

GREAT CELEBRATION FOR LEITRIM PEOPLE



Fr Gerry Comiskey former editor of the Leitrim Guardian sent us this report

THURSDAY THE 12th May 2016 was a day of great commemoration for Leitrim people who were proudly remembering the death of Sean MacDiarmada, one hundred years ago on that day. In the dark of night near one hundred men and women gathered at the gates of Kilmainham Jail for a candle light vigil. Most of them had travelled by bus from Kiltyclogher. Before they left Leitrim they had held a short prayer service at his birth place.

Sean MacDiarmada was born in 1883 in the townland of Corranmore near the village of Kiltyclogher in north Leitrim. He was a member of the Gaelic League, the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Irish Volunteers. He served in the GPO during the events of the Easter Rising in 1916. He was one of the seven to sign the Proclamation, which 'guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens', and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and all of its parts, cherishing all of the children of the nation equally.

Fighting during the Rising lasted a week and resulted in the deaths of over 250 civilians, 130 members of the British forces and over 60 insurgents. In an effort to prevent further bloodshed, Patrick Pearse

declared an unconditional surrender on 30 April.'

Soon after eight o'clock the sound of voices of those who were gathering could be heard in the forecourt of the Jail. Relatives arrived from New York, London, Leitrim, Galway, Donegal and perhaps several other places as well. The commemoration ceremony began at nine o'clock. The programme consisted of welcoming remarks by a military master of ceremonies. There were readings from the original trial documents of the executed Leitrim Leader. Minister Leo Varadkar gave a very powerful and well researched speech. There was a short reading and prayer recited by Father Sean Kelly, a Capuchin Friar from Ballinamore, now working in Raheny. The beautiful ceremony included laying of wreaths by the Minister, representatives of the relatives, a minute's silence, the Piper's Lament and the National Anthem.

Those who were able to be there in the Stone Breaker's Yard were all of the view that it was a great privilege to partake in the historic centenary event.

Minister Varadkar said:

"The night before he died, Sean MacDiarmada predicted that the cause of Irish freedom would triumph, because it had been rebaptised through the sacrifice of its leaders.

Today, one hundred years later, we gather here to commemorate that sacrifice. We remember the life and death of Sean MacDiarmada, and we celebrate his legacy – the cause of Irish freedom. We do so in the presence of his family, and with so many others who were inspired by his example.

After the 1916 Rising, Sean MacDiarmada was hailed by one volunteer as 'the mind of the revolution'. It was a fair description. He was a man of intellect and great organisational ability, who inspired people around him with his courage.

Kathleen Clarke, Tom Clarke's widow, described MacDiarmada as 'a wonderful organiser, full of charm and magnetism, and very handsome...a very loveable character and Tom's loyal and loved comrade'. The Bureau of Military History gives us many stirring accounts of Sean MacDiarmada as a person. One volunteer described him as 'a monarch among men', and remembered clearly 'the pink coloured scarf he was wearing, the burning eyes, so kindly, so unwavering'.

Born in Co Leitrim, Sean MacDiarmada came to believe passionately in the cause of Irish freedom. Affected by polio in 1911, he had a limp and walked with the aid of a walking stick. He travelled widely around the countryside – on

foot, by bicycle, and by motorcar – organising and planning for what became the 1916 Rising. He was one of the seven signatories of the 1916 Proclamation and he believed passionately in its vision of a better and fairer Ireland, an Ireland both free and independent.

After the rebellion he was arrested, and the authorities scrambled to find enough evidence to convict and execute him. He was a bit of a mystery to them – their files even refer to a ‘John MacDermott’. But he was convicted at his court martial and sentenced to death.

In the prison yard where we are now gathered, one of his fellow rebels tried to lighten the mood and joked: ‘They won’t waste a bullet on an old cripple like you’. But MacDiarmada replied that that he wasn’t afraid, and said it would be a privilege to die in the company of Clarke, Connolly, and the others. His calm courage made a huge impression.

Sean MacDiarmada inspired a new generation. When the rebel prisoners were released from internment, they continued to meet in groups. One group called itself ‘The Sean MacDermott Circle’ and was led by Michael Collins. In this centenary year he continues to inspire us.

Today we should also remember the loved ones he left behind. One of the last people to see him alive was the love of his life, Min Ryan. In his final days, he said he would have married Min if he had lived. She left a heart-breaking description of visiting him in the prison cell,

‘with a smile on his face that seemed to transcend this brutal place’. They talked of the past, joking and laughing as if they were enjoying a coffee in Bewley’s.

A few hours later, at 3.45 am on this date one hundred years ago, he was taken out and shot by firing squad.

Min Ryan later married Richard Mulcahy, who went on to become leader of Fine Gael. Her brother, James Ryan, was a very close friend of MacDiarmada, and acted for him on many missions, serving alongside him in the GPO. He was a leading political figure in the new Irish state, and in 1947 was appointed the first ever Minister for Social Welfare.

Alongside Sean MacDiarmada, James Ryan is another inspiration to me as I begin my new role. I have been studying policy reports from The Collins Institute on social welfare reform, based on research which ‘crosses ideological boundaries’, and I believe we need some new thinking and a new approach if we are to solve the challenges of the present.

Capuchin friars from Church Street attended MacDiarmada and the other rebel leaders in their final hours in Kilmainham Jail. It’s only appropriate that a member of the Capuchin Order has been invited to read from the memoirs of one of his predecessors about Sean MacDiarmada’s last moments.

But I want like to conclude with one last thought. In his final letter to his brothers and sisters, Sean MacDiarmada reminded them that he died so

that the Irish nation might live. It is up to us to live up to his legacy.”

At 6.30p.m. a Mass was celebrated in the Church at Arbour Hill for the repose of the souls of Sean MacDiarmada and Tom Clarke, whose father was a native of Carrigallen. It was organised by the Leitrim Association in Dublin. MacDiarmada and Clarke are buried in the grounds of Arbour Hill. The main celebrant and preacher was Father Tom Colreavey. The concelebrants were Father Gerry Comiskey, a native of Newtownmanor and former editor of the *Leitrim Guardian* and Father Ultan McGoohan, a native of Carrigallen.

Later that evening, there was a presentation of a suite of music in honour of the heroes of 1916 in the Pro-Cathedral. It is called *Áille na hÁille/A Terrible Beauty*. The composer is Dr Charlie Lennon, whose is a native of Rossinver. Extracts of accounts from priests who ministered in the streets of Dublin to the injured and dying and to those who were executed in 1916 were read. There was a new composition by a traditional group called ‘MacDiarmada’s Dream’ and a very beautiful reading of an extract from ‘A Terrible Beauty is Born’ by W B Yeats. It was a joy to behold and those who were in attendance were delighted to hear that the composition is available on CD.

There are high hopes that the concert will be performed elsewhere in Ireland and in all probability in America.