

Ailing writer who shaped the rebellion

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the youngest of the Plunkett brothers, also fought in the Rising. An iconic photograph of the aftermath of the rebellion shows George and Jack, uniformed and in identical slouch hats, standing side by side under the eye of a sentry in Richmond Barracks. Like their older brother, both were handed down death sentences but, in their cases, the sentences were commuted. This is not the only reason why one should consider the Plunketts' association with the 1916 Rising as very much a family affair. Joseph Mary Plunkett's father, George Noble Plunkett, was an important figure during, and especially after, the Rising. He became the first-ever elected Sinn Féin MP in the North Roscommon by-election of February 1917.

If family was one important aspect of Joseph Mary Plunkett's 1916 story, then friendship was the other. Seeking a tutor to teach him Irish so that he could matriculate into University College Dublin in 1909, Plunkett found Thomas MacDonagh, well-known Gaelic Leaguer and then assistant lecturer in English at UCD. The two became firm friends through a mutual interest in poetry, which seems to have taken precedence over Irish in their tutorial sessions.

EVEN while in Algiers, Plunkett kept up his friendship with MacDonagh through correspondence wherein they sent each other their poems. From 1913 onwards, Plunkett and MacDonagh took over the running of a small but important radical journal, *The Irish Review*. It combined poetry, prose, and political commentary. The journal was suppressed by the censor under Defence of the Realm legislation in November 1914.

The friendship between Plunkett was enhanced through the fact that they eventually married two sisters. Thomas MacDonagh married Muriel Gifford in 1912. They had a son and daughter born in 1912 and 1915 respectively. In December 1915, Plunkett became engaged to Muriel's sister Grace.

In a most unusual twist of history, Joseph and Grace were due to be married on Easter Sunday 1916 in a double wedding with Joseph's sister, Geraldine, who was engaged to Thomas Dillon, lecturer in Chemistry at UCD. Joseph was forced to postpone his and Grace's marriage not because of the Rising but because he had to undergo surgery on a gland in his cheek early in April.

With Michael Collins as his bodyguard, Plunkett left the nursing home in which he was recuperating on Good Friday 1916, the day after the Aud, the boat carrying the weapons he had convinced the German high command to send, had arrived off the Kerry coast.

On Easter Sunday, while crisis meetings of the Proclamation signatories were held in Liberty Hall, Geraldine Plunkett's wedding went ahead as planned with neither her father nor Joseph in attendance. The next morning, from her bridal suite in the Imperial Hotel on O'Connell Street, she watched the Rising which she had known was coming unfold beneath her window.

Following the seizure of the Post Office, Geraldine Plunkett Dillon watched her brother Joseph out on O'Connell Street erecting barricades from whatever could be found. He placed a homemade bomb into an empty tram on Earl Street, retreated a safe distance, and fired a shot detonating the bomb and immobilising the tram. This was the last time she saw her brother Joe.

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'I See His Blood Upon The Rose'

Joseph Plunkett

*I see his blood upon the rose
And in the stars the glory of his eyes,
His body gleams amid eternal snows,
His tears fall from the skies.*

*I see his face in every flower;
The thunder and the singing of the birds
Are but his voice—and carven by his
power
Rocks are his written words.*

*All pathways by his feet are worn,
His strong heart stirs the ever-beating
sea,
His crown of thorns is twined with every
thorn,
His cross is every tree.*

**PLUNKETT
THE POET**
DR LUCY COLLINS



'I SEE His Blood Upon the Rose' is a poem in the mystical tradition, expressing the intensity of Plunkett's Christian faith. These simple verses testify to the presence of the divine in the world, reading in nature the iconography of the crucifixion. At the centre of the poem lies the conviction that Christ's suffering will never be forgotten, as long as God's word remains the bedrock of existence. Here the deeply personal becomes universal through an unworldly directness of address.

Plunkett's commitment to the revolutionary process suggests how shared intentions may find expression in individual action, and indicates the redemptive power of personal sacrifice. Yet this is also a poem about what it is to see — about the significance of the act of writing as a form of revelation. It reflects our need to move beyond the narrow confines of the self in the search for human meaning.

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UCD's Dr Conor Mulvagh in front of the Kilmainham Gaol altar at which Joseph Plunkett married Grace Gifford, the night before he was executed. FRANK McGRATH

The new bride who became a widow the same night

JUST a few hours before he was shot, Joseph Plunkett married his sweetheart Grace Gifford in the grim prison chapel in Kilmainham. They had been set to marry a few weeks before, on Easter Sunday, but that was postponed due to Joseph's illness. Her sister Muriel was married to Thomas MacDonagh, who was executed one day before Plunkett.

The night before the execution Fr Eugene McCarthy of nearby St James Church was summoned to the jail in the west of the city. He met with the couple and performed the marriage ceremony just before midnight. The marriage certificate stated Joseph was a bachelor with the occupation of 'gentleman', while Grace was a spinster who was an 'artist'. Two British soldiers acted as witnesses.

Some years later, she wrote of the night: "When I saw him, on the day before his execution, I found him in exactly the same state of mind. He was so unselfish, he never thought of himself. He was not frightened, not at all, not in the slightest.

"I was never left alone with him, even after the marriage ceremony. I was brought in and was put in front of the altar; and he was brought down



Grace Gifford (above) and a 1915 letter from Joseph to Grace (below), beginning, 'Darling Grace, You will marry me and nobody else...'

the steps and the cuffs were taken off him and the chaplain went on with the ceremony. Then the cuffs were put on him again. I was not alone with him — not for a minute. I had no private conversation with him at all. I just came away then."

The ceremony over, the priest took Grace back to a house in James Street where the church bell-ringer lived. There she stayed till 2am, when an army car arrived to return her to Kilmainham for a ten-minute supervised visit to her husband before she was taken away again and his execution carried out.

Grace was 28 at the time of her husband's death, and although she said she knew nothing of the Rising, later became a committed republican. She struggled to make a living as a cartoonist for many years and eventually sued her father-in-law over Joseph's estate. She died in 1955. GS

