

Paper by Erskine Childers

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University College Cork
Devere Hall

Reflections on Civil Service and the Treaty Centenary.

I must thank Taoiseach Martin, and Ambassador Johnston for their engaging and thoughtful words at this very intense time between these Islands. Your presence here at this conference is indicative of the poignancy that 100 years can bring to how we navigate through the burdens of history, and how we try to reconcile all the precious lives that have been lost in the balance.

I personally have been reminded—to my face in unpleasant realities of just how far the memories go in the North in regards to partition and the treaty whilst attempting something as simple as paying a bar tab with my name on a credit card in lets say Belfast. “ Your custom isn’t welcome here, Mr. Childers. The door is right there. ” Needless to say, ever since I’ve settled in cash when across the boundary. Lesson learned.

Of course these moments of tension are small in comparison to much more dangerous divisions faced daily by so many, but there are still a lot of fractured families on all sides that have never had closure from the 1920s. I know many of their stories, and have spoken directly to those with open wounds. Grandparents weeping quietly about “those days “.

Let us never forget these families, and as we head into the most difficult of remembrances and commemorations next year, let us keep focus on the 100 year national trauma that is ever present, and

generational. Ignoring longstanding trauma is expensive. It does no society any good. Trauma can't be negotiated. Trauma doesn't know borders or checkpoints. Proof of this is glaringly obvious in the recent commemoration planning at an infamous castle in Dublin.

We have an opportunity to help people through these next coming years, let us embrace that challenge. To help people along the way. As our President Higgins says so well, "Ethical Remembrance".

At this point onwards, I want to say that these words and thoughts that follow are not representative of a family opinion, but solely my own.

The group of descendants, many of whom you heard speaking earlier today, agreed from day one that in order for this event to be successful, it must be apolitical, and although there could be a seven day conference on the undercarriage and enigmas of this Treaty and all its seriously controversial aspects that played out in those months between our Islands; this is not the place nor time for all of that.

The Treaty has been dissected, torn apart by pundits, put back together by historians, dragged through the heights of whataboutery by every faction and side, yet nobody has dealt with the public service involved. The idea that these men and women; not perfect, all with flaws and pride, decided to put their names on the line for something bigger. For a chance to change the direction of a country. To break away from a colonial box.

What we know of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 is based largely on primary sources of information. The " Childers Papers " at the library of Trinity College Dublin is one such primary source. Erskine never got the opportunity to give his own views of those months in the negotiations and beyond which is sad, as you can count on one thing; it would have been beautifully written.

Perspectives abound though. The main books like “ A Dáil Girl's Revolutionary Recollections’¹ by Kathleen Napoli McKenna, “ Peace By Ordeal ’² by Lord Pakenham or a ‘ Whitehall Diary ’³ by Thomas Jones give some wonderful overview of the process and the administration, but don’t reveal everything, and certainly omit some facts that are critically important.

I must stress that very few of the Irish Treaty Delegation themselves wanted to comment or speak directly on what transpired. Of the plenipotentiaries and secretaries, Collins, Griffith and Childers had all passed away soon after the Treaty. The three did make their views publicly known before passing, but without proper memoirs, what we have is just the political exchanges and not the context. These men have biographers, some good and some terrible, but without their own hands on their papers, a lot is left to conjecture.

Robert Barton’s Treaty papers were given in their entirety to Lord Pakenham, and then to the National Library of Ireland.

Duggan essentially avoided the topic and talk of it completely, from what is known.

Gavan Duffy, as our Taoiseach mentioned this morning had the most extraordinary views on the Treaty, and I would go further to say that his influence on Ireland’s Civil law remains with us to this day. Any of the tier one Solicitors and even Judges in this venue presently can attest to that.

John Chartres only publicly shared his views of the treaty once, in an article about Michael Collins shortly before his death. One of the

¹ "A Dáil Girl's Revolutionary Recollections " by Kathleen McKenna, 2014

² “ Peace By Ordeal “ by Frank Pakenham , Chapman , 1935

³ “ Whitehall Diary “ by Thomas Jones , Oxford Univ Press, 1969

most fascinating books on the Treaty is the Murphy book⁴ on him, which I encourage all to seek out.

