

MICHAEL COLLINS

by Mike McCormack, NY State Historian

One of the most controversial figures in Irish history is Michael Collins. To those who loved him, he was The Big Fellow, Ireland's greatest hero. Yet some believe that in settling for the Irish Free State, he betrayed the Republican cause. You be the judge.

Born at Sam's Cross, Co Cork, on Oct 16, 1890 - (120 years ago this month), he was the youngest of 8 children. His father, 75 at the time, was a farmer with an enviable command of Greek, Latin, and French, who also excelled in math. He gave his youngest son his name, and a love of reading. As Michael grew to manhood, he read the prose and poetry of Nationalism, listened to patriotic discussions about O'Connell, Davis, and Emmet, and heard first hand accounts from his grandmother Johanna O'Brien of people starving on the roads during the Great Hunger. He started school at the age of 4-1/2, and was taught by an old Fenian named Denis Lyons. By the time his father died in 1897, the 6-year old well understood his father's last words: *I shall not see Ireland free, but in my children's time it will come, please God.* Michael finished school and left for London in 1906 as an apprentice clerk in the Post Office Savings Bank. In London, he joined the Gaelic League, the GAA, and the Geraldine Football and Hurling Club. He was sworn into the IRB in 1909, and later, the Volunteers. In 1915, he got a job as a clerk in the London office of the Guarantee Trust Company of New York. Then, on a trip to Dublin he met Tom Clarke and Sean MacDermott who convinced him that something big was about to happen. He returned to London, quit his job, and sailed for Ireland the next day. The something big was the Easter Rising, and Collins was a part of that historic event as a soldier in the GPO.

When the Rising failed, Irish prisoners were rounded up and marched to a grassy knoll opposite the Rotunda Hospital where they were surrounded by British Officers. The officer in Charge, Capt Lee Wilson, recognized 58-year old Tom Clarke as one of the leaders, and pulled him from the ranks; he publicly stripped him nude to the taunts and jeers of soldiers and passers-by. Collins was unable to stop the brutality, but years later he found Capt Wilson serving as an RIC inspector in Wexford, and had him shot. Collins and his comrades were bundled off to a prison camp at Frongoch in Wales where his natural ability as a leader emerged. When all were released in a general amnesty at Christmas, 1916, Tom Clarke's widow, Kattie, gave Collins the funds and information entrusted to her by the IRB Supreme Council before the Rising. Collins reorganized the Irish Volunteer and gave financial aid to the returning men. He made valuable contacts with Republicans all over Ireland, and they in turn knew that if they or their families ever needed anything, all they had to do was to see Mick. The reorganized IRB and its political party Sinn Fein renewed the struggle for independence. Sinn Fein members were elected to Parliamentary seats and, instead of going to Westminster, they met in Dublin calling themselves Dail Eireann - the Assembly of Ireland. England tried to disband them and Ireland's war of independence was on, with Collins leading the resistance. Hunted day and night, he led a guerrilla war with many close encounters and daring escapes. In July, 1919, he formed a squad of trusted men for special assignments who were known as the Twelve Apostles. They were an intelligence unit built to infiltrate British agencies and execute special assignments. Collins was Minister of Finance in the new Dail as well as Director of Intelligence, Director of Organization, and Adjutant General of the Army. He was the most hunted man in Ireland.

His intelligence network was extremely effective, and his masterful stroke of identifying 14 top British secret service men operating undercover in Dublin, and eliminating them all at the same time on Sunday morning, Nov 21 1920, displayed a daring and organizational ability that shook the Empire to its very foundation. It also boosted sagging Irish morale for the war had been particularly brutal and demoralizing. Then in mid 1921, Dail President Eamon deValera was invited to London to confer with Lloyd George. On July 9, a truce was announced to explore the possibility of a peace. However, the British had made it absolutely clear that no treaty would entertain an Irish Republic. Dev knew that when he returned to Ireland to select a delegation to negotiate terms. He startled his comrades by refusing to lead the delegation himself; instead he chose Arthur Griffith. Griffith, a journalist and economist, was not a militant republican, and would have been happy with any reasonable offer as long as the fighting was over. The delegation included Erskine Childers, a former member of British Intelligence who had converted to the cause; Childers cousin, Robert Barton; George Gavan Duffy and Eamon Duggan - two lawyers; John Chartres, another former member of British Intelligence; Emmet Dalton, another ex-British Officer; and Michael Collins. The selection of so many men of English background to negotiate Irish freedom leaves many questions to this day, but one thing is certain: Michael Collins as the lone militant would have little voice in establishing terms. The Irish delegation was no match for the English

delegation which included such trained statesmen as Lloyd George, Lord Birkenhead, Sir Austin Chamberlain, and Winston Churchill. The British offered an Irish Free State - a 26-county self-governing dominion within the British Commonwealth of Nations. The question of the other 6 counties would be resolved by a border commission after the Brits were able to pull their interests out. The Irish refused, but the English, with a seasoned army just returned from World War I, offered no alternative but total war. Collins knew that the Republican movement was almost broke and out of ammunition. They had bluffed their way to the negotiating table and now would have to bluff their way to any concessions. After months of negotiation the treaty was accepted. Collins considered it a stepping stone to full freedom, but realized many would not accept the fact that Ireland, though a self-governing dominion, was still under the Crown.

In Ireland, deValera, as President, repudiated the treaty after learning that a new election was one of the conditions. He claimed it was not the Republic that they fought for, but Dail Eireann put it to the people for a vote. In a general election, a war-weary people accepted it and elected Arthur Griffith President. DeValera and the anti-treaty Republican forces took up arms in protest, and in June 1922 a civil war began. Anti-treaty forces steadily lost ground, and by August, most cities and towns were in Free State hands. On August 12, President Griffith died, leaving Collins responsible for bringing the war to an end. On August 20, Collins headed for Cork to meet and negotiate a peace with his dissident former comrades - not as a conqueror, but as a fellow Irishman. He would offer positions in the Free State Army to those who wished them and give their leaders positions of importance in Free State service. Those who chose to continue fighting could go up north and fight the Orangemen who, at that time, were killing Irish Nationalists and burning them out of their homes. In a few years, when the new army was trained and equipped, Collins would dismantle the treaty bit by bit. It was a compromise none but the British could oppose - but they would not know. Unfortunately they did. According to a 1982 book *THE SHOOTING OF MICHAEL COLLINS* by John Feehan, when the Irish took over Dublin Castle, documents were found naming a British spy - code name Thorpe - who had been placed among the Irish. Just before going south, Collins learned Thorpe's identity, and said he would deal with him when he returned. Sadly, he never did for in his own native county, he was the victim of an ambush by Republican forces. The invincible man was dead. In Kilmainham Jail hundreds of Republicans prisoners dropped to their knees in prayer for the man who had led them for so long, though now on the opposing side. The saddest part of the entire story is that one of the finest leaders Ireland ever produced was killed by an Irish hand - a hand that he would rather have held in friendship.

