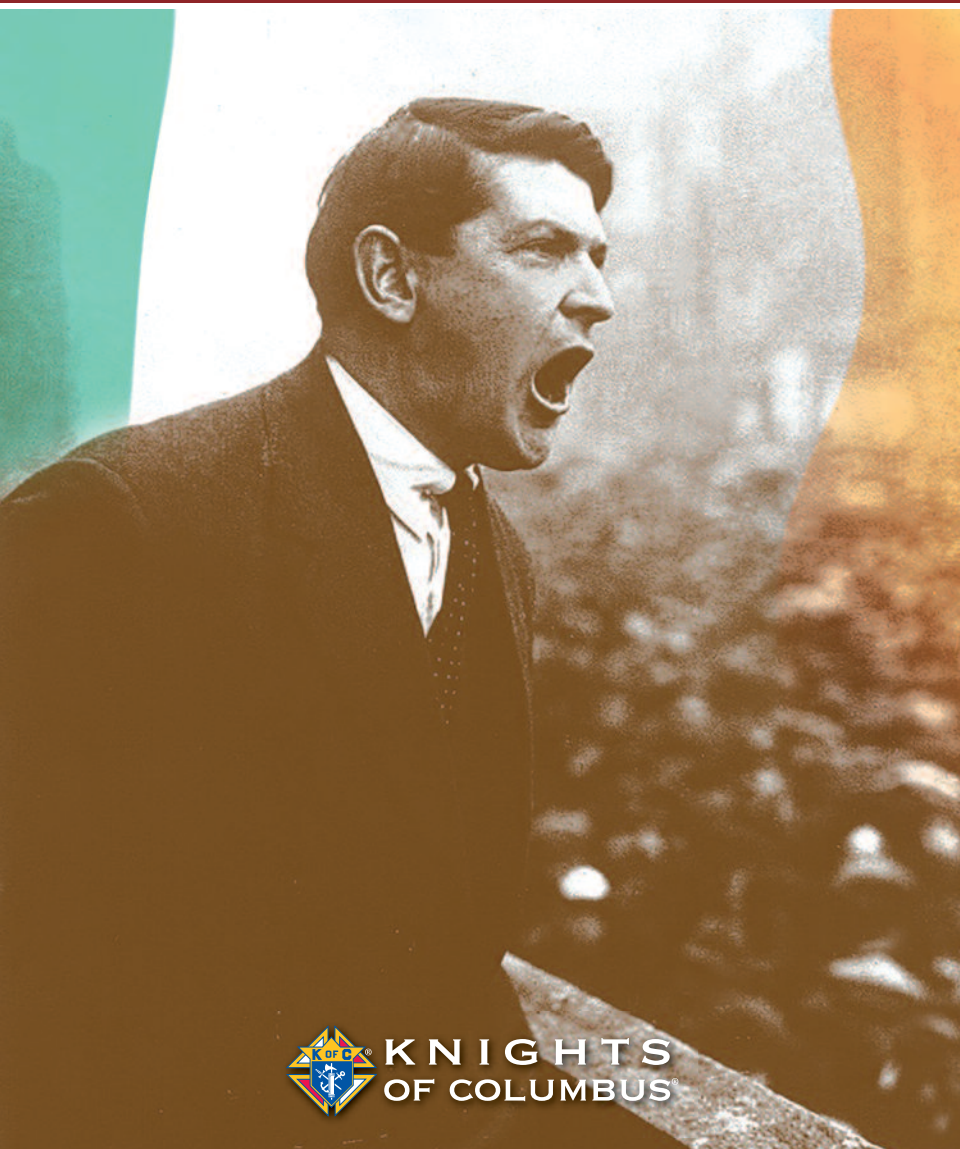


MICHAEL COLLINS

Study Guide



KNIGHTS
OF COLUMBUS

❖ Introduction ❖

When the Normans invaded Ireland in 1169, they began a centuries-long conflict between the native Irish people and British colonists – one which was only intensified by the arrival of the English Reformation and the subjugation of Irish Catholics as second-class citizens.

In 1916, while the British Empire was at its pinnacle of strength and influence, this historic animosity between the Irish and their foreign British rulers came to a head. On Easter Monday of that year, over a thousand Irish revolutionaries attempted to take control of Dublin. Fighting lasted the entire week, until the last of the rebels were arrested and the Easter Rising was suppressed on Sunday, April 29.

Among those revolutionaries was a young Michael Collins, who took the losses of the Easter Rising as a lesson that conventional warfare would not ensure the Irish their independence. Instead, Collins led the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in a strategy of guerilla warfare and political assassinations which pressured the British government into a 1921 ceasefire.

During the ceasefire, Collins joined three other Irish delegates to negotiate peace terms with the English government. The result was the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which created the Irish Free State but also required Irish statesmen to make an oath of allegiance to the British crown. The signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty split Ireland in half, with many Irish leaders, including Irish Republic President Éamon de Valera, believing that it did not secure the full freedom for which they had fought.

From this division sprung the Irish Civil War, which began when the Irish Republican Army, supporting the anti-treaty contingent and no longer under the command of Michael Collins, attempted to take control of Dublin's Four Courts. Michael Collins led the Irish Free State forces fighting against the IRA, until he was killed in an ambush on August 22, 1922. He lay in state for three days before his funeral Mass was celebrated at Dublin's St. Mary's Pro-Cathedral.

Nominated for two Academy Awards, the 1996 film *Michael Collins* explores the story of this political activist and revolutionary. Although it is at times historically inaccurate, especially in regard to the depiction of Éamon de Valera, the film raises provocative questions about the use of violence and demonstrates both the strong Irish desire for freedom and the disunion which the Anglo-Irish Treaty caused among the Irish people.

