The Poets Rising

1916 and Irish Literature

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The Poets Rising 1916 and Irish Literature

The influences of the literary revival on the rebels of 1916 have been well documented but the impact of Irish history on Irish literature was even more powerful and more enduring. The establishment of the Irish nation-state provided Irish writers with a different kind of audience; now Irish historical novelists returned to Irish history in order to make sense of the new nation that had been achieved. They also had the advantage of newer, more, and better sources for Irish history than nineteenth-century Irish historical novelists had enjoyed. (James M. Cahalan: Great Hatred, Little Room: the Irish Historical Novel)

Across the Bitter Sea (1973) Eilis Dillon

Eilis Dillon’s uncle, Joseph Mary Plunkett, was one of the signatories of the Proclamation and was executed after the 1916 Rising. Her first historical novel, Across the Bitter Sea spans nearly seventy years of history, from the devastated landscape of Ireland after the Great Famine of the 1840s to the Easter Rising of 1916.

The Wasted Island (1919) Eimar Ó Duffys

This is one of the earliest literary critiques of the Rebellion of Easter 1916. As with other war novels, there is much worthy conversation and debate about the pros and cons of the rising, the thinking behind it, and, for Ó Duffy, the disaster of it coming to pass. The death of so many of the leaders of the rising, and of so many young men, is seen as a waste of talent and potential. But, even as it criticizes the rebellion, the novel closes with the suggestion that all is not lost as a character determines amidst all this death and waste that, ‘we must begin all over again’. (Dennis Healy: A History of the Irish Novel)

Insurrection (1950) Liam O’Flaherty

Liam O’Flaherty was a significant Irish novelist and short story writer and a major figure in the Irish literary renaissance. His stories span the era, even suggesting the finest work was to come while his novels have been less admired. Insurrection was his final novel. The book shows how the rising was badly planned and executed and set for failure. Like the rebellion itself, the book is brief, sharp, shocking with action and a radiance of idealism which offers the ugly reality with which it deals, while at the same time illuminating the ugliest of its details. (Thomas Surgey writing in the Saturday Review)

The Red and the Green (1965) Iris Murdoch

Born in Dublin to Protestant parents, Iris Murdoch lived in England for most of her life. In her novel, The Red and the Green, she raises the moral and political issue of the relationship between England and Ireland and, in more general terms, the issue of the relationships between ruling, dominant countries and the countries they have subjugated.

In the epilogue, the 1916 Easter Rising becomes emblematic of all those armed struggles in countries that have fought against oppression. It was a reminder that people can be enslaved forever. Tyranny and slavery sooner or later people became to see automatically. It was the freedom that the human nature. Whatever it’s the land of the country, however small, no race against its tears, it represents the oppressed people of the world.

Dé Luain (1966) Eoghan Ó Tuairisc

Dé Luain. Ó Tuairisc noted was designed to commemorate the 50th anniversary of 1916 and deals with the opening hours of the Rising in Dublin minute by minute, from midnight Easter Sunday to noon on Monday.

A work that was written out of the beauty and the hope and the revolutionary ideas of Easter and of the time when the legacy of that revolution was becoming an unanswerable affair and a restless strain for the general public. (Alan Treacy. An Unusual Gesture

A Star called Henry (1999) Roddy Doyle

The novel is set in Ireland in the era of political upheaval between the 1916 Easter Rising and 1921, seen through the eyes of young Henry Smart. From his childhood years to his early twenties, Henry, as a member of the Irish Citizen Army, becomes personally acquainted with several historical characters, including Patrick Pearse, James Connolly, and Michael Collins. Perhaps the best part of the book is the de-glorification of 1916 and the War of Independence. It is surprising that no novelist has done this before. Perhaps it requires a brave author to base this anti-heroic approach to the bloodied men of 1916 and after. For too long, those who fought for Irish freedom were characterized only as heroes and saints, and the horribleness of violence as mere to an end became freely established in the Irish view of ‘Freedom’. (Review by Turleigh Johnston in the Canadian Journal of Irish Studies)
By the early 1960s, Ireland had gained a new security and a comparable prosperity that allowed its people (and its writers) to look to the past with a kinder, more detached view. Returning to the struggle for freedom decades after it seemingly had been settled, MacKen, Murdoch, and Ó Tuairisc were moderate about it not because they had to be but because they could afford to be, unlike the Banims writing a century before who felt they had to be cautious in presenting the Irish struggle for freedom to avoid inflaming English sensitivities.

(James M. Cahalan, Great Hatred, little Room: The Irish Historical Novel).


Morgan Llywelyn (1937) is an Irish-American writer who lives in Dublin and has become an Irish citizen. Her novel 1916 tells the story of the involvement of Nest Hallanes, a young Irish revolutionary leader, with his father and his grandparents who fought for Irish independence. The novel is a story of the Irish revolution of 1916, a story of the brave men and heroic women who fought against the British Empire.

Rebels: the Irish Rising of 1916 (1990) Peter de Rosa

Hour by hour, sometimes minute by minute, Peter de Rosa tells the story of the momentous and terrible days when Irish men and women arms with pikes and rifles, took over the center of Dublin and proclaimed a republic. It was a rash, doomed, symbolic uprising, and the rebel leaders knew it. This great Irish epic moves from poignant comedy to harrowing scenes of war, ending in a tragedy as moving as any in Ireland’s history.

What in the world’s history was ever more romantic than the gesture of a few young men who challenged England when she had a million men in arms, and died, and won by dying?” (Stephen Gwynn, Dublin Old and New).

Rebel Sisters (2016) Marita Conlon-McKenna

Most of this book concerns itself with the Gifford sisters and their family in the years prior to the Rising. It chronicles the development of the suffragette movement in Ireland, as well as the formation and action of Connolly’s mill. The story of the three women is a tragic one, but it’s a story of courage and bravery, of making the covering of strong familial ties, not just for love but for a cause that passionately believed in.

At Swim, Two Boys (2001) Jamie O’Neill

The title is an allusion to Hamlet’s line “At swim, two birds” a book written in a stream-of-consciousness style, similar to what used by James Joyce.

Set during the year preceding the Easter Rising of 1916, At Swim, Two Boys is a tender, tragic love story and a snapshot of people caught in the tide of history. Out at the Forty Foot bathing area, the two 16-year-old heroes make a pact to meet during the Easter Rising and swear vows together to the Corks and plant a green flag there to claim the area for Ireland. At the heart of this novel is the desire for freedom, the freedom of Ireland and the freedom of love.

The Rising of Bella Casey (2013) Mary Morrissy

Mary Morrissy was born in Dublin and is currently lecturer in Creative Writing in UCC. Her book The Rising of Bella Casey (2013) tells the real-life story of Teri O’Casey’s (Bella’s) sister Bella. She rarely featured in her autobiography but in this book, Mary Morrissy fills in the missing years, weaving the real and imagined together to create Bella’s story.

The Scorching Wind (1964) Walter Macken

The third of Macken’s three historical novels, The Scorching Wind, extends from before the Easter Rising into the Anglo-Irish and Civil Wars (1919–23). Macken’s historical Ireland is predominantly a peasant society, in sharp contrast to the world of his (Macken’s) The Red and the Green which is about the Anglo-Irish Accordant.

I met some wonderful people in the course of writing the book — the ordinary men who went out to fight for freedom and when it was over went back to their various jobs and got on with living. It was the greatest period of our history and then we had to sacralize it all with a Civil War. This was a very sad business and I had to bring it in . . . (Walter Macken, Walter Macken: Memoirs on Paper).

Thy Tears Might Cease (published posthumously in 1963) Michael Farrell

Martin, now 17, heads out for a swim on Easter Monday and returning to Dublin afterwards, he finds everything altered and the Proclamation being read, and slowly realises that this is the beginning of a revolution, which ignites the end of his childhood – a vanished world of childhood innocence. The first reaction is that of his class, deep shock. But after the executions, his opinion alters. The novel is noted for its depiction of the social and political changes that affected Ireland at this time and the birth of a new nation after World War I.

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... with the coming of stability and the dissipation of domestic atmospheres, the simulation of a sense of participation in great events would disappear. leaving the poet, the traditional spokesman, empty making way for the emergence of the novelist, with their need to document.”

Labour and Easter Week: a selection from the writings of James Connolly (1949), James Connolly

Labour and Easter Week is a collection of Connolly's writings and speeches from the years 1898 to 1916. William O'Brien wrote the introduction to the book, and gives the background of the history of the time and Connolly's participation in the Rising. The collection shows the development of Connolly's nationalism up to 1916 and the last two essays in the book, titled The socialist war and The Irish flag, originally published in the Workers' Republic on 1 April 1916 and 8 April 1916, respectively, deal with the mobilization of the Irish Citizen Army from 24 March 1916 in readiness for the insurrection. The collection also includes Connolly's last statement to the field General Cecilius Martin, held at Dublin Castle, three days before his execution.

Edith Somerville (1858 - 1949)

Edith Somerville (1858 - 1949) was born in Cork, but spent most of her life at columnist House in Castleleek, Co. Cork. Appointed by the executions of Pearce, Clarke, and Maxwell on 6 May 1916, she wrote the first appeal for clemency for the Irish Rebels in a letter published on 9 May in The Times. She blamed the British for the state of affairs in Ireland.

Sinn Fein was appreciated by the indifference of its votes, proceeded to sharpen its claws. Financed by Germany, lulled by America, sheltered by England the Gaelic League was turned into a big prayer programme of big dancing and washing past freedom in modern Irish, and was set to score effective issues. England's war, just as the war of 1914, while these two were being fought deliberately to her, let her send out these captives to join their brethren in the trenches... "The everywhere is yours, All spare them, my Lord!"

The Sinn Fein Rebellion Handbook (1917) Irish Times

The Irish Times republished this collection of articles in 1917. These were originally published in the newspapers in May 1916. The articles include lists of casualties, memoirs, dispatches and prisoners as well as a list of promises involved and buildings destroyed and a map of key locations.

Lily MacManus (1894 - 1941)

Lily MacManus (1894 - 1941) was born in Castletownshend, Co. Cork, and was an outspoken republican nationalist. Her novels reflect her family’s views on the War of Independence and the Anglo-Irish War (1919-1921). She describes the events of the Rising as "A vivid talking on the countryside..."

Prison Letters of Countess Markievicz (1st published 1934)

Countess Markievicz was imprisoned five times for her part in the Easter Rising and subsequent radical activities. She had been sentenced to death after the Rising but this was commuted to life imprisonment because of her gender. She spent time in Aylesbury, Holloway, and Stafford House prison as well as Cork Jail and the North Dublin Union Internment Camp. These letters were written to her sister Eva Gore-Booth addressing her as ‘Dearest and darling’.

The one thing I have gained by my exile is the privilege of writing a letter but there is very little to say in it. I do not suppose my essay on prison life would pass the censor, however amusing and amusing it might be.”

Excerpt from letter to Eva from Aylesbury Prison, 8 August 1916.
Easter 1916: the Story of the Rising (1941), Brian O’Higgins

Peig Sayers (1873–1958) was born in Dún Chaoin, Co. Kerry. In 1897 she married Peatúil O’Guthain and moved to An Bealach Naíon. She continued to live on the island until 1942 when she returned to Dún Chaoin. Her most famous book, Peig, was published in 1950 and a collection of her memoirs, Meditations Sweeney’s (An Old Woman’s Reflections) followed in 1958. It contains an account of how she heard about the Rising:

“The politician brought the story. Dublin city was one big fire and the big guns of the Stronger Barricading it and the fragrant blood of the trait being spilled. The Irish were awakener again, but the day come at last when they [the Volunteers] were able to strike a blow on their enemy.”

But it will be paid for dearly, because great as our fate for England is, green and wonderful is the strength she has. We heard that she will never go down on her lands.”

The Separatist Idea; The Spiritual Nation: The Sovereign People (1916), Padraic Pearse

These three pamphlets were written by Pearse in the months leading up to the Rising. He develops his ideas on republicanism, focusing on revolutionaries such as Wolfe Tone, James Fintan Lalor, John Mitchel, and Thomas Davis. He considers the concept of independence, national and national freedom in an Irish context.

