



EASTER 1916
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Previous Page: *Geneva Window*, Harry Clarke, 1930. Wolfsonian, Miami. Panel 5 (third from top, left side) contains two inscriptions. The first inscription reads 'If I were to die tomorrow all I would ask from the world would be the charity of its silence' from *The Dreamers*, by Lennox Robinson. The second inscription reads: 'I have heard a sound of waiting in unnumbered hovels, and I must go down, down — I know not where', from *The Countess Cathleen*, by W. B. Yeats.

This essay is an edited version of a lecture delivered at the Yeats International Summer School, Sligo, 3 August 2015.

I

The second chapter of *Ulysses* has Stephen Dedalus teaching in Mr. Deasy's school in Dalkey. The class is reading Milton's 'Lycidas,' but Stephen also permits himself a reverie about historical facts:

*Had Pyrrhus not fallen by a beldam's hand in Argos or Julius Caesar not been knifed to death. They are not to be thought away. Time has branded them and fettered they are lodged in the room of the infinite possibilities they have ousted. But can those have been possible seeing that they never were? Or was that only possible which came to pass?*¹

In the days before the Easter Rising there were three possibilities before the initiates: one, that a Rising would not take place at all, or would be indefinitely postponed; two, that it would take place on Easter Sunday; three, that it would take place on Easter Monday. Of these, the third came to pass, ousting the other two. That third one is not to be thought away. John Bruton and others wish that it had not come to pass;² but that is a different matter, their sentiment belongs to the subjunctive mood of desire.

II

I begin with a letter from Yeats, on 7 January 1915, to Lennox Robinson about Robinson's play *The Dreamers*, which the Abbey had accepted with pleasure. It was a play about Robert Emmet's attempted Rising, in the days between July 16 and 25, 1803. The only question was whether it would be directed by Patrick Wilson or by Robinson. That was not a contentious issue: in the event, Wilson directed it. Yeats ended his letter by saying:

*I believe your play will be the making of us in Dublin this Spring. I imagine it will have many revivals. And with Pierce and McNiel flirting with the gallows tree, will be almost topical.*³

So Yeats in 1915, six months into the Great War, planned to put on in the Abbey a play sympathetic to Robert Emmet, and he warmed to it as 'the making of us' in the Spring. In January 1915 there was much talk of Home Rule and whether or not, suspended for the duration of the War, it would indeed be revived when the War was over. Some thought the War would be over by Christmas, so the question of Home Rule was current. But Dublin in 1915 hardly seemed a fitting place for an insurrectionist play. Yeats's reference to Eoin MacNeill is another oddity. It would not have been a surprise to Lennox Robinson or any one else to hear that Pádraig Pearse had been flirting with the gallows-tree: that was common knowledge from his speeches and essays. Yeats shared a platform with him in Brunswick Street on 17 November 1914, when they addressed the students of the Trinity College Gaelic Society and he listened while Pearse spoke, as he was expected to speak, of Emmet, Tone, and John Mitchel. But Eoin MacNeill had a different reputation. He was a respected nationalist, but he was not given to provocative speeches. Yeats's letter to Robinson makes a small quandary which we may put aside for the moment.

¹ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, edited by Hans Walter Gabler with Wolfhard Steppe and Claus Melchior (New York, 1986), 21.

² Cf. John Bruton's speech at the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin on 18 September 2014 marking the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Home Rule Bill into law: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=duhBjU4Z5E>

³ Accession Number 2576. I leave uncorrected Yeats's misspelling of the names Eoin MacNeill and Patrick Pearse.

W. B. Yeats, *ca.* 1920
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The remote origin of the Easter Rising is not a complex question: there are several possibilities. We might choose 1795, the founding of the Orange Order; the risings of 1798 and 1803; 1 January 1801, when the Act of Union of Great Britain and Ireland came into force; 1836, when the Ancient Order of Hibernians was founded in New York; 1858, the Irish Republican Brotherhood; 1864, the unveiling of the O'Connell monument in Dublin; 1867, the Fenian Rising; 1884, the founding of the Gaelic Athletic Association; 1893, the Gaelic League; or 1905, Sinn Féin. More immediate causes would include the Dublin lock-out in 1913, Pearse's speech at the graveside of O'Donovan Rossa in August 1915, the threat of conscription from 1915 onward. Gladstone's first Home Rule Bill was rejected by the House of Lords in 1886, but even his introduction of it caused riots in Belfast and the death of twelve people. His second attempt was rejected in 1893.

But the Parliament Act of 18 August 1911 made a dramatic difference: the power of the Lords to thwart a bill of Commons was limited to two years. Edward Carson, leader of the Unionists in the North, saw the significance of the Act at once and he revealed plans, on 23 September 1911, for a provisional government to take power in Ulster in the event of Home Rule. The Parliament Act was not put on the statute books out of any belated affection for Home Rule but to ensure that the Lords could no longer defeat a budget as they had defeated Lloyd George's budget in November 1909. Still, the Act could be used to facilitate a Home Rule Bill, and that is how Asquith used it when he introduced his Bill in the Commons on 11 April 1912. The third reading of it in the Commons was carried on 16 January 1913, but defeated in the House of Lords a fortnight later. It passed again in the Commons on 7 July 1913 and was again rejected by the Lords on 15 July.

As early as February 1912, Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, and Andrew Bonar Law were conspiring to exclude Ulster — whatever that word denoted, nine counties or less — from any Home Rule Bill. On 9 April 1912, Bonar Law pledged British unionist support for any resistance the Protestant Unionists in the north would bring forward against Home Rule. He also made a fiery speech to the same end at Blenheim Castle on 29 July 1912. On 28 September 1912, nearly a quarter-of-a-million northern unionists signed a Covenant to resist Home Rule by any available means. The third reading of Asquith's Home Rule Bill was carried in the Commons, but a few days later was defeated in the Lords. This sequence was repeated in mid-July. So the bill would not pass into law until mid-July 1915. Inevitably, the idea of excluding Protestant Unionism from Home Rule gained momentum. The Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) was founded on 31 January 1913 with one aim, to defeat Home Rule. On 11 August King George V urged Asquith to exclude the North from any such bill. On 24 September, the Ulster Unionist Council approved a plan by which the provisional government would take power in the event of Home Rule being enacted.

Meanwhile in Dublin, James Connolly and David Houston met by arrangement in Rev. R. M. Gwynn's rooms in Trinity College. Dismayed by the failure of the Dublin workers in their conflict with employers in 1913, they established the Irish Citizen Army on 19 November 1913. Eoin MacNeill, in response to the setting up of the UVF, wrote an article in *An Claidheamh Soluis* of 1 November 1913 calling for the creation