



A boy in the shadow of his brother

Loyal to the very end, William ‘Willie’ Pearse’s contribution to the Rising was humble but shouldn’t be forgotten, writes **Leanne Blaney**

FEW understood the concept of ‘blood sacrifice’ better than Willie Pearse. Though his name was not among the seven signatories of the 1916 Proclamation, he made numerous sacrifices during his 34 year existence for his ‘blood’, namely his brother Patrick. His dedication earned him imprisonment, a court-martial and eventually an execution in the stonebreakers yard of Kilmainham Gaol on 4 May 1916.

Born on 15 November 1881 in the family home at 27 Great Brunswick Street (later to be renamed Pearse Street), William James Pearse (‘Willie’) was the second son born to Englishman James and his second wife, Margaret (née Brady). From early childhood he was devoted to his elder brother Patrick Henry and hours were spent playing the role of altar boy to Patrick’s priest while their two sisters Margaret and Mary Brigid acted as members of the congregation.

The close ties between the brothers were reinforced in 1891 when they were enrolled in the Christian Brothers School on nearby Westland Row. Willie, with his artistic temperament and limited academic ability, was frequently ill-favoured by his teachers and Patrick became his protector. As adults the two would remain exceptionally close, holidaying together in the west of Ireland and conversing in a private language which, to close friends,

resembled baby-talk. Their tendency to dress flamboyantly (Willie often wore kilts) set them apart and served to both endear and alienate them from their peers.

Earmarked to succeed his father as a monumental sculptor, Willie had spent his childhood visiting and working in the workshops of the family business. However as William Murphy noted in his Dictionary of Irish Biography profile of Willie Pearse, following the unexpected death of his father in 1900 he continued his studies abroad and left Patrick in charge of the business.

Willie assumed control when he returned to Dublin and quickly developed a reputation as an able sculptor with work showcased in Royal Hibernian Academy and Oireachtas exhibitions. Examples of his work, including Éire Óg, for which his favourite subject, a young girl called Mabel Gorman modelled, still exist. However, plans for a sculpture to commemorate Wolfe Tone — drawn up when he served on the executive committee of the Wolfe Tone and United Irishmen Memorial Committee in 1898, alongside Bulmer Hobson, Séan MacDermott and Tom Clarke — were never realised.

The family business closed in 1910 owing to a downturn in trade and the need to raise capital to invest in Patrick’s new school for boys, St Enda’s. Having unsuccessfully applied for a job at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art, Ruth Dudley Edwards observed in her work

Patrick Pearse: The Triumph of Failure that Willie gave up his ambitions to be a sculptor and instead dedicated himself to assisting Patrick and Thomas MacDonagh with their new school.

As an art teacher and a keen dramatist (he and Mary Brigid formed a small theatre company, the Leinster Stage Society), he was responsible for encouraging his pupils to express their Irish identity creatively. From 1913 onwards, Willie acted as assistant headmaster, freeing Patrick to devote his time and efforts towards the nationalist cause.

When Patrick became involved in the IRB Military Council and plans began to be drawn up for the Rising, Willie — known as Captain WJ Pearse to members of the Irish Volunteers and the IRB — was drafted in to assist his brother. In spite of

MacNeill’s countermand it was Willie who issued many of the orders that the Rising would continue to Irish Volunteer leaders, including Captain Séan T O’Killy.

Wholly unsuited for the battlefield, Willie would remain by Patrick’s side throughout the Rising. Having cycled with him to the GPO on Easter Monday, he acted as Patrick’s aide-de-camp among the 400 Volunteers present in the GPO. His sympathetic nature also led a number of others, including James Connolly, to confide in him.

According to the mythology that emerged in the aftermath of the Rising, when the decision to surrender was eventually made, only Willie and MacDermott refused to cry. Such stoicism, Dudley Edwards argues, reappeared when he was the only one of those court-martialed to plead guilty.

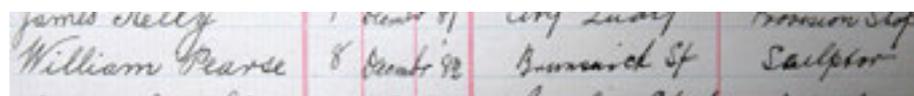
In prison, the brothers were denied the opportunity of a proper goodbye due to ill-timing. Instead Patrick acknowledged Willie’s devotion, with the ode ‘To My Brother’ and in one of his final letters when he wrote: ‘No one could ever have had so true a brother as you’.

Leanne Blaney is a social and transport historian who recently completed her PhD in the School of History (UCD). Her research focuses on 20th century Irish and Northern Irish history with a particular focus on cross-border relations during the early 20th century



Clockwise from top left: Willie Pearse; one of his drawings; Willie and his siblings; a roll book from CBS Westland Row in 1891 showing his name; Leanne Blaney outside Pearse & Sons monumental sculptors on Pearse street, Dublin.

ARTHUR CARRON



SNAPSHOT

WILLIAM ‘WILLIE’ PEARSE

- Born:** Dublin, 15 Nov 1881
- Educated:** Westland Row CBS; Dublin Metropolitan School of Art; Kensington School of Art
- Affiliation:** Irish Volunteers
- Career:** sculptor and stonemason, teacher, St Enda’s (from 1908)
- Died:** Kilmainham, 4 May 1916