“Freedom is a condition which can be bad and worn and lost. Only nationality is a life, which, once lost, can never be recovered. A nation is a stubborn thing very hard to kill, and without nationality never comes to life, may rise to a dead man. The Spiritual Nation (February 1916).”

Nationality is a spiritual fact. Naitsholais includes physical freedom and physical power in order to the maintenance of physical freedom as well as the spiritual fact of nationality. This physical freedom is necessary to the healthy life and may even be necessary to the continued existence of the nation. With it the nation thrives, with it it is unable to flourish.”

The Separatist People (March 1916).”

A Chronicle of Jails (1917), Darrell Figgis

Figgis (1892–1935) was an author, journalist, politician, and his merchant. He was a member of the Irish Volunteers and took part in the 1916 Easter Rising. Although he didn’t take an active part in the Rising, a Chronicle of Jails is an account of his arrest and imprisonment in the aftermath of the rebellion. In the first three chapters he describes the mood in the country up to that Easter Sunday and the following week:

“The days were full of anxiety. A few of the older people in our possession of their persons, caused the ‘Safe Parties’ record. But most were perplexed and told one another of their fear. One day had only one thing. There was little else to tell.”

Máire Nic Shiubhlaigh

Máire Nic Shiubhlaigh (1883–1954) was born in Dublin. A nationalizer and Irish speaking family. She was a founder of the Abbey Theatre, and its first leading lady when it opened in December 1904. She was by all accounts outlying a beautiful and talented, but her acting career to one side when she took part in the Easter Rising. Her father, her brother, and her brother-in-law published the Irish War News for Peadar, and her sister carried dispatches for Cathal Brugha. Máire herself led Cumann na mBan girls in Jacobs biscuit factory.

In her memoir, The Splendid Years (1956), she recalls her experience of the Easter Rising:”

“The great thing was that what you had always hoped for had happened at last. An assumption had taken place, and you were actually participating in it. The pay was that it lasted so long. The storm of the surrender, when it came, was heart breaking.”

The great merit of this whole period was all around us in Ireland, the enthusiasm, the wonderful feeling that national every worthwhile activity in Dublin in those three years. No one had any regrets — ‘why should they have been? Until the surrender there was not a word of complaint from anyone. One never notes much about what the result of it all would be. You never assume that victory was certain, but rather did you think of defeat. What might happen if we lost meant nothing else or death, treason or imprisonment, these things did not enter into it at all.”
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 Revolutionary Playwrights

While Thomas MacDonagh, Pádraic Pearse, James Connolly and Terence MacSwiney were committed to Irish independence and the nationalist movement, they also believed that 'cultural revival and a political renaissance might go hand in hand.' Between 1908 and 1921 the plays they wrote used the stage to highlight various aspects of the political situation of that time.

Thomas MacDonagh's *When the Dawn is Come* (1908)

The Abbey Theatre
Opening Night: 15 October 1908 for 4 performances. Part of a double bill with *The Ragman's Son* by Lady Gregory.

When the Dublin GPO declared independence eight years before the Rising, Pádraic Colum raised the flag over Whitehall House. In 1906 he wrote a drama on the struggle for Ireland, *When the Dawn is Come*, which was produced at the Abbey Theatre in 1908. Although the play received mixed reviews, it marked the beginning of MacDonagh's career as a playwright.

Terence MacSwiney's *The Revolutionist* (1921)

The Abbey Theatre
Opening Night: 24 February 1921

The play was written by MacSwiney in 1914 and first performed at the Abbey Theatre in 1921. The play tells the story of the Irish revolutionaries who were arrested and imprisoned during the Easter Rising of 1916. The play was banned by the authorities, but it continued to be performed in illegal theatres.

James Connolly's *Under Which Flag* (1916)

Liberty Hall
Opening Night: 28 March 1916

The play was written by James Connolly and first performed at the Liberty Hall Theatre. The play was banned by the authorities, but it continued to be performed in illegal theatres.

Pádraic Pearse's *The Master* (1915)

Irish Theatre
Opening Night: 20 May 1915

The play was written by Pádraic Pearse and first performed at the Irish Theatre. The play was banned by the authorities, but it continued to be performed in illegal theatres.

References:
(Re)Pressing the Rising

Now you see it....

