

Con Keating: Personal and Political

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Deceased was drowned in Killorglin while on a special mission in connection with the Rebellion and was acting directly under G.H.Q. Dublin at time of his death in connection with landing of Sir Roger Casement with arms on the Kerry Coast.

- Nora Keating, mother, writing in 1924.

Con Keating, one of the first casualties of the Easter Rising, will be remembered in Kerry County Museum's forthcoming exhibition to mark the 1916 centenary. His 1916 medal and the belt he was wearing at the time of his death have been given on loan to the Museum by his nephew and namesake, Con Keating. These items are a welcome addition to the collection of an institution that holds in trust, collects and cares for artefacts related to the County of Kerry and its people. Each object within the Museum's collection tells a story about the people of Kerry and these are no different.

Cornelius 'Con' Keating was born in 1894 to Jeremiah and Nora Keating. He grew up on the family holding of about 22 acres at Renard, County Kerry. Con attended the Christian Brothers School in Caherciveen before briefly studying agriculture at the Glasnevin Model Farm. He next attended the Atlantic College of Wireless Telegraphy in Caherciveen. There, in 1915, he attained a First Class Post Master General's Certificate

in Radio Operation. At the time of his death in 1916 Con was partially supporting his family to the amount of about £2 per week.

Con joined the Volunteers at Caherciveen in October 1914 and by Easter 1916 he was based in Dublin under the command of Fionan Lynch and Joseph Plunkett. A clear asset to the organisation, he was remembered by Lynch in 1927 as a man “of the most trustworthy type”, a sentiment echoed by another comrade, Con Collins, in the same year. It was from Dublin that Con Keating set off, with four others, on the mission that would result in his death.

On Good Friday April 21, 1916 Con Keating, along with Denis Daly, Charles Monahan, Colm O’Loughlin and Daniel ‘Domnall’ Sheehan, travelled by train to Killarney. They had being “sent under orders from Dublin to Kerry to seize wireless apparatus in Caherciveen” (Lynch, 1927). The equipment was to be taken from the Atlantic Wireless College at Caherciveen, familiar to Keating having been a student there, and brought to Tralee. They were to be conveyed to and from Caherciveen in two cars, one driven by Sam Windrim and the other by Tommy McInerney. Windrim, with Daly and O’Loughlin, left Killarney first. McInerney, with Keating, Sheehan and Monahan, followed. It was decided that a distance be kept between the cars so as not to arouse the suspicion of the police.

The first car proceeded through Killorglin without incident. But it was here that disaster struck for the occupants of McInerney’s car. After taking a wrong turn in the town, unbeknownst to its occupants, the car was now proceeding towards the open quay at Ballykissane pier, where it plunged into the darkness of the river Laune. McInerney, the driver, managed, with some assistance from local man Tim ‘Thady’ O’Sullivan, to swim ashore. The remaining occupants of the car were not so fortunate. All three were drowned.

The accident was not in any way the result of misconduct. It was due to lack of knowledge of the road on the part of the driver of the motor car and to the fact that the night on which they went into the Laune was a very wet bad night and apparently visibility through the wind-screen must have been bad (Lynch, 1927).

The bodies of Con Keating and Domnall Sheehan were discovered the next morning, Holy Saturday. The body of Charles Monahan was not discovered until six months later. The inquest into Keating’s death, held on the April 24, 1916, reached the verdict: “death was caused by drowning” (O’Connell, 1916). Jeremiah Keating gave evidence at the inquest, after which the body of his son was returned to him for burial in the family grave at Killovarnogue cemetery, near Caherciveen.

The car driven by Sam Windrim had continued as far as Caherciveen unaware of the tragedy behind them. The men waited for many hours but it soon became clear that something had gone wrong with the second car and that it would not be following on. Windrim, Daly and O’Loughlin decided to abandon the mission and to return to

Killarney. They did so via a different route, so as not to arouse suspicion, arriving in Killarney early Saturday morning.

These three deaths on Good Friday evening 1916, at Ballykissane, are considered the first casualties of the Easter Rising. The men were on active service, engaged on a special mission direct from General Headquarters (GHQ) in Dublin, with the purpose to retrieve wireless equipment from the Atlantic Wireless College in Caherciveen. The questions outstanding are: for what purpose was the equipment to be used; and did the mission have any chance of success?

