

# Con Colbert, Limerick Man and Irish Rebel

*by John O'Callaghan*

**B**orn on 19 October 1888 in Moanlena, Castlemahon, west Limerick, Cornelius Bernard Colbert was executed by firing squad in Kilmainham Gaol on 8 May 1916. He had commanded rebel forces during the Easter Rising before surrendering and being sentenced to death. Con Colbert's life was that of a mid-ranking, conservative, cultural and militant nationalist. He was a small farmer's son, one of 13 children, who became a bakery clerk: he was representative of the majority petty bourgeoisie cohort of the revolutionary generation; frequently rebels entered the independence movement through the Gaelic League, which offered self-improvement to those with limited opportunities for upward mobility. Colbert was no different. Venerated as a martyr, he came to be defined by his favourite phrase, 'for my God and my country'. The reality is that he was an ordinary man who worried about his family, his job and his romantic relationships, even if in the end love of country trumped all other concerns for Colbert the patriot. He gave of himself to an extent and in a fashion that was rare – emotionally, financially, physically and spiritually. He lost something of his personality to 'the cause', before ultimately sacrificing his life to it. His relationship with his home place and his family is instructive in regard to his radicalisation.

A resident of Dublin from his early teens, Colbert always pined for rural west Limerick. In a lament, 'Away From Home', written in 1909, Colbert sighed 'Oh my heart would be light if I could but live in that loveliest of spots – sweet Temple Athea'. But it was by assuming overlapping roles in the revivalist and republican networks of the capital that he contributed most to revolution. As a member of the Gaelic League, the IRB, Na Fianna Éireann and the Irish Volunteers, he performed a vital function in bridging the transition between cultural renewal, separatist conspiracy and public declaration of force.

Con's parents were Michael William Colbert, originally from Athea, near Castlemahon, and Honora (Nora) Colbert (née MacDermott), originally from Cooraclare, County Clare. William Colbert, Con's grandfather, built and lived in New Park, a house just a few hundred yards outside of Athea on the north side of the main road from Limerick. This is where Michael William grew up. Con was the tenth of Michael William and Nora's thirteen children, the first eleven of whom were born in Moanlena. When Con was three years old, Michael William moved the Colbert's back to Athea and built Gale View, a house on the opposite side of the road to New Park, and closer to the village. The second eldest son of William Colbert, he farmed on old family land at Templeathea. William Colbert had left New Park to his eldest son, William Jr., who was a Justice of the Peace and a landlord, as well as a farmer. The 1901 census indicates that several of the neighbouring families in the townland of Templeathea West were tenants of William Jr. According to local and family lore, William Jr. was a 'vain, bossy, autocratic man' and the brothers 'rarely spoke': 'William did not think much of his brother Michael's farming skills nor of his wife Nora's housekeeping skills'. Con's mother Nora died from 'post-partum haemorrhage' on 17 September 1892, the day of Bridget's birth, but the large family did not separate immediately in response. Con spent some time with relatives locally, and attended Kilcolman national school while living with his aunt Lizzie at Balliston, near Shanagolden.

Con was in Gale View at the time of the 1901 census, which was conducted on 31 March. Despite being twelve since the previous October, Con was recorded as an eleven-year-old scholar. He could read and write. William Jr. died from 'cancer of the lower jaw' in 1909. He was 'pro-British' and Con and he were not on good terms. Reporting on events in Athea, to his brother John

in San Francisco in early 1909, Con revealed the depth of the enmity he felt towards William Jr.: 'My uncle is not dead yet – the devil would not kill a bad thing.'

Like the rest of his brothers and sisters, Con received most of his primary education at Athea national school. Maurice Woulfe taught the Colbert children. He was the father of Dick Woulfe, a chemist in neighbouring Abbeyfeale, who was closely associated with the local Volunteers during the War of Independence. Katty Colbert married Dick Woulfe in 1913 and their business premises and home in Abbeyfeale was a regular meeting place for republicans.

In what was almost certainly 1903, Con moved to Dublin to live with his sister Katty at 7 Clifton Terrace, Ranelagh Road. His first job in Dublin was as an apprentice barman but he returned to study under the Christian Brothers in 1903, completing the Primary Grade examination at St Mary's Place in 1904, and doing about eighteen months of secondary education at the O'Connell schools, North Richmond Street. He sat his Junior Grade in 1905. He took night courses at Skerries College for a brief spell and was apparently called to a post in the Customs and Excise sector of the civil service, but turned down the offer since it would have meant taking an oath of allegiance to the British Crown. Thereafter he commenced to earn his living, obtaining a junior clerkship in Peter Kennedy's bakery in Britain Street (now Parnell Street) in 1905. He studied accountancy for five years through the International Correspondence Schools. He worked for Kennedy's and kept his lodgings at 7 Clifton Terrace, until his death. He also kept his lodgings at 7 Clifton Terrace until his death. At the time of the 1911 census, on Sunday, 2 April, three of the Colbert sisters, Katty, Lila and Ciss, also lived there. Con was the only one who could speak Irish as well as English. Con, who was twenty-two since the

previous October, was listed as being aged twenty-one. It seems that there was a general consensus among the Colberts, probably including Con himself, that he was a year younger than was actually the case. Madge Daly of Limerick suggested that, like her brother Ned Daly and Seán Heuston, the only executed men who he was older than, Colbert 'was little more than a boy when he faced the British firing squad'. His boyish looks and lack of height (he was hardly over 5 feet) did nothing to contradict this. To focus on his youthfulness denies his pragmatism and shrewdness, however. It should not disguise the gravity of his actions. He was without scruples in his recruiting policies and, like many of those he trained, he proved willing to kill and be killed.

Madge Daly wrote of Colbert as 'hero and martyr':

....inspired by a patriotic fervour richly inherited from both sides of his parentage. An uncle was out with the Fenians, and his mother was one of the McDermott's of Cooraclare, who were in the vanguard of the national effort since 1882. ... My uncle had known Con's Fenian uncle, about

whom Con was ever anxious to hear.

Colbert's uncle, Dr. John Colbert, also held Fenian sympathies. The fact that there was a magistrate and a medical doctor in the extended family, as well as the fact that they were land owners, could lead one to assume that all of the Colberts were relatively well off. This might not have been the case, however, especially with so many children to feed. Writing to his brother John in San Francisco on 9 February 1909, Con reminisced about their youth in Athea:

Well every scene and memory comes back to me now – all about Gael View: 'tho poverty reigned often there, still who were happier than the Colberts? Noble and proud, tho' poor and ragged aye and often hungary (sic). Well God rest those that are gone, they did more than ordinary beings for us under the circumstances.

Con's letters to John featured updates on mundane daily events at home:

Athea is getting gay and all are well there. I saw Mrs Dalton and Patsy with their 3 bonny children. She's as

gay as ever and will never forget Jack [John] Colbert ... S O Donnell was in Athea with me. He is as quick as ever and a great patriot and greater Sinn Féiner.

Con was also clearly concerned with the well-being of the family and sought his older brother's advice:

What will Jim become? It struck me the best thing to do was to put him at some profession or other. I think if he was put at engineering – (mechanical or electrical) that he would be successful. Write and let me know your views regarding him.

Colbert concluded this February 1909 letter with a review of his own circumstances in Dublin:

As regards athletics, except a little bit of hurling I never do anything [but he was at a peak of physical fitness when taking the Fianna and Volunteers on 'forced marches' a few years later]. No great chance to develop athletics in Dublin while one is trying to make a living and study. Time will bring us the value of our work. 15/-" a week at 10 hours a day for 6 days



At the rear of Na Fianna Hall, Barrington Street, Limerick, circa 1913. Standing, left to right: Joe Halpin, Joe Dalton, two unidentified men (the second of the two, wearing the hat, could possibly be Con Colbert - although it is impossible to state definitively given the brimmer obscuring the facial characteristics and the possibly distorted perception of height), Seán Heuston, Jack Dalton, Ned Fitzgibbon. Seated, left to right: Patrick Whelan, John Daly, James Leddin. [Courtesy of Des Long]

of the week is my present salary and work. God increase it is my prayer.

The 'study' that he refers to was probably related to his Gaelic League membership. His hope for divine financial intervention is one that would have been shared by many workers. It is an easily understandable sentiment. Colbert does seem to have devoted most of his disposable income to nationalist activities, however, and his personal and public lives became increasingly intertwined.

The next letter from Con to John was at the end of 1909. The tone was relaxed and forthright as Con inquired about both siblings and family friends who had also left Athea for the same area of California as John and gave him family news from Ireland. Again, Con blended the personal and the political when he once more sought John's advice on the education of a sibling, in this case their youngest sister, and draws a link to one of the great public debates of the day:

You should write a letter to Bridgie and ask her mind her books. We would try and give her a good education for she is the only one left. Also ask her mind her Irish – as it is becoming more than a patriotic movement now, and soon there won't be a situation open in Ireland where Irish won't be compulsory. A great fight is at present being raged over the University question. This fight has raged all this year and will never cease till Ireland's language gets its rightful place among the languages of the world in their own University. Everything points to a return to the paths of national spirit now. We have a Sinn Féin daily paper and it is doing wondrous work.

This was Colbert's second reference to Sinn Féin, and while there is no evidence that he was a member of any branch of the party, he was closely following their work. His political commentary has become more radical over the course of 1909 and in this letter of 9 December, excited by the formation of Na Fianna; he makes his first allusion to militant resistance to British rule:

Ten years time and Ireland will be ripe for a struggle with the cursed robbers who change this country into a desert from its great fertility. Now I have to tell you that we've started a boys National organisation, where

they are taught war tactics, and when the day will come they will be able to show the stuff that's in them. I am studying Irish myself pretty hard.

Idioms such as 'cursed robbers', 'desert', and 'great fertility' suggest that he has absorbed more nationalist dogma.

