



Easter Risings

by Simon Belt

The centenary celebrations of the Easter Rising in Dublin 1916 have proved very interesting for those who follow the way perceptions of historical events change depending on contemporary sensibilities. The celebrations seemed a little strange to a British audience schooled in the belief that the 1916 declaration of independence was dangerous folly, yet the occasion this year was a high profile official event.

The other Easter Rising by contrast, was perhaps the least religious marking of Jesus' crucifixion and rising from the dead that I can remember, apart from the amount of chocolate easter eggs being bought, hidden, found and consumed that is. What, if anything connects these events?

Until quite recently, the Easter Rising in 1916 was always described as dangerous folly at best and so for the Irish government to mark the rebellion against British rule could be seen as inflammatory. So have the Irish government been using these celebrations to antagonise the British government? Well I don't think so and if you look at the content and meaning of the celebrations you get a sense of why. The 26 counties of the Irish state has been retrospectively understood as *part independence* or *mostly independence* from Britain, and it is the successful reinterpretation of the 1916 Rising that allowed the official celebration.

What was James Connolly hoping to achieve from the 1916 Rising, and what affect would it have? A socialist schooled in revolutionary politics and some bitter trade union campaigns he was clear that any campaign to free Ireland from British rule, would necessarily unleash a class struggle against fellow nationalists keen to replace British capitalists. These British rulers of Ireland were the very same rulers of something like a third of the world through the Empire, and so a successful campaign for a free Ireland would be a cause for celebration across the Empire for those similarly wanting freedom from British rule.

The partition of Ireland into the 26 county state of Ireland and the 6 county state of Northern Ireland, still under British rule may have represented something of a defeat for the British, already weakened through the 1st World War, but it was also a defeat for the campaign for freedom from British rule. The 26 county state meant that the working class across Ireland was weakened through the split, and the Irish capitalist class left running the show were dependent on the border to maintain the status quo. This has resulted in something of a dual personality approach by Irish politicians - being where they are because of Britain's defeat and yet dependent on them to maintain their state.

The more recent defeat of the nationalist struggle in the North has reduced the threat to the

stability of the Irish state from republicans and therefore the Easter Rising as a historical moment. The broader decline of politics in general, and the issue of national sovereignty in particular has allowed both the British and Irish governments to be more relaxed about the issue of the 1916 Rising. The Queen recently bowed her head and laid a wreath at Dublin's Garden of Remembrance in a hugely symbolic and historic act of reconciliation between Britain and the Irish Republic, with the English national anthem being played.

As part of the broader blurring of historical and political importance, the Easter Rising was bundled together with other wars, further diluting the significance of the Easter Rising as one of the most audacious challenges to the authority of the British State and a reminder of the historic compromise the Irish politicians made when accepting the partition of Ireland in 1921.

The other Easter Rising that has just been celebrated seemed to me to reflect a similar diminishing of the importance of principles and more managerial role of the state, and this was the serious suggestion by the Archbishop of Canterbury to have a fixed date by which Easter should be marked. It's not that I'm religious and feel the need to hold onto centuries old ways of determining when Easter is, but the way in which important historical precedents can be so easily brushed aside for making arrangements based more around the weather than anything else, does smack of a decline in the importance of historically important events.

At a time when the Christian faith can so easily replace previously religious reasons for deciding when Easter is celebrated, it's no wonder that one of the most important rebellious uprisings in British history can be so easily equated with fighting for the British state during the 1st World War as the recent Irish government did when marking the Easter Rising. Thanks goodness though that most other people have a better sense of History - something to really celebrate.