

Two forgotten Limerick Heroes

Mary Perolz and William Pa O'Brien

by Tom Toomey

When writing on Limerick people who played a part in the 1916 Rising, the birth rule is usually used. If somebody was born in Limerick and associated with Easter Week, then that person's story is deemed worthy of inclusion. However, when one considers that Mary Perolz was born in Limerick and moved away as a child and Willie Pa O'Brien was born in County Cork and crossed the border into County Limerick as a child, it is indicative of the fickleness of this rule.

Mary Perolz, a frustrated rebel

Mary (Maíre) Perolz¹ was born in Market Alley, Limerick on 7 May 1874 the third child of Richard Perolz, a Dublin born Protestant printer and Bridget Carter, a Roman Catholic. Mary had two sisters and one brother. Richard found work in Tralee as a compositor and the family moved with him. Mary went to school in Moyderwell Convent in Tralee. The family then moved to Cork where her father worked for the *Cork Examiner* and Mary attended the Presentation Convent. Finally, the family moved with Richard back to his native Dublin and Mary went to George's Hill Convent, which she disliked. Mary was inspired by the Gaelic League procession in 1898, especially as her father was in the parade. He was the first man she heard singing 'West's Awake'. Mary joined the Gaelic League in 1898 and then joined Inghinidhe na hEireann about 1900. She was also in Cumann na mBan and joined Sinn Féin and the Citizen Army at its inception. Mary and Helena Molony were also involved in theatre, and acted the first ever play staged in Gaelic in December 1902. They performed with the young actor Captain Sean Connolly, who was the first rebel to die in the subsequent Rising.

Mary was also registered at the official owner of *Spark*, a weekly socialist newspaper published between February 1915 and April 1916, edited by Countess Markiewicz. Before the Rising, Mary and her sister worked in a fruit shop in Capel Street. After they lost their jobs there were five or six of

them living together and no one earning money except her sister's husband, Matt McNamara. Being unemployed, Mary had more time for other activities. She made contact with a soldier from the Castle and met him regularly in public-houses and got pieces of machine guns from him and paid for them. She also made contact with Sir Thomas Myles, who was also from Limerick and who had earlier helped import guns for the Volunteers. She recalled that she told James Connolly that Myles had offered to be of use to them. "Can I use him?" she said and Connolly replied: "Yes, but don't let him use you." Myles used to give her a lot of information walking along the street without pretending they knew each other. In her witness statement, to the Bureau of Military History,² when she was in her early seventies, Mary reveals a sense of frustration, at being used as a messenger during the Easter Rising. While she was assured that the work was vital, she yearned for more action. 'Afterwards I had a bitter feeling of frustration, as I did not take part in the fighting,' she wrote.

After the Rising she hid out in Tralee, but was arrested on 2 May, 1916, charged with being the owner of *Spark*, 'a seditious weekly paper'. She was arrested the day Tom Clarke was executed. She remembered that 'a tommy told me about the execution. I was brought to Richmond. From Richmond I was sent to Kilmainham, from there to Mountjoy. I was a couple of months or three in Mountjoy. From there we were sent to Lewes where we were well treated. Helena Molony said we should not admit we were well treated.' She was sent to Lewes Prison on 20 June 1916. Questions were raised about her imprisonment in the House of Commons and Mary Perolz was released in July 1916 and she returned to Ireland.

In 1919, Mary married James Michael Flanagan, a fellow left wing campaigner, known affectionately as 'Citizen Flanagan'. They lived on Botanic Road, Glasnevin, Dublin. She continued to campaign for women's rights

particularly in the work place. She died on 12 December 1950.

William Pa O'Brien

William Patrick O'Brien of Galbally, better known as Willy Pa, was serving his time as a pharmacy assistant in Cobh, County Cork when he became involved with the local unit of the Irish Volunteers. Willy Pa was one of a group of Volunteers arrested and detained at Cobh in a general round up of suspects following the Easter Rising. When he was brought to the local RIC barracks it seems he received a very severe beating. His family always maintained that a Sergeant Kingston³ was responsible for administering this beating.⁴ Eventually O'Brien was interned in Frongoch and Wakefield prisons in England.

Willy Pa O'Brien was the second oldest of three brothers who were to make their mark in the upcoming struggle. As a result of the beating and the severe conditions in the internment camps, O'Brien's health broke and when he was released in November 1916 he was immediately transferred to Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital where he died on the 28 November 1916. He was buried in Galbally.⁵ Although Willy Pa O'Brien was listed in *The Last Post*⁶ he has been largely overlooked. His brothers Ned and John Joe later took part in the rescue of Sean Hogan at Knocklong Railway Station in May 1919.

References

1. The Perolz name is French Huguenot in origin.
2. Witness Statement of Marie Perolz (Mrs Flanagan) BMH WS 245
3. Information received from his grand-nephew Gerard Fitzgerald (RIP).
4. Whilst in prison in Frongoch Willy Pa O'Brien became quite friendly with Tomás Malone. In an autograph book in the possession of Malone's son (also named Tomás) there is an entry by O'Brien.
5. *The Last Post* (1976 edition)
6. An entry in *The Last Post*, states that O'Brien was from Mitchelstown, County Cork. While the O'Briens were born in Mitchelstown, their parents opened a business in Galbally, when their children were very young.