Edward Daly - a Limerick Patriot

by Helen Litton

Edward Daly, always known as Ned, was born on 25 February 1891 at 22 Frederick Street, Limerick. The last of a family of nine children, he was the only son of Edward Daly and Catherine O’Mara of Ballingarry, County Limerick. His father, who had been in poor health for some time, died five months before Ned was born.

Edward senior had been a member of the Fenians in his youth, and was imprisoned for some months in 1866. One of his brothers, John, subsequently took part in the 1867 Fenian Rising, and escaped to America. Here he was enlisted into Clan na Gael (the American Fenian group) and was sent to Britain as part of a dynamite campaign, but was arrested in Liverpool and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1884.

It is clear that Ned Daly was born into a family with a strong nationalist and republican identity — indeed, his mother sang her children to sleep with the French revolutionary anthem, ‘La Marseillaise’. He and his eight sisters were imbued with a strong sense of Irish history as they grew up, and all became active in the revolutionary movement which was stirring around the turn of the 20th century.

The death of Edward senior left the large Daly family in difficult circumstances — the eldest girl was just fourteen. A local subscription fund enabled them to open a pub in Shannon Street, but this was not a success. Catharine and her sister-in-law Laura (or Lollie) were dressmakers, but found it hard to make ends meet. However, a saviour appeared in the shape of James Daly, another brother of Edward and John, who had emigrated during the 1850s. Settling on the French-owned island of New Caledonia, in the Pacific Ocean, he had done very well as a trader and sheep farmer, and now, having reared his own family, came to help his widowed sister-in-law.

James moved the whole family (Catharine and her children, Lollie, and grandmother Margaret Daly) to ‘Clonlorg’, a large house in its own grounds on the Tipperary Road. The family also included James Jones, who had been orphaned as a baby; his father, a sea-captain, had helped John Daly to escape in 1867, and in gratitude the Daly family adopted the boy. Jones was the only other male in the family, but he sadly died of typhus in 1894, aged 26, when Ned was about three years old.

The atmosphere in the family was always one of active nationalist activity. Ned’s sisters helped Jim Jones in organising meetings and fundraising in aid of the Amnesty campaign, which was seeking amnesty for Fenian prisoners in British jails. The growing clamour for justice for the prisoners, who were described as suffering greatly under a cruel prison regime, eventually led to many releases. These included John Daly who, after twelve years under very harsh conditions, made his way back to his mother and family in September 1896.

John, although he had been released on condition that he avoided political activity, immediately flung himself into the amnesty campaign for the remaining prisoners, travelling up and down Ireland and Britain, making speeches in support of the cause — he was apparently a dynamic speaker — and could bring thousands roaring to their feet. Between November 1897 and May 1898, he travelled to large American cities such as Boston, Detroit and Philadelphia, speaking to huge crowds. He returned to Ireland financially secure at last, and in a position to take care of his brother’s family as well as his mother and sister.

This was necessary because James Daly had left Ireland for Australia in March 1898. It was well recognised in the family that two Daly males could rarely live peacefully in the same house, and James, a constitutional nationalist, had been at odds with the politics of the rest of the family. John now opened a bakery, at 26 William Street, and moved the whole family into the ten-room house attached to it. He later opened a second bakery, in Sarsfield Street. The business was successfully managed by Madge, one of Ned’s elder sisters, who had a strongly-developed business sense.

Young Ned must have grown up in a very political atmosphere, interspersed with monster meetings and parades, and exciting events such as the presentation of a river-craft to John Daly, by local working men, because he had been blackballed by the Shannon Rowing Club. In 1899, John stood for Limerick Corporation, and became Limerick’s first nationalist mayor, ordering the removal of the Royal Arms from the front of City Hall. He was mayor for three years.

The family settled into a fairly respectable status, despite their political sympathies. Now prosperous, they spent their summers in Kilkee, County Clare, with the rest of Limerick’s middle class, in Kilkee Lodge on the Strand Line. Home life was enlivened by musical
floury atmosphere of a bakery would be unsuitable for him. Besides, the Limerick Bakers’ Society voted to refuse Ned as an apprentice, as he was not the son of a baker.

Ned began work as a clerk at Spaight’s Timber Yard, where his father Edward had once worked as a weigh-master. After two years there, he went to work for his uncle John as a clerk at Daly’s Bakery, but this only lasted for a year. The saying about Daly males had begun to show its truth again, as Ned grew up.

