



What's up with the Big Green Flag? The conservation of the flag of the Irish Republic

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Abstract

As part of the National Museum of Ireland's Centenary exhibition, 'Proclaiming a Republic', the decision was made to conserve the 1916 Rebel Garrison flags as key elements of the display. The flag of the Irish Republic flown over the General Post Office, Headquarters of the Rebellion, was intended as a major focal point. However the flag was in a very fragile condition. Due to its iconic status, the piece has been on almost permanent display, both in England and in Ireland, for the last 100 years. Iconographically unique, the flag was not professionally made and the painted lettering was visibly delaminating. Even moving the double-sided woollen flag out of the case presented difficulties. In consultation with conservators from the National Museum and other cultural institutions, a methodology was devised to both temporarily and then permanently consolidate the paint on both faces. Working together with the State Laboratories and the Garda Forensics Department all elements of the construction of and damage to the flag were analysed. This paper will outline the process of conservation combined with scientific analysis and show how when taken together with historic and documentary research this has thrown new light onto the multiple stories of how and by whom the flag was made.

Introduction

On Easter Sunday 23 April 1916, two armed Nationalist Groups, the Irish Citizen Army and the Irish Volunteers, led respectively by James Connolly and Padraig Pearse, took over a series of key strategic buildings around Dublin city. This event is known in Irish history as the Easter Rising or simply the Rising. The Rebels based their headquarters at the General Post Office (GPO) on Sackville Street, now O'Connell Street.

A variety of different flags were hoisted at the Rebel positions, mainly uncrowned green harp flags and a few tricolours of green, white and orange. Popularised by Thomas Francis Meagher in 1848, 'The white in the centre signifies a lasting truce between the "orange" and the "green" and I trust that beneath its folds, the hands of the Irish Protestant and the Irish Catholic may be clasped in generous and heroic brotherhood',¹ this flag was to become the official flag of the Irish State in 1922. While accounts of a tricolour on the GPO exist, only two small burnt fragments remain.²

Outside the GPO, Pearse formally read out a document entitled, 'Poblacht Na H'Eireann' (Republic of Ireland) from The Provisional Government of the Irish Republic to the People of Ireland. Popularly known as the Proclamation, it is aspirational in setting out the type of state the Rebels would like Ireland to become. Copies of the Proclamation were handed out to members of the

¹ Thomas Francis Meagher, Waterford (Co. Waterford), 8 April 1848.

² NMI. EW. 1153.



public. However to further broadcast the message and as a visual statement of identity, on the left-hand corner of the GPO at Princes Street, a large green flag was hoisted, with the words, 'Irish Republic' in bi-coloured letters of white and orange, on both faces.



*Flag flying over the GPO, April 1916.
© National Museum of Ireland*

The flag is directly referenced in the opening phrase of the Proclamation, 'IRISHMEN AND IRISHWOMEN: In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.' While the colours chosen for the flag are obviously deliberately derived from the Tricolour, the flag itself is iconographically unique.

In response to the Rising, British forces encircled the Rebel positions and by the end of the week Dublin city centre was destroyed and the Rebels had surrendered. The flag of the Irish Republic was captured as a trophy by British troops and subsequently became part of the collection in the Imperial War Museum, London.

In 1966, on the 50th anniversary of the Rising, the flag was formally returned to Ireland by the British government and has been on display in the National Museum, Kildare St and later Collins Barracks, ever since.³



*British troops with captured flag,
1916. © National Museum of Ireland*

As part of the Irish state commemorations of the Rising, a major centenary exhibition was planned at the National Museum (NMI), Collins Barracks. Entitled, 'Proclaiming a Republic' it aims to see the Rising from all sides – Rebel fighter, British soldier and Dublin civilian – and set it into the wider context of Ireland and the First World War. The decision was made to conserve all the Rebel garrison flags including the flag of the Irish Republic for display.

³ Footage broadcast as part of an RTÉ News report, 31 March 1966; <http://www.rte.ie/archives/2016/0330/778343-easter-rising-flag-returned-to-ireland/>

Removing the flag from previous display

The initial challenge faced by the conservator was removing the flag from exhibition. It had been placed flat, into a display case, a decade previously and access was blocked by display panels and the limited manner in which the case opened. This was compounded by the extremely poor condition of the flag itself. Preliminary analysis of the components was carried out; the ground fabric was identified as tabby weave wool and the paint samples of both white and orange colours as containing a high percentage of lead, indicative of ordinary house paint.

