

SEÁN MAC DIARMADA

# Inspiring the next generation



Donal Fallon on the boy from Leitrim who was happy that his martyrdom would reinvigorate a sleeping nation

**S**EÁN MURPHY, an active member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood who participated in the Easter Rising, recalled speaking to a dejected Seán Mac Diarmada while a prisoner in Richmond Barracks. Murphy was taken aback by Mac Diarmada's words that "the cause is lost if some of us are not shot". Murphy told him that "surely to God you do not mean that, Seán. Aren't things bad enough?" To this, Mac Diarmada replied that: "They are so bad that if what I say does not come true they will be very much worse." The martyrdom did come, and the cause wasn't lost. Mac Diarmada was shot by firing squad on 12 May 1916.

Seán Mac Diarmada was born John McDermott in January 1883, the eighth child of carpenter Donald McDermott and his wife Mary. An obituary published in 1913 at the time of his father's passing in the radical newspaper *Irish Freedom* claimed that Donald was not only a veteran of the Land League, but that he "was one of Ireland's true sons and one of those men who, guided by high principles and an ardent love of his country, took his place in the ranks of the IRB."

Brian Feeney, Mac Diarmada's biographer, has noted that while tantalising, "there is nothing else to indicate that the McDermott family was involved in agrarian politics or could have set an example that John McDermott followed."

While he was born in the west of Ireland, at Corranmore, near to Kiltyclogher in Leitrim, his political education came primarily from time spent in the province of Ulster. Following a brief period working in Edinburgh as a young man, Mac Diarmada received an education in Tullynamoyle, Cavan from October 1904 to March 1905, studying the Irish language and book-keeping under the guidance of Patrick McGauran, who kept a night school there.

In his recollections of the young Mac Diarmada, McGauran remembered that he was "anything but a book-worm", but that he did keep a greyhound named Kruger, a nod towards the Boer President Paul Kruger.

Mac Diarmada arrived in Belfast in 1905, a not uncommon journey for a young man



Donal Fallon. DAMIEN EAGERS

from the west of Ireland. Many travelled to the northern city seeking employment, often following family. In Mac Diarmada's case, he was following in the footsteps of his brother Dan, who was working in McGlade's bar in North Street.

Yet Belfast's draw also lay in the fact it was a thriving industrial city, the beating economic heart of the island. Despite this, as Kyle Hughes has noted, it was a city firmly divided on sectarian lines, as "Belfast Catholics were significantly under-represented in all of the heavy-engineering trades where a combination of sectarianism and a restrictive apprenticeship system

precluded Catholics from the most prestigious shipyard trades."

Work for Mac Diarmada came in the form of tram conductor, a position he took up in November 1905, though by July of the following year he had lost the position, as a result of "smoking on the platform of his tram". Yet if the lure of Belfast was employment for many men, for Mac Diarmada it seems the political life of the city was more intriguing.

He actively involved himself in the Ancient Order of Hibernians, a Catholic fraternal organisation which was closely aligned to the Irish Parliamentary Party in the city, yet quickly moved towards more radical separatist politics, joining a Dungannon Club in 1905. On paper a cultural nationalist society, the clubs have been described as an "open front" for the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Indeed, the two central figures behind the clubs, Bulmer Hobson and Denis McCullough, were the driving forces behind the IRB in Belfast. Hobson remembered that "about the end of 1906 I started a small fund, mostly subscribed to by men who could only afford a few pence per week, and made McDermott the whole-time organiser for the Dungannon Club. He established a number of Clubs in various parts of Ulster."

The Dungannon Clubs introduced Mac Diarmada to the politics of the IRB, an organisation into which he was sworn in 1906. He rapidly rose through the ranks of the secretive body, benefiting from the overhaul Hobson and McCullough were embarking upon. He was co-opted onto the Supreme Council of the IRB in 1908, and appointed national organiser.

Given his ascent in the IRB, and the trust both Hobson and McCullough had in him, it is not surprising he was appointed manager of the newspaper *Irish Freedom* in 1910. Based in Dublin, he became particularly close to Thomas Clarke, the veteran Fenian who had been imprisoned for his involvement in the dynamite campaign of the 1880s.

*Irish Freedom* sought to advance and promote the political aspirations of the IRB. The first issue of the paper laid out its



ideology plain and simple for readers: "The Irish attitude to England is war yesterday, war today, war tomorrow. Peace after the final battle." It was not a voice of moderation or reformism; on the eve of a Royal Visit in 1911, Mac Diarmada argued that "Ireland wants no concession from England. We want what is ours; that is our country, and by the Lord we mean to have it, come what may."

Beyond politics, Mac Diarmada battled with poliomyelitis, which struck him down in the autumn of 1911, and which left him reliant on a walking stick, an obstacle for a man who prided himself on his abilities as a national organiser. He was present at the establishment of the Irish Volunteers in the Rotunda Rink in November 1913, and spoke on that occasion.

Hobson remembered that, "In addition to the 4,000 people inside the hall a crowd of about 3,000 were unable to gain admission. The path from Cavendish Row down to the entrance of the hall was a steep slope and we were much afraid that the pressure of people would smash in the doors which had been closed."

Mac Diarmada, along with others such as Hobson and Clarke, believed that the Volunteer movement could be controlled by the IRB. Indeed, Liam Walsh, a member of the Volunteers, remembered Mac Diarmada telling him that "if it came to a showdown, the backbone of the fighters would come from the IRB." When the movement split

SNAPSHOT

SEÁN MAC DIARMADA

**Born:** 27 January 1883, Kiltyclogher, Co Leitrim

**Educated:** Corracloona NS; Tullinamoyle night school, Co Cavan

**Affiliation:** IRB/Irish Volunteers

**Career:** Newspaper manager, activist

**Died:** 12 May 1916, Kilmainham Jail





Richard Mulcahy and Min Ryan, Mac Diarmada's former partner.

