

Erskine Childers: The Howth Guns

(This is the first of a two-part series of articles on Erskine Childers.)

The more one reads Irish history, the more one realizes that Ireland's independence was brought about by individuals with divergent views, not all of whom would conform to our stereotype of an Irish patriot. Many of us first generation Irish Americans tend to assume that all "good Irishmen" are cut from the same bolt of cloth that is typified by characters played by Bing Crosby and Barry Fitzgerald. In reality, the men and women who worked hard to gain Ireland's independence from Great Britain came from all sorts of diverse backgrounds. Some were even loyal Englishmen. Erskine Childers was one such individual.

Born in England in 1870, a graduate of Cambridge University, and a civil servant who spent most of his adult life working for the British House of Commons as, a Clerk, Erskine Childers was what some would call "gung ho" or a "flag waver." For example, he volunteered twice to serve his country. First, when the Boer War broke out, he enlisted in a horse artillery company that was sent to Africa. And then again in 1914 - at the age of 44, and married with two children - he enlisted in the Royal Navy.

This latter decision was a logical choice for a middle aged sailor whose yacht, now on display in the yard at Kilmainham Prison, was once a familiar sight off England and Europe's coastal waters. In fact, Childers had written a mystery novel involving seagoing smugglers and the European coastal waters. This novel so detailed the European coast that some time later the Royal Navy used it as a guide to navigate such waters. For his naval service in World War 1, Childers was awarded Great Britain's highest military honor, the Distinguished Service Cross.

Erskine Childers was "introduced" to Ireland as a young orphan when he was sent to his aunt's estate in County Wicklow for his summer holidays. He was loyal to the concept of empire and saw Ireland as an integral part of Great Britain, the same as Wales and Scotland. Being a liberal, he supported Prime Minister Gladstone's 1911 Home Rule proposal. To help passage of the bill in the House of Commons, he published [A Framework for Home Rule](#).

As Home Rule for Ireland became more of a possibility, the Irish of Ulster vehemently increased their opposition to it. Their slogan became: "Home Rule is Roman Rule," referring to the large Catholic population of the island as a whole. A militia force, the Ulster Volunteers, was formed and began to arm themselves with weapons smuggled in from Germany, despite prohibitions against such actions. Although this was done quite openly, Great

Britain failed to take steps to stop the importation of arms, and by 1914, almost 20,000 Ulstermen were under arms.

These flagrant violations were contrary to Childers' view of Home Rule and made him open to Pearse's suggestion that he use his seamanship skills to help even the two sides up a little. Since the British fleet was used to seeing Childers' yacht, the *Asgard*, cutting through the Irish Sea under full sail, and since Childers knew the coastal waters so well, in the Spring of 1914 Padraic Pearse asked this Englishman to go to Germany and secure arms for use by the Irish Volunteers.

Childers' wife, Mary A. Osgood of Boston, a staunch New Englander whose ancestors could be traced to the Mayflower, insisted on being part of the *Asgard's* crew. Her friend, Mary Spring-Rice, and a British aviator made up the rest of the crew on the *Asgard*. Loaded to the gunwales with 900 rifles and 25,000 rounds of ammunition supposedly bound for Mexico, the *Asgard* left the German freighter for Ireland. That night the little yacht ran into the roughest storm to hit the Irish Sea in the past thirty years. It is a tribute to Childers' courage, stamina and seamanship that his vessel survived at all. He had to lash himself to the wheel to be kept from being swept overboard, all the while steering an overloaded boat to keep it from being swamped by the high seas.

On the morning of July 26, 1914 with the storm behind them, and Mary waiving a red petty coat, he sailed the *Asgard* into Howth Harbor. The guns and ammunition were quickly unloaded by members of the Irish Volunteers, who just happened to be at the beach for a picnic that day. After the rifles and ammunition were unloaded, Childers and his crew sailed back to England, dropping the aviator off near his aerodrome.

The Royal Irish Constabulary and a contingent of Scottish soldiers were sent to block the Irish Volunteers from marching back to Dublin with their new, and unknown to the British forces, unloaded rifles. A roadblock was set up at Clontarf. Faced with such a formidable foe, the Volunteers resorted to a little blarney and with a little jig disappeared from sight like fairy dust on a summer's evening. They even managed to take the trams which had brought the troops from Dublin.

When the RIC and the troops had returned to Dublin on foot, they were in an angry and foot-sore mood. On Bachelor's Walk they encountered an unruly mob, whose spirits had been bolstered by the happening at Clontarf and probably other spirits as well. When a British officer raised his hand for silence and attention, his action was misinterpreted by a soldier who fired

into the crowd. Others took up the volley and when it ended, three civilians were dead and thirty wounded.

The importation of the rifles acted as a catalyst for donations, and donations began to pour in from the Irish living in the United States. However, within a week the much larger "Guns of August" would begin to roar, and Europe was plunged into World War 1. The Howth guns would not be used until Easter Monday, 1916.

(Written by James Conroy)

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