

Constable James O'Brien

The first victim of the Easter Rebellion in Dublin

by Tom Donovan

James O'Brien was born on 8 February 1868, the son of Cornelius O'Brien and Mary Ahern.¹ His brother William, who was three years older, inherited the small family farm at Ballybeg, Glin, which meant that James had to find alternative employment. The O'Brien family had been heavily involved in the Land League movement. In 1881, Cornelius was appointed Assistant Secretary of the first Land League committee formed in Glin and his daughter Jane was the first President of the Ladies' Land League formed by Fanny Parnell, sister of Charles Stewart Parnell.²

In 1894, James joined the Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP) on the recommendation of Major Kiggell, Cahara Lodge, Glin. He was 26 years old and 6 feet 4 inches tall.³ He received identity number 168B and, following regulation training, was soon patrolling the streets of Dublin. In 1904, ten years after joining the force, he used his size to good advantage when he won a silver medal as a winning member of the DMP 'Tug-of-War' team.⁴

The shooting of Constable James O'Brien

A few minutes past noon on Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, a Red Cross nurse, who had been off duty for two hours, was returning to her work at the wartime hospital which had been set up in Dublin Castle. She paused at the main gate and half jokingly asked Constable O'Brien, who was on duty at the gate: "Is it true that the Sinn Feiners are going to take the castle?" to which he replied "No, Miss, the authorities are making too much fuss about it." The nurse smiled and walked on through a stone archway into the upper castle yard. Before she had crossed the yard Constable O'Brien was lying dead on the ground after being shot in the head. He was to be the first casualty of the Easter Rising in Dublin.



Constable O'Brien on duty outside Dublin Castle.



1904 DMP tug-of-war silver medal. Inscribed on front: D.M.P. Tug of War, 1904 and on reverse Winner, Const. James O'Brien.

A second Red Cross nurse recalled how she heard of the shooting of the man they affectionately knew as Jimmy:

It was shortly after noon on Easter Monday, April 24. I was washing bandages in the Sapper Room kitchen, when a man came in and said "the policeman at the front gate has been shot, and they have carried him in." The Sister on our landing was summoned and rushed downstairs ... It turned out to be the nicest, such a dear, with grey hair and twinkly eyes; he always used to salute us when we passed in uniform, and just grin when we were in mufti.... When the men's dinner was nearly over, Sister came back. She had been helping to tie up the policeman, but there was no hope; death had been instantaneous. She confirmed the rumour that it was our favourite; she said she could just recognise him though the upper part of his face was destroyed.⁵

Earlier that Easter Monday morning, members of the Irish Citizen Army, and a few members of Cumann na mBan had assembled outside Liberty Hall. They removed a supply of guns, ammunition and some home-made bombs and grenades which they had secreted inside the building. Before

noon they all marched off to take over the various positions to which they had been assigned.

James Connolly (namesake, but no relation of Seán Connolly) led his men to the G.P.O. Captain Seán Connolly and his company of approximately thirty men and around ten women, who included Dr Kathleen Lynn and Helena Molony, set out from Liberty Hall. They marched up College Green and Dame Street with the intention of seizing City Hall near Dublin Castle. As the group marched up Dame Street at around noon, a party broke away and approached the gate of Dublin Castle.

Constable O'Brien seemed to believe the rebels were part of a regular parade and that they would be going past the castle and up Ship Street. When Seán Connolly, the Captain of the Irish Citizen Army, went to get past him, O'Brien put out his arm to divert the group past the castle gate, whereupon Connolly shot him from point blank range. Connolly "was excited because he had shot the policeman dead" and started to shout at his detachment to go into the castle. But they hesitated and the gates were closed against them. He seems to have taken the fellow members in his group by surprise as much as the other witnesses of the shooting. The



Séan Connolly, who shot Constable James O'Brien



Corke Hill Gate, Dublin Castle, where Constable O'Brien was shot



Helena Molony who described the shooting of Constable O'Brien

plan appeared to be to occupy and defend buildings rather than to attack policemen beforehand.

Helena Molony later recalled:

It was expected that the psychological effect of attacking Dublin Castle, the citadel of foreign rule for seven hundred years, would be considerable when the news spread through the country. By the way, it was at the Castle that the first shot was fired. I did not know beforehand what was to take place. I did not know to which place I was going. I remember being rather surprised at not going to the G.P.O. with James Connolly. Seán was an old friend of mine, and acted in the Abbey Theatre along with me. He was a very good actor. On Easter Monday we advanced up Dame Street towards Dublin Castle. I could not say how many there were altogether. We went out in detachments. Seán Connolly and, I think, about twenty men perhaps, walked up Dame Street; and I, walking at the head of my nine girls, was, I believe, perhaps two or three ranks behind Seán.

