



Kevin Barry: willing to kill

There was an outcry when the youthful UCD medical student was sentenced to be executed, but he was unlikely to have ever regretted his killing of a British soldier, writes **Eunan O’Halpin**

Sunday November 1, 2020, All Saints Day, marks the centenary of the execution by hanging of Kevin Barry, an 18-year-old University College Dublin medical student. His eldest sister Kathy (Barry) Moloney (1896-1969) — Kitby to her family and friends — was my grandmother. The two were very close.

Kitby became the self-appointed curator of Kevin’s memory. Her preoccupation with him precluded any sustained reference to her own extraordinary revolutionary career. The activities, traumas and imprisonments of her siblings and other relatives, similarly, went unnoted: Kevin was everything.

Kevin Barry was convicted by court martial of killing Private Marshall Whitehead, a 19-year-old soldier from Halifax in Yorkshire, in a mismanaged IRA raid on a military lorry outside Monks Bakery on Church Street in Dublin on September 20, 1920. Two other soldiers died, one aged 20 and one just 15 (although the British army thought he was 19). They were the first military fatalities inflicted by the IRA in Dublin in 1920.

The IRA plan had been to rush and disarm a party of soldiers seated in the back of a lorry during a routine collection of bread. Barry’s company had staged such a coup against a military guard at the King’s Inns, disarming them without a shot being fired. But, as the IRA officer in charge told the Bureau of Military History, this time an overexcited Volunteer needlessly discharged his weapon. The soldiers took up their rifles and returned fire. When more soldiers appeared nearby, the IRA party dispersed into nearby streets.

Barry told Kitby that when he fired his Mauser automatic, it jammed; he took cover under the military lorry to clear the blockage, stood up and fired again, killing a soldier, before a further jam caused him to duck once more. While he was clearing the second blockage, his comrades melted away without giving any withdrawal signal. Barry found himself in the hands of the aggrieved British party he had attacked. He was driven to a nearby British base in the North Dublin Union, alongside one dead soldier and two mortally wounded. He was beaten up, threatened with a bayonet, and left with a dislocated elbow but, according to evidence at his court martial, he refused to give any information other than that “we were after the rifles”.

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Refused defence

For some days, his family did not visit him for fear of disclosing his identity. This gap in contact may have been decisive: when Kitby and his mother did see Kevin, he announced that he refused to mount any defence to the charges laid against him. He came to this decision without benefit of any family or legal advice: he did not even speak to a solicitor until two days before his court martial on October 20. He did, however, participate in legal preliminaries to his trial, suggesting he was open to the possibility of a defence. In the event, despite IRA headquarters’ orders, he refused legal representation.

Following Barry’s conviction, his fate lay in the balance. Feeling in Ireland was already running high. There had been a spread of unofficial reprisals by Crown forces; in London even *The Times*, a bastion of the establishment, was moved to denounce these. Then there was the lengthy hunger-strike in Brixton prison of Terence MacSwiney, the Lord Mayor of Cork (it was this medieval civic title, rather than his other role as commanding officer of the Cork city IRA that grabbed world attention). Two hunger-strik-

ing Volunteers in Cork jail were also approaching death.

Calls for clemency for Barry came from across the political spectrum. The Unionist Sir James Campbell, lord chancellor of Ireland, who had lost a son in the war, argued that Kevin’s ‘extreme’ youth was crucial: he had obviously been a hapless tool of older men. There were calls for mercy from highly decorated former officers studying at UCD and Trinity College Dublin, Catholic and Protestant clergymen, Irish unionist grandees, trade unions, women activists and at public meetings in Britain. The cabinet in London debated the question, but left the decision in the hands of the Irish administration. There, the military commander General Sir Nevil Macready was adamant that Barry must die: his execution would be a clear signal of British determination to crush rebellion, would improve military and police morale and would serve to dissuade soldiers from joining the police in unofficial reprisals upon the general population. The ageing and erratic Viceroy Field Marshal Lord French agreed.