Let me say the phrase again “what is known” and make a plea to those who may be watching. If there are relatives out there who have these direct sources of information in a suitcase upstairs, or in a biscuits tin in the closet, please....do us all a favor; get them to one of the many institutions that can preserve them or in another way to one of the auction houses. Regardless of what they contain, they are now the history of our country, and will help us make sense of a storm of a decade.

The three Erskine’s before me came from a long line of civil and public servants. To my count recently, nine direct generations going back. Great-grandfather Erskine⁵ was a fascinating man. He was a man of conviction with a brilliant mind and extraordinary literary gift. His jump from the basic Unionist thinking he was raised with towards the Irish Republicanism at the end of his life is easy to frame up when you consider one of his most passionate topics.

He believed in home rule his entire adult life. This is not generally known about him. At Cambridge University there are records of him defending home rule in debates from the age of 22⁶. This is 1892 I’m speaking of. It would be home rule that later broke his heart after the failure of the Irish Convention in 1918, leading him to not only turn his back on a nearly two decade career of both writer and parliamentary clerkship, but his reputation, London friends and family all at the same time. His move permanently to Ireland in 1919 was precipitated by a sense of duty to help it finally achieve self-governance and independence. Ironically, it would be this sudden family move out of genuine passion that created the spy allegation that dogged him over the last three years of his life.

⁴ “MYSTERY MAN OF THE TREATY “ By Brian P. Murphy , Irish Academic Press 1995

⁵ Robert Erskine Childers (1870-1922)

⁶ “The Cambridge Review “ 25 February 1892, p233

On a page of clear acetate, in hand written blue wax pencil at the Imperial War Museum⁷ are the following blunt words, sent to my namesake at Hans Place under cover. The blue wax pencil in 1921, and the acetate it was written on, were common tools of Newspaper editors, and Erskine knew all of them in London.

“ Journalistic friends in London for whom you have done work desire to warn you on unimpeachable private information that you are being watched and in danger of arrest as a spy. Destroy this. ”

My grandfather President Childers died suddenly without a memoir and without really publicly speaking about his Anglo-Irish childhood in the 1920s, so in some respects there is a decades long cumulative historical family void. A traumatic void; that several biographers have tried piecing back together. A story within another story.

One of the chairs that is unfilled in this hall when we speak of the Treaty is that of a member of the DeValera family, which would of course be welcome by me at any point in the future.

I ask now that you permit me to share a special letter from my grandfather, TD and former President in the Park. It's a private letter from him, giving permission to my father to give a talk on his mentor and dear friend for the BBC Radio; my father then a journalist there. From one Erskine to another Erskine , father to son, about DeValera and the Treaty. On green harp Dail Stationary, 8th June 1965. I will just excerpt the relevant, and don't worry, this won't be put back in a biscuit tin in my shed. It will eventually be donated. From my research, this is the only known comment from my grandfather on DeValera and the Treaty.

⁷ PRIVATE PAPERS OF LIEUTENANT COMMANDER R E CHILDERS DSC RNVR, Imperial War Museum, London - Documents .471



OIFIG AN AIRE IOMPAIR AGUS CUMHACHTA
(OFFICE OF THE MINISTER FOR TRANSPORT AND POWER)

BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH, 2.
(DUBLIN)

8th June, 1965.

Dearest Erskine,

I am sorry to hear you have been having such continuous domestic trouble and hope that all is coming well now.

I imagine that most holidays are booked for August in the Brittas Bay area but there is no way of finding out save by advertising in the Independent and the Irish Times. This can be done at the London offices of the newspapers concerned. The size of the house required should be stated and obviously if they want to be close to you they should keep to the Brittas Bay/Arklow area. They should advertise immediately in order to have any hope of securing accommodation.

