

Patrick Pearse: Nationalist Traditionalist Revolutionary and *The Murder Machine*

From the late eighteenth century onward, Europe has run amok with revolutions and counterrevolutions. While each of them has been studied to some degree, the Irish revolution of 1916 (also known as the Easter Rising) tends to fall into obscurity, at least in the United States. The reasons for this are not quite clear; it could be argued that partial failure doomed the revolution to obscurity, or maybe it is because Americans are more focused on their involvement in World War I at the time of the revolution. Whatever the case, the Irish and British revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries should not go unnoticed, since history is a cycle that repeats itself. One of the Irish revolutionaries who has been studied quite closely compared to others is a man named Patrick Pearse. It has been claimed that the Irish republican tradition owes the most to him.¹ An essay entitled *The Murder Machine* is important to understand Pearse's views. An interesting paradox seems to come into play in this document; Pearse has traditionalist views as well as revolutionary nationalist views, and these views culminated in the Proclamation of the Republic given outside the General Post Office on April 24, 1916.

A background of Patrick Pearse is necessary to understand where he fits into the timeline of Irish nationalism. He was born in Dublin in 1879 to an English father and an Irish mother.² With this lineage, one could say he was destined to have a role in the proceedings in some way from the start. He was involved in the effort to preserve the Irish language and culture, becoming the director of the Gaelic League and contributing to that organization's newspaper, *An Claidheamh Soluis*.³ Words have long been associated with revolution since Jean-Nicolas

¹ "Patrick Pearse", *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*. November 6, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Patrick-Henry-Pearse>.

² "Patrick Pearse", *Britannica*.

³ "Patrick Pearse", *Britannica*.

Billaud-Varenne during the French Revolution used his position as a writer to fuel the embers of radicalism and ended up on the Committee of Public Safety.⁴ Like Billaud-Varenne, Pearse used his writing prowess to encourage Irish nationalism. What is also significant about Pearse's career was that he was a barrister and became involved in a dispute between the British government and an Irish poet about the legitimacy and legality of the Irish language.⁵ While he lost the case, it reveals how passionately he cared about the Irish language and culture.

Probably the most important piece of background information about Pearse in relation to *The Murder Machine* is his foundation of a school called St. Enda's, in which the focus was on boys as Irish individuals who needed to be inspired, not machined.⁶ As *The Murder Machine* is primarily about education, the view of Pearse as an educator is highly important, not only as an educator but as someone who cared about children. As one author states, "It is one thing to write *for* children, quite another to write *of* them".⁷ Indeed, this is an important distinction. When reading *The Murder Machine*, keeping in mind Pearse's role as someone who understood children and wanted what was best for them is paramount. Pearse is not merely using children for pulling on heartstrings or as a means for his own ends; the academic critiques are specifically with the betterment of children in mind, regardless of the obvious nationalism. In other words, the plight of the children gave rise to nationalism, and not vice versa.

Pearse said as much in *The Murder Machine*: "[The English] have planned and established an education system which more wickedly does violence to the elemental human

⁴ R. R. Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 12.

⁵ Mairead Collett, "Niall mac Giolla Bhride", *Creelough*. March 1, 2021, <https://creelough.com/2021/03/01/niall-mac-giolla-bhride/>.

⁶ "St. Enda's: A Vision for Irish Education", *Pearse Museum*. <https://pearsemuseum.ie/st-endas/>.

⁷ L. Ua Gállchobháir, "The Children of Patrick Pearse", *The Irish Monthly* 50, no. 585 (1922): 120. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20505830>.

rights of Irish children than would an edict for the general castration of Irish males”.⁸ Pearse continued with this sentiment, “There is no education system in Ireland. The English have established the simulacrum of an education system, but its object is the precise contrary of the object of an education system. Education should foster; this education is meant to repress. Education should inspire; this education is meant to tame. Education should harden; this education is meant to enervate”.⁹ What is most notable here is that Pearse was not merely claiming that the education system is ineffective (although he does say that as well later), but that even the implementation of the education system was an evil, an attempt by the English to subjugate the Irish. Hence why Pearse referred to fellow republican Professor Eoin MacNeill’s position that the Irish are educational slaves, and having done so, continued, “If one may regard Ireland as a nation in penal servitude, the schools and colleges and universities may be looked upon as the symbol of her penal servitude”.¹⁰

