

# John Daly (1845-1916)

## Fenian Rebel, Republican Mayor and IRB Organiser

by Tom Donovan



On 30 June, shortly after the 1916 Rebellion, John Daly, the Limerick Fenian, who had tirelessly campaigned and organised for the insurrection, died at his home at 15, Barrington Street, Limerick. He was just over 70 years when he died, of motor neurone disease.

John Daly was born in Limerick city on 18 October 1845. He left school when he was 16 and joined his father working as a lath splitter in the timber yard of James Harvey & Sons. Two years later, in 1863 he was sworn in as a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), also known as the Fenians, and became fully involved in Republican activities.

On 22 November 1866 John Daly and his brother Edward were arrested at their home in the Pennywell area of Limerick. They were charged with storing weapons and running a munitions factory, close to their home. The Daly brothers realised that they had been betrayed by an informer. They were released on bail in February 1867 toughened and more determined by the experience.

On 5 March 1867 the ill timed and badly prepared Fenian Rising took place. John Daly was in charge of the Limerick detachment of the IRB. Limerick was one of the few areas where the Fenians were able to display some show of force, however weak. Through lack of numbers they failed to make a significant impact on the mighty forces ranged against them. John Daly moved his men into the county and joined up with other Fenians in an attack on the Constabulary barracks at Kilmallock.<sup>1</sup> The attack was repulsed and Daly disbanded his group of men. Following the failure of the Fenian Rising Daly fled to America where he continued his involvement with the movement. He stowed away first on a boat the *Hollywood*, to England, and from there to the United States on board the *Cornelius Grenfel*. Life in America was not easy and he took a number



John Daly after a charcoal sketch  
by Seán O'Sullivan

of labouring jobs which he recalled in his book *Recollections of Fenians and Fenianism*.

Daly returned to Ireland in 1869 and went back to his old job in the timber yard, and to his Republican activities. Shortly after his arrival home he was elected to the Supreme Council of the IRB. He began to reorganise the body and took part in a number of protests to keep the IRB agenda in the public mind. In November 1869 a Tenants' Rights meeting took place in Limerick city. The IRB objected to the meeting as it did not include prisoners issue on the agenda.<sup>2</sup> Both groups attended the meeting and the ensuing skirmish became known as 'The Battle of the Markets'. Daly and his supporters charged the platform and dismantled it. The meeting did not go ahead and Daly saw it as a propaganda coup. During the 1870s Daly continued to campaign for political prisoners and in 1876 he was arrested and charged with disturbing a Home Rule meeting, but was eventually acquitted. He continued to organise the IRB and he was eventually given charge of the Connacht and Ulster region.

In 1883, Daly was asked by the Supreme Council of the IRB to deliver the graveside oration at the funeral of Charles J Kickham in the United States. Following his visit there he moved to Birmingham, England where he lived with an old friend from Limerick named James Egan. The Special Branch, alerted that Daly had moved to England, assigned a detective to follow him at all times.

In 1884 he was arrested and charged with involvement in the 'Dynamite Plot' at Birkenhead. E. G. Jenkinson, head of Special Branch, infiltrated the IRB and used agents to convict Republicans. One of these agents, Dan O'Neill, a publican and local IRB man was convinced to betray Daly. O'Neill asked Daly to deliver a sealed case to an address in London, and on 11 April Daly was arrested as he was about to board the train for London. Daly admitted his guilt and owning the nitro-glycerine found in his garden. The police then did a follow up raid on the home of James Egan where, they found more explosives buried in his garden and some documents.

Following their arrest, both Daly and Egan were sentenced to penal servitude for life, at Warwick Assizes. While in Portland Prison some of the prison staff got involved in a campaign to poison Daly. This charge was later investigated and proven correct by a Commission of Inquiry, while the prison administrators claimed it was an error by a warder. During his time in prison Daly rekindled an old friendship with Tom Clarke and it was a friendship which endured until 1916, when both men died. Clarke had married John Daly's niece Kathleen Daly.