There are three main theories as to the end purpose of the mission. The first, and most prevalent, is that the wireless equipment, once reassembled at Tralee, was to be used to communicate directly with the Aud. The Aud was a German ship, organised by Roger Casement, which was due to land a large cargo of guns and ammunition on the Kerry coast. These were to be used to arm the Volunteers of Kerry, Cork, Clare, Limerick and Galway. The Volunteers tasked with meeting the ship expected the Aud no earlier than Easter Sunday. However, the Aud arrived in Tralee Bay on Holy Thursday. With nobody there to meet her, the ship left the area early on the morning of Good Friday. She was subsequently identified and pursued by British patrol ships before being scuttled outside Cork harbour. Thus, if the purpose of Con Keating's mission was to establish direct communication with the Aud it would have failed because the ship had already been and gone from Tralee Bay by the time Keating set out for Caherciveen. Furthermore, unbeknownst to Con, there was no wireless equipment on board the Aud.

The second theory, as to the ultimate purpose of the mission, is that the wireless equipment was to be used to communicate with other ships, in particular British ships, patrolling the coastal waters. The idea was to lead these ships away from the coast, clearing the way for the Aud to land her cargo unhindered. Unfortunately by the time Keating left for Caherciveen the Aud had already left the area.

The third theory is that Keating, and his colleagues, were to use the equipment to set up a wireless station in Tralee. The intention was to get the news of the Rising out to the world and, in particular, the United States. The plan would have been to transmit a message to any receiving stations within range. Additionally it was hoped that several ships would receive and relay the messages onwards. Fionan Lynch wrote in 1927 that the mission involved "work in the way of transmission of messages to foreign countries". Whether this could have been achieved with the reassembled equipment is unclear. However, a successful version of this plan did take place in Dublin during Easter Week where the broadcast from Sackville Street lasted for nearly 24 hours.

The three men who drowned at Ballykissane may have had a clear idea of which of the above was the end purpose of their mission, or it may be that they were willing to attempt all three. Regardless they died on active service and are, thus, the first casualties of the Easter 1916 Rising.

The 1916 medal was awarded posthumously to Con Keating and issued to his family in the 1940's. About 2500 of these medals were issued to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Rising. They were awarded to those with recognised military service during the period of the Easter Rising. The circular bronze medal is fashioned in the form of a circle of flame representing the sunburst on which eight points of a star are superimposed. The obverse depicts the death scene of Cúchulainn, partially surrounded by an ancient warrior's sword belt. On the reverse are the following inscriptions: 'SEACTAIN NA CÀSCA 1916' and '36 CON KEATING'. Medals were named and numbered only for those recipients who had died prior to 1941. The medal was issued along with a green and orange poplin ribbon, a suspension bar bearing a Celtic interlaced design and a paper slip reading 'With the Compliments of the President of Ireland'.

The belt, handed down through the family, may appear at first glance to be unremarkable. However, it is reputed to be the belt worn by Con at the time of his death, and, as such, it serves as a poignant reminder of his tragic drowning.



These two objects draw out two aspects to the effect of Con Keating's death: his death on an official mission making him part of the national story of the Rising, and the personal familial loss of a young son in a tragic car accident. The two objects in the Museum allow us to examine both aspects. The 1916 medal, awarded posthumously in 1941, is an official recognition of his service and heroism. As such it is illustrative of the legacy of Con Keating – Kerry's first 1916 martyr. Conversely, the belt is a simple personal item. It

could be described as nondescript except that it was worn by Keating at the time of his death. Thus it provides a tangible link to the tragic death of a young man.

Con Keating's 1916 medal and his belt will be used to tell this story in the upcoming exhibition at Kerry County Museum: 'Casement in Kerry: A Revolutionary Journey'. Marking the centenary of the Easter Rising in 1916 this major exhibition will make an important contribution to the national commemoration. It will provide a unique opportunity for people to engage with the national story in 2016 outside of Dublin. It will take visitors on a series of revolutionary journeys: Roger Casement's path from servant of the Crown to Irish nationalist that led to the gallows in Pentonville Prison; the road to independence for Ireland with the first stepping stone of the Easter Rising; and the dramatic effect the Rising had on the lives of ordinary Irish men and women, including Con Keating, his family and all those touched by the tragic deaths at Ballykissane.

Endnotes:

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