

## ÉAMONN CEANNT

# Gunman in the shadow

Perhaps the least known of the Proclamation's signatories, Éamonn Ceannt is nonetheless an important figure, writes **Aoife Whelan**

**O**N the eve of his execution, Éamonn Ceannt issued a statement from his cell in Kilmainham Jail, declaring that 'Ireland has shown she is a Nation. This generation can claim to have raised sons as brave as any that went before. And in the years to come Ireland will honour those who risked all for her honour at Easter in 1916.'

Edward Thomas Kent was born in 1881 in the RIC barracks in Ballymoe where his father was a constable. In 1883 the family moved to Ardee, Co Louth when his father was transferred and in 1892 they settled in Dublin. By the age of 15, he had begun to sign his name Éamonn Ceannt in his school diaries and, in 1898, achieved excellent results in his final exams and took up a clerical position with Dublin Corporation.

The same year also marked the centenary of the United Irishmen's 1798 Rebellion. Ceannt marched in the commemorative processions and was greatly influenced by these public displays of nationalist sentiment. The following St Patrick's Day, he purchased a copy of O'Growney's book on the Irish language. Shortly after, on 13 September 1899, Ceannt joined the central branch of the Gaelic League. Although the League claimed to be apolitical, it seems that Ceannt became more politicised in it, having been introduced to Patrick Pearse and Eoin MacNeill among others. He began teaching Irish at various League branches and his students included Seán T Ó Kelly and Áine Ní Bhraonáin, who was to become his wife in 1905. Áine was a sister of the journalist and playwright Kathleen O'Brennan.

The Gaelic League was concerned not only with the revival of the Irish language, but also with promotion of a truly 'Irish-Ireland'. This included the fostering of Irish music, dancing, literature, heritage, customs, habits and points of view. Ceannt shared this ideology. As an enthusiast of the uilleann and war pipes, he was involved in the establishment of Cumann na bPíobairí (The Pipers' Club) in Dublin in February 1900 and was elected honorary secretary a year later. Ceannt purchased a printing press in order to produce a journal entitled *An Píobaire* which first appeared on 5 July 1901. In September 1908, he travelled to Rome as official piper for a contingent of Irish athletes. He is reported to have played 'O'Donnell Abú' and 'The Wearing of the Green' during the group's audience with Pope Pius X.

In 1907, Ceannt joined the central branch of Sinn Féin in Dublin. He was an active member of the movement and was elected to the branch committee and then to the National Council. He was also elected to the Gaelic League Executive in 1909. Ceannt was among those who protested against

the visit of King George V in July 1911, under the auspices of the newly-formed United National Societies Committee. His colleagues on the committee included Seán Fitzgibbon, Seán Mac Diarmada, Thomas MacDonagh, Patrick Pearse and The O'Rahilly. The protestors organised a visit to the grave of Wolfe Tone at Bodenstown during the royal visit.

In March 1912, Pearse launched his own newspaper, *An Barr Buadh*, as a platform for his nationalist philosophy. Ceannt was among its most significant contributors. By 1913, Ceannt had been sworn into the Irish Republican Brotherhood by Seán Mac Diarmada. When the Irish Volunteers were established in November 1913 in response to the foundation of the Ulster Volunteer Force, Ceannt was elected to the provisional committee. Although by this point Home Rule seemed to be within reach, many extreme nationalists believed the time had come to seek political independence for Ireland by force if necessary.

Ceannt played an active role in the financing and arming of the Volunteers and was involved in the importation of guns at both Howth and Kilcoole in the summer of 1914. These manoeuvres by the Volunteers were praised openly by the *Irish Independent's* Gaelic columnist, Eoghan Ó Neachtain, who beseeched God to reward the men who completed this task for Ireland's benefit: 'Nár laga Dia na buachaillí a rinne obair an Domhnaigh ar son na hÉireann,' he wrote.

Following the split within the Volunteers, Ceannt was elected financial secretary and was appointed commandant of the 4th Battalion in March 1915. He was also co-opted onto the IRB Military Council, along with Pearse and Plunkett, and became director of communications. Many of the meetings of the Military Council were held at Ceannt's residence in Dolphin's Barn. The song 'Ireland Over All', penned by Ceannt, was sold to raise money for his battalion.

As plans for an armed rebellion took shape, Thomas Clarke and Seán Mac Diarmada were recruited to the Military Council, followed by James Connolly of the Irish Citizen Army and finally by Thomas

MacDonagh. Despite Eoin MacNeill's countermanning orders which appeared in the *Sunday Independent*, on Easter Monday 1916 Ceannt took command of 120 Volunteers at the South Dublin Union workhouse and hospital (now St James's Hospital). Cathal Brugha served as his Vice-Commandant.

Ceannt's wife Áine, son Rónán and mother-in-law had been dispatched to stay with the Brugha family during the agitation. Ceannt and his men entered the Union through the Rialto entrance and immediately cut the telephone lines and erected barricades. Patients, inmates and staff were relocated to safer buildings displaying Red Cross Flags and provisions were allowed through. The strategically-located Night Nurses' Home became the rebels' HQ. They soon came under fire from British forces on the ground, supported by marksmen from the roof of the Royal Hospital nearby. The Volunteers held their positions and following the deaths of two commanding officers, Lieutenant Ramsey and Captain Warmington, the British retreated.

A second wave of troops managed to enter the Union complex. The fighting became an intense hand-to-hand struggle but Ceannt's military expertise and bravery ensured that his men held their position despite heavy losses on both sides. On Thursday 27 April, British troops launched a fierce assault on Ceannt's headquarters. Although losses were sustained and Cathal Brugha was seriously wounded, the British military didn't succeed in breaching the rebels' barricade. When the order to surrender was issued on Sunday 29 April, Ceannt was initially reluctant to comply but eventually stood down as the orders had come from Pearse and Connolly.

Éamonn Ceannt was sentenced to death following court-martial and was executed on 8 May. He hoped his actions and those of his comrades would form a legacy for future generations. He wrote in a letter to his wife: 'Tell Rónán to be a good boy and remember Easter 1916 for ever.' Although overshadowed somewhat in the aftermath of the Rising as scholars focused on other Nationalist leaders, Ceannt was nonetheless a quintessential revival figure as his political and military activism was preceded by his involvement in the Gaelic League, his Catholic schooling and his interest in traditional Irish music.

*Dr Aoife Whelan (pictured right) has recently completed a PhD in UCD's School of Irish, Celtic Studies and Folklore on Irish language journalism during the revival period*





**Left: The Kent family. Back row (l-r): William, Richard, Michael, Éamonn, Áine (née Brennan). Front row (l-r): James Patrick, Elizabeth (née Cummins), James Snr, Nell Casey (née Kent) and Jack Casey. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY MARY GALLAGHER**  
**Above: Mary Gallagher and Éamonn Ceannt pictured at UCD Newman House, St Stephen's Green, Dublin. ARTHUR CARRON**

# Family brings Éamonn Ceannt's story to life

Relatives share stories of the rebel's legacy with **Kim Bielenberg**

**A**s a young man who had just left school, Éamonn Ceannt looked set to become a reporter at the *Irish Independent*.

He had an interview with the editor, but got cold feet. According to his sister-in-law Lily, "upon learning that he would be on duty by day and by night with little freedom, he changed his mind".

It wasn't that Ceannt was anything other than an extremely diligent young man. He just needed time outside work to pursue all his other interests – from playing the pipes, and teaching and learning the Irish language, to becoming a dedicated political conspirator.

He refused to join the Civil Service, because it was British, but accepted a job with Dublin Corporation on the grounds that its funds came from the people of Dublin. He stayed in his job as a clerk right up until the Rising, and after his execution his wife Áine fetched his final pay packet, which ran until Easter.

These details in the life of one of the forgotten leaders of the Rising are contained in Mary Gallagher's intriguing biography of Ceannt in the O'Brien Press *16 Lives* series.

Mary is a grand-niece of Ceannt and came to the work of biographer as a late vocation. She previously worked for Enterprise Ireland and the IDA.

It was only when an aunt died and she read a family diary of the Rising period by her grandfather Michael Kent (Ceannt's brother) that her interest was sparked and she wanted to find out more.

"My grandfather's diary mostly concerned itself with ordinary family life, including children having coughs and colds.

"But in the middle there is a stunning account of some of the events around the Rising."

While Éamonn Ceannt was single-minded and uncompromising in his political outlook and prepared to take up arms, his brother Michael took a sceptical view that would have been quite common among ordinary Dubliners at the time.

Mary says: "My grandfather was quite the opposite to Éamonn. He was an extremely peaceable man."

Michael happened to visit Éamonn on the day before the Rising, when there were Volunteers crowding the family drawing room, with bicycles stacked four abreast on the railings outside. He later recalled: "All through this I had the feeling that the whole thing was a jest: that they were boys playing at being soldiers."

Later that day, Michael drafted a letter urging Éamonn to give up the Volunteers. He said afterwards: "I believed physical force against England with her Super-Dreadnoughts (which could blow up Dublin city from 9-10 miles out to sea) would be utter madness."

But he had to concede that once the rebels had guns, "wild horses would not pull them back".

## WILLIAM KENT

Éamonn Ceannt's brother William, a sergeant-major in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers stationed in Fermoy, Co Cork, was court-martialled in 1916 and subsequently sent to the front line where he was killed almost on the anniversary of the Rising.

The charge at court-martial was that he had



**Áine Ceannt with her son Rónán. UCD ARCHIVES/THE ELGIN O'RAHILLY PAPERS**

Michael may have been sceptical, and another brother Bill served in the British army, but Mary Gallagher says they were a close family, and there were few political tensions.

Mary tells how on the eve of the execution of Ceannt his family were taken by British army car to visit him in Kilmainham Jail. Michael's diary describes how the car travels slowly across the city, and is stopped every quarter of a mile by sentries, their rifles pointing and their bayonets fixed.

In Kilmainham Jail, "the keys rattle, doors open and we enter to find poor Éamonn, after rising from a little table, lit by one candle.

stolen food to give to a prisoner named Thomas Kent (no relation).

This was the same Thomas Kent who was executed in Cork Jail in 1916 and whose remains have recently been identified through DNA testing in UCD. He was given a State funeral in September 2015. **AW**

"He received us and shook hands quite calmly and, after a word or two, put his arm around Áine, bent down with a sweet smile and kissed her lovingly... seeing them wrapped in one another we turned away and conversed with the two sentries at the door..."

Ceannt was executed by firing squad early on the following day. After the death of Éamonn, Áine became more politically active, getting elected for Sinn Féin in local elections and organising fundraising for the widows of rebels, and the families of imprisoned volunteers.

Éamonn and Áine had a son Rónán, who was 10 at the time of Rising.

Rónán is remembered by members of the family as a sad figure, who felt the burden of being the son of a 1916 leader.

A grand-nephew of Éamonn, who is also called Éamonn Ceannt, remembers Rónán coming to visit for Sunday dinner.

Éamonn Ceannt says: "His father had said to him at the time of the Rising that he should look after his mother, and he did so dutifully to the end.

"But when she died he didn't seem to hold it together.

"He was a solicitor but as the years went on, he experienced ill-health and he never really made it economically in life, and he died in poor circumstances.

"He always felt that he could not quite live up to his father's reputation."

In a recently-uncovered letter, Rónán wrote to a family friend: "For years past I have wondered if Mamy (sic) was, in a way, not disappointed in me for not having shown myself as fine a man as my father was."

**Above: Éamonn Ceannt on the pipes. COURTESY: NA PÍOBAIRÍ UILLEANN**  
**Below: The Evening Herald of 8th May, 1916. 'Four More Shot. Edmund Kent among the executed. Twenty Others Sentenced'.**

