



## Mick: The Real Michael Collins

*Peter Hart*

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## **Mick: The Real Michael Collins** Peter Hart

Few leaders in history have been as mythologized as Michael Collins. Before his death at 31, he had fought in the Easter Rising, organized the IRA and out-spied British intelligence, negotiated the Anglo-Irish Treaty, and run the first independent government in Ireland. Peter Hart's groundbreaking biography restores humanity to this mythical figure. Drawing on previously unknown sources, delving into Collins's pre-revolutionary past, and assessing the methods—and the costs—of his rise to power, *Mick* reveals a man of often ruthless ambition, more politician than soldier, whose friendships went no farther than his interests. A work as thrilling as it is authoritative.

## **Mick: The Real Michael Collins Details**

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Memoir

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## IOSEPHVS BIBLIOTHECARIVS says

I finally finished Mick: The Real Michael Collins by Peter Hart which I began almost exactly one year ago. My attraction to this book was my obvious admiration of Collins and the opportunity to read a new biography (there have been many before). Although I was excited, I was also wary because this book was supposed to take a not-very-flattering look at Collins' life. I found this to be true as Hart attempted to look through the praise and hero-worship that has accompanied Collins since his untimely death in 1922. Hart in several places goes too far, interjecting spite and taking the opposite position just to stir things up.

I can say one good thing about the effect the book has had on me, though: if I had not been reading this book, I would never have chosen the topic I did for my final university history paper and broken new ground in the canon of Collins literature. Overall I found it to be very informative and an exciting read (this is probably due to the fact that this is the first Collins biography that I have read cover to cover and there were many things that I learned for the first time). Despite all of Hart's best efforts, I still find myself a devotee of Michael Collins, maybe even more than before, and for that reason I would recommend this book to anyone interested.

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## Rich says

Tough read - it was interesting to learn about the less-glorified side of Michael Collins and the book provides the reader with what appears to be a very accurate description of Collins, but it got very bogged down by specific details.

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## Mark says

There are few people in modern Irish history who loom larger than Michael Collins, "The Big Fellow" who more than any other individual is credited with winning independence for Ireland. In a matter of a few short years he emerged from the ranks of the Republican movement to become one of the key figures in the struggle against British rule. His early death as a result of an ambush in the subsequent civil war gave him the aura of a lost leader, laden with the possibilities of what might have been. In this book, Peter Hart seeks to penetrate beneath the many legends surrounding Collins in order to get at the truth behind this famous figure.

Faced with the stories and misconceptions about Collins's life (many of which were of his own making), Hart bases his narrative on the extensive documentary evidence about his subject's life. The Collins that emerges is not a great guerrilla warrior but a master administrator, one whose organizational abilities and work ethic were both the keys to his rise and his great contribution to victory. These skills were the product of his years in London, where he worked as a postal clerk and spent his free time in various Irish social organizations. His subsequent rise through the ranks of the Irish revolutionary leadership was aided by the loss of the top leadership in the aftermath of the Dublin rising in 1916. The loss of most of the senior leadership created opportunities that Collins exploited to the fullest, gaining positions of authority in which his managerial

talent ensured a flow of money, supplies, and (most critically) intelligence to the members of the IRA in the field.

Hart's achievement in uncovering the real Michael Collins from the layers of myth that built up over the years is impressive, providing a truer assessment of his role in Irish independence than any previous biography. His detective work on Collins's time in London is especially exemplary here, illuminating a part of his subject's life often overshadowed by his subsequent achievements. People seeking the Collins of legend would be better off watching Neil Jordan's hagiographic depiction, but for those wanting to discover the true Michael Collins, this is the book to read.

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## **Matt S says**

I appreciate this book for its research. Two issues I have are both with Hart. First, it appears to be his intent to reduce Collins' position in history by using factual research then injecting question into situations alluded to by the 'evidence.' This served to cheapen the discussion by saying things along the lines of, 'could he have been gay? He spent a lot of time with men, you draw your own conclusion.' I don't think that has a place in biography. Finally, Hart makes his most harsh judgment in the final paragraphs of the conclusion saying that greatness is only coupled with 'moral stature.' I suppose if Hart has decided to take an intrinsically pure philosophical definition of greatness in the final paragraph of his book, it could be a reasonable assertion. I think Collins would have said something along the lines of it being gobshite and he wouldn't be wrong either. True greatness isn't a concept to inject in the discourse so late as measure of Collins. As far as I'm concerned, greatness achieved. Collins is the prototype Cincinnatus who rises to the occasion and takes advantage of his circumstances and does for the greater good.

