

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Patrick Henry Pearse**

**- 5 poems -**

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## **Patrick Henry Pearse (10 November 1879 – 3 May 1916)**

Patrick Henry Pearse (also known as Pádraig Pearse; Irish: Pádraig Anraí Mac Piarais; An Piarsach; 10 November 1879 – 3 May 1916) was an Irish teacher, barrister, poet, writer, nationalist and political activist who was one of the leaders of the Easter Rising in 1916. He was declared "President of the Provisional Government" of the Irish Republic in one of the bulletins issued by the Rising's leaders, a status that was however disputed by others associated with the rebellion both then and later. Following the collapse of the Rising and the execution of Pearse, his brother (Willie Pearse), and fourteen other leaders, Pearse came to be seen by many as the embodiment of the rebellion.

### Early life and influences

Patrick Pearse and his brother Willie were born at 27 Great Brunswick Street, the street that is named after them today. It was here that their father, James Pearse, established a stone masonry business in the 1850s, a business which flourished and provided the Pearses with a comfortable middle-class upbringing. Pearse's father was a mason and monumental sculptor, and originally a Unitarian from Birmingham in England.

The home life of Patrick Pearse was one where he was surrounded by books. His father had very little formal education, but he was a self-educated man. He had two children from his first marriage, Emily and James (two other children died in infancy). His second wife, Margaret Brady was a native of Dublin, but her father's family were from County Meath and were native Irish speakers. The Irish-speaking influence of Pearse's great-aunt Margaret, together with his schooling at the CBS Westland Row, instilled in him an early love for the Irish language.

In 1896, at the age of sixteen, he joined the Gaelic League (Conradh na Gaeilge), and in 1903 at the age of 23, he became editor of its newspaper *An Claidheamh Soluis* ("The Sword of Light").

Pearse's earlier heroes were the ancient Gaelic folk heroes such as Cúchulainn, though in his 30s he began to take a strong interest in the leaders of past republican movements, such as the United Irishmen Theobald Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmet. Both had been Protestant, but it was from such men as these that the fervently Catholic Pearse drew inspiration for the rebellion of 1916.

In 1900, Pearse was awarded a BA in Modern Languages (Irish, English and French) by the Royal University of Ireland, he had studied for two years privately and for one at University College Dublin. In 1900 he was also

awarded the degree of Barrister-at-Law from the King's Inns[9], and was called to the bar in 1901.

### St Enda's

As a cultural nationalist educated by the Irish Christian Brothers, like his younger brother Willie, Pearse believed that language was intrinsic to the identity of a nation. The Irish school system, he believed, raised Ireland's youth to be good Englishmen or obedient Irishmen, and an alternative was needed. Thus for him and other language revivalists, saving the Irish language from extinction was a cultural priority of the utmost importance. The key to saving the language, he felt, would be a sympathetic education system. To show the way, he started his own bilingual school, St. Enda's School (Scoil Eanna) in Rathfarnham, County Dublin, in 1908. Here, the pupils were taught in both the Irish and English languages.

With the aid of Thomas MacDonagh, Pearse's younger brother Willie Pearse and other (often transient) academics, it soon proved a successful experiment. He did all he planned, and even brought students on field trips to the Gaeltacht in the west of Ireland. Pearse's restless idealism led him in search of an even more idyllic home for his school. He found it in the Hermitage, Rathfarnham, where he moved St. Enda's in 1910. Pearse was also involved in the foundation of St. Ita's school for girls, a school with similar aims to St. Enda's.

However, the new home, while splendidly located in an 18th-century house surrounded by a park and woodlands, caused financial difficulties that almost brought him to disaster. He strove continually to keep ahead of his debts while doing his best to maintain the school. In February 1914, he travelled to the USA to raise money for his ailing school where he met John Devoy and Joseph McGarrity both of whom were impressed by his fervour and supported him in raising sufficient money to secure the continued existence of the school.

### The Volunteers and Home Rule

In April 1912, the prospect of self-government for Ireland under a new Home Rule for Ireland Bill became reality, as John Redmond leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, who held the balance of power in the House of Commons committed the government of the United Kingdom to introduce the Bill. Pearse's attitude towards the Bill was remarkably ambivalent.

Pearse moved from welcoming the Bill, asking all sides to support Redmond's praiseworthy achievement to demanding a better Bill with the public warning Let the Gall understand that if we are cheated this time there will be red war in Ireland. Pearse was one of four speakers, including Redmond, Joseph Devlin MP, leader of the Northern Nationalists, and Eoin MacNeill a prominent Gaelic Leaguer, who addressed a large Home Rule Rally in Dublin on a public platform at the end of March 1913. Speaking in Irish Pearse threatened revolution if the Bill were not enacted.

