other words, in F.X. Martin's estimation, this was no just war. A few years later in 1972, Fr. Francis Shaw, Jesuit priest and Professor of Medieval Irish at University College, Dublin, offered his take on the Rising, and on Pearse in particular — one that was not particularly sympathetic to the man or his intentions. He believed that Pearse's 'equation of the patriot with Christ is in conflict with the whole Christian tradition and indeed with the explicit teaching of Christ. […] Christ made it unmistakably plain that he was not a national saviour.'[17] For Shaw, the actions of Pearse, Plunkett, and others were contrary to Christian thought and, in effect, blasphemous.[18]

The hitherto iconic status of Pearse and his fellow revolutionaries, and the hagiographic tendencies of Ireland's teachers, schoolbooks, and (yes) politicians, was finally coming under scrutiny, the fledgling Republic barely half a century old. Admittedly, the glory of shedding blood for a cause was not uncommon among writers at the time who were eager and exhilarated by the rush to arms at the outbreak of the Great War. The concept of blood sacrifice — of violence as something paradoxically redemptive and pacifying — was a theme found in other events at this time. It framed the bloody proceedings of the Somme in 1916, as well as in Ulster, with some of the signatories of its foundational Ulster Covenant infamously signing it with their own blood. It was an ideal taken up by French and English war poets. Indeed, the British Army also engaged it to encourage Irish men to fight in the Great War: what happened to little Catholic Belgium should, in the words of contemporary propaganda, 'stir the blood of Irish Catholic men.'[19]

But shedding blood for a cause may be glorious only if the cause itself is just. Was the moral basis of the revolutionaries' violence just? Were they validly revolting against a

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18 *The End of All Things Earthly*, p. 19.

19 Diarmaid Ferriter, http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/diarmaid-ferriter-nothing-new-in-the-fuss-about-pearse-thinking-he-was-jesus-1.2490033

tyrant that was impoverishing Ireland? We come to the crux of the matter here. I think it is reasonable to say that we need to shed light on the potentially bad theology that informed the noble undertakings of Plunkett and the others. The theology of revolution and the cult of martyrdom espoused most notably by Pearse, who appropriated the Passion and death of Christ as the exemplar for the sacrifice needed to redeem the Irish nation, ultimately resulted in the deaths of around 500 people, most of them civilians.[20] Even today, Irish commentators and politicians cannot not quite decide whether the men and women of Easter 1916 had a valid moral rationale for their actions. Michael McDowell, former Minister for Justice and Attorney-General of Ireland, has consistently challenged historically revisionist views of the Rising as a violent affair which in turn bred more violence. It is worth noting that McDowell is a grandson of Eoin MacNeill, founder of the Irish Volunteers and one of the signatories of the Proclamation. For McDowell, 1916 did *not* mark the beginning of a century of political destruction in Ireland as some suggest; rather, due to the British political establishment's implicit backing of the creation of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) to counter Home Rule demands from 1912 onward, Ireland in fact had little choice but to take to arms in order to guarantee itself some form of self-determination.[21]

However, John Bruton, former Taoiseach of Ireland, has taken a different approach. For Bruton, the events of Easter Week 1916 created what he called a 'recipe for endless conflict.'[22] Distinguishing not one, but two, traditions in Irish separatism — one revolutionary, the other constitutional — Bruton marked the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Home Rule Bill into law in 2014 by suggesting that 'If there hadn't been the introduction of violence into nationalism in that demonstrably dramatic way in Easter Week […] there wouldn't have been a Civil War [in the years that followed].'[23] Understandably, Bruton's assertions ruffled feathers, especially coming from a former head of the Irish Government. For Bruton, the legacy of John Redmond and his Home Rule Bill, deserves a more generous appraisal. Unfortunately, Redmond's memory was, in the words of one recent commentator, 'systematically

[20] *The End of All Things Earthly*, p. 10.
[21] http://michaelmcdowell.ie/five-myths-about-the-rising/
[22] http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/john-bruton-says-1916-was-recipe-for-endless-conflict-1.2590069
[23] http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/john-bruton-easter-rising-damaged-irish-psyche-30399613.html

buried' following the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922.[24] Yet Home Rule *was* successfully enacted in 1914, as a result of Redmond's efforts, for which he had a clear mandate from the Irish electorate. And as Bruton argued, the institutions of government that became operational in the 1922 Irish Free State ironically owed much to the work carried out in preparation for Home Rule.[25] Bruton, like Fr. Shaw and Prof. Martin half a century ago, makes a robust case, and I think it is fair to say that we need continued reflection on the morality of the undertakings of Plunkett, Pearse, and others 100 years ago.

