

2016 Decade of Centenaries History Competition

Title of project:

Piaras Béaslaí's 1916 Rising

Category for which you wish to be entered (i.e. 1916, World War 1; Women in the Revolutionary Period, local/regional category):

1916

Name(s) of class / group of students / individual student submitting the project:

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Background

This project focuses on the role of Piaras Béaslaí during the 1916 Easter Rising. The 1916 Easter Rising was the most formidable rebellion in the history of our state and it has shaped Irish society to the present day. Béaslaí played a pivotal role in the events leading up to the Rising and also in the Rising itself. Prior to watching TG4's 'A Terrible Beauty' we did not know anything about Béaslaí. This inspired us to research the role played by Béaslaí, a relatively unknown character, in the Rising. In this study we will firstly discuss the sources we used in carrying out our research. We will then briefly examine Béaslaí's background to establish why he ended up fighting in the Rising. Our main focus will be to examine his role immediately preceding, during and after the Rising.



Sources

Secondary Sources:

General books:

Initially we looked at some general history books, starting with our textbook *The Pursuit of Sovereignty and the Impact of Partition* by Vincent Foley.¹ This book did not mention Béaslaí. He was barely mentioned in other general histories of the Rising such as *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* by Charles Townshend or *1916: The Easter Rising* by Tim Pat Coogan.²

The Dictionary of Irish Biography and National Library Collection List:

This publication contains an article on Béaslaí. It was written by Patrick Maume and gives a brief background Biography of Béaslaí.³ Maume's article indicated that Béaslaí's personal papers are located in the National Library of Ireland. We found a collection list of these papers on the National Library's webpage.⁴ This collection list includes a brief biography by Marie Coleman. Coleman cites sources that she used to compile her biography. She noted that Béaslaí wrote a series of articles describing his role in the Irish Revolution in the *Irish Independent* in the 1950s and 1960s. We also found some relevant manuscripts in his collection that we will discuss under Primary Sources.

Primary Sources:

Irish Independent

In school we gained access to the *Irish Independent* archive through the Irish Newspaper Archive.⁵ This archive is fully searchable so we easily found the articles mentioned by Coleman quite quickly. A number of articles written by Béaslaí were relevant to his role in the Rising. We printed these articles, which are the main sources that we used in our study.

Michael Collins and the Making of a New Ireland (Vol. 1) by Piaras Béaslaí

This book was the first official biography of Michael Collins, published in 1926.⁶ It can be considered a primary source as Béaslaí witnessed many of the events described, particularly the relevant chapter dedicated to the Rising.

Piaras Béaslaí Papers

Béaslaí's papers contains thousands of written records. By searching the collection list we found a number of items that would be relevant to our study. We decided it might be useful to view some handwritten articles by Béaslaí in his paper.⁷ Our teacher went to the manuscripts room in the National Library and photographed these two articles. They look like notes that were used in making an article or maybe a speech on the topic.

¹ *The Pursuit of Sovereignty and the Impact of Partition* by Vincent Foley (2005)

² *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* by Charles Townshend (2005) and *1916: The Easter Rising* by Tim Pat Coogan (2001)

³ Dictionary of Irish Biography; "Piaras Béaslaí" by Patrick Maume

⁴ Piaras Béaslaí Papers; www.nli.ie/pdfs/mss_lists/beaslai.pdf

⁵ Irish Newspaper Archive; <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>

⁶ *Michael Collins and the Making of a New Ireland (Vol. 1)* by Piaras Béaslaí (1926)

⁷ Piaras Béaslaí Papers; National Library of Ireland - MS 33,935(16) 'North King Street' and National Library of Ireland - MS 33,935(18) 'Church Street on Easter Week'

Bureau of Military History Witness Statements

The online Bureau contains statements given by individuals who were involved in the Irish Revolution (1913-21). The Bureau was set up 'to assemble and co-ordinate material to form the basis for the compilation of the history of the movement for Independence'.⁸ The Witness Statements can be simply searched online. We were able to see a statement given by Béaslaí to the Bureau and other statements of individuals involved in the struggle.

