

# "Coldly and deliberately planned"

## Where it began. The meeting in the Gaelic League Library, September 1914

**By Ed Mulhall**

On the 9th September 1914 at 25 Parnell Square (then Rutland Square) in the library of the Gaelic League, which future President S.T. O'Kelly used as his office, the seven future signatories of the 1916 proclamation met together for the first time to discuss insurrection. Speaking a decade after the Rising, in New York, O'Kelly declared that the Rising was a "coldly and deliberately planned affair" and he points to this meeting as the moment when the intention to rise during the War was first agreed upon by a group representing "all shades of advanced nationalist political thought in Ireland" and who "pledged themselves and their organisations to do all in their power to carry on the agreement arrived at and to prepare the public mind for the great event that was to come."<sup>1</sup>

At the meeting in addition to the seven signatories Tom Clarke, Seán McDermott, Joseph Plunkett, P.H. Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, Éamonn Ceannt and James Connolly - were Arthur Griffith, Major John MacBride, labour activist William O'Brien and possibly IRB men, Seán McGarry and Seán Tobin.<sup>2</sup>

Accounts of the meeting come from two of the survivors of the Rising, Seán T. O'Kelly and William O'Brien and - while there is some difference of recollection on details and who was responsible for instigating the meeting - both are at one as regards its significance and particularly in linking the leadership of the Citizen Army and the more militant members of the Volunteers.<sup>3</sup>

According to O'Brien:

"Connolly (who was living in Belfast as Secretary of the ITGWU) came to Dublin early in August and spoke to me about the desirability of acting with all those who would favour organising an insurrection. He told me that he had seen a number of people who were of the same mind. On his mentioning their names, I advised that they were not of sufficient importance and that nothing could be done without the co-operation of such men as Tom Clarke and Seán McDermott. He asked me if I could put him in touch with the right people, and I undertook to do so. I discussed the matter with my brother, Daniel O'Brien, who was an officer in the Irish Volunteers. As a result, I saw Éamonn Ceannt with whom we were well acquainted, and who was a member of the Executive of the Irish Volunteers as well as a

leading member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. He undertook to arrange a conference for Connolly and myself to attend<sup>4</sup>

O'Kelly, a member of the IRB but not on its Supreme Council, was approached by Tom Clarke and Seán McDermott to allow his office to be used for an important meeting.

“They explained that they wanted a meeting of representatives of the different National bodies whom they regarded as anti-War, and they wished this to take place as secretly as possible ...I asked what the purpose of the meeting was and they said to try and get the heads or at any rate the influential leaders amongst their sections of progressive National organisations together to consider what action should be taken by these in view of the outbreak of the European War. From my conversation with these two members of the Supreme Council of the IRB I gathered it was their intention to try and organise the progressive or as others might call them the extreme Nationalist element to work together to promote certain activities they had in mind toward achieving independence while the war continued.”\*<sup>5</sup>

O'Kelly insisted that the meeting was at the initiative of these republican leaders and it was their intention to have a broad representation with Sinn Féin, the Volunteers and Citizen Army members attending as well as those already in the IRB. Whoever instigated it the choice of attendees was significant. The IRB was represented by its most powerful leaders Clarke and McDermott but others such as Pearse and McDonagh were prominent among the Volunteers and particularly those opposed to the co-option of Redmond's representatives into its leadership. The presence of Griffith was notable but most importantly Connolly as leader of the Labour movement and the Citizen army was also present. Clarke had not long before been quite dismissive of the Citizen Army to his U.S. partners but here they met to develop common cause.<sup>6</sup>

The meeting was chaired by Tom Clarke, who O'Kelly says put the meeting in the context of the War, the efforts being made to recruit in Ireland and the "necessity for the National forces to take united action to prevent recruiting and that steps should be taken to use the war to endeavor to secure the independence of Ireland." <sup>7</sup> According to O'Brien "Connolly advocated making definite preparations for organising an insurrection" and, in connection therewith, getting in touch with Germany with a view to military support.

A discussion took place as to the desirability of this, and also whether there should not be an agitation conducted through an open organisation. “<sup>8</sup>

O'Kelly who said he has 'hazy' recollection of Connolly at the meeting was clear that all present were in agreement that "a joint effort by all the progressive nationalist organisations

that favoured independence should be made before the end of the war to do everything possible to secure independence." <sup>9</sup> He emphasised that Griffith was in full agreement with this approach.

As O'Kelly revealed over ten years later:

"At that meeting it was decided that a Rising should take place in Ireland, if the German army invaded Ireland; secondly if England attempted to enforce conscription on Ireland; and thirdly if the war were coming to an end and the Rising had not already taken place, we should rise in revolt, declare war on England and when the conference was held to settle the terms of peace, we should claim to be represented as a belligerent nation." <sup>10</sup>

In his statement to the Bureau of Military history he provides some added details on the first of these:

"It was agreed that the British should be resisted with force if they attempted to disarm the Volunteers, It was agreed that if the Germans made a landing in Ireland that the bodies represented at the meeting should agree to work with the Germans provided a formal and satisfactory statement could be got from the Government of Germany pledging themselves if they landed in Ireland only to land there so as to help the Irish to expel the British from Ireland and to win complete independence. It was agreed if such a declaration could be got from the German Government a German armed force would be welcomed in Ireland to help end British domination. It was certainly agreed that on no account would the Germans be helped unless an open declaration was received from them through their Government that they did not intend to land in Ireland in order to occupy it permanently." <sup>11</sup>

