

PADRAIG PEARSE

by Mike McCormack



Patrick H. Pearse was a poet, lawyer, playwright, linguist, educator, author, and military leader. Born on Nov 10, 1879 in Dublin, his father's firm belief in liberty (as evidenced by the name he gave his son) left a deep impression on young Patrick Henry. During his formal education at the Christian Brothers School he attained honors in Gaelic each year, and at ages 16 and 17, wrote prizewinning books in the language. He was amply encouraged in his pursuit for he had come to manhood during a period of intense Irishness known as the Gaelic Revival. Pearse joined the Gaelic League whose prime purpose was the revival of the national language, but its impact on the rise of nationalism was far more significant. Years later, Pearse wrote, *The Irish revolution really began when the 7 original Gaelic Leaguers met in O'Connell Street. The germ of all future Irish history was in that room.* In 1896, the Gaelic League was 3 years old, Pearse was 16, and the end of his life was still 20 years away. Despite a heavy schedule of studies, he was a member of the Gaelic League's governing body and President of the New Ireland Literary Society as well. He began to write the ancient language in modern form, discarding the traditional format of the sagas and using the form of short stories, plays, and novels. His pioneering contributions were so significant that the **Encyclopedia of Ireland** notes that, *He brought Irish literature into the 20th Century.* In 1901 he was accepted to the Bar. In one of his few cases, he defended a client who had been fined for putting his name on his cart in Gaelic - a crime in British-controlled Ireland. Though commended for an *ingenious, interesting, and instructive defense*, he lost the case. He never practiced law again, and described the profession of an Irish lawyer in an English court system as the most ignoble of professions.

More and more Pearse's writings came to reflect the nationalist influence of the Gaelic Revival. In 1908 he founded St Enda's College as a bilingual secondary school. He became an outstanding orator, and spoke at many nationalist functions. Tom Clarke, the veteran Fenian who was attempting to rejuvenate the IRB, heard Pearse and invited him to deliver the 1913 oration at the graveside of Wolfe Tone in Bodenstown - an annual event of considerable Republican significance. Pearse publicly identified himself with the nationalist cause when he began his speech, *We have come to the holiest place in Ireland.* In that same month he began contributing articles to the IRB newspaper **Irish Freedom**. By the end of 1913, Pearse was not only a member of the IRB, but of the newly formed Irish Volunteers as well, and he rose to prominence in both organizations. He became the principle speaker for the Volunteers and its Director of Organization, and, as such, had authority to issue orders on behalf of Chief of Staff, Eoin MacNeill.

He was part of a 3-man IRB committee set up by Clarke, with Joseph Plunkett and Eamonn Ceannt, to draft a plan for a military insurrection. This committee later became the Military Council with the addition of Sean MacDiarmada, James Connolly, and Thomas MacDonagh. It was as a member of this group and the Supreme Council of the IRB that Pearse ordered the Volunteers to assemble for training manouevres on Easter Sunday, 1916. He was the indispensable link between the two groups. Tom Clarke's IRB was the agent of the rising, but with no more than 2,000 members it needed the umbrella of the Volunteers. Hence the deception of MacNeill and the key role of Pearse. It was Pearse's conviction that a blood sacrifice was essential to stir his generation of Irish to action. He maintained that the Gaelic Revival had bred a new generation of revolutionaries and forged the weapon that could topple the crown. All that was needed was one significant, bold action to arouse the people to a sense of their rights and put that force into motion. He was willing to initiate that action at the risk of his own life. On Easter Monday, he led his men into a rising to test that theory, even though he was acutely aware that he would not survive.

In 1915 he wrote, *We must be ready to die, even as Emmet died, so that others may live.* He told his mother just before the rising, *The day is coming when I shall be shot, swept away, and my colleagues with me.* After his surrender, he wrote from his jail cell, *This is the death I should have asked for if God had given me choice - a soldiers death for Ireland and freedom.* True to Pearse's estimation, his execution and the execution of the other leaders set the Irish population into a seething rage that lit the fuse for the War of Independence. The groundwork of Pearse was the foundation of Irish freedom. Some 6 months before his execution Pearse wrote to those who did not share his vision, in a poem he called **The Fool**:

The Lawyers have sat in Council, the men with the keen long faces,
and said This man is a fool, and others have said he blasphemeth;
and the wise have pitied the fool who strove to give a life to a dream
that was dreamed in the heart and that only the heart can hold.

O Wise Men, riddle me this: What if the dream come true,
What if the dream come true and millions unborn shall dwell
in the house that I shaped in my heart?