

Clarke, Thomas James ('Tom')

by James Quinn

Clarke, Thomas James ('Tom') (1858–1916), revolutionary, was born 11 March 1858 in Hurst Castle, Isle of Wight, eldest child among two sons and two daughters of James Clarke (b. 1830) of Carrigallen, Co. Leitrim, bombardier in the Royal Artillery, and Mary Clarke (née Palmer) of Clogheen, Co. Tipperary. His father was an anglican and his mother a catholic, and Thomas was baptised a catholic. In April 1859 James Clarke was posted to South Africa and took his family. In 1867 he was sent to Dungannon, Co. Tyrone, and quit the army 26 December 1868 with the rank of sergeant. Thomas was educated in St Patrick's national school, Dungannon, where he became a monitor, and he always considered Dungannon his home town. Sympathetic to nationalist politics, he was impressed by the visit in 1878 to Dungannon of John Daly (qv), a national organiser for the IRB, and later joined the organisation, becoming first district secretary of the Dungannon IRB.

**Prison and New York, 1880–1907** Sought by police after firing buckshot at them during a riot in Dungannon, in August 1880 he emigrated to New York, where he was employed as a hotel porter. He joined Clan na Gael, attended the bomb-making classes of Dr Thomas Gallagher (1851–1925), and in March 1883 went on a bombing mission to England. Spotted in London carrying a suspiciously heavy black bag, he was arrested 5 April 1883 with Gallagher in possession of explosives. On 11 June 1883 he was convicted of treason-felony and sentenced to penal servitude for life. Held in Millbank, Chatham, and Portland prisons, he used his alias, 'Henry Hammond Wilson', throughout his imprisonment. The regime imposed on treason-felons in Chatham (where he served most of his sentence) was particularly severe: in addition to hard labour, little exercise, and enforced silence among prisoners, there were harassments such as interruption of sleep and frequent punishments for infringing prison rules. Under this pressure several Fenian prisoners, including Gallagher, went insane. However, Clarke's reason remained unimpaired, thanks to his own mental resilience and the support of his fellow inmates John Daly and James Francis Egan (qv), also convicted on dynamiting charges. The three worked out ingenious ways of communicating together and forged strong and lasting friendships. Clarke's account of his imprisonment was published in *Irish Freedom* in 1912 and as *Glimpses of an Irish felon's prison life* (1922). After repeated requests from the Amnesty Association, he was released 29 September 1898. Fifteen years in prison had left their mark: he was socially awkward and prematurely aged, slightly stooped, with a gaunt and sunken face. He was, however, as zealous a Fenian as ever and never forgot nor forgave the harsh treatment that he and his comrades had suffered. Fêted in Dublin and Dungannon, he received the freedom of the city in Limerick (2 March 1899), where John Daly had become mayor.

He settled with his mother and sister in Kilmainham, Dublin, but found it difficult to find work and emigrated to America in 1900. In New York he was employed as a metalworker and also as a clerk for Clan na Gael, acting as private secretary to John Devoy (qv). Here he was joined by John Daly's niece Kathleen (qv) (as Kathleen Clarke) whom he had met in Limerick; they were married 16 July 1901 in New York (Maj. John MacBride (qv), was the best man) and had three sons. In September 1903 Clarke helped launch the *Gaelic American*, on which he worked as assistant-editor to Devoy. He became a naturalised US citizen on 2 November 1905. During these years he was active in several Irish-American organisations and in promoting Irish cultural events. In 1905, with his wife suffering from ill-health, he resigned from the *Gaelic American*, and bought a small market garden farm at Manorville, Long Island; afterwards, gardening was his only hobby.

**Conspiracy, 1907–16** Anxious to renew his Fenian activities, in November 1907 he returned to Ireland, and in February 1908 rented a tobacconist's and newsagent's shop at 55 Amiens St., Dublin; in 1909 he bought another shop at 75a Parnell St., and in 1910 moved shop from 55 to 77 Amiens St.; he also took a house at 10 Richmond Avenue, Fairview. He arrived back in Ireland at a time when younger IRB members were attempting to breathe new life into a largely moribund organisation. Because of his sufferings and dedication to Fenian ideals he was revered by young IRB radicals, who regarded him as the embodiment of militant Fenianism, and he was coopted on to the IRB supreme council and appointed treasurer. He helped young militants gain control of the organisation and befriended several of them, especially Seán Mac Diarmada (qv), who became his right-hand man; he assisted Mac Diarmada's appointment as IRB national organiser in 1908. Much of the IRB's business was transacted through front organisations, particularly the Dublin Central Wolfe Tone Clubs Committee, founded in 1910 and presided over by Clarke, and his shop in Parnell St. became the hub of IRB activity in the city. In July 1911 he organised a pilgrimage to the grave of Wolfe Tone (qv) in Bodenstown to counter the visit of George V to Dublin, and during the visit displayed a large poster outside his shop, proclaiming 'Damn your concessions, England, we want our country!'

Active in almost all aspects of the nationalist movement, Clarke joined the Gaelic League. Although he spoke little Irish, he saw the League as a useful vehicle for separatist ideals, and attempted to manipulate its appointments. With similar intentions he joined Sinn Féin. Griffith admired him and asked him to stand as Sinn Féin candidate for Dublin corporation but Clarke was dismissive of electoral politics and his response was 'none of that for me' (Le Roux, 84). He regarded Sinn Féin as 'all right as far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough' (*Glimpses*, 8). He sympathised with the working class and supported trade unionism, but deplored Irish trade unions' dependence on English unions, and regarded labour agitation as a minor sectional struggle compared with the great national struggle for independence.