Why was there such cross-party sympathy for Barry, given that three young soldiers had been killed? Although everyone spoke of his youth, at 18 years and 10 months, and after a year in university, he was scarcely the “poor little Kevin Barry” of whom one priest wrote. A Volunteer since the age of 15, he also had an unusually wide span of operational experience both in Carlow and in Dublin.

One key reason was imagery: the first photographs that the family supplied were taken from group portraits of rugby and hurling teams. Taken between 1917 and mid-1919, these photographs naturally made him appear very young. In his distinctive black and white hooped Belvedere College sports jersey, the images showed a healthy young sportsman and team player, in appearance indistinguishable from thousands of British public school boys and university students lost during the Great War. Immediately before and after his execution, these images, together with his status as a ‘medical student’, ‘Student der Medizin’, and ‘estudiante de medicina’, were carried across the world. This would scarcely have happened had he been, say, an unphotogenic farm boy who had left school at 12.



A crowd gathers outside Mountjoy Prison in Dublin during the execution of Kevin Barry.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

There is a surprising amount of evidence in Kevin’s school work from St Mary’s College in 1915-16 and Belvedere between 1916 and 1919, and in surviving letters, to show that by his mid-teens he was well-informed on world affairs, was a consistent critic of colonialism generally, and was an out-and-out separatist. These views predated the 1916 Rising, which further radicalised him and his older sisters.

He possessed a neat turn of phrase, and had a wry sense of humour. He sometimes wrote about girls in juvenile laddish terms, but he was clearly at ease with women and they liked him for that. This is reflected in his letter to his friend Kathleen Carney, written the evening before his execution. It ends: “Now I’ll shut up. I wish you every success in love and business. Give my adieux to Des [her brother] & your mother and say a little prayer for me when I cash in. Your pal, Kevin.”

Such contemporary evidence leaves us with a conundrum. How could such an agreeable and sensitive young man, in the course of entry to a highly respectable caring profession, be an unabashed killer? Yet history shows that this is no great paradox. The Dublin IRA had a good number of UCD medical students in its ranks by 1920. A few were blooded very early in the con-

Reflection and regret typically come only years after the experience of killing

Kevin Barry: ‘I am off on Monday morning’ Irish Independent, October 30, 1920

He was quite prepared to die. It was an honour to die for Ireland.

So Kevin Barry stated when visited in the condemned cell at Mountjoy Prison yesterday morning by his sister and brother, and also by Father Augustine, of Church Street.

The young lad still preserves a demeanour of absolute calm, and was again quite bright and cheerful.

He told his brother and sister that he was quite prepared to die, and that he considered it an honour to give his life on the scaffold for Ireland, as Sir Roger

Casement had done.

As he was passing through a portion of the prison yesterday, under a heavy escort, to see his visitors, he passed by a number of Sinn Féin prisoners.

He shook hands with one of them whom he recognised, and smilingly remarked: “I am off on Monday morning.”

A party of ‘Black and Tans’ are now on duty in the prison, and one of them is constantly on duty in Barry’s cell.

Young Barry has a host of schoolboy friends in the city, who are shocked at the terrible nature

of the sentence. Although his people come from Co Wicklow, he was born in Dublin and spent all his life in the city.

The Irish Women’s Franchise League sent a telegram to [British Home Secretary Edward] Shortt protesting against the proposed execution of the boy, and adding: “Remember Edith Cavell [a British nurse executed by German forces in World War One].”

To Lord [Lieutenant of Ireland] French they added: “You can stop the execution by the exercise of prerogative.”



Kevin Barry
The Boy Martyr of Ireland
KEVIN BARRY TAKES HIS PLACE ALONGSIDE ROBERT EMMET IN IRELAND’S HALL OF FAME.
John W. Giff



KEVIN BARRY
DIED FOR IRELAND IN MOUNTJOY JAIL.
1st NOVEMBER, 1920



Three commemorative photographic prints of Kevin Barry, two in postcard form
REPRODUCED COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF IRELAND

... and die for his cause



A copy of Kevin Gerard Barry's birth certificate of 8 Fleet Street, Dublin (born 20 January 1902), giving his parents' names, Mary Barry, née Dowling, and Thomas Barry, dairy owner (died 1908).

