

Thomas Clarke (1858-1916)

Fenian, Republican Motivator and Rebel Leader

by Tom Donovan

It was no coincidence that Thomas Clarke was the first name to appear at the end of the Proclamation of an Irish Republic. Apart from the fact that he was recognised as the most senior and influential leader involved in the Easter Rising, he also held the respect of the wider nationalist community. Clarke was the main driving force within the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), as he organised various Volunteer groups around the country in the lead up to that momentous day he longed for all his life.

Thomas J. (Tom) Clarke was born on 11 March 1858 at Hurst Castle, Hampshire,¹ England, where his father James Clarke was stationed as a sergeant in the British Army. He was the eldest of a family of two boys and two girls. James was Protestant while his wife Mary Palmer from Clogheen, County Tipperary was Roman Catholic. However, Tom was reared in the faith of his mother. In 1859 the family moved to South Africa when James was posted with the Royal Artillery. They had a traumatic voyage and nearly perished at sea. In 1867 the family moved back to Dungannon, County Tyrone and James retired as sergeant in 1868. Tom was educated at the local national school. In 1878, when John Daly visited Dungannon, as National Organiser for the IRB, Tom Clarke was enthralled by Daly and the two men became friends for the rest of their lives, as both died in 1916.

Shortly after he left school Tom became a member of the Fenians. In 1882 he emigrated to the United States, where shortly after arriving he joined Clan na Gael. In April 1883 he was sent to London on a bombing mission. Like many others before and after him he was betrayed by an informer and was arrested in possession of explosives. Tom was sentenced to penal servitude for life and he served fifteen years under very harsh conditions in English jails at Millbank, Chatham and Portland. He recalled his experiences in his book



Tom Clarke as a young man and Kathleen Daly in 1901, before her marriage. (Courtesy of Helen Litton).



Glimpses of an Irish Felon's Prison Life, which was published posthumously in 1922.

In 1898, Tom Clarke was released from prison having served fifteen years. He came to Limerick to meet his old friend John Daly. On 2 March 1899, John Daly, who was then elected Mayor of Limerick bestowed the Freedom of Limerick on his old friend. While he was staying in Limerick Clarke met Daly's niece Kathleen, who was twenty years his junior and they fell in love. The Daly family were less than enthusiastic about the romance due to the age gap, as Kathleen was only twenty years old. Tom was aged forty,

but looked much older due to the harsh treatment he received in prison and he was in poor health. Being a released prisoner he could not find work in Ireland, so he left for New York in 1899 and Kathleen followed him soon after. They were married in 1901 and their first son, John Daly Clarke, was born in June 1902. Two more sons followed; Tom (junior) born in March 1908 and Emmet in August 1909.

The Clarkes lived in Brooklyn and the Bronx and Tom, who became a United States citizen in 1905 worked in an iron-foundry, and edited the Clan na Gael newspaper Gaelic American while Kathleen ran an ice-cream store for



Tom and Kathleen Clarke (Courtesy of Helen Litton).

a while. However, Kathleen's health deteriorated, so the family moved to Manorville, Long Island, where they ran a market garden. This venture proved to be unsuccessful so they returned to Ireland in December 1907.

Tom Clarke had a sister Hannah who ran a tobacconist shop in Dublin, and she helped Tom set up a similar shop at 55 Amiens Street, Dublin. He opened a second shop in 1909, at 75A Great Britain (Parnell) Street. This shop comprised of a little counter and a small area for customers, but it became the hub of republican activity in Dublin. In 1910 the shop at 55 Amiens Street was closed and a new one opened nearby at 77 Amiens Street, with living space overhead for the growing Clarke family. Kathleen did the domestic duties, raised her sons and worked in the shops, and was also active in republican affairs. Kathleen's brother Ned moved from Limerick to Dublin in 1912. He got a job working as a clerk and lived with Tom and Kathleen.

Tom's two periods in the United States had reinforced his standing within the revolutionary movement in Ireland. He was forced to keep a low profile, as he was still on a ticket-of-leave, but remained an influential figure behind the scenes. In the years leading to the 1916 Rising,



Hanna Clarke, one of Tom's sisters, and Mrs. Mary Clarke (née Palmer), date unknown. (Courtesy E. Clarke)

he and Seán MacDiarmada revitalised the IRB with the help of his friends in Clan na Gael who were sending money from America. Clarke became treasurer and set up the newspaper, *Irish Freedom*. The ultimate aim was to have an organisation prepared for rebellion.

In 1913 Tom joined the Irish Volunteers when the organisation was formed, but refused to accept any position of authority as he was well aware that he was being observed and he did not want to allow the police an excuse to suspend his ticket-of-leave. He did recognise that the Volunteers had potential as an army of revolution.

After the Irish Volunteers were founded, a women's auxiliary group (Cumann na mBan) was founded the following year. Kathleen was a founder member and became head of the Central Branch. She became involved in drilling and first aid training, selling green, white and gold badges, and commissioning historical pamphlets. She was sworn into the IRB before the Rising, as a form of succession planning, for a time when all the leaders, including her brother and husband, would be dead.

While the outbreak of the First World War presented the plotters of insurrection an ideal opportunity to strike, it also robbed the Irish Volunteers of the majority of its members, as they answered John Redmond's call to aid Britain in their fight against Germany. There were about 11,000 Volunteers left to prepare for rebellion. Tom was extremely upset when Redmond split the Volunteers by forming the National Volunteers in September 1914, but realised that the remaining Irish Volunteers constituted a more effective and unified force with the majority of them dedicated to an Irish Republic. Tom was a member of the IRB Supreme Council and his fellow members recognised his potential when in late 1915 they co-opted him to their Military Council, with responsibility for planning the Rising.