Having examined the English public education system as a form of slavery, Pearse turned to a brief analysis of the system itself. He likened it to machinery, and states that while the machinery may have defects, the primary problem is that it is in fact machinery.¹¹ “It grinds night and day. it obeys immutable and predetermined laws, it is as devoid of understanding, of sympathy, of imagination, as is any other piece of machinery that performs an appointed task”.¹² Taking this analysis to heart, one can imagine the English education system in Ireland as a hammer instead of a mold. What Pearse was arguing is that the system is too rigid, and while it can manufacture, it does not permit growth.

⁸ Patrick Pearse, *The Murder Machine* (1916), 2. <https://www.cym.ie/documents/themurdermachine.pdf>.

⁹ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 2.

¹⁰ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 2.

¹¹ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 3.

¹² Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 3.

Here we come to the first nationalist idea: the Irish school system should be centered on freedom.¹³ While the word freedom here is in relation to the education, the fact that Pearse was a republican also plays into the word choice. And not even just into the word choice, but it plays into the essence of Ireland itself. What Pearse believed is that for the Irish education system to be centered on freedom, so does Ireland, and for Ireland to be centered on freedom means that it must first be free. Pearse finished this thought with the assertion that what is needed is not a reform or a revolution, but a creation.¹⁴ Again, he was referring to the education system, but there is an underlying deeper truth that he saw: bringing about a free education system (and therefore a free Ireland) would not require patches or tweaks to the machinery, but a doing away with the machinery all together. For Irish students to thrive, according to Pearse, the English must go.

Pearse also referred to the Anglo-Irish education system as a type of Laocoön or Procrustes: students are crushed together, forced to fit the frame of a defective system.¹⁵ While this might also not seem nationalist, consider firstly the phrase “Anglo-Irish” (or “English-Irish”, as Pearse used it). What is in fact being described by the “English-Irish” education system has already been discussed: it is an evil, a repudiation of Irish children’s rights, not meant to be reformed but destroyed. Contrast the “Anglo-Irish” system with that of the “Irish” system: freedom, inspiration instead of inertia, heroic tales, “appeal”, and lastly, an “Irish Minister of Education”.¹⁶ In effect, the Irish system would be better off without the English all together, since the Irish system would see its students not as goods to be processed or manufactured or

¹³ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 4.

¹⁴ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 4.

¹⁵ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 9.

¹⁶ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 11.

hammered into shape (or, in relation to the Procrustes myth, cut into shape), but as seeds to be cultivated and cared for.

Pearse maintained that the only way in which to do this was to restore the national component of education. “It is because the English education system in Ireland had deliberately eliminated the national factor that it has so terrifically succeeded. For it has succeeded - succeeded in making slaves of us. And it has succeeded so well that we no longer realise that we are slaves. Some of us even think our chains ornamental, and are a little doubtful as to whether we shall be quite as comfortable and quite as respectable when they are hacked off.”¹⁷ Indeed, the nationalist views of Pearse come explicitly into play under the heading “When We Are Free”. He called for the destruction of “the rotten and worm-eaten boards which support the grotesque fabric of the English education system”, and then put forward his vision for the Irish education system “when an Irish government is constituted”.¹⁸ This is precisely the argument made earlier; Pearse’s education system can *only* be instituted under a fully Irish government, in which the Irish state allows for the freedom of the school to restore both an inspiring education and a national identity. He said this as well: “My scheme, of course, presupposes the getting rid not only of the British Treasury, but of the British connection”.¹⁹

Contrary to Billaud-Varenne’s French Revolution, however, while Pearse embraced nationalist views, he did not attempt to secularize or modernize them. This is curious, since European revolutions in the twentieth century, already in the wake of the Enlightenment and Darwinism, were generally secular and modern in nature. The French Revolutionaries, Marxists and Fascists all rejected the idea of religion as a necessary component of society and attempted

¹⁷ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 12.

¹⁸ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 13.