With IRB militants Denis McCullough (qv), Bulmer Hobson (qv), and Mac Diarmada, he published the republican journal *Irish Freedom* from 15 November 1910 and kept

it going until its suppression in December 1914. Although sharply critical of the Irish parliamentary party and its pursuit of home rule, Clarke was overjoyed at the way in which the home rule crisis polarised Irish politics: colleagues remembered him rubbing his hands with glee whenever he spoke of the UVF. Always on the lookout for dedicated activists, he invited Patrick Pearse (qv) to give the oration at the Wolfe Tone commemoration at Bodenstown in June 1913 and facilitated his entry into the IRB in November 1913, overriding the reservations of those who suspected Pearse of personal ambition and political unreliability. Operating behind the scenes, Clarke helped found the Irish Volunteers in November 1913, and strongly opposed accepting the nominees of John Redmond (qv) on to the Volunteer executive in June 1914 – an issue on which he broke bitterly with Hobson, accusing him of being a Castle spy. Clarke and Mac Diarmada were the main figures behind the coup of 24 September 1914, when anti-Redmondites seized the Volunteer headquarters at 41 Dawson St., and issued a manifesto repudiating Redmond's leadership. They were delighted with the ensuing split, which increased their control over a militant rump of Volunteers.

On 9 September 1914 Clarke presided at a conference of separatists, mostly IRB men, which decided in principle to use the opportunity of European war to mount an insurrection. Clarke, as treasurer, and Mac Diarmada, as secretary, were the key figures on the IRB supreme council – McCullough's presidency was essentially nominal. They were fervent advocates of revolutionary action and increasingly bypassed the supreme council. To prepare for insurrection they established in May 1915 a military committee (later council) which became the real power in the IRB and which they themselves joined in September 1915. During his long imprisonment Clarke had brooded on the inadequacies of previous Fenian conspiracies; now that he was in control, he insisted on rigorous planning and absolute secrecy. He hid his intentions from almost all his IRB colleagues and responded to their suspicions with evasion, indignation, and, on occasion, lies. Anxious to control all aspects of the physical-force movement, Clarke was president of the O'Donovan Rossa (qv) funeral committee and it was at his instigation that Pearse gave the famous graveside oration (1 August 1915). When Pearse asked how far he could go, Clarke replied 'Make it as hot as hell, throw discretion to the winds' (Le Roux, 156). The funeral, well orchestrated and marshalled, attracted a huge crowd and was a great propaganda coup for the IRB, strongly associating the Volunteers with the Fenian tradition.

As a close friend of Devoy, Clarke was an essential link between the IRB in Dublin and Clan na Gael in New York. Wary of the negotiations of Roger Casement (qv) with the German government, in October 1915 he sent Robert Monteith (qv) to Germany to assist and monitor his activities. By December 1915 the military council had decided to rise at Easter 1916 and Clarke worked feverishly with Devoy to arrange the landing of German arms in Ireland. He also planned many of the details of the Dublin rising but his preparations were interrupted in January 1916 when he was accidentally shot in the right arm by Sean McGarry (qv); Clarke never regained

use of his arm. Although he generally shunned the limelight, his reputation and position at the centre of a web of separatist committees could not fail to attract the attention of Dublin Castle, which regarded him as the brains behind republican revolutionary activity in Ireland. DMP detectives rented a room opposite his Parnell St. shop to observe his movements, and the government was preparing to arrest him just days before the outbreak of insurrection. At a meeting on 18 April 1916, the other leaders insisted that he be first to sign the revolutionary proclamation since he had done more than anyone else to bring about the rising.

**The Easter rising** Clarke denounced the countermanding orders of 22–3 April from Eoin MacNeill (qv) as treachery, and was determined to press on as originally planned. Presiding at a military council meeting in Liberty Hall on Easter Sunday (23 April 1916), he alone advocated a rising that evening and only reluctantly agreed to a day's postponement. He served in the GPO during Easter week (24–9 April), and although he held no official position or military rank he presided at military council meetings and, after James Connolly (qv) was badly wounded (27 April), played a major part in directing military operations. After fleeing the blazing GPO to a makeshift headquarters at 16 Moore St., Clarke was the only leader who insisted on fighting on to the end, but was overruled, and he broke down sobbing when Pearse decided to surrender. Many Volunteers were incensed by Clarke's treatment on the Rotunda hospital steps after the surrender, when he was verbally abused and roughly stripped by a British army officer, Capt. P. S. Lea-Wilson (who, as an RIC officer, was shot dead in Gorey in 1920). During the search Clarke was greatly taken aback when a DMP detective read from his police file a detailed account of his entire career, from his conduct in prison, to his time in America, to his recent IRB activities. Court-martialled in Richmond barracks (2 May), Clarke made no attempt to defend himself and was sentenced to death. Allowed to see his wife, he told her that 'between this and freedom Ireland will go through hell, but she will never lie down again until she has attained full freedom' (Kathleen Clarke, 95); he also told her he was glad he would be shot, his greatest dread being that he would be imprisoned again. He was shot in the first round of executions at Kilmainham jail (3 May 1916), and buried at Arbour Hill prison cemetery.

**Assessment** Clarke was probably the most single-minded of all the 1916 leaders, fervently committed to the pure Fenian doctrine of achieving an Irish republic through force of arms. For him there could be no compromise on Irish independence, and all other goals were secondary. Modest and unassuming, he hated public speaking and had little personal ambition, but he was a relentless and ruthless conspirator who masterminded the Easter rising, and his thoroughness and tenacity were afterwards much admired by Michael Collins (qv). His frail and inoffensive appearance concealed a fierce revolutionary spirit, and he was capable of great hatred, particularly for Irishmen he believed had betrayed their country, such as Hobson and MacNeill. During the rising several observers noted how happy Clarke looked, the insurrection being for him the culmination of a decade's work and a life's ambition.

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