Visual Sources:

Scoilnet Maps and Photographs

We used Scoilnet maps to identify the various streets and positions mentioned by Béaslaí. To get a better understanding of the area we walked around these key positions and took photographs using a digital camera.⁹

⁸ Bureau of Military History; <http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/about.html>

⁹ Scoilnet Maps; <http://maps.scoilnet.ie/>

Introduction

Background

Born Percy Beazley, Béaslaí became involved in Irish nationalism due to his family's heritage and his own upbringing. Béaslaí was born in Liverpool, England in 1881 and he was the son of Patrick and Nancy Beazley. His father edited the Catholic Times in Liverpool and his mother was a novelist. Béaslaí's grandparents originally lived in Co. Kerry but were evicted by landlords, and as a result emigrated to Liverpool. Béaslaí's family were devout Catholics and he was educated by the Jesuits at St. Francis Xavier College in Liverpool. The family's nationalism was weaved into young Piaras as he frequently read papers such as the *The Nation* and *Young Ireland*. During his childhood he would spend holidays with his Uncle Fr. James Beazley near Kenmare in Co. Kerry. While in Kerry, Béaslaí perfected the native language and by the age of 17 he was almost fluent in Irish.

Béaslaí became a journalist and also a key revivalist of the Irish language. He moved to Dublin in 1906 and became heavily involved in the Gaelic League. Béaslaí was a key figure in the formation of the Irish Volunteers in 1913. The following year he became one of the most prominent figures to oppose John Redmond's endorsement of the British war effort. Béaslaí also helped organise gun-smuggling missions and travelled from Dublin to Liverpool giving important messages to supporters and raising funds for the organization's cause.¹⁰

1915

The most significant task which Béaslaí completed prior to the Rising were the trips that he made to Liverpool on behalf of the Irish Republican Brotherhood's Supreme Council. In his Witness Statement, Béaslaí explains that he kept a diary for the period 1914-15. He recalled that plans initially began for a Rising in February 1915. He stated that Ned (Edward) Daly was appointed Commandant of the First Battalion on 30 January 1915. Béaslaí was soon elected as Vice-Commandant of the Battalion.¹¹ Béaslaí recorded studying various positions that could be occupied by Volunteers in the city. He was accompanied by people such as Daly, Tomás Ashe and Con Collins. After coming up with a draft plan, he submitted his proposals to Joseph Plunkett. In the end, his plans were not fully utilized for the Rising.

Trip to Liverpool

On the 16th of January 1916, Béaslaí met with Joe Gleeson from Liverpool, a member of the IRB Supreme Council. It was on this date that the Supreme Council decided on a date for the Rising. On the 22nd of January, Béaslaí met with his close friend Seán MacDiarmada who asked Béaslaí to go to Liverpool in two days time to deliver an important message to Tommy O'Connor in Liverpool. O'Connor worked on trans-Atlantic ships and acted as a courier between the IRB and John Devoy in America. Although at the time Béaslaí did not know what the message would be about and to whom he would give it to, he agreed to travel to Merseyside. On the morning of the 24th of January 1916, Piaras was given the encrypted message by MacDiarmada just before he set sail. Béaslaí decoded the message and he understood that he was to give an account of the German armaments situation and also the starting date for the Rising, Sunday the 22nd of April. Upon arrival, Béaslaí met with O'Connor and gave him the message. Later that evening he sailed home to Dún Laoghaire. The following morning Béaslaí reported back to MacDiarmada.¹²

¹⁰ Dictionary of Irish Biography; "Piaras Béaslaí" by Patrick Maume

¹¹ Bureau of Military History Witness Statement 261; Piaras Béaslaí

¹² "Dramatic Prelude to the Rising" by Piaras Béaslaí; *Irish Independent* 16 January 1953

