



ONE MAN'S PART IN "THE RISING"

Bill Byrne

I was born on an out-farm [a tenant farm] at Templenacrow, Co. Wexford to Tom and Alice Furlong on January 24th 1897, the second child and the first son. My sister, Maggie, was their first child.

So begins the unpublished manuscript entitled "The Tommy Furlong Story," written by my uncle, Thomas Furlong, in his ninety-third year. The Tom and Alice Furlong he refers to are my maternal grandparents, whom I never had the privilege to know, and the "Maggie" is my mother, Margaret Byrne, nee Furlong. My uncle's story is replete with gun-running for the Irish Volunteers and later the Sinn Fein, with run-ins with the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) and the British Army stationed in Ireland, resulting in time spent in Irish prisons, with all the drama and mayhem that a young man could want or endure during the period in Ireland known as "The Rising."

I knew of him from stories my mother shared with me, stories about their young life growing up together on the farm in Wexford and later in County Wicklow. I met him twice in my late twenties, once on a short visit to Dublin where he lived, and later on his one visit to the States. On the latter occasion, he proudly showed me his Irish Republican Army (IRA) card. I was unimpressed then but now I am in awe of what he expe-

rienced. Reading his manuscript set me on a quest to understand more about him and the time he lived through.

Kynoch-ing About

I left school at fourteen and worked [farming] with my father for a couple of years. We had moved to a small cottage just outside the town of Arklow, and I was given a job at the Kynoch factory in town as an apprentice industrial chemist. It was about this time I joined the Irish Volunteers.

While at the Kynoch factory, I became pretty efficient at denitration (freeing oxides of nitrogen) and the head chemist wanted me to go with him to South Africa, but my parents refused to let me go.

Some time after the 1914–1918 war started, there was a large explosion at Kynoch with a loss of many lives. After this, I left the factory.

The Kynoch Company built a large, sprawling factory near the north end of Arklow Beach and in its heyday employed thousands of people from Arklow and its surroundings. It continued to produce ammunition for Britain and its allies during World War I and moved its operations to South Africa permanently after 1920. Having a factory producing explosives in that part of Ireland during the period proved somewhat tricky—I'm sure the Sinn Fein never took its eyes off this prize. During World War I, all the employees were issued cards preempting them from being conscripted into the British Army, even though Ireland had no conscription laws. Still, many volunteered to join the fight in France, and some fifty thousand Irishmen died in the trenches. The explosion at Kynoch, to which my Uncle refers, happened on the morning of September 21, 1917. A massive explosion rocked the town at 3 a.m. when there was only a small night shift on duty. Had it occurred during the day, many hundreds would have perished. As it was, twenty-seven died in the explosion. Aside from a few

non-descript columns near the beach that fronts the Irish Sea, little is left to remind the townspeople of the massive factory that once employed so many. On the occasion of my visit to my grandparents' cottage in the late sixties, I visited a monument which marks a common grave for the victims in the cemetery in Arklow. Kynoch, under the name Kynamco and three centuries into its existence, still produces munitions.

Rising Stars

Reference in the manuscript is made to a host of early twentieth century Irish emancipation heroes. Several of those my uncle knew paid with their lives, and others, who outlived the occupation and bouts with imprisonment, went on to serve in the first Irish parliaments.

Some of the great activists of the time met regularly at Tom Clark's shop in Ballsbridge [a Dublin suburb], men like Eamon Martin and Barney and Liam Mellows. Eventually a friend introduced me to them, and I became involved with their activities. We attended many lectures in Dublin given by Pdraig Pearse, Eoin MacNeill, Gavin Duffy, Kettle, Larkin, McDonagh, and many others.

Tom Clark deserves some mention for his role in the Rising. At the age of eighteen, Clark joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), and in 1883 he was sent to London to blow up London Bridge. Failing in that mission, Clark was soon arrested along with three others, was tried, and was sentenced to penal servitude for life at London's Old Bailey prison in May, 1883. He served fifteen years of the sentence, was released due to public pressure, and then moved to America for nine years, all the time working for the cause long distance. Clark returned to Ireland in 1907 and with the proceeds from the sale of his sixty acre New York property, he opened a tobacconist shop, the shop mentioned in my Uncle's account.

Fifteen years of British penal servitude can go a long way in shaping a man's purpose in life. "Life being what it is, one

dreams of revenge,” wrote Paul Gaugin. Clark played a large role in planning the Easter Rising in 1916 at the General Post Office in Dublin. When the affair got sorted out in Britain’s favor—cannons trump small arms every time—he was arrested as one of the leaders. Along with Padraic Pearse, he was executed on May 3rd by a British firing squad.

