

## JER O'LEARY

## Diarmaid Ó Laozáire



*Courtesy of Nora Mai Fleming, niece of Jer O'Leary.*

Jeremiah O'Leary was born at Mount, a townland adjacent to Scartaglin, in 1894. He was the eldest child and only son of James O'Leary, a farmer, and Hanna Scanlon of Knockafreaghaun, Brosna. He was a bright pupil at school and an avid reader with a keen interest in scientific books. He was educated in Scartaglin National School and later worked on the family farm. He was a Volunteer in the Scartaglin Company from its foundation and his four sisters were members of Cumann na mBan.<sup>1</sup> The Scartaglin Company was attached to the 1st Battalion, Kerry No. 2 Brigade.

O'Leary came to prominence at an early stage in the Black and Tan War. He was one of those who participated in the attack on the barracks in his native village on 31 March 1920. Such was O'Leary's reputation as a leader of fighting men, that he was appointed to the position of O/C of the 1st Battalion in May 1921. This command included companies from Castleisland, Scartaglin, Cordal, Currow, Lyre, Knocknagoshel and Brosna. With a reorganisation in July 1921, O'Leary's battalion was transferred to Kerry No. 1 Brigade, as the O/C of that brigade was now Humphrey Murphy, whose native area of Currow was part of the Castleisland Battalion's remit. The Castleisland Battalion was redesignated the 7th Battalion, Kerry No. 1 Brigade, and Jer O'Leary was appointed Murphy's V/C on the brigade's staff. A fearless and popular soldier, he led his men in engagements at Scartaglin, Brosna, Glenlahern, The Black Banks, Feale's Bridge and on the streets of Castleisland.

Following the outbreak of the Civil War, Jer O'Leary and his 7th Battalion

1 Information from Alice O'Keeffe, niece of Jer O'Leary.

remained loyal to the Republican cause. As a result they suffered heavily during that conflict, with the battalion noted to have lost thirteen men either killed in action or murdered in custody from 1922 until 1924.<sup>2</sup> During the Civil War, Jer O'Leary had a dugout built beneath the outer stairs of the large three-storey house owned by his relatives, the Walsh family of Cordal.

On 24 May 1923 Frank Aiken, the IRA chief of staff following the death of Liam Lynch, ordered IRA units throughout the country to dump their arms. This followed the announcement of a ceasefire on 30 April. The military resistance to the Free State government had now officially halted and so ended the Civil War. Jer O'Leary and Seán Kerins, a battalion officer, met in Kilmurry House, owned by the Walsh family, in Cordal to discuss the matter on Monday 28 May. It seems that O'Leary was earlier at a nearby house owned by the O'Loughlin family, where he had gone to inspect a plough that his brother-in-law had recently purchased. Shortly after he reached Walshs', a large Free State force in vehicles passed the O'Loughlins' house, destined for where O'Leary and Kerins were meeting. The O'Loughlin home was adjacent to the main road and, having seen the military convoy, one of the family ran across the fields to Walshs' house to try to alert O'Leary of the imminent danger. However, by the time he reached Cordal House, it had been surrounded by Free State soldiers. As their position was hopeless and due to the fact that there were civilians in the house, O'Leary and Kerins surrendered.<sup>3</sup> They were brought to the Free State Army's headquarters in Castleisland, which was located at the fortified Hartnett's Hotel at the junction of Main Street and the Limerick road. O'Leary was detained in the guardroom of the converted building.

At 11.30 a.m. the following morning he was brought by a Captain O'Donnell to the barracks yard, which had a gate opening onto the street. The yard had been cleared of the soldiers who would usually congregate there. Having been brought into the small yard, O'Leary was ordered by an officer to close the gate which had been conspicuously left open. As he approached the gate, he was shot in the back by Lieutenant Patrick McGinn and Captain Patrick Byrne. Captain Martin Nolan, also of the Dublin Guard, fired twice

2 Irish Military Archives, pension records for the 7th Battalion, Kerry No. 1 Brigade, RO 95.

3 Information for Nora Mai Fleming, niece of Jer O'Leary.

more at the wounded man as he lay on the ground.<sup>4</sup> A woman on the street who happened to be passing near the gate witnessed the shooting. She rushed to the dying man's aid and held his head in her arms as his life slipped away. Local shopkeeper Con Browne also came to the scene and it was he who brought the news to the O'Leary family that their only son had been shot dead.<sup>5</sup> O'Leary was twenty-nine years old when he was killed on 29 May 1923.