Confusion on Easter Sunday

On Easter Sunday Eoin MacNeill's order that all "parades, marches, or other marches" were cancelled were published in the *Sunday Independent*. Béaslaí recalled the frustration and disappointment of Tom Clarke on hearing of the cancellation of the orders. He then went to his battalion's headquarters in Colmcille Hall on Blackhall Street to make sure his Volunteers were aware of the situation (see photograph 1). On reaching the headquarters he remembered the large volume of supplies that existed for the Rising that was supposed to begin that day. On Sunday evening Béaslaí went to the Keating Branch of the Gaelic League, located on North Frederick Street. He was surprised when Ned Daly arrived to tell him that the rebellion was to go ahead the next day. Béaslaí was told to meet at 7 a.m. in Liberty Hall and that action would begin at noon.¹³

The Rising Begins

As requested Béaslaí was up early to get to Liberty Hall. Near the hall was a small hut where breakfasts could be purchased. Along with Frank Daly, another Volunteer, Béaslaí purchased his breakfast. Rumours had obviously circulated that some sort of rebellion was to break out as the old man who served them asked "Is it to-day you're going out to fight?". Both Béaslaí and Daly acted surprised. The old man was concerned; "I was thinking that if there was firing between Liberty Hall and the Custom House, I would be right in the line of fire". Determined to make a joke of the man's remarks Béaslaí replied; "You could duck under the counter at each shot!!". Béaslaí then continued to Blackhall Street where he found that less than half of his battalion had turned out.¹⁴

North King Street, Church Street and the Four Courts

During Easter Week 1916, Béaslaí was Deputy Commanding Officer to Ned Daly; he fought in the North King Street and Church Street areas close to the Four Courts (see photographs 2, 3, 4 and 5). The roads and networks around the area were heavily barricaded and pedestrians who sought to pass were searched by Béaslaí's men. Barricades could be found the length of Church Street and other streets approaching it from both sides up to Brunswick Street. Officers in command included Eamonn Duggan and Eamonn Morkan. The battalion's headquarters were transferred from Blackhall Street to St. John's Convent on Brunswick Street (see photograph 6). Phyllis Morkan, wife of Eamonn Morkan and member of Cumann na mBan found the French Sisters of Charity in the convent to be 'wonderful'; 'They did everything possible to help and continued to help for a long period afterwards'.¹⁵ Béaslaí was also happy to have been 'welcomed with enthusiasm' by Fr Albert and Fr Augustine of the Capuchin Friary on Church Street.¹⁶ After just a day in the convent it was decided to move to Father Matthew Hall, a more suitable building with a central position and ample accommodation. This position was also closer to where the battle of North King Street was taking place. Father Mathew Hall was also used for accommodation by Cumann na mBan and it was also where the sick and wounded were treated. Anyone that was severely wounded were brought to the nearby Richmond Hospital, across from St. John's Convent (see photographs 7 and 8).¹⁷

¹³ "Dramatic Prelude to the Rising" by Piaras Béaslaí; *Irish Independent* 16 January 1953

¹⁴ Piaras Béaslaí Papers; National Library of Ireland - MS 33,935(18) 'Church Street on Easter Week'

¹⁵ Bureau of Military History Witness Statement 210; Phyllis Morkan

¹⁶ "A Thrilling Episode of 1916" by Piaras Béaslaí; *Irish Independent* 20 May 1957

¹⁷ Bureau of Military History Witness Statement 200; Fr. Aloysius

On Easter Monday some Volunteers took up position in an unoccupied public house on the corner of North King Street and Church Street. Lieutenant John Shouldice gave orders to break into the premises as it was evidently vacant. Béaslaí witnessed Shouldice order the smashing of all bottles of liquor so that ‘none of his men should make free with the drink and become intoxicated’.¹⁸ The pub, or “Reilly’s Fort” was occupied by the Volunteers until Saturday (see photograph 9). On Saturday a fierce British Attack supported by armoured cars was focused on King Street from Bolton Street. The stronghold of Reilly’s Fort” saw intense fighting during this incident. In a Witness Statement given by Shouldice he recalls how his men bore holes through walls of the pub in order to send out communications. This fact was not mentioned by Béaslaí. The battle between the Volunteers and the British forces lasted sixteen hours of intense battle. Eventually the Volunteers were forced to retreat as a result of low ammunition. They made a dash southwards suffering no casualties taking up a new position at a nearby barricade with other Volunteers on Church Street.¹⁹