We went right up to the Castle Gate, up the narrow street. Just then, a police Sergeant (sic) came out and, seeing our determination,

he thought it was a parade and that it probably would be going up Ship Street. When Connolly went to go past him, the Sergeant put out his arm; and Connolly shot him dead. When the military guard saw that it was serious, he pulled the gates to. It may be an interesting point in connection with the secrecy of the arrangements for the Rising that it appeared that the men behind Connolly did not really know they were to go through. Connolly said: "Get in, get in" - as if they already did not know they were to go in. That guarded secrecy, not to let it look like anything other than the manoeuvres which were taking place for weeks before, may have been the reason; but certainly there was hesitation on the part of the followers. As Seán Connolly shouted: "Get in, get in" on the flash, the gates were closed. The sentry went into his box, and began firing. I thought no one had succeeded in getting in. It breaks my heart - and all our hearts - that we did not get in. We would have captured the Under Secretary, who was having lunch in the Castle.⁶

When Seán Connolly failed to enter Dublin Castle he decided to occupy nearby City Hall. It was a much easier task for Connolly to enter this building on a Bank Holiday as he had a key to the building. In 1966 his brother Matt Connolly recalled: 'at the time Sean was employed in the Motor Tax Office which was located in City Hall, he knew the building inside out; that is why he was chosen to command this area.'⁷

While Constable O'Brien became the first victim of the Easter Rising in Dublin, Connolly was the first rebel to be killed shortly afterwards.

Dr Kathleen Lynn wrote:

When I got to the City Hall, say some time before 12, it was already occupied by Seán Connolly and his section of the Citizen Army. As I arrived there I saw the dead body of a big policeman lying on the ground - it seemed to be in front of the Castle gate. Just then Sir Thomas Myles came up, evidently going into the Castle and I still remember the look of horror in his face when he saw the body. I don't think he noticed me. He rushed off. I heard afterwards it was to get first aid equipment.⁸

Dr Lynn also described the death of Seán Connolly soon afterwards.

He had suggested they go to the roof of City Hall to defend it and she followed with her medical equipment along with about six other men. Connolly was shot by a sniper: It was a beautiful day, the sun was hot and we were not long there when we noticed Seán Connolly coming towards us, walking upright, although he had been advised to crouch and take cover as much as possible. We suddenly saw him fall mortally wounded by a sniper's bullet from the Castle. First aid was useless. He died almost immediately.⁹

The Irish Citizen Army and the DMP

The most recent DMP man to die on duty prior to Constable James O'Brien was Constable Patrick Sheehan almost eleven years previously. Coincidentally, they were from the same parish of Glin, County Limerick. Constable Sheehan was twenty-eight years old when he died on 6 May 1905. He was suffocated trying to rescue a workman named John Fleming who also died, after both men were overcome by fumes in a sewer.¹⁰ Sheehan's bravery did not go unnoticed by the citizens of Dublin. Following the tragedy a fund was organised to erect a memorial and the following August 1906 the Lord Mayor of Dublin unveiled an impressive monument at the scene of the tragedy.¹¹

Relations between the DMP and the citizens of Dublin continued to be as harmonious as any unarmed police force could expect. However, events during the General Strike and Lock-out in 1913 changed all that. Two men died and several hundred people, including policemen, were injured during riots before and after the arrest of James Larkin. Thereafter the reputation of the DMP suffered considerably. Subsequently, in November 1913, James Connolly formed the Irish Citizen Army to defend members of his trade union the ITGWU from further attacks during strikes and protests. The DMP was a regional police force in Dublin city, from 1836 until 1925, when it was integrated into the newly formed Garda Síochána. When the Easter Rising began in Dublin, the unarmed DMP members were totally unprepared for armed



Plaque on wall of Dublin City Hall commemorating the death of Sean Connolly

conflict and following the deaths of Constable O'Brien and a second DMP casualty, Constable Michael Lahiff, the authorities withdrew other members of the force from the streets until 1 May, when it was deemed safe for them to resume duty.

By a strange coincidence and apparently unbeknownst to each other during that tragic encounter on Easter Monday, both Constable O'Brien and Helena Molony had met five years previously. Both Molony and Countess Markievicz appeared in court following disturbances at a protest meeting in opposition to the visit of King George and Queen Mary to Dublin in 1911. On Tuesday, 4 July, 1911, a man named James Pike, of Phibsborough, Dublin was brought before the court for acting in a disorderly manner. Constable O'Brien told the court that he saw "a large crowd outside the Mansion House and that Pike was cheering and hooting and calling upon the people." At St Stephen's Green, he said: "Pike headed a few ugly rushes at the police, and was shouting at the top of his voice and using profane language when he was arrested." He also noted that the two women were with Pike at the time. They both gave evidence to the court that they were with Pike and had not seen any of the behaviour described by Constable O'Brien. However, Judge Drury said he had no doubt that O'Brien's evidence was correct. This did not mean the 'ladies' were not telling the truth to the court, he added, before fining Pike forty shillings. At the same hearing Molony was told she would

have to pay a fine or go to jail for her part in throwing a stone during the disturbances.¹² "You'll get no money from me," she told the court, to much cheering. She was then led away.¹³

The funeral of Constable O'Brien

Following the shooting at the gate of Dublin Castle, Constable O'Brien's body was removed to the castle hospital, wrapped and sewn in a sheet and then buried along with thirteen others in the recreational grounds within the castle. On Friday 28 April, 1916, his body was exhumed and removed to Mount Argus Church.

The next morning, Requiem High Mass was celebrated by Rev Fr Eustace, assisted by Rev Fr Pancras CP and two deacons. William O'Brien, brother of the deceased, accompanied the cortege to Kingsbridge (later renamed Heuston) Station, where the remains were placed in a mortuary van. After prayers were recited the train left for Foynes, County Limerick, and the coffin was transferred from there by hearse for burial in the local graveyard in Kilfergus, Glin. A large number of DMP colleagues travelled to Foynes where they were joined by local members of the RIC. On the nine mile route to Glin there were large groups of mourners paying their respects and when the cortege arrived at the place of interment 'the cortege was a vast and imposing one.' Archdeacon Roche and his two curates Fr Foley and Fr Connolly officiated at the graveside. As the 48 year old James was unmarried, the chief mourners were his brother William and sister Johanna O'Brien.¹⁴ His grave is overlooked by his old homestead on a hill to the south-east and both places are separated by the Gencorbry River. The inscription on his headstone¹⁵ reads:

Sacred to the memory of
Constable James O'Brien
who died on the 24th of April 1916
from wounds received while gallantly
doing his duty as a member of the
Dublin Metropolitan Police.

Erected by his sorrowing brother and
sister and by the subscribers of the
Irish Police and Constabulary
Recognition Fund.

By strange coincidence William O'Brien received a customary letter from the King, offering his and the Queen's condolences on the death of his brother,¹⁶ who had arrested protestors prior to the Royal visit five years earlier.

Remembering all the victims of the Easter Rebellion

In the poem 'From mountain to mountain ride the fierce horsemen' by W B Yeats the death of Constable O'Brien is ignored, as Seán Connolly is mentioned as 'the first man shot that day'.

Who was the first man shot that day?
The player Connolly,¹⁷
Close to the City Hall he died;
Carriage and voice had he;
He lacked those years that go with skill,
But later might have been
A famous, a brilliant figure
Before the painted scene.

Throughout the years following the Rising the rebels are commemorated while the police and military are at best given a grudging mention. In 1930 an Easter Monday Mass was offered in Glin for 'the brave men who gave their lives for Ireland at Easter 1916'. There was a fitting tribute to Eamon Dore who fought in the GPO in 1916 and the fact that Johanna O'Brien, sister of Constable O'Brien was in attendance was noted.¹⁸

However, by the time the Golden Jubilee was celebrated in Glin, in 1966, there was no further mention of the dead policeman and even some of his younger descendants were unaware of his existence.¹⁹ The commemoration of the centenary of the Easter Rising seems to have redressed this imbalance and a more considered reflection pertains.



Headstone over the grave of Constable James O'Brien

References:

1. Glin Roman Catholic Register of Baptisms.
2. *The Kerryman*, 6 May, 1950
3. Letter from Sergeant J P Duffy, Garda Síochána Museum Archivist, to this writer on 15 August, 1993.
4. Mealy's Catalogue 10 July, 2010 available at: www.mealys.com/documents/CompleteCatalogue_000.pdf
5. Roger McHugh, *Dublin 1916* (Dublin, 1966) includes a first-hand account by a VAD nurse originally published in *Blackwood's Magazine*, December, 1916. The VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) was a voluntary unit providing field nursing services, mainly in hospitals, during the Great War.
6. Bureau of Military History Witness Statement, by Helena Molony BMH. WS0391.
7. Matt Connolly, *The Capuchin Annual* 1966, pp. 193-200.
8. Bureau of Military History Witness Statement, by Dr. Kathleen Lynn BMH. WS0357.
9. *Ibid.*
10. See Tom Donovan, The Tragic Death of Constable Patrick Sheehan, DMP in *The Old Limerick Journal* Winter edition 2005.
11. The monument was recently restored after being temporarily removed to facilitate works on a new LUAS rail-line. It is located at the junction of Burgh Quay and Hawkins Street, Dublin.
12. In her witness statement (cited above), Helena Molony wrote: 'A window displayed the portraits of King George and Queen Mary smug and benign, look down on us. I produced my stones and let fly, without any warning.'
13. Colm Keena, First victim of the Rising, in *The Irish Times* 23 May, 2013 also available at: <http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/first-victim-of-the-rising-1.1402766>
14. *Limerick Chronicle*, 23 May, 1916, *Limerick Leader*, 24 May, 1916 and *Weekly Observer*, 27 May, 1916.
15. The headstone, erected by the DMP, is only a short distance from the more imposing one erected to his former colleague Constable Sheehan. At one stage the limestone O'Brien headstone was broken in three parts and left on the ground. Some local people repaired the stone and replaced it on its plinth. Near the two DMP graves there is also a headstone over the grave of Michael O'Connor, who was shot by accident during the Easter Rising.
16. Ray Bateson, *The Rising Dead: RIC & DMP* (Dublin, 2012).
17. Seán Connolly was an actor in the Abbey Theatre with Helena Molony. He starred in a play, written by James Connolly, called *Under Which Flag?*, a week before the Easter Rising.
18. *Limerick Leader*, 26 April, 1930.
19. *The Kerryman*, 30 April, 1966.