

INTRODUCTION

As a child in Dublin in the 1950s, I was fascinated by the enormous picture over the fireplace in the bedroom occupied by my Grandmother Edwards, the devout republican in the family. Called *The Last Stand*, it was a portrait in the heroic style of a scene of carnage in the General Post Office during the last desperate hours of what was popularly known as the 1916 Easter Rising.*

In the picture, Grandmother pointed out to me five signatories of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic who had been ‘murdered’ by the British. (She never minced her words.) There in the centre, lying on a stretcher, was Commandant General James Connolly, the spokesman of the poor who led the Irish Citizen Army, bravely bearing the terrible pain of his shattered ankle.

Beside him, gazing into the middle distance, was the visionary President of the Provisional Republic, Patrick Pearse; he was standing beside his devoted brother, Willie, who was not a signatory but who was executed anyway. Racing towards Connolly was the poet Joseph Plunkett, seriously ill but still intent on freeing Ireland. At the bottom of the stretcher knelt Seán Mac Diarmada, Connolly’s adjutant, and peeping self-effacingly from behind the Pearse brothers was the moustachioed Thomas Clarke.†

* The term Easter Rising, with its religious overtones, is the one long favoured in nationalist Ireland and is seen by critics as loaded. When in 1992 David Trimble, later a Nobel Prize winner for his part in making peace, wrote a pamphlet on the subject, he called it *The Easter Rebellion of 1916*. Sometimes in this book I use that term, as I also use insurrection or rebellion, without worrying too much about precise meanings or theological or legalistic implications.

† Scholars disagree about some of these identifications, but I think Grandmother got them right.

(Thomas MacDonagh and Éamonn Ceannt, the other two signatories, were fighting elsewhere, but posters showing the Proclamation headed or surrounded by headshots of seven men were ubiquitous.)

Occasionally, Grandmother would arrive home in late afternoon and announce portentously: 'I have had tea with Mrs Tom Clarke and she says the Pearses think they own 1916.' I did not really follow what this was about – it would take a while for me to grasp that men I had been told were heroes and martyrs were not mythical beings but real people with living relatives who were not always in harmony.

In my primary school, where teaching was through Irish and the ethos was intensely patriotic, there were reverential references to *Éirí Amach na Cásca* (the up-rising at Easter) or *Aiséirí na Cásca* (literally, the resurrection at Easter) as the heroic climax of 800 years of nationalist struggle. We were told that afterwards there was a war of independence against the British, which we won. History seemingly came to an end in 1921.

We were told nothing at school about the casualties of 1916 or the subsequent war: the dead who mattered were those executed by the British, particularly Patrick Pearse. Nor were we told about the bitter civil war following the Anglo-Irish treaty, or the seventy-seven men executed by Free State forces. And if Northern Ireland was ever mentioned, it was as a bit of Ireland that was ours, and we would get it back some day. No one ever seemed to go there or know anything about it.

I was better informed than most because my parents talked at home about such inconvenient facts as civil war fatalities, sundered families and vicious political divisions, the involvement of many Irishmen in the British Army in the two world wars, and their view that Protestant unionists deserved our respect. Unlike the IRA and fellow-travellers like my fascist grandmother, they had also been unequivocally anti-Nazi.

It was Patrick Pearse who most fascinated me, because we were told he was the noblest man in Irish history and that he could be canonized someday, yet no one seemed to know anything about him. One friend was taught in her middle-class convent school that Jesus and Pearse were the only two men in the history of the world who were exactly six feet tall. That kind of nonsense made me want to find the real man. I wrote a

student paper about Pearse as an educationalist and in 1964 I tried and failed to find enough material to write a master's thesis about him. The following year, a new cathedral consecrated in Galway city had a side chapel where the image of the risen Christ was flanked by mosaic representations of Patrick Pearse and John F. Kennedy praying to him. Both of them, along with favourite popes and saints, were on many an Irish nationalist mantelpiece.

Then came 1966 and a raft of commemorations that caused some thoughtful people to question discreetly why we had embraced the Easter Rising lock, stock and barrel and why we sang songs praising people who had later killed in its name. The Irish proclamation that was our nationalist bible told us that 'the Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman'. Yet those who had written and signed it were unelected and claimed their justification from God and 'the dead generations' rather than a living electorate. So did those who followed their example.

After 1969, with the eruption of full-scale terrorism, everything became much more relevant and some new historical material became available. Although I was living and working in England, I jumped at a request from a publisher to write a biography of Patrick Pearse.

