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National Library
of Ireland

Revealing History

Arthur Griffith

Journalist, Politician, Negotiator



Introduction

Arthur Griffith made important contributions during the Irish revolutionary period as a writer, journalist, politician, and minister. His book *The Resurrection of Hungary: A Parallel for Ireland* and his prolific newspaper journalism had a major influence on republican political ideas prior to the Irish War of Independence. The political party he founded in 1905, Sinn Féin, would be mistakenly blamed for the 1916 Easter Rising but go on to dominate Irish politics. Griffith's personal papers, held at the National Library of Ireland, underline the central role he played during the War of Independence, in the Anglo-Irish Treaty negotiations, and during the passionate Dáil Treaty debates that followed. Arthur Griffith was also heavily involved in the construction of the new Irish Free State before his health finally failed in 1922.

Digitisation of NLI Primary Sources

This PDF draws from primary source material held in the National Library of Ireland newly digitised to mark the Irish Decade of Centenaries (1912-1923). These documents range from personal letters, memoirs, and official papers to contemporary handbills, maps and photographs and help contextualise the decisions and motivations of the men and women, including Arthur Griffith, who helped shape the revolutionary period in Ireland.

Key Moments

1904
-**1906**

Political Thinker and Author

In 1904 Arthur Griffith published his influential book *The Resurrection of Hungary: A Parallel for Ireland*. His proposal for a withdrawal of Irish MPs from Westminster in order to achieve a republic in Ireland by peaceful means used the example of Hungarian parliamentarians in the 1860s. Griffith founded the Sinn Féin party in 1905 and served as its president and vice president. Although his newspaper *The United Irishman* failed in 1906 it was soon replaced by another newspaper, *Sinn Féin*.

1916

Griffith Imprisoned

Despite neither the party nor Griffith being actively involved in the planning or the fighting of the 1916 Easter Rising, the British authorities mistakenly called it the 'Sinn Féin rebellion'. As a result, Griffith was arrested and imprisoned in Reading Gaol in England.

1919
-**1920**

Dáil President

In March 1919, Griffith was appointed Minister for Home Affairs in the Dáil cabinet. When de Valera travelled to America in June 1919, he became acting president of the Dáil lasting in that position until his final arrest in November 1920.

1917
-**1918**

Elected to First Dáil

Arthur Griffith stood down as president of Sinn Féin in favour of Éamon de Valera in October 1917 and was elected vice-president of the party. Arrested in May 1918 as part of the fabricated 'German Plot' sweep, he was in prison when elected to the British parliament for Cavan East in a June by-election. In the December general election, he was elected to the First Dáil for both Cavan East and Tyrone North-West.

1921

Treaty Negotiator

De Valera chose Arthur Griffith as the chairman of the Irish delegation for the Treaty negotiations in London. The discussions started in October 1921 and finished with Griffith and his fellow delegates signing the Anglo-Irish Treaty on 6 December. In the Dáil Treaty debates that followed, Griffith was the principal speaker in favour of the agreement insisting that the negotiators had achieved the best possible terms. He also served as Minister for Foreign Affairs from 1921 to 1922.

1922

Died aged 51

After the ratification of the Treaty on 7 January 1922, Griffith replaced de Valera as president of the Dáil and formed a new government. In August 1922, not long after the start of the Irish Civil War, Arthur Griffith died from heart failure aged 51.



Writer

Arthur Griffith had a major influence on Irish nationalism in the early twentieth century through his writings. He co-founded *The United Irishman* newspaper in 1899 to promote his ideas on passive resistance and peaceful obstructionism. His newspaper also led a public campaign against British military recruitment in Ireland for the Boer War. By the time his book *The Resurrection of Hungary: A Parallel for Ireland* was published in 1904 he had come to favour parliamentary non-cooperation by Irish MPs at Westminster to force Britain into a peaceful political accommodation with Irish republicans. While not a pacifist, he believed that any Irish rebellion would ultimately fail just as the Boer rebellion in South Africa had finally collapsed. This idea of an independent Ireland that still remained a part of the British empire would eventually prevail during the Anglo-Irish Treaty negotiations of 1921.



