

THE POETS' REBELLION

POETRY, MEMORY, AND THE EASTER RISING

CURATED BY SARAH HARSH AND KEVIN YOUNG

On April 24, 1916, poets, actors, and teachers armed themselves and took control of key locations throughout Dublin. Schoolmaster Padraic Pearse proclaimed Ireland, then under British rule, a free republic. The events of Easter Monday began a weeklong siege of Dublin that resulted in 485 deaths and ended in a surrender to the British Army. The rebellion set in motion a war for independence, a civil war, the partition of Ireland, and, ultimately, the creation of the Irish Free State. It also cemented the connection between poetry, politics, and possibility still present in Ireland today.

THE POET'S REBELLION: POETRY, MEMORY, AND THE EASTER RISING displays artifacts from the Raymond Danowski Poetry Library at Emory University relating to the Easter Rising. The exhibition features a first edition of W.B. Yeats's poem "Easter, 1916," one of only 25 copies privately printed for his friends in the immediate aftermath of the Rising. This ambivalent elegy has become inextricably linked to the memory of the Rising; its famous closing line "a terrible beauty is born" captures the reverent yet apprehensive public mood following the bloody events. Also on display are rare volumes of poetry by the executed leaders, memorabilia commemorating the rebellion, and manuscript drafts by contemporary poets responding to the legacy of the Rising.

The Easter Rising was itself a memorial act. The insurrection followed a long tradition of failed Irish rebellions against British rule which created a culture that celebrated sacrifice and valorized defeat. Leaders like Pearse fostered a cult of martyrdom built on Catholic ideology and a rhetoric of blood sacrifice. While they knew the insurrection destined to fail, they well understood the symbolic meaning and poetic power of their actions. Unlike past rebellions, women played a key role in the Easter Rising. Nationalist leaders Eva Gore Booth and Maude Gonne, whose writings are represented in this exhibition, saw women's rights and national independence as inherently connected. Though the 1916 Proclamation declared freedom for all Irish men and women, the free state that followed failed to live up to the rebel women's ideals. Today, centenary celebrations of the Easter Rising prompt reflection about the closeness of myth and memory, and of poetry and politics.

