What if the guns had landed? Another version of the Easter Rising[1]

John Gibney

I

On April 24 April 1916 a relatively small group of militants, all members of a range of fringe organizations, seized a number of locations in Dublin. While skirmishes took place in other parts of the country, the bulk of the fighting occurred in the capital, as over the next six days perhaps as many as 20,000 British troops occupied Dublin and much of the city center was destroyed. The Great War had finally come to Ireland.

The Rising would not have happened had the war not been ongoing, as it provided the insurgents with both a moment to strike~~,~~ and a potential marriage of convenience with Imperial Germany. That was not lost on some of those who later planned the Rising. When Gearóid O'Sullivan told Seán Mac Diarmada of the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand after hearing of it from a newsboy on a Dublin street, Mac Diarmada immediately (and 'excitedly') exclaimed 'look it Gearóid, this is no joke for us. We're in for it now. Austria will move against these fellows...Russia will back these fellows up, German and Italy will back Austria, France will take on Germany. You'll have a European war; England will join - and that will be our time to strike'.[2]

Mac Diarmada was right. In September 1914, within weeks of the outbreak of the war, a diverse assembly of 'advanced' nationalists took place in Dublin and key figures amongst them, such as Thomas Clarke and Mac Diarmada himself, resolved that they would exploit the opportunity presented by the war: England's difficulty was, yet again, to be exploited as Ireland's opportunity. It was also decided at the same meeting that an integral part of the planning for any rebellion would be an attempt to secure assistance and support from Imperial Germany, on the time-honoured principle that the enemy of one's enemy was one's friend (this was conditional, however, on the Germans restricting themselves to providing assistance, rather then becoming another occupying

[1]Earlier versions of this essay were presented to audiences at *Sir Roger Casement (1864-1916): The glocal imperative, organised by the University of Limerick and the University* of Notre Dame, Tralee, October 2013; and at NUI Galway in March 2015. The author would like to thank Jim Smyth, Ruan O'Donnell, and Brian Ó Conchubhair for their comments on an earlier draft.

[2] Cited in R.F. Foster, *Vivid faces: the revolutionary generation in Ireland, 1890-1923* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), p. 177.

power).[3] And this brings us to Roger Casement, for, having been present in Germany from late 1914 seeking both the political and material support that Clarke and others had hoped to secure, Casement's role in relation to the Easter Rising was ultimately as a conduit for the German military assistance that, in his view, would guarantee the Rising's eventual success. His perceived association with the Rising defines his involvement in Irish political life more than anything else. It was also the basis for his execution in August 1916.

Yet his involvement in the Rising is a catalogue of failures: his failures to persuade Germany to support the Rising militarily, his failure to recruit an "Irish brigade" amongst Irish POWs, his failure either to prevent the Rising or to participate in it; and, above all, the military failure of the Rising itself. For judged from the rubble of Dublin in May 1916, the Easter Rising was indeed a failure. This essay is not going to explore the manner in which that military defeat was transformed into a political and propaganda victory, or how one nationalist movement was ultimately replaced by another. Nor will it be overly concerned with the obscure and tangled machinations that led up to the Rising. Other studies have tackled, and will tackle, what actually happened in 1916; this essay, however, is about what did not happen, or what might have happened—to be precise, it is about everything except what actually did happen. This is a counterfactual speculation, the basic premise of which derives from Richard Evans' precise definition of a counterfactual: "namely, deploying an element of what did not happen in order better to explain the consequences of what did."[4] By changing a single variable, we can explore the limits of what was possible in terms of the Rising that broke out in April 1916. In other words, what if the German assistance (in the form of the cargo of the *Aud*) that was deemed crucial to the Rising's prospect of success had been successfully landed?[5]

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[3] Ed Mulhall, 'Planning a Rising for Ireland', *Century Ireland*: http://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/articles/coldly-and-deliberately-planned (accessed 14 July 2015). The context of the war is a key theme of Fearghal McGarry's entry on the Easter Rising in the *International enclopedia of the First World War*: http://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/easter_rising_great_britain_and_ireland (accessed 14 July 2015).

[4] Richard Evans, *Altered Pasts: Counterfactuals in History* (London: Little Brown, 2014), 38. It This article emphatically does not seek to go down another path identified by Evans, where counterfactual speculations are "concerned with pointing up what are supposedly preferable alternatives and bemoaning the fact that the they never came to pass": Evans, 88. "What if" is not the same as "if only." As Evans notes, "True counterfactual scenarios, whether historical or fictional, always involve drawing historical consequences, often far-reaching in nature, from altered *historical* causes": Evans, 136. For that reason, this article operates under the knowledge that, as Evans again posits, "The real interest of close-call counterfactuals is in pointing up the *limited nature* of such possibilities and the *constraints* within which they operated": Evans, 157.

[5] For other counterfactual scenarios relating to this revolutionary era, see Patrick Maume, "A Counterfactual Chief? If Parnell had lived till 1918" in Paul Bew, *Enigma: A New Life of Charles Stewart Parnell* (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, Ltd., 2012), 205-13; Alvin Jackson, 'British Ireland: What if Home RUle had been enacted in 1912?' in Niall Ferguson (ed.), *Virtual history: alternatives and counterfactuals* (London: Pan, 2003), 175-227; and Peter Hart, "What Did the

II

Any examination of the Easter Rising must address the question of what it was supposed to achieve. Much attention has been devoted to the alleged metaphysical ambitions of those who planned it, a trend shaped by an undue concentration on the writings of figures such as the much-maligned Patrick Pearse.[6] But what of the unromantic machinations of figures like Tom Clarke? Or even Seán Mac Diarmada, whose meticulous (if clandestine) preparations for a successful nationwide uprising could coexist with a desire to sacrifice himself for the cause if need be?[7] Did Pearse and his cohorts really believe in the sacrifice of which they wrote to the exclusion of all other possibilities? Did their followers? The valorising of sacrifice, and of dying for ones country, was by no means unusual in a Europe at war.[8] It might be unwise to dwell upon the rhetoric of the Rising: surely its elevation after the fact into a struggle in which military defeat was irrelevant is a neat way of rationalising that defeat.[9] Given the secrecy in which the planning of the Rising was shrouded and the swift executions of those who planned it, the precise motives of its architects remain open to debate. But Fearghal McGarry's recent account of the Rising, informed by the statements collected from veterans by the Bureau of Military History in the 1940s and 1950s, recreated a version of 1916 that was, in the eyes of those who participated in it, more of an effort at maintaining the integrity of the marginalised separatist tradition than a foolhardy attempt to emulate Christ on the cross.[10] Or as one volunteer put it, it was essentially about having "a belt at the bloody British. "[11]

Easter Rising Really Change?" in *Turning Points in Twentieth-Century Irish History* ed. Thomas E. Hachey (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2011), 7-20

[6] The seminal statement of this position is Francis Shaw, 'The canon of Irish history: a challenge', *Studies*, 61 (1972), 117-153.

