

Michael Collins and the Women Who Spied For Ireland The Irish Delegation: a Disunited Group

Danny Boy won a prize at a dog show on November 26, 1921. Winner of the Kerry Blue puppy class, he made headlines in Irish national and local press, while British Pathe cameramen were on hand to film his triumph for British audiences. He was an ordinary enough sort of dog, but he didn't have an ordinary enough sort of owner. Michael Collins was home briefly from the treaty negotiations in London and was reported to have seen Danny Boy win his prize. The newspaper headlines exclaimed in slightly shocked sensation: 'Michael Collins owns a dog!'

Of course, all of this was part of the media's gossipy fascination with Collins, and just days before signing the Anglo-Irish treaty, he may well have needed the uncomplicated company of man's best friend.

Just as no one person, even one as prominent as Collins, can be all revolution, all war, there's far more to periods and places, even in chaos and crisis, than chaos or crisis alone.

TRUCE

The truce began July 11, 1921. Not long after that, Michael Collins returned home to Cork. He felt that the attitudes of the people there were 'arrogant and provocative.' He said to de Valera 'they regard the position not as a truce but a surrender on our part'. However, while visiting Cork, Collins presided over an IRB meeting and mentioned to Liam Lynch as well as other officers of the IRA, that they had the right to be consulted before the treaty was signed. Perhaps it was an oversight on Collins' part but that was the last communication with the Cork IRA.

ANGLO-IRISH TREATY

Now back in London, Arthur Griffin the unofficial leader of the Irish delegation, was not in great health. Because of his health, Michael Collins was asked to take on more responsibility. The members of Ireland's five man negotiating team were: Arthur Griffith, Michael Collins, Robert Barton, Eamon Duggan, and George Duffy. Erskine Childers was secretary to the delegation. Griffith presided over a disunited group. The tension that previously existed among them, is now magnified. The degrees of separation from Britain varied among the delegates. All wanted a Republic but some were willing to compromise on that.

The British and the Irish did not trust each other. Michael Collins' feelings about the whole negotiation process was 'there's a falseness to it all, because no one trusts one another.' Collins found Prime Minister Lloyd George's attitude to be particularly obnoxious. 'He is all comradely – all arms around the shoulder – all the old friend act - not long ago he would have had me at the end of the rope. He thinks that the past is all washed out now – but that's to my face. What he thinks behind my back makes me sick at the thought of it.'

But being in the Irish delegation was not all work and no play. Hazel Lavery had met Michael Collins at parties during his early days in London before the Easter rising. Because of her Irish

Ancestry and her friendship with Llewelyn Davies, who was a spy for Collins, Hazel became very interested in Irish affairs. Collins was fascinated by Hazel's lively mind. She had some Irish blood but was considered an American Aristocrat.

When Treaty negotiations started, Hazel suggested to her husband, Sir John Lavery, that he should do 'something for Ireland.' Sir John agreed to make his studio 'neutral ground where both sides might meet' and became a venue for many fruitful discussions. It was here that Collins won Hazel's admiration and this admiration continued right up to his death.

Hazel got to know all the delegates but had a particular liking for Collins. She was anxious that the Irish group should meet Englishmen of importance concerned with the Irish question. This resulted in many lunches and dinner parties as well as other functions. Here Michael Collins, Arthur Griffith, and the rest of the Irish delegation, met men like Lord Birkenhead, Winston Churchill, and Lord Londonderry who were able to talk things over in a friendly manner. All the Irish delegation visited the Lavery house except for Erskine Childers.

One night at Hazel's dinner party, Collins and Field-Marshal Lord French, ex Irish viceroy, sat at opposite ends of the table. Lord French looked across the table and said 'this is the first time I have had the pleasure of meeting you, Mr. Collins.' Collins replied, 'It is not the first time I have seen your Lordship. For a couple of months ago you were by yourself near the Lodge and the boys surrounded you; but I called them off.' (Collins organized an ambush but called it off because a train arrived ahead of schedule.) Hazel Lavery's hospitality during the treaty negotiations offered the Irish delegation a reprieve from the everyday life of negotiating a treaty.

However, there seemed to be holes in the Irish delegation. Erskine Childers, who was the hard liner of the delegation, was distrusted by the British. Another member of the delegation, Robert Barton who was Collins' comrade during 4 years of war and thought very highly of him, had to be excluded from their private deliberations and discussions as the cousins, Childers and Barton, would get information back to de Valera. Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith found it difficult to talk freely. It came down to that the only person Collins could trust was Griffith. It didn't help matters that Griffith had an intense hatred for Childers whom he called 'that damned Englishman'.

