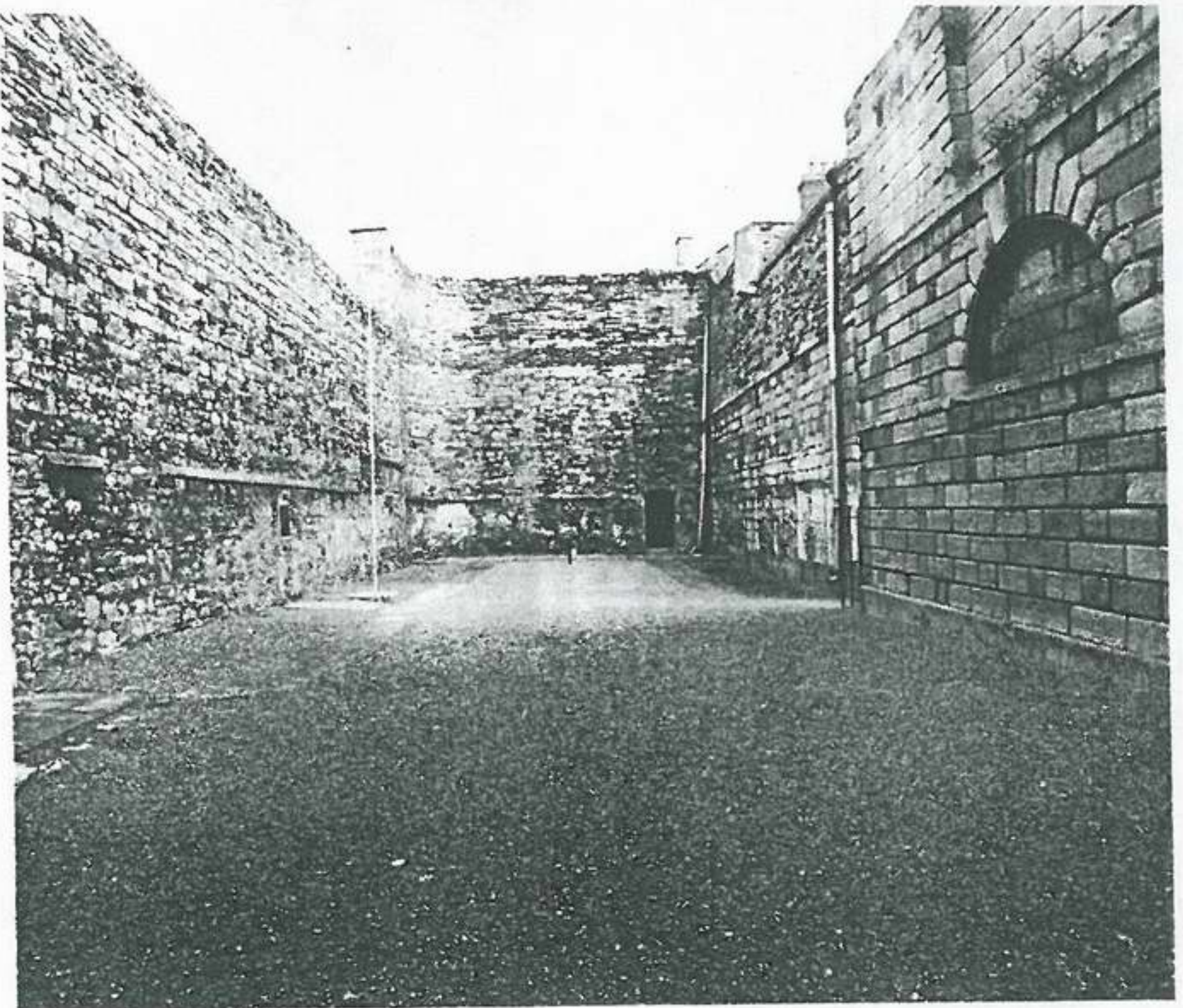


The Easter Rising - A Blood Sacrifice

- Con Healy



The Stonebreakers' Yard. Kilmainham where the leaders were executed

This year we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Easter Rising. The signatories to the Proclamation were idealists who were convinced that Ireland's only hope of achieving freedom was through armed insurrection. Even though the Rising, as planned, never really came off - the leader of the Volunteers, Eoin McNeill, having countermanded the orders on hearing of the fate of Roger Casement and the Aud, nevertheless the signatories to the Proclamation decided to go ahead and commence hostilities on Easter Monday 24th April 1916.

The Proclamation in its various concepts was a noble document. The high ideals of the Easter Week leaders are perhaps encapsulated in the final words of the document.

"We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, whose blessing we invoke upon our arms and we pray that no one who serves that cause will dishonour it by cowardice, inhumanity or rapine. In this supreme hour the Irish Nation must by its valour and discipline and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called".

Signed on behalf of the Provisional Government.