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## **Greg says**

Michael Collins has become a mythological figure. He rose to prominence, was among the leading cadre of politicians that established an independent Irish Republic in the twentieth century. To be sure, there are facts, but those facts are often obscured by the hagiographical biographies that have been written since his death. With a noble purpose in mind, Peter Hart seeks in this book to set the record straight. Hart's introduction is brilliant: "First and always in considering the life of Michael Collins there is the Story of Michael Collins, a story nearly fantastic in its details. Collins, the genius behind the Irish Republican Army's guerrilla campaign, the inspiration for Begin and Mao. The superspy who confounded British intelligence. The gun-runner who bought the first tommy guns right off the production line. The financial wizard who bankrolled the Irish revolution from a hundred secret accounts. The head of the clandestine Irish Republican Brotherhood, the Black Hand of republicanism stretching from New York to London. The godfather whose personal squad of hitmen always found his enemies before they found him. The statesman who could make the final deal with Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George – and make it stick. The founder and defender of the new Irish Free State, the Chairman, Commander-in-Chief and Minister of Everything, who – in seven months – assembled a new government, parliament, army and constitution. The man who strove for peace and then won the Civil War, saving Irish democracy from Irish fanaticism. The man of sweeping political vision, decades ahead of its time in its promise of economic, social and cultural progress. And the final act: the slain hero who died fighting in his home county of Cork – two months away from his thirty-second birthday. Collins the indispensable, the irreplaceable, the Lost Leader unknown before 1917 and mourned by a nation in despair in 1922. The Big Fellow. The Man Who Won The War. What's Good Enough For Mick

Is Good Enough For Me.”

Unfortunately, it is difficult for me to truly discern the truth behind many of Hart’s claims. They strike me, on the whole, as plausible. However, Hart’s tone is one of accusatory condescension. Collins, in Hart’s eyes, was not a great man, but rather a mediocre man who opportunistically leveraged unprecedented nationalistic upheaval to thrust himself almost quixotically into power. Collins is, in Hart’s opinion, a forceful personality, a tireless worker, a man of middling intelligence, and enforcer of others ideas when necessary. This is not the stuff of mythology. The writing is overly verbose at times, and on the whole the most damaging to Hart’s case is the lack of evidence presented with his accusations.

I did find much to learn as an outsider to Irish history, and on the whole I do recommend reading this book, albeit with a cynical eye. At the beginning of his political career Hart tries with scant data to portray Collins. At the beginning, he did not seem to be a radical. Hart notes that he subscribed to the conservative and anti-Parnellite *Weekly Freeman’s Journal*, and on the whole disliked radical politics but “possessed considerable moral courage and independence of mind” (10). As he grew in his career, the data certainly points to the fact that he was not a financial genius. His school record is average at best – failing exams and finishing in the lower third of his clerk examinations. He was typical in many ways, but Hart does note that his secularism set him apart from the Catholic nationalists in his company. Hart also notes his opportunistic view of socialism, while not declaring Collins a socialist.

While interned at Frongach, Collins slowly developed a more influential circle. He frequently sided with the minority, yet end up in positions of increasing authority. In sports, he was not a fantastic athlete but was a spiritual presence for his teammates, and in his dealings with his peers could wax between charming and bullying. Ultimately, he ended up in the Dail, running very efficiently its most influential department. His career was launched. Hart notes that he maintained this position of authority with a simple secret of success: “he worked harder, longer, on more tasks than anyone else.” Hart notes he slept little, and felt compelled by circumstance to drive as hard as he was capable. These are certainly admirable traits.

On the Treaty, Hart presents a fairly persuasive argument that Collins was outmatched by Lloyd George’s negotiating tactics, and by comparison looked quite sophomoric. This actually is fairly understandable, given the wide disparity in experience and training between the two men. Collins, in Hart’s view, was ambivalent to the terms of the treaty, but in the end committed to it because he believed it to be the only deal capable of giving Irish independence, and in the full knowledge that the Irish could not defeat the British in a direct war. Once committed, he was unwavering in his support. Hart does not treat de Valera or his motivations favorable. After reading the book, I found myself firmly on the side of Collins against de Valera in their political separation. The Dev comes across as a smarter, but more opportunistic, and less altruistic man than Collins. Given Hart’s aspersions on Collins character throughout the book, that is saying something. In the end, the radical elements that both men helped to put into power became uncontrollable by them. The remainder of the twentieth century saw Ireland emerge as an ambitious, politically independent and vibrant country. One can only wonder if there was a less bloody path, and whether the decisions of these two men could have changed events had they ultimately chosen to work together.

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## **Mark says**

Those interested in a purely stoical and factual approach to the subject of Michael Collins' legacy in the IRB/IRA are strongly cautioned to read the introduction to this book in the store before purchasing it.

What is evident from the very outset is that the author, Peter Hart, seeks to discount on some levels the lasting effect of Collins and his work on the Irish republican movement. While his intentions are at first objective glance, not entirely pernicious, the constant injection of his opinion and perspective eventually eclipses the narrative of Collins' life, and the book stagnates into an almost adolescent frustration with the figure's mythical status.

What's good here is the sober approach to an oft-canonized historical figure. What's bad here is that it always floats just above reveling in derision of him. Either way, this is by no means a balanced and unbiased portrait of the Collins. It is as slanted as the numerous works that deify him, and clearly written in a reactionary attitude towards such pre-existing works. (The introduction sees fit to detail several biographies the author finds wanting in just this exact manner.)

