

Éamonn Ceannt: the Pope's Uilleann Piper

Éamonn Ceannt (1881-1916) is the least fêted of the seven signatories of the proclamation although he was, as one contemporary put it, 'more naturally a physical force man than any of the other leaders'. He refused to enter the civil service on the basis that it was British and instead secured a clerkship in the city treasurer's office of Dublin Corporation. Like many of his generation, Ceannt was deeply influenced by the arousal of national consciousness occasioned by the centenary of the 1798 rebellion. The following year, he joined the Gaelic League and began to use the Irish form of his name. He was a dedicated student of the Irish language, a frequent visitor to the Connemara Gaeltacht, taught Irish classes in the early 1900s, and was elected to the ard choiste (the governing body). Through the Gaelic League, he met Frances ('Áine') O'Brennan, whom he married in an Irish ceremony in June 1905. They had one son named Rónán and Ceannt fought a successful three-year battle to have the birth registered in Irish. This was typical of his resolve and conviction. An accomplished musician, Ceannt developed a keen interest in the uilleann pipes and was honorary secretary of Cumann na bPíobairí Baile Átha Cliath (Dublin Pipers' Club).

Politically, Ceannt was an advanced nationalist. In 1907 he joined the Sinn Féin party which opposed home rule and he was involved in that body's unsuccessful opposition to the visit of King George V to Ireland in 1911. He was credited with hoisting a banner near Trinity College stating: 'Thou art not conquered yet, dear Land'. That year Ceannt was sworn into the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) and became a member of its supreme council in 1915. A founder member of the Irish Volunteers, he was involved in financing the procurement of arms and was present at the landing of arms at Howth in July 1914. After the split in the Volunteers, following John Redmond's pledge of support for the British war effort, Ceannt was elected financial secretary and was also director of communications. Committed to insurrection, along with Pearse and Plunkett he formed the IRB's military council which secretly made plans for a Rising. As commandant 4th Battalion, Dublin Brigade, Ceannt occupied the South Dublin Union during Easter Week. Those under his command recalled his cheerfulness, coolness under fire and bravery. His small force of forty-two fought tenaciously against far superior numbers until Thomas MacDonagh brought news of Pearse's surrender order in person on 30 April. At first Ceannt was unwilling to give up

the fight, but dutifully obeyed the order. He was tried by court martial on 3 and 4 May, found guilty, and executed on 8 May 1916.

Throughout his life Ceannt displayed an uncompromising devotion to faith and fatherland. Joe Doolan recalled how during Easter Week Ceannt assembled the garrison each evening to recite the rosary and prayers. Father Albert, a Capuchin priest from Church Street Friary who, with his colleague Father Augustine, accompanied the condemned men to the prison yard and anointed them, told Áine Ceannt of how her husband ‘smiling, spoke a few moments before his death of meeting Pope Pius X for whom he played the pipes in Rome’. In September 1908 the Irish Catholic Young Men’s Society organized a pilgrimage to mark the sacerdotal jubilee of Pope Pius X. The pilgrims comprised representatives of Dublin Corporation, Dublin confraternities and the Catholic Young Men’s Society (CYMS). They left Dublin to the strains of ‘God bless the Pope’ played by Ceannt – the official piper. To celebrate the pope’s jubilee the International Federation of Catholic Young Men’s societies organized an international sports meeting at which the Irish team performed admirably. On the team’s return to Dublin, the president of the CYMS stated pointedly that they had gone to Rome to testify to their faith *and* fatherland. While their faith was not in any doubt, Ireland’s distinct nationality, he suggested, had been almost forgotten on the continent. This, the pilgrims, and Ceannt in particular, sought to rectify. Indeed, he determined to speak only Irish while abroad.

On 24 September Pius X received almost two hundred Irish pilgrims in the consistorial hall. After the pope’s address, for the first time in centuries, the skirl of the uilleann pipes was then heard. Attired in a traditional piper’s costume, which according to Áine Ceannt ‘created rather a stir in the streets of Rome’ (it is now in the National Museum of Ireland and), Ceannt marched the length of the hall playing ‘O’Donnell Abú’. When the playing ended the pope, who took a personal interest in the cultivation of music, directed Ceannt to come forward so that he might inspect the pipes after which he was asked to play another short air. Appropriately, Ceannt played ‘The Wearing of the Green’. In a very simple but powerful way he demonstrated Ireland’s distinct national identity. Ceannt’s audience with the pope was a remarkable experience. That he recalled it vividly before dying emphasizes how dear to his soul were his religion and patriotism. Those same convictions helped ensure that the dead signatories of 1916 underwent a swift and lasting process of secular sanctification.

Further reading

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

Áine Ceannt statement to Bureau of Military History (WS 264)

[<http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0264.pdf>]

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

Mary Gallagher, *16 lives: Éamonn Ceannt* (Dublin, 2014)

William Henry, *Supreme sacrifice: the story of Éamonn Ceannt* (Cork, 2005)

Piaras F. Mac Lochlainn (ed.), *Last words: letters and statements of the leaders executed after the Rising at Easter 1916* (Dublin, 1971)

Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: the Irish rebellion* (London, 2005).

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