Thomas J. Clarke

Sean Mac Diarmuda	Thomas McDonagh
P.H. Pearse	Eamonn Ceannt
James Connolly	Joseph Plunkett

Much has been written in the past 75 years about the event and those who orchestrated it. At first it was dubbed the 'mad' Rising; then later the work of

our greatest patriots, men, and women too, who were without blemish, hardly human at all. They were placed on a pedestal and dare anyone offer the slightest criticism. Pearse's concept of 'a blood sacrifice' was understood and appreciated.

This concept of events continued on triumphantly up to 1966 when the Republic of Ireland celebrated an extravaganza on television to mark the 50th anniversary of the Rising. In the past 25 years there has been a cooling of fervour and some historical revisionism arising from the eruption of political violence in Northern Ireland.

However, irrespective of any differences of opinion as to the validity of the event, there would be very few who would doubt the unselfish convictions of those who brought it about.

Nine leaders in addition to the signatories were executed for their part in the Rising. In a publication such as the Limerick Association Yearbook one might ask what part did Limerick play in the insurrection.

Two Limerick men were among those who made the supreme offering. They were Edward Daly of Limerick City and Con Colbert of Athea. Edward Daly was in charge of the Four Courts garrison; his sister Kathleen (who was to become Lord Mayor of Dublin 1939 - 1941) was married to Tom Clarke. He was a nephew of the veteran Fenian John Daly.

Con Colbert was a clerk in Peter Kennedy's Bakery, Parnell Street and was in charge at the Marrowbone Lane Distillery. He was 28, small in stature but big of heart. What kind of men were they? How convinced were they that they were

right? How did they re-act after the surrender especially when they found themselves picked out for execution? Would it be fair to glean from their last conversations on the eve of their executions the nature of their characters?

The Kilmainham Jail Restoration Committee published a book titled 'Last Words' in 1971 which gives accounts of conversations, statements and letters of the leaders who were executed after the Easter Rising. By kind permission of the Office of Public Works I quote some of the material relevant to Edward Daly and Con Colbert.

EDWARD DALY

Edward Daly was visited in Kilmainham Prison on the 3rd May 1916 by his sisters Madge and Laura. Madge gives this account ...

My first words were: 'Oh! Ned! Why are they giving you the highest honours? You must have done great work to earn a place with Tone and Emmet and all the others.' He said: "I did my best." Then he spoke of the great fight and, in glowing terms, of all the men, especially those in his own command. Such soldiers, such heroes, never lived, he said. They never lost heart until the order to surrender came. Then big, strong men cried like children and rebelled too, against the order.

Speaking of himself, he said he was glad and proud to die for his country; that he knew that the week's fight would bring new life to Ireland; that he felt an absolute conviction, facing his God in a few hours, that the next effort would bring victory; that his only regret was that he would not be there to take part in it. I told him how proud our uncle, our mother and sisters would be when they heard that England had given him a martyr's crown. I said that his spirit and name would live on; that we would try to follow in his footsteps and that one day we would all be together in another world. He replied "Yes," that thought would give him added joy.

He spoke in the warmest terms of Tom Clarke, P.H. Pearse and Tom MacDonagh, for whom he had a particular admiration. When I told him that those three had gone that morning he said: "We'll have a glorious meeting in Heaven".

He gave us a copy of the charge at his Court Martial:

"Did an act, to wit: Did take part in an armed rebellion and in the waging of war against His Majesty the King, such act being of such a nature as to be calculated to be prejudicial to the Defence of the Realm and being done with the intention of and for the purpose of assisting the enemy".

He said he had protested strongly against the part of the charge about "assisting the enemy"; that all

he did, and he did his very best, was for Ireland, his own land, to try to free her from the only enemy he knew - England; and that he acted, as he was bound to do, as a soldier of Ireland, in all matters under the orders of his superior officers. He also added that he had only one regret - the surrender; that if he had not understood it to be an honourable one, he and his men would have fought on to the end. He mentioned that he had had a large number of English soldiers and some officers as prisoners and that he gave them the best he had. Here Laura exclaimed: "Why didn't you shoot them as they're shooting you?" "Ah no, Laura," he said. "That wouldn't be playing the game. We got strict orders that everyone captured was to be treated under the rules of civilised warfare as a prisoner-of-war and as kindly as possible under the conditions. In every case those orders were strictly carried out".

He sent loving messages to his mother, to his aunt and to his sisters. He said: "Tell Uncle John I did my best". Then he gave us a small purse with a few coins, two pencils, and buttons off his uniform as mementoes.

Another sister, Carrie, has confirmed that Madge and Laura told of finding Ned asleep on the floor of his cell.

"He was apparently worn out after his very strenuous week," she says. "He was full of pride of the week's work and of all the men who had fought with him. He had no illusions about what would be his fate after the surrender. Tom Clarke had told his wife the night before when she visited him that Ned would be the next to go."

