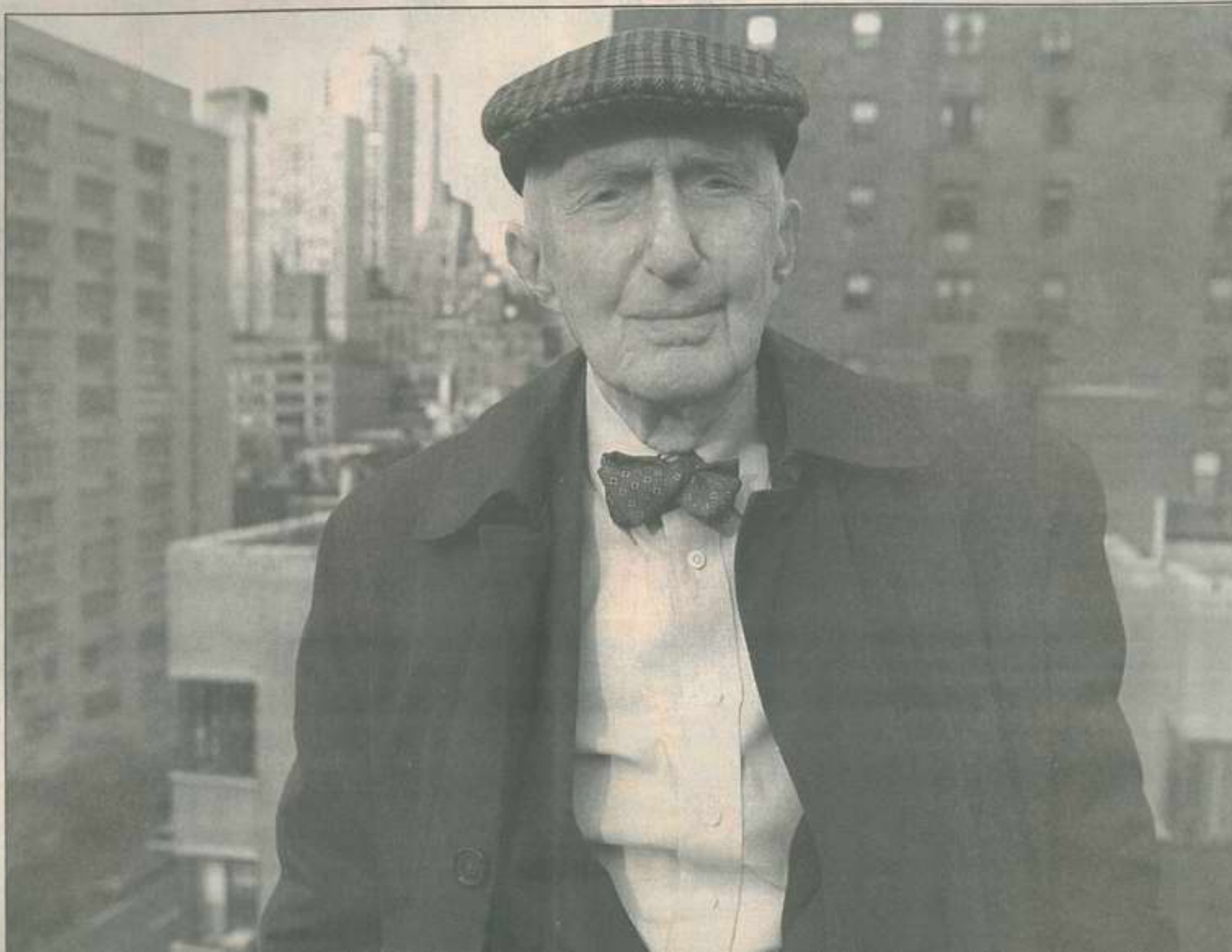


THE LEADER INTERVIEW

With Norma Prendiville



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•Former garda William Geary from Ballyagran, who was wrongfully dismissed from the force for allegedly passing information to the IRA in 1928 and who will be 105 years old in February: I am very well and I am still enjoying life. I have no complaint. My health is good. I am getting around although you understand I have some of the infirmities that come with age. I am walking slowly and I have lack of balance, but I am not complaining a bit Pic: Irish Times

For the sake of his good name

A SINGLE event can change a life, shaping it forever. So it was for William Geary from Ballyagran who will celebrate his 105th birthday in his New York home this February. But when he began his life on February 28, 1899, in Cloonee Cottage on the Geary farm in the townland of Coolasmuttane, there was nothing to indicate the turn it would take.

His was a country childhood, where he went to school barefoot in summer and hunted rabbits on White's Hill on Sunday afternoons and learned to bargain the hard way when he had to sell four calves at Dromcollogher fair. And even yet, his mind's eye sees "spiders' webs, glistening like diamonds in the sun on a frosty morning, the heron flying north, parallel to the little stream on its way to roost in Castletown Conyers after a day's fishing and the mallard duck, pretending to have a broken wing to divert attention from her nest".

And in recalling those days, he can still remember "the chorus of corncrakes in the cottage field on a summer's night and the fragrance of the woodbine in blossom after sundown".

