

## **“THE TRUE GREATNESS OF MICHAEL COLLINS”**

**by Michael McDowell**

RTE has commissioned a series of five programmes under the title *“Ireland’s Greatest”*. The idea, loosely based on a BBC precedent, is that a poll was conducted among the general public with a view to identifying figures in Irish history who could be considered to be Ireland’s Greatest. A shortlist was compiled consisting of Michael Collins, Bono, James Connolly, John Hume and Mary Robinson. This shortlist has attracted some criticism; many people rightly ask: *“What about Daniel O’Connell? W B Yeats: Charles Parnell? Michael Davitt? George Bernard Shaw? James Joyce: Eamon de Valera?”* and so on. Others have made the point that it’s like comparing *“apples and oranges”* to compare people who are still alive (and whose ultimate status in Irish history is very hard to judge) with people who are long dead (and in respect of whom we know the sum total of their lives through history and biography).

Whatever about these criticisms, it does seem to me that it is a worthwhile use of broadcasting time to ask people, no matter how informally, to address their minds to what actually constitutes *“greatness”* and judge about what kind of figures really do amount to *“Ireland’s Greatest”*.

Having agreed to advocate Michael Collins, I decided that I would not be drawn into a negative analysis of the other contenders. All of them, in different ways, seem to me to be estimable people who stand out from the ordinary and have, in one way or another, through their lives changed Ireland, both nationally and internationally.

Why then did I agree to champion Michael Collins? Having a keen interest in Irish history and a sense of pride in Ireland, Collins emerges, in my view, as being the towering figure in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Irish history in terms of personality, achievement, charisma and in terms of his transformative effect on his country.

So many books and films have been made about Michael Collins that he is now, in many senses, a figure of legend.

Many biographies have been written, ranging from hagiographical to skeptical. One of the most recent, *“Mick”* by the brilliant and sadly recently deceased Peter Hart, sets out to deconstruct the myth or legend of Collins and to analyze his significance in a detached and objective way. He follows the footsteps of major biographical works starting with Piaras Beaslai including Rex Taylor, Seán O’Faolain, Tim Pat Coogan, T. Rye Dwyer, León O Broin, Margery Foster and many, many others. Peter Hart set out *“not to debunk the Story as such or to correct previous biographers. Instead, I would like to start from scratch and from a new, forensic, perspective.”* He said of his book *“Mick”*: *“What I hope readers find here is not the man of legend but a dynamic and fascinating man nonetheless: the most gifted, ruthless and powerful Irish politician of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century”*. That description of him is, I think, true.

Some may question the term “*ruthless*” when applied to Collins. Many feel it unfair to describe the man who delivered an independent Ireland from the hands of the Empire as “*ruthless*”. The War of Independence was, like all war, violent but also, in many respects, cruel.

Yet no-one would describe Michael Collins as a “*cruel man*”. Though responsible for prosecuting a violent struggle for independence to its logical end, he did not revel in violence or in any sense glorify death or the letting of blood.

He was clear-minded and did not deceive himself on the moral issues involved in the War of Independence or the steps that were taken to win it.

People now use the term “*terrorism*” rather loosely. Every struggle which does not consist of pitched battles between men in uniforms is not terrorism. The use of terror i.e. bombing civilians to create fear and subjugation is what terrorism is all about.

Moreover, Collins was dealing with a struggle for independence not merely from a much larger neighbouring island but from what was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century the most powerful empire on the globe. If there were to be a War of Independence at all, it was never going to be one in which pitched battles (such as that brought about in 1916), would result in Ireland’s freedom being won against the military power of the British Empire. It had to be based on the model of the “*Boer War*”, the most recent precedent for the struggle Collins hoped to lead.

No matter how revisionist we are asked to be by some commentators, the struggle of the Sinn Féin movement coupled with the IRA was essentially different from the political programme of the Irish parliamentary party, the “*Home Rulers*”. John Redmond, leader of the Irish parliamentary party, spoke sincerely and eloquently of his vision for an Ireland with home rule, one in which young Irishmen would come to be willing to fight and die for what they regarded as their empire was radically different from the separatist nationalists’ agenda for Ireland.

How, then, do we differentiate between Collins in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the Provos at the end of that century? Having seen, and been hugely depressed by, the futility of the 1916 Rising (and Collins admired James Connolly as the most adept of the leaders of that rising, in military terms), Collins determined to seek Irish liberty and to put Ireland on the path to becoming a Republic “*The Path to Freedom*” and he committed himself to do everything to bring about that freedom. The triumph of Sinn Féin in the 1918 election, and the subsequent electoral outcomes in which Sinn Féin again triumphed, justified him, in his and my mind, in viewing Dáil Éireann as the legitimate government of the Irish State. He was not serving a “*paper republic*”. He was serving a truly democratic republic established by the votes of the people. He claimed morally the right to defend and to vindicate that state which Sinn Féin were mandated by the Irish people to create. He never lost or exceeded that mandate. His struggle was never rejected by the people at the ballot box. And he always accorded to the Irish people the right and the privilege to

adjudicate through the ballot box on the way in which Irish freedom would be accomplished.

Without making a schoolboy hero of him, he was an immensely brave man. Very different from many later figures, he was really loved by those who were close to him. They saw him as a good person. He was never betrayed by those close to him. All of that speaks to his moral character.

As someone who considers himself a Republican, as someone who believes passionately in an independent Ireland, and as someone who believes that it was the entitlement of the Irish people through the ballot box to substitute their own government for an illegitimate British government, I cannot agree with those who now claim that Irish independence (as we now have it) would have come to us inevitably by constitutional means.

Where I may agree with some “*revisionist*” critics of the War of Independence is in the well judged criticism that the Irish nationalists fundamentally misunderstood their Northern Unionist countrymen. The constant theme that Unionism was purely economic and was, in some sense, explicable only as a temporary result of British machination and selfish economic interest was wrong.

But Collins, along with de Valera, knew that there could be no coercion of the Northern Unionists. However inadequate their grasp of the reality of Unionism, they were not planning a genocidal civil war against the Unionists.

Finally, Collins is an intriguing complex character. He is no plaster saint. If you doubt me, can I recommend that you go to see Mary Kenny’s play “*Allegiance*” in the Moat Theatre in Naas on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of November?

I think Collins must be one of our greatest historical figures and that in 50 years time or a 100 years time they will still be writing books about him, writing plays about him, shooting films about him and, most of all, Irish people will still view his name with pride. **If you agree with me, please honour his memory by phoning in your vote to 1513 71 71 01 this week – a small gesture of gratitude to the great man who won us our freedom.**