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Dublin Core

Title

Standing on the Platform

Subject

Irish Treaty

Holyhead

Railways

Creator

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Publisher

Ports, Past and Present Project

Date

2023

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Relation

<https://perma.cc/5X8N-ELV6>

Format

Curatescape story

Language

English

Coverage

53.307698060081414, -4.630477384170495

Curatescape Story Item Type Metadata

Lede

An extraordinary photograph shows the first Irish treaty delegation at Holyhead Railway Station in 1921.

Story

History has played out on the route between Dublin and London, and the Port of Holyhead was often the critically timed step across the Irish Sea. Over an intense three-month period one hundred years ago, Irish delegations and secret documents travelled this route at various hours of the night and day as part of Anglo-Irish Treaty negotiations.

The Post Office required a train service which averaged 42 miles per hour on the London-Holyhead route, with a penalty of £1 14s for every minute lost. In 1921 a new set of mail boats – Cambria, Hibernia, Scotia - started to operate on the Holyhead route. These fast ships were capable of 25 knots and the mail contract also meant financial penalties for the shipping company if the ships were late. The journeys undertaken by the treaty delegations had to fit into the strict travel timetable.

The Anglo-Irish Treaty negotiations attracted global media interest. International correspondents travelled with the delegations, and the arrival of the first delegation on their way to Downing Street in October 1921 at Holyhead Railway Station was recorded in this fabulous photograph above (Photo by Topical Press Agency/Hulton Archive/Getty Images). There is so much to see, admire and appreciate.

On the splendid wooden platform made shiny by recent rain, Robert Barton holds the elbow of his first cousin Erskine Childers, and those in the left-hand side of the image, including Arthur Griffith (in profile, front middle), are sharing a joke together. This happy moment in time becomes very poignant with the realisation that Childers would be executed by firing squad the following year as ordered by the Irish Free State, on 24 November. On the right-hand side, Éamonn Duggan with moustache and bowtie, is talking and looking towards a very elegantly dressed man with beard and top hat, probably George Gavin Duffy, lawyer, and probably Fionán Lynch, with umbrella and briefcase. Lead negotiator Michael Collins is absent from the photograph.

The names of these key Irish male negotiators who sat across the table from Prime Minister David Lloyd George are well preserved in history. However, six women also stand prominently alongside the men across the front row of this photograph. This number matches records that Lily O'Brennan, sisters Ellie and Alice Lyons, May Duggan, Bridget Lynch, and Kathleen McKenna were all part of the original October delegation, acting as secretariate support. With reference to other photographs taken in London during the negotiations, it has been deduced that Alice and Ellie Lyons, both trained typists and stenographers, stand on either side of Childers and Barton. A laughing Kathleen McKenna is turned away from but standing beside her boss, Arthur Griffith. At the centre of the photograph an open coat reveals a Celtic style brooch like those worn by members of Cumann na mBan, of which Lily O'Brennan was a founding member. May Duggan and Bridget Lynch standing on right side

of front row between their husbands would complete the identification of the female secretariate members. Spirits were high across this extraordinary network of cousins, sisters, friends, husbands and wives, and the hopes and aspirations of a nation travelled with them.

Social status is reflected in the very wide diversity of hats on display – from flat caps and homburgs to top hats for the gentlemen, fur hats and hats with wide brims and feathers for the ladies. It was not a warm day for standing around on the platform as some coats are buttoned to the neck. There is also one full fur coat, with fur being used as decorative features on the collars and sleeves for other coats worn by the women. Stylish handbags greatly outnumber briefcases and umbrellas. Sturdy practical shoes and ankle boots for travel are worn by all, with prominent fashionable large buckles on two pairs of the women's shoes. The peak capped conductors are present to marshal the passengers on to the waiting train.

You can only admire the foresight of the other onlookers who seize the photographic opportunity to claim their place in history.

The author, Catherine Duigan (@c_duigan), is a writer and researcher who was born in Dublin but now lives on Anglesey watching history pass by. She is a Professor (Hon.) of Environmental Science at Aberystwyth University and she has a keen interest in history and heritage issues.

Factoid

Related Resources

'The Treaty, 1921: Records from the Archives'. National Archives. Retrieved from: <https://www.nationalarchives.ie/2021commemorationprogramme/the-treaty-1921-records-from-the-archives/>, archived at <https://perma.cc/EVV3-XHSJ>

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