Commandant Jeremiah O'Leary was buried in the Republican Plot in Kilbannivane Cemetery near Castleisland. His name is inscribed on the Republican memorial there amongst the men of his command. His father later bought a family grave adjacent to where his only son was buried when his wife died in 1934 and Jer O'Leary's name is inscribed on the family headstone also.<sup>6</sup> Today a plaque on the wall of Hartnett's Hotel, now the Castle Bar, marks the spot where Commandant Jeremiah O'Leary was killed by his Free State captors. Near his home in the village of Scartaglin stands a large Celtic cross erected to his memory. This was paid for by public subscription and unveiled in May 1946. On it is his name inscribed in his native language: Diarmuid Ó Laoigaire. On 29 May each year until her death, his sister, Kate O'Connor, took out the scarf that her brother wore when was killed and shed a tear.<sup>7</sup>

4 The killing was witnessed and subsequently a statement was given to the newspaper *Éire*, 7 July 1923.

5 Information from Séamus Fleming, grandnephew of Jer O'Leary.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Information from Nora Mai Fleming, niece of Jer O'Leary.

## JACK PRENDIVILLE

### Seasán de Prendiville

John (Jack) Prendiville was a native of Breahig, a townland between the small villages of Cordal and Scartaglin and three miles east of Castleisland. Jack was a Volunteer in the very active Cordal Company of the 1st Battalion, Kerry No. 2 Brigade. The Cordal area had a long history of resistance to British rule. During the Land Wars John Joe Twiss of Cordal was executed in Cork Gaol, while two other Moonlighters, Sylvester Poff and James Barrett, were hanged in Tralee. It was into this centre of rebellion that Jack Prendiville was born on 1 May 1899. His brother Denis (Daniel), who was a year older than Jack, was the second lieutenant in the company from its formation in 1917. Both would soldier together during the Tan War until the penultimate day of that conflict, when Jack was killed in action.



*Courtesy of the Martin Moore collection.*

The fight for freedom began again in Kerry in April 1918, when the men of Ballymacelligott attacked the Gortatlea RIC Barracks. Over the next year the Ballymacelligott Company and the Cordal Volunteers forged close links and formed the basis of an active service unit which operated in the Castleisland district during 1920. The Cordal men were present on 24 March 1920 when the barracks at Gortatlea was destroyed. Following this successful attack, the barracks at Scartaglin was attacked on 31 April 1920 and Jack Prendiville took part in this assault, which was to prove unsuccessful as the RIC garrison refused to surrender. On 9 June 1920 Jack Prendiville and his brother Denis were part of the attack force that laid siege to Brosna Barracks and the next day the brothers were part of the Cordal Volunteer unit which attacked a British military car at Glenlahern Cross.

## 1ST (CASTLEISLAND) BATTALION, KERRY NO. 2 BRIGADE

## 7TH (CASTLEISLAND) BATTALION, KERRY NO. 1 BRIGADE

The Irish Volunteers were founded in Castleisland in April 1914. Within a short time the Volunteer movement had been established in all the neighbouring parishes. The region around the market town of Castleisland had long been a centre of militant nationalism and was described as 'the most disturbed area in Ireland' during the Land Wars of the 1880s and early 1890s. And so it was that in the following generation the Moonlighter groups had evolved into the local IRA companies that were to be at the forefront of the fight for freedom in Kerry.

On the foundation of the Volunteers in Castleisland in 1914, a local veteran of the Land Wars, Dan O'Mahony, was appointed O/C. O'Mahony had gone into exile in the United States following his involvement with the Moonlighter movement and subsequently had travelled to South Africa, where he supported the Boer cause in their fight with Britain. Having spent time as a 'big game' hunter, he returned to Castleisland and, despite his age, was regarded as the natural leader of the East Kerry section of the Kerry Brigade of the recently established Irish Volunteers. At Easter 1916 O'Mahony led his men to Camp, three miles from Castleisland, when they mobilised for the Rising. However, he was obliged to send them home again as the elaborate scheme to land arms at Fenit had unravelled and the rebellion in Kerry had failed before it could begin.

From 1917 onwards there was a significant influx of recruits into the Irish Volunteers as the Rising had woken a people from its apathy towards the cause of national independence. In 1919 the single Kerry regiment of Irish Volunteers was divided into three brigades. Castleisland's Dan O'Mahony was appointed O/C of the Kerry No. 2 Brigade and he was also the commander of the local battalion. His deputy was Humphrey 'Free' Murphy of Currow.

The area around Castleisland was designated the 1st Battalion and it remained under O'Mahony's command until a reorganisation of brigade staff in January 1921.

Andy Cooney, an organiser from GHQ in Dublin, arrived in Castleisland in early January 1921 to reorganise and reinvigorate the brigade as the war intensified. O'Mahony was willing to step aside to allow younger men to come to the fore. Humphrey Murphy became O/C of the Kerry No. 2 Brigade and Timothy O'Connor became the O/C of the 1st Battalion. Dan McCarthy was initially the battalion vice-commandant, but in a short time this role was taken by Richard (Dick) Shanahan. David Griffin was the battalion adjutant and John O'Mahony was the quartermaster. In May 1921 further changes were made for a variety of reasons. Jeremiah O'Leary of Scartaglin became O/C, a position that he held until his murder in custody following the end of the Civil War. David McCarthy of Cordal became his V/C and Dick Shanahan of Castleisland was the adjutant. John Walsh of Lyre, Currow, was the 1st Battalion's quartermaster.

The 1st Battalion was composed of companies from Castleisland and the surrounding parishes. There were Volunteer companies in Brosna, Knocknagoshel, Cordal, Castleisland, Scartaglin, Currow and Lyreacrompane. In July 1921 Humphrey Murphy replaced Andy Cooney as O/C of the Kerry No. 1 Brigade. As Murphy was from Currow and the Castleisland area was his powerbase, it was decided to transfer much of the 1st Battalion to the Kerry No. 1 Brigade. Thus this portion of the original battalion became the 7th Battalion, Kerry No. 1 Brigade. The Ballymacelligott Company was transferred to this new 7th Battalion from the 2nd (Firies) Battalion, Kerry No. 2 Brigade. Scartaglin remained in the Kerry No. 2 Brigade and together with companies from Rathnanane, Currow, Anabla and Knockrour it formed the reorganised 1st Battalion of Kerry No. 2 Brigade. However, in practice such units were separate only on paper, as the active Volunteers moved and fought throughout the Castleisland district as the situation demanded.

The 1st Battalion was one of the most prominent units in the Tan War. In June 1920 there was an attempt to attack the Brosna RIC Barracks. Following the failure of the initial assault, the attackers returned two weeks later and unsuccessfully laid siege to the building. Scartaglin Barracks was attacked in

March 1920 and, though not captured, this prompted the RIC to abandon the post. The topography around Castleisland favoured guerrilla tactics and the 1st Battalion waged constant warfare on the forces of the crown. With the formation of the flying column of the Kerry No. 2 Brigade in March 1921, several experienced Volunteers from the battalion saw action with this column during attacks at Headford Junction and Clonbanin Cross. The formation of a battalion active service unit in the late spring of that year resulted in further significant attacks on the crown forces, both on the streets of Castleisland and in the surrounding countryside. On the eve of the Truce, a large-scale attack on a military patrol on Castleisland's Main Street resulted in five British fatalities, but three members of Humphrey Murphy's force were also killed.

The 7th Battalion, as it now was, remained committed to the Republican cause following the division that occurred as a result of the Treaty. Castleisland was captured by Free State forces on 5 August 1922 and they established their garrison in Hartnett's Hotel at the corner of Main Street and the Limerick road. The Free State detachment stationed there soon gained a reputation for brutality as they attempted to quash resistance in an area where popular support was given to the local Republican fighters. The Free State Army suffered significant casualties in the ongoing conflict and it, in turn, responded by summarily executing several Republican prisoners who had the misfortune to fall into their hands. It is probable that the 7th Battalion area suffered more than all other areas of the county and, perhaps, in Ireland as a whole, as the Civil War dragged on to its bloody conclusion. The ceasefire of 30 April 1923 didn't halt the killing, as Commandant Jeremiah O'Leary of Scartaglin was shot dead while in custody at Hartnett's Hotel three weeks after the IRA had silenced its weapons.

