

# THE Fianna Heroes of 1916

*"There is but one life worth living—an Irish life; and one death worth dying—a hero's death."*

WHEN the Irish Volunteers raised the banner of freedom in Easter Week, 1916, and took over many public buildings in the name of the Irish Republic,



**CON COLBERT.**

it was not only grown-up men and women who answered the call to arms. Young boys, little more than children, cheerfully offered their services and their lives in the sacred cause.

Two of these boys, Sean Heuston and Con Colbert, were executed as leaders, while Jack Healy, Sean Howard, Gerald Keogh, Fred Ryan, James Fox, and Brendan Donnellan were killed in the fight.

**SEAN HEUSTON** was born in Monalena, Athea, Co. Limerick. He went to school to the Christian Brothers, and after a brilliant Intermediate Course he went into the service of the Great Southern and Western Railway Company.

In 1910, a year after the formation of the Fianna, he organised a strong branch of the organization in Limerick.

All his spare time he spent in the little hall, drilling, giving lectures and in general making the work so interesting for the boys that in a short time he had one of the largest sluaighs in Ireland, with 250 boys.

In 1913 he came back to Dublin, where he met Liam Mellows and Con Colbert, two other leaders of the Fianna. He was given command of a slough in the north side of the city, which held its parades in Hardwicke Hall. He shortly afterwards became Vice-Commandant of the Dublin Brigade, and Director of Training on G.H.Q. Staff.

On the Sunday of the Howth gun-running, July 26th, 1914, Sean was in charge of the transport—in other words, of the Fianna trek-cart, which has since become famous on account of the part it played that day. It was fully loaded with rifles from the White Yacht, and in spite of every effort by the British

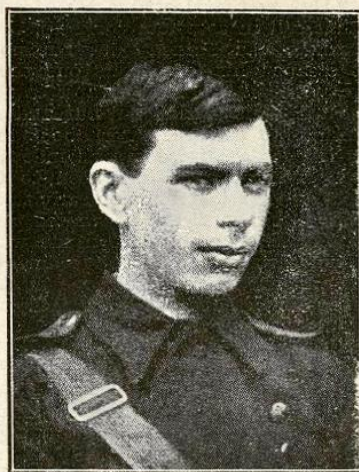
enemy to capture it, the trek-cart brought its cargo safely into Dublin.

When the Volunteers were organized in 1914 he offered them his services and was very soon appointed O/C. D. Coy., 1st Batt. His labours were now divided between the Fianna and the Volunteers. On parade days he was to be seen drilling companies of men like an experienced soldier, with a seriousness and determination of manner which added much to the discipline of his parade.

## Easter Week.

On Easter Monday, at a few minutes after noon, Captain Sean Heuston, with about a dozen volunteers, took possession of the Mendicity Institution, Usher's Island (formerly Moira House, where Lord Edward Fitzgerald often stayed before his arrest) in the name of the Irish Republic. He immediately ordered the building to be fortified, while he himself and three others went out and erected a barricade on the quays to hinder the advance of the enemy. The idea in taking possession of this building was to use it as an outpost to engage the enemy while the Irish Republican troops in the Four Courts were making preparations for an effective resistance. But Heuston and his men were only barely back in the building when a party of British troops, the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, from the Royal Barracks, appeared down the quays on their way to attack the Four Courts. Heuston and his men opened fire and the enemy, taken completely by surprise by the fusillade, scattered in all directions.

Many of the enemy were killed. British reinforcements, however, were quickly rushed to the scene, they surrounded the building and opened such a fierce attack that the brave little garrison gave up all thoughts of returning to the Four Courts and



**SEAN HEUSTON.**

concentrated instead on defending their own position. This was not easy, as their numbers were few and their supply of ammunition very limited. All through

the night the fight continued and there was little sleep for the Volunteers, as they were all needed on duty.

Late on Tuesday evening, a small detachment of men, sent by Commandant James Connolly from the G.P.O., managed to fight their way through to the relief of the Volunteers in the Mendicity Institution. They brought with them some welcome ammunition and messages of courage and hope from Padraig Pearse.

