

Michael Collins: The Big Fellow

The wanted man strode fearlessly by the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) police officer, nodding a brusque greeting which was grudgingly returned. Although he had a price on his head and had served time in both Irish and English jails, Michael Collins, Minister of Finance for the Sinn Fein Cabinet and Director of Intelligence for the IRA-- the Big Fellow, went boldly about the business of revolution on the streets of Dublin in 1920.

The Big Fellow was not a giant of a man, but was possessed of gargantuan qualities: charisma; the ability to bring order out of chaos; a superb memory; a genuine interest in people. Born when his father was seventy-five and his mother thirty-eight, Collins, like so many Irishmen, had to go to England in 1906 to earn a living. Ironically, it was in London when he was working for the British Post Office and the Guaranty Trust Company of New York that Collins took to nationalistic Irish movements like the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Ten years of Irish nationalism on British soil under the influence of men such as Arthur Griffith and Roger Casement culminated in Collins' return to Ireland in 1916 to participate in the Easter Rising. Not one of the major leaders of the Rising, the Big Fellow was interned at Frongoch Camp in North Wales for his part in the rebellion.



It was in the years after the 1916 revolt that Michael Collins rose to prominence as an Irish leader who would bring the Irish the independence so many had died for. One of his main goals was to disable the informant network which the British had used successfully to thwart Irish nationalistic movements. The RIC, working out of Dublin Castle, were the eyes and oars of the Crown. Police reports, paid and unpaid informers, and a dedicated band of spies known as the Cairo Gang had a crippling effect on nationalistic

activities. Collins counterattacked by convincing Irish employees in British offices to act as counterspies. Such a counterspy was Detective David Neligan who - came to Collins to join the IRA as an open member but who was turned into a valuable source of information for the IRA.

One of Collins' boldest moves against the informer network was the assassination of the Cairo Gang. In the early hours of November 21, 1920, Michael Collins' death squad struck at the Cairo Gang as they slept in their beds, killing twelve members. In reprisal, on the same afternoon Black and Tan troops fired on the crowd in the stands at Croke Park in Dublin. Thirty one spectators were killed on this Bloody Sunday with hundreds of others wounded. The Big Fellow, still a wanted man, felt free enough to serve as pall bearer for one of the IRA men killed on Bloody Sunday.

Michael Collins is given credit for the tactics, which today we would call guerrilla warfare, which led to the Free State agreement in 1921. While he was in the Frongoch Camp, Collins realized that an irregular army like the Volunteers could never win in a stand up fight against a well trained army. A war of ambush with flying columns of lightly armed troops who disappeared into the countryside before the smoke of battle had settled was Collins' plan. This was the era of the Black and Tans, noted for their aggressiveness against the native population. Collins' tactics and ruthlessness were a countervailing force against the RIC and the Black and Tans. Sadly and ironically, when Collins turned from being a warrior to being a negotiator for peace, he stepped on the path which was to lead to his death at age thirty-two.

One of the great tragedies of the Big Fellow's life and of Irish history was that the Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland which created the Irish Free State, but which excluded the six counties, generated a civil war which pitted Michael Collins against one of his personal heroes and one of Ireland's enduring heroes, Eamon de Valera. Against his own wishes, Collins was part of the negotiating committee which inevitably had to reach a compromise on the division of Ireland. De Valera did not want to be associated with a compromise settlement, so he stayed home in Ireland while Collins was seen to represent the hard-line IRA view. His part in the agreement would give the Treaty validity in the activist ranks, it was thought.

The joy of the Treaty of December 1921 became the pain of civil war by January 1922. As soon as the Dail undertook debate on the Treaty, anti-Treaty forces grouped around de Valera and pro-Treaty forces around Collins, the person who had undertaken the care of de Valera's family during his exile in America. conflict. Pro-Treaty candidates were elected to a clear majority in the Dail in the June 1922 elections with Collins the Chairman of

the Provisional Government. Within days of the election, Collins had to call on the new Army to shell, with a borrowed English cannon, the Four Courts to expel anti-Treaty forces, Irishmen, of course. The Big Fellow was now in command of the regular army in a war against insurgents.

As Commander-in-Chief of the Free State Army, Michael Collins had the Republicans on the run. The Republicans, well trained in Collins' tactics, used guerrilla warfare in the brief but bloody struggle which is the Irish Civil War. Tragedy followed tragedy: Harry Boland, Collins' idol, ordered by Collins to be arrested, was killed in the apprehension; five hundred Irishmen were killed in July and August 1922 on both sides; Arthur Griffith, just appointed Prime Minister, died on August 12, 1922; and ten days later the Big Fellow was killed in an ambush at Bael na mBlath in Cork, the county of his birth. Not long after, the fighting came to an end. Enough Irish blood had been shed.

To find out more about Michael Collins read the biography by Tim Pat Coogan and see the film opening in October. Read about the Civil War in the novels **Irish Gold** by Andrew Greely and **The End of the Hunt** by Thomas Flanagan.

(Written by James Conroy, September 1996)

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