## MICHAEL BROSINAN

Mícheál Ó Broisnán<sup>1</sup>

Michael Brosnan was a native of Castleisland. He was born on 24 November 1900 and he followed in his father's footsteps earning his living as a cobbler. He was a member of the Castleisland Company of the 1st Battalion, Kerry No. 2 Brigade. His activities made him the focus of RIC interest and he was forced to leave his native town. He moved to Rathoneen, near Ardfert, where he lived with his aunt, Margaret Collins. This townland near Banna Strand was where Roger Casement was captured in 1916 and would be the site of several killings during the Civil War.

The first week of November 1920 saw a dramatic increase in attacks on the crown forces throughout North Kerry. This resulted in several RIC fatalities as IRA Volunteers became increasingly active in the villages north of Tralee. The intensification of the conflict provoked a harsh response from the RIC, who were now supported by Black and Tans. Hampered by the abandonment of many of their rural barracks, including that in Ardfert, the RIC were forced to patrol the hostile countryside in military vehicles and in large numbers to prevent guerrilla attacks.

On 8 November 1920 one such RIC convoy entered the village of Ardfert, arriving by two different routes. Their sudden arrival surprised the villagers, as the RIC had carried out raids in the village three days previously following an attack on Causeway Barracks. They detained Michael Brosnan at his workplace. They also arrested John Cantillon, an Ardfert IRA Volunteer who was going to the doctor in the village that morning, and another local man, Maurice (Mossy) McElligott. The three prisoners were placed on the police vehicles to be used as hostages when the convoy moved off in the direction of Rathoneen, where further raids were carried out.<sup>2</sup>

Returning towards Ardfert, the convoy stopped and the three men were ordered out of the Crossley tender and were brought into a field at the edge

1 There is no known photograph of Michael Brosnan.

2 Patrick Sheehan, BMH WS 1088.

of the village near the old school. This field is now the Hazel Grove housing estate. The Black and Tans ordered Michael Brosnan and John Cantillon to run, but the RIC officer standing in front of Mossy McElligott advised him not to move for his own safety. Brosnan and Cantillon were both shot dead after they had run about fifty yards. Their bodies were described as having been riddled with bullets. McElligott, although he received a beating from his captors, survived the ordeal. The Black and Tans then crossed the field and, going over a stile, entered O'Sullivan's public house, now Kate Browne's, by the back door. There they demanded free drink from the publican.<sup>3</sup>

Michael Brosnan's remains were returned to his native Castleisland and he is buried in the Republican Plot at Kilbannivane Cemetery. The Republican monument in Ardfert is adjacent to where this Castleisland man gave his life for Ireland's freedom.

3 Information from Tommy O'Connor, local historian.

## PATRICK BUCKLEY

### Ṗάτρικς Ó Ḑυάκλλη

Patrick Buckley was born near Tournafulla in West Limerick. He joined the RIC in 1909 and by 1916 he was stationed in Farranfore Barracks. He had no nationalist sympathies and had a reputation as a stern constable in a district that had been a hotbed of Moonlighter resistance to British rule a generation earlier. Following the Rising in Dublin a proclamation was issued stating that persons holding firearms should surrender these to the RIC before 6 May 1916. Buckley was one of two constables from Farranfore to journey to nearby Currans to post the proclamations, while another pair travelled the two miles to Firies village to issue the order there. The latter RIC men were met by local Irish Volunteer, Jim Riordan of Longfield, as they walked along the village street. Riordan shot and seriously injured both of them with his pistol before they could react. Jim Riordan went 'on the run' and Constable Patrick Buckley was to the forefront in attempts to capture him and his brother, Paddy Riordan, the Firies Company captain. Constable Buckley went to the extreme of going undercover in the district in an attempt to apprehend the Riordan brothers, dead or alive. However, the two Firies Volunteers evaded capture, with Jim escaping initially to America and later to Australia, where he died in 1947.<sup>1</sup>

Such was Buckley's antipathy to the Volunteers in the Farranfore area that he quickly became a figure of hatred and was transferred to Sixmilebridge in County Clare for his own safety. In 1917 he gave evidence against some Clare Volunteers who were tried for illegal drilling, but, following this episode, he

1 *The Kerryman*, 27 November 1948.



*Courtesy of the Martin Moore collection.*