On Wednesday, Sean Heuston and his gallant little band of about 20 men surrendered to the British enemy. After they had laid down their arms and were walking out behind the white flag, an English soldier, violating the rules of war, shot dead one of the Volunteers, Peter Wilson, of Swords.

In most countries, claiming to be cultured, soldiers who surrender, or are overpowered and captured in arms, are interned and kept as military prisoners until the war is over. But England and England's successors, the Free State, ignored the rules of war and shot their soldier prisoners.

Ten days after his surrender, on Saturday, May 6th, Sean Heuston and his Fianna comrade, Con Colbert, were tried by court-martial and sentenced to be shot.

Father Albert, who has since died in exile, has left an account of Sean Heuston's last night on earth. He wrote: "On Sunday night, May 7th, 1916, Father Augustine and myself were notified that we would be required at Kilmainham Jail the following morning, as four of the leaders of the Rising were to be executed.

"At 1.30 a.m. a military motor car came for us to Church Street, and on our arrival at Kilmainham we were brought to the wing of the jail in which our friends were confined. Father Augustine went to Eamon Kent's cell and I to Commandant M. Mallin's. I did not remain long, as he was on his knees in prayer with two friends. Having visited Con Colbert and Eamon Kent, I went to Sean Heuston's cell at about 3.20 a.m. He was kneeling beside a small table with his Rosary beads in his hand. On the table was a little piece of candle and some letters which he had just written to near relatives and friends. He wore his overcoat, as the morning was extremely cold, and none of these men received those little comforts that are provided for even the greatest criminals while awaiting sentence of death. During that last quarter of an hour we knelt in that cell in complete darkness, as the little piece of candle had burned out; but no word of complaint escaped his lips. His one thought was to prepare with all the fervour and earnestness of his soul to meet his Divine Saviour and His sweet Virgin Mother, to whom he was about to offer up his young life for the freedom and independence of his beloved country. He had been to Confession and had received Holy Communion early that morning and was not afraid to die. He awaited the end not only with that calmness and fortitude which peace of mind brings to noble souls, but during the last quarter of an hour he spoke of soon meeting again Padraig Mac Piarais and the other leaders who had already gone before him.

"We said together short Acts of Faith, Hope, Contrition and Love; we prayed together to St. Patrick, St. Brigid, St. Columcille and all the saints of Ireland: we said many times that beautiful little ejaculatory prayer, 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I give you my heart and soul, etc.,' which appealed very much to him. But, though he prayed with such fervour for courage and strength in the ordeal that was at hand, Ireland and his friends were close to his soul. He loved his own unto the end.

"In his last letter to his sister—a Dominican Nun—he wrote: 'Let there be no talk of "foolish enterprises." I have no vain regrets. If you really love

me, teach the children the history of their own land, and teach them that the cause of *Caitlin Ni hUallachain* never dies. Ireland shall be free from the centre to the sea, as soon as the people of Ireland believe in the necessity of Ireland's freedom, and are prepared to make the necessary sacrifices to obtain it.'

"In his last message to me he said: 'Remember me to the boys of the Fianna.' At about 3.45 a.m. a British soldier knocked at the door of the cell and told us the time was up. We both walked out together, down to the end of the large open space from which a corridor runs to the jail yard: here his hands were tied behind his back, a cloth placed over his eyes, and a small piece of white paper, about four or five inches square, pinned to his coat over his heart. Having reached a second yard, I saw there another group of military, armed with rifles. Some of these were standing and some sitting or kneeling. A soldier directed Seán and myself to a corner of the yard, a short distance from the outer wall of the prison. Here there was a box (seemingly a soap box), and Seán was told to sit down upon it. He was perfectly calm, and said with me for the last time: 'My Jesus, mercy!' I scarcely had moved away a few yards when a volley went off, and this noble soldier of Irish Freedom fell dead. I rushed over to anoint him; his whole face seemed transformed and lit up with a grandeur and brightness that I had never before noticed."

#### CON COLBERT.

Con Colbert, who was executed the same morning as Sean Heuston, was born in Monalena, Co. Limerick, in 1893.