However any attempt to move the flag as it was would result in extensive paint loss, as the painted lettering was visibly crumbling and delaminating from the ground fabric. It was decided to carry out tests on fabric painted samples in order to find a way to temporarily consolidate the painted surfaces without any long-term consequences and allow the piece to be safely moved.

Cyclododecane spray, which suspends the consolidant in a waxy form over the surface and gradually dissipates over time was found to be effective.⁴ It has been previously used in paintings conservation, but tests found that it does not mark or damage the woollen substrate.⁵ The components of the aerosol spray are extremely toxic and removal was carried out with limited personnel in protective masks and clothing. The spray deposited a visible white layer over the object, and a roller could then be inserted to allow access to the reverse. Delaminating paint was visible on the base board. Once completely covered in consolidant, the flag was boxed and transferred to the conservation department.



*Temporary consolidation for removal
from display.
© R. Phelan Textile Conservation*

A film crew were refused access to the removal of the flag due to the safety implications. An unintended consequence was that the museum switchboard and website were inundated with enquiries. Moving the piece from display even for a limited time was seen as a political act.

Construction and condition

As is standard in conservation a full technical analysis of both the construction and condition of the piece was undertaken. The ground fabric consists of three narrow selvedge width lengths of wool each approximately 43-44cm wide and ranging in length from 122.5cm to 169.5cm. One edge is turned back and hemmed in the two lower fabric sections. This area exhibits no stitch marks or damage. The other edge has a large section of loss. Photomicrograph analysis of this area clearly shows a long straight cut edge, a small torn section, followed by two cut edges. No pole sleeve is present. The flag is machine stitched with cotton thread throughout.

⁴ Kremer Pigmente, *Cyclododecane Spray. Material safety data sheet.*

⁵ Stoner and Rushfield, p. 376.

The manner of construction is extremely unusual. The outline of the painted letters on the other face is clearly visible, as was the crumbling delaminated paint surface. Painted flags generally have a prepared silk substrate or separately prepared painted canvas inserts or appliqués. While the woollen fabric is fundamentally sound, there is no preparatory ground. As a result the loose weave and hygroscopic (water-absorbing) nature of the wool mean that every movement and alteration in humidity is causing the paint to shatter and lift.

The remains of previous display methods were also clearly visible, including pin marks and turned back fabric along the top edge and tacking threads running through the painted areas. The top right section had extensive distortions to the letters 'H' and 'S' of 'Irish'.

In order to ascertain the history of the object, images and records from both 1916 and 1966 were tracked down. Contemporary 1916 images show British troops with the flag deliberately upside-down and the large section already missing. In 1966 Taoiseach Sean Lemass, the then Prime Minister, is depicted with the hemmed edge of the flag turned around and pinned to a pole.⁶ Records showed the Imperial War Museum (IWM) had never treated the flag.⁷ IWM archives supplied an image of the other face of the flag taken in the 1960s. This was the side they had always displayed uppermost. This face has greater paint loss especially in the word 'Republic' and the distortion in the top corner is less extensive.

Consolidation of the lettering

In order to ensure the long-term preservation of the flag, a methodology to stabilise the paint on both faces, without altering the appearance of either face, needed to be adopted. Any form of liquid consolidant that could be applied to the paint would simply wick into the fabric, stain and possibly embrittle it. An adhesive overlay would irreversibly alter the appearance of the letters and later reversal of the treatment would result in further paint loss. As elemental analysis had shown the paint to have high lead concentrations; a consolidant such as gelatine or isinglass that must be kept at temperature was required. These could not be applied as a cold vapour through a medical nebuliser.

Having consulted widely with conservators of every discipline, John Gillis, Senior Book Conservator at Trinity College Dublin pointed me in the direction of a machine he had seen in use at the Getty Institute.⁸ The Lascaux AGS 2000 is designed to aerosolise any 1 per cent aqueous solution and maintain it at a heat of c.38 degrees.⁹ In this manner the paint could be consolidated without any staining or visible change in appearance. On consultation with the National Museum, the decision was made to purchase the equipment.

After tests carried out on sample letters painted onto a woollen substrate, each letter was isolated with a Melinex¹⁰ template. The consolidant (1 per cent gelatine) was applied in a fine mist moving continuously over the treatment area. It took five-six layers for structurally sound sections, seven-eight layers on

⁶ *Irish Press*, 1 April 1966.

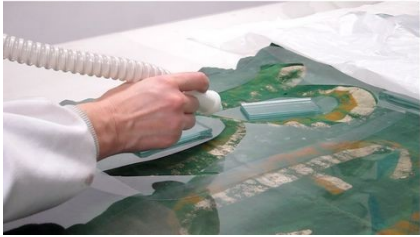
⁷ *Irish Times*, 31 March 1966.

