

THOMAS KENT

Agrarian agitator to forgotten volunteer

Grassroots protests over land reform ended in bloody siege at Kent family farm, writes **Richard McElligott**

THOMAS KENT was the fourth son born to Mary Kent at Bawnrard House, Castlelyons, near Fermoy, Co Cork. The Kent family were substantial farmers and

Thomas was raised as an Irish speaker who developed a deep affection for Irish music, dance, poetry and drama.

At the age of 19, he emigrated to Boston where he became active in several Irish-American cultural organisations. He returned home in 1889 at a time of significant land agitation. Frustrated by the British government's lack of progress on Irish land reform, several high-profile members of Charles Stewart Parnell's Irish Parliamentary Party launched the Plan of Campaign – where Irish tenant farmers on landlord estates were encouraged to negotiate as a body to secure rent reductions. In 1890, Thomas was arrested and sentenced to two months' hard labour for conspiring to encourage evasion of rent. Local support for Kent's activities was manifest in the huge crowds that assembled in Fermoy to welcome him on his release.

With the political fall of Parnell and the bitter split in the Irish Party that followed, Kent became increasingly disillusioned with the in-fighting which characterised mainstream Irish nationalist politics. He instead began to devote his energies to the Irish cultural nationalist movement, joining the Castlelyons branch of the Gaelic League. He also became an avid supporter of Arthur Griffith's emerging Sinn Féin party. Various studies on the Rising have shown how exposure to cultural nationalism was a

SNAPSHOT

THOMAS KENT

Born: Castlelyons, Co Cork; August 29, 1865

Educated: Castlelyons NS

Affiliation: Irish Volunteers

Career: Publishing, church furnishing, farmer

Died: Cork Barracks, May 9, 1916

radicalising force, with many of the 1916 generation experiencing a sort of natural graduation from cultural nationalism to political violence.

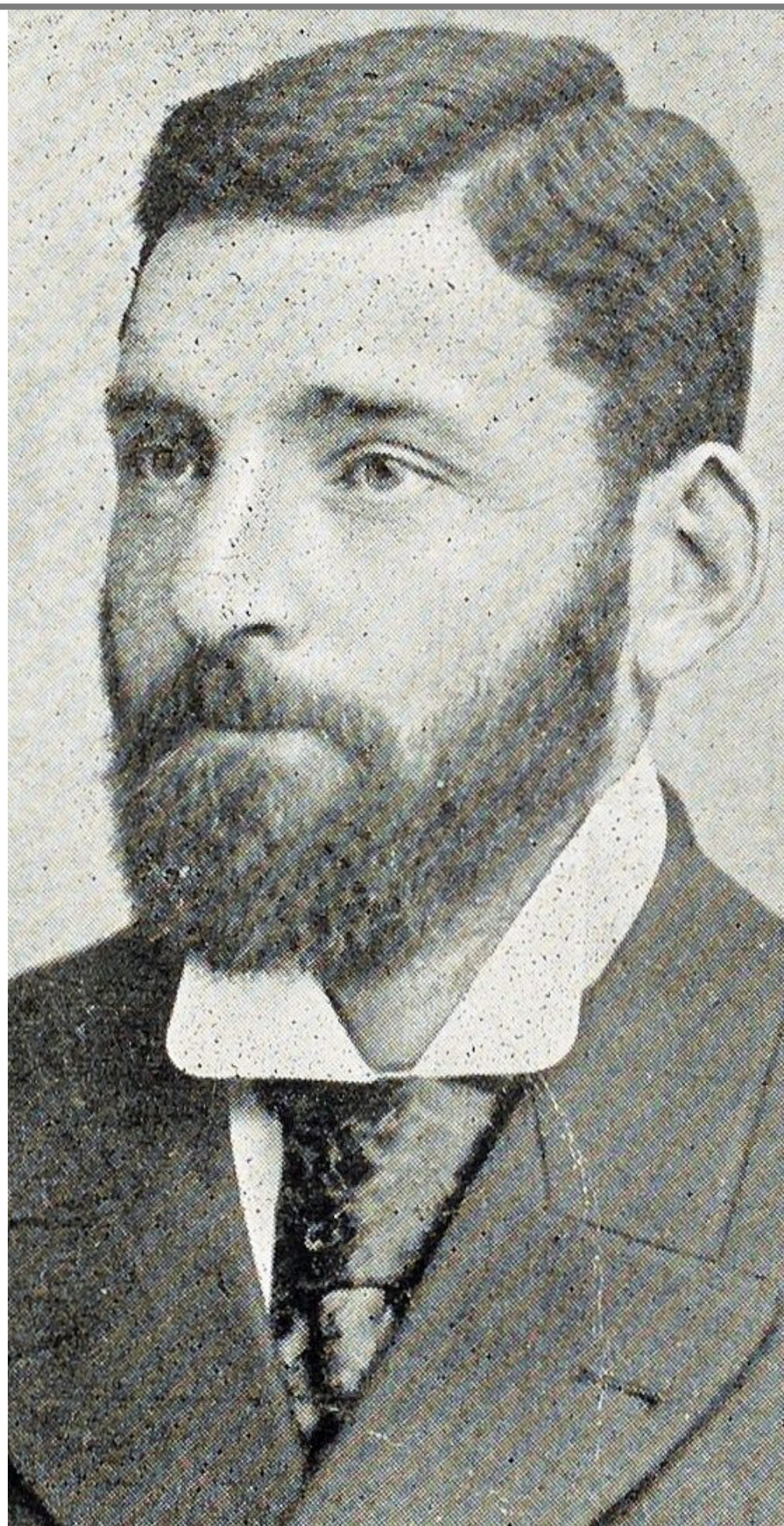
Additionally, evidence suggests that there was a strong link between family traditions of land agitation and subsequent revolutionary activity. Agrarian unrest both reflected and created a tradition of resistance to authority in much of rural Ireland which manifested itself again in enlistment in the Irish Volunteers from 1913 onwards.