Published in 1977, the book was a critical success, though denounced by IRA apologists as revisionist, a term of abuse levelled at anyone critically examining the nationalist narrative. However, as Marxism became fashionable, Pearse began to recede slightly into the background and his socialist comrade-in-arms James Connolly moved into the foreground. I wrote a short book about him too. As a biographer, I don't have to agree with my subjects: I was not hostile to either Pearse or Connolly, though I concluded they had opened a Pandora's box.

Although I've written a lot about non-Irish subjects, the Troubles kept me close to Ireland not least, from 1993, as a journalist. I was fascinated by the nationalist preoccupation with a seamless lineage of heroes and martyrs, particularly over the past two centuries, who have been used to inspire generation after generation to kill and die for Ireland without any regard to the wishes of the people.

Coming up to the centenary of 1916, a flood of books has emerged. Many now try to paint a complex picture – most Irish people have

moved beyond the stage of thinking that the nationalist narrative is the only one that deserves a civil hearing.

It is significant how fairly the National Library in Dublin, in its introduction to its 1916 Exhibition, pointed out that initially the insurrection had been widely condemned as ‘foolhardy in the extreme and downright criminal’, but that within two years ‘a substantial sector of the nationalist electorate now pledged allegiance to the Irish Republic and honoured the Proclamation as virtually constituting the national constitution’:

The morality and political legacy of the 1916 Rising have long been matters of debate. Some maintain that the Rising was unnecessary and that a republic could have been achieved by purely democratic means, claiming that the limited form of Home Rule already enacted (but suspended for the duration of the war) was a basis for further advance in an evolving process. They deplore the loss of life and national trauma resulting from the Rising, from the ensuing War of Independence (1919–21) and from the Civil War (1922–23), and further argue that the Rising made the Ulster unionists more averse to sharing power with nationalists, thus making the partition of the country in 1921 all the more inevitable. Others, however, believe that the 1916 Rising was the catalyst that inspired the country to abandon Home Rule as a worthless half-measure and to strive for complete independence from Britain. These accord the 1916 leaders iconic status as the founding fathers of the present Irish Republic.

I became obsessed with the subject again, particularly the founding fathers. There were good new biographies, but each concentrated on one subject, making the others bit parts in each other’s lives. I became ever more curious about why and how such an apparently ill-matched group should have teamed up and done what they did, what the chemistry was like between them, and who led whom into what and how.

And so I wrote this book . . .

Chapter One

THOMAS J. CLARKE¹

Tom Clarke himself wrote that the horrors of his convict cell had burned ineffaceable memories into his soul.

What had burned into his soul was something akin to the Miltonic hate, unconquerable will and study of revenge, and most certainly a courage never to submit or yield until the flame of insurrection and a flash of rifles rounded off the tragic glory and intensity of his life.²

Desmond Ryan, 1959

Able, vengeful, focused, selfless and implacable, Tom Clarke was the spider at the centre of the conspiratorial web. Although he was better known to the police and intelligence services in Dublin than he ever was to the public, he was the primary, consistent driving force behind the Rising. From the age of twenty-one, when he committed himself to the cause of Irish independence, until his death forty years later, Clarke never wavered in his dedication to rebellion, whatever its terrible cost in suffering to him, his wife, his family or the people of Ireland.

It was a life that would have horrified his father.

In 1847, a month short of his eighteenth birthday, in Ballyshannon, County Donegal, Clarke's father James joined the Royal Artillery as a cavalry soldier. He had been brought up on a four-acre farm shared by his father and uncle in Carrigallen, Leitrim, which was by now in the second year of the devastating famine that through death and emigration would reduce the population of the county by a quarter. A member of the Church of Ireland and loyal to the crown, Clarke would survive dreadful conditions fighting against Russia in the Crimean War.³

Now a bombardier, he was garrisoned in 1856 with his regiment in Clonmel, County Tipperary, when he met Mary Palmer, an illiterate Roman Catholic servant from Clogheen whose father worked in the Bridewell jail; they married in an Anglican church in her village two months after she bore their son, Thomas James, on 11 March 1857.⁴ James agreed that their children would follow her religion.

James Clarke was stationed on the Isle of Wight at this time, but when Tom was two he and his mother accompanied the regiment to South Africa. Augmented by daughter Maria Jane, the family returned to Ireland in 1865 when Tom was eight, by which time the boy, who had been to school in Natal, was already sympathetic to the Boers, seeing them as victims of British oppression, and would embrace their cause passionately. As boy and man, Tom Clarke was of fixed views: he would never seem aware that, while the Boers had legitimate grievances, much of their quarrel with their colonial governors had to do with enlightened British actions in abolishing slavery and imposing legal equality between races.

James Clarke – who had risen through the non-commissioned officer ranks – transferred on return to the Ulster Militia as a sergeant and set up home in Dungannon, in Tyrone.* He would remain in the army until 1886 when, at fifty-six, he was discharged on the grounds of age.

Dungannon was a bitter town in an angry county: the inhabitants of Tyrone were mired in tribal and sectarian hatred. From a Gaelic Catholic perspective, it was part of a vast area of land that was forcibly seized and colonised by the crown after clan chief Hugh O'Neill, 2nd Earl of Tyrone, had been forced into exile in 1607, along with many other native leaders. From the perspective of the English and Scottish Anglican and Presbyterian settlers, internecine warfare between native clans had made proper cultivation of land impossible and the constant backdoor threat from continental Catholic enemies made confiscation and reallocation of land justifiable. To them, the Ulster Plantation was a force for peace and prosperity. The town was evenly split between Catholics and the generally more prosperous

* In 1868, after twenty-one years of service, he was honourably discharged and given a pension, but immediately appointed a sergeant on the permanent staff.

Protestants; vicious sectarian rioting was frequent, particularly when there were parades on their respective high days by the Orange Order, founded in 1795 to uphold the Protestant Faith, or the Catholic Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH), set up in opposition several decades later.

Tom Clarke was educated at St Patrick's National School. His wife would later say that his character had been formed by 'the ruin and desolation, the evictions and injustices he saw all around him [that] drove him mad'.⁵ He was ten at the time of the abortive Fenian* uprising of 1867, which further polarised the population, not least because police and soldiers kept a close eye on republican sympathisers.

The normal school-leaving age was about thirteen, but, though shy, Clarke was clever and industrious and was appointed a monitor, an assistant to his teacher, Cornelius Collins. The job was that of a badly paid dogsbody. In the 1890s (while trying to help get him released from jail), Collins would describe Clarke as having been 'a quiet, harmless, good boy, regular in his attendance to school duty, and respectful and attentive in the discharge of the work laid off for him by me'.⁶

Yet Clarke was instinctively rebellious and the loathing he had developed in South Africa for the British was honed and intensified in his school years in Dungannon. His school friend Billy Kelly said that even in his early teens he was obsessed with driving out the British and 'found no pleasure in the companionship of anyone who acquiesced in the existing regime'.⁷

Nor did Clarke find any pleasure in learning about views that challenged his own. He read Irish history for confirmation of English villainy and of Irish suffering interspersed with derring-do and heroism. He was particularly stirred by the story of the United Irishmen, educated liberal Protestants inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution to form in 1791 in Belfast – then a cauldron of reformist political ideas – a society dedicated to the achievement of religious equality and a radical

* The secret oath-bound Irish Revolutionary (later Republican) Brotherhood, otherwise known as 'the organisation' or the Fenians, was set up in 1858 with the objective of establishing an Irish republic through physical force; it was based in Britain, Ireland and America.

extension of the franchise. He loved their leader, the effervescent utopian Dubliner Theobald Wolfe Tone.*

Radicalised by the unresponsiveness of the Dublin parliament and by the outbreak in 1793 of war between Britain and revolutionary France, the United Irishmen embraced violent republicanism and sought and obtained French support. Their anti-sectarian ethos was fatally undermined when they were joined by large numbers of Defenders, members of an oath-bound Catholic agrarian secret society with a history of cruelty. Yet Tone was sanguine about revolution: if there was a strong enough invading French force, he believed, it would be supported by the Presbyterians, who were 'the most enlightened body of the nation . . . are steady republicans, devoted to liberty and through all the stages of the French revolution have been enthusiastically attached to it'. The vast majority of Catholics would support it too, for they 'are in the lowest degree of ignorance and are ready for any change because no change can make them worse'.

As well as stirring rhetoric, there was plenty of romance in the Tone story, which culminated in a dramatic last few years, to stir the imagination of the young Clarke. To avoid prosecution for his association with a French spy, in 1795 Tone agreed to go with his family to live in America, but he hated it, not least because the American government

* Tone was born in 1763 in Dublin, the eldest of sixteen children, of whom six survived infancy. His Church of Ireland father was a coachbuilder descended from sixteenth-century French religious refugees: his Catholic mother converted to Protestantism when Wolfe was eight. Though he wanted to join the army, he was sent to Trinity College in 1791; suspended for a year after a fatal duel, he returned as an outstanding student and debater. Given to passionate attachments, he eloped in 1785 with a sixteen-year-old, with whom he had four children. Impulsive, curious and easily distracted, he qualified as a lawyer, but was utterly bored. After the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, he became a pamphleteer, denying that Ireland had any obligations to be involved in Britain's foreign wars. In 1791 in the brilliantly written, passionate and influential *An argument on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, he echoed other advanced reformers by calling for unity of all denominations in pursuit of parliamentary reform. He ignored the evidence that there were many Presbyterians who doubted that Catholics were fit for liberty and many Catholics who trusted the government more than they did Presbyterians.

refused to back the French revolutionary government against the British. He yearned to be part of the action back home. The following year he left to become a revolutionary ambassador to France. Later that year, in his new role as a French brigadier general, he sailed from Brest to Cork with more than 14,000 troops, but disastrous weather sent the fleet back to France without landing a single soldier.⁷ Enraged at this treason in wartime, the government's savagely repressive measures, implemented by yeomen and militia, escalated to the imposition of harsh martial law and executions of suspects.

The United Irishmen continued to plan a rebellion, believing that they could count on about 250,000 supporters, with 100,000 from Ulster. Well-meaning, but ignorant and naïve about both the French revolutionaries and his fellow-Irishmen, as Thomas Bartlett puts it, Tone 'was utterly blind to the havoc wreaked by the French war machine on Europe (and on France); he had only a hazy idea of the furies that lurked beneath the surface of Irish life and which would have undoubtedly emerged after a successful French invasion.'⁸

Back in Paris, he had some inconclusive meetings with Napoleon Bonaparte, the rising military star, who sounded positive but was occupied elsewhere. Tone was surprised to learn of the rebellion in Ireland that had begun in May 1798: already doomed because government spies had led to the arrest of most of the leadership, the outbreaks of violence were scattered, incoherent and mostly aborted. A supportive French invasion in August had short-lived success and its successor, in September, with Tone on board again, was another fiasco that led to his capture.

In the dock, Tone cut a romantic figure in full French uniform: 'A large and fiercely cocked hat with broad gold lace and the tricoloured

* Such setbacks did not silence the balladeers. The *Shan Van Vocht* (a corruption of Sean Bhean Bhocht – 'poor old woman' – a poetic representation of Ireland) assures the listener that 'the French are on the sea', 'the Orange will decay', the yeomen will 'throw off the red and blue' and green will be ubiquitous. It ends:

And will Ireland then be free?
Says the Shan Van Vocht
Yes! Ireland shall be free,
From the centre to the sea;
Then hurrah for Liberty!
Says the Shan Van Vocht

cockade, a blue uniform coat with gold and embroidered collar and two large gold epaulets, blue pantaloons with gold laced garters at the knees and short boots bound at the top with gold lace.' He pleaded guilty, though denied he was a traitor, explaining in his fine speech from the dock that he had fought under the French flag 'to save and liberate my own country'. For that aim, he had 'repeatedly braved the terrors of the ocean' and had 'courted poverty; I have left a beloved wife, unprotected, and children whom I adored, fatherless. After such sacrifices, in a cause which I have always conscientiously considered as the cause of justice and freedom – it is no great effort, at this day, to add the sacrifice of my life.' He was denied his request to be shot rather than hanged and committed suicide.

The authorities were interested in crimes, not motives. About 30,000 people had died and there were terrible atrocities on both sides: the massacres of Protestants by priest-led rebels in Wexford ended Presbyterian flirtations with rebellion.* As well as striking a heavy blow against notions of fraternity and equality, another unintended consequence was the end of the Irish parliament, for in 1801 the government introduced the Act of Union to bind the two kingdoms firmly into the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

His aspirations, life and death made Wolfe Tone the patron saint of Irish republican separatism and the life-long hero of Tom Clarke. 'To subvert the tyranny of our execrable government,' Tone had said in words that would be echoed down the generations,

to break the connection with England, the never failing source of all our political evils, and to assert the independence of my country – these were my objects. To unite the whole people of Ireland, to abolish the memory of all past dissensions, and to substitute the common name of

* In the ballad 'Father Murphy', a priest from Boolavogue, who had proved a daring and effective rebel leader, was compared to his advantage with Julius Caesar, Alexander and King Arthur. The last verse of the much more rousing and still popular 'Boolavogue', written for the centenary of 1798, is: 'God grant you glory, brave Father Murphy, / And open Heaven to all your men, / The cause that called you may call tomorrow / In another fight for the Green again.'

Irishman, in the place of the denominations of Protestant, Catholic, and Dissenter – these were my means.

These were also to be the aims and means of Thomas James Clarke.

In viewing Tone and his legacy uncritically, Clarke was part of a long Irish tradition of worshipping unexamined heroes because of their good intentions and tragic ends. Most people blamed the authorities for the terrible events caused by the revolution and more songs and stories of rebel martyrs were added to the long oral history of Ireland's wrongs. Ireland's is a singing culture full of potent songs about valour and sacrifice and suffering that fuel nationalism, with ballads so rousing and memorable as to be enjoyed even by those of different political persuasions. Many of the songs extolling the United Irishmen and subsequent anti-sectarian revolutionaries would be sung into the twenty-first century by a band called the Wolfe Tones, which specialised in celebrating the Provisional IRA and its squalid sectarian war on Irish Protestants. In his prison diary, the hunger striker Bobby Sands referred to 'The Rising of the Moon', possibly the most famous of all songs commemorating 1798. It ends: 'And a thousand pikes* were flashing at the rising of the moon / At the rising of the moon, at the rising of the moon. / And a thousand pikes were flashing at the rising of the moon.'

Yet there was nothing sectarian about Clarke. His consciousness that both Protestant idealism and Catholic bigotry featured in 1798, combined with the Catholic Church's condemnation of oath-bound organisations like the Fenians, helped make him lukewarm about his religion and inclined towards anti-clericalism. He would have no prejudices against Protestants as long as they shared his politics.

Tom Clarke's parents had eight children, of whom four survived. Theirs was an affectionate home: family harmony survived Tom's teenage rejection of his father's loyalties and his refusal to contemplate acquiescing with his wish that he follow him into the British army, as

* The pike remains a metaphor for arms. The IRA reluctance to decommission in the early part of this century, for instance, is still referred to as wishing to 'keep the pike in the thatch'.

Alfred, thirteen years Tom's junior, later did. Tom would tell his wife that in discussion of his politics his father assured him that the British Empire was unassailable. Defying it, he said, would be akin to banging his head against a wall, to which Tom said he replied that he would just keep going however long it took. In that, as in so much else, he was a man of his word.

In 1878, when he was twenty-one, Clarke's instinctive pull towards physical-force nationalism found its validation when he heard a rousing speech by John Daly, a separatist zealot from Limerick who would dictate the course of Clarke's life and become one of his most intimate friends and co-conspirators.

From an ardently republican family, Daly had joined the secret Irish Republic Brotherhood (IRB) in 1865 at the age of eighteen. His niece Kathleen would record that he had imbibed his passionate republicanism from his mother, who led night-time family prayers that always began with a supplication for Irish freedom. Mothers, aunts and grandmothers who told children tales of Irish suffering and nationalist heroism were a potent force in inspiring generations of men to kill and die for Ireland. It was, as Conor Cruise O'Brien once said, a mutant gene transmitted through the female line.

Arrested and tried for treason-felony* in March 1867 and released on sureties of good behaviour, Daly took part the following month in an IRB attack on a Limerick police barracks and had to flee to America. He returned home in 1869 and in 1872 was appointed travelling organiser of the IRB in Ulster and joined its supreme council. Implacably opposed to the Home Rule movement, he disrupted its public meetings at every opportunity.

The oratory of this charismatic, uncompromising man convinced Clarke he should devote himself to the overthrow of British authority in Ireland. Not long afterwards, in Dublin, Daly formally set Clarke on his life-long revolutionary path by having the young man and his best

* Treason, which covered deeds, carried an aggravated death penalty disliked by juries. The 1848 Treason Felony Act covered threats and conspiracies and imposed penalties of transportation or imprisonment. It infuriated those Fenians who regarded themselves as political prisoners rather than common criminals.

friend Billy Kelly swear a solemn oath to do their 'utmost to establish the independence of Ireland' and 'bear true allegiance to the Supreme Council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Government of the Irish Republic and implicitly obey the constitution of the Irish Republican Brotherhood' and all their superior officers, and 'preserve inviolable the secrets of the organisation.'

The pair had travelled to Dublin under the improbable auspices of the Dungannon Catholic and Total Abstinence Reading Rooms and Dramatic Club, in which Clarke was a prominent actor. Such was his success in the role of the crippled, homicidal, doomed servant Danny in Dion Boucicault's melodrama *Colleen Bawn* that he was invited to join the Irish National Company. Instead, Clarke accepted Daly's instruction to be the centre, or leader, of the Dungannon District Circle* of the IRB, a cell that operated under the cover of the club. His acting ability would, however, prove useful throughout a life of concealment, conspiracy and deceit. Like Daly, he was implacably opposed to constitutional nationalism and loathed the Home Rule† movement, and as a leader he was 'a strong disciplinarian, with no mercy for slackers'.⁹

Clarke met his mentor again when Daly came to address the IRB members on the need to be armed and trained for action when required, especially against the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC). On 15 August 1880, a parade celebrating the Feast of the Assumption was attacked by Protestants, and in the ensuing savage riot the police fired on the crowd; one died, many were injured, and Clarke and Kelly were among those firing back. The following night, according to Kelly, they and the rest of the circle fired on several members of the RIC and, though there were no casualties, with Clarke under suspicion from the

* Organised on continental lines, and designed to reduce the impact of informers, assuming there were enough recruits, a centre (A) appointed nine captains (B), who each selected nine sergeants (C), who each appointed nine men (D), with rigid hierarchical restrictions on who knew what.

† The opposition to the Act of Union gradually developed into a succession of popular and parliamentary campaigns for a return to parliamentary independence that in the mid-nineteenth century became known in all their constitutional manifestations as the Home Rule movement.

authorities, he, Kelly and some others decided to abandon Dungannon and head for America. Falling school rolls had cost Clarke his monitor's job and he had nothing to lose. He left without telling his family.

They reached New York in October and headed straight to the house of Pat O'Connor, from Dungannon, who was a member of the IRB's sister organisation, Clan na Gael.* He gave them jobs in his shoe shop for a few months, after which Clarke became a night porter in a Brooklyn hotel and Kelly a boilerman.

O'Connor introduced them to Clan na Gael's Napper Tandy Club,† where they were sworn in. Clarke – described long afterwards by its president as a 'bright, earnest, wiry, alert young fellow' – soon became recording secretary. The Clan provided a political and social outlet for its members as it sought money to finance the armed campaign back home: the young men had neither need nor inclination to look for company or inspiration beyond its virulently Anglophobic boundaries.

In 1871 Prime Minister William Gladstone had released and exiled to America several IRB prisoners, who immediately set about revitalising Irish-American revolutionary politics before falling out over policy. John Devoy, who for most of Tom Clarke's life would be the dominant figure in the Clan, had lost support from the more militant wing in 1879 when he put the organisation's weight and resources behind what became known as the 'New Departure', an alliance in Ireland of the IRB, the National Land League and Charles Stewart Parnell's parliamentary party.

What Tom Clarke had learned about hate in Dungannon was mild compared to what he would encounter in Irish America, which lived

* When the IRB's American sister organisation, the Fenian Brotherhood, split rancorously after a decade, the IRB sided with those who formed in 1867 the new Irish-American secret society known as Clan na Gael. It recognised the authority of the IRB Supreme Council.

† Napper Tandy had an inglorious career as a revolutionary leader in 1798, ended up living self-indulgently in France, and was immortalised in the famous lament 'The Wearing of the Green':

I met with Napper Tandy, and he took me by the hand
 And he said, 'How's poor old Ireland, and how does she stand?'
 'She's the most distressful country that ever yet was seen
 For they're hanging men and women there for the Wearin' o' the Green.'

off an ever more wildly embellished narrative about past grievances and heroic struggles. None of the stories and songs of persecution and resistance was distinguished for understatement. There was, for instance, no one in nationalist circles challenging the belief that the famine had been genocide. The gifted and incendiary propagandist John Mitchel, the Young Irelanders' greatest hater, explained it thus: 'The Almighty indeed sent the potato blight but the English created the famine . . . a million and half men, women and children were carefully, prudently and peacefully slain by the English government.'

Popular mythology added such memorable twists as the story invented in the late nineteenth century and cherished in republican circles that Queen Victoria – who became vilified as the 'Famine Queen' – had contemptuously donated just £5 for famine relief. She had in fact given £2000,[†] the largest individual donation in the kingdom.

Irish Americans would take the narrative of exceptional Irish victimhood to extreme levels of narcissism, self-pity and absurdity and feed it back to republicans in Ireland in what became a malign circle. For decades, old exiled Fenians ruled the roost in New York, Boston and Chicago, collecting dimes and dollars to incite, fund and control revolution back home. Many of them did well in business, politics and the law. Revered for having suffered when transported or imprisoned, they enlisted for their cause younger men who would meet such fates, or worse.

* The Young Irelanders were a group of idealists that included cultural, political and social nationalists who became radicalised after the outbreak of a terrible famine in 1845 and inspired by Europe-wide insurrections would launch a rebellion in July 1848 that was farcically ineffective and derided in the press as the rebellion of 'the Widow McCormack's cabbage patch'. John Mitchel, from a Londonderry Presbyterian family, was a lawyer who became a brilliant and openly seditious journalist and who in May 1848, despite the efforts of Robert Emmet's brother-in-law, his defence counsel, was sentenced to transportation. After Bermuda and Australia, he ended up in America, where as an enthusiast for slavery he sent his three sons to join the Confederate Army.

† Calculated in today's money as being worth anything from £150,000 to over £2 million.

Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, who had been released with Devoy, was a legendary hater. His family had been impoverished and separated by the famine, which his reading of John Mitchel had convinced him was genocide, and set him on the Fenian path that would land him in jail. His account of the 'severest of sufferings and indignities' he endured 'in the British dungeons', said Henri Le Caron (a successful British spy in Irish America), won him much sympathy, 'and as both in public and in private he lost no opportunity of dilating upon his grievance, the sentiment was in no sense allowed to waver or grow weak.'¹⁰ Rossa had indeed had terrible times in his first three years in jail, exacerbated by his persistent breaking of the rules and sometimes violent aggression, but Edmund Du Cane, the new chief director of convict prisons, proposed a fresh start in 1868, after which conditions improved considerably. Not that Rossa gave him any such credit.

Self-aggrandising, alcoholic, wildly indiscreet and prone to helping himself to funds, Rossa was set on sending waves of 'skirmishers' to England to slaughter, cause widespread panic and set the English against the Irish in their midst. His plans included the assassination of Queen Victoria, the poisoning of the entire House of Commons and the indiscriminate bombing of civilians. Fenians who believed in a military code of honour and in not alienating public opinion found their voices drowned out by those who embraced terrorism and set out to spread carnage, destruction and panic among the most vulnerable. Devoy was displaced by a triumvirate known as the 'Triangle', led by Alexander Sullivan, a Chicago machine boss, who wished to compete with Rossa by replacing gunpowder with the new-fangled dynamite whose infinite possibilities had seized the imaginations of the bloodthirsty.

Where previous republican militants had been prepared to accept civilian casualties as an unintended consequence, these believed in a terror campaign that would seek them out. The instruments of terror were single young men whose lives their superiors were happy to lay down for Ireland. Le Caron, who was close to many of the Clan na Gael leadership, wrote in 1892 of his profound contempt for the 'modern Irish political agitator in America'. In a description that would be true of elements of Irish America for more than a century, he wrote:

Brave and blustering in speech, he advocates, in the safety of his American city, three thousand miles from the seat of danger, the most desperate of enterprises; and without the slightest pang of compunction or twinge of conscience he rushes his poor dupes across the water to their fate on the scaffold or the living death of penal servitude.¹¹

As the historian Carla King has reminded us, Michael Davitt, who transformed Irish politics and society with the foundation in 1879 of the Irish National Land League, habitually referred to Rossa as 'O'Donovan Assa', describing him as 'the buffoon in Irish revolutionary politics with no advantage to himself but with terrible consequences to the many poor wretches who acted the Sancho Panza to his more than idiotic Don Quixote'.¹²

Rossa's skirmishers began their work in England in 1881. Sullivan was paranoid about infiltration and his preparations took longer, but under him the Clan was set on an 'unsparing and unceasing' course. The executive committee's policy, Clan branches were told in a secret memorandum, 'would be to make assaults in all directions, so that the suffering, bitterness and desolation which followed active measures should be felt in every place'. A memorandum went out seeking 'men best fitted for private work of a confidential and dangerous character': Clarke and Kelly volunteered and, after vetting, were accepted.

Being set on fighting for Ireland one way or another, and being by nature secretive, Clarke had maintained no contact with his family for their and his sake, and he had formed no attachments in New York. That Kelly was less dedicated was clear when he dropped out because his job took him to Long Island.

Clarke's dynamite mentor was Dr Thomas Gallagher, a Glaswegian of Irish parentage who had trained at a New York medical school and had a successful practice. His hatred of Britain was matched by his enthusiasm for explosives. The classes he ran in the Napper Tandy Club lasted for about two years: on one occasion Gallagher took Clarke to Staten Island to blast rocks with nitroglycerine.

In late 1882 Sullivan sent Gallagher to England to plan a civilian bombing campaign and he returned bullish and full of purpose. But, as one of Clarke's biographers put it, 'Tom's fate now rested in the hands

of an amateur who was about to give a master class in ineptitude.¹³ Not only had Gallagher little idea of what he was doing, but the spy Henri Le Caron was a trusted confidant.

Gallagher dispatched Alfred George Whitehead to Birmingham to rent premises for a bomb-making factory and two months later others began the journey separately. Clarke, who was now twenty-six, was about to take up a job managing a large hotel near Coney Island, but he answered the skirmishing call instantly and left America under the alias Henry Hammond Wilson. He was so disciplined that he left without telling his friend Billy Kelly, something he said later had been one of the hardest things he ever did. Kelly didn't know he had gone until another Dungannon exile delivered Clarke's trunk to him for safe keeping, along with a note telling him to stonewall any enquiries from the Clarke family.

Le Caron distinguished between 'miserable dupes' and those, like Gallagher and John Daly, who were 'men inspired with fanatical hatred of all things English, and ready at all times to risk freedom and life in working out their designs'.¹⁴ Tom Clarke, whose hatred would rival that of Mitchel and Rossa, would prove to be the most effective of all their recruits.

