

ON THE BRINK

The Politics of Conflict 1914-1916 Project

FOCUS STORIES

1916: EASTER RISING & BATTLE OF THE SOMME

Easter Rising

Before the War, the most pressing item on the Westminster agenda was that of the governance of Ireland. Those in favour of Home Rule and those against had formed into two opposing militias and the country was on the brink of civil war. By 1916, the majority of both sides were in British Army uniform fighting for the Allies. The Irish Home Rule Bill had been passed but suspended for the duration of the War. However, there were those who believed that Ireland should not support the War and that Home Rule was not enough. They held that Ireland should be a self-governed independent nation.

Around noon on Easter Monday, 24th April 1916, over 1,000 republicans, members of the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Citizen Army (ICA) and Cumann na mBan, seized several key sites in Dublin. These included the General Post Office, the Four Courts, Jacob's Biscuit Factory, Boland's Mill, the South Dublin Union, St Stephen's Green and the College of Surgeons. The rebel headquarters was the General Post Office. It was here that James Connolly, overall military commander, and other members of the Military Council; Patrick Pearse, Tom Clarke, Sean Mac Dermott and Joseph Plunkett were based. It was on its steps that Pearse read the Proclamation of the Irish Republic.

In response, Lord Wimbourne, the Lord Lieutenant, declared martial law throughout Ireland. With vastly superior numbers and the use of heavy artillery, which devastated much of central Dublin, the British Army shelled the rebels into surrender on Saturday 29th April. The leaders of the rebellion were tried under martial law and rapidly executed. Many more were interned in Britain.

During the Rising, there was little support from the Irish people but nationalist opinion soon shifted. The executed leaders were hailed as martyrs whose protest in arms inspired widespread nationalist demands for an Irish Republic.

Evidently, the Easter Rising did not happen locally but people from the local area may have been involved in a number of ways either as rebels belonging to the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Citizen Army or Cumann na mBan; or as members of the British army and the Royal Irish Constabulary involved in ending the armed rebellion. There is also the possibility that local people were simply civilians present in Dublin when the rebellion broke out.

ON THE BRINK

The Politics of Conflict 1914-1916 Project

FOCUS STORIES

1916: EASTER RISING & BATTLE OF THE SOMME

Cathal O' Shannon

Cathal O' Shannon was born in Drumsough, Randalstown, in June 1889. His mother was Eilís McLarnon and Charles, his father, was a train driver and a staunch Parnellite. The family moved to Draperstown when Cathal was a young boy. Here he learned some initial Irish from a local schoolteacher. While attending St. Columb's College, Co. Derry, he attended classes with a native Irish speaker living in Ballinascreen, Draperstown. He then sat his Irish examinations at school and published essays in Irish nationalist publications, including the Irish Peasant, writing under the pseudonym 'Sean Athair'.

In 1909, he took a clerical post with Heysham Shipping Company, Belfast and after joined the Gaelic League and the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). He helped to found the Belfast branch of Na Fianna Éireann, a semi-militant, nationalist Boy Scout organisation being set up across Ireland. He was co-founder of the Socialist Party of Ireland, whose leader, James Connolly, asked him to join the staff of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union in Belfast.

In 1913, O' Shannon helped to establish the Belfast Battalion of the Irish Volunteers. He sat on its Civil Committee, with others, including IRB leader, Bulmer Hobson, who was Committee Chairman. They were responsible for directing the policy of the Volunteers; fundraising, obtaining training facilities and procuring arms and other equipment.

On Easter 1916, the Rising began. It was planned that the Belfast, Tyrone and Monaghan Volunteers would meet in Dungannon and then make their way to Connaught, linking up with Volunteers there to participate in the rebellion. On Easter Saturday, O' Shannon, with a large contingent of Irish Volunteers and some members of Cumann na mBan, headed off to Coalisland. However, the following day they found the Tyrone Volunteers were unwilling to move. MacNeill's countermand had caused utter confusion in regard to their orders. The women headed on to Dublin and the men dispersed. Once back in Belfast, O' Shannon headed for North Dublin where he intended to join the fighting but was too late. He returned to Belfast and was arrested by British Army Officers. He was initially interned in Dublin's Mountjoy Prison and Richmond Barracks and was then sent to Frongoch Jail in North Wales and later to Reading Jail in England.

