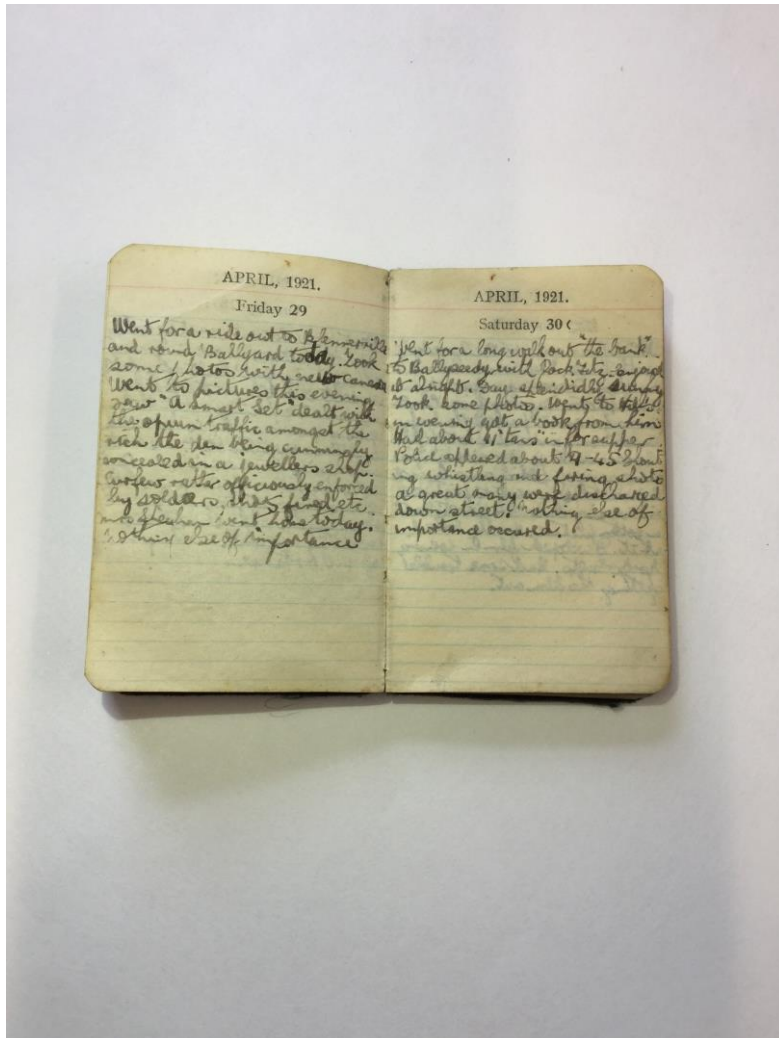


Christy O'Grady: patriot, prisoner and professor

by Jude O' Gorman



A small and unprepossessing diary in the store at Kerry County Museum reveals a little of the life of 16-year-old Christopher Patrick O'Grady during the early 1920s. Written primarily in 1921, but with additional entries for January 1922, it throws a light onto the daily life of a teenager living in Tralee through the troubled times of the War of Independence. His family were staunch Republicans and the diary entries reveal, amidst the mundane interest of a teenager, his involvement in this struggle and his response to national events.

ILLUS 1 – Page from diary

Christopher, always known as Christy, was born in 1904, the oldest son of James and Ellen O'Grady, nee Enright. Ellen was born in Ceann Duimhche, the Maherees, but spent a number of years in the United States before returning to Kerry and marrying James O'Grady. At the time of Christy's birth the family were living in Market Place in Tralee and James was working as a postman. Seven years later, according to the 1911 Census, they had removed to Rock Street, James was now head postman and the family had grown to include two

additional sons, Michael and James. This Census reveals that the family had been visited by a familiar tragedy of the time, infant mortality, James and Ellen had lost two other children in their eight-year marriage. Sometime after this Census the family moved to 22 Upper Castle Street where they ran a shop. Family history recalls that Ellen was the first shop owner in Tralee to make and sell her own ice cream, a skill she is believed to have developed during her years in the United States.