The Irish Nationalist press had many voices before The Rising, ranging from the cultural nationalism of An Claidheamh Soluis to the paramilitary instruction manual that was the Irish Volunteer.

In what was to be the latter's final issue, dated April 22, the following appeared, notifying the Volunteers of Easter maneuvers:

The confusion which followed in relation to this notice was to play a crucial part in the fate of The Rising.

The Irish War News, April 25, did manage to publish, proudly announcing the Rising and the establishment of the Irish Republic.

The invasion spark, also dated April 23, responded to warnings from the London Times. The latter thundered about the need for British authorities to crack down on the Irish Volunteers, a theme which, closer to home, was also dear to the Irish Times.
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(Re)Pressing the Rising
And now you don’t....

The outbreak of The Rising led to a declaration of martial law and the implementation of strict censorship.

The Catholic Bulletin, May/June issue, with its censored editorial.
Three poems in this issue were also excised.

Some were content to carry on business as usual, as this advertisement from the Irish National, June 22, shows.

The Irish Opinion, August/September issue, has some interesting material:
Obituaries of the literary leaders of The Rising, as well as tales of petty literary politicking, and attempts to fill in the gaps left by the ongoing British censorship.

A plethora of postcards, mass cards, pamphlets and ephemera of all sorts filled the gap for information about the Rising, its leaders and their subsequent executions. They justified for attention with the mainstream press and helped to shape the public reaction to the Rising.

Additional reasons for the falling-off in Nationalist publications are also illustrated by the following explanation from the Irishman, September issue.

The Irish Book Lover, August/September issue, has some interesting material:
Obituaries of the literary leaders of The Rising, as well as tales of petty literary politicking, and attempts to fill in the gaps left by the ongoing British censorship.
Ireland has a long tradition of song and ballad-writing which reflect our social, economic and political history, a tradition which continues to the present day.

Not unsurprisingly, the events of 1916 also generated many such songs and ballads, of which the following are but a small selection.

**The Soldiers’ Song**

On Wednesday, 26 April 1916, in the G.P.O., James Connolly, in an effort to raise the spirits of the Volunteers, started to sing ‘The Soldiers’ Song’, one of their marching songs. The Volunteers joined him, singing ‘Soldiers are we, whose lives are pledged for Ireland...’ (Agony at Easter, the PBR uprising. Thomas McCoey)

They were to sing it again,rowning ‘but the roar of the flames and the guns’ as they left the burning G.P.O. for the last time on Friday, 29 April 1916.

(1916 The Easter Rising. Tom Purcell)

Originally written by Peadar Kearney in 1937 with music by Patrick Heaney, and translated into Irish as **Amhrán Na bhFiann**.

**Amhrán Na bhFiann**

Sarsa na hAll

A lá fi gholl ag Einin,

barnú dár saoil

Thar rann na bhfogare chugrann,

16 mhínd oibre níos ann

Sean trá or sin ar Eachar

Ní fheachfor ar thiontáil le fada

Anróth a thion ní dhearna hain,

Le gneáth usghadh tráthnónai ón seo

Le gneáth creach ar thiontach ag dtugtar

Sar fheachfor an 16ú mhí na hAoine.

**Óró, Se do Bhaith a ‘bhaile**

Another song reported to have been sung in the G.P.O. during the Rising.

The words of this old Jacobite song were adapted by Padraig Pearse to welcome home the Wirth Genie who would return from America to free Ireland.

**GUNS FROM GERMANY**

In July 1916, Erskine Childers, accompanied by his wife Molly and Mary Spring Rice, landed in Howth with a consignment of rifles from Germany aboard The Asgard. British forces confronted Volunteers who were transporting the arms back to Dublin and some rifles were lost. As the British were returning to their barges they were stoned by an angry crowd at Bachelors Walk. They responded by firing on the crowd, killing 9 people and wounding 37 others.

These events are remembered in two songs - My Old Howth Gun and Bachelors Walk.

**Bachelors Walk**

A local’s 1916 confrontation, where Irish Republican Volunteers were transporting weapons from Germany aboard The Asgard. British forces confronted Volunteers who were transporting the arms back to Dublin and some rifles were lost. As the British were returning to their barges they were stoned by an angry crowd at Bachelors Walk. They responded by firing on the crowd, killing 9 people and wounding 37 others.

