



Michael Collins: The Man Who Made Ireland

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Traces the life of the man who negotiated for Irish independence and describes the political background of the times.

Michael Collins: The Man Who Made Ireland Details

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Raven says

A brilliant, if difficult, read. The book requires a hefty familiarity with Irish history (and at times, geography), so it's not the first book on Irish history one should pick up. However, if you're looking for a detailed and incisive look at the formation of the Free State, the military actions that came before it, and the political wrangling that happened during the treaty process, this is your book. The tensions between Collins and de Valera are the central theme of the later 2/3rds of the book, and it's a story well told. The author is an unabashed Collins partisan, and that side-taking is unusual in someone so diligent at sourcing and citing his finds. I understand he's also written a biography of de Valera, which I'm very tempted by. He clearly doesn't think well of the man; I'll be interested to see if he can give him a similar thorough and understanding treatment. This is a particularly valuable read for people interested in the histories of successful and unsuccessful insurgencies, but it's very steeped in Irishness and that was a great part of its charm to me. I'll definitely seek out more of the author's work.

Elizabeth says

MY FAVORITE IRISH HISTORY AUTHOR! Wonderful story of Michael Collins rise to power . . . incredible detail that other biographers cannot include!

J.R. Ortiz says

great

Paddy says

Extremely well detailed! A great biography of an interesting historical figure, this is a must read for anyone interested in the life of Michael Collins!

Nancy says

Certainly the best book on Collins to date.

Christopher Carbone says

A relatively good book, but with some interesting problems. The fact of the matter is that while reading

about the IRA and the British occupation force, one is left with a striking realization- Michael Collins is a terrorist. Now, one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter, but reading the cavalcade of acts Collins committed in the name of a free Ireland is really stark.

And moreover, it becomes distracting listening to the apologist tone of the author- who inexplicably mixes Collins harsh acts with cute stories about Collins. It becomes a "house of mirrors" where Coogan mixes and matches the awful with the human, thus giving us a very mixed picture. At one point, Coogan's nostalgia for Collins becomes so warped that I wondered if Coogan really thought that by telling nice stories about Collins, that somehow made his bloodletting more excusable.

However, overall, the book does bridge the gap decently- Collins was a bad guy but was in a very good cause (or so one could argue). It tells a good story in a compelling manner. .

Brendan says

Coogan's book is so focused on the minutiae that it winds up turning the entire story of the Irish revolution into a clinical breakdown of "he-said/she-said." It's a long, difficult, generally boring read about a story that is in no way boring or dull. Best example - Coogan dedicates about 5 pages to "Bloody Sunday" and about 50 pages to the minor squabbles over the wording of the Anglo-Irish treaty. Brutal. There are pages and pages of direct source quotes and TONS of name-drops of incidental characters and first-hand witnesses, that, while impressive from a research standpoint, doesn't add much to the story. I was really disappointed with this book, but I suppose if you have an advanced knowledge (or lived through) the Revolution this might be enlightening.

Donna Davis says

To date, this is the single best volume that's been written about Collins, and it's a meal. I purchased this title on an annual pilgrimage to Powell's City of Books in Portland, Oregon when I was there to visit family a few years ago. Although the length of the book is listed as 480 pages in paperback, the reader needs to come prepared. The type is tiny and dense, and it took me a long time to wade through it. If it were formatted using more standard guidelines, it would be a great deal longer.

As I write this review I am halfway through Coogan's epic history of the IRA (Irish Republican Army), and the style in which he writes is consistent in both books. Coogan tells us everything that is historically important, and he also tells us everything else he finds out, with no apparent filtering. His writing is half Irish history, half family Bible in the sense that if someone was briefly or peripherally involved with Collins, their proud relatives can probably find that person and his or her historical role somewhere in these pages. His shoe size is here, and the names of every girl he flirted with. For a man that lived so briefly, he left a large shadow, and the author was plainly unwilling to let even the tiniest bit of research go to waste, relevant or no.

I am somewhat surprised that Collins doesn't rate more favorably with the author, given that his name is the one most associated with the creation of an independent Ireland. But Coogan does due diligence in establishing the brutality of the British occupiers, who killed indiscriminately with the use of terror. At one point, soldiers opened fire on a school yard where little children were at play; these royal ambassadors were

the original school shooters, killing six little ones for being Catholic. In the protests that followed, women and girls knelt before British tanks and said their rosaries for those that had been killed for their Fenian identities.

The Irish freedom struggle took place at a time when the whole world was on fire. The Russian Revolution was unfurling with breathtaking speed; at the same time, there was no established Marxist revolution to look to for guidance, and Irish freedom fighters had no single idea of what political ideology should shape the struggle. Most of the revolutionaries were barely old enough to shave, and a lot of errors were made because of this lack of clear vision. The results were often tragic.

There's an interesting discussion of whether Irishmen should become German allies during World War I. There is a strong resistance to becoming shills for the British, and so the question, then, is whether to remain neutral, or take the side of Britain's enemy in the hope of receiving reciprocal assistance. In the end, nobody was organized enough, in this era of little technology, to come up with a cohesive plan, so the point was a moot one.

Should you read this biography? I think it depends upon how much time you have, and how strong your interest level is. One consideration might be to purchase it as a reference volume and flip through it to tease out the most relevant information, but be forewarned: sifting through the minutiae is not an easy enterprise. For researchers, the photos alone might be of interest, since they constitute primary documents.

Recommended for those with strong basic knowledge of Irish history that want to flesh out the details, and for those building a reference library.

Samuel says

Michael Collins, pulled off a feat unparalleled in the history of his countrymen. In the past, the British crown could count on the luck of the Irish to ensure the destruction of any subversive elements who attempted to break the grip of London on the Emerald isle. That, superior resources, superior talent and the Irish tendency to never look at the small details ensured that successive rebellions would blow up in their faces and Britain would go skipping to the bank.

When Collins came onto the scene, all this changed. Professional spies and soldiers would call him a gifted amateur, and Coogan milks the wonder of a man for who all intents and purposes is a mere accountant student with no military experience, making complete, and utter fools of the best Spies and soldiers in Europe and then killing a lot of them. This book is an unapologetic pro collins biography but accurately captures the reasons of his success, the keen eye for detail that averted the biggest mistake that allowed Britain to grind into dust, successive Fenian revolts in the past, an audacious ruthlessness balanced by a cool, professionalism and honor that today's terrorists don't bother with, and most importantly of all, that charisma which allowed him to develop a borderline fanatical loyalty among his friends, minions an assets, many who were willing to go the extra mile for "the big fella" who they saw as the one great hope for Ireland to be free.

Overall, a good, solid read.

Mick says

Havta read Dev's version before I give a proper wording

Sean says

Beautiful biography of an extraordinary man. Well written.

Kristine says

This was a very thorough examination of Collins' 32 years of fighting for Irish freedom. The author doesn't necessarily shy away from his favorable bias toward Collins, but it doesn't overwhelm the story being told. My own bias is away from books this dense, as the names and facts eventually turn into a jumble by the time I'm halfway through.

Definitely recommended for those interested in Collins or the history of Irish independence.

Hadrian says

Flawed, but interesting biography of a flawed, but interesting man.

Julian Jan says

not a typical biography that starts in his childhood and goes up to adulthood. Rather about the series of events that led up to the signing of the Anglo- Irish treaty of 1921.

David Eppenstein says

This was a difficult book to get through for a couple of reasons. First, the writing and then second, the history itself. The writing. I read a book by this author last year concerning the Irish Starvation of the mid 19th century and found that book quite compelling. That book tells me that this author does know how to write so I am puzzled by what I encountered in this book. There were numerous lengthy sentences liberally sprinkled with commas that made it difficult to understand who was talking or what was being described. I had to read these sentences several times to make sense of them and then wondered if it was worth the trouble since many of the discussions and events seemed rather trivial. I am guessing that the author's problem was the material he had to work with and the type of events depicted in this history. Initially it should be pointed out that it appears the author is the son of a veteran of this turbulent time so his objectivity may be open to question. The author refers repeatedly to this time as a "war" and specifically as the "Anglo-

Irish War". After reading this book this was no war as I understand the use of that term in history. This was a campaign of terrorism and counter-terrorism. Much of what the author describes was, to me, like reading of the activities of contemporary street gang running up and down alleys at night approaching unsuspecting targets and shooting them in the head. Such acts would then be responded to by government officers storming into the homes of yet more unsuspecting innocent parties and shooting them in their beds. There were no heroes in this conflict on either side and this was another part of my difficulty. Nevertheless, the author needed to convey to the reader what exactly happened and he tried to do this. I suspect he had an abundance of source material and struggled to ensure the activities of what he might have considered to be patriotic acts were properly preserved and noted of record in his book. Sadly, there were a great many of these acts committed by people who were mentioned briefly and then had it noted that they were subsequently arrested or killed, or executed and were never mentioned again. This problem then occurred again when the author recounts the negotiations between the Irish and the English government. It seems like we are subjected to reading every note, diary, memorandum, telegram etc. that passed between the various parties throughout this process. It would have been far more advantageous to the reader had the author synthesized this material and then described the significance and critical stages of the process leading to its conclusion. Again, the reader is subjected to numerous run-on sentences littered with commas. It was, at times, quite maddening. But all was not lost. In the second half of the book, after the conclusion of the negotiations, the writing improves and the author's ability is demonstrated. This is the period during the early stages of the Irish Free State and the civil war that ultimately claims Collins' life.

The second difficulty I had, as I mentioned, is with the history itself. Thanks to my grandparents I have dual citizenship with Ireland and I am proud of that. It is this heritage that has induced me to learn more about the country of my grandparents. While this book is supposed to be a biography of Michael Collins and it is, it is also a fairly detailed history of the formation of the independence of Ireland in the early 20th century. There is a quote in the book attributed to Eamon de Valera as he comments on the death of an adversary "I do not approve but I must not pretend I do not understand". This history is brutal, barbaric, and completely outside the realm of accepted military behavior in or out of a war time environment. However, I enjoy reading British history and more than slightly familiar with their colonial activities. The English colonial history is a monument to ineptitude, arrogance, racism, exploitation, and brutality. It reads as though any life that wasn't English and, better yet, English nobility was something less than significant or worthy. The English conduct during the Irish Starvation of the 1840's was about as close to a government sanctioned genocide as it could get. To win their independence from the English yoke the Irish were never going to be able to create and field a conventional army and conduct a conventional war. Terrorism was their only alternative and the English certainly made that option very easy for them to take. The things that were done lead to retaliation and escalating acts of brutality and revenge. I can understand how this author can desire to paint these men and women as patriots and thus give his national history a nobility it should have but the acts are what they are and they are hard to accept and to read. This is a sad history and in de Valera's word I can't approve but I do understand.