In July 1895, John Daly was elected unopposed as MP for Limerick, while still in prison. He was not allowed take his seat as he was a convicted felon and the election was declared null and void. Despite the fact that the head of Birmingham police, who led the arrest



John Daly, Tom Clarke and Sean MacDiarmada.

party, made a deathbed confession that Daly had been “convicted on perjured evidence” the authorities refused to release him from prison. He was eventually released as political pressure mounted. In 1896, he went on a lecture tour of England with Maud Gonne and in 1897 John Devoy organised a tour of America for him. During the years 1899 to 1901 he was elected mayor of his native city three times. In his first year as mayor Daly granted, his old friend and former fellow prisoner, Tom Clarke the Freedom of the City of Limerick. The following year he bestowed the same honour on Maud Gonne.

On his return from America he had enough money to start a bakery business in Sarsfield Street, Limerick, where he employed some of his nieces. He had plenty nieces to choose from. His brother Edward and his wife Catherine (née O’Mara) lived at 26 Frederick Street (O’Curry Street), where they had ten children, nine daughters and one son. Their son Edward was born after his father died. After the death of her husband in 1891 Catherine, who lost a lot of her clientele from her dressmaking business after John Daly was arrested, ran a pub for a while. When this venture failed the family were saved from penury by her brother-in-law James Daly, who arrived home from New Caledonia.

John Daly continued as one of the head men of the IRB and when the Fianna was founded in 1909 Daly provided a hall, behind his home at 15, Barrington

Street, for the Limerick city sluadh. He ensured that the unit was the best trained and organised in the country and this was confirmed by many reports from the Inspector General of the RIC. He jointly financed the founding of *Irish Freedom*, an IRB newspaper, in 1910 with Pat McCartan.

John Daly did not marry and some would claim he was married to the cause. While he lost his nephew Edward Daly and one of his closest friends and allies Tom Clarke, who was married to his niece Kathleen, following their execution in the aftermath of the Easter Rising, he would have had the satisfaction of finally realising his dream of striking a blow for freedom and unlike the failed Fenian Rising almost fifty years previously, this one stirred the nation.

If anyone doubted the fact that John Daly was the father of the Republican movement in the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was little doubt about his popularity after he died. The combination of respect for the old Fenian and a groundswell of Republican sympathy following the execution of the leaders of the Rising led to a massive turnout for his funeral on Sunday 1 July. The *Limerick Chronicle* reported there had not been ‘a larger and more representative cortege’ in living memory. Throngs of people, of ‘every class and all shades of national and political belief’ travelled from the county and surrounding district. They joined with the huge crowds from the city which had gathered near his home well before the appointed time of 1 p.m. The polished oak coffin, draped with the Irish Republican flag, was then removed from his residence at 15, Barrington Street. The large procession then moved through the Crescent, George’s Street (O’Connell Street) and William Street. The Limerick Corporation, with the sword and mace bearers and the fire brigade attended in state. The service at the graveside was conducted by Rev Fr Kelly C C St John’s and John O’Hurley, a Gaelic League organiser, delivered an address. The oration was delivered by Sean O’Muirthille, who said “the devotion to Irish Nationality was as strong today as ever.”

Sadly, the memory of John Daly has faded from the limelight in his native



John Daly before imprisonment (Courtesy of the Daly Collection at the Glucksman Library, University of Limerick)

city. While the Daly Cup, presented to the winners of the Limerick Senior Hurling Championship, was donated to the GAA, by his niece Madge Daly, in 1928, few would be aware who it honours. In a year of commemoration there would be no better time to honour the inspiration for the Rising in the centenary of his death. The *Limerick Leader*, in a tribute to John Daly, described him as ‘one who was a sincere and genuine patriot to the finger tips.’

#### Sources

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#### (Endnotes)

1. The Irish Constabulary had the prefix ‘Royal’ bestowed on them following the successful suppression of the Fenian Rising in 1867.
2. It appeared somewhat unreasonable to demand that the prisoner issue should be considered at a meeting on tenants’ rights.