Michael Colivet

by William O'Neill

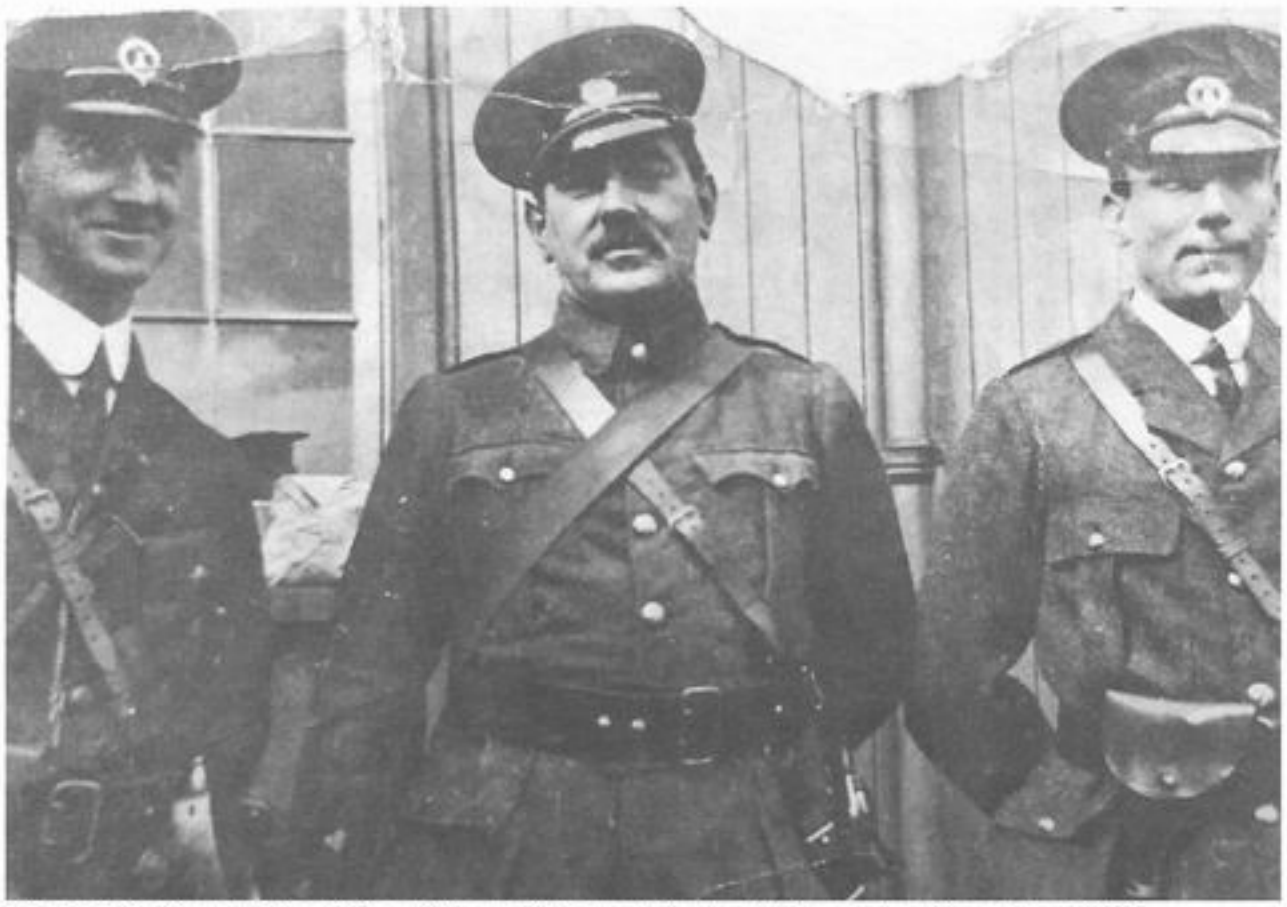
In Mount Saint Lawrence cemetery, Limerick, an inscription on a small Celtic cross requests that one should 'Pray For The Soul Of Anne Colivet. Died Nov 24th, 1910, R.I.P.' Anne Colivet (née Kinnerk) was the mother of Michael Colivet, who was an MP for Limerick, but is probably more famous for being the Commander of the Limerick branch of the Irish Volunteers in 1916. According to one of Michael Colivet's Volunteer colleagues, Anne 'was a fiery patriot, who often recalled to her children that an ancestor of hers had been hanged in 1798.'[1] This may explain why Colivet was a member of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) and the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) and was also leader of the local Volunteers in Limerick. It was perhaps at odds with the mind-set of Colivet's father, John. John Colivet was listed in the 1911 census as being a Master Mariner. This would obviously explain why John Colivet was Chief Officer on the *S.S. Aylevarroo* in the British Navy. A full year and a half after his son plotting and planning the Easter Rising, John Colivet was lost at sea, being a part of the mercantile fleet of the British Navy. Three months later, his daughters were in court, battling for compensation from the British government for the tragic loss of their father on active service at the age of fifty five. They were eventually awarded £300 for their loss.[2] And yet, here was Michael, whose father was a British naval officer of French descent, and whose mother was a staunchly nationalist Limerick woman. Michael Colivet was an enigma. Scattered throughout the Bureau of Military History Witness Statements are descriptions of Colivet as a reluctant republican, a sensible military leader, a patriotic politician, a defiant political prisoner, a rousing speech-maker, and even a confused commandant who did not know which way to turn in a time of crisis. This article will examine not only Colivet himself as an individual, but also examine the causes and consequences of his actions during 1916.

