

Remembering Lincoln Prison Escape

Anna T. De Loughry

This year 1982 being the centenary of the birth of Eamon de Valera, and by request, I am devoting this brief note to recalling an incident in the life of a man born here in the Middle House of Rothe House or, as his Birth Certificate states, Wolfe's Arch.

We must go back in time to December 1919; the scene is set in a prison in Lincolnshire in England where nineteen Irishmen, one — Terence McSweeney — are prisoners. They are allowed to work and play games in the compound at the back of the prison encircled with barbed wire. They wrote and received letters and wore their own clothes.

Four men are together, three, by name, Sean Milroy, Sean McGarry and Eamonn de Valera, are under sentence of death. They shake hands with the fourth young man who has a proud look. He has just received a letter informing him that by a unanimous vote he has been elected Mayor of his native City of Kilkenny — an honour he was to hold for seven consecutive years — by name, Ald. Peter De Loughry, my father-in-law.

“You know Dev”, he said, “I’ve been thinking since I came in, wouldn’t it be great if we could get you out, if I had a blank I could cut a key”. The three looked dubious but they set themselves to plan how they could get a blank key in.

Sean Milroy was a clever cartoonist and sketched a Christmas Card depicting Sean McGarry trying to get a large key into a small keyhole and on the other side showing him in a prison cell staring at a large keyhole. The first side had the words “Xmas 1917 can’t get in”, the reverse had “Xmas 1918 can’t get out”. Underneath in De Valera’s handwriting in Irish was a covering message which Field would translate into English. Field was the pseudonym of Michael Collins.

This was sent to Dublin to Mrs. McGarry who thought it was a joke and left it aside. The condemned men were getting very anxious as there was no response to the card, but eventually the meaning became clear and a beautifully iced cake, made by an Irish School-Teacher in Lincoln named Kathleen Talty, arrived in the prison. Inside was a blank key and two small files.

Now Peter De Loughry had to get an impression of the huge lock, but how? He served morning Mass in the Prison Church and took the drippings from the Altar Candles which Dev., who was Sacristan, collected in a tin box in which the candles were dropped

after Mass. With the grease he got a faint impression. First he had to remove the lock and then replace it. He described it as a difficult, frustrating job as he had to work in silence with the two files and a stout penknife at night-time. Only the four involved knew what was happening. Alasdair McCabe, founder of the Educational Building Society, who was a fellow prisoner told me here in Rothe House that he had no idea of the planned escape.

The key was completed and contact made with Michael Collins who was then in England. A system of signalling was devised and the time arranged. They again asked Peter De Loughry to go with them but he said, "I'd better not, but when all is over, Dev., I want my key back". This was promised.

On Monday, February 4th, 1919, the prisoners had tea at 4.30, and after that, Sean McGarry, Sean Milroy and Eamonn de Valera vanished without trace. The Master Key had opened three massive doors.

Night fell early — at the prison wall, Michael Collins, Harry Boland and Paddy Donohue were awaiting with a rope ladder and a motor car. They cut the barbed wire and made their escape. The three men divided — McGarry and Milroy got back to Dublin, probably by boat waiting at Grimsby. It was considered de Valera would be more easily recognisable — he stayed in England.

De Valera was out — the country was wild with joy — not so the Prison and Local Authorities. They were mystified and thought someone outside had thrown a key over the Prison wall. All houses in Lincoln were searched without success. There was disquiet in the House of Commons as there were persistent rumours that de Valera would go there and cause a scene before the Election of the Speakers.

Accompanied by Harry Boland, and disguised as a pair of lovers, they made their way to Kerryborn priest, Fr. Chas. O'Malley, who was Chaplain to the Workhouse at Crumpsall, Manchester.

Dev stayed until Cathal Brugha came over to tell him of conditions in Ireland and when it would be safe to travel. Shortly after, linking the arm of Kathleen Talty, Dev. left Crumpsall.

Ten years later on the floor of Dáil Eireann, coming from different sides of the house, Eamonn De Valera, T.D. returned the key to Peter De Loughry, T.D. It is now in the National Museum of Ireland. (It seems the Christmas Card has not survived).

During his Presidential Campaign, Eamonn de Valera came to Kilkenny and visited Rothe House where the key was then on display. He was almost completely blind and asked to have the key put in his hand. He felt it and said — "You know it turned like velvet in the lock".

Addendum: Names of Fellow Prisoners of Peter De Loughry in Lincoln Jail:

Terence McSwiney, Eamonn Corbett, Samuel Flaherty, John O'Mahony, Laurence Lardner, Sean McGarry, Eamon de Valera, Alisdair McCabe, Philip Monahan, Paul Dawson-Cusack, Thomas Ruane, Sean Etchingham, Michael Lennon, Sean Corcoran, Seamus Cotter, Michael Colivet, Sean Milroy, Seamus Dobbin, Francis Burke.



FEDERATION OF LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETIES

The Federation held its first formal A.G.M. in Rothe House in October 1982. At this meeting a constitution was adopted and officers and committee were formally elected. A number of workshops were held and each society was invited to tell the meeting about itself and its activities. This showed how enormously varied were the projects undertaken by the societies and how much of real value was being achieved.

In April a meeting was held in Limerick. This time there was an overall theme of Folklore and Folklife and all the workshops dealt with aspects of this. The following day the group visited Bunratty Folk Park, where they were guided by the manager, Mr. Chris Lynch, and the Cregganown Project.

However, these seminars are only the public face of the Federation. Much work is done behind the scenes by the committee. A recent success has been that the Portal Tomb at Brownshill, Co. Carlow, has been taken into State care helped, we believe, by representations from the Federation. They are also backing the Wexford Historical Society in their efforts to save their town walls and the Westgate of the town.

The committee are also negotiating on several fronts to have an award-earning course in Local History established at third level and by so doing to raise the standing of local history studies in the country.

Valuable links have been formed with the Federation for Ulster Local Studies and with the British Association for Local History. During the trip to Wales by K.A.S. the chairman and secretary of the Federation met Mr. David Hayns, the BALH field officer, and had a long discussion with him. The history of both parts of Ireland and England are so entwined that they must be studied together and so these links can only strengthen all concerned.

The Federation is now firmly established and going from strength to strength. To date about thirty-five societies are affiliated. We welcome all members of local history societies to our meetings and we welcome new societies which wish to affiliate with us.

SARAH FITZMAURICE, Hon. Secretary.