While he was still quite young he came to live in Dublin, and when the Fianna was formed in 1909 he threw his whole energy into the organization. He was quickly appointed Captain of a sluagh, becoming first Captain of Fianna Eireann, which came to be known as the best sluagh in Ireland. Although his sluagh was the last to buy uniforms it was the first to be fully equipped with arms and camping outfit.

Con Colbert believed that the more you taught the boys the more enthusiastic they became and practically every night in the week he gave them classes in either small arms signalling, scouting, map reading, First Aid; while on bright starry nights he brought them up the mountains where they held practical experiments of finding their way by the stars.

Every Sunday he took some of the Fianna boys up the Dublin mountains, far beyond the pine trees, to the grouse and the heather, where after strenuous military manoeuvres they would sit around their camp fire, tell stories of Ireland's many fights for freedom and wonder whether they also might get the chance to strike a blow.

As Con Colbert grew older he also joined the Volunteers, and became a Captain. Padraig Pearse called him the "Gallant Captain Colbert," and he thought so much of him that he asked him to drill his boys at St. Enda's School. This school was at some distance from Dublin, and Colbert had very little free time of his own, but whether it rained, hailed, or snowed, Colbert never failed to turn up. Once, Padraig Pearse, as tactfully as he could, suggested that Con Colbert should accept some remuneration for his work, but Con immediately got so angry at the idea of being asked to accept payment for the work he was doing for Ireland, that Padraig Pearse went no further with the subject.

Now, both Seán Heuston and Con Colbert were very lucky to have as a friend the wonderful Tom Clarke, one of the finest men in Irish history. This great, little, old man must have had an inspiring effect on these two young boys just beginning a life of work for Ireland. What an example he was to any man!

He had spent 15½ years suffering the cruellest imprisonment in England's worst dungeons, and came out unconquered and unconquerable. He ran a little tobacconist and newsagent shop at the corner of Parnell and O'Connell Streets, and Heuston, who lived quite near, at Fontenoy Street, was a constant visitor.

England's spies in the police force also knew this shop, and watched and noted every one who went in. After the Rising, these human blood suckers betrayed their own countrymen to the enemy and sent some to their death.

#### **A Travelling Man.**

Con. Colbert spent all his holidays cycling from village to village, like the "man from God knows where" in his native county, Limerick. At first he formed sloughs of the Fianna, and later companies of volunteers. Owing to his keen sense of humour and love of fun, he was a great favourite everywhere. Indeed, if he had not been so gay, one would be inclined to say he was too holy, as he neither drank nor smoked, and was always denying himself the good things of life. Often he gave up meat all during Lent. Indeed, it is even known that he deprived himself of the necessities of life in order to give the money for arms. He was as thoughtful and careful not to give trouble as Cathal Brugha. Miss Daly, of Limerick, tells how on Christmas morning, 1915, Con turned up at her house at 7 a.m. in the morning. He had travelled from Dublin by the mail train, which arrived about 3 a.m., and rather than disturb his friends at that unearthly hour he walked around the streets until he thought they would be up.

#### **Easter Week, 1916.**

Although he was only 23 years of age when the Irish Volunteers proclaimed the Irish Republic in 1916, Con. Colbert was given command of the *Marrowbone Lane Area*, one of the most important outposts connected with the South Dublin Union. The military purpose in invading this area was to cut off the approach of the enemy from the south and east. It was no easy matter to achieve this, as there was a perfect maze of streets in this particular area. Con. Colbert, however, had not studied the geography of Dublin for nothing, and he managed not only to take over houses commanding all approaches but he also succeeded in maintaining a line of communication between them.

Some fierce fighting took place in this area, and continued from Monday, 24th April, until the following Saturday, the 29th, when Con. Colbert got Pearse's signed order to surrender for the sake of the lives of the Dublin people.

#### **Court-Martialled.**

On the following Saturday, May 6th, Con. Colbert was tried by military court-martial and sentenced to death.

But, as in the case of Sean Heuston, no one thought that such young boys would be executed. It was thought that even British vengeance would be satisfied with the eight victims who had already been shot for the part they took in the Rising.