The Asgard - Mary Spring Rice

**My Old Howth Gun**

There is sorrow in my heart, O my old Howth gun

Since we safely had to part, O my old Howth gun

Far in Ireland’s day of need will you proved a friend indeed

When you made the bullets spin, O my old Howth gun

When you made the bullets spin, O my old Howth gun

Two years later on the eve of the Rising, on Good Friday, 1916, a further consignment of arms was to land on the Kerry Coast, found by the Asgard and the news of this was conveyed in the haunting Lonely Banna Strand.

**Lonely Banna Strand**

’Twas on Good Friday morning. All in the month of May

A German ship was signalling beyond out in the bay

We had twenty thousand rifles all ready for to land

But no answering signal did come from the lonely Banna Strand.

If we said to Queenstown Harbour, said the Germans, ‘You’re undone.

The British are our masters mean for men and gun for you.

We’re twenty thousand rifles here, but they never will reach land.

We’ll sink them all and bid ashes to lonely Banna Strand.

The R.I.C. were hunting for Sir Roger High and low

They found him at Mahon’s Fort, said they, ‘You are our foe.

Said he, ‘I’m Roger Casement, I come to my native land,

I meant to free my countrymen on lonely Banna Strand.

’Twas an English prison that he went to meet his death.

I’m dying for my country,’ he said, with his last breath.

In prison gaol they’ve said him, far from his native land.

Now the wild waves sing his requiem on lonely Banna Strand.

Roger Casement
Cumann Na mBán

Many women, mostly members of the Cumann na mBan, took part in the Rising and are remembered in "The Soldiers of Cumann na mBan" by Brian O'Higgins:

"They stand for the honour of Ireland In silken days that are gone And they'll march with their brothers to freedom The sisters of Cumann namnabn..."

O hush be the heart of our Mother The day the has longed for is nigh. When the sun shall out of freedom Shall glow in the eastern sky. And none shall be harnessed more proudly That morning by children and clan. Than the daughters who served her in danger. The sisters of Cumann namnabn.

It is estimated that 485 people were killed during Easter Week. The grief experienced at the loss of life is brought home to us in Seumas MacRae's poignant "The Dying Rebel" written after the Rising:

"The first I met was a grey-haired father Searching for his only son. I said 'Old man, there's no use searching For you've gone up to heaven, your son has gone."

The old man cried, our broken hearts banding our hands, I heard him say: 'I knew my son was too kind-hearted. I knew my son would never yield.'"

The last I met was a dying rebel, banding low I heard him say: 'God bless my home in dear Cork City, God bless the cause for which I die.

James Connolly

James Connolly, written by Cork poet Patrick Galvin, is widely regarded as one of the finest tributes to this 1916 leader. Frank Harte wrote: "When I met Patrick Galvin I mentioned that I had been singing the song for years without knowing that he had written it. He was pleased that the song had been accepted by the singers and said that it was not important that they should know who had written it." (Songs of Dublin, 1978)

"Where oh where is our James Connolly? Where oh where is that brave man be? He is gone to organise the union. That working man might yet be free. They carried him up to the jail. They carried him up to Kilmainham Gaol. And there they shot him as bright May morning. And quickly 'laid him in a quick white grave."

The Foggy Dew

The Foggy Dew was written by Rev. Charles O'Neill from Roslevan, Co. Cork and set to music by Carl Dahlbeck, first Professor of Music in University College Cork.

When O'Neill attended the first meeting ofail Eireann in January 1917, many of those who had been elected were in prison in England. When their names were called out the reply was "Yes, gone up to heaven." (summarised by the foreman). He returned home and wrote what is probably the song most associated with the Rising.

While painting a vivid picture of the Rising it also explains in stirring terms why Irishmen died in Ireland for Irish freedom rather than fleeing to foreign shores on behalf of an Empire which had promised the freedom of small nations.

The Foggy Dew

As dawn the glen one Easter morn in a city fair rode: There armed lines of marching men in squadrons passed me by: No pipe did hum, no battle drums did sound in loud tattoo But the Angela bell on the Liffey's swell rang out in the foggy dew. Right proudly high over Dublin town they hung out a flag of war. "Two letters to the trench on Irish sky there at Suvla or Sedd El Bahr. And from the plains of Royal Meath strong men come hurrying through While Britannia's hure with their great big guns, sailed throug in the foggy dew."

