

**Michael Collins** (1890-1922), Irish revolutionary and chairman of Provisional Government; was born on 16 October 1890 at Woodfield, Clonakilty, Co. Cork. Collins' father, a small farmer, was sixty years old when he married twenty-three year old Marianne O'Brien. Collins was the youngest of eight children. His father instilled in Collins a sense of nationalism and taught him patriotic ballads and poems. He attended national school at Lissavaire. His schoolmaster Denis Lyons and blacksmith James Santry who were active members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) also influenced him. From there Collins went to Clonakilty Secondary School and studied for the British Postal Service. He worked briefly for his brother-in-law who owned the newspaper *West Cork People*. The local policemen described the Collins family of Woodfield as 'brainy', 'disloyal', and 'dangerous'.

At the age of sixteen, Collins went to London and worked as a clerk in the Post Office before taking a job with an accounting firm in 1910. Collins later took up employment at a stockbroker's office and in 1914, he moved again, to the bills department of an American Bank. Collins lived with his sister Hannie and moved in largely Irish circle while in London. He was a member of Sinn Féin by 1908 and he joined the IRB in 1909. He was also elected secretary to the Gaelic League and the Gaelic Athletic Association. Collins strongly believed that Irish Independence could only be achieved by physical force. In 1914 he became an Irish Volunteer and in the same year, he was appointed treasurer of the IRB for southern England, and became privy to its plans for a rising in 1916.

The introduction of conscription in Britain in January 1916 forced Collins to return to Dublin. His organisational talents were extremely valuable as preparations were made for a rebellion. His financial skills were also developed in the accountancy firm of Craig Gardiner. Collins spent much of his time at the Volunteer training camps. During the Easter Rising he was second in command to Joseph Mary Plunkett in the General Post Office in Dublin. Collins did not take part in the fighting. After the general surrender he was not considered dangerous enough to be court-martialled. Following the Rising, Collins, as a prisoner of war was sent to Stafford (England) and to Frongoch (Wales) where his magnetic qualities as leader emerged.

Upon his release in December 1916 he became a prominent member in Sinn Féin. As director of the Volunteer movement, he drafted a new Irish constitution. Collins was elected to the Supreme Council of the IRB; he was by now an important figure in every major Republican group. Along

with Cathal Brugha and Éamon de Valera, Michael Collins emerged as one of the most influential republican leaders in Ireland.

Following Sinn Féin's victory in the 1918 General Election Collins was elected to the first Dáil for Cork South and for Tyrone, he was appointed Minister of Home Affairs and in April 1919 Minister for Finance. In the latter function he organised the Dáil loans, which financed the republicans' alternative government. Collins and Harry Boland were the masterminds behind de Valera's dramatic escape from Lincoln Prison in February 1919.

During the War of Independence (1919-1921), he organised the supply of weapons and developed an intelligence system to produce information about military plans. Collins became the chief organiser of the British resistance campaign in Ireland. He, allegedly, had his own network of spies in Dublin Castle and other government offices. He also had a 'Squad' otherwise known as the 'Twelve Apostles' a group of specially trained gunmen, who were employed on a permanent basis and were salaried. As the War of Independence raged, Collins set up the GHQ of the IRA to replace the Volunteer Executive. On 21 November 1920, Collins's Squad assassinated fourteen British officers, effectively destroying the British secret service in Ireland. In reprisal, the Black and Tans fired on a crowd watching a football match at Croke Park. Twelve people were killed and the day became known as 'Bloody Sunday'. Collins's authority and influence were felt at every level of the national resistance movement. The British Government recognised this and placed a £10,000 reward on his head, but Collins was never captured.

During this period Collins and his close friend Harry Boland, MP for Roscommon, vied for the affection of Kitty Kiernan. From the latter half of 1921 until his death, Collins and Kiernan exchanged more than three hundred love letters. In May of 1921, the IRA set fire to James Gandon's 18th century Custom House. Its destruction was planned by Oscar Traynor, commanding officer of the Dublin Brigade of the IRA, at the suggestion of de Valera. The plan to destroy the 18th century masterpiece was opposed by Collins, but de Valera argued that the loss of public records would seriously compromise the working of the civil service. The building burned for nearly eight days and was badly damaged. Five IRA volunteers were killed and 80 wounded in the subsequent gun-battle; casualties to Crown forces were not revealed. Compromise was inevitable. The IRA was desperately short of men and weapons, and the British were completely demoralised with public opinion mounting against the continued repression. A truce was finally agreed on 11 July

1921, and Collins was chosen as one of the Irish delegates to negotiate an Anglo-Irish Treaty. Following lengthy debates the Treaty was signed on the 6 December 1921. Collins considered the Treaty the only as a means towards obtaining a 32 county republic and signed it with 'great reluctance'. He subsequently fell into a mood of deep depression and wrote to a close friend

*'...I tell you this—early this morning I signed my own death warrant ...'*

Following ratification of the Treaty, there was deep dissatisfaction and resentment and the government split into pro-Treaty and anti-Treaty camps. The main burden of responsibility fell on Collins, as Chairman of the Provisional Government and Minister for Finance in the Dáil government. Taking over from the British would be no easy task and successfully carrying out government functions was difficult, owing to the growing state of anarchy in the country.

A vicious civil war (1922-23) followed between the pro-Treaty Free State forces and the anti-Treaty group led by de Valera. Collins was Commander in Chief of the pro-Treaty army. The Civil War was even more vicious than the War of Independence, pitting brother against brother, friend against friend. On the 22 August 1922, during an inspection tour of the south, Collins's convoy was ambushed at Béal na mBláth near Macroom in Co. Cork. He was shot in the head and died almost immediately. He was only thirty-two years old. His funeral was held on 28 August and the *Irish Independent* reported on the:

*'Greatest pageant of sorrow ever seen in Dublin: a cortège three miles long.'*

An estimated 300,000 people lined the streets of the capital as the funeral procession wound its way to Glasnevin Cemetery. General Richard Mulcahy, commander in chief of the Free State army, gave the oration at Glasnevin Cemetery and referred to Collins as 'the fallen leader, a great hero and a great legend'. Collins' death was even acknowledged by Lloyd George and James Craig described it as 'a terrible loss'. Collins, 'the Big Fellow', had his reputation further enhanced by youthful martyrdom. He became for many the ultimate symbol of revolution; for others he was the ultimate pragmatist. Many biographies and memoirs have been written and Neil Jordan's feature film *Michael Collins* (1996) ensured his contemporary iconic status.