⁸ Lohnas et al.

⁹ http://lascaux.ch/pdf/en/produkte/restauro/9_restaurierungsgeraete/ags2000.pdf

¹⁰ Transparent polyester film.

more friable areas. Testing was undertaken with a silicone tipped brush. This procedure was then carried out on the other face.



*Consolidation of painted surface.
© R. Phelan Textile Conservation*

Once the paint was consolidated, it was possible to start to humidify the badly distorted corner using a Sympatex¹¹ poultice to relax the whole area evenly. This had to be done in stages and the letters reconsolidated. While all the distortion could not be safely removed, the aim was to return the corner to its 1966 state.

Documentation and analysis

As part of the conservation process all the damage to the flag was investigated. There are several irregular areas of loss though the body of the piece, the surrounding fibres are desiccated and burnt, indicative of damage from debris when the building was shelled. There are also multiple small holes, these are concentrated towards the hemmed edge of the flag and many of them are in an aligned trajectory.

The British army used a standard ammunition .303 bullet during the period of the First World War. Working in conjunction with An Garda Síochána, the Irish Police Force, ballistics analysis was carried out at the Phoenix Park range. With the assistance of Detective Garda Dave O'Leary, a comparable sample of wool fabric was shot with period .303 bullets using a First World War British Lee Enfield rifle from the Garda arsenal.

Comparison of the sample under magnification with the holes in the flag revealed multiple points of similarity. Both have a small punched circular area of damage, 5mm in diameter with limited distortion of the wider surrounding area. The diameter of a .303 bullet is 7mm, but the fabric contracts back into position once the bullet has passed through.



Bayonet and corresponding area of loss. ©R. Phelan Textile Conservation

There is also a very peculiar area of damage under the letter 'I' of 'Irish' towards the hemmed end of the flag. It consists of a curved slice profile in three segments with long frayed edges and very little surrounding distortion. After further consultation with Garda forensics, the damaged area was examined

¹¹ Breathable hydrophilic laminate membrane made from polyester and polyether compound.

together with a British standard pattern 1911 bayonet. This was standard issue in the First World War and would have been fitted to the top of the Lee Enfield rifle.

While it was obviously not possible to insert the bayonet into the flag, the dimensions and shadow created by placing the bayonet above the object exactly match. Inserting the bayonet into a comparative sample of wool produced a very similar pattern of damage.

How was the flag removed from the GPO?

The Witness Statements of the Bureau of Military History (BMH) have multiple accounts relating to the flag. Sergeant Albert Fletcher-Desborough of 3rd Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment, recalls that, 'One of our orderly men ascended to the roof and hauled down the Defenders flag.'¹² However the interior and roof of the GPO were entirely destroyed and historic images show that the ropes supporting the flagpole have given way and the pole was hanging downwards.



*Ruined GPO and broken flagpole.
© National Museum of Ireland*

It has been speculated that the flagpole fell into the street, from where the flag was retrieved by British forces.¹³ But there are no dirt, soiling or distortions from footprints present. When the soldiers have the flag as a trophy, a large section is already missing and there is no visible pole sleeve extant nor any evidence of one on the hemmed edge.

The pattern of damage to the object throws some light onto how the flag might have been removed from the GPO. When the pole broke and was hanging out over the street the flag would have made a tempting prize, but as it was still well above street level it would not have been straightforward to reach. The British improvised armoured vehicles during the Rising, made from Guinness lorries with locomotive smoke boxes soldered together. Two soldiers standing on top of such a vehicle with bayoneted rifles could have accessed the dangling flag. One to hook it up, hence the bayonet hole and the other to cut it down, indicative of the long slicing cuts along one edge.

Display: obverse or reverse face

The result of this analysis has a direct impact on the display of the flag. The military convention is that all flags hang from the left; that is with the pole sleeve to the left as viewed and the fly end to the right. All evidence would appear to suggest that the correct 'front' of the flag is the face with much of the paint removed that the British displayed uppermost. However in Ireland the piece has always been displayed with the other face up, on which the political

¹² BMH.WS.1604.

¹³ Matthews, p. 43.

message, 'Irish Republic' is clear. After consultation with Ragnall Ó Floinn, Director of the National Museum of Ireland, the decision was made to mount the flag in the traditional manner, even though this was probably the reverse.



Flag after conservation.
© R. Phelan Textile Conservation

Who painted the lettering?