O the night fell black and the officer cried "許多 Alice, wake" with the bonnet rose, seven tongues of flame did shine over the lines of steel. Be each shining blade a prayer was said that to help her sons be true. And when morning broke till the war flag shone out its fold in the foggy dew. "Two England boys our mild green grove but small nations might be free. But their lonely graves are by Suvla waves or the fringe of the groy North Sea. C'had they died by Pearse's side or fought with Cottrell Bright. Their names will keep where the Ferran's sleep,neath the shroud of the foggy dew."

The invader fell, and the requiem bell rang mournful and low. For those who died that Easter tide in the springtime of the year. While the world did gape with deep amaze at those fearless men, but few. Who gave their lives that freedom's light might shine through the foggy dew.

Ah, back through the glen I rode again, and my heart with grief was sore. For I parted then with valiant men whose I never shall see more. But lo and I'm in my dreams I go and I'd breed and pray for you. For Scarsity first, O glorious deed, when you fell in the foggy dew.
Poetry has a long history of living underground in the Gaelic tradition and dreams of nationhood and the longing for freedom found expression in a particular way in poetry. Little wonder, then, that three poets, Pearse, MacDonagh and Plunkett, were among those who walked out on Easter Monday morning 1916 to set their country free. Their poetry expresses the longing for freedom that the authorities, fully taken up with parliamnetarian and rebel movements, were blind to.


Poems of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood (1916)
Poems of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood (1916), edited by Padraic Colum and Edward J. O’Brien
This collection was published a few months after the 1916 executions and includes poems by Pearse, MacDonagh, Plunkett, and Casement. In his introduction Padraic Colum states:

Primate, MacDonagh and Pearse are among the leaders of a recent political society that had revolution as its object... They made a great and immediate gesture... With the good and brave Connolly, with the cruel and captivating Clarke, with Shaw Macdonnell... and with the slyer Eamon Ceannt, who with them signed the declaration, they have passed away from our sight and they have become part of the memory of Ireland. (Poems of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, introduction, pp. 1-1).

W. B. Yeats (1865-1939)

W. B. Yeats was one of the foremost figures of twentieth-century literature in Ireland and internationally. He was one of the leading lights of the Irish Literary Revival and one of the founders of the Abbey Theatre, with Lady Gregory, in 1904. He became enamoured with Irish nationalism in the 1880s after befriending Fenian John O’Leary and Maud Gonne. He was a member of the IRB in his younger days, although he distanced himself somewhat from republican politics in later years. However, the events of 1916 inspired the most famous of all Irish poems, Theano 1916 — in which he was deeply moved by the heroism and martyrdom of the rebel leaders, who are mentioned in the poem: Pearse, Connolly, MacDonagh and MacBride. Other poems by Yeats inspired by the Rising include: Sixteen dead men, The second time and In memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markievicz.

He died in 1939 in France.

In April 1916 a handful of Irishmen took over the city of Dublin and were finally surrounded and overwhelmed by British troops with artillery. At first my only reaction was horror that Irishmen could commit such a crime against England. But the English were calling us traitors again and they seemed to be right. The English shot the first batch of Irish leaders and this was a worse shock, for the newspapers said — the pro-British ones with a sneer — that several of them had been poets and I was in favour of poets. One of them, Patrick Pearse, on the night before his execution had written some poems... which showed him to be a man of nice feeling. What made it worse was that most of his poetry had been written in Irish, the language I had abandoned in favour of Flemish. And Corkery, who introduced me to Irish, I had not seen for years. A revolution had begun in Ireland but it was nothing to the revolution that had begun in me.

Excerpts from Frank O'Connor's An only child (1941) pp.122-124
Pádraic Pearse (1879-1916)

Pádraic Pearse is known for his revolutionary ideas and for his dedication to the Irish language. He became a symbol of the 1916 Easter Rising, which was a significant event in Irish history. Pearse was a poet, playwright, and teacher who was involved in the planning of the Rising. He was executed after the rebellion.