Christy attended Mungret College, near Limerick, the College annual lists him as an Apostolic scholar in the 1919/1920 academic year when he was 15. Apostolic students were admitted to the College to train for the priesthood. Admission required that the student pass an entrance exam and that a fee of 60 guineas per year be paid, a not insignificant sum at the time. The religious life was obviously not for him as 1921 sees him back in Tralee writing his diary. He seems to have spent much of his time working in the family shop although in April he was offered a job at Lipton's in the town. He started at Lipton's on April 6 and "spent most of the day weighing sugar, etc". However, this turned out to be unappealing and two days later his diary records that the job was too much and he had chosen to retire. In August 1921 his father bought the Ashbourne Hotel in Nelson Street, now Ashe Street, for £1400 and the family moved into the hotel in September although they still owned the property in Castle Street. According to *The Kerryman* "In the troubled days the Ashbourne Hotel was a haven for the soldiers of Ireland and there was always a hearty cead mile failte by the O'Gradys for those engaged in the fight for freedom".¹

The diary is, at first glance, a record of the interests of a typical 16 year old of the time. There are regular entries recording attendances at local dances and almost daily visits to the cinema. Christy recorded his impressions of the films he saw and his reviews were not always positive. On October 17 his comment on the film *Out of Luck* was a pithy "senseless picture...acting exaggerated". He enjoyed dancing and as the year progressed his dancing skills improved. By October 23 at a dance in the Foresters Hall he recorded that he was "out in every dance. I can now do it as good as an old stager". It's perhaps difficult for us to imagine these social events taking place in Tralee at a time when the town and surrounding area was subject to curfews, destruction and random acts of violence. The Auxiliaries and the Black and Tans were frequently on the streets of the town arresting, rounding-up and attacking residents, both day and night. Christy reports leaving the pictures early on March 23 "as I heard police were beating chaps down the street". On May 14 the Head Constable was shot dead on Rock Street and after that the Black and Tans were on the streets beating people and randomly shooting. Christy ends his diary entry on a heartfelt "thus ends a terrifying day".

He was not merely an observer of the situation; he was an active member of the IRA. According to Ryle Dwyer, Christy "joined the IRA in December 1919 and was a member of C Company of the Third Battalion of Kerry No.1 Brigade".² Because of his young age, he would have been 16, it appears his initial contribution during the War of Independence was to provide eyes and ears for the IRA and to act as a scout. However, later diary entries refer to his telegraphy, flag and lamp training with the Brigade, all vital skills for those carrying and transmitting messages. There are some coded entries in his diary that record activities without specifying what they involved and leave us guessing somewhat. On June 25 he "spent good part of day posting -?" when he had "two narrow escapes" and another entry on August 26 reads "Went to the military rifle range about one looking for - ! mushrooms".

By September 1921 he began to record a more obvious, high profile role in the local organisation. Mobilisations and training activities became a regular occurrence. Even at his young age Christy was involved in disciplining errant members of the Brigade. On September 10 he writes that a low attendance at a mobilisation forced him and five others to round up the non-attendees.

Most of the crowd refused to go. Had to drag a few. One drew a jack knife. After hard work gathered up most of them. They made one attempt *en mass* to get away. But failed. Court martials for five as a result.

These later diary entries also record the increasing activity of the Brigade. On October 5 there was a “full strength mobilisation at 6.30 for night manoeuvres (120) spent all night til 3.30 marching and counter marching by roads and ditches”. More strenuous activity is noted in later October, although this did not deter the young man from his dancing.

Today was about the hardest day I ever spent. Marching and drilling from 11 – 6. Travelled about 10 miles of road. Signalling, etc, also. Dog tired when we got home. Had a hot bath and got freshened. Went to dance at Foresters. But did not enjoy it much as I was too tired.