[7] See Thomas Fitzgerald's review of Brian Feeney's recent book, *Sean MacDiarmada: 16 Lives*; Fitzgerald, "The Insurrectionist," *Dublin Review of Books*, September 1, 2014, http://www.drb.ie/essays/the-insurrectionist. See also Feeney's original text; Feeney, *Sean MacDiarmada: 16 Lives* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 2014), 217-35.

[8] See Joost Augustijn, 'Patrick Pearse: proto-fascist eccentric or mainstrem European thinker?', *History Ireland*, 18.6 (2010), 33-37.

[9] P.S. O'Hegarty, for example, claimed that the Easter Rising was indeed intended as "a Dublin insurrection, a demonstration of national spirit, a blood sacrifice for a principle, without any hope of success." He claimed that MacDermott had revealed plans to him in May 1915 for a revolt that would be confined to Dublin, possibly as early as September 1915, based on plans that were originally Plunkett's: "we'll hold Dublin for a week, and save Ireland." The plans to expand the Rising were supposedly taken much later. All of which suggests, in the light of what was happening elsewhere, that O'Hegarty was kept in the dark: *A history of Ireland under the union* (London, 1952), 700.

[10] Fearghal McGarry, *The rising: Easter 1916* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). The Bureau of Military History (BMH) witness statements held by the Military Archives are available online: http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie (accessed 14 July 2015). These can be augmented by the ongoing release of

The idea of becoming a martyr for Ireland and being involved in a successful rebellion were not mutually exclusive. The nearest thing to a plan for a prospective rebellion at the behest of the military council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) dates from early 1915; and this plan is at the core of the argument presented here. In early 1915, J.M. Plunkett arrived in Germany to determine "how much Casement had achieved in Berlin" and held what were inconclusive (and possibly unfriendly) talks with "representatives of the German General Staff."[12] In September 1914 Plunkett had been tasked with devising military plans for the insurrection that was expected to occur before the end of the First World War, though in early 1915 Casement seems to have been in the dark about what was being planned in Ireland. The original contact between the IRB and the German authorities had been brokered by figures such as the veteran Fenian John Devoy in New York, and Devoy remained a crucial point of contact between Ireland and Germany; Casement was his emissary. But even aside from the difficulties of communicating with Casement in Imperial Germany, Devoy seems not to have trusted Casement's judgment, and ultimately chose to by-pass him to communicate with the German authorities directly.[13] In that sense, Casement was being kept out of a loop that he had helped to create. Plunkett may have brought him back into it.

III

Plunkett's role in the planning of the Rising, and the timing of his arrival in Germany, suggest that he was probably the prime mover behind the composition of the report. At this juncture, the Germans were apparently losing interest in the prospect of challenging Britain via an Irish theatre of war—a lack of interest likely to have been prompted, at least in part, by the spectacular failure of

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the Military Service (1916-23) Pensions Collection (MSPC): http://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/military-service-pensions-collection (accessed 14 July 2015).

[11] Patrick J. Stephenson, "Heuston's Fort: the Mendicity Institute, Easter Week 1916," [Dated 1966], National Library of Ireland (NLI) MS 36,147: 3.

[12] Reinhard R. Doerries, *Prelude to the Easter Rising: Sir Roger Casement in Imperial Germany* (London: Routledge, 2000), 15.

[13] Devoy described Casement as "very emotional. He never hesitated to act on his own responsibilities, fully believing that his decisions were in the best interest of Ireland's cause. This caused many difficulties and embarrassments for us"; see John Devoy, *Recollections of an Irish Rebel* (New York: Charles P. Young, 1929), 406. Casement later recorded his alienation and exclusion from the subsequent planning of the Rising: Roger Casement, "A Last Page of my Diary," ed. Angus Mitchell, *Field Day Review* 8 (2012), 53, 71.

Casement to recruit an "Irish Brigade" from amongst Irish prisoners of war.[14] Plunkett's visit, and the plan he and Casement devised, may well have been intended to re-engage that German interest.

The memorandum that Casement and Plunkett drafted was submitted to the German General Staff, who sent it to the German Foreign Office on June 8, 1915.[15] It is quite telling that it only appeared when Plunkett arrived in Germany; he had brought no papers with him, and the document seems to have been composed on the spot a further indication of how marginalised Casement had become. The text contained numerous inaccuracies and exaggerations about the potential support for an uprising against British rule that may have been intended to sooth any German skepticism. It provided details of the composition and posture of the Irish Volunteers (overstating its case as it did so). It also claimed that extensive localised intelligence was continually being collected on Ireland's infrastructure and topography for use in a rebellion, and outlined the training of the volunteers. But "help from an external source" was a prerequisite for any uprising. The key difficulty for any prospective Irish rebellion remained a lack of weapons: apparently, the other ingredients (manpower, money, and a preparedness to act) were in place. In the absence of any sense of what that help Ireland might receive from Germany, the volunteers felt that there were three things within their power to do: they could reinforce a landing force; disrupt infrastructure; and seize Dublin.[16]

What were the conditions of their opponents? Casement and Plunkett claimed that British forces in Ireland in early 1915 consisted of little more than "small, scattered garrisons and many large training camps", including Finner Camp, the Curragh, Mallow, Fermoy, Belfast, Dundalk, and Mullingar. Five-thousand troops, mostly infantry, were based in Dublin, as was the British military headquarters, though County Cork had the largest number of troops on the island, with large depots at Mallow and Fermoy, and smaller ones elsewhere. Overall, "the total number of troops in Ireland from the 1st to 12th March [1915] did not exceed 40,000."[17] The only heavy artillery on the island

[14] Andreas Roth, "'The German soldier is not tactful': Sir Roger Casement and the Irish Brigade in Germany during the First World War," *The Irish Sword* 19 (1993-1995): 313-32.

