

How Successful were each of the Delegations in the Negotiations of the Anglo-Irish Agreement?

The Irish delegates went to London with two main aims: to achieve a republic and to end partition. They achieved neither. If you look at the situation in such black and white terms, it seems that for the Irish the treaty was a catastrophe, whereas for the British it was a success. However you have to realise that the Irish aims weren't entirely realistic. Personally I think that overall the delegates were right to sign the treaty, for a number of reasons and that essentially it was a success, but not the one they had hoped for.

The whole issue of sovereignty is the area in which the Irish were most successful. According to articles 1 and 2 of the treaty, Ireland was now the 'Irish Free State' and remained a dominion. Clearly this wasn't ideal and many hardline republicans had major problems with it. However realistically, had Britain given total independence to Ireland many other dominions of the commonwealth would have sought similar treatment. According to the treaty Ireland would have the same status as Canada, where Britain interfered rarely (although as Erskine Childers argued Canada was a lot further from Britain than Ireland). One way which the treaty was actually marginally better than the deal with Canada was that all members of parliament had to swear an oath only of faithfulness to the king of England, rather than allegiance. This was technically a negotiating success for the Irish but in reality an oath to the king of any kind was never going to sit well with the Republicans. As Sean McSwiney said "I have sworn an oath to the Republic, and for the reason I could not vote for the Treaty". On the other hand normal citizens cared little about technicalities in the phrasing. An end to the chaos in Ireland and an avoidance of war was all they wanted.

With regard to partition the delegates were entirely less successful. According to articles 11 to 15 a boundary commission would be set up to transfer areas from Northern to Southern Ireland and delimit it until Northern Ireland was no longer economically viable, or so the Irish thought. We know now that was not in fact the case and that the Boundary Commission changed little. The delegates' real failure here was in neglecting to set definite dates when the commission would meet. This can be brought back to the lack of negotiating experience of the Irish. The delegates weren't the only ones to believe that the Boundary Commission would be more successful than it was. Overall we can't really blame them for their lack of success. While they sought retrieval of all six northern counties, realistically this was never going to happen. A Northern parliament had already been established and Lloyd George could do little to force them to join Ireland after the Government of Ireland Act 1920.

The treaty can be seen as a major success for the British. Lloyd George achieved both of his main aims: Ireland stayed within the Commonwealth and he kept the Conservatives happy by protecting the unionists in Northern Ireland. While he told the Irish that the Boundary Commission would essentially tear Northern Ireland apart, he could reassure the unionists that it would be entirely ineffective. Much of the British success could be seen as the result of Lloyd George's personal skills as a politician. As prime minister since 1916 he was highly experienced, especially in comparison with the Irish delegates. Most likely he deliberately left out any fixed dates to do with the boundary commission.

In conclusion if you view the treaty in the simplest of terms it was a failure for the Irish. However there were a number of factors to take into consideration, such as the fact that Ireland had not in fact won the War of Independence and therefore could not simply dictate the terms of the Treaty. The signing of the treaty also reflected the desires of the normal Irish citizens. And finally as Collins said "it gives us freedom, not the total freedom that all nations desire and develop to but the freedom to achieve it". All of these complexities have to be taken into account in judging the varying success of both delegations.