

Kent (Ceannt), Thomas

by Desmond McCabe and Lawrence William White

Kent (Ceannt), Thomas (1865–1916), farmer, and member of Cork Volunteer Brigade, was born 29 August 1865 in Bawnard House, Castlelyons, near Fermoy, Co. Cork, fourth among seven sons and two daughters of David Kent, a substantial farmer (leasing 200 acres), and Mary Kent (née Rice). He received a national school education locally, and worked on his father's farm, until being sent at age 19 to Boston to join two brothers who had emigrated previously. There he worked with a catholic publishing and church furnishing firm, and participated in Irish cultural activities. Returning to Cork in 1889/90, he immediately became actively involved in the plan of campaign being organised by William O'Brien (qv) (1852–1928) and the land league; three of his brothers had recently served prison sentences arising from the agitation. Summary trial under the Balfour act of 1887, on charges of conspiracy to encourage evasion of rent, resulted in terms of two months' imprisonment with hard labour in Cork jail for Thomas, and six months with hard labour for his brother William (qv), who had previously been incarcerated for a similar offence. Huge crowds in Fermoy applauded the brothers on the occasions of their release. Of infirm health from this period, Thomas, along with his brothers, ceased to participate in nationalist politics after the death of Charles Stewart Parnell (qv) in 1891. Until his late forties he confined himself to the cultural nationalism of the Gaelic League, learning and promoting traditional Irish music and dancing, as a member of the Castlelyons branch. For a brief while he joined his brother William, who had emigrated to South Africa.

In January 1914 Thomas and his brothers enlisted in the Cork Brigade of Volunteers under Tomás MacCurtain (qv); they soon were training recruits in weaponry on the family farm. The Kent family helped organise the Castlelyons company of Volunteers (said to be the first teetotal unit in Ireland), and mustered equipment. Thomas was present at the historic graveside oration by Patrick Pearse (qv) at the funeral of Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa (qv) (1 August 1915), and represented several Cork districts at the Irish Volunteers convention in the Abbey theatre, Dublin (October 1915). In November 1915 he helped disrupt British army recruitment at Dungourney, in east Co. Cork. Charged alongside Terence MacSwiney (qv) with making seditious speeches at a Volunteer recruitment meeting at Ballynoe (2 January 1916), he was tried under the defence of the realm act, but acquitted. Within weeks he was sentenced to two months' imprisonment for illegal possession of arms, arising from a police raid on Bawnard House on 13 January.

During the Easter rising of late April 1916, the Kent family, after hiding for over a week hoping for a general mobilisation, came back to Bawnard House on the night of 1–2 May, but were observed by RIC, who encircled the house in the early morning, and called the brothers out. Accounts of the ensuing events differ.

According to nationalist chroniclers, the family (including the 85-year-old matriarch) carried on a determined gun battle as self-declared soldiers of the Irish republic for several hours, refusing to surrender to the constabulary or military reinforcements, until they ran out of ammunition and gave up; police alleged that, after an hour's exchange of shots, gunfire ceased and a protracted siege occurred, until military arrived and the family surrendered. Head Constable W. C. Rowe was shot dead in the fray, and one of the brothers, David (qv), was seriously wounded. Richard Kent (see below) was mortally wounded trying to burst through a hedge before being handcuffed. At Cork detention barracks on 4 May, Thomas and William were tried under courts martial for 'wilful murder'. While William was acquitted, Thomas was found guilty and sentenced to death by firing squad. On 9 May he was executed, standing in an attitude of prayer, gripping a set of rosary beads. He died unmarried. Popular esteem for the exploits of Thomas and his family was shown in January 1917 when an enormous cortège assembled at the funeral of his mother.

His brother Richard Kent (1875–1916), farmer, land agitator, and Volunteer, was born 4 January 1875 at Bawnard House, youngest son of David and Mary Rice Kent. Arrested with three of his brothers (David, William, and Edmund) and charged with conspiracy during the 1889 plan of campaign, he was acquitted owing to his youth. A fine athlete, well known in GAA circles, he worked for years on the family farm. He joined the Irish Volunteers in 1914, but seems not to have been as active as his older brothers. Shot and critically wounded while attempting to escape arrest after the gun battle at Bawnard House, he died the next day (according to the death certificate) in Fermoy military hospital (3 May 1916). He was unmarried. His remains were interred in the family vault at Castlelyons; a small crowd defied a military ban and attended the obsequies. At David Kent's murder trial the following month in Dublin, William Kent testified that Richard, who he asserted had spent time in a 'lunatic asylum' owing to an accident, had seized a shotgun on seeing police outside the family home, and that any shooting coming from the house had been done solely by him.

GRO (birth, death certs); *Catholic Bulletin*, vi, no. 8 (Aug. 1916), 457–9 (portrait photos); National Gallery of Ireland, *Cuimhneachain 1916: a commemorative exhibition of the Irish rebellion 1916* (1966), 61–2, 71; Florence O'Donoghue, 'The Irish Volunteers in Cork, 1913–16', *Cork Hist. Soc. Jn.*, lxxi, no. 213–14 (1966), 41–8; Patrick Power, 'The Kents of Bawnard, Castlelyons, and their fight for Irish freedom', *Rebel Cork's fighting story: from 1916 to the truce with Britain* (1966), 33–8; Martin Shannon, *Sixteen roads to Golgotha* (c.1966), 162–7; Tomás O'Riordain, *Where martyred heroes rest: the story of the republican plot, Kilcrumper, Fermoy* (1987), 34–7; *1916 rebellion handbook* (1998 ed.)

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