In 1859, the ship taking the toddler Tom and his parents to South Africa had been involved in a serious collision with a coal ship. In 1883, Clarke almost drowned for the second time when his ship hit an iceberg and sank. The passengers were rescued and taken to Newfoundland, but, given new clothes and £5, Clarke pressed on to Liverpool. By now, as well as knowing from Le Caron that the Clan were planning to bomb London, Special Branch had already responded to a tip-off from a supplier about the paint and wallpaper shop in which Whitehead was industriously manufacturing dynamite, and were watching the building and reading his mail. Conveniently for the police, Clarke, who was en route to London, stopped off in Birmingham, where he met Whitehead, who was being visited by Gallagher.

Elementary errors by several of the conspirators helped put the whole scheme at risk almost immediately. Clarke's contribution to the disaster included a letter to Whitehead with his London address, declaring his intention of calling on him to collect explosives. On 3 April, in Birmingham, Clarke packed a case containing 80lbs of

nitroglycerine in rubber bags and returned to London. Gallagher was thinking big: his plan was to blow up the Houses of Parliament and Scotland Yard.¹⁵

On 4 April, nine days after his arrival in England, the police had Clarke, Gallagher, Whitehead and others in custody along with 500lbs of explosives – enough to destroy large swathes of London. Since January 1881 there had been explosions in Manchester, Chester, Liverpool and Glasgow, and in March 1883 bombs in Whitehall and at *The Times* office. Londoners were terrified by the activities of the Fenian dynamitards and by the feverish rumours of what they were planning next, so in June what was called the ‘Dynamite Conspiracy’ trial – presided over by the Lord Chief Justice and two other senior judges – was a ticket-only event of great public interest.

They were charged with treason-felony, which, *The Times* explained loftily, had been introduced in 1848 ‘to clear up uncertainties, and to substitute in certain instances a milder sentence for offenders who were deemed too contemptible to be executed.’¹⁶ Events were followed closely in the United States too, where most of the press were viciously condemnatory of the Irishmen in their midst who were taking advantage of their legal immunity to plan death and destruction in Britain. ‘There is not a right-thinking man in this country who does not detest the principles and practices of O’Donovan Rossa and his fellow-Fenians,’ said the *New York Times* a few days before Clarke landed in England. ‘Who is responsible for their existence, and why do they come over here to try our patience with this violence and make the name of Irish–American fairly hateful to us?’ The revelations in court when the six men were charged caused the *New York Herald*, in a philippic against O’Donovan Rossa ‘and his gang of dupes, fools and rascals’, to declare that it would be ‘the first to adjust the noose and pull the rope, were it lawful to hang O’Donovan Rossa and his fellow cowards and blatherskites as the worst enemies Ireland has.’¹⁷

The six men went on trial at the Old Bailey in June on charges that included levying war and conspiracy to murder. To their horror, the main prosecution witness was one of Gallagher’s team who had turned Queen’s Evidence. ‘It seems to be a law of nature that when three or four partners in an ignoble conspiracy are gathered together an informer is present,’ observed *The Times* mordantly.¹⁸

Sticking to his alias of Henry Hammond Wilson, giving his age as twenty-two and his occupation as clerk (apparently a pun), like his co-defendants, Clarke pleaded not guilty. Never short of self-confidence, he decided, unlike them, to conduct his own defence during the four days of the trial, arguing that there was no proof that he would have committed any crime. He cross-examined witnesses with some success, but made an important mistake by correcting a lawyer about the composition of the explosive found in his room, which brought the response 'So, you know all about it.' That foolish error would help make this already secretive man obsessively so. He never again, wrote one of his biographers, 'said a word too much about anything'.¹⁹

Clarke refused to address the jury, but received a back-handed compliment from one of the three judges, who regretted 'such ability was misused'. Two defendants were acquitted; the others were sentenced to penal servitude for life. *The Times* reported that Clarke shouted at the judge 'Good-bye, we shall meet in Heaven.'²⁰

Thirty years later, Clarke would recall that after the Lord Chief Justice passed the sentence of penal servitude for life on him and three others

we were hustled out of the dock into the prison van, surrounded by a troop of mounted police, and driven away at a furious pace through the howling mobs that thronged the streets from the Courthouse to Millbank Prison. London was panic-stricken at the time, and the hooting and yelling with which the street mobs used to assail us, going to and from the Courthouse whilst the trial lasted, need not be further noticed. A few hours later saw us in prison dress, with close-cropped heads.²¹

He had experienced solitary confinement while on remand in Millbank prison, but that had been a temporary privation. What horrified him among the rules and regulations now read to them was that strict silence at all times was obligatory. Prisoners were never to speak to one another and no one would be considered for release for twenty years. Having 'remembered with what relentless savagery the English Government has always dealt with the Irishmen it gets into its clutches,