Little wonder that Thomas, though now in his late forties, experienced a renewal of the radicalism of his youth. In January

1914, Thomas and his brothers enlisted in the Cork Brigade of Volunteers commanded by Tomás Mac Curtain. The Kent family then helped organise a local Volunteer company in Castlelyons that trained on their farm. It was purported to be the first teetotal unit of the force in Ireland. When the Irish Volunteers split, Thomas, with the aid of Terence MacSwiney, began to reorganise local companies of the Irish Volunteers in Cork who remained loyal



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to Eoin MacNeill. In January 1916, the Royal Irish Constabulary staged a raid on Kent's family home and Thomas was sentenced to two months' imprisonment for the illegal possession of arms found there.

Aware of the Military Council's plans for rebellion, Kent and his brothers spent Easter Sunday in Cork city awaiting orders from Pearse to mobilise. Once news of MacNeill's countermanding order reached Cork, they went into hiding still hoping that MacSwiney would order the Cork Volunteers into action locally in the days

ahead. Once the rebellion in Dublin was defeated, the British authorities ordered the detention of all well-known local sympathisers. On the night of May 1, the Kent brothers returned to their family home but were observed by the RIC who encircled the house in the early morning with orders to arrest the entire family.

The Kent brothers refused to be taken and as the police laid siege they began a firefight which lasted several hours with their 85-year-old mother helping to reload their guns. In the melee, Head Constable



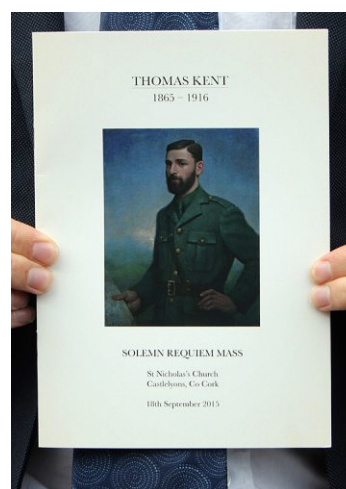
The state funeral of Thomas Kent in Castlelyons, Co Cork, in September 2015. Below: soldiers fire a volley of shots at the funeral. GETTY IMAGES



Thomas Kent, main picture, and above on the left, with William Kent, being marched across the bridge in Fermoy, Co Cork, after their capture in May 1916.

Right: an Order of Service from Thomas Kent's 2015 funeral. GETTY IMAGES

Below: UCD's Richard McElligott.



Nieces' DNA solves mystery of prison grave

THOMAS Kent was executed on May 9, 1916, and his body placed in an unmarked grave, filled with quicklime, in the grounds of Cork Prison in Victoria Barracks. Almost 99 years later, the remains of a body were exhumed and so began a scientific investigation to ensure that they were indeed the remains of Thomas Kent.

Head of the Garda Forensic Co-ordination Office, John Byrne, approached genetics expert, Dr Jens Carlsson from the University College Dublin School of Biology and Environmental Science, to see if a Mitochondrial DNA test could be used. However, as such a test requires maternal relatedness, and Thomas Kent had no living relatives on the maternal side, this technique would not bear results.

Instead, Dr Carlsson chose another method, a micro-satellite technique, recommended by archaeologists who attempt to retrieve DNA from bones going back thousands of years. The analysis of the bone samples involved the State Pathologist's Office, the National Forensic Co-ordination Office at the Garda Technical Bureau, Forensic Science Ireland and Dr Jens Carlsson's team working in the Pinhasi ERC Ancient DNA Laboratory at UCD.

DNA from blood samples of two of Thomas Kent's nieces were sent to Carlsson to test against the bone samples from the remains. Because of the novelty of this case, the team ran statistical simulations to verify their results – and the conclusion was overwhelming – these were indeed the remains of Thomas Kent.

It is expected that this extraordinary scientific case will help discover the true identities of victims of war crimes abandoned in mass graves.

To hear the full story of how Thomas Kent was identified, go to: <http://bit.ly/1QDh6kt>

WC Rowe had his head blown off while Thomas's brother David was seriously injured. With their ammunition running out and military reinforcements now on the scene, the Kents finally agreed to surrender. Thomas's brother Richard then tried to make a run for the nearby woods but was shot down and fatally wounded. He died the next day.

There were reports that the RIC, enraged over the death of Rowe, wanted to execute Thomas and his brother William on the spot, but they were spared by the intervention of a British army officer.

Thomas and William were marched into Fermoy while a horse and cart carried the wounded David and Richard. On May 4, Thomas and William were tried by court martial. William was acquitted but Thomas was convicted of high treason and sentenced to death. David was later handed the same sentence but it was commuted to five years' imprisonment. Both William and David would later be elected as TDs for Cork.

On May 9, Thomas, clutching a pair of rosary beads, was executed by firing squad in Cork barracks. His body was

placed in an unmarked grave within the grounds. A century-long campaign to identify his remains and repatriate them to the family plot in Castlelyons culminated in Kent's state funeral on September 18, 2015.

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

