

How Dev escaped execution in 1916

Ronan Fanning on the series of lucky breaks that spared the life of future President



EAMON DE VALERA'S heroic image as the most senior Irish Volunteer officer to survive 1916 has obscured the reality of his minimal role in planning the Rising. He had reluctantly joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) in 1915, an oath-bound secret society which was the real driving force behind the Rising, only when he realised that some of the subordinates in his battalion who were also in the IRB knew more about what was being planned than he did.

Although he took the IRB's oath, his commitment was conditional: he attended no meetings and did not want to know the names of other members or any of the organisation's other secrets other than those he thought essential for his role as battalion commander.

De Valera was not a signatory of the Easter Proclamation, which he had no part whatsoever in drafting. He saw himself not as a leader but as a follower, as a soldier obedient to the orders of his senior officers.

"He was glad that he [had] no responsibility for deciding anything and that he had simply obeyed orders", De Valera told William O'Brien, the Labour leader, when they were imprisoned together after the Rising.

This political anonymity goes a long way towards explaining why Éamon de Valera escaped execution in 1916. Another reason was that the delivery of Patrick Pearse's surrender order to De Valera at Boland's Mill, on the south-eastern outskirts of the city, was delayed by 24 hours. Two more days elapsed before De Valera and his men, who were then temporarily imprisoned in the RDS grounds in Ballsbridge, were marched across Dublin to join the main body of the prisoners in Richmond Barracks in the west of the city.

The screening and court martial of the leaders of the

SNAPSHOT

ÉAMON DE VALERA

Born: New York, October 14, 1882

Educated: Bruree NS, Charleville CBS, French College (Blackrock), Royal University (UCD)

Affiliation: Irish Volunteers

Career: Teacher, politician (Taoiseach 1932-48, 1951-54, 1957-59; President 1959-73)

Died: Dublin, August 29, 1975

Rising had already begun while De Valera was apart from the main body of prisoners and isolated in Ballsbridge. On his first morning in Richmond Barracks, many prisoners were awoken at 3.45am by the volleys signalling the earliest executions: Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh and Thomas Clarke. The shots did not wake De Valera, always a sound sleeper, but he expected to share their fate.

There were four more executions the next day, May 4, including that of Edward Daly whose case resembled De Valera's on two counts: he was not a signatory of the proclamation and he was a commandant of one of the Volunteer battalions in Dublin. But he had the misfortune to have been among the first of those court martialled – on May 2, when De Valera was still in Ballsbridge.



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Another execution, of John MacBride, took place on May 5 and a weekend lull followed; De Valera's court martial did not take place until the afternoon of May 8, a day that had begun with another four executions. Between May 2 and 17, convictions were recorded in 149 of the 160 cases of prisoners who were tried by Field General Court Martial; but only 15 of the 90 death sentences passed were carried out.



Before De Valera's court martial, his wife Sinéad had already made representations to the American Consul in Dublin that he was a US citizen and the Consul had written to that effect to the most senior official in Dublin Castle, the Under Secretary, Sir Matthew Nathan. His relations in New York – notably his half-brother, Father Thomas Wainwright, a Redemptorist priest – did likewise.

But, under questioning at his court martial, De Valera made no such representations on his own behalf; he said that he had been born in New York but did not know "whether his father was a Spanish subject or a naturalised American." He also said that "he always regarded himself as an Irishman and not as a British subject."

De Valera was transferred to Kilmainham Gaol – those executed were shot by firing squad in the prison yard – to await the decision of General

Maxwell, Britain's newly appointed general-officer-commanding in Ireland, on the confirmation of his conviction and sentence.

But Herbert Asquith's government were already taking fright at the political repercussions of the executions and on the same day as De Valera's court martial John Redmond warned the House of Commons that such a draconian policy was already alienating many who had no sympathy with the insurrection. John Dillon made an even stronger speech when the Commons debated the Irish crisis on May 11 and when Asquith began a weeklong visit to Ireland next day Maxwell immediately assured him there would be no more executions.