In November 1913 Pearse was invited to the inaugural meeting of the Irish Volunteers, formed to enforce the implementation of the Third Home Rule Act passed by the House of Commons in the face of opposition from the Ulster Volunteers. In an article entitled "The Coming Revolution" (November 1913) Pearse wrote

"As to what your work as an Irish Nationalist is to be, I cannot conjecture; I know what mine is to be, and would have you know yours and buckle yourselves to it. And it may be (nay, it is) that your and mine will lead us to a common meeting-place, and that on a certain day we shall stand together, with many more beside us, ready for a greater adventure than any of us has yet had, a trial and a triumph to be endured and achieved in common."

The bill just failed to pass the House of Lords, but the Lord's diminished power under the Parliament Act 1911 meant that the bill could only be delayed and was finally placed on the statute books with Royal Assent in September 1914, but suspended for the duration of World War I, whose

context set the backdrop for events to follow.

John Redmond, leader of the IPP, feared his "national authority" might be circumvented by the Volunteers and decided to control the new movement. Despite opposition from the Irish Republican Brotherhood members, the Volunteer Executive agreed to share leadership with Redmond and a joint committee was set up. Pearse was opposed to this and was to write: "The leaders in Ireland have nearly always left the people at the critical moment; they have sometimes sold them. The former Volunteer movement was abandoned by its leaders; O'Connell recoiled before the cannon at Clontarf; twice the hour of the Irish revolution struck during Young Ireland days and twice it struck in vain, for Meagher hesitated in Waterford, Duffy and McGee hesitated in Dublin. Stephens refused to give the word in '65; he never came in '66 or '67. I do not blame these men; you or I might have done the same. It is a terrible responsibility to be cast on a man, that of bidding the cannon speak and the grapeshot pour."

The Volunteers split, one of the issues being support for the Allied and British war effort, a majority following Redmond in the National Volunteers in the belief that this would ensure Home Rule on their return. Pearse, exhilarated by the dramatic events of the European war wrote in an article written in December 1915 on patriotism:

"It is patriotism that stirs the people. Belgium defending her soil is heroic, and so is Turkey . . . . .

It is good for the world that such things should be done. The old heart of the earth needed to be warmed with the red wine of the battlefields. Such august homage was never before offered to God as this, the homage of millions of lives given gladly for love of country."

#### The IRB and the Irish Republic

In December 1913, Bulmer Hobson swore Pearse into the secret Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), an organisation dedicated to the overthrow of British rule in Ireland and its replacement with an Irish Republic. He was soon co-opted onto the IRB's Supreme Council by Tom Clarke. Pearse was then one of many people who were members of both the IRB and the Volunteers. When he became the Volunteers' Director of Military Organisation in 1914 he was the highest ranking Volunteer in the IRB membership, and instrumental in the latter's commandeering of the remaining minority of the Volunteers for the purpose of rebellion. By 1915 he was on the IRB's Supreme Council, and its secret Military Council, the core group that began planning for a rising while war raged on the European Western Front.

On 1 August 1915, Pearse gave a now-famous graveside oration at the funeral of the Fenian Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa. It closed with the words: "Our foes are strong and wise and wary; but, strong and wise and wary as they are, they cannot undo the miracles of God Who ripens in the hearts of young men the seeds sown by the young men of a former generation. And the seeds sown by the young men of '65 and '67 are coming to their miraculous ripening today. Rulers and Defenders of the Realm had need to be wary if they would guard against such processes. Life springs from death; and from the graves of patriot men and women spring living nations. The Defenders of this Realm have worked well in secret and in the open. They think that they have pacified Ireland. They think that they have purchased half of us and intimidated the other half. They think that they have foreseen everything, think that they have provided against everything; but, the fools, the fools, the fools! — They have left us our Fenian dead, and while Ireland holds these graves, Ireland unfree shall never be at peace. (Full text of Speech) "

#### Easter Rising and death

Pearse, given his speaking and writing skills, was chosen by the leading IRB man Tom Clarke to be the spokesman for the Rising. It was Pearse who, in behalf of the IRB shortly before Easter in 1916, issued the orders to all Volunteer units throughout the country for three days of manoeuvres beginning Easter Sunday, which was the signal for a general uprising. When

Eoin MacNeill, the Chief of Staff of the Volunteers, learned what was being planned without the promised arms from Germany, he countermanded the orders via newspaper, causing the IRB to issue a last minute order to go through with the plan the following day, greatly limiting the numbers who turned out for the rising.