Michael Colivet in the early 1920s. *(Courtesy of Aine O'Loughlin and family)*

Michael Colivet was Commandant of the Brigade which comprised the whole of the City and County of Limerick, Clare, Mitchelstown, and some adjoining districts of Tipperary. According to Irish Volunteer Seamus O Goibin, Colivet 'had not the extremist background of Ledden and Clancy, and did not become a member of the IRB until sworn in by Seán McDermott in December 1915.'[3] Colivet was also a member of the AOH, which at the period of the early 1900s experienced a sharp growth in Limerick. This popularity stemmed from the nationalist groups that had started to sprout up around the country. Yet Colivet then began to take an 'active interest in the Volunteer movement once the question of inaugurating it locally' in Limerick was considered by the Volunteers. At a later stage he was co-opted onto the organising committee.[4] While he had been a member of the AOH, he had initially supported the Irish Parliamentary Party, and had not really embraced the idea of nationalist militancy at this stage. In fact, when he joined the Volunteers in 1913, it was more to offset aggressive Unionist activities, and to defend the ideal of Home Rule more than a desire to strike a bloody blow at the British authorities in Ireland.[5] It was noted by one of his colleagues that Colivet seemed just like an Imperial Home Ruler, and did not seem like he was committed to the cause of Irish republicanism. Irish Volunteer Alphonsus J. O'Halloran even remarked that when the Volunteer movement was in its infancy, Colivet 'said to me in a very hesitating manner, as if he were not quite sure as to how I would take the suggestion: "I have been thinking it would not be a bad thing were we to obtain complete separation from England". My reply was: "I've been thinking that since I was fourteen!"[6]

Colivet soon came to be in charge of the Company in Limerick. His employment was advantageous to the Volunteers. Even Volunteer recruiter Ernest Blythe, who loathed Colivet, asserted that it was to be an 'advantage to have him, because he was employed in the Shannon Foundry and had been able to get pikes made for the men for whom no firearms of any sort could be obtained. I think he also made a type of bayonet which could be fitted on to a shotgun.'[7] However, after the formation of the Volunteers, the British government grew wary of what could potentially turn into a militant paramilitary arm of the nationalist movement. Due to the British Government's spies and informants, as well as their surveillance division, arming the Volunteers was quite a big problem. Colivet and the Shannon Foundry played a big role in bypassing British surveillance, with 'the vast bulk of the arms consisted of shotguns with buckshot ammunition, pike heads, etc. Pike heads were manufactured at the Shannon Foundry, Limerick, a number of them reaching our area.'[8]

Of course, it is at this point where Colivet's foibles come to the fore. The Volunteers were now established, and were very professional in their drills and techniques, emulating real regimental



Michael Colivet, Robert Monteith and George (Saoirse) Clancy in December 1913.
(Courtesy of the Colivet Family)

regimes, based on people like Robert Monteith's experience in the military. According to one of Colivet's colleagues, he had 'an almost fanatical adherence to facts' which was probably 'his chief characteristic.'[9] His attention to detail is probably what earned him his place on the IRB council in Limerick. According to his IRB superior, Colivet was 'an active lieutenant' and it was in part to his contributions that the IRB Supreme Council was 'satisfied that the organisation was fairly strong in the city.'[10] There is a slight difference in recollections in that there are conflicting accounts of when Colivet joined the IRB. However, it seems as though the majority of testimonies have Colivet inducted just before the start of 1916. It appears as though he was not aware of the over-arching plan for a Rising that was being plotted from January onwards. In fact, this is in line with the fact that he 'heckled' Pearse the week before the Rising 'as to the help that was expected to come from Germany. In other words he was not prepared to take anything for granted.'[11]

It is clear that Colivet was in the thick of the action for the Easter Rebellion, albeit not in the thick of the planning and preparation in the weeks and months prior to the Rebellion. In some of the witness testimonies, Colivet is clearly seen as a stringent individual, who would not want to make a hasty decision. According to Charles Wyse-Power, a member of the IRB Dublin branch, Colivet demanded to meet Sean MacDiarmada, who had a strong relationship with Tom Clarke and John Daly. Colivet was escorted to Dublin to meet MacDiarmada, in order to iron out the finer details of the Rebellion.[12] Soon after this, as Colivet was made aware of plans to strike at the British authorities, he began to embrace the idea, and was soon spreading the word among the battalions to prepare themselves for action. About a fortnight previous to Easter, 1916, a meeting was held for the heads of Clare and Limerick Volunteers. It was here that the other Volunteer leaders heard for the first time that a Rebellion was being planned. It was during this meeting that Colivet 'urged that the military training of the Irish Volunteers should be intensified, and he also dwelt on a number of aspects of such training which required particular attention. No specific date was mentioned for the Rebellion nor was there any discussion of plans.'[13]

As time went on, Colivet started to address different battalions of Volunteers, not going into specific details, but being vague in his requests of action. Yet people realised that an important action was about to take place. All the battalion districts, included in the Limerick brigade area under Comdt. Colivet, were briefed on this. One Volunteer recalled that he 'impressed on everybody the great need for conserving our limited stock of ammunition and guns, and he urged the collection of shotguns and empty cartridge cases.'[14] However, Colivet would sometimes divulge the finer details to those that were a part of the closely-knit, secretive group. Tadhg Crowley of Ballylanders was one of these key players in this plan for Limerick during 1916. Colivet informed him that 'if anything was to occur, the password or the indication of any thing occurring would be that "the football match is on"…. He spoke to me by myself, nobody else being present, and I anticipated that when I would get word to the effect that the football match was on it would be an indication of the day or date we would rise.'[15] He was also quick to give advice that was passed down by members of the upper echelons of the Rising's planners; according to William O'Brien, Colivet told him that James Connolly had advised that when using barricades in a street fight, 'they need not be so strong as people thought and that if nothing else were available they would have to procure furniture from houses which would not make them very popular.'[16]

However, when it came to the Rising itself, plans for Limerick were discarded before operations had even began. William O'Brien recalled:

> I saw nothing, and came in and went to bed and to sleep. About two o'clock my mother was just going to bed when she heard a knock at the door. She opened it and saw Marie Perolz and Charlie Power, who had come from Sean MacDiarmada. They gave her a written sealed despatch which we understood contained the words: "We strike at noon. Obey your orders". It was addressed to Colivet and signed by Pearse. They told my mother to take the 9 a.m. train to Limerick, and deliver it at John Daly's house. She was to come back, if possible, and say whether she could deliver it. I accompanied her to the station for the 9 a.m. train, by outside car. We went to Limerick. I am positive it was not the 6.45 a.m. train. At Ballybrophy or Limerick Junction I saw Marie Perolz or Mary W. Power in the Cork part of the train. We arrived in Limerick shortly after 1 p.m. We went to Daly's. Madge was there and old John. They told us that the Volunteers were in Killonan. They took charge of the message; and two of the sisters took it to Colivet immediately. We were told that O'Rahilly had come the previous morning with the countermanding order and that, as a consequence, the Volunteers had

Wedding photo of Michael Colivet and Anna Hartigan in September 1912. *(Courtesy of Aine O'Loughlin and family)*

> been demobilised. The Daly's were debating what could be done, as the confusion was great.[17]

John Hosty stated:

I now gave MacNeill's message to Michael Colivet. There was a big mobilisation. He met me with his staff, Ledden, big Seán Muirthille and others. We walked up the field. I passed the remark to Michael Colivet that I thought… he already had got countermanding orders the previous evening. The O'Rahilly was in Limerick and had left a short time earlier that Sunday.[18]

Meantime, Colivet dispatched Lieut. Whelan to Tralee to glean fuller information. He returned from Tralee with the news that Austin Stack and Con Collins had been arrested and that a ship, supposed to be carrying arms, had been sunk. He had contacted Vice Commandant Cahill; He spoke with great bitterness of the Germans, who, he said, were out for cheap Irish blood. He said no men were coming, and that the cargo consisted of obsolete Russian rifles and machine-guns. He advised against a Rising, and recommended Colivet to try and bluff through. He was especially virulent regarding Von Papen, who had been German Military Attache in the United States. Von Papen was incapable of understanding the meaning of the Irish struggle, and looked on the whole affair as a civil war, rather than the uprising of a separate nation, seeking to rid itself of foreign domination.[19] Whelan also reported that:

> The men having been disbanded and directed to await further orders, nothing transpired for a few days. Then a message was received at the post office from the District Inspector of the R.I.C. in Bruff that a surrender had taken place in Dublin, and a message was submitted to be put up on the post office window stating that Pearse had surrendered. Subsequently, Michael O'Sullivan, who was an officer in the Mitchelstown Volunteer Company, brought a message from Colivet, who was O/C of the Limerick City Volunteers, directing that we should surrender all arms. Thomas Murphy, who was Captain of the Ballylanders Company, ordered their surrender, and the arms from the Galbally Company were surrendered in or about the same time. They were handed over to the R.I.C., some of them broken. They were mostly shotguns; and only one or two rifles.[20]

So, on 5 May 1916, the surrender took place. A dark evening; R.I.C. men posted singly in the streets adjacent to the Town Hall; curiously silent knots of onlookers stood at corners. British military patrols were posted outside and inside the building. The men arrived singly or in small groups. They had been instructed to render the arms useless, and this order was effectively carried out. The rifle bolts were missing in most cases; corrosive acid had been poured down the barrels, some of the barrels were bent into half hoops; some were so thoroughly destroyed that they had to be surrendered in haversacks. Each man handed his rifle to Colivet, who then laid it before the Mayor. He in turn handed it to the Officer in charge of the British Military. A tense situation developed at one stage. The Mayor left the Council Chamber temporarily, and a British Officer took his place. Colivet at once stopped the proceedings and declined to hand over any more arms. The tension was relieved by the return of the Mayor, and the proceedings continued. A few days later most of the Battalion officers were arrested but were released after a few days, a further example of Weldon's magnanimity. So ends the true inner story of Easter Week in Limerick, recorded as a tribute to the courage and loyalty of the Limerick Battalion They were ready and willing to do their part, and if they did not go into action, the fault was not theirs.[21]

Some time in 1917 a committee was appointed by the Executive of the Volunteers, to inquire into the action of Limerick Kerry and Cork during Easter Week, who submitted the following report in March 1918:

> We regret delay in completing the investigation re action of Cork, Kerry and Limerick during Easter Week 1916. This delay was unavoidable. Our decision regarding Cork is that, owing to conflicting orders, no blame can be attached to them for their inaction. Against Kerry no charges have been made; consequently their action through the whole matter was, we consider, justifiable. With respect to Limerick, we have read statements from all the principal men concerned. We have also investigated the dispatches alleged to have been received by them from Dublin and Kerry. Some of these dispatches they did not in our opinion receive at all, and those they did receive were so conflicting that we are satisfied no blame whatsoever rests on the officers and men of Limerick. With regard to the surrender of arms, it is to be deprecated that at any time arms should be given up by a body of men without a fight, but we do not see that any good purpose will be served by any further discussion on this matter as far as 1916 is concerned. This opinion will, we hope, be weighed should any similar circumstances arise in the future.

