

KEVIN BARRY

by Mike McCormack

Dublin in 1920 was a tense city. Searches, shootings, and ambushes were a daily occurrence as the Irish people showed their disdain for England's new police force - the Black and Tans. This force had recently been recruited from the English military returning from the Great War, expressly to keep the Irish in check after the Easter Rising of 1916. Since military personnel are not trained in civilian policing tactics and treat any opponent as the enemy, they operated so with a significant amount of brutality.

It was therefore, not unusual that the British lorry which arrived at Monk's bakery in Upper Church Street at 11:30 AM on September 20, was heavily guarded by armed members of the Second Battalion of the Duke of Wellington's Regiment. As the soldiers loaded supplies to transport to Collinstown Camp, a voice from the street called, *Drop your rifles and put up your hands*. It was a group of Irish Volunteers. The Volunteers had been reorganized after the 1916 Rising to continue the fight for Ireland's independence by opposing the British presence in Ireland. Suddenly, one of the soldiers fired, then a fusillade erupted as Volunteers and soldiers duelled with revolvers and rifles. When it was over, one soldier was killed and four wounded, and the Volunteers had fled. The British spotted a young man hiding under their lorry and pulled him out. They threw him into the back with their wounded and sped off. An official statement later that day from British HQ stated that, *One of the aggressors had been arrested*.

The aggressor, as it turned out, was an 18-year old medical student named Kevin Barry. Kevin had joined the Irish Volunteers when he was only 15. His job was to cycle to various parts of the city delivering orders and communications between officers of the movement. As a precaution against written messages being intercepted, most of the communications had been verbal and Kevin had an intimate knowledge of the movement, its members and leading figures. Kevin was from a nationalist family; his mother was a Dowling from northeast Carlow, where the Barrys and the Dowlings had done their part in 1798. Kevin's older brother Mick was Officer in Charge of the Volunteers in Toombeagh, Co Carlow, and his sister Shiela was in Cumann na mBan – the IRA Ladies Auxiliary. The British knew of Barry's position as courier for the movement and knew that they had a prize catch.

The questioning and physical persuasion began in earnest: *Who were his companions? Name the officers of the Volunteers? . . . Where was their Headquarters?* Kevin steadfastly refused to betray the independence movement. He was offered amnesty and freedom, yet he refused. He was tortured for days on end, and still he refused. The British had never seen such determination in one so young. His mother visited him, and reported that his arm was in a sling as a result of the beatings and mistreatment he received, yet Kevin did not give in. Finally, under the misnamed 'Restoration of Order Act', Kevin was charged with murder. At a secret Courts Martial, he was convicted and sentenced to death by hanging.

A reprieve movement began, and focused world-wide attention on the injustice of British rule in Ireland. Terence MacSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork, had only recently died in Brixton Prison, after a 74-day hunger strike, and was laid to rest on the eve of Barry's proposed execution. This intensified the pressure on England to release the young student, but still no repeal.

Late at night, Kevin was taken to see the scaffold that would end his life the following morning. With incredible cruelty and mental coercion, he was promised a full pardon, his tuition paid at any Medical school in the world, and a pension of 2,000 Pounds Sterling a year for life if he would only reveal the names of his officers and comrades. Kevin, visibly shaken, listened to the officer in silence, then glanced up at the beam from which hung the noose that would end his life and said, *Yes, I think that should bear my weight*.

On November 1, at 8 AM, his hands pinioned behind him with leather straps, the slender young 18-year old boy was led to the gallows at Mountjoy Jail where his short life was ended. Later, Father Albert, one of Kevin's

last visitors, reported that Kevin's final message to Ireland and his comrades in arms, was, *Hold on, and stick to the Republic.*

Kevin Barry's life was over, but his influence had just begun. His name became a symbol and a slogan; a hymn to freedom and to unconquerable youth.

Photos by Kevin Barry relative, Tom McNabb

Barry Home, Rathville, Co. Wicklow



Rare Photo of Kevin Barry from Barry Home