[15] Casement subsequently informed Rudolf Nadolny, his contact, that as a precaution, Plunkett had brought "no documents or plans such as would now enable a detailed report to be drawn up here on the military situation in Ireland." See Doerries., *Prelude to the Easter Rising,* ~~pp~~ 128-29. The plan is discussed in Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: the Irish Rebellion* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 106-11. The National Library copy is NLI MS 13085/5.

[16] 'Abschrift', NLI MS 13085/5, f. 5-9.

[17] It was estimated at 30,000 in early 1916: "poorly trained men with a few competent officers" and little heavy weapons; William O'Brien and Desmond Ryan (eds.), *Devoy's Post Bag* (Dublin: Fallon, 2 vols, 1953), ii, 485. The figure of 40,000 was an upward revision in the memorandum.

was at Lough Swilly, Belfast Lough, and "possibly" at Killiney. The existence of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) was a factor to be borne in mind. The Irish Volunteers, on the other hand, "should be considered an unarmed force," with no more than 10,000 members, but they were hamstrung by a lack of weapons. These statements were true, but the claims that followed on from it were, to put it mildly, wildly optimistic: "there is no doubt that at least 40,000 [or] 50,000 could be raised now if arms and equipment were to be supplied" (though Casement had previously claimed to his German contacts that there were 60,000 members[18]). A supply of weapons was to be the key to any successful rebellion.

Casement and Plunkett put forth a hypothesis: the Germans could land on the Shannon Estuary with weapons for 40,000 prospective volunteers. Limerick (a major source of food supplies) could be bypassed, as news of the landing of weapons would be sent to Dublin. Extra recruits from Kerry and Clare would come to Limerick, and key rail junctions could be cut. Artillery could also be sent to Limerick Junction, thence to capture Tipperary and take up positions in the Galtee Mountains. The River Shannon, from Limerick to Killaloe, could be held by a small force, with a "moderate" force left in Limerick, and a minefield could be laid in the Shannon between Tarbert and Foynes. The Volunteers could then press on to Athlone. There were apparently few British troops in Connacht between Galway and Athlone: the Volunteers might reach Sligo before an attack could be mobilised. Connacht and its coastline would be held, with the Shannon acting as a natural barrier. The volunteers could go from Athlone to Mullingar, where the garrison could be attacked; thence to Dublin, across the midlands. The canals to Dublin could "form lines of transport and defence."[19]

The terrain would also be an ally, as it was rougher than it looked: it was broken up by hedges, and walls and bogs were natural barriers. Cavalry would be useless in most places. "The country is eminently suited to a kind of guerilla or irregular warfare where the individual rifleman in cover can be of great value," noted the report. This latter point may well have been playing on the fear of irregular (*franc-tireur*) warfare that had become rife in the German army during the invasion of Belgium in 1914.[20] According to Casement and Plunkett, the ingredients for an uprising were allegedly all in place.

[18] Doerries, *Prelude to the Easter Rising* 118-19
[19] 'Strategical sketch', NLI MS 13085/5, f. 5
[20] John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2002), 89-139.

The plan drafted by Casement and Plunkett did contemplate the British response: "It seems likely that the first conflicts might develop on the lines Limerick-Tipperary, and Mullingar-Tullamore."[21] Sligo could be a base from which to seize Donegal from the landward side: "a favourable result would entirely alter British naval strategy and provide an Atlantic base for the German fleet."[22] And having conjured the specter of the German navy, the plan proceeded to examine the coastline. Dublin had a good landing spot at Killiney, though this was likely to be fortified. Heavy guns there and on Howth Head could command the bay, but equally, the Dublin Volunteers could deal with the city garrison. The Wicklow and Wexford volunteers were poorly armed and organised, but could blow up railways: the destruction of the rail line from Dublin to Rosslare was seen as vital. In Cork the volunteers were numerically strong, with the potential for more recruits there if weapons became available (though this would be offset by the strength of the British garrison). But "there is excellent nationalist and pro-German sentiment in Kerry. The Volunteers are very badly armed, if at all. Practically no pro-British feelings. No troops, unless a few at Tralee. Very fine harbours and islands." Bantry, Ventry (which they claim was "ideal"), Kenmare, and Dingle Bay were all "well protected and deep." The Great Blasket was even mooted as a potential submarine base (an idea which would emerge again in early 1916).[23]

Limerick was also seen as a vital strategic point due to its proximity to the Shannon estuary—"The river is not fortified but could be made as impregnable as the Dardanelles"—and, being a transport hub, would offer "penetration" to the rest of the country, especially the east and south. It would also have access to the rich farmland of Munster, thus would assist in providing supplies. The Shannon was described as "the chief strategic line of Ireland"; it was crucial to the plan that was sketched out here. The river and its lakes offered swift access to Athlone, which had an artillery unit (ironically, the artillery later used to suppress the insurrection in Dublin came from Athlone). Athlone also had the only rail bridge over the River Shannon and was a natural gateway to Sligo.[24]

Limerick and Clare were fine in terms of nationalist sentiment, but were poorly armed. Galway was claimed to be pro-German, and Connemara was highlighted as a potentially fertile ground for recruits. They correctly observed that Galway City, on the northern shore of Galway Bay, was vulnerable to attack to naval bombardment, unlike Limerick. On the other hand, Killary harbour, on

