

Michael O'Connor, Ballyhahill (1888-1916)

'An innocent casualty' of the 1916 Rebellion

by John Curtin

While it is necessary to commemorate the combatants who died during Easter Week, and the sacrifices made by all those who were injured or lost their lives, they at least, joined the fight aware of the risk.

In the general mayhem, during the Rebellion, innocent members of the public got caught up in the fighting. Some were imprisoned in error and others lost their lives. Michael O'Connor, aged 28, son of Mr Patrick and Bridget O'Connor, Ballyhahill, County Limerick, was an innocent victim who was caught in crossfire and killed.

Michael had followed in the footsteps of his parents, who were both National School teachers in Ballyhahill¹, when he qualified as an Intermediate teacher.² He taught in Secondary Schools in Carlow, Roscrea, and Newbridge and was teaching in St Kieran's College, Kilkenny, until the Easter holidays in 1916.³ Michael must have been unaware that the Rebellion had commenced, on Easter Monday, as he travelled to Dublin on Tuesday 25 April. Next day he visited a Mr O'Shaughnessy at the Lucan Dairy.⁴ After half an hour he left



St. Kieran's College, Kilkenny

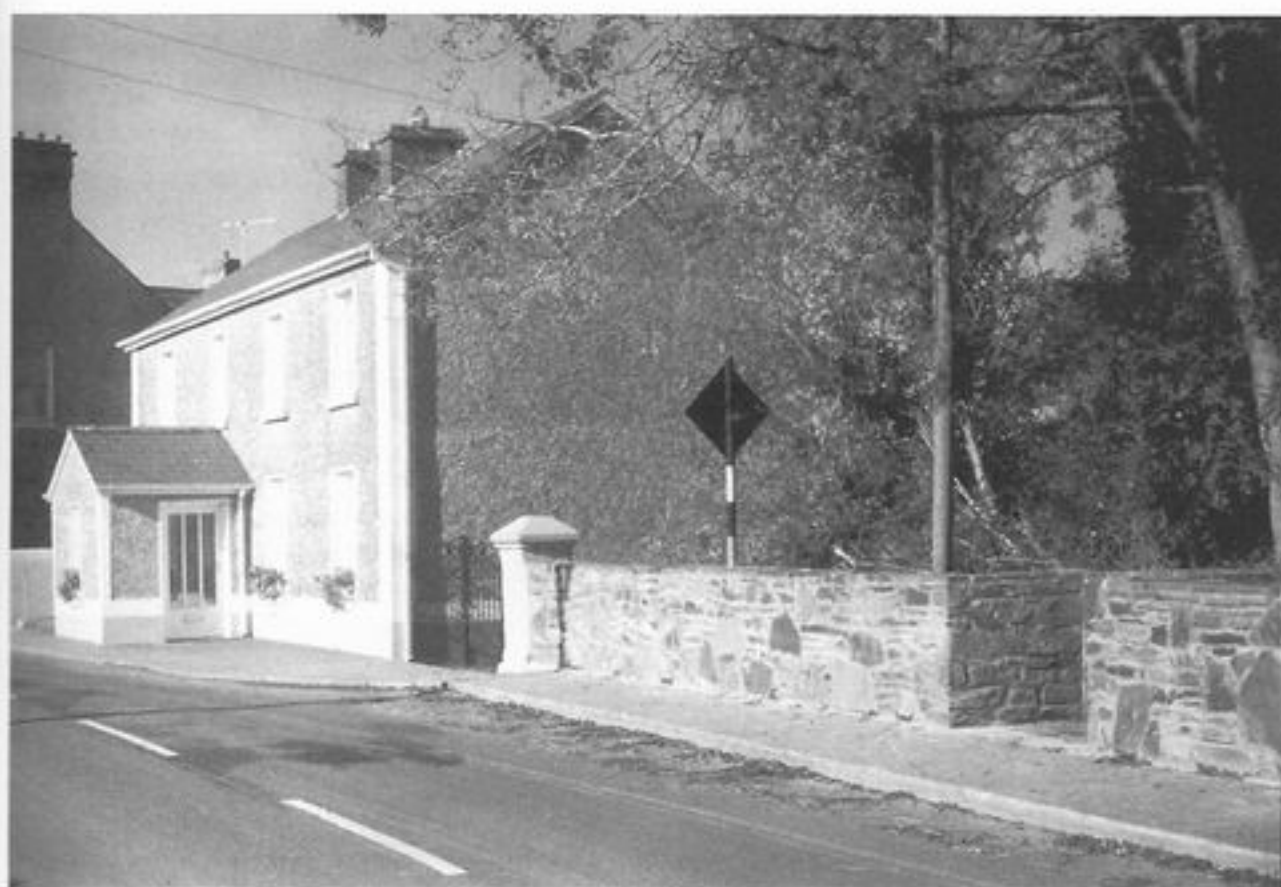
for South Richmond Street,⁵ where he had arranged to stay that night.

