

The Irish Civil War – A Country in Turmoil

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

I can identify with this topic. Although I did not live through it, I heard family stories secondhand. My grandfather Patrick (Chrissy) Hegarty, born in Monkstown, Co Cork, joined the Irish Free State Army in 1922. His mother (my great grandmother) persuaded him to join the Michael Collins side as opposed to the Republican (anti-treaty) side. She told Chrissy that the Hegartys were related to Michael Collins and family does not fight against family. The Hegarty family that live in Ireland today believe in the Collins relations to this day, but I do not. I just think a mother will do what she can to protect her son. The free state side had the backing of the English and the Irish population, so the logical position, the safer position, was to support the side that negotiated the Anglo-Irish Treaty signed in December 1921.

My grandmother, Ellen (Nellie) Roche was born to a Republican family in Kilbrittain, Co Cork. She served her country well in the Irish War as a courier, delivering messages through enemy positions and setting up billets for the IRA as an active member of Cuman na mBan. Nellie worked as a domestic servant in Monkstown, where she met Chrissy and started a courtship around 1924. Nellie's older brother Jack Roche just spent eight years on the run from the English army fighting the good fight as a republican soldier under Tom Barry. Jack was a decorated IRA veteran earning numerous medals for his battlefield engagements. Chrissy traveled to Kilbrittain, Co. Cork to visit Nellie and to meet the Roche family. I did not know this about this first meeting until I traveled to Ireland and heard it directly from the Roche relatives. Jack was unhappy with his sister's choice of a suitor. When Chrissy knocked on the Roche front door to introduce himself, Jack walked out the back door, refusing to meet and shake hands with my grandfather, Chrissy. I confess, when I heard this story, it bothered and disappointed me very much as I was close to my grandparents. Jack Roche had nothing to do with Chrissy, he had fought against the Free-State army, and he resented him, they were enemies a year earlier. And Chrissy never mentioned him. They were dead to each other.

This is one heart-breaking story coming out of the turbulent Irish civil war. One thing for certain is it changed family dynamics and political affiliations to this day. I am about to tell you two other tragedies.

Kevin O'Higgins was an Irish statesman who attempted severe repression of the Irish Republican Army in the aftermath of the Irish Civil war (1922 – 23). He was described as a man of intellectual power and was an excellent administrator. Following the Easter Rising in 1916, O'Higgins joined the Sinn Féin national movement and was imprisoned. In 1918, while still in jail, he was elected to British Parliament from County Laios, and in the next year became assistant to the minister of local government under William Cosgrave.

Although originally opposed to any settlement short of republican status for Ireland, O'Higgins did accept the treaty and dominion status. He was highly critical of Eamon de Valera, then president of the Dáil Éireann (Irish parliament), for his condemnation of the signatories, O'Higgins deferred to the judgement of Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith. O'Higgins was a leading supporter of the dáil debates, working for a united Ireland within the British Commonwealth. After the acceptance of the treaty by the dáil, he became minister for economic affairs (January 1922) in both the Dáil Éireann government headed by Arthur Griffith and the provisional government headed by Michael Collins. During the first half of 1922 he went frequently to London, in negotiations concerning the implementation of the treaty, the transfer of assorted governmental powers, and the tentative constitution of the Irish Free State.

After the outbreak of the civil war, he was relieved of his cabinet position and given a military staff position as assistant to adjutant general (July 1922). Following Michael Collins's death in August 1922, O'Higgins was made minister for home affairs (retitled Justice in 1924) as

well as vice-president of the executive council (December 1922) when the Free State constitution came into force. He promoted the passage of the Army Emergency Powers Resolution, which authorized internment, military courts, and executions as legal instruments for the national army.

As minister for Justice, O'Higgins organized an unarmed police force known as the Civic Guard and took measures to restore order following the civil war between the Free State forces and the IRA. His part in signing 77 republican death warrants in 1922 – 1923 made him many enemies. His cynical wit, his inflammatory speeches during the civil war, and his curtailment of the liquor trade did not enhance his reputation. Here are two such death warrants signed by Kevin O'Higgins.



Left is a picture of Kevin O'Higgins's wedding party taken in October 1921 during the Anglo-Irish Treaty negotiations. O'Higgins is center and his two best men, to the right Rory O'Connor, and to the left Eamon de Valera, took opposing sides in the Civil War. Fourteen months after the wedding Kevin O'Higgins signed the death warrant of his school friend Rory O'Connor and three others, who had joined the anti-Treaty IRA and was captured at the Four Courts. These were retaliatory executions of four republican prisoners who included Rory O'Connor, after the

republicans assassinated dáil member, Sean Hales. Consequently, these executions were seen as martyrs by the republican movement. The aftermath of the Four Courts battle, during which the Free State troops used British artillery for the first time, provided impetus for the divided Irish marking the beginning of the Civil war. O'Higgins made a case for his best man, Rory O'Connor, but rather than be the dissenting voice he decided to sign the death warrant.



Another unfortunate incident occurred after Michael Collins' assassination. Emergency laws announced the death sentence for anyone caught armed without authorization. Nationalist, Robert Erskine Childers (picture left); author, staff member of the Anglo-Irish negotiating team, arms smuggler for the Republic; was arrested in November 1922 in the home of his cousin Robert Barton (signatory of the Anglo-Irish Treaty) for carrying an unlawful firearm. By an order signed by O'Higgins, Childers was executed by the Free State government several days later. Ironically, the pistol had been a gift from Michael Collins. Childers supported the Anti-Treaty forces in the vicious Irish civil war. Before they shot him, Childers shook the hand of each member of his firing squad and forgave them. His last words were: "Take a step forward, lads. It will be easier that way." In the prison cell the night before he died,

Childers made his son promise to forgive those who were about to kill him. Fifty-one years later his son would be elected president of the Irish Republic.

One Sunday in July 1927, Kevin O'Higgins was shot several times by three gunmen while walking from his Dublin home to Mass at his parish church and died a few hours later after explicitly expressing forgiveness for his assailants. The gunmen were never captured, but nearly sixty years later, after all were dead, their identities were revealed in the memoirs of an IRA veteran.

Taking sides in the Irish Civil War often placed a wedge among families causing political divisions for years to come. Having a family wrapped up in these unfortunate circumstances is nothing new in the birth of a new Irish Nation.