The diary includes entries for the first weeks of January 1922 and the entry for the 7th records Christy’s view on the ratification of the Anglo-Irish Treaty establishing the Irish Free State “no jubilation as in my opinion the FS is a bosh”. The following day he was appointed a Section Commander in the local Brigade. The diary entries conclude on 14 January 1922 but his involvement with the IRA did not cease. According to Ryle Dwyer by February 1922 Christy was in Dublin with the anti-Treaty forces and in July was amongst those occupying the Hammon Hotel on O’Connell Street.³

The hotel had been taken over as headquarters by the IRA at the end of June and was at the centre of fierce fighting with the National Army. It was eventually destroyed on 5 July. Christy managed to escape from Dublin and spent time in Cork, Mallow and Fermoy before returning to Dublin in September 1922.

His luck ran out in November and he was arrested on Lower Dorset Street. For the next year he was held initially in Wellington Barracks and then latterly in the Hare Park Camp on the Curragh. Hare Park had begun to house Republican prisoners in July 1922 and Christy remained there until his release in December 1923.

ILLUS 2 – trowel Hare Camp

After his release Christy’s energies turned to his musical interests. Entries in the diary reveal that he had long been involved in the music scene in Tralee. On June 29th he “went to Collis Sandes with the fiddle. Had great night playing for sets, reels, etc...Sang a few songs”. In the diary he makes the distinction between the fiddle and the violin, the latter seems to have been played in more private moments. His talents also stretched to the mouth organ and the diary records a number of purchases during 1921. By the late 1920s he was heavily involved in the Tralee Musical Society and his talents appear to have been well known throughout the county. A report in *The Kerryman* covering a concert in Maharees school in January 1929 states that “his name drew young and old from their firesides and as in the case of the Pied

Piper of Hamelin and the rats, so would the people of Maharees follow Mr O’Grady into the depths of Brandon Bay”⁴

Christy obviously wanted to develop his musical talents and education and another item in the Museum confirms this. His passport, issued in July 1927, tracks his travels back and forth between Ireland, France and the United States.

ILLUS 3 - Passport

He was travelling specifically to advance his musical experiences and to gain qualifications. He studied in London and Paris and at the world famous Juilliard School in New York, passing his examinations with honours. According to *The Kerryman* he was “widely known in Irish circles, social and musical in the greater city of New York and he was social editor of *The Irish Echo and Advocate*”.⁵ By the late 1930s Christy was back in Tralee where he was living at the Ashbourne Hotel and heavily involved in the local music scene. It was at this stage that he began advertising classes for musical education at the hotel at a cost of 1/6d per class, “all classes will be under the personal direction of Professor C. O’Grady.”⁶ In June 1941 his comic opera *The Kerry Cow* was first performed at St John’s Theatre in Tralee and was well received. According to *The Kerry News* “the music ... is pleasing, its plot good and the lyrics are witty”.⁷ In addition to his musical interests and running a restaurant business at the Ashbourne Christy became involved with the Local Defence Force (LDF) and was appointed Area Communications Officer for Kerry.

He married Lucy Conway from South Kerry late in life, in 1943 at the age of 39. However, the couple were to have little time together as Christy died in February 1945 after a short illness, described in the burial register as “lung trouble”. His standing in the community was reflected in the large turnout at his funeral. The funeral procession was headed by a military band followed by an LDF rifle party and guard of honour. At Rath cemetery three rifle volleys were fired and the Last Post was played.

ILLUS 4 – Picture from Capuchin Annual

In addition to the respect shown him at his funeral Christy was obviously held in high regard within the wider national community. After his death his photograph appeared in the *Capuchin Annual* of 1945/1946, unfortunately without an obituary. The readership of this publication was predominantly Irish but it also had an international circulation and the inclusion of Christy’s photograph shows him to have been a respected and well regarded figure at the time of his death. His was a short life, full and eventful although largely unrecorded, it is fortunate that the small diary in the Museum has survived to shed some light onto his early years.

Endnotes:

¹*The Kerryman*, March 3, 1945

²Dwyer, R. (2001) *Tans, terror and troubles*, Mercier Press, p.267

³*The Kerryman*, January 15, 1999

⁴Lynch, M (2016) *The land and people of Maharees and Castlegregory*, published by the author, p.353

⁵*The Kerryman* March 3, 1945

⁶Information from a flyer supplied by the family

⁷ *Kerry News*, June 16, 1941

Many thanks to Christy's family for their help with this article