

Lt. Col. Sir Anthony Weldon (1863-1917)

by Des Ryan

At the outbreak of the Easter Rising in Dublin in late April 1916, Lt. Colonel Sir Anthony Arthur Weldon was the Commanding Officer of Military Forces in Limerick. Weldon was born on 1 March 1863, at Oxford Square, Paddington, London. He was educated at Charterhouse School, Godalming, in Surrey and Trinity College, Cambridge. Weldon always wanted to join the army, but his father would not hear of it; so he began studying for the legal profession. While he was at college his father then asked him to come home and manage the family estate in Ireland.⁽¹⁾ In 1885, Weldon joined the Militia, a group of civilians with some military training who would be called up during an emergency. The following year he was given a commission as a Lieutenant in the 4th Leinster Battalion (formerly Queens County Rifles). He also joined the Masonic Order and was a member of Lodge No. 167, in Athy, County Kildare.

Weldon was an accomplished banjo player with a taste for theatricals and was a capable amateur performer. It was through his acting that he met Lord Wolseley, Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces in Ireland. Weldon was staying at Lord Drogheda's House at Moore Abbey, Monasterevin, County Kildare, for a theatrical week, when he met Lord Wolseley. Weldon remarked that it was "an eventful meeting" as he and Lord and Lady Wolseley became great friends. In 1894 and 1895, when army manoeuvres were being inaugurated in Ireland, Lord Wolseley asked Weldon to accompany him as his A.D.C. (Militia). One morning, while at breakfast, during manoeuvres, Wolseley received a letter informing him that he had been made Commander-in-Chief of the British Army. Shortly after the appointment was made public Weldon accepted the post as one of Wolseley's Aide-de-Camps.⁽²⁾ Weldon said:

We ADC's, had to report to the Chief when any distinguished people, Kings, Ambassadors,

Presidents, etc., came to England, or left calling cards. I used to like when he went on tours of inspection, I and the other ADC'S had to arrange his itinerary, and go with him. I think my most interesting experience as his ADC was when I took part in Queen Victoria's Jubilee procession in 1897.⁽³⁾

Weldon was the first Militia Officer to be employed by the Commander-in-Chief at the War Office in London and he held this position until Wolseley's retirement in 1900. When the Anglo-Boer war began in South Africa [1899-1902], Weldon asked Lord Wolseley for leave to travel to South Africa. Weldon said "At that time they were not sending any officers of the Auxiliary forces, so he could not send me out directly, but gave me leave to go at my own expense for six months, and recommended me specially to General Sir Redvers Buller".⁽⁴⁾ Weldon served on the General's staff as a Special Service Officer, as a Railway Staff Officer, and spent some time with the Army Service Corps. He took part in the following operations in the province of Natal; the Relief of Ladysmith, fighting at Colenso, Spion Kop, Val Kranz, Tugela Heights and Pieters Hill. On one occasion he was down with enteric fever. Weldon was mentioned in dispatches twice and was awarded the Distinguished Service Order in recognition of his services. He had two brothers and seven cousins serving in the war. During that period he inherited, on the death of his father, the title as the 6th Baronet Burdett, of Dunmore, County Carlow. This included Kilmorony House, Athy, County Kildare, with its 2,800 acres estate. He was recognised as a sympathetic and indulgent landlord.⁽⁵⁾ Sir Anthony was fond of outdoor sports, and was an enthusiastic supporter of fox hunting and even provided a perpetual challenge trophy, the Weldon Cup, for the best ladies horse taking part in any hunts in Kildare, Carlow, Queens County [Laois] and Castlecomer, Kilkenny.⁽⁶⁾ When he had the time he joined the



Field Marshal Lord Wolseley

Kildare and Carlow foxhunts; on one occasion with the Carlow Hounds his horse tripped while jumping a fence and rolled over on Weldon causing him to be badly bruised about the head and shoulders.⁽⁷⁾

On 11 February 1902 he married Winifred Varty-Rogers, daughter of Lt. Col. J.E. Varty-Rogers, formerly of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, at St. Peter's Church, Eaton Square, London. When they returned from their honeymoon, in Paris, a month later, a deputation of residents from the parishes of Athy and Kilberry came to Kilmorony House and presented the newly married couple with a silver salver.⁽⁸⁾ By 1904, Weldon was Deputy Lieutenant and J.P. for Queens County [Laois] and J.P. for County Kildare. He was a member of the Kildare Archaeological Society,⁽⁹⁾ and a member of Athy Board of Guardians. From 1906 to 1908, Weldon was Vice-Chamberlain to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, the Earl of Aberdeen. In the 1908 British Army reforms, the Militia infantry battalions were re-designated as the Special Reserve forces and Weldon was promoted to Colonel. He was also appointed State Steward and Chamberlain and