A "Catholic Priest" writing in July, 1916, gave the following account of his meeting with Daly immediately before his execution:

"... I remember well seeing him coming down from the prison cell where he had been to Confession and received Holy Communion. He was calm and brave as when he was with his men in the Church Street area and wished to be remembered to the Sisters of Charity, Brunswick Street, who were known to him and had been very kind. As I shook his hand for the last time I felt intensely all that was meant by marching out blindfolded to his death, such a gentle, noble, brave young Irishman."

CON COLBERT

Con Colbert did not send for any of his relatives to visit him as he felt that a visit would grieve both too much. Instead he wrote no less than ten letters. These were to his sisters Lila, Nora, Gretta and Katty; his brothers Mack and Jim; his aunt - Mary O'Donnell; his cousin Maire O'Donnell; two friends Annie and Lily Cooney and one of the Dalys.

However, Con Colbert was visited in his cell in Kilmainham by Mrs. Séamus 'O Murchadha, wife of Séamus 'O Murchadha of the Marrowbone Lane Garrison. Describing the visit Mrs. 'O Murchadha said:

"My husband was Captain of "A" Company of the Fourth Battalion of the Irish Volunteers who used to drill at Larkfield, Kimmage. He was in Marrowbone Lane Distillery during the Rising and, on Easter Tuesday, when I learned where he was, I went to see him. I remained in the Distillery and cooked for the volunteers. I met Con Colbert there. I did not know him before that, only by appearance. I was in the Distillery up to the surrender of Sunday the 30th April. The men were in splendid spirits throughout. They did not like the idea of surrendering, but when they got the order from their superior officers, they obeyed it without hesitation. After the surrender about eighty girls, including myself, were arrested and detained in Kilmainham. I saw Con Colbert at Mass on Sunday, 7th May, with Éamonn Ceannt, Michael Mallin and J.J. Heuston and a number of others. I saw five of the men going to Holy Communion that morning, including Con Colbert, Heuston and Mallin. I did not know the other two. The Volunteers marched out from the building where Mass was celebrated, before the women. We were in the gallery and we saluted the men as they passed out. We were afterwards severely reprimanded for doing so.

On that Sunday night May 7th, when I was in my cell with another girl, the sentry came to the door with a wardress and said someone wanted to see me. When I got outside the wardress asked me did I know anyone of the name of Colbert. I said I could not tell until I would see him. I was taken before the Governor who ordered that I be brought to Con Colbert.

There was a soldier present during our interview.

When I entered the cell Con was lying on the floor with a blanket over him. There was no plank bed or mattress of any kind in the cell and the night was bitterly cold. There was a little table and stool in the cell and a candle lighting on the table as Con was expecting the priest.

He jumped up when he saw me and said: "How are you? I am one of the lucky ones". Of course I knew what was going to happen to him when he said that. "I am proud," he said, "to die for such a cause. I will be passing away at the dawning of the day." I said: "What about Éamonn Ceannt?" He was the only other one of the men I knew. He replied: "He has drawn the lucky lot as well".

Con had his prayer-book with him and said he would leave it to his sister Lila. "Here", he said, "is

what I am leaving you", and he took three buttons belonging to his Volunteer uniform out of his pocket. "They left me nothing else," he added. He appeared to be happy and said he was quite resigned to go before his Maker. He said he never felt happier as he never thought he would get the honour of dying for Ireland.

I said to him that he was setting an example for all soldiers of the way they should die. The soldier who was present was crying. He said: "If only we could die such deaths".

I asked Con why he did not send for his sister, Lila. He said that he did not like to cause trouble. I said: "Never mind the trouble; they are bound to send for her". He said that she might find it hard to bear the strain.

I knelt down and asked him for his blessing. He gave it to me and said in a simple earnest way: "We will all meet above under happier circumstances".

He asked me when I heard the volleys fired on the following morning at Ceannt, Mallin and himself would I say a Hail Mary for their departing souls. I said: "Of course I will". "If you are let down to exercise tomorrow," he added, "and if you meet all the girls ask them to say one Hail Mary each for the three of us who will be gone". I promised to carry out his request.

When leaving I said to him that a martyr's death was a noble one. He was smiling as I was going out and said: "The priest will be here in a minute now, so I will not lie down again".

I heard the volleys fired the following morning at break of day and myself and the girl who was sleeping in the cell with me got up and we said the De Profundis three times for the men who were passing into eternity".

These two Limerick men exemplify the spirit of the 1916 leaders. There is no doubt but that they were endowed with the highest standards of patriotism and were fully convinced of the righteousness and justice of their cause. They were happy to die for the future generations of Irish men and women so that we would have an opportunity to order our own affairs and be masters of our own political destiny.

Another Irishman who was later to make the supreme sacrifice also, Terence McSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork, wrote in his book 'The Principles of Freedom' . . .

"that we will win our freedom, I have no doubt that we will use it well, I am not so sure."

This is a question that we can all put to ourselves. It is of particular significance on this the 75th anniversary of the Easter Rising.