For all that, his was no untrammelled childhood. The death of an older brother in infancy left William the oldest of three brothers and two sisters and the death of his father when William was eight years old left its own mark. But the boy became man and was trained as a wireless operator, sailing the high seas to India, Burma, South Africa and North America on merchant ships with the rank of officer.

"I even had a batsman to polish my shoes and shine my buttons," he recalls.

In May, 1922, he joined the newly-established Garda Síochána and in those turbulent post-Civil War days, he was rapidly promoted, becoming a superintendent in 1924 and arriving to a posting in Kiltrush in February 1928.

"There was a lot of arson in the area but the people got sick and tired of the trouble and we made an impact," he recalls. "We were unarmed and all young and had no training and served 24 hours a day—and to this day I have the fondest regard for the people of County Clare. They were really wonderful people."

June 15, 1928 is burned into his mind as the blackest day of his life, setting in train events that were to have lifelong consequences. On that day, Supt Geary was ordered to go in uniform to Ennis and to report to the chief

superintendent's office.

"I went in and had a conversation with the chief and 20 minutes later, we walked down the street to the Old Ground Hotel. We walked up the stairs and the chief had his hand on the knob of the door when he leaned over to me and said: 'Your life is ruined—you'd better tell the truth.' I went into the room with him. Inside I found (Garda) Commissioner Eoin O'Duffy, the deputy commissioner, Eamonn Coogan and Chief Supt David Neligan sitting at the table. I was standing up and I saluted and the Commissioner told me to sit down. He said to me: 'Mr Geary, we have evidence that you took £100 for information you gave the Republicans.'

"I was really shocked and I didn't know what it was about. He then asked me: 'Did you sign a receipt for money?' When I said 'no,' he asked how was it that I was involved and not any other superintendent? I told him that I was never offered any money.

"In my mind, as I had nothing to conceal, I told him that Det Keyes, Kiltrush, had told me about a month before that he (Keyes) had received information I was to be offered money for information. His source of information was not disclosed to me and after discussing the matter with Det Sgt Conroy, Ennis, I dismissed the matter from my mind as I thought it simply silly. I heard no more about it.

"Commissioner O'Duffy then said: 'I have your signature in receipt of money, and can you explain that?' I said I could not. The commissioner did not show me the alleged signature at the time nor was it ever seen by me." Mr Geary was then searched by Chief Supt Neligan, his lodgings, personal belongings as well as his office were later searched and he was suspended from duty.

A few days later, William Geary recalls, he was offered a job in Government Buildings if he told the whole story.

"Being innocent of the allegations made against me, I could not in good conscience fabricate some story to avail of the offer," he says.

He was expecting an inquiry and asked to have a solicitor to represent him but no inquiry took place. Instead, on June 25, he was dismissed from the force by the Executive Council and a report was published in the Irish Independent two days later.

"I was branded a criminal, a felon and I was ashamed to stay around in Ballyagran. It was a slur and a stigma on my family name. We

are an honourable people. Never was a Geary convicted of anything," he says.

His only choice, he says, was to leave and in November 1928 he left for the US, vowing that he would not return until his name was cleared.

"I was under terrific stress, my name was blackened but as soon as I stood on the ship, the Baltic, I felt like a new man and when I landed here (in New York), nobody knew me." It was not easy getting a start in the New World.

"The moment I left Ireland and came here, I was no longer a superintendent. I was an emigrant. From then on, I just had to conform to that."

He boarded first with a woman who had worked for the Gearys, and his first job with the Consolidated Edison electricity company involved pulling cables and digging trenches.

"It was spade work but I took it. I just had to do it. I had to keep my previous record under wraps but I never lost faith and I wasn't unhappy," he says.

Later, during World War II, William was drafted and worked in financial administration with the American airforce.

"I never fired a shot, I never flew but I was very proud to serve in the American army. I owe a lot to this country. It took me in. It was a harbour for me when I couldn't get a job in Ireland," he says.

It was in New York that he met and married Roscommon woman Margaret Shryane and they had two daughters, Helen and Anne, but in his new life, William Geary did not forget the dishonour done to him.

"I was branded a scoundrel and had to bear that indignity all my life," he says. And he felt it his duty to clear his name "for myself, for my family and for the county of Limerick".

He began his campaign in 1934, writing his first letter on the matter to Donnchada O'Briain, a Fianna Fáil TD for Limerick—unaware that it would take countless letters and almost until the new millennium before he succeeded.

The first approach to a Minister for Justice—PJ Rutledge at the time—brought the reply that "some fresh facts" were needed to justify any review. It was the kind of answer that William Geary would hear again and again and from more than one Minister for Justice in the course of his campaign.

After he retired in 1967, William wrote to Jack Lynch, then

Taoiseach, the Geary file was passed to Justice Minister, Micheál O Moráin, but nothing happened.

Then in 1971, William Geary made contact with David Neligan, one of those intimately involved in his dismissal, now retired and the author of *The Spy in the Castle*. In a letter Mr Neligan told him: "I am the man who got you dismissed on what seemed at the time impeccable evidence, and it is up to me now, even at this late stage, to try and clear your name."