After December 1909, there were two full years before the next letter from Con to John. These were two years, 1910 and 1911, in which Con was immersed not only in the cultural nationalist movement, but also in Na Fianna and the IRB. Apart from a brief introduction and leave-taking, which are themselves a strange blend of the heartfelt and the somewhat cursory, the letters are largely impersonal. There is no news given or requested, little curiosity as to how his brother is faring. The subject is not Athea, family or friends. Instead, the subject is Ireland and what Con considers as its brave past and glorious future. Clearly present is an Irish nationalist version of the type of jingoism that was rampant around Europe in the years before 1914 and to which Colbert was evidently not immune. The tone is strident, even shrill, and the rhetoric employed might be more usually found in a polemical pamphlet than in a Christmas letter to a brother.

They, who thought that Ireland's spirit was dead, will soon [see] that Ireland can produce armed men. England sowed well and widely the seeds of Brutality lawlessness and Godlessness and the corn is growing and the grain of revenge is deepening. Hope on! You who would doubt of Ireland's future. The Golden West may be a great land, a

rich land, a free land, but the land of the Star Spangled Banner has never struggled for centuries for freedom; It has never given the world a record written in blood like ours; and the glow of an Irish nation shall yet light the world; and before that brightness shall dim all the glory of other nations. Hope on! All who have a drop of blood to shed, and prepare you, who are willing to spill it in the struggle for freedom. Are there no rifles in America. Is [there] no such thing as the 69<sup>th</sup> or Clann na nGaedheal. Hope on! Since the glow of the dawn is warming the veins of Ireland's youth, and the rumble is the tide of the swollen torrent of bloody tyrants being crushed beneath the heels of the victors. Ireland's alive! Ireland's a great land, none other like it. Ireland's making ready again for another fight and let us pray that that the fight will be won. England may beat us but we'll have given the

Right: Unveiled in 1938 on Sarsfield Bridge, Limerick city, this monument stands at the site of a statue of Viscount Fitzgibbon, who was killed in the Crimean War in 1854 and which was destroyed by republicans in 1930. The original pedestal remained intact, however, and served as the base for the 1916 memorial. Erected through public subscriptions, it included portraits of Ned Daly, Tom Clarke and Colbert, as well as the feminised Mother Ireland, her broken shackles being loosened by Colbert. Rifle in hand, Clarke points to the Proclamation. The sixteen executed leaders are listed alongside the names of men killed in action during the Rising. A torch was initially intended to 'forever' illuminate the golden '1916' carved on the pedestal (*Irish Press*, 26 March 1938). Courtesy Ray Bateson.



world another example of what's freedom, what's Ireland and who the Irish are. Lift up your heads oh sons of the Gael and prepare you the way for battle. That's my message. Let it be heard in the west wherever Ireland's sons have ears to hear; that's my Xmas greeting. Roe O'Donnell escaped from the clutches of England at Xmas Eve and perhaps Ireland shall wring herself free from the same greedy grasp before too many Xmas's pass. Hope On! is my message. God save and guard you and all the true sons of the Gael is my prayer. All die, men have as good a chance of heaven on the battlefield as on the Gallows and the chance on the Gallows is as great as that on bed. Which place is nobler. Let young Ireland answer and the west will echo. Love, blessings and happiness be yours this Xmas is the fervent wish of your loving Bro.

Reading between the lines, it is possible to detect something akin to an unconscious insinuation, an unwritten censure to John for abandoning Ireland and the cause. This sentiment generally is to the fore in Colbert's poem, 'In Exile':

*I have betrayed my trust  
For I have fled from my native land  
All for the sake of golden dust*

Of particular significance are Colbert's comments to John on what he perceived to be the likely nature and outcome of the future fight. He wishes for victory but realises the possibility, and perhaps even the probability, of defeat. The overriding imperative, however, is the declaration in arms of Ireland's national rights and character. The letter is evocative of the sense of historical responsibility felt by Colbert and his peers to the physical-force tradition.

Christmas 1915 marked Colbert's last visit home and he made it a productive one, swearing his brother Jim into the IRB and also the local schoolteacher and Volunteer commander, William Danaher. He also took the opportunity to inspect the local company. He fought bravely during Easter Week, first in Watkins' brewery on Ardee Street and then in Jameson's distillery on Marrowbone Lane. As civilians being tried by court martial, the rebels were in a unique position and were permitted to correspond and receive visitors. Unlike the other condemned men, Colbert



The plaque on the house where Colbert was born in Moanlena. (Courtesy Ray Bateson).

refused the opportunity to have the company of his people. He wrote an explanation to his sister Lila: 'I felt it would grieve us both too much'. Colbert penned at least eleven letters to relatives and friends during Sunday, 7 May, bidding them farewell and seeking their

prayers. Alongside the other thirteen rebels shot in Kilmainham, Colbert was buried in Arbour Hill military prison cemetery without a coffin, in quicklime, in a trench that constituted their common grave.

**IRISH REBELLION, MAY 1916.**



**CORNELIUS COLBERT**

(Who took a prominent part in the Rebellion),  
Executed May 8th, 1916.

Memorial postcard dedicated to Cornelius Colbert