

Cornelius 'Con' Collins

1881-1937

by Tom Donovan

Cornelius 'Con' Collins was born in Arranagh, Monagea, County Limerick on 13 November 1881. He was one of nine surviving children born to John and Mary Collins (nee Mulcahy). Con's mother hailed from a nationalist family in Meelin, in north County Cork and had an influence on her family, especially her sons.

Con attended Monagea National School and then progressed to the Courtenay Schools where he was taught by the famous teacher James D Musgrave. He then sat a Post Office examination in Newcastle West as his brother Frank was already employed in the sorting office of the Post Office in London. In 1901 Frank came home to collect Con and take him to London, where Con also got employment in the sorting office. While there Con joined the Gaelic League and the socialist Fabian Society and became part of what was known as the 'Irish Club'. Con returned to Dublin in 1908 and transferred his job to the Sheriff Street postal sorting office. By 1910 he was a member of the Gaelic League in Dublin and taught Irish language classes in Michael Cusack's school at the city end of Gardiner Street. Tom Clarke was one of his pupils at this time. The enthusiasm for all things Irish spread back home to Monagea, as the remainder of the Collins family left at home all insisted on completing the 1911 census form in Gaelic. Con continued to be immersed in the nationalist spirit. He shared lodgings in Dublin with Sean McDermott and both men were involved in the publication of the nationalist newspaper *Irish Freedom*.

Con became well known by the leaders within the IRB and those planning the Easter Rising. He was chosen to go to Kerry to oversee the landing of a shipment of arms which were due to arrive from Germany. On Good Friday, he and Austin Stack had been on their way to meet Sir Roger Casement at Banna Strand, near Tralee, County Kerry the next day (Easter Saturday 1916) when they were both arrested by



Con Collins

the police. A Volunteer named Patrick Garvey of Clash East, Tralee, gives an account of the arrest of the two men.

On the Good Friday I, with other members of the I.R.B., went for a walk outside the town until the afternoon. We returned to Tralee in the afternoon and learned that Stack and Con Collins had been arrested in the town. Con Collins had been arrested first. The R.I.C. then sent a message to Stack saying that Collins wanted to see him at the barracks. Stack went to the barracks and was detained there with Collins. I also learned that another man had been arrested by the R.I.C. stationed at Ardfert and taken into Tralee Barracks. It being Good Friday most of the Volunteers were out of town. That evening we were mobilised at the Rink and paraded round the town at the double. Dan Healy, the Battalion O/C, had charge of the parade. When we returned to The Rink, our headquarters, we were dismissed.

I remained at the Rink for a short while and learned that the prisoner

taken in from Ardfert was Roger Casement. So on the Good Friday the police had Stack, Con Collins and Casement in custody!

I left the Rink soon after this and went to the A.O.H. hall in the Square where I saw a man who was a stranger to me. After a few minutes one of my pals told me that the stranger was Captain Monteith. On Saturday morning I learned that Roger Casement had been removed by British military on the 10 o'clock train from Tralee.¹

Con was held in Tralee Barracks and then moved to Richmond Barracks, Dublin before being tried by court martial on Friday 16 June 1916. He was sentenced to penal servitude for life and was released from Pentonville Prison a day over a year later on 17 June 1917.

It is coincidental that two men from the same parish and near neighbours were chosen to travel to Kerry that Easter Week. Donal Sheehan had attended the same church and schools as Con Collins and on leaving school chose the same employment. Neither of the two men took part in the Easter Rising as Donal Sheehan died tragically at Ballykissane Pier and Con Collins was imprisoned.

On their return home to Ireland the prisoners received a rapturous welcome from the local people. A Volunteer in west Limerick recalled that:

When the sentenced prisoners were released from the English gaols in June, 1917, there were Volunteer parades at Rathkeale and Newcastle West to welcome them home. All Volunteers of the 1st Battalion mobilised to do honour to Dr. Richard Hayes, Con Collins and Frank Thornton.²

Shortly after his return home, in 1917, Con met Julia Ryan, manageress of Benner's Hotel, Tralee and they were married that year. It was not long before

Con resumed his active service and had to go on the run to avoid being re-imprisoned. Jeremiah Kiely recalled that he was charged with ensuring his safety and comfort:

While Con Collins, later a T.D., was 'on the run' for the most part of 1918, men of 'A' Company did guard for him in turn, brought him dispatches, delivered his replies and did everything possible for his comfort and that of his people.³

In the 1918 general election Con was elected unopposed as Sinn Féin MP for Limerick West. All Sinn Féin MPs refused to take their seats at Westminster and assembled instead in the Mansion House, in January 1919, for the first meeting of Dáil Éireann.

In the 1921 general election he was again elected as an unopposed candidate to represent the constituency of Kerry and Limerick West. When the Treaty was debated in the Dáil Con opposed its ratification. It is alleged that he refused to accept a Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs as an inducement to support the Treaty.

Both he and Richard Mulcahy were sworn to non-violence by a member of the Augustinian Order and as a result did not join the anti-Treaty forces during the Civil War.

Con Collins was elected for a third and final time as an anti-Treaty Sinn Féin candidate to again represent Kerry and Limerick West, this time as a T.D.

Both he and Piaras Béaslaí share a record that they both contested and were elected in three Irish general elections while being unopposed by any other candidates

After the Civil War ended Con Collins retired from politics and vowed to never discuss politics again. His mother died in 1922⁴ and around the same time his wife Julia bought Finn's Café in William Street, Limerick.⁵ She used her hotel management skills to develop the business. Con returned to work in the Post Office in Limerick and did so until he died in Dublin on 23 November 1937, aged 56. He is buried in Mount St. Lawrence Cemetery, Limerick.

General Sources:

Census returns 1901 and 1911.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Con_Collins

Limerick's fighting story, 1916-21, told by the men who made it. (Cork, 2009).

Interview with John Collins, son of Con Collins, 9 February, 2016

References:

1. BMH Witness statement of Patrick Garvey, WS 1,011. <http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1011.pdf#page=6>
2. BMH Witness statement of Jeremiah Kiely, WS 851. <http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0851.pdf#page=12>
3. Ibid.
4. *Limerick Chronicle* 4 November, 1922.
5. Finn's Café was owned by a Finn family from County Tipperary. The members of this old established Fenian family were always willing to allow their business to be used as a hub of nationalist activity in Limerick for many years. It was likened to Wynn's Hotel in Dublin which provided a similar service to like-minded nationalists.



Monagea Roman Catholic church (Courtesy of Baker Photography)



Headstone over the grave of Con Collins