Béaslaí was also involved in the successful taking of Linen Hall Barracks on Thursday of Easter week. Béaslaí recalled that taking the barracks sounded ‘a more difficult feat than it proved in practice’. He and his Volunteers received a tip that the men in the barracks were unarmed which proved to be correct. Béaslaí searched the men himself, found no weapons and stated that they were, in fact, not so much soldiers as clerks dressed in khaki. The barracks was then burnt to the ground and rebels faced great difficulty trying to stop the spread of the fire.²⁰

On noon Easter Saturday Ned Daly called a meeting of his officers at their new headquarters in the Four Courts. Not all captains were present but Joe McGuinness a First Lieutenant that showed incredible bravery over the course of Easter week was invited. It was reported to the captains that “Reilly’s Fort” had been evacuated and was now occupied by British Forces. Volunteers now took up positions to the rear of the Four Courts, with their only protection being the barricades in the area surrounding Church Street built over the course of the week. A failed attempt to recapture lost positions was met with a loss of communications with the General Post Office. It was clearly visible from the Four Courts that Sackville Street was under heavy fire but little did they know that the leaders had been forced to evacuate. By this time Béaslaí was feeling the effects of having little rest during the week. He slept for a period in a room in the Four Courts before being wakened by Eamonn Duggan. Dugan brought news that James Connolly had surrendered unconditionally. He was greatly surprised by this, as he ‘thought that the defenders of each position would be expected to fight on as long as fighting was possible’. Béaslaí then went outside and witnessed Ned Daly surrendering. Daly returned inside and handed the order of surrender to Béaslaí with the signature of Pdraig Pearse at the bottom. Béaslaí recalled Daly then burying his head in his hands and weeping. Soon afterwards Daly and Béaslaí called a meeting of all Volunteers present to make all aware of the situation. Some of the Volunteers were reluctant to surrender but were quickly reassured by Daly. A British army officer then approached the Volunteers. According to Béaslaí, the officer was very polite but came up with ‘an ingenious device to pick out victims for the court-martials’. The officer remarked ‘it has been decided, as a mark of honour, that your officers will be allowed to march at the head of the men’.²¹

¹⁸ “A Thrilling Episode of 1916” by Piaras Béaslaí; *Irish Independent* 20 May 1957 and Piaras Béaslaí Papers; National Library of Ireland - MS 33,935(16) ‘North King Street’

¹⁹ “The Hero of Reilly’s Fort” by Piaras Béaslaí; *Irish Independent* 19 January 1953

²⁰ “A Thrilling Episode of 1916” by Piaras Béaslaí; *Irish Independent* 20 May 1957

²¹ “The Surrender...and After” by Piaras Béaslaí; *Irish Independent* 20 January 1953

Surrender

Daly, Béaslaí and the rest of his battalion were marched off. Béaslaí remembered that there were few civilians on the streets except for a small group of middle-aged women who cursed and shook their fists at the Volunteers as they passed. Béaslaí stated that the streets were swarming with British military; 'There were sections of them armed and equipped at every street corner'. On reaching the bottom of O'Connell Street, the men were marched north where they were eventually halted at the Rotunda Hospital. Daly was immediately cast aside by soldiers who pressed their bayonets against him. Morkan and Duggan were also taken aside. Béaslaí was not recognised as a ring-leader. He was asked for his name and address, which he duly gave. The soldier who requested this information could not make out what Béaslaí had said. Béaslaí repeated in an angry voice. He claimed that his anger was due to his nervousness at the time. Béaslaí's battalion and Volunteers who had fought in the GPO were confined to a seating position on the green area in front of the Rotunda. In Béaslaí's biography of Michael Collins Béaslaí mentions the ill-treatment of the Volunteers by Captain Lee Wilson, an Irishman. He describes how he 'had prisoners hauled before him and stripped; he insulted, tortured and derided them in the presence of the others. He picked out old Tom Clarke, Ned Daly, Morkan, and others (including myself) for his bestial diversion'.²² Morkan confirmed in his Witness Statement that this ill-treatment had occurred, noting that Béaslaí, Clarke and Daly were 'the object of this officer's insulting behaviour'.²³ Daly, Morkan and Duggan were separated from the battalion and Béaslaí found himself sitting beside Joe McGuinness.²⁴