The front page of *The United Irishman* newspaper on 24 February 1900 criticising British conduct in South Africa. You can find out more about this newspaper (MS 50,251/15) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsoo0739162#p age/1/mode/tup>

Political Leader

Arthur Griffith founded the political party Sinn Féin in November 1905. Its stated aim was to encourage Irish economic, cultural, and political self-reliance as well as promoting the establishment of an independent republic in Ireland. Sinn Féin won fifteen seats in the 1908 Dublin local elections but had little initial influence outside the capital.

Neither the party organisation nor Griffith himself were actively involved in the planning of or the actual events of the 1916 Easter Rising. This didn't stop the British government from referring to the fighting, however, as the 'Sinn Féin rebellion'. Griffith was quickly arrested and imprisoned in Reading Gaol in England.

In March 1919, Griffith was appointed Minister for Home Affairs in the Dáil cabinet before becoming acting president of the Dáil when de Valera travelled to America in June 1919.

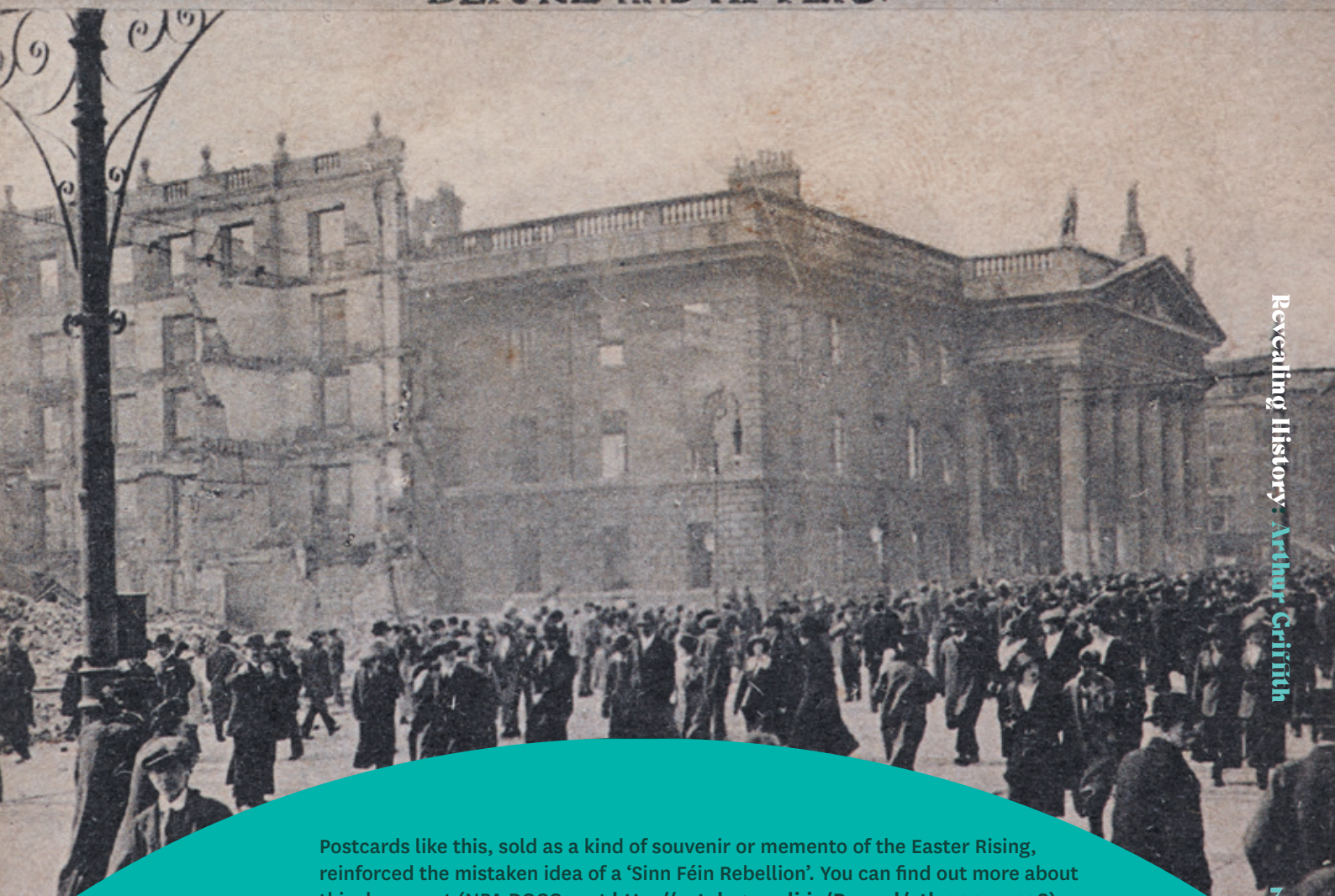
**Arthur Griffith founded
the political party Sinn Féin
in November 1905**



SINN FEIN REBELLION.

HOTEL METROPOLE AND POST OFFICE, DUBLIN.

BEFORE AND AFTER.



Political Prisoner

Arthur Griffith was arrested three times during the Irish revolutionary period. Imprisoned first in Reading Gaol in 1916 after the Easter Rising, he was also jailed in May 1918 as part of the fabricated 'German Plot'. The British plan to introduce conscription in Ireland in 1918 had led to massive anti-conscription rallies all over the country and an increase in support for both Sinn Féin and Irish independence. Griffith was a determined and articulate opponent of this Military Service Bill and was chosen as the Sinn Féin candidate for the Westminster parliamentary seat of Cavan East. Before the by-election could be held, however, Griffith was among 73 Sinn Féin leaders arrested on 17-18 May 1918 for what Lord French, the British Lord Lieutenant in Ireland, claimed was engaging in 'treasonable communication with Germany'. The fictitious charges of this 'German Plot' kept Griffith in Gloucester prison for the next ten months. During this period, he was elected as MP for Cavan East.

In November 1920 while acting president of the Dáil, he was arrested again and spent seven months in the more comfortable surroundings of Dublin's Mountjoy Prison. He was finally released when unofficial peace negotiations started to get underway.

His personal papers in the National Library of Ireland provide first-hand accounts of the difficult conditions Griffith endured during these prison stints and the impact those enforced absences had on his family life. His correspondence with his wife Maud and his son Nevin while in prison is particularly poignant. After a long courtship Arthur Griffith had married Mary Sheehan, known as Maud but he always called her Molly, in November 1910. They had two children, Nevin and Ita. Their home in Clontarf was continually raided by British Crown forces during the Irish revolutionary period.



Postcard of 3 March 1919 sent by Griffith from Gloucester prison to Nevin, 'Tell your Momma I got her letter'. News from the outside was precious for the Irish republican prisoners. You can find out more about this postcard (MS 49,530/5/6) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsoo0532501>



Arthur Griffith arrives at Downing Street in London for negotiations on the morning of 11 October 1921. You can find out more about this photo (NPA MKN30) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsoo0721137>

Negotiator

Arthur Griffith was part of the Irish peace delegation led by Éamon de Valera that travelled to London in July 1921 to negotiate a truce with the British government. This cessation of military action ended the Irish War of Independence and led to final peace negotiations. In September 1921 de Valera, with the full backing of Dáil Eireann, picked Griffith to lead a team of negotiators who would travel to London with full independent powers to accept or reject a negotiated settlement with the British government. De Valera stayed in Dublin.

In October 1921 formal negotiations started between the two delegations at 10 Downing Street in London with Prime Minister David Lloyd George leading the British team and Arthur Griffith chairing the Irish delegates. The tense negotiations continued until December when Lloyd George delivered an ultimatum to the Irish delegates. Sign the Treaty or face the immediate resumption of war between Britain and Ireland. Griffith indicated that he would sign even if his fellow delegates would not. Reluctantly the Irish negotiating team agreed to the terms. The Irish plenipotentiaries and their British counterparts signed the 'Articles of Agreement for a Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland' at 2:15am on 6 December 1921. Griffith was the first to sign the final document.

Arthur Griffith was part of the Irish peace delegation led by Éamon de Valera that travelled to London in July 1921

Pro-Treatyite

The terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty divided Sinn Féin and the country. Arthur Griffith, who was keen to end the violence in Ireland, wanted the Dáil to approve the Treaty as a stepping-stone towards full independence. Although he agreed with the anti-Treaty side that the terms were not ideal, he argued forcefully that they were the best available. He was adamant that the interests of the Irish people should take priority over abstract political ideals.

As the most senior signatory of the Treaty and having voted in favour of the Treaty in the Sinn Féin cabinet, Griffith was the target of concerted anti-Treaty propaganda and personal abuse in the difficult public debate that followed. He was confident, however, that the public backed his stance and he received many private messages of support from Ireland and from Irish America.

