

KILTYCLOGHER HERITAGE CENTRE AN OPEN INVITATION

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Kiltyclogher Heritage Centre opened its doors to the public in June of this year during the annual Seán MacDiarmada Summer School. It is situated in an iconic building, built in 1831 by the local landlord, Charles Henry Tottenham. His heraldic shield, bearing the image of a lion, stands above the impressive double archways, which form the entrances. I like to playfully remind visitors and school groups that the Lion is not Aslan from C.S Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia. Strangely enough C.S Lewis did stay in Rossinver during a visit to Ireland. I like to think that he perhaps looked on the Tottenham lion with as much admiration as our visitors do. The sandstone blocks from which the Centre is built were quarried in the nearby townland of Killea, near Thur Mountain. This eye-catching building served as a courthouse,



■ Monument to
SEAN MACDIARMADA
by sculptor,
Albert Power.



■ **Seán MacDiarmada** market house and, in recent years, a crèche. After the crèche closed the building lay unused for a number of years until Kiltyclogher Community Council had a series of creative conversations with Leitrim County Council. The services of a consultant were engaged and a plan for the Centre's content and look began to emerge.

The result of this was the renovation of this beautiful, unused



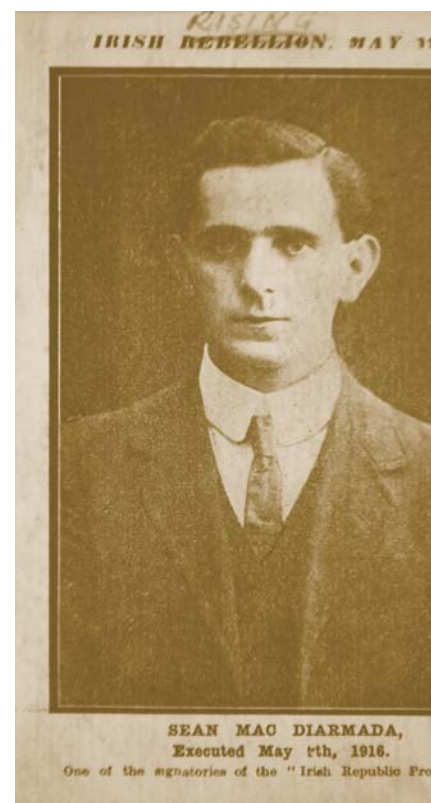
■ Musician Ben Lennon and Martin Connolly

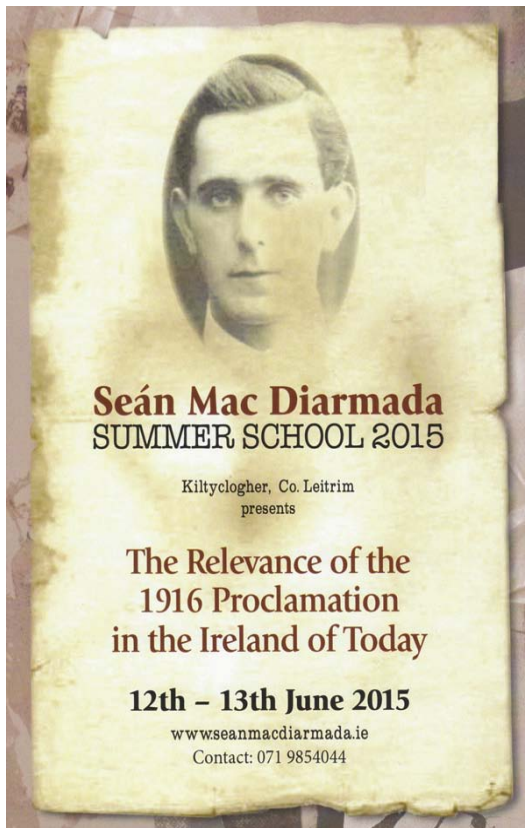
building as an Interpretive Centre, telling the story of the village, its history and surroundings. This was funded by Peace III through the European Regional Development fund which was administered through Leitrim County Council. Renovations began and under the watchful gaze of a conservation architect, the interior was lime-rendered, painted and transformed. Visitors passing through the doors today are met by a bright, spacious, zen-like space. Interpretive panels adorn the walls telling the story of Kiltyclogher and its people from famine times to the 'Troubles', a period which was to tragically change the character of the village forever. The one story that

dominates all others is that of the revolutionary and signatory of the 1916 Proclamation of Independence, Seán MacDiarmada who was born nearby.

It's ironic that I should find myself working as a tour guide in Kiltyclogher. When I lived in Dublin my flat was down the street from Kilmainham Gaol where Seán MacDiarmada was executed. I also grew up in Belfast on the Falls Rd, not far from a GAA club that bears his name, close to St Paul's church, Clonard Monastery and the Grosvenor Road, an area that MacDiarmada would have known well and in which gave his first public address. Born in

1969, during the 'Troubles', I can also relate well to what the people and village of Kiltyclogher experienced during those times.





As I open the Heritage Centre each day I never tire of looking at the Seán MacDiarmada monument, which stands at the heart of Kiltyclogher. The statue

was carved by Albert Power, a man considered to be one of the most eminent sculptors of the day, and was unveiled in 1942 on the anniversary of MacDiarmada's execution. The monument is loaded with symbolism. The figure is clothed in a smart suit that he can be seen wearing in some of the existing photos of MacDiarmada. In life he was a distinctive figure, very handsome with sallow skin and chiselled features. The wall

against which he stands represents the wall of Kilmainham Gaol where he was executed by firing squad on May 12th 1916. He appears almost resigned and

unruffled by his fate. In one of his final letters before his death he refers to his pending execution as 'part of the day's work'. Some joke that the statue is positioned with its back to Northern Ireland. I don't think that's true. I think he's actually looking out onto the road, which leads to his family home out in Corranmore. The monument is carved from crystallised limestone, which is common in Leitrim. In Irish Leitrim, or Liatroma, means 'the grey ridge'. This for me is an interesting point. It's as if MacDiarmada is carved from the fabric of Leitrim itself. Usually eclipsed by Pearse or Connolly, his role in the Rising has been re-evaluated and MacDiarmada has been dubbed 'The Mind Of The Revolution', one of the driving forces of the 1916 rebellion. The source of that drive came from Leitrim. He was a man formed out of a county that endured famine, evictions, poverty, political struggle and upheaval.

As part of my job I offer guided tours to the family cottage where Seán MacDiarmada was born and raised to tell his story. The cottage is located in Corranmore, a few kilometres outside the village and has been maintained in its original condi-

■ Kiltyclogher man Jim Dillon (centre) with two MacDiarmada relations



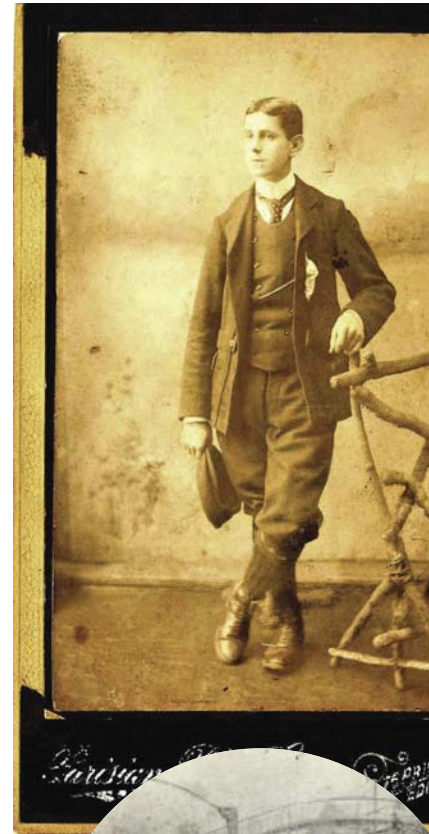


■ Local councillors, Philip Rooney, Felim Gurn and Sean MacDermott in the MacDiarmada house.

tion as a National Monument by the OPW since 1965. The homestead consists of three buildings: the cottage, the dairy and the byre, and commands an spectacular view across the valley. The cottage itself is impressive and incredibly atmospheric. To open the door and cross the threshold is to step back in time, to an age where people who struggled to survive, were tough and resourceful. Opening the door is my favourite part of the tour. I enjoy watching the visitors' reactions of surprise and delight as they step inside.

It's also very entertaining to watch the expressions of horror from schoolchildren raised in the Celtic Tiger era when they learn that there's no cosy bathroom with a toilet!

Admission to the Heritage Centre and tours of the MacDiarmada house are free. The Centre is open Thursday-Saturday 10am-4pm. Tour numbers to the interior of the MacDiarmada house are restricted to groups of ten people and the last tour is at 3pm. Prior booking is therefore recommended. Visitors are responsible for their own transportation to the MacDiarmada house and the house is not wheelchair accessible. Both the cottage and the



Heritage Centre can be viewed at the following link:
<http://www.irishtv.ie/leitrim-matters-46>

Consider yourself invited. I look forward to welcoming you there.

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