JOSEPH MARY PLUNKETT

Ailing writer who shaped the rebellion

Dr Conor Mulvagh on the military tactician of the Rising who married shortly before his execution in Kilmainham Gaol

P atrick Pearse and James Connolly became the icons of the 1916 Rising as it passed into history and national memory. Their edification eclipsed their comrades and, of these, among the most interesting backstories is that of Joseph Mary Plunkett. On the face of it, Plunkett was perhaps an unlikely revolutionary. Biographers have variously described him as eccentric, nervous, and fragile. By far the most financially comfortable of the Proclamation signatories, Plunkett lived a privileged existence but also came from a family with deep republican credentials.

The enduring image of Plunkett is of him, standing at the altar in Kilmainham, marrying his bride just before his execution in the breakers’ yard. However, behind this romantic and romanticised representation is a much more complex figure without whom the Rising would certainly not have played out as it did. Plunkett was the primary military tactician of the Rising. Along with Pearse and Éamonn Ceannt, he managed to link up with Roger Casement both classically Pearsian flourish of rhetoric, roller-skating. Plunkett had skated at Kilmainham, indeed Frank Nally has recently written that skating was something of a craze in the city in the early 1900s with several rinks operating, the biggest of which was the Olympia at the KDS, which opened its doors in 1909. Such was Plunkett’s prowess that he was offered a job at a skating rink in Algiers. Plunkett’s biographer Honor Ó Brolcháin states that one job offer he received was to manage a skating rink “after the then manager ran away with the owner’s wife”. Monica Seale meanwhile states that Plunkett seriously considered the offer of work as a professional skater being attracted by the magnificent white costume which went with it.

Algerian adventures aside, Plunkett’s 1915 trip to Germany was conducted through Spain, Italy, and Switzerland and he grew a beard and moustache to disguise his appearance. In Italy he further enhanced his counter-surveillance safeguards by adopting the alias of ‘James Malcolm’. Travelling to Germany on trains often loaded full of German soldiers, Plunkett’s lack of familiarity with the language — for he knew Latin, Spanish, French, Italian, Irish, and Arabic but no German — made him fearful that he would be accused of being a spy.

In Germany, although efforts to raise an Irish Brigade remained difficult, he collaborated with Roger Casement on a related project, The Ireland Report, a dossier outlining a much more ambitious rising than that which ultimately occurred. On foot of this proposal, a commitment to send a shipment of arms of the southwest coast of Ireland was given. Plunkett left Germany for America and there met with the senior Fenian John Devoy in New York. By October 1915, Plunkett finally sets sail for Ireland after this extraordinary six-month journey.

Back home in Dublin, Plunkett established a rebel training camp at a recently acquired family property at Larkfield, in Kimmage, south-west of Dublin city. The camp had been founded following the introduction of conscription in Britain (but not in Ireland) in January 1916. Under the watchful eye of Plunkett and his siblings, the ‘Kimmage Garrison’, as it came to be known, was assembled out of Irishmen — most of whom had an existing Irish Volunteer or IRB connection — who had left Britain not wanting to be conscripted. At Kimmage, they were instructed in military tactics and even ran a bomb-making factory preparing munitions for the planned insurrection. In his statement to the Bureau of Military History in 1948, Seamus Robinson, a member of the Garrison, lists 89 comrades who lived with him at Larkfield by name. There were comings and goings from the property but, ultimately, 60 inhabitants mustered on Easter Monday 1916.

T he garrison was the most extraordinary training camp to have existed in Ireland during wartime. In a classically Pearsean flourish of rhetoric, Patrick Pearse told the men of Larkfield that they were ‘Ireland’s first standing army since the days of Patrick Sarsfield’.

Joseph Mary Plunkett’s younger brother, the 22-year-old George Plunkett, was Officer in Charge of the Kimmage Garrison. Jack,
A portrait of Joseph Plunkett and inset opposite page, a photograph of Joseph Plunkett, his brother George and William Fogarty taken in 1912 on the steps of Springfield, Kilternan.

MILITARY ARCHIVES
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VEN 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 supressed 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 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.

Joseph 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.

Phrases like: 'I see his face in every flower; His strong heart stirs the ever-beating sea, His crown of thorns is twined with every thorn, His cross is every tree.'

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 as 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 unfailish, 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

Rocks are his written words.

The thunder and the singing of the birds

Hie his voice—and carven by his

The bird whistles and the sun shines on the sea.

I see his blood upon the rose

And in the stars the glory of his eyes,

Histears fall from the skies.

And in the starsthe glory of his eyes,

Rocks are his written words.

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