

DE VALERA -A FATEFUL VISIT



o partition. No oath of allegiance. No dominion status. Those were the terms under which the Irish delegation set off with to the bargaining table in London after a truce had been called in the War of Independence. The year was 1921. The terms had been laid down by the President of the Irish Republic. The President was Eamonn de Valera.

On the 5th of December that same year the city of Limerick was agog with excitement. Eamonn de Valera was coming to town to be conferred with the freedom of the city. To coincide with this civic reception the weekly half-day holiday was brought forward. All those normally working would now have a chance to see 'the Long Fellow' as he motored through the town en route to the Theatre Royal.

The Limerick city battalion of the I.R.A. had been in readiness since early morning when the presidential motorcade drew up at Caherdavin on the outskirts of the city. De Valera had just come from Ennis, having completed a tour of the Clare constituency which had elected him to the Dail. Travelling with de Valera was Mrs Kathleen Clarke, the widow of Tom Clarke, one of the executed leaders of the 1916 Easter Rebellion. She was also to be conferred with the freedom of the city.

Before journeying into the city the President reviewed the battalion, much to the appreciation of the large crowd assembled there. The Mayor of Limerick, Alderman Stephen O'Mara, was absent on a fund-raising mission in America, at de Valera's request, so the civic welcome given by the Deputy Mayor, Mrs. O'Donovan.

After lunching with Mrs. O'Donovan de Valera was driven through the crowd thronged streets of the centre of the city. Limerick had come to a standstill. Most of the business premises had closed, and young and old left their homes to catch a glimpse of 'Dev'. Such was the excitement of the occasion that it could only be rivalled by St. Patrick's Day parade or the return of the internees in 1917.

The presentation ceremony, during which the freedom of the city was conferred, was held at 4 o'clock that afternoon (Monday) at the Theatre Royal in Henry Street. All present at the theatre

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waited patiently for the response of the president in his thank-you speech. They were not to be disappointed. Cheers of approval resounded throughout the theatre when the President stated that there was one thing the enemy could never hope for, and that was success. He went on to say that the enemy's aim was to obtain from the Irish people allegiance - the sort of allegiance given it by the people of Yorkshire. But Ireland was not Yorkshire, and 'they, never to the end of time, will get from this nation allegiance to their rulers'.

Later that evening at 8 p.m. a concert was given in honour of Limerick's two new free citizens. As was expected, de Valera again gave a speech which was received enthusiastically by the capacity attendance. This time he spoke of the need for all Irishmen to remain united against the British foe. He urged that the salvation of the minority was to join the majority, because the foreigner would play one against the other, and it was for them to cut the middleman out. They still held out the hand of friendship to their fellow-countrymen in the North - although it was often spurned. They were ready to grasp the hand of their Northern fellow-countrymen any time they felt ready to join them. Shouts of 'hear hear' and stamping of feet showed the approval of the audience.

It had been a long and exhausting day, and de Valera was no doubt glad to retire to the sanctuary of the O'Mara residence at O'Callaghan Strand.

The Irish delegates at the Treaty negotiations in London had had a very different day.

The War of Independence had ended officially on the 11th of July 1921 with the declaration of a truce. Almost five months had since passed and the British delegation's patience was wearing thin. The negotiations had been going on for two months, far longer than had been anticipated. In addition to the drawn-out proceedings the Irish delegation seemed not to be able to

accept or reject any of the British proposals without first consulting the 'Chief' at home. They travelled back and forth to Dublin on several occasions to confer with the Dail on the latest proposals being put forward by the British plenipotentiaries.

December the 5th, 1921 was a harrowing day for Michael Collins. Only two days earlier the steamer on which he, Erskine Childers and Gavan Duffy had been travelling had been involved in a collision with a schooner in the Irish sea. That same day he attended a cabinet meeting in Dublin. The following day (Sunday) he was back in London to prepare for the resumption of the treaty negotiations on Monday. On Monday morning the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, met privately with him to discuss the outcome of Saturday's cabinet meeting in Dublin. Lloyd George was not pleased. That afternoon as de Valera was making his way through the crowded streets of Limerick to receive the freedom of the city, Michael Collins, Arthur Griffith and Robert Barton were having a reception of a very different kind. They had been summoned to the conference table and issued with an ultimatum, 'settle now ... sign the agreement for a treaty or else quit ... and both sides would be free to resume whatever warfare they could wage against each other'.

At 7.15 p.m. the Irish withdrew to consider the proposal. They signed the treaty between Ireland and Great Britain at 2.10 a.m. on the 6th of December, 1921.

In the grey hours of early morning, in the house overlooking the Shannon, beside the Sarsfield Bridge, de Valera was roused from his sleep to receive the news that the treaty had been signed and the Irish Free State created. The lean bespectacled man standing by the telephone could hardly have envisaged the terrible bloodbath that was to follow when brother would kill brother and family allegiance would be rent in two.

The man who boarded the train at Limerick on that Tuesday morning was a very different man to the one who had, less than 24 hours before, entered the city in such a triumphant fashion. More than any other man, Eamon de Valera knew that Ireland was on the brink of civil war.