The meeting decided to form two sub-committees, one secret which would endeavor to make contact with Germany and make other plans, and the other to establish an open organisation to be used for propaganda purposes and as a recruiting ground for the secret movement. This public organisation was the "Irish Neutrality League" which had James Connolly as President, O'Kelly as Secretary, with Griffith, O'Brien on its committee, together with Countess Markievicz and Francis Sheehy Skeffington. They had a number of meetings which were addressed by Major McBride, Thomas Ashe, Miss Wyse Power and committee members while it lasted. According to O'Brien it popularised the wearing of the republican colours - green white and orange. <sup>12</sup>

However, it was the regular secret contact (between those who had attended the Gaelic League Library meeting) that was to be its lasting effect.

Joseph Plunkett was to say that a long conversation with Connolly after one of the meetings convinced him that he "was the most intellectual and the greatest man he knew in every way" <sup>13</sup> Nora Connolly was sent later that year to America with confidential messages for the IRB leadership there. <sup>14</sup> A secret military planning committee was established, initially comprising Pearse, Plunkett and Ceannt, then adding Clarke and McDermott. The following year, around the time of the funeral of Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, Seán McGarry was able to alert Tom Clarke to Connolly's impatience at the slowness of developments which led to Clarke bringing Connolly into closer confidence and eventually onto the military committee which McDonagh also joined. <sup>15</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the first meeting, the group met again to plan to disrupt the appearance of Prime Minister Asquith with John Redmond at a recruiting meeting in the Mansion House. The plan was to use a joint Volunteer/ Citizen Army force to occupy the building the night before so as to prevent its use. (They had also planned to get the electricity cut off). About 100 or so gathered in the Foresters' Hall and Liberty Hall on the night before the meeting (including two future Irish Free State ministers, Richard Mulcahy and Joseph McGrath). O'Kelly does recall close co-ordination with Connolly at this event, with a decision eventually to abandon the due to the security already in place at the Mansion House. <sup>16</sup> (The same evening, 24th September, in an operation organised by Clarke and McDermott, those opposed to Redmond took over the Volunteer's headquarters. That day also saw the members of the Provisional Committee issue their repudiation of Redmond's strategy, signatories included Pearse, Plunkett, Ceannt and MacDermott as well as Eoin MacNeill and Bulmer Hobson. If the takeover of the Mansion House had happened as planned these three events together would have been a significant statement of intent. The Volunteer split followed in November. <sup>17</sup>)

There were not to be many such co-operative ventures between the Citizen Army and the Volunteers between then and Easter 1916 (O'Donovan Rossa's funeral being an exception) but during that period there developed a growing trust between the core group who had gathered in the Gaelic League library that September and a common objective: to act.

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<sup>1</sup> Seán T. O'Kelly speech, Wallachs Theatre, New York, April 4th 1926, published in *An Phoblacht*, April 30th 1926,

in S T O'Ceallaigh papers NLI MS 27,716

<sup>2</sup> McGarry and Tobin both included by O'Kelly not O'Brien see MS 27,702/2 Both were IRB: McGarry was a close associate of Tom Clarke and Tobin had been involved in assisting the Howth Gun running operation in Dublin.

<sup>3</sup> Apart from the emphasis discussed the main difference is that O'Kelly does not include Connolly in his first account of the meeting in his New York speech. However having read O'Brien's account he says he has a 'hazy

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recollection' of Connolly being there and includes this in his Witness statement which is his definite account. O'Brien is emphatic that the purpose of the meeting was to have Connolly meet the Republican leaders. O'Kelly's papers in the NLI include his copies of O'Brien's account from Labour News and his Witness statement.

<sup>4</sup> William O'Brien, *Labour News*, May 1<sup>st</sup> 1937. Reprinted in William O'Brien, *Forth the Banners Go*, Dublin, 1969.

<sup>5</sup> Witness Statement S T O Kelly, BMW, WS 1765

<sup>6</sup> For Clarke's view of the Citizen army see Tom Clarke to John Devoy, May 14th 1914, John Devoy's Post Bag (edited by Desmond Ryan and William O'Brien), Dublin 1948.

<sup>7</sup> BMW WS 1765

<sup>8</sup> O'Brien, 1969

<sup>9</sup> BM WS 1765

<sup>10</sup> *An Phoblacht* April 30th 1926,

<sup>11</sup> BM WS 1765

<sup>12</sup> O'Brien, 1969

<sup>13</sup> Geraldine Plunkett Dillon, *All in the Blood*, Honor Ó Brolcháin (ed.) Dublin 2007 p 164.)

<sup>14</sup> Nora Connolly O'Brien, *James Connolly, Portrait of a Rebel Father*, Dublin 1935

<sup>15</sup> Charles Townsend, *Easter 1916*, London 2005 p 95, Sean McGarry Witness Statement WS 368).

<sup>16</sup> BM WS 1765

<sup>17</sup> F. X. Martin, *The Irish Volunteers*, Dublin 1963 p. 152-155; Louis N. Le Roux, *Tom Clarke and the Irish freedom movement* (Dublin, 1936)