

Conversation with Teresa O'Connell

Sister of the late Kathleen O'Connell, Personal Secretary to Eamon de Valera from 1919 until her death in 1956.

Notes compiled by Seosaimhín Ní Mhuirí

These notes were compiled over two days – 5–6 December 1992. Teresa O'Connell was then 93 years old. She was staying in the Home of the Little Sisters of the Poor, Roebuck, Stillorgan, and was healthy and happy there. She spoke with a very refined Kerry accent, and was most ladylike. Her sisters, Marie and Kathleen O'Kelly, visited her twice a day, and saw to her every want. She went shopping with them, and they brought her to their homes on alternate weeks. She had a very keen sense of humour, and a remarkable memory, particularly of events in the remote past.

She was imprisoned from November 1922 until 9 October 1923, first in Mountjoy, next in Kilmainham and finally in Dublin City Union. Each transfer was made in the dark of night. Teresa lived with her sisters, a brother and her parents in Caherdaniel, County Kerry. Her sister, Kathleen, had gone to the United States and returned home in 1915. She brought home several copies of *An Phoblacht* and Teresa read these with interest. She recalled that her sister Lena was annoyed with her for being so taken up with advanced nationalist ideas at the age of 15. Lena was 19 at the time, and she and other family members seemed to be more engaged with British participation in the First World War than with Irish nationalist politics. Teresa recalled that some of them were singing 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary.' However, she also remembered Kathleen hinting at coming events in Ireland.

Kathleen brought Tessie to Dublin on 22 March, 1922. Tessie went straight to work at 23 Suffolk Street, near Grafton Street, the Headquarters of Sinn Féin. She had never been out of Caherdaniel in her life. She remembered that on Easter Monday, 1916, a policeman visited her home in Caherdaniel to tell her parents about the Rising, and being so moved by the news that from the moment she knew she 'wanted to do something for Ireland.'

Her job in Suffolk Street involved delivering dispatches, addressing envelopes and sending out propagandist literature. She remembered being sent on a message with a dispatch to a house on a road near the Mater Hospital. She noticed an Army Truck on the road. She did not get to see the person to whom she was to deliver the dispatch. On the way back, the soldiers in the truck told her to halt. She pretended not to hear them, and kept on walking. Some of them caught up with her and snatched her bag. They removed the documents and a Bank Book

and gave her back the bag. When she got back to Suffolk Street she was sent to the Dublin City Bank to cancel the account. Seamus Ó Broin accompanied her on this occasion. He was a brother of Leon Ó Broin, later a prominent historian and senior civil servant. The brothers took opposite sides in the Civil War.

Teresa did not like to dwell on her loss of the dispatch, as this was one of the few occasions on which Republican dispatches were captured. Those who carried them always boasted of their success in delivering them safely. A while afterwards, Sinn Féin HQ was raided by Government troops led by Major-General Emmet Dalton. One of the soldiers in the raiding party whispered something to Dalton, who looked Teresa up and down and nodded to the soldier. Members of the raiding party had recognised her as the girl from whom they had taken the dispatch a few weeks before. All the staff in the Suffolk Street office were lined up around the fire. Everything in the office was seized by the soldiers – documents, literature, office equipment etc. There was a secret code to alert senior members of the staff who occupied an office upstairs. Teresa pressed a bell alerting the only person upstairs at the time, Seamus Ó Broin, who made his escape out the back. He was able to throw her an important dispatch before he went. She had edged over to receive it, anticipating the place of his exit. She got the dispatch without being detected and hid it.

She and sixteen of her co-workers were arrested. These included Kathleen Devaney (known as ‘Davey’), who became Mrs. Liam O’Doherty; Rita Birmingham; Cecelia Saunders, later wife of Frank Gallagher; Nóirín Cogley;¹ Lily O’Brennan; Mrs Humphreys and her daughter Síle Humphreys and Máire Comerford. Two of those arrested, Nóirín Cogley² and Dorothy Macardle, had called at the office a few days before to know if they could help.

Those arrested were brought to Mountjoy on 10 November 1922, in the dark. They had nothing to eat all day. They asked permission to go to the Robert Roberts Café nearby, or even for the Café to send them tea before they left. Both requests were rejected. Tessie and the others were in Mountjoy Jail, which also housed a large number of male Republican prisoners who had been there since they surrendered following the fall of the Four Courts to Provisional Government forces armed by the British Government with heavy artillery. On 7 December 1922, the provisional Government selected four of these prisoners, Rory O’Connor, Dick Barrett and Joseph McKelvey, for execution without trial on 8 December, as a reprisal for the fatal shooting of one Government TD and the wounding of another, by persons unknown. Teresa remembered seeing soldiers belonging to the execution squad swinging their rifles and laughing as they marched away. She also had a vivid recollection of seeing another soldier at the sentry-box kneeling in prayer.

