



Left: Extracts from Joseph Plunkett's Field Message Book, or Diary, during the 1916 rebellion. MILITARY ARCHIVES
Above: Grace Gifford, the artist who married Plunkett the day before his execution; Grace's drawing of her husband (right). MILITARY ARCHIVES
Below left: Joseph Plunkett, by artist Brian O'Neill.



JOSEPH MARY PLUNKETT

Ailing writer who shaped the rebellion

PATRICK 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 was part of the group that conducted a feasibility study into holding an insurrection in Ireland as early as October 1914.

Plunkett was exceptional, too, in that he managed to travel to Germany in 1915 to link up with Roger Casement both to inspect and to assist his foundering efforts to raise an Irish Brigade from Irish prisoners of war in Germany. As an experienced traveller and possessing the credible excuse that he needed to travel abroad to aid his fragile health, Plunkett was uniquely placed among the rebel conspirators to travel to Germany in wartime. Under the pretence of travelling to Jersey, Plunkett set sail for Spain in March 1915 on a long and circuitous voyage that ultimately led to Germany. Knowing the gravity of his mission, he went as far as to destroy every known photograph of himself prior to his departure. Hence, say one of his biographers, only very few 'strange

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

schoolboy photographs' of Plunkett have survived.

As a young man, Plunkett had spent a significant period abroad. Glandular tuberculosis had plagued him since childhood and, in 1911, at the age of 23, he travelled to Italy, Sicily, and Malta with his mother to convalesce. He remained abroad until 1912, spending the winter in Algiers with his sister Moya where he studied the Arabic language and literature. Some of his most important early poems, including those for his first volume of poetry, *The Circle and the Sword*, were written in Algiers. He even reportedly composed some verse in Arabic.

While in Algiers, Plunkett also developed his skills at something a little more frivolous than mystic poetry and revolution: roller-skating. Plunkett had skated in Dublin, 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 RDS, 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 Leahy 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 set 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, Séamus 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.

THE 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,

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SNAPSHOT

JOSEPH MARY PLUNKETT

Born: Dublin, 21 Nov 1877

Educated: CUS and Belvedere in Dublin, Stonyhurst in England; University College Dublin

Affiliation: IRB, Irish Volunteers

Career: journalist, poet

Died: Kilmainham, 4 May 1916





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

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.

EVER 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 carved 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.

Dr Lucy Collins is a lecturer in English at University College Dublin (UCD). She is the curator of 'Reading 1916', a forthcoming exhibition at UCD Special Collections.

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