“The course of life and labor reminds me of a long journey I once took on the railway. Suddenly, there was a breakdown ahead, and passengers took the event in various ways. Some of them sat still resignedly, and never said a word. Others again went to sleep. But some of us leaped out of that train and ran on ahead to clear the road of all obstructions.”

— Michael Collins



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❖ Memorable Quotes ❖

Michael Collins: We have a weapon more powerful than any in the whole arsenal of the British Empire! That weapon is our refusal to bow before any order but our own!

Lincoln Prison Chaplain: I can't understand your politics, but I appreciate your integrity.

Harry Boland: Did you hear there's a butterfly been seen in West Clair? Its wings are green, white and yellow ...

Michael Collins: You know the problem with butterflies? ... They only last one day.

Harry Boland: Aye, but what a day, Mick!

Michael Collins: I want peace and quiet. I want it so much I'd die for it.

Harry Boland: You mean, you'd kill for it first?

Michael Collins: No, not first. Last. ... I hate them because they left us no way out. I hate whoever put a gun in Vinney Byrne's hand. I know it's me, and I hate myself for it.

Michael Collins: Give us the future, we've had enough of your past. Give us back our country, to live in, to grow in, to love.

Eamon de Valera: The Irish people established the Irish Republic. It can only be disestablished by the Irish people.

Michael Collins: Make me a scapegoat if you will, call me a traitor if you will, but please, let's save the country. The alternative to this treaty is a war which no one in this room can even contemplate. If the price of peace — if the price of freedom — is the blackening of my name, I would gladly pay it.

❖ Thoughts for Discussion ❖

1. Under Michael Collins, the Irish Republican Army began its guerilla warfare tactics, which involved assassinating figures connected to the British government. Over the years, and apart from Collins' leadership, these tactics would evolve to the point of the IRA being proclaimed a terrorist organization.

What is Collins' role in these future crimes of the Irish Republican Army? What differentiates his actions against British officials from the later actions of the IRA against the general public? Were either courses of action just?

2. Contemporaries of each other, Michael Collins and Mahatma Gandhi both sought liberation for their countries. However, their methods differed widely, with Collins using urban warfare and Gandhi championing nonviolent methods of civil disobedience.

How do these methods compare? Would civil disobedience have worked against the British in Ireland in the early 1900s? Is it right to pursue liberation at all costs? If your answer is yes, describe the situation when violent revolution would be morally acceptable.

3. Biographer Margery Forester wrote of Michael Collins, "His favorite saint was St. Paul... He carried a relic of that apostle of many perils in his pocket. It was no mere sharing of tribulation that attracted

him to the saint, however. “You see [St. Paul] had the divine saving grace of not having been always good.” [Collins] wrote.”

How does Michael Collins’ Catholicism match with his revolutionary tactics? Are the two compatible? Is Collins a Pauline figure? If so, what was his ‘Damascus moment’?

4. **After saying Mass in the Lincoln prison, the prison chaplain says, “If prayer can transcend these things, there’s hope, surely.”**

What role does religion play in the film *Michael Collins*? How do we pray for our enemies and how often? How might we begin to do so more?

5. **Éamon de Valera leaves for a political tour of the United States, seeking for “international moral support” from the American government and people.**

What is our role in international moral support? How can we, as both citizens and Knights of Columbus, strengthen that support, especially in regards to religious freedom, the rights of the unborn, and protections for people with developmental disabilities?

6. **When trying to convince Ned Broy to sneak him into the British headquarters, Collins quotes J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, saying, “Everything’s possible if you wish hard enough.” In various letters and memoirs, Collins’ friends shared that he much loved the story of Peter Pan. Collins was, in fact, a little envious of the character who never grew up and whose imagination lead him to soaring heights.**

What does this fascination with Pan say about Collins himself? Do you think Collins could have envisioned a hopeful future, free from foreign rule, if he did not have such imagination?

7. **The relationship between Michael Collins and Kitty Kiernan is fairly accurately depicted in the film, including Kiernan’s initial relationship with Collins’ friend, Henry Bolland, and Collins’ death occurring only four months before he and Kiernan were to be married.**

What is the role of Kitty Kiernan in Michael Collins’ life? What can we learn from their relationship about the importance of the vocation to marriage, even in times of struggle and war? Why do you think the filmmakers decided to include the relationship between Collins and Kiernan in the movie?

8. **Throughout the film, we see the differences in Michael Collins’ and Éamon de Valera’s leadership styles. These different approaches create conflict between the two Irish statesmen—conflict which leads to their eventual parting of ways, and, Collins’ death.**

How much of the clash between the two leaders can be attributed to pride, rather than legitimate disagreement? How can leaders, protect against pride corrupting their leadership and team dynamic?

9. **The film closes with the following quote from de Valera: “It is my considered opinion that in the fullness of time, history will record the greatness of Michael Collins and it will be recorded at my expense.”**

Is Michael Collins a great figure – is he a hero, a villain, or both? If he is great, how do we reconcile this greatness with the scope of the death he helped bring about? Does his greatness come at the expense of de Valera?

10. **Éamon de Valera went on to successfully introduce the Constitution of Ireland, winning full freedom from England, and serving as both Taoiseach (prime minister) and President of the Republic of Ireland.**

Does de Valera’s success with the Constitution of Ireland belittle the Anglo-Irish Treaty negotiated by Collins? How does de Valera’s success effect your answer to the previous question?