[21] 'Strategical sketch', NLI MS 13085/5, f. 7.
[22] 'Strategical sketch', NLI MS 13085/5, f. 8.
[23] O'Brien and Ryan (eds.), *Devoy's Post Bag,*ii, 486.
[24] 'Strategical sketch', NLI MS 13085/5, f. 7

the Galway-Mayo border, was ideal as an "impregnable" submarine base, and a harbour for "the biggest battleships in the world."[25] The reports suggested that an invasion would be welcomed in Galway and Mayo, and digressed to invoke the expedition of the French General Humbert in 1798 by way of example (five of its fifteen pages were devoted to this). Sligo, Leitrim, and Donegal were not as significant: there was less pro-German sentiment, and sectarian issues muddied the waters; the emphasis in these counties was more "anti-Carson than anti English." However, "national feeling in Donegal would be tempered much more by local antagonism to the opposing volunteer forces."[26] This was a clear reference to tensions between the militias that had been formed in Ireland before the war: the overwhelming Protestant and unionist Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), and the predominantly Catholic and nationalist Irish Volunteers. That said, the latter organisation had split into two factions in 1914 over the issue of whether or not to support the British war effort. The majority of the organisation remained loyal to the Home Rule leader John Redmond and was renamed as the Irish National Volunteers; the 'Irish Volunteers' that Casement and Plunkett spoke of was the smaller, more militant faction who had kept the original name. The topography and presence of Lough Swilly meant it could not be entirely ignored, however. As for Derry, Antrim, and Down, a traditional blind spot of Irish nationalism was evident here: "the inhabitants, in the main, must be considered rather as English or Scotch 'colonists' than as natives of Ireland."[27] The report then worked its way south through Louth and Meath to Dublin, and "it is in Dublin city [that] the best organized and equipped body of Irish volunteers is to be found."[28] Their confident claim that the population of Dublin was 'overwhelmingly national' - presumably in the sense that they might sympathise with or support such a rebellion, and give it a prospect of success in the capital - would, however, be belied by later events.

IV

Casement and Plunkett were gilding the lily. The alternative British intelligence report for 1915 submitted to the chief secretary, Augustine Birrell, provided a very different analysis of the state of Ireland. Admittedly, the information this contained was not automatically foolproof—the British, after all, did not fully anticipate the rising that eventually broke out—but its overview of a country in what seemed to be a relatively peaceful condition, relatively devoid of sectarian tension, and the

[25] Ibid, 5.
[26] Ibid, 12.
[27] Ibid, 14.
[28] Ibid, 15.

only notable unrest that came to the attention of the authorities were land disputes and outbursts of agrarian agitation (especially in Clare and Galway).[29] The intelligence assessment offered hints of simmering activity by "Sinn Féiners" and the Irish Volunteers; but these groups were small in scale, marginalised, and primarily given their limited impetus by opposition to recruitment for the war.[30] County Kerry, for instance, was "in a peaceable and satisfactory state during the year and free from serious agrarian trouble."[31] The rival National Volunteers in Kerry numbered 4,202; 1,038 were "Sinn Féiners." But its membership dropped to 2,800 by end of year, and a detachment of Irish Volunteers was formed, with 960 members by the end of the year.

The Irish Volunteers had, by their own account, become markedly more active and efficient in March and April of 1915 in Cork, Kerry, and Limerick, though their numbers did not expand. It was noted, however, that the volunteers had started to appoint dedicated organisers, such as Liam Mellows The report delivered to the October 1915 Ard Fheis was optimistic—one Volunteer noted that "it can truthfully be said that any estimate of its strength based upon the reports received at Headquarters is an underestimate"[32] and yet it was somewhat vague in its assertions of fruitful activity: the only concrete detail given is that approximately 200 men attended training camps in Tyrone, Wicklow, Cork, and Galway between July and September 1915.[33] That said, the plans for a rising do seem to have been assuming "more concrete" form in early 1915, and the prospect of weapons being supplied from Germany was being very deliberately factored into the planning by the end of the year; it changed the dynamic.[34] Certainly, in the view of the future Cork IRA leader Florence O'Donoghue, until the end of 1915, the volunteer posture was defensive.[35] What else could they do? What would the go on the offensive with? There were suspicions of low-level arms smuggling by passengers on ferries, as well as cases of "larceny of high explosives." But this did not equate to the existence of a formidable force: the estimated numbers in the Irish Volunteers for the counties instanced in Casement and Plunkett's memorandum—Dublin, Wexford, Wicklow, Kerry, Limerick, Roscommon, Westmeath, Clare, Galway, Mayo, Louth, and Meath—came to approximately 3,400. As for the weapons that they might use, the Irish Volunteers reportedly had 2,534 rifles in

[29] Breandán Mac Giolla Choille (ed.), *Intelligence Notes 1913-16, Preserved in the State Paper Office* (Dublin/BÁC: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1966), 135-95.
[30] Ibid., 142-43.
[31] Ibid., 148.
[32] F.X. Martin (ed.), *The Irish Volunteers, 1913-15: Recollections & Documents* (Dublin: J. Duffy and Co., 1963), 194.
[33] Martin (ed.), *Irish Volunteers,*197
[34] Joost Augusteijn, *Patrick Pearse: The Making of a Revolutionary* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 287-89.
[35] Florence O'Donoghue, "The failure of the German arms landing at Easter, 1916," in *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* LXXI, no. 213-14 (1966), 51.

January 1916; the National Volunteers had 9,834 and the UVF had 53,539.[36] According to Under-Secretary Matthew Nathan, as of 31 March 1916 the Irish Volunteers supposedly had 1,886 British, German, and Italian rifles, 1,654 shotguns, and 925 revolvers and pistols, with another 825 firearms of various kinds in Dublin: for a total of 5,291 in all. Of the guns held outside Dublin, half—specifically 2,226 firearms—were held in Munster, with 472 in Leinster, 650 in Connacht, and the remaining 1,118 in Ulster.[37] In other words, those who might carry out a rebellion were the most poorly armed forces in Ireland. In that sense, Casement and Plunkett had a point. The weapons that they sought were intended to alter the balance; at least, outside Dublin.