The presence of Dorothy Macardle in Mountjoy as a fellow-prisoner helped to alleviate some of the misery of prison life, particularly that associated with the poor quality of the food served to prisoners. She was a daughter of Sir Thomas Callan Macardle, owner of the brewery in Dundalk which bore his name. He did not approve of his daughter’s association with the anti-Treaty cause, although at the time of her arrest, the extent of that association was her editorship of an

1 Mother of the sports journalist Mitchell Cogley.

2 Born in France.

anti-Free State publication, *Freedom*, published by Maud Gonne. She later became the author of *The Irish Republic*, a classic account of the period 1916–1923, written from an anti-Treaty perspective and largely based on documents supplied by Eamonn de Valera. Another of her works, *Tragedies of Kerry* dealt with the atrocities perpetrated by Free State troops in that county during the Civil War. Teresa remembered that Sir Thomas Callan Macardle, who protested to the authorities at Dorothy's arrest, nevertheless made sure that she would not be hungry in prison. He had a large hamper of food sent to her every week while she was there. The celebrated firm of Leverett and Fyre of Grafton Street had the order for this, which she shared with her colleagues.

After Kilmainham Jail had been cleared of male prisoners in January 1923, the hospital building there was made ready for the accommodation of female prisoners from Mountjoy, including Teresa. Two months later, there were over 200 female prisoners in Kilmainham. Teresa was particularly impressed by Mary Mc Swiney, who was on the floor above hers. She had been arrested twice. She went on hunger strike for 24 days. When she was being carried on a stretcher down the stairs to hospital, the women prisoners, including Tessie, gathered on the stairs as a guard of honour. Mary Mc Swiney saluted them from her stretcher, barely able to lift her hand, but she managed a salute and a smile. Teresa conveyed the impression that she and her colleagues in the Republican movement shared something of the determination and fearlessness shown by Mary Mc Swiney. 'We were never afraid,' she told me. 'We were all together, prepared to die. We were young. We had courage. We never sensed any danger. We would have been proud to die. The elite were on our side. Educated people. The very best.'

Teresa cited the example of Máire Comerford. 'As she was being transferred from Mountjoy Prison, she struggled with a soldier, fell, and hit her head. She was bleeding profusely from a deep gash. A doctor was called. Her head needed to be stitched. She hopped onto the table and refused an anaesthetic. The doctor stitched her in the presence of others. She did not utter a sound.' Teresa commented on this incident: 'Máire Comerford was a stoic. She would not give them the satisfaction of being otherwise.' She also mentioned that she and her colleagues kept up their spirits by singing. They heard afterwards that the soldiers guarding the prison were very surprised by the bravery of all the women prisoners.

Teresa's third and final place of imprisonment was the North Dublin Union. Unlike Kilmainham it had a large open park, where the prisoners played games, including rounders. Sile Humphreys escaped from this facility. Teresa got to know Linda Kearns, also a prisoner, who later became Mrs McWhinney, and was well known for her connection with the Childrens' Hospital, St. Ultan's, in Richmond Street.

In the North Dublin Union prison, a priest came for the first time to hear the Confessions of the prisoners. He was Father Glesson, a Jesuit. It was 24 April, 1923. An envoy from the Pope, Monsignor Salvatore Luzio, had recently arrived in Ireland on a fact-finding mission, and with the purpose of finding a basis for peace between the two sides in the Civil War. He was also concerned about the decision of the Irish bishops, made in October 1922, to refuse the sacraments to Republicans who persisted in their entire opposition to the government. His

presence in Ireland, Teresa believed, may have had some influence on what occurred when Father Glesson heard her confession. She had a perfect recollection of what was, for her, as a conscientious Catholic, a crucial episode in her life. Her account of what happened was as follows:

Father Glesson: Do you believe in all the Catholic Church teaches about faith and morals?

Teresa: I do.

Father Gleeson: Do you believe in all the Catholic Church teaches about faith and morals in Ireland?

Teresa: Why in Ireland? I was of the opinion that the teaching of the Catholic Church is the same worldwide.

Father Gleeson: Not now, I don't want to get involved in any political arguments.

Teresa: Neither do I, Father.

Father Gleeson: Do you believe in all that the Catholic Church teaches about faith and morals?

Teresa: I do.

Father Glesson: Ego te absolvo.

Eventually, on 9 October 1923 Tessie was released. One that very day, her sister Kathleen, who was de Valera's personal secretary, sent her with a parcel to deliver to him in Arbour Hill. He had been a prisoner of the government since his arrest in Ennis on 15 August 1923, when he was addressing an election meeting. When she reached Arbour Hill, a soldier took delivery of the parcel. She later regretted that she did not ask to see de Valera.

After working briefly with the Irish Hospitals Sweepstake, she got a job with the Irish Hospitals Commission, where she worked for years. This Commission was established under the first Fianna Fáil administration in 1933. Its first Secretary was Dr Andy Cooney, who succeeded Frank Aiken as IRA Chief of Staff in 1935, and had fought in the War of Independence as well as in the Civil War on the anti-Treaty side. He had also been involved in the events of Bloody Sunday in 1920. In the Hospitals Commission, Teresa worked with Jack O'Sheehan from Athlone, who wrote the well-known Republican ballad, 'Soldiers of the legion of the Rearguard.' She also worked with a Ms. Gifford, sister of Grace Gifford who had married Joseph Mary Plunkett in prison before his execution in 1916.

