

Easter Monday 2016

Wreath Laying Commemoration

The Four Courts

Remarks by

The Hon. Mrs. Justice Susan Denham,

Chief Justice of Ireland

Minister, Relatives of the 1st Battalion,

Welcome to this Quadrangle of the Four Courts.

The Four Courts, which is the centre of the administration of justice in Ireland.

Each day, when a court sits, the national flag is raised here: a symbol of our nationhood and independence.

We are privileged to be at this historic building today, commemorating events of one hundred years ago. We stand in the shadows of many brave men and women who fought here. They sought, as so many had before, freedom for Ireland.

In this place of justice today, we see a physical manifestation of the consequence of the events which took place in the 20th century – sparked off by the Rising of 1916, and the executions.

Here, we have the courtroom of the Supreme Court of Ireland – the interpreter and protector of the Constitution of a sovereign, independent and democratic State. In 1916, it was the House of Lords in London, which heard ultimate court appeals.

One hundred years ago, on Easter Monday, this place was a major centre of that push for freedom: a centre of rebellion.

The Four Courts Garrison had spread out across the area from here to the Phibsboro area, taking and holding vital access routes into the city. The gates you walked through today were barricaded with furniture and books, which were passed out through the windows.

The single policeman at the time was relieved of his keys, and the caretaker was permitted to leave.

These buildings were held as a vitally strategic position, to cut off reinforcements coming from the west. The 1st Battalion commenced the week at a strength of only 130, out of a Battalion of usually 400. "C" Company of the First Battalion, under the command of Captain Frank Fahy and Lieutenant Joseph McGuinness, occupied the Four Courts. It is a testament to the military prowess and dedication of the local people and Volunteers who created the Four Courts Garrison, that they held out in this area for so long.

People such as Ned Daly; Charles Bevan, Liam Tobin, Nurse Elizabeth O'Farrell, Liam O'Carroll and many others, all played important roles throughout the week.

Today, across the city, we are marking many aspects of the Rising.

- the effect on children;
- the causes of the conflict;
- its outcome; and
- the various views on what the Rising meant, and why many were not involved.

Here, in this Quadrangle, we focus on the military aspect of the rebellion, and the bravery and loss of our local heroes.

The military operation, the Rising of 1916, was the first rebellion in Ireland in the 20th Century. It was also the first which was essentially urban warfare – fighting from house to house causing mayhem where people lived, worked, studied and played. We now see this type of urban warfare every night on television, in coverage of wars elsewhere.

From the East Wing of this building, a group of British soldiers in the Medical Mission on Chancery Place were held at bay for most of the week - despite bombardment from a heavy gun across the river.

Hand to hand fighting at the cross roads at North King street was some of the fiercest in the city.

Stories of capture and escape permeate local recollections of these events. What struck me in reminding myself of this historic event was the care shown by the volunteers to those captured from the enemy force. Not only did the Volunteers treat them humanely here in the Four Courts, but the lives of many were saved by the Volunteers when a water mains burst and those in the cells of the Bridewell were about to drown.

Bravery must extend to doing the right thing - to being humane. Our Four Courts Volunteers certainly showed that bravery, not just in fighting, but in respect for those they overcame.

The hospital here in the Four Courts cared for injured Volunteers and captured soldiers, up to and following the surrender, until medical supplies were exhausted.

The surrender was not welcomed by the Volunteers here as described by Ruán O'Donnell:-

“Commandant Daly addressed us, and stated that orders had been received from General Pearse that we were to lay down our arms and surrender unconditionally. This was a cause of an outburst amongst the men and some of the officers who replied that they would fight on sooner than surrender ...

Daly, however, sympathised with them and stated that personally he would prefer to fight on under these conditions, but the orders from General Pearse were definite and had to be obeyed ... The Four Courts was gradually being surrounded by strong military forces and the final surrender occurred about 7 p.m.”¹

¹ Ruán O'Donnell, *16 Lives: Patrick Pearse* (The O'Brien Press, 2016) at 263-264.

Commandant Ned Daly put himself forward as their leader, thus ensuring a trial and, perhaps, death. He was amongst 1,000 prisoners taken in Dublin.

There is no doubt that the conduct of the ensuing military trials, deportations and executions created an atmosphere of revulsion and rebellion. The sacrifice of the Volunteers raised a spirit of defiance, and was a catalyst to change in Ireland.

The Proclamation of the Irish Republic was addressed to Irishmen and Irishwomen. The Rising, and the nation building which followed, owes much to the role played by women. Our recollections throughout this day include that often forgotten role of the 276 women recorded as having played an active part in the Rising. We also remember the 40 children who died that week and, of course, the civilians - who died as collateral to the fighting - or who were singled out and slain for no good reason. Close to us here, 15 men were killed in what was simply a massacre.

Patriotic Irishmen and Irishwomen in 1916 found themselves in the British Army, in the Volunteers, in the IRB, the Citizens Army, or none. Often it was happenstance which brought them where they were.

It was Francis Ledwidge (then in the British Army) who wrote of Thomas MacDonagh (a leader in the Rising) in his “Lament for Thomas MacDonagh” words which recall all of the fallen:-

“He shall not hear the bitter cry
In the wild sky, where he is lain,
Nor voices of the sweeter birds,
Above the wailing of the rain”²

Whichever side people took, or none, in 1916, it is clear that it, and the executions which followed, acted as a catalyst for change here, and indeed throughout the British Empire.

Within these Halls of Justice, and without, across the city, people made great sacrifices of self, family, and future, for Ireland. It is right that we remember and commemorate them.

²Padraic Colum, *Anthology of Irish Verse* (Horace and Liverlight, 1922).