Engagement photos of Sir Anthony Weldon and Miss Winifred Varty Rogers in 1901.

in that capacity he attended many state functions at Dublin Castle and at the Vice-regal Lodge [now Áras an Uachtaráin]. During a concert given at the Curragh Military barracks, to raise funds for the Drogheda Memorial Hospital and the Women's National Health Association, one newspaper reported that Sir Anthony Weldon proved to be the 'draw' of the evening when he sang several of his comic songs and recitations. Lady Weldon, not to be out-done by her husband, also sang a number of songs.⁽¹⁰⁾ In 1911, he was made a Commander of the Royal Victorian Order. On 2 April 1914, the *Irish Independent* reported that Sir Anthony Weldon, who had been sick at his house in Dublin Castle, was feeling much better and had moved to the Vice-regal Lodge for a change of air.

On 28 June 1914, while on a visit to Sarajevo, Bosnia, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie were assassinated. This led to the outbreak of war among the major European powers. The German invasion of Belgium, in early August, brought England into the conflict. Ireland, at that time, was part of the United Kingdom and was on the verge of getting Home Rule, a limited form of freedom; but this was put on hold until the War in Europe was over.

In August 1914, the 4th Leinster battalion was stationed in County Cork, and on receiving mobilisation orders was moved to Crosshaven, and in November, to Passage West. In March

1915, two nuns fleeing the German occupation of Lille, in northern France arrived in Ballylinan, Athy. At the request of the people of the district Colonel Weldon provided the nuns with a vacant house, free of charge, for their own use.⁽¹¹⁾ By May 1915 the 4th Leinsters had moved to Devonport, near Plymouth, England, the battalion moved back to Ireland in September and was stationed at Gough Barracks in the Curragh, County Kildare. Towards the end of the year Weldon visited the front line in France and returned home on Christmas Day. On 7 April 1916 an advance party of the Leinsters left the Curragh for the New Barracks, on Edward Street, Limerick. Less than a week later, on 13 April, the battalion arrived in the city without a regimental band.⁽¹²⁾

Following his arrival in Limerick, Lt. Col. Weldon had a meeting with Brigadier-General Stafford who had come from Queenstown [Cobh], County Cork. Stafford informed Weldon that an attempt would probably be made to bring guns into the country somewhere on the west or south-west coast of Ireland. Accordingly Weldon took measures to organise a 'striking force' of six officers, 114 men of other ranks and a machine-gun section ready to move at a moments notice if necessary.⁽¹³⁾

On Easter Monday, 24 April, news reached the Military authorities in Limerick that Irish rebels had taken over a number of key buildings in Dublin

and that heavy fighting was taking place. At 4.30 p.m. that afternoon Lt. Col. Weldon issued orders to his staff and within twenty minutes the battalion was ready for action. Each man was issued with 120 rounds of ammunition. All communication with Dublin had been severed with the exception of the telephone line to the Army headquarters in Cork. Sentries were sent to guard the Post Office, gaol and railway bridge across the river Shannon [near Watchhouse Cross, Kileely]. Meanwhile, the Irish Volunteers, under the command of Michael Colivet, who had marched out to Killonan in anticipation of the Rising on Easter Sunday, made their way back to Limerick on the afternoon of Easter Monday. As they reached the outskirts of the city, those with rifles marching at the front, with their bayonets fixed and in extended formation, could see soldiers in British uniforms on the streets. It would appear that Weldon had given instructions to the soldiers not to attempt to arrest or disarm the Volunteers, in order to avoid bloodshed or shoot-outs on the streets, as they made their way down through the city. On 26 April reinforcements from the 3rd Leinsters and the 4th Royal Irish Regiment arrived and were sent to hold various bridges in the city. All barbed wire in the city was commandeered by the Military, and by nightfall on the 27 April the bridges around the city were in a strong state of defence. On the following day all petrol was seized and brought to the New Barracks. On Saturday 29 April Colonel Weldon issued the following notice which was published in the newspapers:-

To whom concerned, - After consultation with his Worship the Mayor [Sir Stephen B. Quinn] of Limerick, I consider it would be in the best interests of the public safety, for which I am responsible, that all licensed premises in the City of Limerick, and within a radius of four miles from the boundary of said city, should be closed until further notice at 9.30 p.m. daily for the sale of intoxicating liquor, Saturdays included.