All through the long Saturday and Sunday, Con. Colbert and Seán Heuston, alone in their separate cells in Kilmainham Jail, passed their last few hours awaiting the final call. What were their thoughts as the hours fled on in these cold and dimly-lit cells? Did they think their deaths would be in vain? If they could only have looked into the future they would have seen that their names would go down to history, that they would be remembered for ever as the two great Fianna Heroes of 1916.

Many boys, if they knew they had to die within twenty-four hours, would become terrified; but Heuston and Colbert knew that in serving their country they had served their God, and that they had nothing to fear in going before The Just Judge.

Father Augustine, who was called in to administer

to Heuston and Colbert, has left a description of Colbert's last moments. He wrote: "While my left arm linked the prisoner's right, and while I was whispering something in his ear, a soldier approached to fix a piece of paper on his breast. While this was being done he looked down, and then addressing the soldier in a cool and perfectly natural way, said: 'Wouldn't it be better to put it up higher—nearer the heart?' The soldier said something in reply, and then added: 'Give me your hand, now.' The prisoner seemed confused and extended his left hand. 'Not that,' said the soldier, 'but the right.' The right was accordingly extended, and having grasped and shaken it warmly, the kindly, human-hearted soldier proceeded to gently bind the prisoner's hands and afterwards blindfolded him.

"Some minutes later, my arm still linked in his, and accompanied by another priest, we entered the dark corridor leading to a yard, and, his lips moving in prayer, the brave lad went forth to die."

#### **SEAN HEALY, aged 15.**

The youngest martyr of 1916 was John Healy, who was only 15 years of age when he died for Ireland. He was born in Phibsboro' in 1901, and went to St. Peter's, Phibsboro'. While he was still very young his imagination was fired by the story of the Fianna of long ago, and he longed for the time when he would be big enough to join the Fianna of his own day.

When he was thirteen he joined a slough in the north side of Dublin, and had the honour of being drilled by Sean Heuston. He scarcely ever missed a parade up to Easter, 1916.

On Easter Saturday night he helped his father to remove guns and ammunition from one side of the city to the other in readiness for the coming Rising. He was not home from this dangerous work until 4 o'clock on Sunday morning.

All day Easter Monday he waited and watched for his mobilisation order, which never came. The Fianna Executive had issued orders not to mobilise the young members of the Fianna for action, and had even arranged for a special route march for the very young boys to keep them away from the fighting area.

Losing all patience at being, as he thought, forgotten, he left his home on Tuesday morning and made his way across town to Jacob's Factory, held by Commandant Tomas MacDonagh and his volunteers. When he was there for some hours he was given a message to carry to the officer commanding the volunteers defending Phibsboro' Bridge. Very probably he was given this despatch to take to his own district in the hope that he would go home when he had delivered his message. As a matter of fact he ran in home on his way to the Bridge to tell his mother that he was all right. Only delaying a few moments he left again in high spirits and had only gone a few hundred yards to where he was shot by the enemy at the Phibsboro' Corner. His dying words were: "God bless the Volunteers."

#### **SEAN HOWARD, aged 17.**

Seán Howard was born in 1899. He went to the Christian Brothers' Schools, and had a brilliant Intermediate Course, taking Honours in Irish and French. Irish and Irish History were his favourite subjects, and at a Father Mathew Feis he was awarded prizes for Storytelling and History in Irish.

In 1914 he went to London as boy clerk. Here he was also successful, being quickly promoted, and in 1915 he returned to Dublin with a good position in the Land Commission. But before very long he was asked to take an oath of allegiance to the British King, and as he, of course, refused on principle, he was dismissed.

Sean Howard took part in some of the most daring and courageous exploits carried out during that week of wonderful deeds. With a few sticks of gelignite he and a few other members of the Fianna blew up a

bridge by which the enemy hoped to advance on the Four Courts.

He was defending a barricade in the open streets when he was shot dead.

#### GERALD KEOGH.

Gerald Keogh, Fianna and Volunteer, was only 20 years old when he was shot dead while on active service in 1916.

He was educated at the Christian Brothers' Schools, Synge Street, and at Pearse's College, St. Enda's.



SEAN HEALY.

He was the son of a Fenian, and many a winter's night as he sat at a cosy fire he got his father to tell him the story of that snowy night in March, 1867, when the Fenians rose against British rule in Ireland. He had heard how that Rising failed owing to the terrible weather and the failure of some orders to reach the proper people. Young Gerald, when he heard this, prayed to God to give fine weather for the next attempt. God heard his prayer and sent the most gorgeous weather in Easter Week 1916.

Very soon after joining the Fianna he became an officer, and in 1914 passed from the Fianna to the Volunteers. On Easter Monday he answered the call to arms and was with those who took over the G.P.O. shortly after noon.

Late on Easter Monday night he was sent by Commandant Padraig Pearse for a contingent of fifty men to Larkfield. On the way he went to Confession at Clarendon Street. Returning with two others to the Post Office towards dawn, he was shot dead in front of Trinity College.

#### FRED RYAN, aged 17.

Fred Ryan was 17 years of age when he died for Ireland in Easter Week, 1916. At the age of 12 he joined the Fianna sluaigh which met in Skipper's Alley, Dublin. On the formation of the Irish Volunteers in 1914, he became a Volunteer and for a while was a member of both organisations.

Later when he came to know James Connolly he joined the Citizen Army and being one of their most enthusiastic soldiers was mobilised to defend Liberty Hall. The Hall was attacked from land and sea, from the latter by the British gunboat *The Helga*, now

called *The Muirchu* by England's successors. The British enemy, however, wasted all their ammunition in this attack as the Volunteers had evacuated it on Monday.

Fred Ryan went with Commandant Michael Mallin and Madame de Markievicz to Stephen's Green. While covering the retreat of his comrades from Stephen's Green to the College of Surgeons, he was shot dead at the corner of Harcourt Street.

#### JAMES FOX, aged 16.

James Fox was born at his father's residence, Spencer Arms Hotel, Drumree, Co. Meath. He went to school at Dunshaughlin, and later to Christian Brothers, Marino. He was especially fond of Irish and Irish history. He joined the Fianna and the Irish Volunteers almost at the same time.

Shortly before the Rising he won a Sword, in a shooting competition run by his Battalion, the 1st Battalion of the Irish Volunteers.

At the time of the Rising he was only sixteen years of age, and owing to his youth, his father was at first opposed to his taking the field, but finally yielded to his continued entreaties.

In accordance with his own wish he went out with the Citizen Army, and was one of the party stationed on the north side of Stephen's Green, near the Grafton Street gate. Early on Easter Tuesday morning he was shot dead in a trench opposite the United Service Club.

#### BRENDAN DONELAN, aged 18.

Brendan Donelan was born near Loughrea, Galway, in 1898. He had only been about four years in Dublin and a few months in the Irish Volunteers when the Easter Week Rising took place.

When he received his mobilisation order on Easter Monday, he nobly responded to the call to arms and was on his way to report to the South Dublin Union when he was shot dead on the very first day of the Rising.

Such are the stories of the lives of the boys of the Fianna who died in Easter Week, 1916.

Many boys and girls of to-day regret that they did not live fifteen years ago, as they think they also might have been heroes and heroines. They foolishly think that there is nothing for them to do in these days. They make a great mistake. Ireland to-day, needs heroes more than she ever did before. But heroes are not made in a day.

The very fact of your reading this shows that you also are anxious to be a hero for Ireland. So begin at once to train yourself to think honestly, to deny yourself and make sacrifices in small things in preparation for the big things which will later be asked of you.

Every boy over 8 years of age should join the Fianna, the young army of Ireland, whose object is to re-establish the Irish Republic. The Fianna are striving to build up a brotherhood of young Irishmen who, like their ancestors the Fianna of old, are strong of limb and fleet of foot, chivalrous, keen of intellect, cultured. "No Fian ever told a lie—no Fian ever turned his back on a foe."

And as Truth and Justice are not to be found without the love of God and one's neighbours, the Fianna love God and the people of Ireland and all other people, too, for that. They love and respect their language, music, pastimes and good customs, their history and their motherland.

*Easter, 1931.*

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