After the Rising, O'Shannon was released under the Amnesty of 1917. He was elected to Dáil Éireann as a Labour TD in 1922 but lost his seat at the following election. He remained an active socialist and trade unionist until his death in 1969.



Photograph of O' Shannon (left) coming off hunger strike at the Mater Hospital, Dublin, 4th May 1919. He is being visited by Father Augustine Hayden of the Capuchin Order of Friars.
©RTE Stills Library (0507/010)

ON THE BRINK

The Politics of Conflict 1914-1916 Project

FOCUS STORIES

1916: EASTER RISING & BATTLE OF THE SOMME

Fredrick Robert Franklin

'Experiences in Dublin during the Sinn Fein Rising'

A schoolboy witness from Coleraine Academical Institution, 1916

'Sackville Street, one of the finest streets in Europe, was a mass of smoking ruins. Nelson's Pillar stood alone in the midst of a scene of devastation ... The Post Office, banks, hotels and shops in that great thoroughfare shared a common fate. Hundreds were killed and wounded, and thousands reduced to destitution and want.'

Fredrick Robert Franklin from Dublin, was a boarding pupil at Coleraine Academical Institution. He was home for holidays in Dublin during the Easter Rising, writing an article for the school magazine on his return, *'Experiences in Dublin during the Sinn Fein Rising'*.

'Many stray bullets found their billets in our neighbourhood, fired, doubtless, by the rebels who were holding Northumberland Road in great strength. At night I took great care to pull my bed into the corner of the room, which I concluded was safer than immediately in front of the window ... People were wandering around with long faces telling each other that there was a battle raging in Belfast, that Cork was in flames, and that fighting was going on all over the country. One dear old lady produced the interesting statement that the Sinn Feiners had turned the gas into the Liffey, and all the fish were dead! A lady who lived in the neighbourhood wrote down all the stories in a book, which she called her "Book of Lies" ... On Saturday the rumour that the rebels had surrendered caused a thrill of joy and excitement everywhere.'

To travel in and out of the city required a pass. Franklin was unable to get a pass but still managed to board a train back to school in Coleraine.

'as we moved slowly out of Dublin my principal emotion was joy at getting out of it, though I would have been sorry to have missed the excitement.'

Franklin was awarded the Clothworkers' Scholarship in 1916. In October 1916 he entered Trinity College, Dublin, and subsequently joined the Officer Training Corps. Franklin got a commission in Royal Irish Rifles in September 1917, and was killed in action in France on 9th December 1917, aged 19.



Fredrick Robert Franklin
Courtesy of Coleraine Academical Institution Museum

ON THE BRINK

The Politics of Conflict 1914-1916 Project

FOCUS STORIES

1916: EASTER RISING & BATTLE OF THE SOMME

Battle of the Somme

The Somme Offensive was conceived as the 'Big Push' that would get the Germans out of the trenches, break their lines and open the road to Berlin. The plan was for heavy artillery bombardment to decimate the enemy ranks and shellshock the few survivors into surrender.

On 24th June 1916, 1,537 artillery pieces began bombardment on a 20 mile front of the German lines. It continued until 7.30 on the morning of 1st July. However, the Germans were dug in much deeper than the Allies thought. A series of strong points, with bunkers up to 12 metres deep had been constructed which most of the British guns did not have the power to penetrate. Due to faulty fuses, 30% of the 1.7 million shells did not explode. Worse still, many of the Allied shells fell short of target into the British lines.

At 7.10am, the first wave of the 36th (Ulster) Division entered 'no man's land'. No other British unit went 'over the top' until the barrage had finished. Their objective was to capture all German trenches and fortifications between Beaucourt and Thiepval. Unlike other divisions, which advanced in lines, the 36th moved forward in small groups, widening the breaks in barbed wire made by the shelling. Under heavy German machine-gun fire and short-falling Allied shells, they achieved all their objectives.