This report was accepted and ratified by the Irish Volunteers Executive at a meeting on 10 March 1918. Colivet was profoundly dissatisfied with the part of the report dealing with the surrender of arms. He demanded not merely a pious wish on the part of the Headquarters Executive but a definite verdict as to whether or not the surrender of arms in Limerick in the circumstances prevailing there at the time was justifiable. He was also aware that he had detractors, and demanded that their charges should be brought into the light of day, so that he could deal with them. His representations elicited the following reply:

Michael Colivet with Sean T O'Kelly and friends in 1923. *(Courtesy of the Colivet Family)*

Michael Colivet at Liam Forde's wedding in the Dunraven Arms in 1922. *(Courtesy of the Colivet Family)*

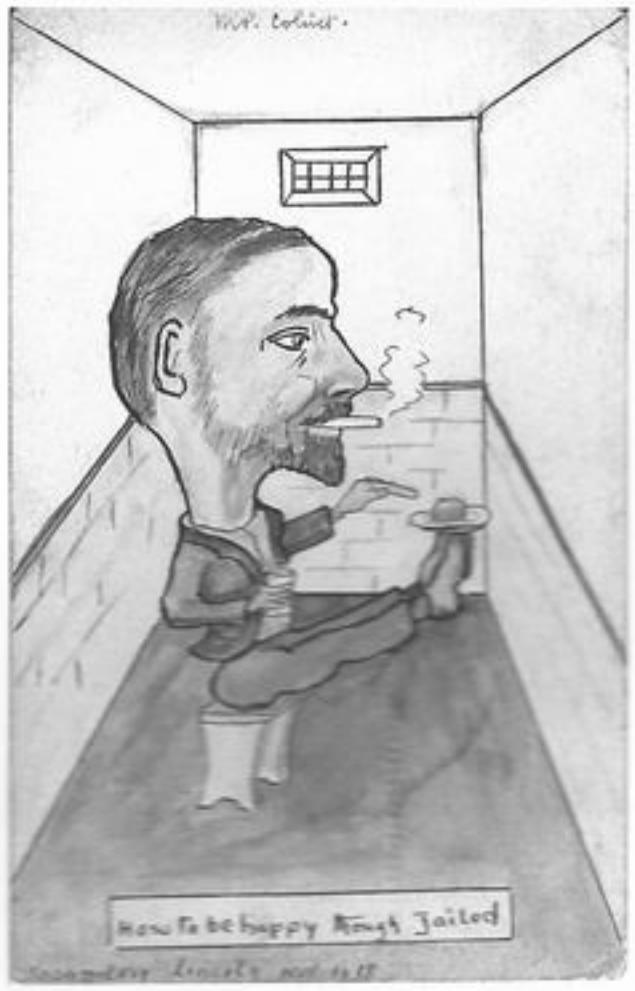
> The Irish Volunteers, General Headquarters, Dublin. 17th September, 1918. Statement by Irish Volunteer Executive regarding report issued March 1918 by Committee of Enquiry into affairs of Easter 1916. Commandant Colivet of Battalion Limerick City has on behalf of self and said Battalion objected to above report out of grounds (1) that he was not furnished with particulars of evidence tendered to the Committee so as to enable him to meet any adverse evidence or charges, (2) that in consequence of (1) the report has, in his opinion, pronounced unjustifiable the surrender of arms by the Battalion at the period mentioned. The Executive have considered the matter and desire to say in regard to No. 1 as the report has not condemned Commandant Colivet it was not necessary to furnish him with evidence. In regard to No. 2 the report made no pronouncement on this head. This statement is being circulated to those persons to whom the original report was circulated. Signed for and on behalf of I.V. Executive (Signed) Cathal Brugha.

