

# Seán Heuston and his association with Limerick

by Tom Donovan

**S**eán Heuston was born on 21 February 1891 at 24 Lower Gloucester Street, Dublin, the son of John Heuston and Maria McDonald. Seán was their eldest son, with one sister Mary two years older than him and two younger siblings Teresa and Michael. Seán gave his name as John into his twenties, but like many Volunteers, he began to use the Gaelic version as he became more aware of his Irish heritage. Seán and his three siblings moved with their mother to live with her two unmarried sisters in Jervis Street, Dublin and were still living there in 1901. The two aunts were Teresa McDonald (an envelope maker) and Brigid McDonald (a vest maker). Seán went to school at the Christian Brothers (O'Connell's Schools) on North Richmond Street and he was educated there to Intermediate level.

In 1908, at the age of seventeen, Seán achieved first place in Ireland in an examination for clerkships held by the Great Southern and Western Railways (GSWR). He was appointed as a clerk in Limerick railway station and spent the next five years in Limerick. When he came to Limerick he took lodgings with a young married couple Francis J Humphries, who was employed as a sorting clerk and telegraphist, and his wife Agnes. They lived at 7, Military Road (now O'Connell Avenue), Limerick.

In August 1909, shortly after he arrived in Limerick, Seán joined the local Fianna Éireann, the scouting club for boys revived by Bulmer Hobson and Countess Markievicz. He took part in the training of the Limerick slua. He organised an extremely active branch which eventually had a membership of 250 boys. He was determined to make the Fianna movement relevant and keeping the boys fully occupied and interested. History lessons were given by the Reverend Father Hackett; Joe Dalton was in charge of physical culture, while others conducted language classes, and Seán took charge of drill, signalling and general scout-training. Madge Daly, the sister of Ned Daly, recalled that he was a fluent Irish speaker and used his

native language whenever possible. In 1912, John Daly and some of his Fenian friends built a hall for the Fianna behind the Daly house in Barrington Street. It was opened by Bulmer Hobson in December 1912. John Daly was carried into the hall in his invalid chair to make a fine speech, which was his last one in public. Later Tom Clarke wrote to John Daly: 'Bulmer gave me a great account of the fine shape you were in. It is grand to find that you have made the Fianna such a great success in Limerick. You are away ahead of anything else in Ireland. In Dublin, they have not yet got the length of even thinking about building a hall'. Some years later the hall was burned to the ground by the Black and Tans.

In 1913 Seán was transferred to Dublin by the GSWR and assigned to the traffic manager's office at Kingsbridge (now Heuston) station, which in 1966 was renamed in his honour. He continued his work with Fianna Éireann where he met Limerick man Con Colbert, who was prominent in the organisation. Seán was given command of a branch on the north side of the city based in Hardwick Hall and he was promoted vice-commandant of the Dublin Brigade and became director of training. Colbert and Patrick Pearse engaged him for Saint Enda's school, where he provided training in drill and musketry for the pupils. In July 1914, Seán led a group of Na Fianna to Howth to assist with unloading arms from the Asgard and his group was responsible for bringing a consignment of guns safely back to Dublin in a trek-cart. In November 1913, Seán joined the Irish Volunteers soon after their formation, eventually becoming a captain in Ned Daly's 1st Battalion. He worked hard with his company, organising marches and field manoeuvres, fostering a spirit of commitment and camaraderie, and procuring arms and equipment by purchase and any other means at his disposal. On Easter Monday he was assigned command at the Mendicity Institution, a building on the south side of the river Liffey, to the west of the Four Courts where Daly and the 1st Battalion



Sean Heuston in 1912

were based. It is most likely that Seán was well acquainted with Daly from his time spent in Limerick. His function was to control the route between the Royal Barracks (later Collins Barracks, now the National Museum of Ireland) and the Four Courts for some hours so that Daly and the remainder of the 1st Battalion would have time to settle in. However, Seán and his force of less than thirty men held out for over two days. Surrounded and in a hopeless situation, he surrendered on Wednesday to save the lives of his men. He was tried by court-martial and sentenced to death. He was executed on 8 May. At twenty-five years of age he was one of the youngest of the men executed; Ned Daly was just four days younger than him. Like Ned, Seán was unmarried and in his final hours he was accompanied by his mother and his nineteen-year-old brother Michael, then a student for the priesthood at the Dominican Priory, Tallaght. He was executed at around 4 am on 8 May 1916. Seán Heuston was shot in the former stonebreakers' yard at Kilmainham Prison. His remains were later buried in Arbour Hill Cemetery. He is remembered in Limerick where a small street, Seán Heuston Place, is named in his honour.

Sources:

National Library of Ireland website at: <http://www.nli.ie/1916/exhibition/en/content/executed/seanheuston/index.pdf>

NAI Census returns 1901 and 1911 at: <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie>