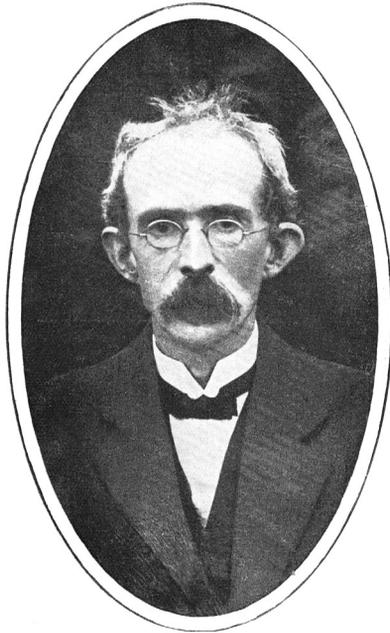


THOMAS CLARKE



Thomas Clarke, the oldest of the executed leaders of the Easter Rising, was born at an unlikely location: the British Army barracks at Hurst Castle, Isle of Wight, on 11 March 1858. His father, Thomas Snr, was an officer in the British Army and had served during the Crimean War. He was a native of Co. Leitrim and his wife, Mary (née Palmer), was from Co. Tipperary. Thomas Snr was subsequently transferred

to South Africa and the Clarkes spent some years living in various British Army garrison towns in that country. In 1865 Clarke's father attained the rank of battery sergeant and the family transferred to Dungannon, Co. Tyrone.¹ For Thomas, who moved around so much as a young child, Dungannon was the closest to a home place he ever had. According to his friend and associate Seán McGarry: 'Tom always retained a great love for Dungannon of which he regarded himself as a native.'²

Clarke attended national school in the town and was later appointed monitor, the role given to older pupils who worked as classroom assistants. According to McGarry, Clarke may well have become a teacher except that he refused to work on a Sunday, when he was required to teach catechism to the younger pupils at the school. Clarke objected to working outside normal teaching hours.

It was in Dungannon that Clarke first engaged with radical nationalist politics. In 1878 John Daly, the IRB organiser who later played a prominent role in Clarke's life, visited the town. Clarke was greatly taken with what Daly had to say and the well-known Fenian swore him into the IRB. William Kelly, a fellow classmate of Clarke's at the national school in Dungannon, was initiated into the IRB two years after him, in 1880. At this point Kelly noted that Clarke was at the centre of the IRB circle in Dungannon, which consisted of twenty-three members. John Daly returned to the town shortly afterwards and advised the IRB to begin training and

drilling in preparation for 'taking military action against the RIC'.³

On 15 August 1880 a riot broke out between members of the Orange Order and members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, who were parading for the Catholic feast of the Assumption. The RIC intervened and opened fire on the riot; one man was shot dead. The following night Clarke, Kelly and up to four other members of the IRB ambushed a group of RIC men on Irish Street but were forced to retreat when reinforcements arrived. Fearing repercussions for his involvement in the ambush, Clarke decided to emigrate to America. Before leaving he made contact with Camp No. 1 of Clan na Gael, the Irish-American revolutionary organisation which had formal links with the IRB in Ireland. On arrival in New York Clarke was welcomed by Clan member Patrick O'Connor, who provided him with employment in his shoe shop. In the spring of 1881 Clarke found other work as a night porter at the Mansion House Hotel, Brooklyn.

During this period Clan na Gael were involved in organising a bombing campaign in England. In America they trained men in the use of chemicals and arranged for their passage to England, where they were to participate in a plan to detonate explosives. Clarke's growing involvement with the Clan in America coincided with this development, and in the summer of 1881 he was part of a group of 'prospective dynamitards' who were shown how to make and use explosives by Dr Thomas Gallagher.⁴

In early 1883 Clarke was preparing to take up a management position at a hotel in Brighton Beach when he was ordered by Clan na Gael to prepare for a secret voyage to England. He set sail shortly afterwards, travelling under the alias Henry Hammond Wilson. On arrival in England, he lodged in the Southwark area of London. Unknown to Clarke and his co-conspirators, including Dr Gallagher and James Murphy (known by his alias, Alfred Whitehead), they had aroused the suspicion of police officers who were now trailing them. Clarke was arrested at his lodgings on 5 April 1883. Whitehead had been arrested in Birmingham the day before, and Clarke and Gallagher were reading about the arrest in a newspaper when the police swooped to take them into custody. Clarke was tried in the Old Bailey, where prosecution witnesses included a cab driver and a train station worker who had observed him carrying a large and heavy portmanteau. He was using this case to transport liquid explosives, which were discovered during his arrest.

On 14 June 1883 Clarke, along with three other Fenians, was found guilty of treason felony and sentenced to life imprisonment. He was first held at Millbank Prison, before being transferred to Chatham Prison in December 1883. Clarke suffered the worst of the Victorian prison regime, with treason-felony prisoners subjected to particularly harsh conditions. He later wrote about his experience in the memoir *Glimpses of an Irish Felon's Prison Life*, which recounted the relentless monotony of the system of silence and separation:

Had anyone told me before the prison doors closed upon me that it was possible for any human being to endure what the Irish prisoners have endured in Chatham Prison, and come out of it alive and sane, I would not have believed him, yet some have done so, and it has been a source of perpetual surprise to me that I was able to get through it all.⁵

As a treason-felony prisoner, Clarke and the other Fenians were not held in the main hall of the prison along with the other convict prisoners but were kept separate in small penal cells. According to Clarke, their separation from the main body of prisoners allowed the guards to engage in ‘a scientific system of perpetual and persistent harassing’.⁶ This included sleep deprivation, where the guards would deliberately slam shut a heavy iron trapdoor when carrying out checks on the prisoners at night-time, to wake them. During his imprisonment Clarke worked as a moulder in the iron foundry and this laborious work was made more difficult by the fact that he was often on bread and water punishment while working on heavy castings.

In 1884 Clarke’s imprisonment was made somewhat more bearable by the arrival to Chatham of John Daly, his mentor from his days with the IRB in Dungannon. Like Clarke, Daly had been arrested for possession of explosives, at Wolverhampton train station. Although the operation of the silent system at Chatham meant that Clarke could not speak to Daly, his presence in the prison along with his IRB colleague James

Francis Egan gave him 'support and encouragement'. Clarke devised a type of Morse code system of knocking on the walls of the cells to allow for some communication between the Fenian convicts.

But the bar on communication, as well as the harshness of the regime, took its toll. Gallagher and Whitehead suffered a total breakdown of their mental health while at Chatham. Clarke was admitted to the prison hospital several times during his fifteen years of imprisonment. Meanwhile at home in Ireland an Amnesty Association was formed to campaign for the release of the Fenian prisoners. Clarke's case was championed by the socialite and political activist Maud Gonne, and after 1896 by John Daly, who was released from prison on medical grounds. Clarke was finally released from prison on 29 September 1898 and he came to Dublin, where his mother and sister were now living in Kilmainham.

As part of the reception held to welcome him home to Ireland, Clarke was awarded the freedom of Limerick city on 2 March 1899. It was during his visit to Limerick that he met Kathleen Daly, John Daly's niece. She was unimpressed by him when they first met:

I was keenly disappointed. His appearance gave no indication of the kingly, heroic qualities which Uncle John had told us about; there was none of the conquering hero which I had visioned. He was emaciated and stooped from the long imprisonment and hardship.⁷

In spite of this poor first impression, they began exchanging letters, and continued to correspond with each other when Clarke emigrated to America with his sister Maria in 1899. He found work there as a pattern maker in the Cameron Pump Works in New York and in his letters he encouraged Kathleen to join him in America so that they could be married. The match met with the disapproval of the Daly family, not least because of the significant age gap of twenty-one years. But Kathleen was determined to marry Tom and she travelled to New York, where they were married on 16 July 1901. John MacBride, the Fenian veteran of the Boer War, was their best man.