When the Easter Rising eventually erupted on Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, there never was any plan for a military victory in the minds of the leaders. It was Pearse who proclaimed a Republic from the steps of the General Post Office and headquarters of the revolutionaries. After six days fighting, heavy civilian casualties and great destruction of property, Pearse issued the order to surrender along with the remaining leaders.

Pearse and fourteen other leaders, including his brother Willie, were court-martialled and executed by firing squad. Sir Roger Casement, who had tried unsuccessfully to recruit an insurgent force among Irish-born prisoners of war from the Irish Brigade in Germany, was hanged in London the following August. Thomas Clarke, Thomas MacDonagh and Pearse himself were the first of the rebels to be executed, on the morning of 3 May 1916. Pearse was 36 years old at the time of his death.

Sir John Maxwell, the General Officer commanding the British forces in Ireland, sent a telegram to H.H. Asquith, then Prime Minister, advising him not to return the bodies of Pádraig and Willie Pearse to their family, saying: "Irish sentimentality will turn these graves into martyrs' shrines to which annual processions will be made which would cause constant irritation in this country.

Maxwell also suppressed a letter from Pearse to his mother, and two poems dated 1 May 1916. He submitted copies of them also to Prime Minister Asquith, saying that some of the content was "objectionable."

In addition that document used the term "President of the Provisional Government", not "President of the Republic". A "President of a government" is akin to a prime minister, not a president of a state. Pearse and his colleagues also discussed proclaiming Prince Joachim (the Kaiser's youngest son) as an Irish constitutional monarch, if the Central Powers won the First World War, which suggests that their ideas for the political future of the country had to await the war's outcome.

### Reputation

Largely, as a result of a series of political pamphlets Pearse wrote in the months leading up to the 1916 Rising, he soon became recognised as the voice of the 1916 Rising. In the middle decades of the 20th century, Pearse was idolised by Irish nationalists as the supreme idealist of their cause. However, with the outbreak of conflict in Northern Ireland in 1969, Pearse's legacy was used by the Provisional IRA. Pearse's reputation and writings were subject to criticism by some historians who saw him as a dangerous, fanatical, psychologically unsound individual under ultra-religious influences. As Conor Cruise O'Brien, onetime Labour TD and former unionist politician, put it in writing: "Pearse saw the Rising as a Passion Play with real blood."

Others defended Pearse, suggesting that to blame him for what was happening in Northern Ireland was unhistorical and a distortion of the real spirit of his writings. Though the passion of those arguments has waned with the continuing peace in Northern Ireland following the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, his complex personality still remains a subject of controversy for those who wish to debate the evolving meaning of Irish nationalism.

Former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern described Pearse as one of his heroes and displayed a picture of Pearse over his desk in the Department of the Taoiseach.

His former school, St. Enda's, Rathfarnham, on the south side of Dublin, is now the Pearse Museum dedicated to his memory. Cullenswood House, the

old Pearse family house in Ranelagh, where Padraig first founded St. Enda's, today houses a primary Gaelscoil (school for education through the Irish language) called Lios na nÓg, part of a community-based effort to revive the Irish language. In Ballymun the Patrick Pearse Tower was named after him. It was the first of Ballymun's tower blocks to be demolished in 2004.

Pearse's mother Margaret Pearse served as a TD in Dáil Éireann in the 1920s. His sister Margaret Mary Pearse also served as a TD and Senator.

#### Commemoration

Pearse Street was renamed in honour of the Pearses. Westland Row Station in Dublin was renamed as Pearse Station in 1966 after Pearse and his brother Willie. The Ten shilling coin minted in 1966 featured the bust of Patrick Pearse. The coin is unique among Irish coinage in that it is the sole coin to feature the bust of anyone associated with Irish history or politics.

#### Works:

Pearse wrote stories and poems in both Irish and English. His best-known English poems include "The Mother", "The Fool" and "The Wayfarer". He also penned several allegorical plays in the Irish language, including *The King, The Master, and The Singer*. His short stories in Irish include *Eoghainín na nÉan* ("Eoineen of the Birds"), *Iosagán*, "An Gadaí" Na Bóithre ("The Roads"), and *An Bhean Chainte* ("The Keening Woman"). These are translated into English by Joseph Campbell (in the *Collected Works of 1917*). Most of his ideas on education are contained in his famous essay "The Murder Machine". He also authored many essays on politics and language, notably "The Coming Revolution" and "Ghosts".

Pearse is closely associated with the song, "Oró Sé do Bheatha 'Bhaile", for which he composed additional lyrics.

## **Bean Sléibhe ag Caoineadh a Mhac (A Woman of The Mountain Keens Her Son)**

Grief on the death, it has blackened my heart:  
It has snatched my love and left me desolate,  
Without friend or companion under the roof of my house  
But this sorrow in the midst of me, and I keening.