No intoxicating liquor is to be sold in registered clubs after 9.30 p.m. within the said limits. I hereby direct that [the] above instructions are to be strictly complied with. Notices were also issued that owners of

motor cars and motor cycles must obtain permits to travel, and that those in possession of petrol for trade purposes will have to store same with the military authorities.⁽¹⁴⁾

When news reached Limerick, from the British Military authorities at Queenstown, that the Rebellion in Dublin had failed, it was made public as soon as possible.⁽¹⁵⁾ The news was conveyed to Michael Colivet and his staff and they were asked to surrender their weapons unconditionally or immediate steps would be taken against the Volunteers to secure the weapons. The Mayor sent for Colivet to convey Weldon's demand for the surrender of the arms. A meeting of the Volunteers and their Officers decided to refuse Weldon's ultimatum, but upon learning that the soldiers were about to carry out raids for the arms it was decided to hand them over to avoid bloodshed.⁽¹⁶⁾ It was arranged between Colivet and the Mayor that the weapons would be handed over at 8.00 p.m., on the night of Friday, 5 May, at City Hall in Rutland Street.

The Volunteers were most civil and amenable, pointing out, with complete justice, that during the crisis [Rebellion] they had appeared neither in uniform nor under arms nor done anything to endanger the lives or property of anyone. Lt. Colonel Weldon on his part undertook to represent to the authorities as favourably as possible their action and voluntary surrender of arms.⁽¹⁷⁾ A lot of the weapons were damaged before they were handed over and the Volunteers thanked Weldon and dispersed quietly to their homes.⁽¹⁸⁾ A week later about forty people connected with Sinn Fein were arrested; eventually all those arrested were released. The struggle for Irish Independence continued until 1921. While home on leave in August 1916, Weldon attended a convention of the Athy Board of Guardians where he gave his opinion on the political situation in Ireland. He said:

Without the North, Home Rule would be impossible. The late Rebellion, ill-judged and ill-advised as it was, had opened the eyes of the people to the promiscuous carrying of arms, which should never have been allowed, [a reference to the Ulster Volunteer Force in the north and the Irish Volunteers in the south]. That was the excuse given

to me when I had to take action in Limerick against Sinn Feiners. It is the end, I hope, forever of that sort of work. At the same time, I think out of ill may come good and in a short space of time some measure of local government will be devised with the wish of the whole country, which will bring peace to this unhappy country in the future.⁽¹⁹⁾

In January 1917, Weldon spent three weeks in France and, while visiting the front line, was wounded and had a narrow escape from an artillery shell. Thereafter his health deteriorated. The battalion history states that for some time previously it had been apparent that Lt. Colonel Weldon had not been well. The Easter Rising had put a great strain on him and the duties of being the Military authority for the counties of Limerick and Clare had laid heavy responsibilities on him. On 6 April, Colonel Anthony Arthur Weldon, having already suffered a slight stroke and paralysis, left the battalion and was admitted into the Dr. Wheeler's Hospital for Officers, Fitzwilliam Street, Dublin. A War Office letter dated 3 April 1917 placed him on the retired list.⁽²⁰⁾ Weldon died in the hospital on the 29 June 1917. He was 54 years of age and was buried in St. John's Cemetery, Athy. The Mayor of Limerick and Town Clerk sent a telegram of condolence on their behalf and on behalf the citizens of Limerick to Lady Weldon and her family in their bereavement. The 4th Leinster battalion was held in high regard by the people of Limerick, and in the civil life of the city Weldon was equally popular. During the few months that he spent in Limerick he contributed on many occasions to concert programmes at the New Barracks.⁽²¹⁾

After the death of Colonel Weldon, Kilmorony estate fell into decline. Lady Winifred Weldon was unable to manage the estate and contracts to supply the Curragh Military barracks with hay, fruit and vegetables were lost. While Kilmorony House and the land on which it stood remained in the hands of the Weldon family some of its contents were auctioned in 1934.

Michael Colivet wrote to the solicitor handling the sale asking for the return of a sword that he had surrendered to Lt. Colonel Weldon in 1916. In his letter Colivet stated that 'Weldon was a very considerate man and that

Limerick was the only district where severe measures were not taken after Easter Week. Colonel Weldon had promised to return to me at a later date, my sword and scabbard, which being a military weapon, he could not return to me at that time.' Colivet received reply a from Weldon's son stating that if the sword was in his possession he would return it, and carry out what he believed would be his father's wishes. Kilmorony House had been raided in 1921, he told Colivet, but there were still some swords there; he invited Colivet to come to the house and see if one of the swords was his one.⁽²²⁾ It is not known if Colivet visited the house or if he recovered his sword

On 17 December 1938, Lady Winifred Weldon, Colonel Weldon's widow, married Wilfred Fitzgerald. In 1947 the Weldon family sold off the entire contents of Kilmorony House. The Irish Land Commission took over the estate and the house fell into ruin.⁽²³⁾ Lady Weldon died four years after the sale on 19 February, 1951.

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