

IN THIS WEEK'S PAPER...

The list of the dead and a city emerges from the rubble

Exactly one week after the rebels evacuated the GPO with the burning roof falling in on their heads, the first regular edition of the *Irish Independent* in almost a fortnight appeared. Today, we reprint that dramatic newspaper.

By the stuffy standards of the day, it was a sensational affair, with an abundance of striking images jumping out from pages often wallpapered with unbroken columns of print.

For almost two years, the newspapers had been carrying heavily censored reports from the Flanders front. These deliberately vague dispatches came with anonymous photos of trench warfare stalemate. Readers had become used to opening their paper to find that today's blurred photos of No Man's Land looked the same as yesterday's.

In sharp contrast, today's reprinted *Irish Independent* from Friday, May 5, 1916, confronted people with vivid images of death and devastation on their own doorstep. Headlined "One Of Dublin's Leading Streets Wiped Out", the panoramic main photo on page four showed Sackville (O'Connell) Street all but razed to the ground. That photo, and the other scenes of devastation scattered across the pages, hit home in a way that thousand carefully controlled images from the front never could.

Even though the newspaper, like virtually every other arm of the Irish Establishment, was deeply hostile in its coverage of the surrendered rebels, the photos and short pen-pictures it carried had an immediacy for readers far more potent than any report back from the front, where tens of thousands of Irish were fighting.

There is coverage of the executions the previous day of four ring-leaders — Joseph Plunkett, Michael O'Hanrahan, Edward Daly and Willie Pearse. While there was sound reason for believing the latter had no leadership role and was shot because he was Pádraig's brother, Plunkett was one of the Rising's masterminds. He had married his sweetheart just hours before facing the firing squad, as had his best friend Thomas MacDonagh a day earlier. The *Irish Independent* shed no tears over these sentimental goodbyes, condemning the executed men for their treachery and the innocent deaths they had caused.

In some ways, the reprinted paper reflects the dazed and confused country it was reporting on. Following a list of dead and dying in each Dublin hospital, a grim column headlined "Some Of The Sufferers" admits to a "mystery" surrounding one officer reported wounded in Dublin while seemingly in France on the same day. Somewhat jarringly, the list of dead and wounded is immediately followed by a jolly promotion for a new "remarkable holeproof cloth" under the banner "Suits Given Away".

Official notices called for an immediate return to work, especially by those in the food, munition and coal sectors. Service providers and retailers took out adverts displaying that they were ready to pick up the pieces. The authorities were anxious to put the Rising behind them as a petty sideshow to the greater theatre of war, and normal service was resumed with reports from the fronts in Europe, East Africa, Russia and Mesopotamia.

DAMIAN CORLESS

CENTENARY PAPERS

What saved Dev from firing quad?

PROF ROBERT SCHMUEHL untangles the mystery that for years has surrounded de Valera's last-minute reprieve and re-examines his relationship with the US

Consequential as it became to the course of modern Ireland, Eamon de Valera's escape from execution after the Easter Rising still evokes mystery as an enduring dimension of its history.

What exactly was the reason for de Valera's reprieve?

Was it the fact that he wasn't a signatory of the Proclamation and didn't fight in the General Post Office?

Was it the lateness of his court-martial amid the mounting criticism over the deadly policy of reprisal?

Was it the circumstance of his birth in the United States at a time when Great Britain was trying to cultivate a closer relationship with the increasingly influential nation?

A search of de Valera's papers (now housed at the Archives of University College Dublin), documents at the UK's National Archives at Kew and numerous other primary or secondary sources lead someone in different directions before reaching a conclusion.

For example, de Valera's American ties are often cited as a principal factor in the British decision to reverse his death sentence. His wife Sinéad certainly tried to play this card, and stories circulated in US newspapers that his American heritage proved decisive.

The *Boston American* on July 9,

1916, published an article with this headline: 'Citizenship in US Saved Valera's Life.'

Complete with the mistake in the surname, this news account and two others saying the same thing are included in de Valera's papers at UCD.

