

CORNELIUS 'CON' COLBERT

From a boy scout to rebel leader with a cause

Limerick native wept openly when told he had to surrender, writes **Leanne Blaney**

EXECUTED by firing squad at the age of 27, Cornelius 'Con' Bernard Colbert came from a long lineage of Fenian and nationalist activists. Born the son of a farmer on 19 October 1888 in Moanlena, Colbert, along with his 12 siblings, enjoyed a childhood rich in local history, national affairs and the Irish language. After the death of his mother Nora (née McDermott) at 37, the family began to leave Limerick in order to earn a livelihood and at 16, Colbert moved to Dublin to live with his elder sister Katherine at 7, Clifton Terrace, Ranelagh Road.

Having completed his secondary education at the CBS on Richmond Street and following a brief spell at Skerries College, Colbert became a junior clerk at Kennedy's Bakery on Britain Street (now Parnell Street). As a keen advocate of Irish manufacturing, who always ensured his clothes were manufactured in Ireland, the position allowed him the opportunity to pursue his nationalist interests. He became an active participant in various Gaelic League activities, including the national boy-scout organisation, Na Fianna Éireann.

Initially, appointed captain of the Inchicore Fianna branch, he rose to become the Chief Scout of Ireland. Proficient in Irish and confident that previous nationalist rebellions had failed solely because of "drink... want of discipline and loose talk", Colbert employed a British army instructor for private lessons in military drill. Though small in stature and quietly-spoken, Colbert proved an effective drill instructor and by 1910 was employed part-time at St Enda's.

Having joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood in 1907, he helped commence the secret drilling and military training of IRB members at the National Foresters Hall, Parnell Square in 1913. As captain of F Company of the Fourth Battalion,

SNAPSHOT

CON COLBERT

Born: 19 October 1888, Castlemahon, Co Limerick

Educated: Athea NS, North Richmond St CBS, Dublin

Affiliation: IRB/Irish Volunteers

Career: Clerk, drill instructor

Died: 8 May 1916, Kilmainham Jail

Dublin Brigade, he was responsible for the selection and training of those who would serve as Volunteer officers during the Rising.

Ironically, given that Colbert was a dedicated pioneer, during Easter Week he was responsible for commanding the garrison at Watkin's brewery on Ardee Street and later successfully defending the Jameson distillery on Marrowbone Lane. Blindsided by the order for general surrender issued by Patrick Pearse, Colbert allegedly wept openly when it was passed to him from Thomas MacDonagh.

In Kilmainham, while awaiting execution, he refused visitors for fear it would prove upsetting, with the exception of asking to meet the wife of one of his captains, Séamús Ó Murchadha, who was also a prisoner in the gaol.

"I asked why he did not call for his sister Lila. He said he did not like to cause her trouble." Instead he spent the time writing letters to his family, as well as to "the nicest girl in Dublin" Lucy Smyth, a member of Cumann na mBan who had spent Easter Week as a volunteer in the GPO.

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became a defining feature of the first days of the rebellion. Hordes of opportunistic individuals, mainly from the poverty-stricken inner city tenements, converged around Sackville Street to ransack shops and premises. Owners that got in the way were mercilessly beaten. Ernie O'Malley, who happened to be on Sackville Street, recalled looters selling "diamond rings and pocketsful of gold watches... for sixpence and a shilling". The situation became even more dangerous when they began to start fires to cover their actions.

For those who resided in Dublin's southern suburbs, the fighting and the fires attracted crowds of sightseers anxious to catch a glimpse of some action. Yet for those forced to live in the squalor of Dublin's inner city, the close quarter fighting proved deadly. It is estimated that around 256 civilians, 38 of whom were children, were killed over the course of the rebellion. Most were simply caught in the crossfire.

On Thursday 28 April, ferocious house-to-house fighting enveloped the area around North King Street as British troops advanced on rebel positions near the Four Courts. The British were forced to bore through walls from one house to the next, in the process several civilians sheltering in cellars were buried alive. Many more died from fires or stray bullets. Enraged by the heavy casualties they were sustaining, soldiers of the South Staffordshire regiment broke into the homes of locals on the Friday evening and shot or bayoneted 15 civilian men whom they accused of being rebels. A token military inquiry into the incident later concluded that the

deaths could not be blamed on any specific individual.

Perhaps the most famous civilian death of the rebellion was Francis Sheehy-Skeffington. A well-known radical pacifist, he had been trying to organise a small crowd into an anti-looting patrol

when he was arrested by a suspicious Army lieutenant on the Tuesday evening. Skeffington was taken to Portobello Barracks where, the next morning, Captain JC Bowen Colthurst of the Royal Irish Regiment executed him and two other innocent men he suspected of being involved in the rebellion.

The evening before, Colthurst had also casually shot dead a boy passing outside. Colthurst was declared insane during his subsequent court-martial but it is an indication of the frenzied atmosphere ordinary

Dubliners endured that even after the killings, none of his superiors felt the need to detain him. He remained at large for some time.

In the fallout from the Rising, the attempts by the British Army to cover up the circumstances of Sheehy-Skeffington's death would become a long running and, arguably, fatal public relations disaster for the British administration in Ireland.

Dr Richard McElligott lectures in Modern Irish History in UCD. He teaches the Uncovering 1916 and the Irish War of Independence courses which are being hosted by the National Library of Ireland from January 2016



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The Rising's outbreak created a surreal atmosphere in Dublin. At first there were rumours that this was some sort of German invasion. Traffic into the city centre swiftly ceased while tramways ground to a halt. The authorities quickly declared Martial Law

CORIEL. Bureau of Military History 1916-17. No. W.S. 156. 7/8/16.

My dear Jim,
Don't fret when you see this. Believe me I have a good chance of dying well, which may God grant. I'll pray for you all, so also pray for me.
Goodbye,
I am,
Your loving brother,
Conn.

My dear Nora,
Get a line to say goodbye to you and yours, and to ask you to say a prayer for my soul. Don't be sad, perhaps it's God's way of saving my soul. Goodbye and God bless you and yours.
I am,
Your loving brother,
Conn.

My dear Gretta,
Forgive the writer for his negligence and want of affection, for now he'll not see you again. Say a prayer for his soul, which he hopes will soon see Heaven, where he'll see those who are gone before, and where he'll be able to pray for you. Don't fret, for with God's help I'll die in His Grace.
With much love,
I am,
Your loving brother,
Conn.



Copies of three of the letters Con Colbert (right) wrote to his siblings on the eve of his execution in Kilmainham. BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY