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Collins, Michael

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Collins, *Michael* (The Big Fellow)

Revolutionary leader and chairman of the Irish Provisional government

Born 16 October 1860 in Sam's Cross, Ireland

Died 22 August 1922 in Beal na mBlath, Ireland

Michael Collins was a revolutionary leader who rose to become chairman of the Irish provisional government in 1922 and Commander-in-chief of its army in the brief interval that supervened before his death the same year. He sought to use violence in a politically intelligent way to achieve an Irish state. Capable of unflinching ruthlessness, he did not conform to the stereotype of the fanatical European revolutionary in the era of the Great War.

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Early Life

Michael Collins (1890-1922), the son of a tenant farmer, was born on 16 October 1890 in Sam's Cross, West Cork. Educated locally, he scraped an appointment to the Post Office Savings Bank in West Kensington, and left for London in 1906, joining his sister [Hannie Collins \(1879-1971\)](#). He was subsequently employed by a firm of stockbrokers in the City of London, and finally by Guaranty Trust Co. In London he was involved in the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Gaelic League and Sinn Féin; he was sworn into the Irish Republican (or Fenian) Brotherhood (IRB) in 1909. He also joined

the Irish Volunteers. Returning to [Ireland](#) in January 1916, as conscription took effect in England, he encountered resistance among his contemporaries as an overbearing returned emigrant. He provided financial advice to the Plunkett family, and then worked for the accountancy firm of Craig Gardner. He joined the Keating Branch of the Gaelic League, an IRB front.

The Easter Rising and After

His role in the [1916 rising](#) was *aide-de-camp* to [Joseph Plunkett \(1887-1916\)](#) in the General Post Office. He was to become hostile to the staging of the rising as a Greek tragedy. He was interned in Stafford and then in Frongoch in North Wales, where the dispersed Irish prisoners were brought. Here, while resented by some for his thrusting, still callow assertiveness, and his involvement in establishing an IRB circle in the camp, Collins began to emerge as one of the better-known figures in his revolutionary generation, and was first designated the "Big Fellow". Shortly after his release in late 1916, Collins was appointed secretary of the Irish National Aid and Volunteer Dependents Fund. He became a member (and, it seems, President in 1919) of the reconstituted Supreme Council of the IRB. He was narrowly elected to the Sinn Féin executive in September 1917. He was appointed adjutant general of the reorganised Irish Volunteers (later known as the IRA). At the 1918 general election he was elected for Cork South. In April 1919, Collins was appointed Minister for Finance, and threw his remarkable organising energies into the organisation of the Dáil loan. By mid-year, he had also commandeered the position of IRA director of intelligence. His network of informants reached into Dublin Castle, giving the IRA an important advantage.

War of Independence

Collins, who contrived to remain at large, was centrally involved in the putting together of the "Squad", whose initial purpose was to kill a number of plain-clothes detectives in the G division of the Dublin Military Police. The intention was to achieve an escalation of the conflict, to terrorise others within the Dublin Castle system, and to provoke a repressive response from the British authorities. The strategy achieved its culmination on "Bloody Sunday", 21 November 1920, when a dozen special branch detectives were killed in their homes, prompting a massive backlash. It relied on after-events to give a vestige of credibility to Collins' insistence that the IRA's "organized and bold guerrilla warfare" was in self-defence.

In what became known as the War of Independence, Collins was a superlative organiser rather than a commander in the field. Capable of utter ruthlessness, he sought to calibrate the deployment of violence in the attainment of a defined political end. Few revolutionaries were so alert to public opinion. Though apt to pose as primarily a fighter, he was a highly gifted and exuberantly charismatic politician.

The Treaty and the Civil War

Collins was one of the plenipotentiaries in the Anglo-Irish Treaty negotiations. Conscious that the IRA was not in a position to withstand a full-scale British military onslaught, Collins came down on the side of the treaty, signed on 6 December 1921. He and [Arthur Griffith \(1872-1922\)](#), who called him "the man who won the war", were the Treaty's principal proponents. Collins became chairman of the Provisional Government, and remained Minister for Finance. His various endeavours to avert military hostilities with the Treaty's opponents, which exasperated Griffith, were unsuccessful. He and [Richard Mulcahy \(1886-1971\)](#) directed the military operations of the hastily constituted Irish Army. On 12 July 1922, he made himself Commander-in-chief, the last of the extraordinary sequence of overlapping positions he was to hold.

On the evening of 22 August 1922, returning from a tour of inspection in Cork, his convoy was ambushed in a remote valley called Beal na mBlath. Collins impetuously insisted on engaging the ambush party, and sustained a gaping head wound. His immense myth in contemporary Ireland continues to radiate beyond the remote valley not far from his birthplace in which he met his death.

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