The origin of the information is never reported and not rebutted until many years later. It's little wonder that for the better part of de Valera's six-decade public career, his birthplace kept coming up as playing a role in his commutation.

As late as 1963, de Valera himself didn't hesitate to retell the story of his reprieve by emphasising his roots in another country.

During John F Kennedy's only trip to Ireland while US president, he became the first foreign head of state to honour the Rising's executed leaders at Arbour Hill Cemetery.

Later, according to their book *Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye*, Kennedy aides Kenneth P O'Donnell and David P Powers report that during their last night in Ireland, the American party attended an informal dinner with de Valera at which (in their description) "the conversation was sparkling and the laughs plentiful".

But Kennedy could not resist asking de Valera one specific question. Why had he not been shot in 1916?

"De Valera explained that he had lived in Ireland since his early child-

hood," we're told, "but he was born in New York City, and because of his American citizenship, the British were reluctant to kill him. 'But there were many times when the key in my jail cell door was turned,' he said, 'and I thought that my turn had come.'"

This account notes that Kennedy "listened, spellbound".

Was de Valera, then 80 and President of Ireland, trying to impress the young Irish-American leader in a politically ingratiating manner? Did he know otherwise at the time?

Such questions arise because six years later, de Valera's story officially changes. In 1969 (and now in his second term as president), he took up paper and pen to draft a personal statement, which included this declarative sentence: "The fact that I was born in America would not have saved me."

A document with the heading 'Reprieve of Eamon de Valera' was prepared on July 3, 1969, and printed on presidential stationery. It incorporated phrases and sentences that de Valera had crafted, amplifying some along the way. The key sentence — "The fact that I was born in America would not have saved me" — became "The fact that I was born in America would not, I am convinced, have saved me" in the official version.

In the first point de Valera makes is definite: "I have not the slightest



Soldiering on: De Valera in his Volunteers uniform pictured around 1914

Right: De Valera addressing the public in 1930

doubt that my reprieve in 1916 was due to the fact that my court-martial and sentence came late."

The last paragraph in the official statement, not a word of which appears in de Valera's handwritten composition, returns to the timing of his case: "By the way, Thomas Ashe was court-martialed the same day that I was. He, too, would have been executed, I have no doubt, had he been tried earlier... He was not an American citizen, and it could not be suggested, therefore, that it was on that account he was reprieved."

How sensitive had de Valera become to the suggestion that his American roots were involved in his corporal salvation? The year after his 1969 explanation, the authorised biography *Eamon de Valera* by the Earl of Longford and Thomas P O'Neill was published.

In retelling how the aftermath of the Rising unfolded, the authors note: "Two commandants escaped the firing squad because of the delay in bringing them to trial. They were Thomas Ashe and Eamon de Valera. It has been suggested that the latter was reprieved because of his American birth. There is no evidence of this, and the fact that he and Ashe were both tried and reprieved on the same day supports the view that it was the effect of the executions on public opinion and the delay which saved them."

Almost always, treatment of de Valera's reprieve includes some reference to his American birth — if only to deny it.

But was de Valera accurate in saying his late court-martial helped save him? Probably so.

In the book *WE Wylie and the Irish Revolution 1916-1921*, León Ó Broin draws on Wylie's unpublished memoir about his service as a second lieutenant in the Territorial Army and as a barrister who witnessed many of the court-martial proceedings after the Rising.



DE VALERA SAT IN HIS CELL WRITING FAREWELL LETTERS ... SOME THAT INCLUDED THE CHILLING WORDS; 'TOMORROW I AM TO BE SHOT'. BUT TOMORROW NEVER CAME

For someone who harboured serious misgiving about the planning for the Easter Rising, Eamon de Valera soldiered on and ultimately became a symbol and embodiment of its importance to the cause of Irish independence.

Interestingly, however, before the first shots were fired on April 24, 1916, de Valera could not envision how he would survive the rebellion's combat.

