

The Easter Rising through Australian Eyes

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The Easter Rising stands among the most significant events in Irish history and on that account its centenary deserves to be commemorated by Irish people at home and abroad. Yet, the rising was also a significant event in Australian history. While in Ireland it marked the beginning of the Irish revolution, here in Australia it marked the beginning of the darkest period of disunity in our nation's history.

From 1788 until the early 1900s European society in Australia had experienced a sectarian divide between Catholics, mostly Irish, and Protestants, mostly British, that reflected the ethnic divisions of the United Kingdom. Usually this chronic sectarianism simply simmered, but occasionally it boiled over into violence, often on the Twelfth of July or St Patrick's Day, such as in Melbourne in 1846 and Sydney in 1878. Before the First World War sectarian tensions increased to fever pitch following a concerted campaign by Catholics to restore state aid to their schools and local reaction to the British government's proposal to grant home rule to Ireland.

However, on the outbreak of war, a truce ensued between Irish Catholics and British Protestants, who united to support Britain in her life-and-death struggle with Germany. Catholics tempered their education demands and the Irish question was neutralised when the Home Rule Bill was enacted, albeit suspended until war's end.

For twenty months the truce held. When news of the Easter Rising reached Australia, Irish Catholics and British Protestants were critical of the rebels. Even Archbishop Mannix deplored the rising, describing the rebel leaders as misguided. But when the Crown began to execute the leaders, impose martial law and intern thousands of Irish men and women, the Australian Irish openly criticised the British government. This provoked a backlash questioning their loyalty. Harsh sectarian

rhetoric, shelved in August 1914, re-appeared, with Irish Catholics labelled "Sinn Feiners, shirkers, pro-German!" The revival of sectarianism might have been short-lived but for the fact that Prime Minister Billy Hughes decided to introduce conscription, calling a referendum that in October 1916 was narrowly defeated.

Irish Catholics, who mostly opposed conscription, were singled out as scapegoats for its defeat, along with militant trade unionists. In 1917 sectarian tensions increased, culminating in the second conscription referendum in December with Hughes and Mannix metaphorically slugging it out. But it didn't end there. Sectarianism continued to plague the nation into the post-wars years with the Irish War of Independence being vicariously fought out in Australia, thankfully without guns.

With the establishment of the Irish Free State, Irish affairs ceased to resonate in Australia. On the whole, Irish Catholics and British Protestants welcomed the outcome. When the Irish began to fight among themselves over the role of the Crown, the Irish in Australia, who had done well under the Crown, lost interest.

So, we should not regard the Easter Rising simply as an event that occurred "over there", whose centenary is something to be commemorated by the people of Ireland with our good wishes. For Australia, too, it was an event of major significance, marking the beginning of six and a half years of sectarian tension and tumult which, along with relentless industrial discord, threatened the social fabric of the nation.



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