John was an autocratic man, who laid down the law for his nieces and nephew, but was not listened to. The younger girls delighted in escaping out the window at night to attend dances, and Ned was often seen ‘down the town’ with his boon companions. John clearly felt that this unsatisfactory nephew, who had a fine baritone voice and would gather with his friends in a music shop in the Coliseum Building to listen to the latest classical recordings, was only a milktop, a mollycoddle. He seemed to care about nothing except his appearance (he was always carefully turned-out), and showed no ‘stickability’ at employment, or anything else.

However, Ned did nourish a secret ambition, which was to be a soldier. He spent any spare money on buying second-hand military manuals and books on tactics and strategy, and much of his spare time in studying them. It seemed unlikely he would ever achieve his dream; he could not join the British Army, and where else was there to go?

John Daly’s life in prison had been assisted by a close friendship he developed with a much younger fellow-prisoner, Thomas Clarke, who had also been convicted of dynamite offences. Clarke was released from prison in 1898, after fifteen years, and visited John in Limerick. Here he met Kathleen Daly, John’s third eldest niece, and they fell in love. They married in New York in 1901 and lived in America till 1907, when they returned to Ireland. They opened a tobacconist shop in Amiens Street, Dublin, and later one at 75A Parnell Street.

In 1913 Ned Daly left Limerick after a final brawling row with his uncle John. He moved to Dublin, to the Clarke’s, and helped occasionally in the shops, or with babysitting the three Clarke sons. He began work as a clerk in Brooks Thomas building contractors, then moved to May Roberts wholesale chemists.

He was again living in an atmosphere of political ferment. Clarke was now a prominent member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), and the central figure of a group of young men who aimed at freeing Ireland from British rule - men such as Bulmer Hobson, Patrick Pearse and Sean MacDiarmada. MacDiarmada, in particular, had become a close friend of Tom’s, and of the whole Daly family.

When Home Rule was finally promised by Britain, Unionists in Ulster refused to accept it, and established the Ulster Volunteer Force. The IRB and other nationalists realised that they needed to arm themselves in response, and on 25 November, 1913, a meeting was called in Dublin to establish the Irish Volunteers. Thousands of young men signed up that evening, and among the first was young Edward Daly, a soldier at last.

Ned was thrilled at achieving his life’s ambition, and joined B Company, First Battalion, as a private. Elections were soon held for officers, and he was appointed captain. This may have been because of his relationship to Tom Clarke, but was probably also because he could demonstrate a high degree of military intelligence and technique. He made a new friend that first night, James O’Sullivan, who also became a captain in B Company. The two young men, both aged 23, became inseparable. New
officers, much younger than many of the Volunteers they commanded, they grew moustaches to make themselves look older – without much success.

Ned revelled in his new life, and took pride in his own military appearance and that of his company. He insisted on high standards among the men, both of behaviour and turn-out, and was disciplinarian, but he seems to have been greatly respected by those he commanded. When he was made Commandant of the First Battalion, in January 1915, no-one could complain that he had not earned his promotion.

It was not a serious business, of course; the Volunteers ran fundraising dances and entertainments, and enjoyed summer training camps, all of which Ned Daly took full part in, often finishing an evening by singing one of the Gilbert and Sullivan songs he loved. The camps included young women from Cumann na mBan, the women’s auxiliary force which had been established to support the Volunteers, and it is clear from some of their accounts that Ned Daly, with his melancholy dark eyes, serious expression and solemnly bearing, attracted a good deal of feminine attention.

However, only one name has ever been linked romantically with Ned Daly, that of a young woman called Molly Keegan. A noted mezzo-soprano singer, she was studying music in London when, in early 1915, Ned wrote to her sister Laura and confessed that he was considering marriage. This is the only reference to the relationship that survives, and nothing came of it in the end; in February 1916, Molly married a businessman in London. Political differences might have been the problem, as Molly’s father and uncle had been police officers, and her brother joined the Royal Irish Constabulary.

Ned may have been worried off getting closer to such a family, as when he became a Commandant he was also sworn into the IRB, and would be more closely involved in its activities.

Plans for a Rising were continuing. The First World War, starting in September 1914, gave the IRB the opportunity of striking a blow for Irish freedom while Britain was distracted in France. In June 1915, when the Fenian Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa was killed in the USA, Tom Clarke immediately saw the opportunity for a huge nationalist set-piece, and a massive public funeral saw thousands of Volunteers, Cumann na mBan, and Citizen Army members following the coffin to Glasnevin Cemetery. Ned Daly’s First Battalion led the procession, and he took a leading role in the ceremonial. The funeral was noted for Patrick Pearse’s eulogy, in which he proclaimed Ireland’s need for independence, and the will to fight for it. Hundreds more young men and women joined the movement.