How concerned was this senior officer of the Irish Volunteers about his future? He made sure to prepare a will in advance of the fighting.

According to his authorised biography, *Eamon de Valera*, by the Earl of Longford and Thomas P O'Neill: "His position as an insurgent would not, he felt, invalidate the will, but he was anxious in regard to a small life assurance policy. If he were killed in the Rising, would the assurance company pay the sum assured? In fact, he felt that death was almost inevitable."

Then, after he surrendered and was arrested, he awaited death again, this time by firing squad at Kilmainham Gaol. Imagine what it was like, in terms of concentrating the mind, to compose a succession of farewell letters to family and friends telling them he'd be shot before long.

A year after the Rising, while imprisoned in Britain, de Valera wrote a letter to his wife, Sinéad. Both poignant and deeply personal, the words revisit the darkness he experienced earlier.

"Yes this time last year I foresaw for you the agonies you would suffer when the rifles began to crackle and the guns to boom almost at the door. I foresaw, and endured in sympathy the terrible suspense you would endure so



NAGGING DOUBT ABOUT THE TIMING OF RISING

long as the fighting continued or till you heard definitely of my death — I saw you finally sink stunned with the leaden weight of the last news — bereft of that last thread of hope which alone made the suspense bearable.

"Yet I did not foresee what was perhaps the most terrible part of all for you. The long interval from the surrender till the announcement of my sentence — made more terrible for you by the daily list of those condemned and executed, but during the time itself I knew you were suffering and I prayed God to lighten it."

Moving as the letter continues to be, it is one of the few autobiographical statements de Valera wrote about the Rising itself and his feelings related to it.

In his biography of Dev, De

Valera: Long Fellow, Long Shadow, Tim Pat Coogan observes: "Probably the most telling comment on de Valera's behaviour during 1916 is his own silence. Amongst all the recollections contained in his own collection of papers, lovingly preserved over a long lifetime, there is no de Valera memoir of 1916."

Coogan judges it "a pity" that de Valera never composed a detailed remembrance of the period before, during and immediately after the Rising. That it is.

Clearly, though, the exhilaration of cheating death twice in less than three weeks — a story told again and again — would become high-octane political petrol during de Valera's next six decades.

ROBERT SCHMUEHL

front in the Great War had opened up in Ireland, and there are several tally reports about the number of people killed, wounded, taken prisoner — and executed.

De Valera's name does not appear in the dispatches sent to Asquith, even though his death sentence had been commuted.

The day after Maxwell reported to the prime minister that the court-martials were "practically finished", he reiterated — and defended — his position for the executions of James Connolly and Seán Mac Diarmada, both of whom were Proclamation signatories and major participants in the Rising.

Interestingly, Maxwell does not acknowledge de Valera's role as a commandant in his communications. Connolly and Mac Diarmada were the last two leaders executed on May 12. At the same time the final firing squads were being assembled, de Valera sat in his cell at Kilmainham Gaol, writing farewell letters to family and friends that included for some these chilling words: "Tomorrow I am to be shot."

But that tomorrow never came. De Valera escaped death and served time in British prisons before his release and the beginning of a political career that continued until 1973, when he left the presidency at age 90. Why did he wait so long to prepare his

formal statement titled 'Reprieve of Eamon de Valera'? Had the repeated references to his American background become a distraction, if not a burden, for someone identified as the dominant Irish political figure of the 20th Century?

Especially during the period when de Valera was fighting for independence, it was valuable to keep the relationship to the US in the public's mind. When he landed in New York on June 11, 1919, for an 18-month sojourn in the States to build support for an Irish republic, Irish-Americans took pride in the fact that a native son was in a central position to try to do for Ireland what the colonies in the New World accomplished at the end of the 18th Century. The Yanks also reached into their wallets to help the cause de Valera championed, as he barnstormed across the country and spoke to massive crowds.

Clarifying the details of his reprieve could wait several decades while he cultivated the mystery of his persona — and made history.

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