On 19 December Griffith proposed the motion ‘That Dáil Éireann approves of the Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland, signed in London on 6 December 1921.’ He added his own considerable political weight as the principal pro-Treaty speaker in the Dáil debates that followed. On 7 January 1922 Griffith provided a robust defense of the Treaty in the Dáil to counter the arguments of de Valera and other anti-Treaty TDs. The pro-Treaty side prevailed later that day when Dáil Éireann ratified the Treaty by sixty-four votes to fifty-seven. When de Valera was later defeated in the election for president of the Dáil, anti-Treaty TDs walked out in protest. Griffith was elected in his place and formed a new government.

‘That Dáil Éireann approves of the Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland, signed in London on 6 December 1921.’



Memorial postcard with its portrait of Arthur Griffith produced and sold after his death. You can find out more about this postcard (NPA POLF88) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsooo642643>

No. 2

DO YOU WANT TO BE FREE

NATIONALLY To govern yourself, in your own way, for your own good.

COMMERCIALLY To develop and protect your Industries, by tariffs if necessary.

SOCIALLY To deal with your own problems, in your own way.

INDIVIDUALLY To hold in peace; to acquire in justice; to pursue happiness.

?

THEN VOTE FOR THE TREATY

Irish Labour, Irish Paper and Irish Ink.

Pro-Treaty poster listing four reasons to vote in favour of the terms. You can find out more about this poster (EPH A17) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsooo276809>

Minister

While Arthur Griffith led the new Dáil government, Michael Collins became the chairman of the Irish provisional authority to which the British transferred their actual powers. Griffith attended most cabinet meetings of this new Provisional Government although he was not an official minister. By the end of April 1922, the Dáil government had disappeared completely but Griffith remained a frequent visitor to London to negotiate with the British government or to explain the actions of the provisional government. In the run-up to the Irish Civil War Griffith was insistent that the provisional government should crack down on uncooperative anti-Treaty soldiers but he was genuinely heartbroken by the start of the fighting in June 1922.

Final Months

In the months leading up to Arthur Griffith's death in 1922, there were clear signs that his health was deteriorating. The strain of his heavy involvement in the Anglo-Irish Treaty negotiations, his rigorous public defence of the settlement and the difficulties in establishing the new Irish Free State all contributed to his failing health. His signed final statement, written four months before his death in April 1922, suggests that he knew that his physical condition was declining rapidly. Despite these health warnings, Griffith dedicated himself to his work right up until he suffered a fatal heart attack on 12 August 1922. Dead at just 51 years of age, Arthur Griffith was the first head of an Irish government to have a state funeral with businesses and shops closed and house blinds drawn right across Dublin. He was buried in Glasnevin Cemetery.

Signed statement dated 15 April 1922 and written in Sligo from Arthur Griffith referring to the disposal of his possessions. In his final statement, opened after his death, he also asked the Irish people to 'stand firm for the Free State'. You can find out more about this document (MS 49,530/20) at <https://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsoo0532762>

Conclusion

Arthur Griffith, writer, journalist and politician, was a central figure in the Irish revolutionary period. As newspaper editor and journalist, he was influential in the formation of republican political thought. His ideas for Irish self-rule achieved by peaceful means as articulated in his book *The Resurrection of Hungary: A Parallel for Ireland* eventually prevailed with the creation of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921. Founder of a party, Sinn Féin, which was wrongly blamed for the 1916 Easter Rising but which eventually dominated Irish politics, Griffith was a skilled and effective politician. While he was not a militant and took no part in any fighting, he was imprisoned multiple times due to his political beliefs. His stature in republican circles was shown with his appointment as chairman of the Irish delegates who negotiated the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Arthur Griffith's political reputation after his death in 1922 was soon eclipsed, however, by other leading republican figures like Michael Collins who was killed ten days after the death of Griffith.



Griffith-Collins Cenotaph, Leinster Lawn, Dublin. A commemorative monument unveiled in 1923, it gave Griffith and Collins equal pride of place. You can find out more about this photo (NPA DOCG59) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsooo0722255>



Arthur Griffith's funeral cortège leaving City Hall in Dublin on 16 August 1922, where his body had lain in state. You can find out more about this photo (Ke 167) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsoooo030679>



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