By early 1916, plans were well advanced for an armed rebellion, to begin in Dublin and to spread throughout the country. In Limerick, John Daly had established and funded a Volunteer battalion, but Ned stayed in Dublin with the First Battalion. He had mended fences with his uncle, and had been welcomed back to Limerick for Christmas in 1914 and 1915.

Many of the Volunteers had no idea of what was being planned. The IRB maintained absolute secrecy, and indeed it was only rebellion in Irish history which eroded the attentions of spies. Of course, the authorities in Dublin Castle were well aware of Volunteer drills and marches through the city streets, but they were not inclined to take the movement too seriously. Above all, they presumed the Volunteers were poorly armed, despite weapons having been landed illegally at Howth in April 1914. However, many British soldiers were selling their weapons surreptitiously, needing money for drink or debts.

If the rank and file Volunteers were kept in the dark, most of their Commandants were well informed. The First Battalion had been allotted the area around the Four Courts to defend, and Ned Daly and James O’Sullivan spent weeks walking round the streets, working out defensive positions and likely command posts. On 18 April, Ned was finally informed by Tom Clarke of the exact date of the Rising, to begin on Easter Sunday, 23 April. According to Kathleen Clarke, Ned got a bit of a shock that the Rising was so close, and really about to happen, but immediately began to complete his preparations and ready his men.

Meanwhile Eoin MacNeill, chief of staff of the Volunteers, became aware that he had been sidelined by the IRB (he was not a member), and that the Rising was planned to go ahead with or without his consent. He was against starting a rebellion without the consent of the people, and was appalled at the idea of a small, untested group deciding to go to war against the British Empire, with all the probabilities of death and disaster. He placed a notice in the Sunday Independent, cancelling the Volunteer manoeuvres called for that day.

This threw all the plans into disarray. Thousands of Volunteers, coming together on Sunday morning expecting to fight, were told to go home and await further orders. The IRB leaders, furiously re-planning, decided to go out on Easter Monday instead, and Pearse sent orders around the country by courier. However, many Volunteers were simply confused by this, and never came out at all. In Limerick, the battalion leaders decided to obey MacNeill’s order, and stood down their men.

When Ned Daly reviewed his battalion on the morning of Easter Sunday, preparing to march to the Four Courts, he was looking at barely 100 men, out of a full complement of 380. Nevertheless, he carried out his orders, and headed for the area he had been ordered to defend.
On Saturday, about 1pm, Ned Daly was brought a message from Patrick Pearse, ordering him to surrender as the GPO garrison had done. He handed over his sword, and ordered his men to form up in ranks, having urged those not in uniform to save themselves by leaving through the back of the Four Courts. He then marshalled the men to march to O'Connell Street, singing as they went. Here they found the other garrisons, and all were kept in the gardens of the Rotunda Hospital that night, before being taken to Richmond Barracks in the morning.

Ned Daly was court-martialled on 3 May, the day on which Tom Clarke, Patrick Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh were executed. Clarke had wanted to see Ned before he died, but Daly was brought too late, and was only able to say a prayer over the bodies of his brother-in-law and his comrades. At his own court-martial, at which he pleaded 'not guilty', he said that he had not expected the Rising to succeed, but that he had followed his orders. He was sentenced to death, and taken to Kilmainham Gaol.

That night his sisters Madge, Laura and Kathleen were allowed to visit him, and take messages to his mother and uncle; Kathleen had also visited the gaol the previous night, to say goodbye to her husband. Ned was then given the Last Rites by Fr Columbus, one of the Capuchin monks who attended the condemned men. He was executed between 4 and 4.30 am on the morning of 4 May, in company with Willie Pearse, Joseph Plunkett and Michael O'Hanrahan.

John Daly, who was already in poor health, was shattered by Ned's death, and the loss of his friends Clarke and MacDiarmada, and died the following month.

Both Edward and John Daly are commemorated in Limerick by a plaque on the site of the bakery in William Street, and Ned is portrayed on the 1916 monument on Sarsfield Bridge, along with Tom Clarke and Con Colbert. Many descendants of the Daly sisters still live in Limerick, and keep the memory of their heroic forebears green.

Edward Daly Snr.