This included the capture of the Schwaben Redoubt, a heavily defended earthwork fort. However, due to the failure of the flanking divisions to make progress, the Ulstermen had to abandon the hard-won ground that they had gained. Their casualties amounted to 5,500, of whom almost 2,000 were dead. Almost every community in Ulster had cause to mourn.

ON THE BRINK

The Politics of Conflict 1914-1916 Project

FOCUS STORIES

1916: EASTER RISING & BATTLE OF THE SOMME

Rifleman Robert Quigg

Robert Quigg worked as a labourer on the Macnaghten estate. At that time, Sir Harry Macnaghten was heir to Dundarave estate, Bushmills. When World War One broke out, both men joined up and were attached to the 12th Royal Irish Rifles. Sir Harry was Platoon Commander and Quigg was appointed his 'batman', or servant. A local story states that Lady Macnaghten, Harry's mother, told Quigg not to come back from the War without her son.

On 1st July 1916 - the first day of the Battle of the Somme - both men 'went over the top'. A survivor recalls that Harry was killed within minutes. Quigg, though involved in the heaviest of fighting, survived. The next day, Quigg heard that Harry was still alive and he 'went over the top' again to find him.

'... he went out seven times to look for him, under heavy shell and machine-gun fire, each time bringing back a wounded man. The last man he dragged on a waterproof sheet from within yards of the enemy's wire. He was seven hours engaged in this most gallant work, and was finally so exhausted that he had to give it up.

Extract from Robert Quigg's medal citation

Sir Harry was never found and his title passed to his brother, Arthur Douglas, who was killed in action September 1916, also at the Battle of the Somme. Robert Quigg received a Victoria Cross for his bravery, awarded to him by King George V on 7th January, 1917. Quigg retired from the Army in 1926 after an accident. He died in May 1955 and was buried with full military honour at Billy Parish Church.



Robert Quigg
Courtesy of Robert Thompson

ON THE BRINK

The Politics of Conflict 1914-1916 Project

FOCUS STORIES

1916: EASTER RISING & BATTLE OF THE SOMME

Robert Bill

Robert Bill was raised in Ballyvoy, Doagh, Ballyclare, by parents Frank and Mary. In December 1909, aged 24, he married Mary McClure. Robert worked in The North of Ireland Paper Mill, Ballyclare. His wife was a housekeeper at Cogry Mill House, for the McMeekan family, who owned the local linen mill.

When war broke out, Bill enlisted in the 11th Battalion Royal Irish Rifles (South Antrim Volunteers) attached to 108th Brigade of the 36th (Ulster) Division. During the first week of October 1915, he travelled with his battalion to France, landing near Boulogne. On 13th June 1916, Bill wrote to his wife, Mary, hoping that the wether would take up so that the farmers will get on with their crops. He also noted a brooch he had sent to her and expressed satisfaction in having been to church on Sunday. Some days later, on 25th June, he was killed at the Somme, aged 32.

The day after Bill's death, Rev J G Paton, Presbyterian Chaplain to Bill's battalion, wrote to Mary extending his sympathy and that of Bill's comrades. Rev Paton wrote:

'he was killed instantaneously yesterday morning & passed away without any pain. Your Husband was buried yesterday on a hillside among beautiful trees overlooking a river which flows peacefully along in spite of the noise & terror.'

On 14th August 1916, Captain E F Smyth wrote to Mary apologising for the delay in writing owing to all the A Coy Officers being wounded, however he did offer some detail on the circumstances surrounding Bill's death:

'He was killed outright on June 25th by a German shell, while we were waiting in our trenches during the bombardment which lasted for 7 days before our attack on 1st July and was buried in Thiepval Wood that afternoon by the Parson attached to us.'

Shortly after his death, his wife gave birth to his only child; a little girl.

Rifleman Robert Bill is one of 92 names commemorated on Ballyclare War Memorial. He is also remembered on Thiepval Memorial and Kilbride Parish Church Roll of Honour.



Studio photograph of newlyweds Robert Bill and his wife Mary
Courtesy of Leith Burgess