As I walked the mountain in the evening  
The birds spoke to me sorrowfully,  
The sweet snipe spoke and the voiceful curlew  
Relating to me that my darling was dead.

I called to you and your voice I heard not,  
I called again and I got no answer,  
I kissed your mouth, and O God how cold it was!  
Ah, cold is your bed in the, lonely churchyard.

O green-sodded grave in which my child is,  
Little narrow grave, since you are his bed,  
My blessing on you, and thousands of blessings  
On the green sods that are over my treasure.

Grief on the death, it cannot be denied,  
It lays low, green and withered together,--  
And O gentle little son, what tortures me is  
That your fair body should be making clay !

Patrick Henry Pearse

## **Mise Eire (I am Ireland)**

I am Ireland:  
I am older than the Old Woman of Beare.

Great my glory:  
I that bore Cuchulainn the valiant.

Great my shame:  
My own children that sold their mother.

I am Ireland:  
I am lonelier than the Old Woman of Beare.  
1912

Patrick Henry Pearse

## The Fool

Since the wise men have not spoken, I speak that am only a fool;  
A fool that hath loved his folly,  
Yea, more than the wise men their books or their counting houses or their quiet  
homes,  
Or their fame in men's mouths;  
A fool that in all his days hath done never a prudent thing,  
Never hath counted the cost, nor recked if another reaped  
The fruit of his mighty sowing, content to scatter the seed;  
A fool that is unrepentant, and that soon at the end of all  
Shall laugh in his lonely heart as the ripe ears fall to the reaping-hooks  
And the poor are filled that were empty,  
Tho' he go hungry.  
I have squandered the splendid years that the Lord God gave to my youth  
In attempting impossible things, deeming them alone worth the toil.

Was it folly or grace? Not men shall judge me, but God.  
I have squandered the splendid years:  
Lord, if I had the years I would squander them over again,  
Aye, fling them from me !  
For this I have heard in my heart, that a man shall scatter, not hoard,  
Shall do the deed of to-day, nor take thought of to-morrow's teen,  
Shall not bargain or huxter with God ; or was it a jest of Christ's  
And is this my sin before men, to have taken Him at His word?  
The lawyers have sat in council, the men with the keen, long faces,  
And said, `This man is a fool,' and others have said, `He blasphemeth;'  
And the wise have pitied the fool that hath striven to give a life  
In the world of time and space among the bulks of actual things,  
To a dream that was dreamed in the heart, and that only the heart could hold.

O wise men, riddle me this: what if the dream come true?  
What if the dream come true? and if millions unborn shall dwell  
In the house that I shaped in my heart, the noble house of my thought?  
Lord, I have staked my soul, I have staked the lives of my kin  
On the truth of Thy dreadful word. Do not remember my failures,  
But remember this my faith  
And so I speak.  
Yea, ere my hot youth pass, I speak to my people and say:  
Ye shall be foolish as I; ye shall scatter, not save;  
Ye shall venture your all, lest ye lose what is more than all;  
Ye shall call for a miracle, taking Christ at His word.  
And for this I will answer, O people, answer here and hereafter,  
O people that I have loved, shall we not answer together?

Patrick Henry Pearse

## **The Mother**

I do not grudge them: Lord, I do not grudge  
My two strong sons that I have seen go out  
To break their strength and die, they and a few,  
In bloody protest for a glorious thing,  
They shall be spoken of among their people,  
The generations shall remember them,  
And call them blessed;  
But I will speak their names to my own heart  
In the long nights;  
The little names that were familiar once  
Round my dead hearth.  
Lord, thou art hard on mothers:  
We suffer in their coming and their going;  
And tho' I grudge them not, I weary, weary  
Of the long sorrow--And yet I have my joy:  
My sons were faithful, and they fought.

Patrick Henry Pearse

## **The Wayfarer**

The beauty of the world hath made me sad,  
This beauty that will pass;  
Sometimes my heart hath shaken with great joy  
To see a leaping squirrel in a tree,  
Or a red lady-bird upon a stalk,  
Or little rabbits in a field at evening,  
Lit by a slanting sun,  
Or some green hill where shadows drifted by  
Some quiet hill where mountainy man hath sown  
And soon would reap; near to the gate of Heaven;  
Or children with bare feet upon the sands  
Of some ebb'd sea, or playing on the streets  
Of little towns in Connacht,  
Things young and happy.  
And then my heart hath told me:  
These will pass,  
Will pass and change, will die and be no more,  
Things bright and green, things young and happy;  
And I have gone upon my way  
Sorrowful.

Patrick Henry Pearse