Court-Martial

Béaslaí was court-martialled in Richmond Barracks. Béaslaí was one of the first six Volunteers to have been tried by the courts martial, which he described as 'a mere travesty of judicial proceedings'. When the Volunteers were transferred to the barracks from the Rotunda on Sunday 30 April around one hundred men were kept in a large gymnasium part of the barracks. The rest of the Volunteers were taken away to be deported. It was only at this point when he found MacDiarmada, Plunkett and Clarke in his company that he learned of the events in the GPO and Moore Street.

Béaslaí was taken along with Duggan for a 'preliminary investigation' which he described as a frame up with a sole purpose of collecting evidence for the court-martial that was to follow. Both Béaslaí and Duggan were brought before two British officers that had been held as prisoners in the Four Courts. Duggan had visited both officers multiple times during the week to ensure that they were treated properly. Béaslaí had not seen either officers before as he was in Church Street for the majority of the week. During the investigation the two officers were asked two questions about both Béaslaí and Duggan; (1) 'Had they seen this man during the week?' and (2) 'Was he armed?'. Both officers answered yes to both questions in the case of Duggan. When it came to Béaslaí, one of the officers claimed to have seen Béaslaí in the Four Courts but was unarmed. The other officer truthfully admitted that he had not seen Béaslaí before. After this investigation both men were taken back to the room where they were initially. That evening they were given their charges. Their charges were taking part in armed rebellion with the purpose of assisting the enemy. They were to stand before the court-martial the following morning along with Joe McGuinness.

²² *Michael Collins and the Making of a New Ireland (Vol. 1)* by Piaras Béaslaí (1926)

²³ Bureau of Military History Witness Statement 411; Eamonn Morkan

²⁴ "The Surrender...and After" by Piaras Béaslaí; *Irish Independent* 20 January 1953

The three men were brought before three officers who sat behind a table in a small room. Another prosecuting officer sat to their right and some detectives of the Dublin Metropolitan Police sat at the rear of the room. The farcical proceeding of the court was recognised when the two officers who provided evidence the previous day were called upon to give evidence. Both of the officers then claimed that they both had seen Béaslaí in the Four Courts and that he was armed. Béaslaí responded by saying that on the previous day one of the officers had claimed to have never seen Béaslaí before. The officer's reply was; 'I may have. But I recognise you now'. Béaslaí protested and asked how he was armed. Again, the officer's reply was farcical; 'I don't remember, but you were armed'. A detective then stood forward to give evidence of character of the three men. He knew nothing about Béaslaí. Another detective emerged from the back of the room to claim that Béaslaí was 'a prominent Volunteer officer'. At the end of the trial Béaslaí, Duggan and McGuinness were asked if they had any statement to be made. They claimed that as Volunteers they were acting under orders. Duggan denied that they had any interest in supporting any enemy but were interested only with Irish affairs. No sentence was given to any of the men. They were then returned to the gymnasium where they found Pearse, Clarke and Thomas MacDonagh. That night they were marched to Kilmainham Jail. Béaslaí was placed into a completely bare cell. With such a lack of sleep over the entire week he lay on the floor and slept until daybreak until he heard the sound of shots outside. A few hours later an officer entered his cell to tell him of his sentence; three years penal servitude (see photograph 10). Béaslaí was taken to a different cell where he met Duggan and McGuinness. A sympathetic officer then told them of the execution of Pearse.