V

The Easter Rising was planned in great secrecy, but after the Rising some participants devoted time to trying to fully understand what they had been involved in. According to the Wexford volunteer leader W.J. Brennan-Whitmore, "it always seemed to me that the plans for a rising against the British occupation of Ireland were originally groups of ideas rather than one coherent plan."[38] It is an understandable assumption; localised plans for the IRB insurrection certainly existed in other parts of the country.[39] But what makes all of this intelligence data significant is that insofar as plans of "groups of ideas" can be discerned, they correspond with much of what was contained in the document submitted to the Germans by Casement and Plunkett in early 1915. The Kerry Volunteers were vitally important, as it was up to them to get the weapons northwards after they had landed. To this end, they would be in touch with their counterparts in Clare, Limerick, Galway, and Cork. A line would extend from Kerry up the Shannon, to south Ulster. Weapons were to be distributed north from Tralee via goods trains. The availability of weapons might lead to people to flock to the Volunteers's banners, swelling their ranks. The British may have become hesitant to engage such an enlarged force, and attempts to suppress it—let alone fight it—might have attracted adverse publicity in the US. Troops also would have been diverted to Ireland, weakening the British position on the continent; and, crucially, according to the Belfast-born IRB organiser Albert Cotton, who held senior rank in the Kerry volunteers, "we would not have had to stake all on the single chance of the

[36] Mac Giolla Choille (ed.), *Intelligence notes*, 179.
[37] *The Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland. Minutes of evidence and appendix of documents* (London: HMSO, 1916), 122-23.
[38] W.J. Brennan-Whitmore, *Dublin Burning: The Easter Rising from Behind the Barricades*, (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1996), 12.
[39] Feeney, *MacDiarmada*, 222-28.

successful landing of one large quantity of weapons and the success of a sudden revolt."[40] He also suggested that smaller, more surreptitious shipments of weapons would have had a much better effect: "every thousand rifles would have meant a fresh influx of recruits."[41] And after all, Florence O'Donoghue, like so many others, pinpointed the failure of the landing, and thus the Rising, on a combination of excessive secrecy and bad communication between Ireland, America, and Britain; it was, for him, the single most crucial factor in determining the "fortunes of the insurrection."[42]

But O'Donoghue, like Brennan-Whitmore, also hinted at the absence of a more general plan—that the mobilisation and movement of Volunteers in Cork and Kerry was "in effect planning for a limited mission of gun-running, not planning for an insurrection."[43] The IRB was the vehicle for the dissemination of these plans. O'Donoghue observed that "it is possible that the Military Council had further plans, which would have been disclosed after the start, but what Tomas MacCurtain had in Cork on Easter Sunday morning, what Austin Stack had in Tralee and Michael Colivet in Limerick were plans for the reception and distribution of the expected arms. All of them realised of course that the operation could result in a fight, but as far as is known, they had no orders as to how the fight was to be sustained."[44] There were vague suggestions of co-ordination; in conjunction with the rising in Dublin, Tralee would be seized and communications cut off, and the RIC would be attacked. Similar things would happen in towns such as Listowel, and the volunteers would police these districts; asserting their control was a necessary precondition for the distribution of weapons.[45]

The plans recorded in Limerick were similar to those in Kerry: neutralising of RIC, seizing of infrastructure and communications, cutting of the rail line to Limerick Junction—all intended to ensure unhindered transit for the train, which was to deliver arms en route to Galway, as Limerick was to be seized.[46] The plans in Galway also revolved around the weapons, which were to have been distributed from Gort: a major volunteer parade was due to take place there on Easter Sunday.

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[40] A. Cotton, 'Kerry's place in the general plan', in *Kerry's Fighting Story 1916-21: Told By the Men Who Made It*, ed. Brian Ó Conchubhair (Cork: Mercier Press, 2009), 92-102, at 95.
[41] Cotton, 'Kerry's place in the general plan', 95.
[42] O'Donoghue, "The failure of the German arms", 161. Even as late as February 1916, Pearse was requesting that weapons be landed at Limerick; see McGarrity paper, ~~p.~~ 60. It had been resolved to land weapons near Limerick on 20-23 April 1916, but the Germans opted for Fenit on foot of a memorandum passed to them via Devoy from Tom Clarke: O'Brien and Ryan (eds.), *Devoy's Post Bag,* ii, 486.
[43] O'Donoghue, "The failure of the German arms", 49.
[44] Ibid., 50.
[45] Cotton, 'Kerry's place in the general plan',101-102.
[46] *Limerick's Fighting Story 1916-21: Told by the Men Who Made It*, ed. Brian Ó Conchubhair (Cork: Mercier Press, 2009), 46-48; BMH WS 992.

Pearse suggested holding the River Suck as a defensive line near Ballinasloe, but a friendly priest pointed out that the Shannon was impossible to hold without weapons: the flat terrain would make the volunteers sitting ducks for artillery and machine guns—a point not noted in the report submitted by Plunkett and Casement.[47]

As should be obvious, the plan drafted by Casement and Plunkett corresponds to the discernable fragments of a plan to distribute weapons along the west coast. But this does not confirm the existence of an overall plan; nor even, as F.X. Martin suggested in the 1960s, that any such plan might turn out to be a feasible plan.[48] The Dublin Volunteer and academic Liam Ó Bríain later tried to piece together the fragments of an overall design for the Rising, and submitted his notes on this to the Bureau of Military History in May 1947, in which he recorded Plunkett and Mac Diarmada expressing the belief that their plan for a rising had been fool-proof, but also reports the Irish Citizen Army leader Michael Mallin (who was himself a former soldier) being skeptical about it. Ó Bríain related that the guns from the *Aud* were to be sent north by a "seized" train, via Limerick and Clare to east Galway; in this account, to Athenry rather than Gort. He observes that there seemed to be no plan in Galway, judging by what actually transpired there. Some weapons were also to be sent east from Kerry: the Cork Volunteers were to move west to get them. Denis McCullough brought Belfast Volunteers to Coalisland, County Tyrone, but the planned rendezvous for weapons never happened; as it was unclear what exactly they were expected to do, he and his men returned to Belfast.[49] Apparently McCullough was not to have fought in Ulster; he was to have held "the line of the Shannon" at Belcoo in Fermanagh. There seemed to be an emphasis on potential operations in the west as well as in Dublin, but again, this was a moot point in the absence of the guns they would have needed. The British were to be engaged at Limerick (though Sean Fitzgibbon, sent by MacNeill to investigate preparedness of the Limerick volunteers, painted a gloomy picture). Ó Bríain also gave hints of what might have happened elsewhere: the Westmeath Volunteers were to cut the rail link to Dublin at Tyrellspass before moving across the Shannon with other Volunteers from the midlands. The Drogheda-Dublin rail line was also to be cut.

The fighting in Dublin was to be based on Robert Emmet's plans for a rising in 1803: the plan was supposedly to seize castle and city, pin down the British, and "electrify the country; cause it to rally

[47] Fergus Campbell, *Land and Revolution: Nationalist Politics in the West of Ireland 1892-1921* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 205-207.
[48] F.X. Martin, 'The 1916 Rising: a 'coup d'etat' or a 'bloody protest'?', *Studia Hibernica*, 8 (1968), 106-37.
[49] Information provided by Jim Smyth.

to the cause of the Volunteers."[50] And the west was to be the stronghold: after a few days Dublin brigades were to break out and make for Athenry in order to receive reinforcements from the Germans, who would hopefully have landed by then. Wexford's role was to block Rosslare harbour, as W.J. Brennan-Whitmore recalled. The latter's recollection was consist with other fragments: he suggests that there were plans to isolate Dublin and the Curragh (which contained the largest military base in Ireland), and to cut off-road and rail links with the Protestant northeast, which, it was vaguely felt, would leave the British military to deal with it without reinforcements. Again, the key was to buy time for the distribution of weapons from the *Aud*. But there was also a realisation that volunteers in the southeast might have to deal with British landings there, as well as keep communications between Dublin and the south open. Enniscorthy, given its location, was to be a distribution point for weapons. After that, the southeastern ports of New Ross and Rosslare could be seized; these would have to attack and harass any landing, and if worst came to worst, a retreat to Wicklow was envisioned, the better to attack the Curragh.[51]

Ó Bríain's account can be summarised thus. There were to be two key areas: Dublin for political purposes, and Kerry for military purposes. The assumption was that the British would ultimately get the upper hand in Dublin: hence it would be abandoned. Athenry in east Galway was then to become the "all-Ireland base," but if weapons could be ferried further north from the landing point in the southwest, so be it. Volunteers from the Midlands were to move across the Shannon, and Ulster was also to be abandoned. It is worth noting that Ó Bríain, Brennan-Whitmore, and O'Donaghue all felt (in hindsight) that, at some level, martyrdom and a preparedness to sacrifice themselves played a part in the considerations of those who had planned the rebellion—regardless of whether or not such sentiments were representative of the rank and file.[52] But the *sense* of a general military plan, however vague, was perhaps essential to stiffening the resolve of the volunteers by tapping into their aspirations to be soldiers, a plan to get something started—a means, as Ó Bríain suggested, to "a blood sacrifice made in Ireland." [53] But Ó Bríain also concluded that "I would be inclined to say that probably the leaders had no further plans; that subsequent movements would be dictated by circumstances." They were to get weapons and to mobilise, but

[50] Liam Ó Bríain, BMH WS 6: 10.
[51] Brennan-Whitmore, *Dublin Burning,* 18-19.
[52] See Brennan-Whitmore, *Dublin Burning,* 13-14; also O'Donoghue, "The failure of the German arms"; and, Ó Bríain, BMH WS 6.
[53] Ó Bríain, BMH WS 6: 15

after that, their purpose was unclear. He agreed with the executed Michael Mallin that the lack of a "Plan B" was surely a fatal flaw.

But we can see the outlines of something resembling "Plan A," however poorly coordinated. Let us make a crucial assumption: irrespective of the morbid doubts that gripped Roger Casement in March and April 1916—as he realised, that is, that he was essentially to be thrown to the wolves by an uninterested German government—the cargo of the *Aud* actually landed and got as far as, say, southeast Galway, either Athenry or Gort—both locations mentioned in relation to their distribution. Dublin would rise, and Kerry would serve as the point from which the rest of the country would be armed, hopefully garnering further recruits along the way. The volunteers would establish an armed presence along the west coast from Cork to Sligo, with the Shannon as a natural barrier (the "line of the Shannon"). Volunteers from Dublin would then move into the midlands. The wearily disillusioned Casement had by this time realised that all that was forthcoming from Germany was the 20,000 rifles, 10 machine guns, and 5,000,000 rounds of ammunition (this equated to 250 rounds per rifle; the rifles themselves were captured Russian Mosin-Nagant rifles, ammunition for which would not have been available in Ireland). The German army corps Casement had hoped for was not forthcoming and this, in his view, rendered the prospective rebellion "worthless."[54] The limited assistance offered by the Germans was purely "to get rid of us[…]on the cheapest possible terms to themselves."[55] Yet guns were still to be delivered, and could yet be distributed in the manner suggested above. What could their opponents do about this?

VI

By March 1916 Casement was deeply pessimistic about the prospects for success that any rebellion might have. But what would the rebels have fought against? The pre-war garrison had been reduced to perhaps 2,000 infantry, 400 cavalry, and four machine guns by November 1914, though the exigencies of training later guaranteed a reasonably large military presence that could be numbered in the tens of thousands in early 1916, according to John Devoy.[56] But the British chief secretary Ivor Churchill Guest, Viscount Wimborne, later claimed that "Ever since the departure of

[54] See Roger Casement, "A Last Page of my Diary," *Field Day Review* 8 (2012), 51-52; see also Doerries, *Prelude to the Easter Rising*, 16-22.
[55] Casement, "A Last Page of my Diary," 53.
[56] See David Fitzpatrick, *The Two Irelands: 1912-1939* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 56; see also O'Brien and Ryan (eds.), *Devoy's Post Bag*, ii, 485.

the Irish Divisions for the front I had been of opinion that the Irish garrison was quite inadequate."[57] The garrison in Ireland had been eroded by the requirements of the Western Front. In September 1915 Wimborne commented that "from now on, less than three thousand trained mounted troops at the Curragh and a few guns were all the English troops that were at the disposal of General Friend in the event of trouble, domestic or foreign"[58]—though this figure did not include Irish Reserve Battalions, which were "practically training battalions.[59] Wimborne and Birrell (possibly in an attempt to deflect criticism after the event) both claimed to have been worried that "we have not enough troops in Ireland in case of internal trouble," but that the War Office opposed the idea of sending an additional division to Ireland as this would put a gap of a fortnight in the training and dispatch of troops to the Western Front. Wimborne explicitly stated to the inquiry that the demand for extra troops was not to assist recruiting; rather, it was to act as a "powerful deterrent" to potential subversives (a view that Birrill concurred with). Wimborne suspected that, regardless of its claims to the contrary, the RIC was not in a position to definitively assess the activities of militant nationalists.[60] According to Nathan, the RIC numbered 9,302 on 31 March 1916; its ranks had decreased since the outbreak of the war due to its members enlisting in the army, and the police were unwilling to compete with the army for recruits at this time.[61] The "present strength" of the Dublin Metropolitan Police was 1,121.[62] Did Wimborne expect a rebellion in early 1916? "I think the position was getting unsatisfactory. I do not mean to say that I, anymore than anybody I have met, apprehended a rebellion."[63] That can be taken to mean "no."