For these men we can say that it was Cathleen ní Houlihan, and *not* Christ, for whom they chose to shed their blood. Revolutionaries may be martyrs to a noble or indeed ignoble cause. A noble and righteous martyr chooses to endure suffering and death in a great cause, not inflict it on others or even on himself. Today, we see the hijacking and corruption of the selfless love of martyrdom in the destructive acts perpetrated by men and women associated with ISIS, both in the Middle East and closer to home in Europe. It is worth considering the extent to which the activities of Plunkett and others amounted to a selfless martyrdom for a noble and necessary idea, the cause of a free Ireland, where 'all the children of the nation,' to take the words of the Proclamation — Protestant, Catholic, or dissenter — would be cherished equally. History suggests that the trouble with revolutions is that they are born in violence and beget violence. Simon Schama has made the case about the French Revolution that 'violence […] was not just an unfortunate side effect […] it was the Revolution's source of collective energy. It was what made the Revolution revolutionary.'[26] Of course, compared with the French Revolution, the violence and bloodshed of the 1916 Rising was minimal. Indeed, it has sometimes been remarked that, following the achievement of independence a few years later, with officials, administrative frameworks, and laws all remaining *in situ*, all that changed in newly free Ireland was the headed paper. In its being led by poets and dreamers, perhaps the Easter Rising of 1916 is more remarkable for its profound symbolism than for its bloodshed — a nation born and reborn at Eastertime.

[24] Stephen Collins, quoted by John Bruton in *Studies*, 2012 (101), p. 13.
[25] John Bruton, *Studies*, 2012 (101), p. 13.
[26] Schama, *Citizens*.

The connecting concerns of faith and fatherland gave rise to some of Plunkett's most respected poetry. They are, in this sense, terrible beauties, to borrow Yeats' words on the Easter Rising. Plunkett's tragic end brought humanity and pathos to the Rising, and stirred sympathy among the public. He loved Grace Gifford dearly, and, tragically, all too briefly. But he did not die for her. He died for Cathleen ní Houlihan, the other woman in his life. And yet in popular memory, it is as a poet and as a lover, more than as a revolutionary, that he is remembered now. Most schoolchildren have learned *I See His Blood Upon the Rose*. And, in the early 1980s, a song called *O Grace*, describing his all-too-short marriage to her, topped the charts…

Grace
As we gather in the chapel here in old Kilmainham Jail
I think about these past few weeks, oh will they say we've failed?
From our school days they have told us we must yearn for liberty
Yet all I want in this dark place is to have you here with me

Oh Grace just hold me in your arms and let this moment linger
They'll take me out at dawn and I will die
With all my love I place this wedding ring upon your finger
There won't be time to share our love for we must say goodbye

Now I know it's hard for you my love to ever understand
The love I shared for these brave men, the love for my dear land
But when glory called me to his side down in the GPO
I had to leave my own sick bed, to him I had to go

Oh, Grace just hold me in your arms and let this moment linger
They'll take me out at dawn and I will die
With all my love I'll place this wedding ring upon your finger
There won't be time to share our love for we must say goodbye

Now as the dawn is breaking, my heart is breaking too
On this May morn as I walk out, my thoughts will be of you
And I'll write some words upon the wall so everyone will know
I loved so much that I could see his blood upon the rose.

Oh, Grace just hold me in your arms and let this moment linger
They'll take me out at dawn and I will die
With all my love I'll place this wedding ring upon your finger
There won't be time to share our love for we must say goodbye
For we must say goodbye