A — I see no objection whatever to your preparing a half-hour talk on Dev. The main thing is to make sure that the issues at the time of the Treaty are fully understood. At the end of the negotiations, as you know, Dev. was quite prepared to accept an association with the Commonwealth of a kind which is now virtually universal with the exception of the older Dominions. This was not accepted by Lloyd George and the English delegation. Then, again, it is terribly important to point out that de Valera did everything he could to prevent a civil war by establishing a pact with Collins whereby the issue of the Treaty was to be postponed for the time being and the country governed in a way which would prevent civil war. I think the Civil War is best treated as a Greek tragedy - an event which was almost bound to have taken place even if Mr. de Valera himself had not taken the firm stand which he did at the end. It was simply a conflict between people who were inspired by the 1916 Rising and those who, previous to that, had been Home Rulers and who felt that the Treaty offered a means of advancement in the future. I think the next point to take up would be the irony of the situation created by the fact that Mr. McGilligan and Desmond Fitzgerald fought at the Imperial conference, ^{in 1928} ~~with him on~~, for the Statute of Westminster, which was later passed in 1931. When Mr. de Valera took office in 1932 he gradually removed the Crown clauses in the old Constitution and established a new Constitution within the Commonwealth, through the External Relations Act, to which all Irishmen could subscribe. His decision to enter Parliament in 1927 and to agree to a form of link with the Commonwealth which in those days was completely novel indicated his belief in the present Commonwealth principle.*

In fact, looking back on it all, de Valera set a tremendous example to the rest of the world in being able to secure independence with a minimum of bloodshed, even allowing for the deaths in the Black-and-Tan War - which were, by standards that have now been created, absolutely minimal - and in being able to arouse the spirit of the Irish people, which could have been done by no other person in this century in the same way. He enabled us to have a peaceful and friendly relationship with Great Britain in spite of all the historic past.

I think it very essential to mention the fact that never at any time did de Valera propose the use of force as a solution for the Partition problem and that even at the height of the Anglo-Irish War of Independence in 1921 he publicly stated that physical force was not contemplated. His statement then has now been taken up in far greater reality through the decision to find matters of common concern with the people of the North. Very few countries in the world have succeeded in gaining their independence with some 500 dead and very few have been able to overcome and expunge the memories of a bitter civil war so rapidly.

You know all this. I am merely giving you the kind of over-all picture of Dev. which would seem to me to be suitable for the BBC - but of course I have left out all the elaborations and have omitted a description of the grandeur of the man himself.

I would be very interested to get the picture of the Dulcibella, which would be of great interest to put among the souvenirs of the family.

Love,



*. From 1932 to 1937 Cumann na
 na nGaedheal sought every change in
 the Constitution made possible by the
 Statute of Westminster

A. It is an historic fact as you know
 that the Collins de Valera Pact

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was broken because of the
 British governments decision
 that the Treaty must be
 implemented immediately

Families and indeed widows of public servants know the issues of privacy and public service. In Japanese culture they call this special toil, "Omote-Ura"; the public face and the private Face. The men and women of the treaty delegation faced this duality as well. As Carol Fawsitt mentioned this morning, the Irish Delegation were all subject to daily threats; daily unsolicited envelopes put through the door at Hans Place. Phone calls by unknowns. An unshot bullet left on a door sill in Dublin. All sorts

Dail memorandum, diaries and Ministerial letters give you an incomplete picture of someone's service to their country. They generally give you the outline and timeline, but they seldom penetrate the surface.

My first cousin once removed, Robert Barton in the years after the treaty, right up until the 1970's and his death, consistently avoided discussing it with nearly everyone except for a rare family conversation here and there, and if then only briefly. My father, in his unpublished memoir⁸ written 5 years before his death describes the following scene from a visit to Barton in the 1960's at his house in Wicklow. The 'Bob' mentioned here is what he let close family call him:

" I walked alone with Bob up the bleak hill behind Glendalough House. I had not planned to but something made me simply ask him what that moment that night in London was like—and I remember instantly feeling foolish to have framed such a question, if embarked on the enormous question at all. Bob said " Erskine, you know I never talk about that..." ; and he said nothing more about anything for a long time as we tramped over the short grass and heather, further up the slope. Then he stopped, and turned facing down the mountainside and said, " Did anyone ever tell you that your Grandfather Erskine loved the view from here?" I thought of him, and thought that this was the end of it, and his way of changing the subject. Then I heard that strong, reticent man

⁸ "Aquit You Well" By Erskine B. Childers, 1991

sigh and say in his high pitched voice, " I will not talk about it, but it was much much worse than if Lloyd George had held a gun to my head, Erskine. That would have only threatened me! The gun he held pointing at me was pointing at all of Ireland! "

An American Journalist called Peter Golden, was one of the last to interview my great-grandfather Erskine, some fifty kilometers away from this building in the fall of 1922. This would be only weeks before his execution in November of that year. This is an excerpt from his book, ' Impressions of Ireland'⁹:

" It is said Childers knows more intimately than anyone else, all that transpired at the various conferences in London between the Irish delegates and Lloyd George. The vendetta of hate has been deliberately set going against him by those who are not anxious that these revelations be brought to light.....Childers tells me that he doubts if any event in Irish History were ever so thoroughly documented as the proceedings in London. I ask " Are those documents safe?". He says with a shrug of his shoulders " I have made all possible efforts to have them kept safe."

And to make things more complex of course is when the weight of his heritage was used against him publicly as the " damned Englishman "; the insult given to Erskine by Arthur Griffith in the Dail¹⁰ during the Treaty debate in 1921. That exchange enveloped him in.....not being Irish enough....not being English enough....not being Republican enough. Misunderstood in Ireland....misunderstood in England. A lonely moment you might say, but one that he stood up to with pride.

Erskine was absolutely fearless, and when it came to questioning what he considered being of service. At those times he was stalwart. He

⁹ " Impressions Of Ireland" by Peter Golden, Irish Industries Depot , 1924

¹⁰ Dáil Éireann Debates - 10 January 1922, Volume T No 17

remained so until he was shot by Irishmen, or rather in my opinion, judicially killed.

As we look back at a century of recent Irish history, it is important to consider what civil service in 1919-1921 meant for a burgeoning new underground government. One of the youngest of such governments in Europe. Historian Dr. Kennedy in his benchmark essay "Civil Servants Cannot be Politicians"¹¹ from whom we heard from yesterday has called the Sinn Fein government of 1919 a "tragedy" in that it was in essence the foundation stone, of a traditional civil service, that would be fractured by the treaty itself two years later, only to then be put back together after the 1922 handover. Lives by then lost. Friendships destroyed. Towns becoming battlegrounds and religious animosity exploding.

Recently in these last years we have all witnessed that as the world has become more geo-political, more extreme, more tribal, that treaties, articles of agreement, referendums and even elections have been laundered by gamification. The media is increasingly pure entertainment, and critical journalism is continually seen as old fashioned, or stuck in platitudes of the past. People will pick up a newspaper in the train station for free, but won't pay for a real newspaper. As AI continues to influence trends in communication, this will only get worse. And automation is coming for all of us. But I digress....

This paper was only meant to give you a vignette into 1921, but what I want to leave you with today, and this will be recorded for posterity, is that at no time in Irish history has it been more important to encourage and support those young men and women, in their teens to twenties looking towards or interested in a possible career to serve publicly. You've seen many of us talk about our family experiences. You've heard about the harsh realities when history falls on top of a persons time of service.

¹¹ "Civil Servants cannot be Politicians!": Irish Studies in International Affairs Vol 8:1997 pg 95 RIA Dawson St

The family names you've heard mentioned over these last two days hold their place in history, because their relatives showed up. They put everything on the line. Their families did as well.

One day history may fall upon you. It may call you to risk everything for a greater good. For the benefit of many.

Where will you stand on that day?

Thank you.