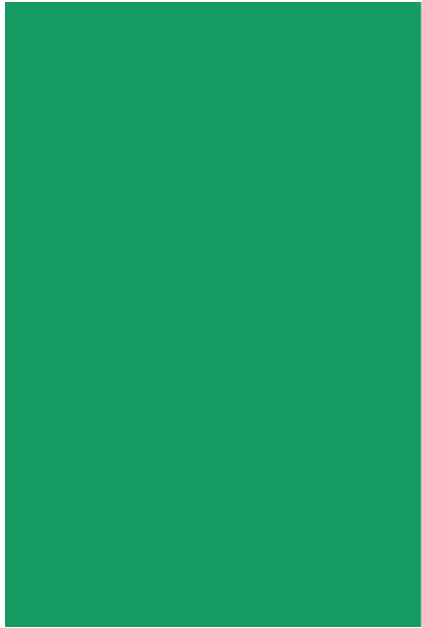


The Anglo-Irish Treaty

Something Is Better Than Nothing



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There is an old proverb that states all battles are won or lost before they are ever fought. This is true of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. The British had all the weapons and bullets going into the negotiations, while the future Free Ireland side was worn out and had few armaments left at their disposal. Great Britain was confident that the Irish Catholics would ratify a compromise agreement to avoid future bloodshed at the hands of English forces. If ratified by the Irish Parliament, the Dáil Éireann, it would leave any fighting to be internal among the Irish factions. This is exactly what the British wanted and what occurred.

The battle for freedom for the Irish covered centuries before the 1921 treaty signing. Many would argue that the most significant time period was the Victorian era, and the treatment that the Irish received from the crown in the 1800's. This drove many Irish abroad, seeking a new, better life. The full revolution effectively stretched from 1912-1924. The goal of the Irish War of Independence was complete separation from Britain and establishing an Irish Republic. The heavily Catholic counties of Ireland were at odds with the Church of England, as well as the underlying government. Significant events during these years included the Easter rising in 1916, the first strong uprising by the Irish, and the IRA killing two British Constables in January of 1919. "Bloody Sunday" in April of 1920 was one of the primary drivers for the peace talks the following year, as Great Britain placed Ireland under martial law. Violence was continuous within Ireland.

The primary negotiators on behalf of the Irish were Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith. Notably absent was the elected President, and future Prime Minister, Eamon de Valera. He would lead the anti-treaty faction after the treaty was ratified. The dissent would lead to the Irish civil war in the near future. Great Britain was represented at the talks by its Prime Minister, David Lloyd George and the indomitable Winston Churchill.

Without question, the ultimate goal of the Irish delegates was to gain immediate independence from Great Britain for the complete island, including the Northern counties. However, at the negotiations of the treaty this was never addressed, an Irish Republic or a 32 county united Ireland. This would not be possible as the Northern counties had a majority of Protestants who would be loyal to the crown. The British knew this and offered that a boundary commission along with the county populace would decide which country to which they would belong. The Brits wanted to keep the Northern counties and to this day Northern Ireland remains part of the British Empire. The most significant outcome from the treaty was the establishment of an Irish constitution and self-determination over themselves. While the country would still be under surveillance by the British, full independence would be achieved in the 1940's. The lynch pin in the treaty was in the continuing "Oath of Allegiance" to Great Britain, that the Irish would have to accept. This would effectively give England full access to Ireland, especially in terms of seaports and anything in its national security interest.

In many respects, Michael Collins and his negotiating team had little choice in signing the treaty and bringing the document back to their countrymen. The Irish team had to play the only cards they had, and deal with the realities of the era. The British knew they had every strong card in their hands. They would leave the Irish to fight among themselves over the results, which is exactly what happened. The bloodshed and civil war in Ireland in the mid-1920's was unavoidable. The sentiment between Collins's fighters and the de Valera's complete independence mindset, was too strong to avoid anything short of civil unrest, or in fact war. Satisfaction is not easy to achieve across an entire country, and Collins wrote that he knew he had signed his own death warrant by agreeing to the treaty. Unrest would remain for decades, yet the treaty was a remarkable first step for the Republic.

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