After the Rising

Following his sentence Béaslaí was imprisoned in Lewes and Portland prisons in England. He was released during the general amnesty in June 1917. Inspired by the election of his friend Joe McGuinness as a Sinn Féin candidate in the South Longford by-election. Elected as a Minister of Parliament (MP) to the House of Commons, McGuinness abstained from attending parliament in Westminster. Sinn Féin continued this policy and won 73 seats in the election. Béaslaí was put forward as a candidate for Kerry East and duly became MP for this constituency. He was a key figure in the establishment of the First Dáil Éireann. During the War of Independence that followed, Béaslaí used his journalistic talents in creating propaganda for the Volunteers (who became known as the IRA). As his personal friendship with Collins grew stronger it is unsurprising that he supported Collins in favouring the Treaty made with Great Britain in 1921. He became a Major-General in the Free State Army and held this position until 1924. For the rest of his life Béaslaí continued to support the Irish language movement, writing plays and poetry. In later life he became involved in Volunteer veteran's groups such as the "Association of Old Dublin Brigade IRA" and the "1916–21 Club" (see photograph 11). Béaslaí died in 1965 and is buried with Thomas Ashe and Peadar Kearney in the republican plot in Glasnevin cemetery.²⁵

²⁵ Dictionary of Irish Biography; "Piaras Béaslaí" by Patrick Maume

Conclusion

This project has outlined the role of Piaras Béaslaí in the 1916 Easter Rising. It is important to acknowledge the contribution of figures like Béaslaí who are relatively unknown and to not simply study key personalities of the revolution. From our study we found that Béaslaí was quite an important and significant figure, yet the importance of his role in the Rising have not been recognised, except in the case of his own writings. Perhaps the fact that Béaslaí was not Irish may have lessened his importance through the eyes of historians.

Given that Béaslaí was a journalist, dramatist and playwright, it is surprising that he did not write a memoir of his life. From the articles that we have read on his role in the Rising, he does not merit the importance of his own achievements – it may be for this reason that he has not left a written record of his life behind.

Photographs



Photograph 1. Blackhall Street. Béaslaí's Battalion HQ was located in Colmcille Hall, currently a residential area (5 Blackhall Street, second building from right hand side).



Photograph 2. North King Street (facing east)



Photograph 3. Church St (facing south). The Four Courts are located on the left hand side when approaching the quays.



Photograph 4. Church St (facing north). The Capuchin Church can be seen on the left hand side.



Photograph 5. Four Courts (photograph taken from opposite side of River Liffey).



Photograph 6. St John's Convent, currently St Paul's Primary School.



Photograph 7. Fr Matthew Hall



Photograph 8. Richmond Hospital



Photograph 9. “Reilly’s Fort” at the junction of Church Street and North King Street



Photograph 10. Béaslaí's photograph in a newspaper cutting from the time²⁶

²⁶ Piaras Béaslaí Papers; National Library of Ireland - MS 33,935(16) 'North King Street'



Photograph 11. Béaslaí pictured with many people that he mentions in his articles. The photograph is taken outside the Fr. Matthew Hall in 1964.

Back row left to right; Tom Sheerin, Frank Shouldice, Maurice Collins, *Eamon Morkan*
Front row left to right; John O'Connor (*brother of Tommy O'Connor*), Mark Flanagan, *Piaras Béaslaí*, *Jack Shouldice*, Fionan Lynch, *Phyllis Morkan*.²⁷

²⁷ “1916: The O’Connor Brothers Story”; <http://www.storiesfrom1916.com/1916-easter-rising/tommy-and-johnny/>

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

- *Irish Independent*
- *Michael Collins and the Making of a New Ireland (Vol. 1)* by Piaras Béaslaí (1926)
- Piaras Béaslaí Papers (National Library of Ireland)
- Bureau of Military History Witness Statements

Secondary Sources:

- General books:
1916: The Easter Rising by Tim Pat Coogan (2001)
Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion by Charles Townshend (2005)
The Pursuit of Sovereignty and the Impact of Partition by Vincent Foley (2005)
- Dictionary of Irish Biography
- National Library Collection List: Piaras Béaslaí Papers

Visual Sources:

- Scoilnet Maps
- Photographs