# Min Ryan, the woman who 'would have been my wife'

**S**EAN MAC DIARMADA'S last letter to his brothers and sisters contains a poignant aside. He tells them that if he has any more messages for them, he will convey them through "Miss Ryan, she who in all probability, had I lived, would have been my wife."

Mary Josephine (Min) Ryan was from a prosperous family who farmed at Tomcoole, near Taghmon, Co Wexford. A founder member of Cumann na mBan, she and several of her 11 brothers and sisters were active in the Rising and the conflicts that followed.

During the Rising Min and Phyllis acted as couriers to the GPO garrison.

In July 1916 Min Ryan wrote about her last visit to the man with whom she had been romantically involved for less than a year.

It was reproduced in *Erin's Tragic Easter: the Irish Rebellion of 1916 and its Martyrs*, edited by Maurice Joy:

"The last time I saw Seán McDermott was in a prison cell at Kilmainham Jail at 3 o'clock on the morning of May 12th. He was shot at 3.45 the same morning..."

"The cell was small, black and white were the colours... As he came to the door with both hands extended to welcome us, with a smile on his face that seemed to transcend this brutal place, one felt fortitude and confidence in oneself once more and a strong desire to show no surprise at this unusual scene.

"We sat on the plank bed beside Seán. We discussed many of the events of the revolution. He told us of what had happened to them after

they had been burnt out of the Post Office, the insults hurled at them by the most 'civilised' of armies when they had laid down their arms..."

"He preferred to talk of all sorts of casual matters, asking about different people we knew, referring to various happy events of the past and enjoying little jokes and jests almost as naturally as if we had been in Bewley's."

Mac Diarmada cut buttons from his jacket and scratched his name upon them and some coins to pass on to friends as keepsakes.

"As one looked at his beautiful head bent over his work in the dim candlelight, one could scarcely keep one's feelings from surging over at the thought that beautiful head would be battered by four bullets..."

"At 3 o'clock, on the arrival of the Prison Chaplain, we bade farewell to Seán and left him to spend his last three-quarters of an hour in prayer and in preparation for a more lovely world."

In 1919 Min married Richard Mulcahy, who took command of the pro-Treaty forces in the Civil War after the killing of Michael Collins. He was leader of Fine Gael 1944-48.

Her elder sister Kit — a lecturer in French at UCD — married another 1916 veteran and future President of Ireland, Seán T O'Kelly who, after her death in 1934, wed her sister, Phyllis. Yet another, Agnes, married Denis McCullough, President of the IRB. Their brother, James was a minister for almost 30 years.

Min Ryan died, aged 92, in 1977.

Gerard Siggins

in 1914 in the aftermath of John Redmond encouraging Irishmen to enlist in the British war effort, Mac Diarmada's rhetoric in *Irish Freedom* only became more hard-line.

He was central to the organising of a meeting in the Gaelic League library at Parnell Square in September 1914, where a decision to mount a rebellion during the war was reached. To Seán T. O'Kelly, one of those present in the room and later President of Ireland, this meeting had brought together "all shades of advanced nationalist political thought in Ireland".

Despite secretly discussing the prospect of insurrection, Mac Diarmada remained a public voice, and he was imprisoned under the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) in May 1915 following a passionate speech in Tuam, Galway, which encouraged Irishmen to seize upon England's difficulty as Ireland's opportunity. Upon his release from prison, he became a part of the secretive Military Council that set about turning the Rising into a reality.

On Easter Monday 1916, Mac Diarmada, now heavily dependent upon his stick, was unable to take part in the combined march of Volunteer and Citizen Army forces from Liberty Hall to the GPO. Limping, he travelled ahead by car and waited with Tom Clarke on the men to arrive. By Friday, when the roof of the GPO was ablaze, Liam Tannam remembered that: "I heard Tom Clarke declare that he would never leave the

GPO alive." According to Tannam, Clarke was adamant that he would stay, and even "go down with the building". It was Mac Diarmada who convinced him to leave.

In the chaos of the evacuation of the GPO, as the rebels attempted to enter a row of houses on Moore Street, Mac Diarmada was present at a moment of great tragedy. Unable to open a locked door, a Volunteer burst a lock by firing upon it.

When the door opened, a child lay dead on the other side. Joe Good, a member of the GPO garrison, recalled Mac Diarmada limping into the house demanding to know who had fired the shot, but that "the woman of the house herself was insisting that it was an accident and the Volunteers were not to be blamed". This incident brought home the suffering of the civilian population to Mac Diarmada, Pearse and other leaders present.

Did Mac Diarmada believe that the Easter Rising could succeed? From reading his departing letters, it seems he believed that the achievement of the Rising would be in its inspiring another generation to fight. Writing to the veteran Fenian John Daly, he outlined his belief that "our blood will rebaptise and reinvigorate the old land. Knowing this it is superfluous to say how happy I feel."

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**Above: Tour guide Paul Gibson with pupils from Kiltyclogher National School, visiting the birth place of Seán Mac Diarmada in Kiltyclogher, Co Leitrim.**

PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES CONNOLLY

**Opposite page, inset top: A portrait of Mac Diarmada by Irish artist Brian O'Neill.**