

THE SORROWS OF MAY

by Mike McCormack, NY State Historian

The month of May is a special month in the roster of Ireland's heroes. It was in that month, in 1916, that some of Ireland's greatest patriots were murdered by a British firing squad. They had come together in a dream; a dream eloquently articulated by Padraic Pearse; skillfully organized by Tom Clarke; expertly planned by Joseph Mary Plunkett and Thomas McDonagh; brilliantly guided by James Connolly; and courageously executed by Sean McDermott, Ed Daly, Micheal O'Hanrahan, Willie Pearse, John MacBride, Michael Mallin, Eamonn Ceannt, Con Colbert, Sean Heuston, Eamon deValera and the men under their commands. The dream was for an independent Ireland and Pearse passionately wrote of that dream in his poem, **The Fool**:

*The Lawyers have sat in Council, the men with the keen long faces,
and said This man is a fool, and others have said he blasphemeth;
and the wise have pitied the fool who strove to give a life to a dream
that was dreamed in the heart and that only the heart can hold.*

*O Wise Men, riddle me this: What if the dream come true,
What if the dream come true and millions unborn shall dwell
in the house that I shaped in my heart?*

To bring that dream to reality, brave men joined the Irish Volunteers, The Citizens' Army, The Hibernian Rifles, Fianna Éireann, the Foresters, and equally brave ladies joined Cumann na mBan. Following the formation of the Provisional Government, as outlined in the Proclamation, these organizations formally became known as Óglaigh na Éireann, (the Irish Republican Army), under the command of James Connolly. The organization mustered into five commands: the 1st battalion under Commandant Ned Daly, the 2nd battalion under Commandant Thomas MacDonagh, the 3rd battalion under Commandant Éamon de Valera and the 4th battalion under Commandant Éamonn Ceannt. The 5th command was a joint force of Volunteers, Irish Citizen Army and ladies of Cumann na mBan under the command of Commandant James Connolly as part of the headquarters command which, in addition to Connolly, included four other members of the Military Council: Patrick Pearse, President and Commander-in-Chief, Tom Clarke, Seán MacDermott and Joseph Mary Plunkett.

Last minute misfortunes upset the timetable of the Rising and after 7 days of fighting it became evident that the British had successfully isolated communications from Dublin and nationwide support would not materialize. After British Army casualties of 116 dead and 368 wounded; Police casualties of 16 dead and 29 wounded; and civilian casualties of 318 dead and 2,217 wounded, Pearse, seeing no hope of success, decided to surrender to stop the bloodshed. The Volunteers and Irish Citizen Army recorded 64 killed in action.

The British ordered the arrest of all who had supported the movement even if they were not in the Dublin rising. A total of 3,430 men and 79 women were arrested and General Maxwell, in secret Court Martial sentenced more than 100 to be executed. One attempt to arrest members of the nationalist Kent family in County Cork on 2 May led to a Constable being shot dead in a gun battle. Thomas Kent was arrested and became the only rebel leader outside of Dublin to be executed for his role in the dream.

The Sorrows of May began on May 3 with the murder of Padraic Pearse, Clarke and McDonagh. On May 4, Daly, Willie Pearse, O'Hanrahan, and Plunkett were shot and May 5 saw the killing of Maj. John MacBride. Since May 6 and 7 were a Saturday and Sunday, the Brits gave their executioners the weekend off. On Monday, May 8 the slaughter commenced again with the homicides of Mallin, Ceannt, Colbert, and Heuston. Then, on May 9, Thomas Kent was slain at Cork Detention Barracks. A manuscript recently found in the Capuchin Archives in Church Street, Dublin revealed just how uncaring the executions were. Father Columbus Murphy, a Capuchin priest, was called on to help administer to the prisoners prior to their execution. He and Fathers Augustine, Albert, and Sebastian OFM Cap were allowed only a short time to exercise their ministry. He described the whole process as callously informal. *The governor said a name and gave a signal. The prisoner's hands were then tied behind his back, and a bandage placed over his eyes. Two soldiers, one on either side, guided the prisoner, and the priest went in front. When the prisoner reached the outer door another soldier pinned a piece of white paper over his heart. The procession went along one yard, then through a gate leading to the stonebreaker's yard. Here the firing squad of 12 soldiers was waiting, rifles loaded. An officer stood to the left; on the right were the governor and the doctor. The prisoner was led to the front wall and was turned to face the firing-squad. The two soldiers guiding him withdrew quickly to one side. There was a silent*

signal from the officer; then a deafening volley. The prisoner fell in a heap on the ground - dead. After the executions the friars were driven back to the friary where they celebrated Mass for the repose of the souls of the executed men. The public were horrified at the slaughter.

In the House of Commons, John Dillon, Irish Parliamentary Party MP, demanded an end to the killing. He intervened with Lloyd George to halt the 97 remaining sentences of execution pronounced by General Maxwell during court-martial without defense council nor jury. Dillon insisted that if they continued they would fill the whole country with rebels. He declared in the House that the rebels were wrong, but had fought a clean fight. His intervention resulted in Prime Minister Asquith sending a telegram to Maxwell to halt the executions until he arrived on May 12 to investigate for himself. On the morning of May 12, Maxwell defied the order and had Sean MacDermott brought to the Stonebreaker's Yard at Kilmainham and shot. Then he ordered the wounded James Connolly brought from hospital; his ankle, shattered by a bullet during the rising, had gangrened from a lack of treatment. He was carried, in great pain, into the yard on a stretcher, placed on a chair against the back wall, nearest the entry gate, and propped up to receive the bullets for sharing a dream. When Asquith arrived, he commuted the remaining death sentences to terms of imprisonment, but it was too late; the fuse had been lit.

Following the Rising, the manner in which the trials and executions were carried out in secret, changed public opinion to sympathy for the rebels. The self-sacrifice of the leaders for the dream of a free Ireland, the bravery of the rank-and-file and the nauseating manner in which Connolly had been killed at last moved even the most liberal among the public to intense anti-British sentiment. Meanwhile, the 3,000 'rebels' who had been picked up in the military sweep ordered by Maxwell, had been deported to Britain and held in prisons and internment camps which served as virtual academies of sedition. When the government realized they could not afford to house and feed all those interned, they declared a general amnesty secure in the belief that the Irish had once again been duly spanked into submission. On their return home, the Irishmen immediately set about building an army of opposition; it was called the Irish Republican Army and it would eventually fight the Brits to the treaty table after a brutal War of Independence. The leaders may have died, but the dream did not. And true to Pearse's words, millions have dwelt in the house that he shaped in his heart in spite of the fact that the landlord still holds a small piece of the property!