VII

The insurgent plans in Dublin were relatively sound in theory due to the location of defensive positions that could block major routes and infrastructure, but not in practice due to their numerical weakness and paucity of weapons.[64] In other words, in this counterfactual scenario, the Rising in Dublin is no different to the rising that did happen. The distinction lies in what might have happened elsewhere: what if the guns had been landed? There seems to have been little cognisance

[57] *Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland,* 34.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid., 38.
[60] Ibid., 35. However, the initial request does not seem to have been made on security grounds; recruiting seems to have been the argument, possibly to avoid awkward questions being asked about the Irish administration.
[61] Ibid., 10.
[62] Ibid., 14.
[63] Ibid., 40.
[64] P.J. Hally, "The Easter Rising of 1916 in Dublin: The Military Aspects," *The Irish Sword*, 8 (1967-1968): 48-57.

of the practicalities of getting the rifles from the *Aud* to the train that was supposed to ferry them north, but if the guns had been distributed across the west and south, and into the midlands (though not as far as Dublin), and if these areas were seized by the Volunteers; *then* what would then have happened? And how long could the Volunteers have sustained such a rebellion? The British mobilised huge numbers of troops rapidly to crush the eventual rebellion that did happen: there is no reason that this could not—would not—have been continued, and in the circumstances it was inevitable that the British would seek to crush the revolt lest the Germans think twice of having washed their hands of it. Or would the *perception* of a widespread rising have prompted an excessive reaction akin to what happened in Dublin, regardless of the reality on the ground? In time of war, it is inconceivable that they would not have responded on a disproportionately greater and more ruthless scale in time of war (though perhaps with an eye on US opinion as they did so). But would such a British response alienate the locals? How would Home Rulers have stood in relation to what could be painted as an invasion, if it were to happen on a sustained scale across large swathes of territory? (Equally, how would Ulster Unionists have responded?) Even if sympathy and support were garnered by the Volunteers—and the experience of places such as Galway City ("the most Shoneen town in Ireland"[65]) suggests that such support was unlikely to have been forthcoming—their limited munitions would not have lasted for long. The possession of Dublin and the continued loyalty of Belfast would have ensured that these cities could still be used as entry points for troops. The British could easily have swept across the midlands, but the line of the Shannon might slow an advance. It is hard not to think that, even in this reading, the British still win on the ground, and ultimately contain the rebellion. But how long would it take them, and what would the internal impact be? There was, after all, an attempt to fast-track Home Rule after the Rising: might similar negotiations have happened? The Boer Wars, previously a lodestar for 'advanced' nationalists, had ended in a British victory, but in less than a decade the British had come to terms with their former opponents, as the Union of South Africa came into being.

It is hard not to expect the British to win this alternative Easter Rising. But it could take them a while to do so, and such a victory might come with a price. As Liam Ó Bríain argued (with the benefit of hindsight):

[65] Cited in Conor McNamara, '"The most shoneen town in Ireland": Galway in 1916', *History Ireland*, 19.1 (2011), 34-37.

> Had the volunteers of 1916 been able to produce for a few months in the summer of 1916 the state of affairs which existed here in 1920-21, what might we not have seen when we consider the then state of the war, American opinion, etc etc? A few months of guerilla warfare, and I for one could visualise correspondence, a truce, negotiations, a settlement, all taking place in 1916. A Republic? Perhaps not. "We hoped to push the ball up the hill high enough for others to push it up the whole way after us," said Sean McDermott to me during the long conversation I had with him and Tom Clarke while we were sitting on the floor of the gymnasium of Richmond Barrack on the Sunday night of the surrender. […]

Based on what he had seen and heard, Ó Bríain continued to speculate on what might have happened:

> Had the fighting been prolonged for one other week, what a rush there would have been of journalists and historians to libraries everywhere from Moscow to Valparaiso, on the orders of hundreds of editors, to prepare articles on Ireland's history, on Ireland's wrongs, on England's crimes or on England's rights, on "small nations" and on "self-determination"! What a flow back to London there would have been of reports from alarmed ambassadors, ministers, consuls, agents and propagandists all over the world telling of the staggering blow to their cause, especially from the big American centres, from an America still neutral![66]

Ó Bríain noted the divergence of views within the volunteer leadership as to what their strategy should be: either a sudden revolt, or a guerilla war of attrition following any attempt to suppress volunteers, which would garner sympathy as a possible prelude to conscription. According to Albert Cotton "if Germany won the war we would gain our objective -an Irish republic; but if Britain won[,] our sustained revolt would have strengthened our position so much that we could hardly fail to get a hearing at the peace conference, and would obtain at least dominion status for all Ireland."[67] Was there an echo of the aftermath of the Boer War here as well? The prospect of a seat at such a table was a view held by some of those executed for their involvement in the Easter Rising. It is perhaps too optimistic a scenario; but it is a rational scenario, with a South African precedent. The radicalisation of Irish nationalists lay in the future: in 1916-17, would they have settled for less?

[66] Ó Bríain, BMH WS 6,16-18.
[67] Cotton, 'Kerry's place in the general plan', 101-102.

And what of the repercussions elsewhere in the empire? Brennan-Whitmore mused whether "if, on the outbreak of such a war, Islamic militants could be induced to revolt and if the revolt was of a sufficiently widespread nature, the effect on the military outcome of an Irish revolt might well be considerable."[68] The British Empire's difficulty might yet be Ireland's opportunity.

