

Plough and the Stars Flag

Senior Cycle Lesson

The Irish Citizen Army had been formed in 1913 to protect the workers of Dublin during the 1913 Lock-Out. In 1914, the re-organised Irish Citizen Army adopted its own flag. The new organisation was a radical Irish socialist and republican group. The name and design of the flag were inspired by James Connolly, who said that a free Ireland would control its own destiny from the plough to the stars.

Look at the flag and read the introduction to its history.

Answer the following:

1. Why, in your opinion, was a gilt fringe placed around the flag?
2. The cutting edge of the plough is a sword rather than a metal cutting tool. Can you suggest why a sword was used on the flag?
How many stars are there?
What is the popular name given to the constellation known as *Ursa Minor*?
3. Why would an organisation such as the Irish Citizen Army design and produce its own flag? What was the intended symbolism or meaning of the flag?
4. What may have caused the holes on the flag?
5. The flag was raised on Easter Tuesday. It flew over the Imperial Hotel, opposite the GPO, during the remainder of Easter week, 1916. Why did Connolly choose to fly this flag over the hotel owned by William Martin Murphy?
6. A tricolour flag and a green flag flew from the GPO, while the Plough and the Stars flag flew across the road over the Imperial Hotel. Which of these flags became most important after the Easter Rising? Explain your answer. What does your answer indicate about the symbolism of flags in a conflict situation?
7. About thirty female members of the Irish Citizen Army took part in the Easter Rising. Most of them acted as nurses and messengers rather than as fighters.
Research the Easter Week role of some of the following in the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* - Kathleen Lynn, Helena Molony, Constance Markievicz and Margaret Skinnider. This website is available online and free of charge in most schools through the Schools Broadband Network. It is also available in public libraries.

Activity

Sean O'Casey's play, *The Plough and the Stars*

Sean O'Casey, a former member of the Irish Citizen Army and a socialist, wrote a play entitled *The Plough and the Stars*. It was first performed in 1926. His dramatic representation of the Rising led to a riot in the theatre by republicans who disagreed with his view of the Rising.

O'Casey stated that he wrote *The Plough and the Stars* because there was "no play yet around the period of the actual Easter Rising, which was the beginning of all that happened afterward."

The play featured the poor people who lived in Dublin's tenements, and highlights the tough living conditions as well as showing the disruption to their lives during the Rising. The play highlights the background to as well as the brutal realities of fighting during the Easter Rising.

It concludes after great sadness - Nora Clitheroe has a breakdown after the death of her husband and her stillborn child; Mrs. Gogan's daughter (Mollser) dies of tuberculosis; the play ends with Bessie Burgess killed by a British army sniper after moving Nora away from the window of her tenement flat.

Activity

Sean O'Casey and the "Plough and the Stars" flag, 1954

In 1954, G. A. Hayes-McCoy, from the National Museum of Ireland, asked Sean O'Casey if he could assist him in identifying a banner showing the "plough and the stars" design that had flown over the Imperial Hotel in Dublin during the 1916 Rising. O'Casey was a member of the Irish Citizen Army. The following contains some extracts from the letter.

Dear Sir – G. A. Hayes-McCoy,

The flag depicted in the Photograph is not the original Citizen Army Banner; not the one I knew and handled. But, on the other hand, I have no doubt that the Flag is a genuine one; ... that the Sender, when he was a British Officer, took it down, or picked it up, from the burning building, kept it safe, and has now kindly and generously returned it to Ireland. I hope you will let him know how grateful you (and I am) are for sending back such a dear Symbol of Ireland's battle for political freedom in 1916.

I knew, of course, the man who carried the flag. He was one of three brothers name Espell, I['m] nearly sure; three magnificent lads, six foot three or more; but ... he found it hard to carry the banner when the wind was blowing moderately, and how he carried it at all, I dont know, just with his hands and arms, without any other aid ... I persuaded the [Citizen] Army Committee to allow the expense of a harness, strapped over both shoulders, and having the socket in the middle of the body ... so you see I had a lot to do with the flag.

My opinion is (for I remember, or seem to remember) how disappointed most of the C(itizen) A(rmy) Men were that the color (sic) wasnt (sic) green instead of blue; green to them being the one color known to poor oul' Ireland – that the green aspect of the flag rose from the almost sub-conscious idea that every Irish flag must be necessarily green.

Connolly had a very sentimental attachment and reverence for "our own immortal green" witness his hoisting the green flag with the harp – a beautiful flag by the way – over Liberty Hall. Well, there you have all the information I can give you; and there is nothing to add except that the ... flag is a genuine one as being the flag of the C. A. that went out to fight, and so should be precious, and kept safely for display to the generations yet to come.

With all good wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Sean O'Casey [Sean O'Casey to G. A. Hayes-McCoy, 31 October 1954 (National Museum of Ireland)]

1. What is O'Casey's opinion of the British officer who donated the flag to the National Museum of Ireland?
2. O'Casey tells Hayes-McCoy about the men who used to carry the flag. Why does he give him this information, in your opinion?
3. The Citizen Army flag did not contain the colour green. Why were some of the Citizen Army men disappointed at this decision?
4. James Connolly was one of the leaders of the 1916 Rising. What, according to O'Casey was his view of the green flag with the harp?
5. O'Casey concludes his letter by stating that the flag "should be precious". Why does he write this statement, in your opinion?
6. "Well, there you have all the information I can give you": O'Casey's views as expressed in the letter that this was not the original Citizen Army flag was challenged by in an article in History Ireland in 2015.

Written by Pat Callan