

A HISTORY OF BRITAIN by Andrew Chater
Transcript from the online video resource



THE EASTER RISING (1916)



I'm back in Ireland. I'm in Dublin, outside the General Post Office, the scene of an uprising, the so-called Easter Rising, of 1916. At the very moment the British Empire was at its height, nationalists here in Dublin rose in rebellion against British rule.

Up till now, I've been telling the story of imperialism – how we Brits carved out an Empire abroad. But in the early twentieth century British imperialists came face to face with a

new force: Nationalism – the desire of native peoples to win independence.

We've already traced the roots of Irish nationalism back through the centuries, to the Plantations – the confiscation of Catholic land for English and Scottish settlers. The native Irish became tenants of mostly Protestant landlords. And for centuries poor Catholics had remained under the British thumb. They suffered high rents. And then, worse, in the 1840s, famine struck, the failure of potato harvests made worse by British inaction. Almost a million Irish men, women and children starved – whilst food (beef and grain) left Ireland for English markets.



This is Dublin's Kilmainham Gaol. And this place like no other witnessed the consequences of that troubled relationship between Britain and Ireland. Between 1798 and 1916, the leaders of five separate failed rebellions against British Rule were locked up here. It 1883 this was where we hung by the neck the Invincibles – a gang of Irish nationalists, who'd murdered the First Secretary for Ireland, the Englishman Lord Frederick Cavendish. He was

out walking in the park one day. They'd attacked him with long surgical knives – very nasty.

But for me, the most important political prisoner ever held here was a certain Charles Stuart Parnell, the greatest Irishman of the 19th century, if only because he was struggling to find a peaceful solution to Ireland's problems.

He called for the transfer of land by Act of Parliament back into Catholic hands. He called for the transfer of power back from Westminster to Dublin – so-called, “Home Rule”.

But we Brits dangled the promise of Home Rule for thirty years without delivering on our promises. Until by the outbreak of the First World War, the tide had turned. Some nationalists had come to believe that the time for talking was over. Violence seemed the only solution.

The Easter Rising of 1916 was led by the poet Patrick Pearse. He marched a thousand men into Dublin, they occupied public buildings, and Pearse proclaimed an Independent Ireland. The British – busy fighting the First World War – were caught, at first, off guard. But they brought in troops and artillery. They even stationed a gunboat on the River Liffey. For six days central Dublin came under heavy fire. Until at last the rebels were brought to heel.

It's strange to reflect that when this uprising broke out, most Irish people despised these rebels. We were half way through the First World War – hundreds of thousands of Irishmen were fighting in the trenches to defend the Empire – this sideshow in Dublin seemed a pretty foolish act of treason.



As the rebel leaders were marched off to prison, they were jeered at, spat on. And yet – within months of their execution, they'd become, in the public imagination, heroes.

This was where they kept Patrick Pearse before he was shot. And this was where they kept his brother William. Not one of the leaders of the rebellion, but killed, just the same, because he was Patrick's brother. And it was that kind of

vindictiveness that sums up the British response to this crisis, and it was that vindictiveness that turned public opinion in favour of the rebels. Ireland – under martial law – began to question: were these rebels really so foolish? Or was it somehow glorious, to die in such a cause?

The Easter Rising failed. But within just five years, public pressure here in Ireland forced the British to accept, in part, Nationalist demands. The South of Ireland split from the United Kingdom; it became a free state.

For the Empire, this was the beginning of the end.