

Death and the Irish

'A cause worth dying for: the last letters of Pearse, MacDonagh and Clarke'

The most significant consequence of the 1916 Rising was the transformation of public feeling occasioned by fifteen executions and the crude application of internment and martial law. As the Rising was doomed to military failure, its leaders knew that they would face the supreme penalty. On the afternoon of 2 May a court martial tried and found guilty Prisoners 1, 30 and 31: Patrick Pearse, a schoolmaster; Thomas MacDonagh, an assistant lecturer in English at UCD; and Thomas Clarke, a shopkeeper. They were the first to face execution the following morning. From his prison cell in Kilmainham Gaol, MacDonagh wrote a touching last letter to his wife and children; Pearse wrote to his beloved mother and Clarke produced a message for the Irish people which he entrusted to his wife, Kathleen. Impending death was at the heart of these final testaments which balanced the roles of political martyr with that of husband, father and son. They offer a compelling lens through which to view the men's patriotic convictions and moving personal concerns. But each document was also a final act of political defiance. By thanking God that he would 'die in so holy a cause' and by declaring that he was actuated only by love of country and the 'desire to make her a sovereign independent state', MacDonagh's pen spoke less to posterity than to the febrile political landscape of his time.¹ Through death, he and the other Rising leaders aimed to alter the political consciousness of Ireland and legitimize the Rising. Hence Pearse informed his mother: 'we have done right. People will say hard things of us now, but later on they will praise us'.² Within days and weeks, this was vindicated as the dead of 1916 underwent a steady process of secular beatification.

MacDonagh's is the most poignant letter because his readiness to die for Ireland cannot mask the sorrow and 'bitterness' of impending separation from his wife and young children, Donagh and Barbara. He did not see them before his execution. Sniper fire prevented a driver reaching the MacDonagh home at 29 Oakley Road, Ranelagh to collect them. Only his sister, Sister Francesca, visited Kilmainham. Pearse too had no visitors but Kathleen Clarke spent an hour with her husband. MacDonagh was acutely conscious that his devotion to national work had resulted in his family being inadequately provided for. He trusted that his country would 'take them as wards' because he had accumulated debts of £181 and was uncertain if his life assurance would be paid out.³ He also looked to his siblings to assist his family and hoped that his literary efforts might eventually generate revenue. That MacDonagh believed it was 'a great and glorious thing to die for Ireland' softened the emotional wrench of leaving his family behind: 'It breaks my heart to think that I shall never

¹ MacDonagh's statement written in Kilmainham, 2-3 May 1916 in Piaras F. Mac Lochlainn (ed.), *Last words: letters and statements of the leaders executed after the Rising at Easter 1916* (Dublin, 1971), p. 60.

² Pearse to his mother, 3 May 1916, *ibid.*, p. 33.

³ MacDonagh's statement, *ibid.*, p. 61.

see my children again, but I have not wept or mourned. I counted the cost of this, and am ready to pay for it.’⁴ He informed his daughter that he loved her ‘more than ever a child was loved’, while he asked his ‘darling little boy’ to ‘remember me kindly. Take my hope and purpose with my deed ... I think still I have done a great thing for Ireland, and, with the defeat of her army, won the first step of her freedom.’⁵ The very same sentiments were expressed by Clarke who spoke of striking ‘the first successful blow for Freedom’.⁶ Pearse too was happy ‘to die a soldier’s death for Ireland and for freedom’.⁷

Sincerity of purpose and composure in the face of death contributed to the halo of martyrdom that subsequently surrounded the executed. Critically, so too did their strong religious convictions. The last letters of Pearse, who envisaged his own sacrifice emulating that of Christ, and MacDonagh, who in his youth had briefly considered the priesthood, took solace in their belief in Heaven. MacDonagh urged his wife to be brave: ‘God will assist and bless you ... Goodbye my love, till we meet again in Heaven. I have a sure faith in our union there. I kiss this paper that goes to you’.⁸ Pearse hoped ‘soon to see Papa’ and consoled his mother that ‘in a little while we shall all be together again’.⁹ Father Aloysius of the Capuchin Friary on Church Street shuttled between the cells of Pearse and MacDonagh. He was Pearse’s only visitor. He prayed with the condemned men, heard their confessions, gave them Holy Communion and administered the last rites. Though not permitted to be present at the executions, Father Aloysius’s protest ensured that priests were allowed to remain with all other prisoners before their execution.

Pearse, MacDonagh and Clarke were shot by firing squad at dawn on 3 May. Their bodies were then buried in quicklime at Arbour Hill Detention Barracks. Their belief in the transformative power of death was neatly captured by Clarke who prophesied: ‘we will die but it will be a different Ireland after us’.¹⁰

Further reading

Brian Barton, *From behind a closed door: secret court martial records of the 1916 Easter Rising* (Belfast, 2002)

Michael Foy and Brian Barton, *The Easter Rising* (Stroud, 1999).

Michael Laffan, *The resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Fein party, 1916-23* (Cambridge, 1999).

Piaras F. Mac Lochlainn (ed.), *Last words: letters and statements of the leaders executed*

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 62.

⁶ Clarke’s message to the Irish people, 3 May 1916 in Mac Lochlainn (ed.), *Last words*, p. 45.

⁷ Pearse to his mother, *ibid.*, p. 33.

⁸ MacDonagh’s statement, *ibid.*, pp 62-3.

⁹ Pearse to his mother, *ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁰ Piaras Béaslaí, *Michael Collins and the making of a new Ireland* (Dublin, 1926), i, p. 122.

after the Rising at Easter 1916 (Dublin, 1971)
Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: the Irish rebellion* (London, 2005).

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