Volunteers were bored by all the drilling and training and needed some active engagement. Tom Clarke realised that the death of the Fenian Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, in New York, could be

turned into a propaganda coup. The funeral procession was indicative of the strength of the republican movement and the enormous turnout in July 1915 encouraged many more people to join the Volunteers and Cumann na mBan. The climax to the events was a stirring speech by Patrick Pearse who admonished the foolhardiness of the British authorities who had left Ireland with its 'Fenian dead'.

Clarke worked well with Seán MacDiarmada as he arranged the general strategy and MacDiarmada had the responsibility of working out the details.

During the Rising Clarke occupied the General Post Office with most of the other members of the Provisional Government. He opposed the eventual surrender, but was outvoted by the other rebels.

General Sir John Maxwell's description of Clarke now reads like a ringing endorsement of his prowess as a rebel and leader:

This man was a signatory to the Declaration of Irish Independence. He was one of the most prominent leaders in the Sinn Fein movement in Dublin. He was present with the rebels in the GPO, Sackville Street, where some of the heaviest fighting took place and was proved to have been in a position of authority there. On 20 May 1885, under the name of Henry H. Wilson, he was sentenced in London to Penal Servitude for life for treason felony, and was released on licence on the 20 September 1898. He exercised a great influence over the younger members of the organisation with which he was connected.

Clarke was tried by Field General Courts Martial on 2 May 1916 when he was charged with 'taking part in an armed rebellion and in the waging of war against His Majesty the King, such act being of such a nature as to be calculated to be prejudicial to the Defence of the Realm and being done with the intension and for the purpose of assisting the enemy'. The fact that he pleaded not guilty and was an American citizen was to no avail.

He was sentenced to death by shooting and the sentence was confirmed by General Maxwell.



Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa, Fr. Micheál O'Flanagan, Eileen O'Donovan Rossa, Tom Clarke, July 1915. (Courtesy of Helen Litton).

It was difficult for Kathleen to say goodbye to her husband when he left to spend the previous Easter Sunday night in a hotel, but she was stoical and resisted revealing her emotions. She spent all that week at home in Fairview, where the family now lived. As a distraction she planted several rows of cabbages and as she did so she could hear gunfire in the distance. She was joined by her sisters Laura and Nora Daly, recently arrived from Limerick. They went to the GPO for an update, but Kathleen was too weak to accompany them. She realised that the fighting had ended when British soldiers arrived in an armoured car to arrest her, on suspicion of having been involved in the Rising. She was brought to Dublin Castle for the night, and at midnight she was taken to Kilmainham Jail to visit Tom. She fully realised the consequences and had to summon strength for the final meeting. She spent a couple of hours with Tom in his small cell, talking of many things, but avoided personal feelings, as it would break both of them.

Shortly before 4 a.m. on 3 May 1916, Tom Clarke was shot in the former Stonebreakers' yard at Kilmainham Jail. His remains were later buried in Arbour Hill Cemetery. Kathleen walked home that morning by herself and was later joined by her sisters Madge and Laura. That evening they were brought to Kilmainham Jail again, to say goodbye to their brother Ned, aged 25 and he was shot the following morning, 4 May.

POBLACHT NA H EIREANN. THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT OF THE IRISH REPUBLIC TO THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND.

IRISHMEN AND IRISHWOMEN: In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.

Having organised and trained her manhood through her secret revolutionary organisation, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and through her open military organisations, the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, having patiently perfected her discipline, having resolutely waited for the right moment to reveal itself, she now seizes that moment, and, supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe, but relying in the first on her own strength, she strikes in full confidence of victory.

We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible. The long usurpation of that right by a foreign people and government has not extinguished the right, nor can it ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people. In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty: six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms. Standing on that fundamental right and again asserting it in arms in the face of the world, we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State, and we pledge our lives and the lives of our comrades-in-arms to the cause of its freedom, of its welfare, and of its exaltation among the nations.

The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.

Until our arms have brought the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women, the Provisional Government, hereby constituted, will administer the civil and military affairs of the Republic in trust for the people.

We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, Whose blessing we invoke upon our arms, and we pray that no one who serves that cause will dishonour it by cowardice, inhumanity, or rapine. In this supreme hour the Irish nation must, by its valour and discipline and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called.

Signed on Behalf of the Provisional Government,

THOMAS J. CLARKE,
SEAN Mac DIARMADA, THOMAS MacDONAGH,
P. H. PEARSE, EAMONN CEANNT,
JAMES CONNOLLY, JOSEPH PLUNKETT.

The Easter Proclamation, 1916

1916 Proclamation signed by Thomas J Clarke

Tom left some money for a Dependents' Fund and Kathleen started this work immediately. She threw herself into her work and she worked so hard she suffered a miscarriage. She chose not to tell Tom that they were expecting a fourth child, as it would add to his worries.

Tom Clarke had a long and varied life from his younger days when he travelled with his father and the rest of his family protecting the interests of the British Empire, an Empire he wanted banished from his home country and to this end he devoted his entire adult life.

Reference

1. Hurst Castle is on the end of a spit of land which is only three-quarters of a mile from the Isle of Wight. Some accounts give Tom Clarke's place of death as the Isle of Wight, whereas near the Isle of Wight would be more correct.