¹⁹ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 13.

to bring their nations out of medieval thought and practice. This is where Pearse deviated from the norm.

Having put forth his view on education with freedom, Pearse stated, “One scarcely knows whether modern sentimentalism or modern utilitarianism is the more sure sign of modern decadence. I would boldly preach the antique faith that fighting is the only noble thing, and that he only is at peace with God who is at war with the powers of evil”.²⁰ Once again, Pearse’s word choice reflects his deeper beliefs. “Antique”, yes, but not “primitive”. Pearse saw antiquity as having value and worth, despite the claims made by previous revolutionaries.

Once again, Pearse’s denouncement becomes explicit, arguably even more so than his nationalist views. Under the heading “Against Modernism” Pearse railed against the ideology of his day: “I expressed the hope that even Home Rule would not commit Ireland to an ideal so low as the ideal underlying the phrase ‘a sound modern education.’”²¹ Pearse then ridiculed the idea of a “sound modern” anything, stating that medievalism was better for both education and religion.²² What the reader gets from Pearse is not a glowing recommendation of modernity, but a scathing critique of it. What does this mean for his education system? The basis must lie in medievalism and in the ancients.

This basis is exactly what the reader finds. “To the old Irish the teacher was ‘aite’, fosterer; the pupil, was ‘dalta’, foster-child; the system was ‘aiteachas’, fosterage”.²³ Pearse referred to the “old” Irish, and since he used Gaelic, he was most likely referring to the times

²⁰ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 4.

²¹ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 5.

²² Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 5.

²³ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 6.

before the Norman invasions of the 1100s.²⁴ Pearse followed with, “The modern school is a State-controlled institution designed to produce workers for the State”.²⁵ This in turn demonstrates another of his views: education is for the benefit of the child, not for the benefit of the State. This same problem is still being debated as of 2021, as the recent governor elections in Virginia show.

Pearse continued to demolish the modern education system by bringing up the ancient and medieval way of education: the Master. He referred to Jesus as a sort of master and the disciples as His pupils, and then referred to the idea that a “school” is not a place, but the people.²⁶ In fact, Pearse saw this concept of a foster Master as integral to a child’s education: “Always it was the personality of the master that made the school, never the State that built it of bricks and mortar, drew up a code of rules to govern it, and sent hirelings into it to carry out its decrees”.²⁷ Pearse saw more value in the presence of and relationship with a figurehead than the presence of a lecture hall. This is why he referred to the teacher as a “civil servant” because in doing so, he was stating that the needed relationship was not present, and by default neither was the needed fosterage.²⁸

Pearse dug even deeper into this idea under the heading “Master And Disciples”. And while it is quite extensive, this is the crux of the matter:

In the Middle Ages there were everywhere little groups of persons clustering round some beloved teacher, and thus it was that men learned not only the humanities but all gracious and useful, crafts. There were no State art schools, no State technical schools: as I have said, men became artists in the studio of some master-artist, men learned crafts in the

²⁴ Ronan McGreevy, “Marking the Norman invasion of Ireland: 850 years and counting...”, *The Irish Times*. May 1, 2019, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/marking-the-norman-invasion-of-ireland-850-years-and-counting-1.3877350>.

²⁵ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 6.

²⁶ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 7.

²⁷ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 7.

²⁸ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 7.

workshop of some master-craftsman. It was always the individual inspiring, guiding, fostering other individuals, never the State usurping the place of father or fosterer, dispensing education like a universal provider of ready-mades, aiming at turning out all men and women according to regulation patterns.²⁹

Pearse wanted to draw a clear distinction between the proposed Irish system and the current Anglo-Irish system, and he did so by going back to education's roots. It is also important to note that while Pearse decreased the value of a building in relation to the increasing of the value of the teacher, he did not get rid of the building entirely. This is most noticeable not in the text, but in the example of St. Enda's.

As mentioned earlier, religion also played a part in Pearse's traditionalist approach. He stated, "I do not think that there can be any education of which spiritual religion does not form an integral part, as it is the most important part of life, so it should be the most important part of education".³⁰ What happens if religion is the most important part of education? Pearse theorized that religion is the best form to implement inspiration (along with the heroic tales).³¹ Both of these are aspects of rejecting modernity, and in fact in some cases are linked. Pearse mentioned the Christian hero Colmcille by name multiple times throughout the essay, but even beyond Christian heroes he mentioned Cuchulainn, Robert Emmet, Anne Devlin, and O'Donovan Rossa, among others.³² What this does is return to the medieval and ancient tradition of storytelling, but also instills values and lessons. Essentially, inspiration in education should lead to character growth for the betterment of the student, and with character growth comes the desire to excel in life: whether academically, spiritually, or physically. When inspiration is mentioned in this text, Pearse was referring to an internal change that develops the external practices.

²⁹ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 8.

³⁰ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 11.

³¹ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 11.

³² Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 11.

It is no surprise that the nationalist and traditionalist views can be implemented together. The inclusion of O'Donovan Rossa in the list of heroes in particular is directly related to Pearse's involvement in the Irish Volunteers and the historic speech that he gave at O'Donovan Rossa's funeral.³³ One of the quotes takes both of these views that have been outlined in this essay and perfectly synthesizes them: "I hold it a Christian thing, as O'Donovan Rossa held it, to hate evil, to hate untruth, to hate oppression – and, hating them, to strive to overthrow them".³⁴ The quote "Ireland unfree shall never be at peace" also comes from this oration as the final line. This is very similar to the final line of *The Murder Machine*, in which Pearse wrote, "We need the divine breath that moves through free peoples, the breath that no man of Ireland has felt in his nostrils for so many centuries, the breath that once blew through the streets of Athens and that kindled, as wise kindles, the hearts of those who taught and learned in Clonmacnois".³⁵ This is another example of a perfect synthesis. Here are the traditionalist views of the influence of Ireland in the past and the influence of Athens, while the nationalist view of freedom is present as well.

It is precisely this synthesis which found Pearse on the steps of the General Post Office in Dublin on April 24, 1916.³⁶ The nationalists were declaring a revolution, and as Pearse orated at the funeral of Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, he orated again here. This time, however, it was not a funeral, but what was called the Proclamation of the Republic. The main themes that were written in *The Murder Machine* were present in this document as well: freedom, religion, and most curiously, children. Pearse called for freedom in the name of God but later, when listing the

³³ "Patrick Pearse's Graveside Oration at the Funeral of Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, August 1915", *Century Ireland*. 2015, <https://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/images/uploads/further-reading/Ed59-GravesideOrationFinal.pdf>.

³⁴ "Patrick Pearse's Graveside Oration".

³⁵ Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, 15.

³⁶ "The Proclamation of the Irish Republic", *National Museum of Ireland*. <https://www.museum.ie/en-IE/Collections-Research/Collection/Resilience/Artefact/Test-3/fb71e3dc-2e95-4406-bc46-87d8d6b0ae5d>.

rights of Irish citizens, the Proclamation stated, “cherishing all the children of the nation equally”.³⁷ In other words, Irish children were no longer going to be made to fit into boxes in which they did not fit. Pearse, in writing *The Murder Machine*, foreshadowed the Easter Rising of 1916 to a fault. For the betterment of Irish children, they must be free...free in education, free in inspiration, and free from British connection, as God would have it done.

Following the put down of the Easter Rising, the leaders of it would be executed by the British State.³⁸ Pearse was not excluded. He was executed on May 3, 1916, in Kilmainham Gaol.³⁹ Ultimately, the revolution he helped create would be his undoing, yet his legacy would live on. The republicans who came after Pearse had him as a figurehead, a fiery orator who believed in the divine mission of a free Ireland, one in which children could grow in knowledge in character, and one in which the teacher had a role more important than that of a civil servant or a Procrustes. The importance of *The Murder Machine* made the evils of the English modern education system clear to those who read it, but also, on a fundamental level, were the deepest beliefs of a man who cared for his nation and its children.

³⁷ “The Proclamation of the Irish Republic”.

³⁸ “The Proclamation of the Irish Republic”.

³⁹ “Patrick Pearse”, *GPO Museum*. <https://www.gpowitnesshistory.ie/history/patrick-pearse/>.

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