Kathleen and Tom set up home at Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and their first son, Daly, was born in 1902. Clarke lost his job at Cameron Pump Works and the young couple set up an ice-cream and sweet shop. Clarke resumed his activities with Clan na Gael, encouraging John Devoy, the leading member of the organisation, to establish a newspaper. Clarke subsequently became manager of the *Gaelic American*, with Devoy as its editor. Throughout this period of the early twentieth century, the relationship between America and Great Britain grew closer and an Anglo-American alliance was proposed. Clarke was involved with Irish-American organisations which tried to thwart this alliance by highlighting the cause of Irish independence.

Kathleen found life in New York difficult. It was hard for her to adjust to apartment living in Brooklyn, where she had to learn to make no noise so as not to disturb her neighbours. She

and her son suffered bad health and had to return to Ireland for a few months in 1905 for Daly to recover from a bout of diphtheria. Kathleen was advised by her doctor to move to the countryside for the sake of her health, and her uncle, John Daly, bought a farm for the Clarkes on Long Island. Because of its distance from New York, Clarke had to resign his post with the *Gaelic American*.

Although the family were fairly content with their life on Long Island, Clarke began to itch to go home. One of his greatest disappointments was that there had been no rebellion in Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century, when the British Army was preoccupied with fighting in the Boer War. Growing tensions between Britain and Germany suggested the possibility of a war between these two countries. Clarke was motivated to return to Ireland to plan for a rebellion at a time when England's attention would be diverted by another foreign war. Clarke was also impressed with Bulmer Hobson, an IRB member who toured America in 1907. Buoyed by the prospect of a new generation reinvigorating the Fenian movement, Clarke decided to return to Ireland with his family.

Kathleen's sister Madge assisted the Clarkes with the purchase of a newsagents in Dublin in January 1908. Their first shop was located at 77 Amiens Street, and in 1909 they purchased another shop at 75a Parnell Street. Clarke threw himself into IRB activities and was co-opted onto the organisation's Supreme Council. He became president of the North Dock Ward Branch of Sinn Féin and organised com-

memorations of Wolfe Tone at his grave in Bodenstown. Clarke tried to rejuvenate the IRB by focusing his attention on the younger generation and he formed a close relationship with Seán Mac Diarmada, an up-and-coming political activist. In 1910 he was involved in the establishment of the *Irish Freedom* newspaper, which was to be a mouthpiece for the IRB. Clarke was chair of the editorial committee and its other members were drawn from the more youthful side of the organisation: Hobson, Mac Diarmada, Pat McCartan, Piaras Béaslaí and Seán McGarry. Clarke also facilitated the entry of Patrick Pearse into the IRB, by giving him the opportunity to speak at a commemoration for Robert Emmet in 1911 and by publishing his articles in *Irish Freedom*.

In 1911 Clarke succeeded in ousting the older generation of the IRB, including Fred Allan, chair of the Supreme Council. Clarke, along with Mac Diarmada and Hobson, was now in control of the IRB, and his shop on Parnell Street became the hub of the organisation. McGarry later recalled that ‘from this time forward Tom became the pivot of the whole separatist movement’.⁸

Another turning point came with the formation of the Irish Volunteers in November 1913. Clarke saw the potential in this organisation to provide a revolutionary force for the rebellion he anticipated would take place if Britain went to war. Although he supported the formation of the Irish Volunteers, Clarke did not become a member of its Provisional Committee. He preferred to remain in the background to avoid bringing

himself to the attention of the authorities. In June 1914 the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, John Redmond, sought to exert control over the growing membership of the Irish Volunteers by seeking to nominate twenty-five members of the Provisional Committee. Bulmer Hobson was alone among the IRB men on the committee who supported Redmond's proposal. Clarke was disgusted by his actions and never spoke again to Hobson, who subsequently resigned from the Supreme Council of the IRB.

Clarke and Mac Diarmada were not directly involved in the landing of arms at Howth on 26 July 1914 until they received word that soldiers were seen boarding a tram headed for the seaside village that afternoon. They immediately took a cab to Howth, where they met some Volunteers and filled their cab with arms, making as many return journeys as they could to bring the rifles back to Dublin. Clarke later ensured that some of these rifles were distributed to the Irish Volunteer corps in his native Dungannon.