He and two friends then went to the Phoenix Park, where they were sitting in the People's Garden discussing the best and safest way to get out of the centre of Dublin. It was later alleged that gunfire was opened on the Military Headquarter Offices, at Parkgate Street from the direction of the People's Garden and the Military Guard returned fire.⁶

O'Connor shouted "down, bullets" and they all dived for cover. O'Connor's two friends decided to find better shelter behind a nearby lavatory. While doing so, one of them got grazed on the cheek and the other friend was also wounded. O'Connor hid behind a large tree. When he saw a young girl walking on a nearby footpath he rushed out to help the girl to also take cover behind the tree. At that moment he was shot dead.⁷ In the follow up search two bodies, including Michael O'Connor's, were found.⁸

In the aftermath of the Rebellion there was a lot of uncertainty and confusion in regard to casualties and people who were missing. It is therefore not surprising that the death of Michael O'Connor went unnoticed for a while. The first indication that anything was amiss was when reports that he was missing reached west Limerick and the matter was reported in a local newspaper.⁹ The reports stated that he was last seen at Kingsbridge Railway Station,¹⁰ Dublin, at 11 a.m. on Wednesday 26 April, but his whereabouts thereafter were unknown.

The dreaded news of Michael's death was soon evident and the fact that he was not connected to the Rebellion added to the sorrow felt in his hometown. It was not until over



Home of Michael O'Connor, in Ballyhahill village



Military pass through Parkgate Street, Dublin in 1910

a month later, in June 1916, that his body was released for a final burial. On Saturday 3 June 1916 the remains were carried from Kingsbridge Station, where he had been on the morning he was shot, and travelled by train to Foynes. The re-interment took place later that evening in Kilfergus Graveyard, Glin, in the presence of a large assemblage of mourners.¹¹

On 31 July 1916, Patrick Joseph O'Shaughnessy M.P. for West Limerick raised a Parliamentary Question at Westminster. He outlined the facts of how "Michael C. O'Connor, an innocent victim, came to be shot" and asked the Prime Minister if the case of O'Connor "who was in no way connected with the Rebellion" would be, "included in the public inquiry about to be set up into the killing of non-combatant persons by the Military in Dublin in connection with the insurrection?"

The Prime Minister replied:

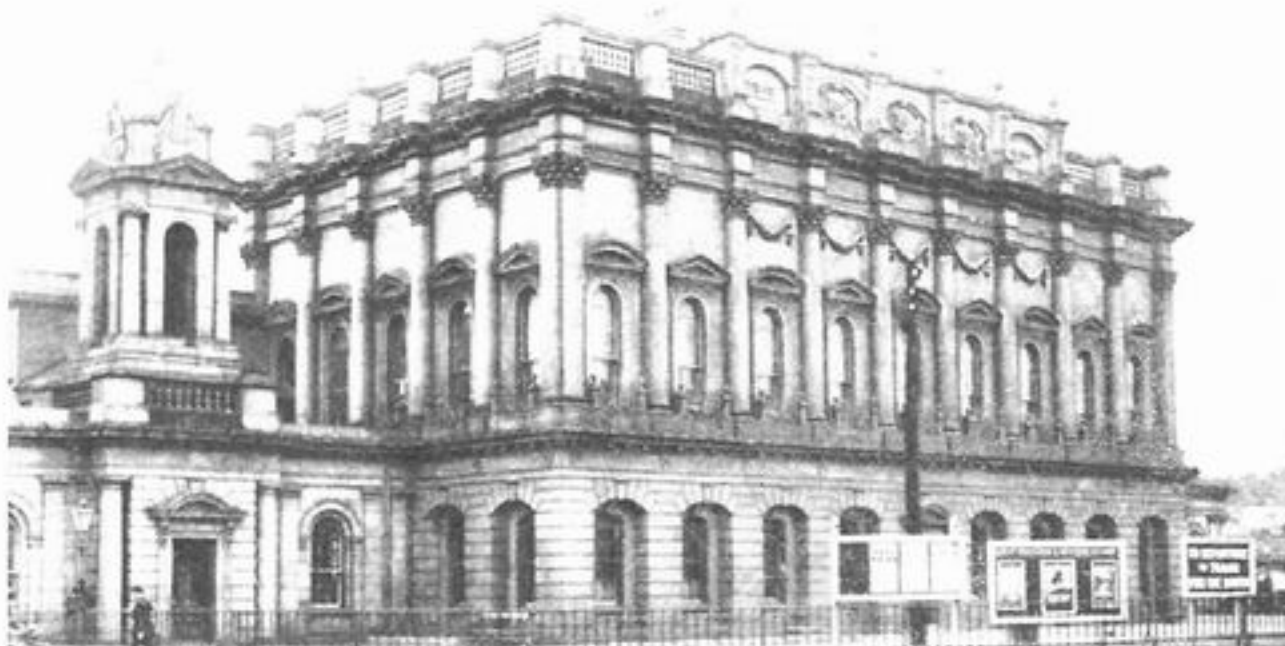
"I am informed that the circumstances are believed to be as stated in the question. Fire was opened on the Headquarters Offices, Parkgate, on the 26th April, from the direction of the People's Garden, and was returned by the Guard. When firing ceased the gardens were searched and two bodies found, one of which was subsequently identified as that of Mr. O'Connor. The answer to the last part of the question is in the negative, as it is believed that no further facts could now be elicited by inquiry". Mr O'Shaughnessy M.P. then asked the Prime Minister "Will any compensation be given to the parents of this man? The Prime Minister responded that he "would consider it".

Whether or not his parents received compensation is unknown, but if they did, his mother did not live long after

her son's death to derive any benefit. She died in December 1917, little over a year after her son's tragic death.¹² Michael's younger brother John, known as Jack Tom O'Connor, played a leading role in west Limerick, during the War of Independence. The shooting of his older brother by the Military and the subsequent death of his mother may have been the catalyst that set him on that path.

(Endnotes)

- 1 1901 and 1911 Census records for Ballyhahill.
- 2 The post of intermediate teacher was introduced two years earlier, in the 1914 Act of Parliament, under pressure from the recently formed A.S.T.I. and it replaced the poorly paid post of assistant teacher.
- 3 Weekly Observer June 3 1916.
- 4 He most likely visited a branch of Lucan Dairy, at 24 Parkgate Street, near the Phoenix Park.
- 5 South Richmond Street is located near Portobello and the Grand Canal.
- 6 HC Deb 31 July 1916, Vol 84 cc2056-72056 <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1916/jul/31/death-of-a-secondary-teacher>
- 7 NLI Ms. 13, 416 /1-22
- 8 It is not known if the other body recovered was the body of one of O'Connor's friends or another casualty.
- 9 Weekly Observer 3 June 1916.
- 10 Dublin rail station is now named Heuston Station, in honour of Sean Heuston who was executed following the 1916 Rebellion.
- 11 The Irish Times 6 June 1916.
- 12 The Irish Times 8 December 1917.



Kingsbridge Railway Station (renamed as Heuston Station in 1966)



Headstone over grave of Michael O'Connor in Kilfergus Graveyard