The conservation process has also thrown some light onto the contested issue of who painted this flag. The most popular version is from Maura O'Niell Mackey, a member of Cumman Na mBan (the women's auxiliary of the Irish Volunteers).¹⁴ She states that the flag was made from the bedspread of Nationalist MP Laurence Ginnel and that the Countess Markievicz painted the letters as the girls held the fabric taut over the grand piano. Mustard was used as an additive for the orange part which she refers to as gold. The missing section is attributed to Poppet, the Countess's dog, who jealously tore it off. At the end of this account, O'Niell Mackey does mention that a certain Theobald Wolfe Tone Fitzgerald assisted the Countess in the process.

While there is a small part of the hemmed section that is missing and might have been torn, the large section missing on the other end is clearly the product of a series of slicing cuts. Analysis has shown the paint to have a high concentration of lead indicative of house paint, not mustard. In order to create the sample letters for testing, it was found that the paint had to be applied very sparingly and then allowed to dry to create a ground layer, otherwise it would transfer straight through the absorbent wool. A second coat of paint could then be applied. The fabric must also be pinned out under tension while the paint is applied or the design will distort on drying. As the paint takes about eight-ten hours to dry and the lettering is on both faces; this would appear to be the work of a week not an evening.

Constance Gore-Booth, Countess Markievicz, was an Anglo-Irish aristocrat who became radicalised to the Nationalist cause during the Dublin Lockout of 1913. She took an active part in the Rising and was imprisoned afterwards. On her release she became the first woman elected to the House of Commons in 1918, though she did not take her seat. The Countess herself, like a good politician, never says a word about the flag.

The Countess had studied fine art in London and Paris, and like aristocratic ladies of the time produced landscapes and fine embroidery, including the beautifully worked Na Fianna Eireann banner, now in the Royal Collection.¹⁵ At the beginning of the twentieth century, signwriting and what would now be termed, 'graphic design' were considered a trade not art. All 28 letters are freehand and executed with great skill by an experienced hand. One hundred years on, there is a variation of 2-3mm in the width and 3-4mm in the

¹⁴ National Library of Ireland, MS 18,463; *Irish Times*, 5 October 2015.

¹⁵ Royal Collections Trust, RCIN 68941.

alignment.

However there is another, often overlooked, account of the flag. Volunteer Robert Walpole describes hoisting the flag over the GPO and says that the flag was pinned to the wall of a back bedroom in Surrey House (Countess Markievicz's home) for about a week prior to Easter 1916.¹⁶ He states that the flag was poplin, made in Fry's factory. But by hand over this statement is written, 'My impression is the flag material was bunting. Theo Fitzgerald.' Fitzgerald is correct, this being the term for plain loose woven wool, traditionally used for flags.

So who was Theo Fitzgerald? A founder member of Fianna Éireann (Irish Boy Scouts), he came from a large Nationalist family who lived at 173 Great Brunswick Street (now Pearse Street).¹⁷ His father Thomas filled in the 1911 census, when Theo was 11, listing his profession as 'Painting Contractor', while two of his sons are listed as painters.¹⁸ Hence Theo had easy access to a large amount of house paint. According to the Fitzgerald family the firm specialised in churches and stately homes, with Theo doing the decorative fine detail work.¹⁹ Theo and his brothers fought at Boland's Mills during the Rising, under the command of Eamon DeValera. He was 17 years old when he painted the flag.



'Proclaiming a Republic', exhibition display, NMI.

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Conclusion

The conservation and analysis of the flag provided an opportunity to develop new techniques and shed a new perspective on the construction and history of a cultural icon. The 1916 Rising, while a failure militarily, is seen as the foundation event of the modern Irish State. In Easter 2016 to mark the Centenary, a replica 'Irish Republic' flag once again flew from the GPO at the Princes Street corner. The original flag of the Irish Republic is currently on display in a new custom made case at the National Museum, Collins Barracks.

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¹⁶ BMH.WS.218.

¹⁷ James Pearse, father of Padraig Pearse, ran a stonemasonry business at 27 Great Brunswick Street. The street was renamed in 1926.

¹⁸ <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie>

¹⁹ Personal communication from Eithne Fitzgerald Adams.



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Author biography

Rachel Phelan holds a primary degree from Trinity College, Dublin and graduated from the Textile Conservation Centre in 1998. In 2002 she established a studio in Dublin, working for a wide range of institutions and private clients. She was accredited in 2005, is a board member of the Institute of Conservator-Restorers Ireland and is currently the Irish representative to the UK Conservation Register. Flags and ceremonial textiles are an area of special interest.