Left: Kevin Barry in the Belvedere College rugby jersey

REPRODUCED COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF IRELAND

REGISTRATION OF BIRTHS AND DEATHS IN IRELAND.

Certified Copy of Entry in the Register Book of Births deposited in the Superintendent Registrar's Office.—(See Endorsement.)

1902. BIRTHS Registered in the District of *South City* in the Union of *South Dublin* in the County of *Dublin*

No.	Date and Place of Birth.	Name (if any).	Sex.	Name and Surname and Dwelling place of Father.	Name and Surname and Rank or Profession of Mother.	Rank or Profession of Father.	Signature, Qualification, and Residence of Substant.	When Registered.	Signature of Registrar.	Signature of Father.
1902	20 Jan 1902	Kevin Gerard	M	Thomas Barry, 8 Fleet St.	Mary Barry, nee Dowling, 8 Fleet St.	Dairy Owner	The Mark of <i>Kevin Barry</i>	1902	<i>[Signature]</i>	<i>[Signature]</i>

I hereby Certify that the foregoing is a true Copy of the Entry No. *174* in the Register Book of Births of the above District deposited in my Office.

[Signature] *South City Dublin*
20th October 1920

[Signature] *South City Dublin*
for the District of *Dublin*

flict: in April 1920 Hugo MacNeill, whom Kevin knew from his year in St Mary's College, was one of two members of 'the Squad' who calmly assassinated Detective Henry Kells, a 42-year-old married man from Cavan, as he left his home to go to work. Other medical students took part in the major 'Bloody Sunday' operations on November 21, 1920. The legendary Ernie O'Malley quit his UCD medical studies to become a full-time IRA organiser in 1919, and later an anti-Treaty leader. We should not be surprised that medical students saw no contradiction between training to save lives, and willingness to risk and to take life in the name of a just cause.

Violent experiences

Should we fault Barry for not expressing sympathy for the dead soldiers? Most psychological studies of combatants indicate that reflection and regret typically come only years after the experience of killing. Some Volunteers were, undoubtedly, quickly shattered by their violent experiences; others were not. From all we know of Barry, his evidently happy childhood, and his capacity for friendship, I think it likely that he would not have been traumatised or haunted by his actions.

The centenary of his execution raises questions regarding the physical force tradition in 20th (and 21st) century Ireland. Contemporary republicans — a term I use narrowly to describe those who believe that complete Irish freedom has yet to be secured and that it can only be achieved through physical force — see Barry as an appropriate symbol of the continuing struggle for freedom who set an example that should be followed today. The great majority of Irish people evidently feel otherwise, regarding him as a freedom fighter whose courage and sacrifice helped to secure independence for most of Ireland.

Barry might be amused by the fact that two rival political parties, Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin, have cumáinn named after him. Kitby always maintained that Kevin would never have accepted the Treaty, and would have abjured Eamon de Valera as she did when he accepted the Free State. Yet many of Barry's Dublin IRA comrades and friends who fought alongside him came to terms with the Treaty compromise, and many others eventually followed de Valera's lead.

Like other revolutionary icons such as Patrick Pearse and Michael Collins, in death Kevin Barry was and remains whatever people chose to make of him. But no one can deny that in 1920 he was willing both to kill and to die for his cause, and that he did both without hesitation or regret.

He possessed a neat turn of phrase, and had a wry sense of humour

● Eunan O'Halpin's most recent works are 'Kevin Barry: An Irish Rebel in Life and Death' (Merrion Press, €15.99) and (with Daithí Ó Corráin) 'The Dead of the Irish Revolution' (Yale University Press, €60)