On its own merits, it is an exciting narrative if you can get around the author's clearly antagonistic voice. The latter half of the story detailing the signing of the Anglo-Irish treaty is especially compelling, and redeems the greater part of the book. However, I purchased this book for education on the man and his tactics - the portrait of the former clearly had ulterior interests and the portrait of the latter was omitted almost entirely.

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### **Doug says**

A new, critical biography of Michael Collins is long overdue. This isn't it. This is one of the most poorly written books I have read in a long time. It is laden with innuendo and speculation. In a typical passage, Hart proceeds to say there is no information about Collins and prostitution and then make the case that almost assuredly used them.

"We have very little to speculate with on the subject of Collins and what he might or might not have got up to on the streets of London or Dublin, but we should not dismiss the possibilities out of hand. Republicanism was not the opposite of sex, despite its hyper-respectable self-image. It had its secret liaisons and its bohemian fringes - as in the Plunketts' Larkfield commune. His pals in London weren't choirboys either, and nor was he. Frank O'Connor felt that Collins was too 'shrewd' (whatever that means) to pay for sex, but it may have been pretty difficult to get otherwise. Nor would it have been out of character for swear', drinkin'; and smokin' Mick Collins to try another temptation." (343)

Ignore the bad writing, ignore the baseless innuendo, and you're still left one of the most poorly argued quasi-historical biographies you'll ever find. Hart's central thesis, that Collins was indelibly marked by his experience as a clerk in London is highly suspect. It hardly comports with the facts even as Hart fudges them. His conclusions that anyone of his circle could have 'been Michael Collins' is to say anyone could have been Washington, Lincoln, Napoleon, Garibaldi or Mandela. Don't bother with this 426-page piece of drivel.

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### **Nathan says**

The story of Michael Collins in Irish history is replete with hagiography and embellishment. He is cast as an iconic figure with few, if any faults. Peter Hart's biography puts paid to that view. Hart takes the reader from Collins youth through his death, examining each era in his life, defined by the significant shifts in his activities. The author goes more in depth than most Collins' biographers; however, he also interjects his own conclusions, rather than laying out the facts and allowing the reader to make their own determination. The

flow can feel a bit disjointed due to the structure of the biography, with the transitions between eras not as smooth. Hart doesn't gloss over the flaws in Collins, how he gathered allies, alienated those he deemed important, and confronted his enemies. Most of all, though, Hart emphasizes the truly practical nature of Collins - his drive to achieve independence for Ireland as fast as possible, and his intense desire to take the country from war to peace.

Overall, this was a great book for an objective history of the life, triumphs, and tragedies of one of the most important figures in Irish history.

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### **Jaime says**

The best parts of this book were when Michael Collins got angry at meetings and stormed off...on his bicycle. This is actually a very easy to read biography of a fascinating man.

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### **The Scrivener's Quill says**

The book doesn't grab me. It makes assumptions that I know a heap of Irish history' the author makes historical references that he assumes are general knowledge. It also wasn't moving fast enough for me to keep it up. The book cover is great, but it needs to move faster.

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### **Juicy Julian says**

A solid account of a figure shrouded in mystique, myth and legend - especially for someone like myself living in the state he had a major hand in creating, where the [school] history books tended to display him in the light of a brave warrior and master of subterfuge. The reality of a mediocre but dedicated, hard-working and shrewd accountant, bureaucrat and politician was slightly jarring but made far more sense in context than the picture of a Cú Chulainn-esque figure I had previously thought him to be, moving rapidly across the country during the War of Independence to rouse the flying columns and guerillas to battle against the British occupiers - rather than a man with little control over an organization he himself had given autonomy to in reforming the Volunteers, not conducting the war itself but giving advice oft times from his various offices in the capital.

Hart gives the lie to the notion of Collins as a messianic, predestined sort of character born to do the things he did and with a natural aptitude for the roles he played, fated to be a big figure in Ireland's history from the beginning. Instead he tells us of what was acknowledged by many as his unwelcome overbearance throughout his life, not especially aiming for any roles of leadership until after the 1916 rising and his stint in prison, two things that would open up a new world for him and lead him down the path to becoming the figure we all know today, still a sort of household name even a century later.

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### **Nicholas says**

This being the first Michael Collins biography that I have read, I cannot attest to its superiority over its

predecessors, but I can say that this is one well written and thorough look at the life and actions of Michael Collins.

The author attempts to look at "Mick" as a man, and not some legendary character out of Irish myth. A man has faults, a man is not perfect, a man tries his best and sometimes comes up short, and I feel that Peter Hart did a wonderful job of showing these imperfect characteristics of Collins. At times Hart does seem to relish almost too much in his demystification of Collins, as other reviews have stated, but overall he paints a generally positive portrait of this great man.

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### **Nancy says**

Nothing earth-shattering or revealing in this book about Collins that hasn't already been printed.

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### **Dianna LeFevre says**

A bit dry, but very balanced. Would have liked a bit more detail about some of Collins' activities while working for home rule, but on the whole, a good introduction.

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