The other external consequence might not, however, come from within the empire. In this reading the commitment to the Rising weakens the British war effort elsewhere, with potentially pregnant consequences. And *en route* to a conclusion, it is worth glancing at an earlier counterfactual. In 1966, Conor Cruise O'Brien speculated on a rebellion that took place in 1918 rather than 1916.[69] Clarke, Pearse, and Connolly are still alive, and against the backdrop of conscription, a much bigger rebellion breaks out with mass support, resulting in a substantial British military commitment (though less than they deployed in the 1919-21 period), using "the same methods of terrorism as they did at the time of the Black and Tans" to hasten its successful suppression. Mutinies break out among Irish troops on the western front. Mutinies had "taken Russia clean out of the war"; it had already affected the French army. Might such a mutiny spread? Might it lead to a general revolt of the proletariat? "The premature character of the [R]ising[…]may also have been the misfortune of those who were to die in the Second World War."[70]

This may seem fanciful, as all such speculation is bound to be, but, as hinted at in Wimborne's testimony, a commitment to crush an Irish rebellion might have had a knock-on effect in terms of the British commitment to the Western Front. Would they have been weakened by a prolonged counter-insurgency in Ireland? Germany, in the July crisis before the war, had viewed the prospective "Ulster Crisis" as a useful distraction that would divert British attention away from continental affairs, and to their obligations to the Triple Entente. In October 1914 the German navy concluded that to remove Ireland from the equation, all they had to do was blockade Belfast and Dublin; surely this would be a relatively straightforward task? But in the prelude to the Easter Rising, this plan came back onto the German agenda as part of a projected wider assault against the British. The Germans let Casement return knowing his opposition to the Rising: did they care one way or the other? But this evident German disinterest excludes the possibility that a prolonged rebellion, along the lines suggested by Ó Bríain, might have reignited their interest. After all, the

[68] Brennan-Whitmore, *Dublin Burning*, 19.
[69] Conor Cruise O'Brien, "The Embers of Easter, 1916-66," in *1916: The Easter Rising*, eds. Owen Dudley Edwards & Fergus Pyle, (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968), 225-27.
[70] O'Brien, "The Embers of Easter," 227.

Germans revisited the Irish issue later: in late 1916 they planned a landing of 60,000 weapons at Tralee and Galway under submarine escort for February 1917, but the German reluctance to commit troops ensured its cancellation.[71]

Might the Germans have been emboldened in the summer of 1916? Might the British have been forced to extend conscription to Ireland in 1916 as a consequence, adding insult to injury in the midst of an unpopular war? Might they also have carried through on their commitment to Casement to recognise Irish independence? By the summer of 1916 the RIC were noting the shift in sympathies towards the rebellion in counties such as Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Clare—the centres of the putative rising in the west. Was there the prospect of sympathy on the part of Irish soldiers on the Western Front? Was there any prospect of a mutiny along French or Russian lines? That is more debatable; especially given the hostile reception accorded to Casement when he tried to recruit an 'Irish Brigade' from among Irish prisoners of war in German custody. But perceptions are revealing. The French, for example, were concerned about the implications of 1916 at a time when the ongoing battle of Verdun was taking a horrific toll on their army. They felt that the Germans were capitalizing on British fears of a German expeditionary force, and that this had, in turn, distracted the British from their obligations on the continent; a result viewed as a successful psychological ploy by the Germans.[72] The Conservative and Unionist elements of the wartime coalition would surely have demanded intervention in the event of any such German landing, and how, in turn, would Irish and German lobbies in the US have responded to this? And what of an enemy empire? The Easter Rising was noted with approval by the press in the Austro-Hungarian empire, who sought to link its outbreak to ongoing war propaganda about the "small nations" that Britain supposedly sought to defend: might an alternative, and more successful, Easter Rising along the lines suggested here have been noted further afield, as Brennan-Whitmore hoped, with further implications?[73] And this returns us to Roger Casement.

[71] Jérôme aan de Wiel, "Europe and the Irish Crisis, 1900-17" in *1916: The Long Revolution*, eds. Gabriel Doherty and Dermot Keogh (Cork: Mercier Press, 2007), 30-44.
[72] Jérôme aan de Wiel, *The Irish Factor 1899-1919: Ireland's Strategic and Diplomatic Importance for Foreign Powers* (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2011), 218-220.
[73] Jérôme aan de Wiel, *Irish Factor*, 232-36

IX

What did Casement think of the Easter Rising that actually took place? In the summer of 1914, writing from Malahide near Dublin, he wrote of how "it is quite clear to every Irishman that the only rule John Bull respects is that of the rifle."[74] We can safely assume that his life and career had made him concieve of what became the Easter Rising as simply another manifestation of the wretched of the earth rising up against their oppressors.[75] But that is not to say that he approved of it. Writing in Berlin at the end of March 1916, he gave full vent to his disillusionment with Britain's German enemies, and his belief that a shipment of weapons without "serious foreign aid, say 5,000 men" was worse than useless; it would be

> A masterpiece of idiocy that admits of only one explanation. That explanation is clear. The German Government want to bury the "folly" of the [Irish] Brigade, the Treaty & all their coquetting with "Irish rebellion" in this paltry gift of 20,000 rifles, leaving us to bear the shock and pay the piper and they want bloodshed in Ireland.
>
> My view is that we should try & get the guns across. If we don't do that we run counter to the strong wish of those at home and in America who are counting on this at least. The guns, if landed, are an asset & to merely land them need not necessarily involve any bloodshed, or serious trouble, if the men in Ireland can act well.[76]

If guns were to be landed in Ireland in April 1916, they could be used another day.

The rising envisioned by Casement was not the Easter Rising that actually broke out. While in custody in Scotland Yard, he observed that "I was distracted by my anxiety to stop useless bloodshed. I know the rebellion must fail absolutely. I had never wished for [this] rebellion in Ireland and it had been arranged without my knowledge. It would have been different if the seaway had been clear for a German landing [when a force could come over]."[77] In the speculative reading of history presented in this essay, that statement can still stand, for the one factor that might not have changed had our alternative rising broken out was the incarceration of Casement. His fate

[74] Casement to Richard Martin, 1 May 1914 (typescript), Benjamin Iveagh Library, Farmleigh House.
[75] Margaret O'Callaghan, '"With the eyes of another race, of a people once hunted themselves": Casement, colonialism and a remembered past' in Mary E. Daly (ed.), *Roger Casement and world history* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2005), 46-63.
[76] Casement, "A last page of my diary", 59.
[77] Roger Casement, "Rex versus Sir Roger Casement: Brief to counsel for the accused," NLI MS 10,764/1b: 21.

would surely have been sealed, even had his machinations resulted in even a limited degree of success. But a century later, we would surely be presented with a rather different set of centenaries to mark then the ones we currently face.

John Gibney is currently Glasnevin Trust Assistant Professor of Public History and Cultural Heritage at Trinity College Dublin for 2015-16.