While Teresa felt bitter about 'the shooting of 77 boys' by the Free State authorities during the Civil War, she also acknowledged, as she put it, that 'we were also responsible, for example, for the shooting of Seán Hales, and the burning of the home of Seán Mc Garry TD, which resulted in the death of his nine-year old son.'

**Letter from Mountjoy Prison from Teresa O'Connell to her sister Kathleen.
No date. Letter sent on 28 November, 1922.**

Dearest K,

Many thanks for note which I received last night. It was terrible about Childers.³ The four young fellows who were executed a few days ago [November 17] were sacrificed in order to give them a chance to execute Childers. Mary Mc Swiney is growing weaker every day. We are constantly in and out to her room for she has refused having the nurses as Annie wasn't allowed in [Annie, Mary Mc Swiney's sister, was keeping vigil outside the gates of Mountjoy during Mary's imprisonment]. She is very bad to-day. Two other girls were brought in here last night - Miss Coyle from Donegal and one of the girls - you know from communications - Nora O'Shea. She was taken in '45.' We have just been looking at the men in A wing, and they are in great spirits, cheering and shouting. I had a letter from Lena [her sister] last night, and one of the letters I posted to her never reached her. We saw F.G. [Frank Gallagher] a few times in the distance. It is hard to speak to any of them; though some of the sentries are decent, others are rotters. I think I told you before that Mary Mc Swiney was anointed and got confession since. I had a letter from Maurice on Friday night. No news in it. Who told you that we were tried and sentenced to a month's imprisonment? We were not tried at all, and as far as we can understand, we are in for the duration of the war, at any rate. Only for the duration of the war at any rate. Only for the parcels the girls get in we could hardly put up with the prison food, but to give them their due, they gave us very good bread and butter. No more news at present. Will write again in a day or two. Best love from all here and give our kindest regards to P. [President de Valera]. Will you forward the enclosed note to Lena. There is a note for mother enclosed in it. I wasn't able to send this sooner. Miss Mc S [Mary Mc Swiney] was released last night. [27 November].

Love from Tessie [Teresa].

**Letter from Kathleen Devaney to Kathleen O'Connell from Mountjoy Prison,
dated 9 February, 1923.**

A Chara Dhílis,

You'll probably be surprised to hear from me, but as an opportunity presented itself, I thought I'd let you know that 'T' [Teresa O'Connell, Kathleen's sister], among others, has been removed since Monday night, 5th [February]. There were 42 in all - that included all the Kerry girls, L.O.B [Lily O'Brennan], Mrs. Bermingham, Mrs Gallagher and others. fFor some unknown reason, fourteen were left. The Deputy [Governor] informed us

3 Childers was executed without trial on 24 November 1922, while his appeal to the Courts was pending.

by orders from H.Q. These included Mary Dinegan, Margaret Skinnider, Eithne Coyle, Mrs Buckley, Annie Moore (whose brother was executed at the Curragh), myself and the others whom you probably don't know. You heard of the fight here and how beds were removed nearly a month ago, then limited number of parcels were restored but not beds. The day after the others were restored we wrote [to the] Governor demanding beds back, also one letter per day out with no restrictions on incoming letters or parcels. This was refused unless we repudiated the actions of those who broke beds, locks etc.⁴

Needless to remark, we refused to comply and sent an ultimatum to the Governor: unless other rights were restored this night, the 8th inst., twelve of us would go on hunger strike. Having received no reply, we are on strike since last night. Of the fourteen who are here, two are ill, and were not allowed to go on hunger strike.

I was afraid if you heard of it, you would naturally be troubled about Teresa. I don't suppose there will be anything arising from their new quarters. They all went off in great form.

I was horrified to see by to-day's paper how Liam Deasy has turned out, and the statements from Limerick jail were awful. ⁵

Hope all our friends outside are in good form. Will you please pass the enclosed on to Madge.

Mise do Chara,
Kathleen Devanney

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- 4 The prison authorities had imposed these restrictions after Máire Comerford and Sighle Humphreys, who shared a cell, wrecked as much as they could of its contents and fittings, including locks and crockery over a period of three days from 7-10 January. As a reprisal, the Governor punished all the prisoners by stopping parcels and letters and turning lights off at 10pm. Free State soldiers removed all furniture and left only blankets and mattresses.
- 5 Deasy, a senior anti-Treaty officer, was captured with arms and sentenced to death in January 1923. His captors agreed to spare his life, on condition that he sign the following statement: 'I accept and I will aid an immediate an unconditional surrender of all arms and men as required by General Mulcahy.' Deasy was also obliged to appeal for a similar undertaking and acceptance from senior members of the anti-Treaty leadership