Mr Neligan went on that he would seek a personal interview with the Department of Justice, but by October, 1972, he had retreated from his initial position. He wrote saying that the original evidence was "from an unimpeachable source, the origin of which I am not at liberty to disclose. So long a time has elapsed that it is difficult to see what can be done now," he concluded. About this time, journalist Vince Moran became aware of William Geary's story and recounted it at length in the *Limerick Leader*, along with excerpts of Mr Neligan's letters.

And yet another Minister for Justice, this time Gerard Collins, was approached. Mr Collins dismissed the evidence of Mr Neligan's statements as weak and seemed to indicate that the file relating to the Geary case had been destroyed.

"It is not possible to decide that a dismissal of 50 years ago was unjustified or even that the matter was open to doubt, just because the information on which the authorities of that time acted is not now available to be evaluated," he told William Geary. Mr Collins said, however, that he had spoken to people in Clare about the background to the case. "The information I received from them was that it was rumoured—and believed locally in certain circles—that the then local IRA had deliberately taken certain action which would mislead the Garda authorities into thinking that you were associated with them. However, when I tried to check the basis of the rumour, the answer was always that only a tiny number of people would have known whether it was true."

William Geary continued his campaign however, and in 1984, appealed directly to another Justice Minister, Michael Noonan, to reopen the case. So also did Frank Prendergast of the Labour Party, but Mr Noonan refused them both. Then Mr Prendergast got his party's research office to look for

Mr Geary's records and found the minutes of the executive council decision to dismiss him. The research officer concluded from the minutes that dismissals were commonplace at the time and that there was evidence of "a virtual witch-hunt against civil servants down to grade clerical officers, Garda Síochána, Army personnel etc".

It was discovered, also, that a file was in existence was marked closed to the public for 70 years or until 2002. This breakthrough galvanised William Geary even further and he sought out new evidence. He even underwent lie-detector tests and handwriting analysis in a bid to confirm his innocence and signed a statement waiving all rights to backpay and compensation to underline his contention that it was not about money, but about his name.

His campaign reached into the 1990s when he wrote to the Taoiseach Charlie Haughey and to the President, Mary Robinson. And in May, 1991, a letter from Justice Minister Ray Burke told him that another file had been located which contained more information about his dismissal. However, the letter went on: "Not only does it not contain anything that would help you to advance your case, but there would be a genuine concern that the release of the papers would tend to set your case in a less rather than more favourable light."

William Geary was enraged at being denied access to this file and accused the Department of Justice of denying him his civil rights and acting as judge and jury. But he refused to give up and finally, in 1999, his persistence paid off. The files he had sought were released, ostensibly on humanitarian grounds. On April 22, 1999, came the announcement William Geary had waited almost 72 years to hear. Justice Minister John O'Donoghue publicly declared that the only evidence produced against William Geary was "certain intercepted IRA correspondence" and that he was not convinced the procedures followed in 1928 were satisfactory.

"The Government considers it reasonable that Mr Geary should have the impediments to the future enjoyment of his good name and reputation lifted," the Minister went on. He granted William Geary a lump sum of £50,000 and his full pension on an ex-gratia basis. But, Minister O'Donoghue went on, the question of a pardon did not arise as Mr Geary had not been

charged or convicted of any offence.

"It was a long fight, but we won," was William Geary's response. "It is a case that happens once in a hundred years. I am proud I served in the Garda Síochána. I took an oath to serve my country and I did."

Today, he still rejoices in his success but bears no rancour against those who delayed the day of his vindication.

"What good does it do to be angry?" is his attitude. He is at peace now, he says and he is proud of the honour done him by Limerick County Council when they presented him with a scroll in 2000.

"This, once and forever, completely eliminates the dishonour," he said at the time.

Now relocated to Queens after a lifetime in Manhattan, William Geary retains his independence, living in his own apartment but close to that of his daughter, Helen, who, he says, is extremely kind and watches over him.

"I am very well and I am still enjoying life. I have no complaint. My health is good. I am getting around although you understand I have some of the infirmities that come with age. I am walking slowly and I have lack of balance, but I am not complaining a bit." Mr Geary rises at 7.30 most mornings, still does some of his own shopping and cooking—"the minimum", he stresses—and reads the *New York Times* daily. He also reads the *Limerick Leader* and is in regular correspondence with cousins and neighbours in Ballingrane.

"The Lord has been so good to me," says the man who is a Knight of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem. "He gave me patience and fortitude in adversity. I think it was destiny—so much happened in my life. I can't understand it. My entire life is a kind of mystery." But yes, he concludes: "I feel very happy and satisfied. But as St Paul used to say: 'I am in exile from the Lord'."

He knows now he will not return to Ballyagran. Had he been vindicated in the 1970s, he says he would have made the journey. But he recalls a photograph he was shown of a road in Ballyagran with the white, traffic line down the middle.

"That made me smile," he says, wishing all in County Limerick prosperity and peace in 2004.