Thomas MacDonagh (1878-1916)

Thomas MacDonagh was a poet and a member of the Irish Volunteers. He was executed during the 1916 Rising. His poetry was a significant part of the Irish literary tradition.

Joseph Mary Plunkett (1887-1916)

Joseph Mary Plunkett was a journalist and a member of the Irish Volunteers. He was also involved in the planning of the 1916 Rising. He was arrested and executed during the rebellion.

Thomas Ashe (1885-1917)

Thomas Ashe was a journalist and a member of the Irish Volunteers. He was executed during the 1916 Rising. His efforts were significant in the struggle for Irish independence.

Monument at Rath Cois, north of Adare, erected to remember the events of 29 April 1916.

The inspiration for the monument comes from a poem by Thomas Ashe.
1916 in Poetry

Francis Ledwidge (1887-1917)

One of Ireland’s best loved poets, Ledwidge was both an Irish patriot and soldier in the Great War. He left a wealth of work that includes collections such as: Songs of the Fields (1917), Songs of Peace (1917) and The complete poems of Francis Ledwidge (both published posthumously). An Irish Volunteer, he initially opposed John Redmond’s call to join Irish regiments in WWI but eventually enlisted in Lord Dufferin’s regiment. He served in Sevilia Bay (the Gallipoli Campaign), Serbia, and lastly on the Western Front in 1917. He continued to write while on active service. While on leave during the Rising he was hospitalized in Manchester. He was devastated to hear of the executions of the leaders of the Rising, particularly of his friend Thomas MacDonogh. His death inspired him to write one of his most poignant poems, Thomas MacDonogh (He shall not hear the kitten cry...). Other poems of Ledwidge inspired by the Rising and events in Ireland at the time include: Ireland, The dead kings. A soldier’s grave and To Mrs Joseph Plunkett. He was killed in an explosion in Ypres in July 1917.

George William Russell (A.E.), (1867-1935)

Although not a participant in the Rising, A.E. was an ardent Nationalist and a supporter of the leaders. In 1916 during the 1916 Lockout. A poet, painter, and intellectual, he played a large part in the Irish Literary Revival and counted among his friends W B Yeats, James Joyce, James Stephens, Padraic and Mary Colum, and Thomas MacDonogh. He was director of the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, and through The Irish Homestead, his journal, which he edited, he controlled, read poems, essays, and stories. He published more than fifteen collections of poetry, two novels, and many essays. Although a pacifist, he nevertheless held the leaders of the Rising in great regard and they in turn respected his work and poetry. Examples of which are: a Leader. On behalf of some Irishmen not followers of tradition, Toleration, and Controversy.

Eva Gore-Booth (1870-1926)

Suffragist, labour activist, sister of Countess Constance Markievicz, friend of W B. Yeats, Eva Gore-Booth was a lifelong campaigner against injuries and poverty. Although a pacifist, she nevertheless welcomed her sister’s imprisonment and death sentence for her part in the Rising and that of other friends — Roger Casement, who was hanged for treason in Pentonville Prison in August 1916, and fellow pacifist Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, who was murdered during the week of the Rising. Three of her poems are dedicated to Constance, Casement, and Skaffington, while others — Francis Duffil 1926, Easter Week and Contribute — honour other leaders of the insurrection. All are in the collection, Broken Glory. She died in London in 1926.

Padraic Colum (1887-1972)

Poet, playwright, novelist, children’s author, and collector of Irish folk songs. Colum was a leading figure of the Irish Literary Revival and a member of the Gaelic League and first board of the Abbey Theatre. He won one of the Medallions of The Irish Review. He and his wife, Mary, a noted writer and literary critic, were part of the international literary scene, traveling to New York and Paris at various times from 1914 to the 1930s. Generations of Irish schoolchildren would be familiar with two of his poems — An old woman of the road and A Christmas Song — as well as with his words of the song. She moved through the fair. Many of his friends were caught up in the events of Easter Week 1916, and both he and Mary were very saddened by the executions of some of those friends, particularly Roger Casement for whom he wrote the lament, The Rebel Roger Casement. He lived until he was ninety, dying in 1972 in Connecticut.