

Desmond Fitzgerald, who spent many hours talking to Plunkett and Pearse, recorded that the moral issues which had so long tortured Pearse were still not banished from his mind.

Plunkett could forget in conversation, the facts that surrounded us. Sometimes when there were only the two of us together we would talk about literature and writers, and he would ask questions about writers who were friends of mine. But with Pearse it was different. Even when he spoke of what might have been, one felt that the major part of his mind was turning over what actually was. Time and again we came back to one favourite topic which could not be avoided. And that was the moral recititude of what we had undertaken. These can hardly be called discussions for only the one side was taken. We each brought forward every theological argument and quotation that justified the Rising. And if one of us could adduce a point that the other two had not been aware of it was carefully noted.

This religious preoccupation was a feature of the rising which Pearse had turned over time and again in his writings. Most of the rebels were Catholics, and the more sophisticated among them had some difficulty in reconciling their actions with their religion. Yet the task was made easier by the divided attitude of their church. Firmly as the bishops always set their face against political violence, there were always priests who felt sympathy with Irish revolutionaries—some were even in the IRB—and could help to keep theoretically excommunicated men within the Catholic Church. But few of the rebels could have been as earnest in their practice of religion as Pearse, and few had to go to such lengths to appease their own consciences. One of Pearse's early acts in the Post Office was to send for a curate from the nearby Pro-Cathedral to hear confessions from the men.

By mid-afternoon, a new phenomenon forced its attention on the rebels: looting. There had already been unpleasantness from the crowds in Sackville Street, intensified as queues of women lining up outside the GPO to collect their British army separation allowances were told that with the establishment of an Irish Republic the allowances had ceased. Up to now the insurgents had been subject to ridicule and occasional abuse, but now the insults came thick and fast, and the mob turned ugly. They had already seen supplies being requisitioned without interference, since the police had absented themselves from the area, and there was nothing between the people of the nearby slums, who made up the majority of the crowd, and the goods in the high-class shops of Sackville Street

but the glass in the display-windows. Once the first window was broken the crowd went wild. As the rebel leaders gazed in mounting horror, the sovereign people trampled each other in their lust for the possessions they could never afford to buy.

Pearse, despite his sympathy for the poor, had virtually no firsthand experience of their ways, and had expected them to be at worst passive supporters of the rebellion, at best participants. The riots of the 1913 lock-out had been largely precipitated by police brutality, and Pearse had had no difficulty in ennobling, in his imagination, the exploited masses, while he deplored the conditions in which they were forced to live. Connolly had long worked closely with representatives of the urban poor, but he was quite unprepared for the extremes of behaviour so typical of any mob once it senses the absence of restrictions; the materialism on which his political philosophy was based gave him no clue to the frantic smash-and-grab party he now witnessed. The stream of slumdwellers running across Sackville Street with their pathetic trophies goaded MacDermott into action. He limped out of the post office and turned on a section of the crowd the eloquence which had won him numerous recruits to the IRB during his years as an organizer, but it was too late for words. His appeals to the looters not to disgrace the fight for Irish freedom went unheard.

Connolly took a more aggressive step, sending the diminutive figure of Sean T. O'Kelly at the head of a small party to dissuade the crowds with batons, but as fast as they cleared them from one shop another was invaded. When he arrived back to report defeat, Connolly growled that he would order another sortie to shoot looters down, but he did not. Pearse, standing beside Desmond Fitzgerald with a tragic face, backed up Connolly's strong line and said that anyone caught looting was to be shot. But when Fitzgerald told him later that one culprit had been caught, Pearse's heart failed him and he sighed, "Ah, poor man, just keep him with the others".

There was a steady trickle of new recruits during the afternoon and evening (including 30 of the Hibernian Rifles), as the news of the rebellion spread, but few of them brought much elation to their new leaders. Too many of them, like O'Rahilly and Fitzgerald, believed that the call to arms had been ill-advised, and came out of duty, convinced that death was inevitable. Louise Gavan Duffy, who had suffered from Pearse's impetuosity while she taught at St Ita's, rebuked him for his action, but helped to run the canteen efficiently all week. The Cumann na mBan contingent in the post office were assigned to the traditional female roles of feeding the men and caring for the wounded; several Citizen army women were aiding Countess Markiewicz in St Stephen's Green.