This is the first mention in the manuscript of the IRB which was a secret oath-bound fraternal organization dedicated to the establishment of an “independent democratic republic.” Its counterpart was known as Sinn Fein (“We Ourselves”). The members of both wings of the movement are often referred to as one and shared the same goals—the end of British rule in Ireland, national self-determination, and the unity and independence of Ireland as a sovereign state.

My uncle writes about two people who interested me as much for their names as their roles in the Rising. Etchingham doesn’t sound like much of an Irish name, but one Sean Etchingham was a captain in the Irish Volunteers and a close friend of my family. He was arrested for his role in the 1916 Enniscorthy raid that held the railway there to prevent the British from sending reinforcements for the Easter Rising in Dublin. When the Dublin Rising failed, Sean surrendered and was imprisoned with several other leaders. While in prison he composed a song that my mother was wont to call “Comallyas,” which I gathered referred to the opening lines of many rebel songs —“Come all you young rebels and join in the fight.” Sean’s song went:

*They’d think we’d sing
God save their King
And pray God save their Queen
Because they gave us every day
A mite of margarine.*

It’s not clear from the manuscript how much time Sean served, but eventually he was set free in a general amnesty, probably the one in 1917. My uncle then tells of a friendly Irish constable who knew Tom and knew that Sean was a frequent visitor

to my grandparent's cottage. The constable warned Tom that Sean would be arrested again the next morning. Tom gave Sean his bicycle for his getaway and concluded the Etchingham saga with "*he died on the run shortly after that.*" My uncle got that wrong, an understandable error since he was probably serving time in prison somewhere. Sean Etchingham appears in the first Dail Eirann (Irish Parliament) records as an elected representative from Wexford first and then East Wicklow. He is on record as opposing the first 1921 Irish Accord.

Sean's demise was a lot less romantic than my uncle's account. His obituary in 1923 appears under the name John Redmond Etchingham, age 55 and indicates he died of the effects of cerebral palsy. I surmise that he favored the Irish version of his name, not the English "John," and that is why the history from the time refers to him by both first names. I cannot find any record of him marrying or having children. The Irish census of 1911 lists him as "Head of Household" and living with two sisters and two nephews. While that is not definitive proof, it lends some credence to the rumor that he was from "the illegitimate" Etchingham branch of the family. The story of the friendship between my family and this outcast warms my Furlong genes.

Another name that intrigued me appears in the following excerpt: "*We carried on the Sinn Fein meetings, drills and cycle runs. Our favorite place for meetings was Father Sweetman's school near Gorey.*" In the accounts from that time, Father Sweetman is referred to as "the controversial Benedictine monk, Dom John Francis Sweetman, of Mount St. Benedict, Gorey." The locale of the school, formerly known as Mount Nebo, was the home of the notorious pro-Britain and anti-Catholic magistrate, Hunter Gowan. It was re-christened Mount St. Benedict to exorcise the memory of the "the divil of Gorey." Dom Sweetman, while he ran St. Benedict's College, was the puppet master in the election of representatives from Wexford to the first Irish Parliament and a staunch supporter of the causes espoused by Sinn Fein. Clerical Orders, like the Benedictines, are run on a paramilitary model, so I wonder if Dom

Sweetman's Superiors ever tried to reign in his activities. He was not the first Catholic priest (but maybe the one and only monk) who took part in the cause for Irish independence, nor would he be the last.

The Role of Women

As members of the Irish Volunteers we were very popular with some of the local girls. I still remember with great pleasure the times we spent with Maud Gomme, Alice Stouffer-Green, Maria Comerford, the Countess, and many others.

During the Rising, women in Ireland were becoming a factor in the independence movement. Most of them served as nurses and messengers during the time and were kept out of actual combat. Their role is summed up as “tend and befriend”—tend to the care and feeding of the fighters and give them safe haven should the RIC and/or the British army come looking for them. The nationalists in Ireland promised women suffrage once independence was achieved, but many women suffragettes did not believe them and took no part in the struggle. One feminist group called the *Cumann na mBan* or the League of Women stood by the revolutionaries, hoping for equal rights for women as promised in Padraig Pearse's Easter 1916 proclamation. Sadly, even after the formation of the Irish Free State and the later Republic of Ireland, women did not get full voting rights until 1928.

Some of those “*local girls*” whom my uncle names were more directly involved in the struggle as combatants. Most famous among them was the so-called “Countess of Irish Freedom,” Constance Gore-Booth Marcievicz. Born into a wealthy Anglo-Irish family in Sligo, she married a Polish Count and turned out to be an epic figure in the Rising. A 1915 archival picture shows the lieutenant Countess in uniform, kneeling against a studio prop holding a gun. She was arrested for her part in the Easter Rising, was jailed with Pearse and Clark, was condemned to execution by firing squad, but had her sentence

commuted to life in prison “because she was a woman.” She was released in the general amnesty in 1917 and continued her fight for the cause. When she died, an estimated 300,000 Dubliners stood by as her funeral cortege made its way to the Dublin cemetery where she is buried.

Gun-Running

Gun-running was something of a lark for Tommy Furlong. On one occasion he writes that he and a friend “borrowed” a Dublin Corporation (Dublin sanitation department at a guess) “*handcart full of shovels and brushes,*” mixed six rifles in with the tools, and brought them to 41 York Street, the Irish Volunteers drill hall. He writes: “*We did a lot of gun-running around Howth [another Dublin suburb] in July 1914, carrying weapons through the streets in full view of the RIC. We thought it was a lot of fun and at 17 years of age, I suppose it was.*”

It’s not surprising that gun-running was a big part of IRB and Sinn Fein activity. After all, the pro-British North was arming itself vigorously, and the English authorities aided and abetted them. What was a revolutionary to do to restore some balance? Ultimately it proved mostly a futile pursuit for the pro-independence Irish forces. Whenever the RIC or British forces wanted to defeat them, all they had to do was roll out the big cannons, which they did on more than one occasion.

What did surprise me in the Tommy Furlong manuscript was this reference: “. . . *a ship docked in Arklow after a six month voyage. My brother-in-law was mate on the ship and he’d brought back two .38 caliber revolvers. He gave them to me with a box of bullets.*” That reference startled me because the brother-in-law he refers to is my father, Robert Byrne. And those two revolvers, it turns out, resulted in my uncle’s first in a series of arrests and imprisonments.

No sooner had Tommy stuffed the Smith & Wesson revolvers into his riding pants, than someone reportedly notified the military dock attachment. An English army captain, ac-

accompanied by two regulars, showed up at my grandparent's cottage and carted Tommy off to Dublin Castle prison. I can only speculate about what became of my father's ill-timed gifts.

The Royal Irish Constabulary

Several references to the role of the Royal Irish Constabulary had me wondering about their role at the time. Composed of mostly Catholic members like the general population they oversaw, many were pulled in both directions—anti-Crown and pro-liberation. In the back of my head, I hear Father Sweetman castigating his RIC parishioners in an imaginary Sunday sermon. In the period covered in the manuscript, it is probable that a portion of the RIC were beginning to realize they were backing the wrong side in the fight.

My uncle had little respect for the RIC, it is true, as he found it easy to avoid their scrutiny. One of his stories has him and several League women visiting Mountjoy prison to comfort several Volunteers caught with Sinn Fein literature and handbooks. With the evidence left unguarded by a careless RIC jailer, one of the women secreted the material under her coat, thus allowing the prisoners at trial to go free for lack of evidence. Nor did the English army have much respect for the RIC either. Tommy tells of his first arrest in front of my grandmother and has the British captain apologizing with these words: *"I'm sorry missus. We've been sent here to do the dirty work of the RIC."*

At its high point in 1901, the RIC had 116 barracks (outposts) and 11,000 members. In January 1922, the force was disbanded and replaced by today's police structure—Garda (Guardians of Peace) in the Irish Republic and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) in the North.

In and Out of Prison

Tommy covers his prison years extensively in the manuscript, a period ranging from mid 1917 to late 1924. He spent

that time in a whistle stop of Irish prisons—Dublin Castle, Mountjoy, Crumlin Road, Wicklow, Portobello Barracks, Marlborough and Tintown Camp at the Curragh. That may or may not be a record for one prisoner, but it probably comes close. As a result, most of his early twenties were spent in and out of prisons, for periods as short as several weeks and as long as several years.

Dublin's Mountjoy, "The Joy" as it's called, is situated in the center of Dublin. It was built in 1850 and never intended to be anything other than a transit station for prisoners bound first for Spike Island and then Van Diemen's Land. Still in use today, it houses a little over five hundred inmates. Of his stay there Tommy writes:

We were expected to clean our cells and were allowed in the exercise yard one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening. We were made to walk round and round the yard and forbidden to speak to each other. But we managed to communicate in whispers without the guards knowing anything about it. To relieve the boredom we would stand on tables pushed up against the cell windows and give concerts. To applaud we'd rattle our tin plates against the bars.

When the crowding at Mountjoy became acute, some of the prisoners, including Tommy, were shipped to the Crumlin Road Gaol in Belfast. It was the first prison in Ireland to be built according to "The Separate System," intended to separate prisoners from each other with no communication between them. It stopped taking prisoners in 1996 and is being restored as a museum. What the authorities hadn't bargained for during this period was the effect of putting so many committed IRB and Sinn Fein troublemakers in one place.

