

THE IRISH PROBLEM AND THE EASTER RISING 1916

Many of the Irish population had never been reconciled to London rule. While the landowners were largely English and Protestant, the mass of the peasantry were Roman Catholics. There was much poverty. Resentment against the British was increased by the **Potato Famine** of the 1840s in which a million people died and many more were forced into emigration. During the later 19th century there was a growing demand for Irish self-government. After their success in the election of 1910 the **Irish Nationalist Party** gave their support to the Liberal Government which had committed to bringing in some form of Home Rule. In 1907 a new Irish party had been founded – **Sinn Fein** – which campaigned for a completely independent Irish republic.

In 1912 Asquith's Liberal government brought in an **Irish Home Rule Bill** to set up an Irish parliament to deal with all domestic matters. But in one corner of Ireland this was viewed with great alarm. The people of Ulster were predominantly Protestant and feared coming under the domination of the Catholics. Led by Sir Edward Carson, they set up the **Ulster Volunteer Force**, a paramilitary force pledged to fight Home Rule at all costs. They were backed by the Conservatives in the British Parliament and the House of Lords used its delaying powers to stop the Bill coming into law before 1914. Alarming, in March 1914, the "**Curragh Mutiny**" occurred when many army officers in Ireland indicated they would not obey orders to enforce Home Rule in Ulster in the event of a rebellion. Meanwhile, in the south, supporters of Irish self-government set up the **Irish Volunteers** to oppose the U.V.F. With a potential civil war looming in Ireland, it is not surprising that the Government decided when war broke out in August 1914, that Home Rule should be set aside till the war was over.



Destruction caused during the Easter Rising

Many Irishmen, both Catholics and Protestants, signed up for the armed forces and fought and died for the British Empire during the war. But there were also groups like the **Irish Republican Brotherhood** who saw it as an opportunity to achieve independence, with help from Germany. In April 1916 **Roger Casement** landed on the west coast bringing a shipment of arms from Germany for a planned rising. Casement was quickly arrested and the arms ship was scuttled; but the rising went ahead anyway. On 24th April the **Easter Rising** started when Irish Republicans, led by **Patrick Pierce** and **James Connolly**, seized control of major buildings in Dublin including the Post Office. The Rising was quickly suppressed by the army and 14 of its leaders were court-martialled and shot as traitors. Though the Rising had had only limited support, the courage of its fighters and the harsh way the British army had dealt with them led to growing sympathy for the Republican cause. As a result, though Irish soldiers continued to serve loyally in the army, it was never possible to use conscription in Ireland.

The 1918 elections brought a landslide victory for **Sinn Fein**. They set up their own alternative parliament - **the Dail** – and declared independence from Britain. This led to three years of conflict during which the Republicans fought a guerilla war against the British. To back up the Royal Irish Constabulary, the British recruited to its ranks many ex-soldiers. The **Black and Tans**, as they were nicknamed, soon earned themselves a dreadful reputation for brutality. Finally peace was signed in December 1921. By the terms of the treaty the **Irish Free State** was set up with dominion status. Like Canada and Australia it became an independent country under the British crown. **BUT** in Ulster six counties were given a separate administration to satisfy the demands of the Protestant majority there. This was originally seen as a temporary measure, but still survives to this day.