In the meantime, on May 10, an officer had already come to De Valera's cell and read him the verdict of his court-martial: guilty and sentenced to death. But he then read a second document, commuting the



A uniformed Éamon de Valera c 1914 (left) and at a rally in America in 1919 (above). GETTY IMAGES



President Éamon de Valera with his wife Sinéad Ní Flannagain, children and grandchildren (above); with Sinéad at a state function in Dublin in the 1960s (left); and with senior members of Sinn Féin in 1919 (below). IRISH INDEPENDENT



‘It’s the women left behind who will suffer most’

The fate of his family troubled the leader ahead of the Rising, writes **Kim Bielenberg**

HE was called Edward, and she had been born Jane. They formed a bond that was to endure through revolution, imprisonment, long separation and civil war.

Edward de Valera, who soon became Éamon, met Jane Flanagan at Gaelic League Irish language classes, where she was his teacher. Steeped in the language, she had changed her name to Sinéad Ní Fhlannagáin.

At Christmas in 1908, he sent her a “nice plant”, on which was inscribed ‘O Chára’ (from a friend). Sinéad was not sure who had sent the present, but she suspected it might have been the tall, earnest man with the long nose and spectacles.

Dev did not delay before proposing to her, and according to her account, they hardly knew each other before they were engaged.

In a family memoir, Sinéad observed one of her husband’s character traits: “In small things, Dev is very much given to weighing up things; he sees all the difficulties. On the other hand, when a big matter is at stake, he will go boldly forward.”

The couple married on January 8, 1910, and by the time of the Rising, they already

had four children – Vivion, Máirín, Éamon, and Brian.

De Valera had initially been drawn to the Irish language to further his teaching career, but gradually, he became more immersed in the language movement and nationalist politics, before eventually joining the Irish Volunteers.

His historical reputation is one of an austere, puritanical figure, but his letters to Sinéad early in his marriage were passionate. He quotes erotic Irish poetry about the “perfectly rounded breast”, and writes longingly of “nectar-lipped” and “wild” kisses.

De Valera was already heavily involved in the Volunteers by the summer of 1914 and helped to pick up guns when they were landed in Howth. He travelled around the city on a motorcycle with a side car. The couple lived on Morehampton Terrace, in Donnybrook.

In the run-up to the Rising, he was told he would have to command the area around Beggars’ Bush Barracks to the south of the city. He reconnoitred the area by taking walks through the streets holding the hand of his five-year-old son Vivion.

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sentence to penal servitude for life.

In the last analysis, De Valera owed his survival more to luck than to Asquith or America. He was lucky that Boland’s Mill was isolated on the city’s south-eastern periphery. Lucky that he was first imprisoned in Ballsbridge and not with the other leaders. Lucky that he was not transferred to Richmond Barracks for 48 hours and that his trial was delayed until May 8. Lucky that General Maxwell had already been summoned to London on May 5 by a government so alarmed at the impact on Irish public opinion that it urged him to bring the executions to an end.

The last of the executions – of Seán Mac Diarmada and James Connolly, both signatories of the Proclamation, took place on May 12 – Asquith arrived in Dublin later on the same day. Having confirmed Connolly’s fate after a discussion with William Wylie, the prosecuting officer at the trials, Maxwell had asked who was

next. De Valera, Wylie replied, stumbling like so many others over the strange name. “Is he someone important”, asked Maxwell, and Wylie made what Tim Pat Coogan has described as “the immortal reply: ‘No. He is a school-master who was taken at Boland’s Mill’” and so de Valera escaped death.

With the benefit of hindsight and in the light of all De Valera made of the life thus spared, Wylie’s reply may indeed seem immortal; but in the context of the time it reveals a more mundane reality: Éamon de Valera survived in 1916 because he was then unknown.

This article is an extract, edited by the author, Professor Ronan Fanning, Professor Emeritus of Modern History at UCD, from his biography ‘Eamon de Valera: A Will to Power’ (Faber & Faber, 2015)