While at the Crumlin Road jail in Belfast we met a lot of men who were regarded as famous in the Cause: Ernie Blight, Austin Stack, Finian Lynch, Jack O'Sheehan, Owen Duffy, Hogan and many others. Austin Stack was the [prisoners'] officer-in-charge. Soon we were joined by Terence McSweeney and a small group from Cork and Kerry. From Tralee, we had Dr. Crowley and

Shawn O'Shea. Tommy Hayes from Cork was, like myself, very young.

That litany of Irish patriots contained some heavyweights in the struggle. Dr. John Crowley was a medical doctor and like Austin Stack, a political figure from the time. Both opposed the 1921 accord and, while elected to the Irish Free State parliament, both refused to honor that body by taking their seats. Stack never regained his health after a forty-one day hunger strike in jail and died at the age of 48. Jack O'Sheehan was an Irish balladeer and a good friend to my uncle. O'Sheehan wrote the unofficial anthem of the IRA—"Soldiers of the Rear Guard"—and, with my uncle's help, published political tracts opposing the 1921 accord.

There were occasional flare-ups between the prisoners and the RIC guards. The manuscript recounts efforts to successfully hide certain prisoners, so they could not be tried and possibly executed. Fires were set every now and then, as much for warmth as disruption. In fact, the political prisoners did everything they could to confound their keepers.

While Tommy was at Crumlin Road in 1918, the influenza pandemic of 1918–1919 hit with full force. Only a handful of political prisoners, my uncle among them, and several warders, didn't come down with it. These few were inoculated and pressed into service taking care of the sick, including the prison warden. Tom writes that *"we were forced to help with the administration of the jail. We had to work 14 to 16 hours a day in the cook house, the stores, and help with the distribution of the food and medicines."*

The Civil War

As near as I can tell, Tommy left the Crumlin Road jail in late 1921 or early 1922, and moved for a time to work for the cause of Irish unity with Jack O'Sheehan in Glasgow, Scotland. It is at this time that the Articles of Agreement for a Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland established the Irish Free

State. The Treaty was opposed at the time by many members of the IRB and Sinn Fein and that internal disagreement over the Treaty led to the Irish Civil War (1922-23). My uncle writes movingly of that time:

Things weren't going well in Ireland. The Treaty had been signed and the Irish Free State established. But not everyone agreed with the situation. Those of us who were Republicans opposed the idea of partitioning Ireland. Things went from bad to worse and a Civil War began. It was a sad time. Friends became enemies; fathers warred against their sons, brothers against brothers. The shootings, murders, bombings—all that blood! Ireland was being torn apart. I decided to leave Glasgow and return home to Arklow.

A movie based on that time garnered critical acclaim for its portrayal of the Irish Civil War. If you would know whereof my uncle writes, you have only to watch *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (dir. Ken Loach, 2006).

Camptown Races

No sooner had he gotten back to his Emoclew cottage home from Scotland than the Irish Free State authorities issued a warrant for his arrest and confined him to the Tin Town Camp at the Curragh, the famous Irish racetrack. Irony is where you find it, and I find it ironic that they interned a “Furlong” at a sixteen “furlong” racecourse. (In a further irony of history, another racetrack, Santa Anita in California, was used to imprison Japanese-Americans at the outbreak of World War II.) Based on pictures of the place, the prison camp was a sprawling amalgam of buildings, reminiscent of an army installation but a prison nonetheless. My uncle found his time there uneventful, even reuniting with Sean Etchingham’s nephew, Dudley Butler. He was finally set free some time toward the end of 1924.

His remaining years were spent in various parts of Ireland, marrying and fathering two children, working at various

jobs, mostly on the German-engineered Shannon Scheme to electrify Ireland. He passed away in his 96th year, having lived just shy of a century.

Conclusion

I'm left with several unanswered questions after reading my uncle's manuscript. I wonder how my grandparents viewed his activities. My grandmother, I'm certain, was concerned for his safety, but she probably supported his activities on behalf of an Ireland free of the English yoke. It is commonly said that most Irish mothers dote on their sons. But what did my grandfather think of his activities? I wonder. I also wonder how my uncle survived imprisonment, how he managed to live so long a life, how he managed to do what he did with only one eye. Early on in his account, he tells of a childhood meeting with a carelessly stowed pitchfork. Since he was an avowed believer in a united Ireland, I wonder how he felt at the end of his life not to have seen all thirty two counties under one tri-colored flag.

At the end, Uncle Tommy, I'm left to wonder at and to celebrate your long life. From your manuscript I know you loved to sing, and so I sing you to your rest with these words from a song you knew well:

So, as I grew from boy to man,
I bent me to that bidding
My spirit of each selfish plan
And cruel passion ridding;
For, thus I hoped some day to aid,
Oh, can such hope be vain ?
When my dear country shall be made
A Nation once again!