Prime Minister Lloyd George soon saw the cracks among the Irish delegation. The head of the delegation, Arthur Griffith was led into a trap. In return for promises of a Boundary Commission, he earlier gave Lloyd George his personal assurances on the crown, unknown to the others, in writing. This was a useful weapon for Lloyd George to use to his advantage at a later point in time. Collins was asking for predominately catholic Counties and regions of Northern Ireland to be saved by the Boundary Commission. Collins further stated that any proposal for the association of Ireland with the British Commonwealth of Nations was conditional upon the unity of Ireland. At this point, Lloyd George stood up and accused the Irish delegation of trying to break on the Ulster question. He brandished an envelope and reminded Griffith that he agreed on November 13 to stand by the decision of the Boundary Commission. Barton and Collins were totally blindsided by this side deal that would take Ulster off the table. Lloyd George stated that it is now for Irishmen to keep their end of the bargain. Griffith advised he would sign the document anyway. But Lloyd George said that is not enough. Every delegate must sign the document and 'undertake to recommend it or there can be no agreement...' He then produced a second envelope. 'Here is the alternate letter I have prepared.'

If I send this letter it is war and war within three days. Which envelope do you want me to send? They await word in Belfast. We must have your answer by ten tonight. You can have until then, but no longer to decide whether you will give peace or war to your country.

That evening Collins, Childers, and the other four delegates fought over whether they would sign for Ireland being a dominion and guaranteeing peace versus a Republic and apparently certain war.

They were a tired, overworked, overstrained group of men, all ready to do what was best for Ireland. Collins, at one time agreed with Griffith that they were in this together and he was not likely now to abandon his colleague at this moment; and he indicated the same to Barton as they returned from Downing Street. They talked, argued, shouted, stopped, and shouted again and again.

Finally Collins, Griffith and Duggan put on their hats and coats and prepared to go, but Barton and Duffy held them back. Again the argument raged. Collins' mind was made up. He pointed out to the Irish delegation the difficulty the IRA would have achieving any success should the war be reactivated. The physical force element lacked arms and lost its coordination and harmony that had taken so many years to achieve. Furthermore, it would not have the backing of his own intelligence department as Michael Collins was now without cover. (Many years earlier, Collins would walk down the steps of a building with de Valera, Griffith, and other Irish dignitaries. The citizens of Dublin would look right through him like he was invisible or didn't exist and gave all the attention to the leaders. Collins prided himself on anonymity.)

The realization of starting a new war and the thought of having their comrades slaughtered, as they lost so many already, was too much for the remaining Irish delegation. Griffith and Collins impressed on Barton, the last dissenter, that if he did not sign, he alone would be responsible for 'Irish homes laid waste and the youth of Ireland butchered'. Barton eventually caved in and Duffy was not prepared for the responsibility of war, consented.

The Irish delegation walked through a thick fog with heavy hearts back to Downing Street. All were silent, taut and serious as if walking in a funeral procession. At half past two in the morning of December 6 they consented and signed the Articles of Agreement for a treaty.

Collins rose. 'I may have signed my political death-warrant tonight' said Lord Birkenhead, turning to Collins. 'I may have signed my actual death-warrant' was Collins' reply.

Upon leaving Downing Street, Michael Collins immediately left for the Lavery's. He wanted to let them know the stress he felt. Sir John noted that Collins felt he had acted correctly in signing the treaty but now is weighing the repercussions and consequences of that decision.

Late that evening, the negotiating team sailed back to Britain, but so divided were they that they took different boats. Barton, Childers and Duffy on one, with Collins, Griffith and Duggan sailing on the other.

In August 1922, when Michael Collins was assassinated in Cork, there was a book of Rossetti poems with a letter from Hazel in it on his body.

AFTERWORD

This wasn't the first time that Michael Collins won an award for his dogs.

At that time all dog shows were held under licence from the English Kennel Club, but Collins and a few others held its own show outside the English jurisdiction. Its first show took place on October 16th, 1920, at Summerhill, Dublin. It was also the occasion of Michael Collin's 30th birthday. He brought his dog, 'Convict 224' to compete in the show and the day proved to be a great birthday celebration for Collins when his beloved Kerry Blue terrier won first prize. Collin's prize winning Terrier was named after a Kerry man, Austin Stack, who served time in Lewes prison under the name 'Convict 224.'

Also at the dog show that day was Under Secretary for Ireland, Sir James McMahon, unknowingly brought his dog to compete alongside that of the most wanted man in Ireland.

To this day the name of Michael Collins, along with the name of his dog, is still etched on the trophy which is now in the hands of the Irish Kennel Club. Today, under the Irish Kennel Club, the 'Collins Cup' is annually awarded to best of breed at Kerry Blue Terrier shows.

Michael Collins was in the habit of giving Kerry Blues to friends as gifts. He gave two to Harry Boland to serve as companions on Boland's long sea journey to America and he presented another to Hazel Lavery in 1922 which she named "Mick."

Although Ireland does not have a designated national dog, the common misconception is that the Irish Wolfhound is the official canine symbol of Ireland, but if Michael Collins had dodged that assassin's bullet in 1922, it would be the Kerry Blue Terrier that would hold that national status.

Shortly before he met his death, Michael Collins had laid down plans to adopt the Kerry Blue Terrier as the officially recognised dog of the new Irish Free State.

Sources of information:

Michael Collins and the Women who Spied for Ireland by Meda Ryan

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