This ended the matter as far as Headquarters was concerned, although the echoes of the controversy which followed, and which subsequently wrought enormous damage to the movement, may still be faintly heard in be city.[22]

For his role in the Rising, Colivet was arrested. While in jail in Lincoln, he was elected to the Dail. Republicans such as Colivet, many of whom had returned from English jails after the 1916 Rising were determined to take full advantage of the opportunity provided by the 1918 elections. Sinn Féin ran its campaign in an atmosphere of massive intimidation, including the arrest and jailing of over 100 prominent Sinn Féin candidates and activists, the confiscation of election material and the suppression of republican papers. Despite being in jail, Colivet was still elected, alongside Dr. Richard Hayes and Con Collins. After a brief period spent on the run, Colivet was rearrested, and sent to jail once again. Tragically, while Colivet was interned, his wife Anna died after an illness. The British authorities did not allow any compassionate leave for Colivet to visit his wife, neither during her illness nor even for any of the funeral arrangements in June 1921.

Limerick Corporation publicly declared their displeasure at the lack of compassion shown to him by the British authorities.[23]

Michael Colivet is buried in Mount Jerome cemetery in Dublin. In another city, Patrick Colivet, Eoin Colivet, Michael Colivet, Annie Colivet, Anastasia Colivet, and Mary Colivet lie in Mount St Lawrence. These are the names that are listed as being buried beside Michael's mother, Annie. Yet the most famous of these Colivets that seemed to embody the nationalist spirit which was a key trait of the family, was buried in Dublin, his new home, after finding love again in the wake of his release from prison. However, he has a lasting legacy in Limerick, and his contributions both before and after the Rising are testament to his Limerick roots; he always did what he felt was best for Limerick. As his nationalist colleagues attested, Colivet never made a decision without all the details, and did not want to throw lives away for the sake of it. His dedication to detail saved his men from certain death, as their numbers and equipment paled in comparison to the British Army's. Had the arms landed in Kerry, and had MacNeill been privy to the plans for the Rising, then Limerick's 1916 story and the story of Michael Colivet could have been much better known.



Sketch of Michael Colivet, by Sean Milroy, November 1918. *(Courtesy of the Colivet Family)*

References:

1. Seamus O Goibin (James A. Gubbins), Witness Statement Ref #: 765, pp.6-7
2. *Limerick Leader*, 14 January 1918.
3. Ibid.
4. Alphonsus J. O'Halloran, Witness Statement Ref #: 910, pp.2-3
5. Seamus O Goibin (James A. Gubbins), Witness Statement Ref #: 765, pp.6-7
6. Alphonsus J. O'Halloran, Witness Statement Ref #: 910, pp.2-3
7. Ernest Blythe (Earnan de Blaghd), Witness Statement Ref #: 939, p.34
8. Edmond O'Brien, Galbally, Co. Limerick. Witness Statement Ref #: 597, p.7
9. Alphonsus J. O'Halloran, Witness Statement Ref #: 910, pp.2-3
10. Diarmuid Lynch, Witness Statement Ref #: 364, p.13
11. Alphonsus J. O'Halloran, Witness Statement Ref #: 910, p.2-3
12. Judge Charles Wyse-Power, Witness Statement Ref #: 420, p.6
13. Sean O'Keeffe, Witness Statement Ref #: 1261, pp.4-5
14. Art O'Donnell, Witness Statement Ref #: 1322, p.15
15. Tadhg Crowley, Witness Statement Ref #: 435, p.13
16. William O'Brien, WS Ref #: 435, p.77
17. Milo McGarry, Witness Statement Ref #: 356, p.4
18. John Hosty, Witness Statement Ref #: 373. p.14
19. Liam Forde, Witness Statement Ref #: 1710, pp.8-9
20. Tadhg Crowley, Witness Statement Ref #: 435, pp.16-17
21. Seamus O Goibin (James A. Gubbins), Witness Statement Ref #: 765, pp.30-35
22. Ibid, p.31.
23. *Limerick Leader*, 8 June 1921.

Uniform jacket of Colonel Michael Colivet of the Irish Volunteers. *(Courtesy of Limerick Museum)*

Michael Colivet at what is believed to be his second marriage. *(Courtesy of the Colivet and O'Loughlin families)*