Following Redmond's speech at Woodenbridge in September 1914, the Irish Volunteers split between those who supported Irishmen being part of the British war effort and those who opposed Irishmen joining the British Army. Clarke and Mac Diarmada were overjoyed at this division, which meant that Redmond could no longer exert his influence over the remaining Irish Volunteers, leaving them free to set the organisation on the path to rebellion.⁹ At a meeting chaired by Clarke at the library of the Gaelic League on 9 September

1914 it was decided that the war in Europe would be used as an opportunity to stage a rebellion in Ireland.

Throughout 1915 Clarke played a central role in orchestrating plans for the rebellion, although he continued to do so as a background figure. The government had in December 1914 suppressed *Irish Freedom* and Clarke and Mac Diarmada were behind the establishment of the replacement newspaper, *Nationality*, in 1915, of which Mac Diarmada was manager. The arrest and imprisonment of Mac Diarmada from May to September 1915 came as a blow to Clarke, both personally and from an organisational point of view.

Clarke opposed Roger Casement's efforts to travel to Germany via the USA to seek arms and support for a rebellion in Ireland. He instructed John Devoy in America to have nothing to do with him. As with Hobson, a rift had developed between Clarke and Casement over the latter's support for Redmond in the controversy over the twenty-five nominees. Clarke's concerns were heightened when Casement reached Germany, as he believed that Casement did not have full knowledge of 'the actual situation in Ireland'.¹⁰ Clarke sent Robert Monteith to follow Casement to Germany to keep an eye on him.

A military committee of the IRB, including Patrick Pearse, Joseph Plunkett and Éamonn Ceannt, had been formed to plan the rebellion. Clarke and Mac Diarmada joined the committee in September 1915, and this became the new Supreme Council of the IRB. They held the positions of secretary and treasurer, and had Denis McCullough, an IRB man living in

Belfast, elected as chair. McCullough's distance from Dublin ensured that Clarke and Mac Diarmada 'effectively controlled the supreme council'.¹¹

Clarke's greatest triumph in 1915 was undoubtedly his role as director of arrangements for the funeral of Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa. He chaired the committee set up on 1 August and was given free rein by Devoy to plan the funeral as he saw fit. According to McGarry, the O'Donovan Rossa funeral allowed Clarke to demonstrate 'his great capacity for work, his power of organisation and his complete mastery of details'.¹² Clarke succeeded in bringing together many nationalist organisations for the funeral and his decision to ask Pearse to deliver the graveside oration showed his foresight in realising the potential of Pearse's powerful oratory. Large crowds attended the funeral and it was a rallying point for nationalists ahead of the rebellion in 1916.

By Easter Week 1916 Clarke looked much older than his fifty-nine years. His fifteen years of imprisonment had taken its toll and he was a small, thin, greying man. Nonetheless he was respected among republicans as a figurehead for the movement. On Tuesday evening of Holy Week he returned to his home in Ballybough to tell Kathleen that a rising would take place the following Sunday. He also informed her that he had been proposed as the first signatory of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic and that Thomas MacDonagh had refused to sign the document until Clarke had done so, believing that 'no other man was entitled to the honour'.¹³

But the plans that Clarke had so carefully masterminded began to fall apart on Good Friday. The arrest of Roger Casement in Co. Kerry and the scuttling of the *Aud* with its cargo of arms prompted Eoin MacNeill to issue a countermanding order calling off the Rising late on Holy Saturday. At a meeting of the Supreme Council at Liberty Hall on Easter Sunday, Clarke was the only council member to argue for a rebellion to go ahead that evening. He was eventually persuaded to delay until the following day. McGarry recalled a conversation with Clarke that evening, when Clarke was still contemplating the impact of the order:

The shock of the morning's blow had been terrific. I accompanied him home that evening. He was very silent. After a while he recovered and discussed the affair. He regarded McNeill's [*sic*] action was of the blackest and greatest treachery. But having said all he wanted to say about it he did not refer to it again.¹⁴

He spent the night of Easter Sunday at home, with McGarry and another IRB man acting as bodyguards.

Clarke was too frail to march to the GPO with the Irish Volunteers on the morning of 24 April 1916. He travelled by car and on arrival he helped the Volunteers to smash the windows of the building. He stood by Pearse outside the GPO while the latter read aloud the Proclamation. Throughout Easter Week he did not wear a uniform, nor did he hold a military position in the new army of an Irish Republic.

Nonetheless he was acknowledged by the garrison at the GPO as a person whose orders should be obeyed. McGarry observed that Clarke remained calm and collected during the week in the GPO, giving orders 'decisively and as calmly as if he were in his own shop'.¹⁵ On Tuesday evening Clarke explained his reasoning behind organising the rebellion to Min Ryan, a Cumann na mBan courier from Wexford:

The gist of it was – that people naturally would now be against them for rising and coming out like this; that one of the reasons for people being against them would be because of the counter-manding order, but that they had come to this conclusion that it was absolutely necessary that they should have this Rising now, because if they did not have it now, they might never have it ...¹⁶

It is clear that from the time of his return from America in 1907, Clarke was determined not to repeat the mistake of the past by failing to have a rebellion during a time of war.

Kathleen remained at home during Easter Week and received updates from the GPO from messengers. Her brother, Ned Daly, was also in action during the rebellion, commanding at the Four Courts. By Friday Kathleen no longer needed the couriers to keep her informed of developments as she became keenly aware of events by watching from her bedroom window:

That night I watched, from the upper windows of the house, the smoke and flames of what seemed to be the whole city in flames.

I watched all night; it seemed to me no one could escape from that inferno. The picture of my husband and brother caught in it was vividly before me, and their helplessness against that raging fire appalled me.¹⁷

The fires witnessed by Kathleen forced the inevitable evacuation of the GPO. Clarke was with the other leaders who retreated to Moore Street and convened a military council to discuss their options. Again he proved to be the most determined of the revolutionaries, objecting to the surrender proposed by Pearse and arguing that the rebels should fight on. He broke down in tears when the decision was taken to seek terms.

Following the surrender, the Volunteers spent Saturday night sleeping in the open in the gardens of the Rotunda Hospital. Witnesses described seeing Clarke being very roughly handled by British officers, including Captain Lea Wilson. Michael Collins witnessed this treatment and subsequently ordered the assassination of Wilson during the War of Independence.

Along with the rest of the GPO garrison, Clarke was marched from the Rotunda to Richmond Barracks in Inchicore on Sunday morning. Liam Ó Briain, a fellow prisoner, recalled seeing Clarke sleeping side by side with Seán Mac Diarmada that night, Mac Diarmada's head lying on Clarke's lap.¹⁸ Clarke was court-martialled on 2 May 1916. As he had done at his trial for treason felony almost thirty-three years previously, Clarke cross-examined the sole witness produced by the prosecution. Lieutenant S. L. King of the Royal Inniskilling

Fusiliers testified that he was held prisoner in the GPO during the Rising and that he considered that Clarke held a position of authority among the rebels. Clarke did not call any witnesses in his defence, nor did he make a statement to the court. He was found guilty and was sentenced to death by firing squad.

Kathleen Clarke was arrested at her home in Ballybough on the same morning as her husband's court martial, 2 May. She was held for the day in Dublin Castle and that evening she was brought to Kilmainham Gaol, where her husband was to be shot at dawn the following morning. On entering his cell the first thing she asked him was why the rebels had surrendered. He replied that he had been outvoted by the other leaders on the matter. He told her that he had dismissed the priest who had been attending him, as the priest wanted him to express sorrow for his part in the rebellion before he would give him absolution. Tom told Kathleen:

I told him to clear out of my cell quickly. I was not sorry for what I had done, I gloried in it and the men who had been with me. To say I was sorry would be a lie, and I was not going to face my God with a lie on my tongue.¹⁹

Kathleen was pregnant at the time of Tom's execution but she did not tell him that she was carrying their child during her last visit with him. According to Kathleen he was in 'an exalted frame of mind' when she left him. Tom Clarke was executed at dawn on 3 May 1916.