

SEOIRSE (GEORGE) CLANCY – MAYOR OF LIMERICK

By Jack Clancy

“On the morning of 7th March 1921, Seoirse Clancy, Mayor of Limerick, and Michael O’Callaghan, his predecessor in office, were foully murdered by British police at their homes, and in the presence of their wives. The Mayoress, Mrs Clancy, was wounded during the assassination of her husband. The murder of Michael O’Callaghan took place about 1.10 am and that of Seoirse Clancy about 2.30 am. Some hours previously, Joseph O’Donoghue of the IRA was murdered, and his riddled body was found on the street in the morning.” (*Ref Limerick’s Fighting Story*).

Seoirse and Family

The parish of Grange has produced many worthy sons during the long and turbulent years of its existence, but few more illustrious than George Clancy, affectionately known to his friends as just Seoirse. He was born in 1881. He died a violent death in 1921.

Seoirse’s father, John (Johnny) Clancy and his grandfather, George Clancy, filled the young boy with a love of his country’s history and folklore. He learned many things from his grandfather whose mind stored the history and legends of his native place, the tales of Ireland’s heroic age and the facts of Irish history at home and abroad. Seoirse’s mother was Bridget O’Farrell, who came to Grange from Annacotty, just outside Limerick City, now just off the Dublin Road. Her father, Edward O’Farrell, was a millwright at the old mill, which can still be seen beside the bridge over the Mulcair River. Her father, Edward, was compelled to leave Ireland and go to the USA as a penalty for his part in the 1867 rising, thus leaving his wife, Margaret, to look after the needs of the family – three girls and one boy. The boy, Stephen, was reared in Grange by his sister, Mrs John Clancy and his brother-in-law, Johnny Clancy. Stephen later became a priest and ministered in Liverpool.

Seoirse’s father, John (Johnny) Clancy, ran a public house in Grange. He also farmed and ran the post office. Breda Bulfin, a niece of Seoirse, subsequently operated the post office until it was closed down in 1988, in line with government policy. Joseph Clancy, a brother of Seoirse, ran a thriving joinery establishment in Main Street,

Bruff, and his wife, known to all as “Bob”, taught at Bruff National School for girls.

Seoirse also had a brother, Patrick Clancy, who after the foundation of the State, represented Limerick City and County in Dáil Éireann. Another brother, Ned, better known as “Egan”, was a well-known athlete and Limerick hurler. He later immigrated to Boston, where he became editor of the *Boston Irish News*. Another brother, Jack Clancy, who lived at Upper Grange, was the least known member of the family, but like Seoirse, he delighted in exploring in depth the history and folklore of Grange, Lough Gur and all of County Limerick. Seoirse had two sisters, Bridget (Mrs Thomas Bulfin) and Miss Mary Clancy.

Education and Friends

Seoirse commenced his early schooling at Grange National School, under the guiding hand of teachers, Mr Coffey and later Mr James Connolly. Both of these men played a big part in moulding his outlook during his early school days. He was of a studious nature. He was also educated at St Patrick’s Seminary in Bruff. When he concluded his preliminary studies, Seoirse enrolled at the Royal University, Dublin, in 1899. In Dublin, he associated himself with all of the national and cultural ‘movements’ of the time. He joined the Celtic Literary Society, where Arthur Griffith was among his fellow members. His love of the Irish language naturally led him to membership in the Gaelic League, and he was deeply impressed by one of his teachers, Padraig Pearse. Seoirse helped Pearse for a period while teaching in St Enda’s School, Rathfarnham. (*PH Pearse: 1879-1916, executed in Kilmainham on 3rd May 1916*).

One of his colleagues at university was the novelist and poet, James Joyce. It has been said that the character “Davin”, the nationalist peasant scholar in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was modelled on Clancy. From this work by Joyce, it can be seen how Clancy’s enthusiasm impressed those with whom he came in contact.

The following is recounted by Richard Ellmann in *James Joyce* – “Joyce and another student, George Clancy, liked to rouse Cadic (Professor of French, a native of Brittany) to flights of miscomprehension. In a favourite little drama, Joyce would snicker offensively at Clancy’s efforts to translate a passage into English. Clancy pretended to be furious and demanded an apology, which Joyce refused. Then Clancy would challenge Joyce to a dual in the Phoenix Park. The horrified Cadic would rush in to conciliate the fiery Celts, and after much byplay would persuade them to shake hands.”

Kate O’Brien, in her book *My Ireland* quotes Joyce’s biographer, Richard Ellmann, who stated “according to Joyce, George Clancy was the only one among his friends at university who called him James; and there appears to have been a special vein of gentleness and respect in [his] feeling for this young dreamer from Limerick”.

Seoirse knew and loved old Michael Cusack, founder of the Gaelic Athletic Association, whom he often met in An Stad, an Irish tobacco shop kept by the famous

Irish humourist, Cathal MacGarvey, in North Frederick Street, Dublin.

He took a large part in founding Cumann na bPáirtidhthe (Irish Confederates' Club), which on the social side, held weekly debates on national subjects and organised ceilidhthe and excursions in the various seasons. On the athletic side, it had a hurling club, of which Seoirse was captain, and Na Suibhloire ('Tramps'), who walked long distances during weekends among the Wicklow hills and to whom Seoirse was guide, philosopher and friend.



George Clancy, JF Byrne and James Joyce.

In 1904, Seoirse graduated and took up a language teaching post in the Jesuit College of Clongowes Wood. Thomas McCurtain (murdered in 1920, when Lord Mayor of Cork) and Terence McSweeney (the Martyr of Brixton) – Mac Curtain's successor, were very close associates of Seoirse, who played a big part in perfecting their fluency in the Irish language.

During the many years that Seoirse was absent from Grange, he returned at every opportunity to spend holidays or spare time amongst his neighbours and childhood acquaintances. He loved to stroll along the banks of the Camogue River or to sit and read by the romantic and beautiful Lough Gur. He spent many weekends at the home of his aunt, Mrs Nicholas Hayes, who ran a hostelry beside what local people referred to as the "Cross of Lough".

Seoirse loved folklore, and, while staying at Lough Gur, he never lost the opportunity to add to his store of knowledge, by asking the older folk questions concerning the local history of the district that he loved so well.

Nationalism was becoming prominent in the minds and hearts of the Irish at this time and by virtue of Seoirse's upbringing and background, he was firmly caught up in the nationalist fervour shared by many of his contemporaries.

One of Seoirse's favourite activities was to visit the girls' school in Grange and listen to Annie Meade play the piano and to listen to her instructing her music pupils. He had a love of music; he was said to reprimand any pupil who might strike a wrong note.

Teaching and Ill-Health

Ill-health forced Seoirse to give up his teaching post in Co Kildare, and he returned to Grange, but not to an idle life. He commenced classes, teaching Irish to the local people, and he organised many functions of a Gaelic nature. In 1906, he was the person mainly responsible for the agitation to divide up untenanted land on the de Salis Estate, near his own home, among the small farmers and the landless, which ended successfully with a monster meeting in Grange in September 1906. John Redmond, struck by the outstanding capacity of the young organiser, offered him the secretaryship of his party, which Seoirse refused as he had no faith in parliamentary action. Three years later, he was offered the representation of East Limerick, which he also declined.

In 1908, he commenced teaching Irish in Limerick City. He was to be found, on many evenings, at the premises of the Gaelic League on Thomas Street. For many years, he taught the Irish language and Irish nationality to the children of Limerick. The sweetness of his personality and the strength of his character, with earnestness and patience and careful method, bore fruit in time. He taught Irish at Mary Immaculate Teacher Training College, Limerick, between 1916 and 1921.

Seoirse was a regular visitor to Colaiste na Mumhan, Ballingearry, County Cork. Many Limerick members of Connradh na Gaeilge spent their summer vacation in the village of Ballingearry, perfecting their knowledge of the native language.

In 1915 (July), Seoirse married Maire Ni Cillin, a Limerick national school teacher, who taught at St Patrick's NS, Clare Street for many years. She shared all of his interests. Indeed, they first met at a county feis. She was a member of her local Connradh na Gaeilge.

In the early years of the twentieth century, Ireland had entered a very troubled era. Seoirse was always to the forefront of any national movement. He was a founder member of the Irish Volunteers in Limerick and took a great interest in the formation of Fianna Éireann (Irish Boy Scouts), working with Sean Heuston (executed in Dublin after Easter 1916) and others. After the Rising of 1916, the Volunteer leaders were under constant surveillance by the military, and numerous arrests were made. Seoirse was among those arrested and gaoled in Cork. However, the prisoners went on hunger strike before they could be brought to trial and were released.

Seoirse, back in Limerick, resumed his teaching activities. He bore the burden of organising military activities, as many of the Volunteer leaders and officers were under arrest or in hiding. This was a trying time, which served to undermine his health.

After a severe attack of influenza, he was forced to abandon the teaching profession that he loved so much and to take up a post with the National Assurance Company.

Seoirse was a firm believer in education for all. He is reputed to have stated to his brother, Jack, words to the effect that “Independence” of itself was of degraded worth unless all of the people were educated in order to take full advantage of the opportunities that would present on foot of Irish self-determination.

National Collection

He was commissioned by Michael Collins to raise a loan for the purpose of funding the new Dáil Éireann. There was a national collection and Seoirse’s task was to supervise the City and Liberties of Limerick collection. When this was completed, he handed £3,653-10-00, some in gold, to Michael Collins. This was one of the largest collections throughout Ireland. Seoirse had great leadership and organisational abilities, and these together with a wonderful personality, most likely, contributed greatly to the collection success in Limerick City. The Clancy family has in its possession a personal letter of thanks from Collins to Seoirse. The historic letter read as follows:

“Dáil Éireann

Department of Finance,

Mansion House,

Dublin.

10th June 1920

A Sheoirse a Chara,

Dáil Éireann Loan

Further to the temporary receipt I gave you last night I now beg formally to acknowledge receipt of the sum of £3653:10:0, being the second payment in respect of the above from Limerick City.

Please accept my special thanks for the amount of Gold contained in this total.

As arranged I shall be glad if you will send up the Application Forms at an early date.

Do Chara go buan,

Míceál O’Coleann

Aire Airgid.”

Alderman

At the local Limerick City Council election of 1920, the people of Limerick illustrated their high regard for Seoirse by electing him senior Alderman of the City. His poll was more than double that of any other candidate. He had the votes of his former pupils who had grown to be men and women and of the parents of his later pupils. Said one poor woman: “I’ll vote for Clancy, who never closed his eye to my child.”

The City Council was prepared to elect him Mayor that same year; however, he declined the honour, feeling that he did not possess sufficient experience in civil matters.

That honour was, however, conferred on Seoirse in the following year of 1921 – a year that was to prove tragic for the Clancy household and wider family, not to mention County Limerick and the State. In his address to the Corporation after his election, he said he was a hundred percent Sinn Fein, and when his time would come, he would be found pure wool and unshrinkable. And so it proved to be.

Raids on the Clancy Home

In Limerick at that time, raids were carried out at night-time on the homes of those who were known to be active members of any nationalist organisation. Men were taken from their homes by forces of the Crown and lodged in gaol. On little or no evidence, Seoirse was arrested, and when released, he realised that it would be unsafe for him to sleep in his own house if he was to avoid imprisonment. Raids on homes were nightly events from 1916 to 1921. In Mrs Clancy's narrative, she recalled raids on the Clancy home. One such raid took place one November morning at three am.

“There came a loud knocking, awakening the household. I got up, called the maid, and together we went to the door. I asked who was there and got the answer ‘Military’ followed by, ‘If the door is not opened in 30 seconds it will be broken in.’ I opened the door and in rushed a military officer, a number of soldiers and one member of the RIC. The officer asked for my husband, and I answered that he was not at home. He then placed his men all over the house, in the garden and backyard. He searched the house over himself minutely, examining every place, even the hen run. This search lasted about two hours, and as the night was extremely cold, I was feeling pretty bad when it was over. When going, the officer informed me that they would come again. Nightly expecting another raid my husband and myself had not very much rest for the next few months, but strange to say, were not again visited for a considerable time.”

“On the night of December 7th, 1920, at 10.30 pm. the long expected summons came. I went to the door, and I asked who was there. The hall was quickly filled with RIC, ‘Black-and-Tans’ and cadets in uniform and mufti, all carrying rifles and revolvers, a number of them being under the influence of drink. They were led by a man in civilian clothes, brandishing a revolver in one hand and having a flash lamp in the other. They spread through the house, even invading the privacy of the room in which my mother and father were in bed. My poor mother got up and dressed, but my father, being an invalid, could not do so.

“The raiders asked for my husband, and when I said he was away from home on business; they replied I should tell them where he was. I repeated I did not know, and they then said if I did not tell them they would burn me out. I was detained in the dining room for over an hour surrounded by ten policemen and a cadet in uniform who sat on a table dangling his legs and enjoying the insults and abuse poured on me. They told me we were murderers, that we knew all about certain ambushes, and that we brought my parents to live with us so as to cloak our misdeeds, and so on. One of their number, an RIC sergeant, ordered two men to go upstairs and carry my father out of the house to the avenue, so that they could, as he said, ‘blow the place to pieces’.

“At the same time he ordered others down to the lorry for petrol. Another sergeant went into the sitting room and took a picture from the wall – a camp group of Volunteers, with my husband and myself in it – and called me to walk on it. I refused, he then asked the maid to do so, but she, taking her cue from me, also refused. He walked on it himself and tearing the picture out, burned it. This same man put the maid, a young girl of about eighteen, with her back to the wall of the sitting room and questioned her about her home and people. Then in a threatening manner he told her to clear out of my house before six the next evening and tell her father to get her ‘decent’ employment.

“Some of the raiders then left the house and returned in a short time with two women searchers. My old mother of 70, the young girl and myself were sent to the sitting room to suffer the humiliation of being searched while the men went through the house and ransacked every corner of it. Before leaving, the RIC sergeant, who had trampled on the photograph and who seemed to be in command of the raiders, officers and cadets included, told me to the evident amusement of the cadet before mentioning that if my husband did not report at William Street Barracks before seven o’clock the next evening, they would come again the next night and actually burn us out.”

Miss Katie Ryan, Grange

The maid or housekeeper at the Clancy home was Miss Katie Ryan of the Old Road, Grange. She looked after Mrs Clancy’s parents as well. Katie was the brave young eighteen-year-old mentioned in Mrs Clancy’s account of the raid on her home on December 7th, 1920. Katie was also present at the family home on the night of Seirse’s murder, and she assisted and supported Mrs Clancy in what followed the shooting. It wouldn’t be any surprise if Katie was terrified as those events unfolded.

Some Grange people who remember Katie Ryan have described her as a quiet and private person who was well-liked in the parish.

Mrs Clancy's Account of the Murder

In recounting the events of that fateful night, following the shootings, Seoirse's wife provided a detailed account, which includes the following extracts:

"My father died on the 4th March 1921 and was buried on Sunday 6th March. That night friends remained with us up to curfew hour, ten pm. Then we had the family prayers, and we chatted for a little while before going upstairs. Seoirse insisted that I should sleep in my mother's room that night so that she might not be lonely. He came with us and remained some time consoling her and trying to lighten her sorrow. Before getting to bed, I discovered that the candle in his room was still alight, and I went in as I was anxious about him – he had a slight cold for some days...I wished him 'Good night' and left him.



Seoirse (George) Clancy.

"It was then midnight and, though we did not know it, Joseph O'Donoghue was at that time dead, and his murderers were making their way to Michael O'Callaghan's house.

"At about 1.30 a loud noise awakened me. I jumped up startled and asked what the matter was. My mother said, 'Oh God! It is a raid; they are hammering at the door'. I got on my dressing gown and slippers, calling up to my husband as I did so, 'Seoirse, I will open the door'. He answered 'No, Moll, I will', and went down the stairs ahead of me. He held a candlestick in his

hand and said back to me, 'It's all right, Moll, only a raid'.

"Before opening the hall door he asked who was there and got the answer 'Military'. I was just behind him at the foot of the stairs, and when he opened

the door I saw three tall men wearing goggles with caps drawn well down over their faces and the collars of their coats turned up. Two stood at one side of the door and one at the other; one of the two held a flashlight. Even then I did not realise the murderous work they had come to do. The man at the right asked 'Are you Clancy', pointing a revolver at Seirse. My husband answered 'Yes, I am' and stood straight in front of him. Then this man said, 'Come out here, we want you.' Seirse asked 'What for?' and the man said, more loudly, 'Come outside.' 'No, I won't' Seirse answered, and stepped back a pace or two, opening the door still wider as he held the knob in his hand. The spokesman then stepped into the hall and shouted 'Then take this', and before I could move fired three shots at him. I then dashed between them screaming and trying to move Seirse back and push the man away, but even as I did so, he emptied his revolver. I heard in all, seven shots. The men then rushed off and banged the hall door, leaving me in the dark, as the candle Seirse held had fallen, and the gas was not lighted.

"I did not know then that I was wounded. I thought the sting I felt in my wrist was a blow I got in the struggle. I groped about with my hands to find my husband but could not. Then I saw the door at the end of the hall and also a door beyond it leading to the yard were open. I called Seirse by name and getting no answer I rushed around the yard still calling him but could not find him.

"I opened the gate leading into the garden and ran across to a friend's house, falling many times on the way. I knocked on Mr Barry's bedroom window and asked him to come and help me as my husband was shot, and I could not find him. I went back immediately and passing in through the gate I stumbled over my husband's feet. He had fallen in the yard, and I had passed out without seeing him. The maid, who was now up and dressed, came into the yard when she heard my cry on discovering him. Between us, we tried to lift Seirse but failed as my hand was useless. I then discovered I was wounded, and the blood was streaming from my wrist. I ran back again to Mr Barry and told him I could not lift Seirse as I was wounded in the wrist. He was dressed by this time and came to me immediately, and with the help of the maid we lifted Seirse into the kitchen.

"My aged mother had come downstairs in her night attire and had been wandering about the yard in her bare feet, looking for Seirse and myself. She was a pitiable sight, with her poor feet covered with his blood and mine. My only thought now was to get the priest to my poor Seirse while he was still

alive. I then asked Ned – Mr Barry – to go for the priest, and he went off not knowing but that he himself might be shot on the way. I knelt beside Seoirse and tried to say the ‘Act of Contrition’ in his ear – he was breathing very heavily but seemed unable to speak. In a few minutes, Canon O’Driscoll, who had prepared Seoirse’s mother for death, arrived and administered the last sacraments to the pupil he had encouraged and taught at Bruff Seminary, twenty-five years before. After this, Seoirse opened his eyes and looked at me, then he looked at the Canon and back again at me. I was now faint from loss of blood, so the Canon led me away, just as Seoirse expired.”

Great Sadness and Mourning

It is said that thousands of children filed past the body of deceased Mayor Clancy at his home. For two days, there was a constant stream of people who came to see their dead Mayor and to say a prayer for his soul. The Lord Bishop said the Rosary in Irish by his side. During the two nights – Monday and Tuesday – his comrades stood guard in the room where he lay, and the Rosary was recited almost without intermission. On Wednesday, he lay in state at St John’s Cathedral with his murdered comrades, and next day six Irish Mayors bore his body to the grave at the Republican Plot, St Lawrence’s Cemetery in Limerick.

Mayor Seoirse Clancy had yielded up his life for the objectives that he so passionately believed in and worked towards – for a free and Gaelic Ireland for all of her people. He had not died in vain.

Conclusion

Seoirse Clancy’s portrait hangs in the Mayoral Office at Limerick City Hall. It must have, as they gazed upon it over the intervening years, served as a sharp and motivating reminder to all who held the office of mayor from time to time, of the high standards that were appropriate to this lofty and ancient office, as exemplified by the public life of Mayor Clancy.

Mayor Clancy’s robes and uniform are on display at the National Museum, Dublin (1916-1922 Collection).

To this day, the mere mention in Grange circles and beyond of Mayor George Clancy instantly evokes sentiments of awe, reverence and pride, as well as gratitude for a life so unselfishly and heroically lived and given up for family and country.

References and Notes

- (1) The article, written by Paddy Clancy, published in *The Dawn*.
- (2) The Book titled *Limerick’s Fighting Story 1916-1921: Told by the Men Who Made It* – Mercier Press, Cork, 2009. Originally published by *The Kerryman*, 1948.
- (3) *My Ireland*, 1962, by Kate O’Brien,
- (4) *James Joyce*, revised 1982, by Richard Ellmann.
- (5) *Writings by Jim Kenny (a former Mayor of Limerick City)*, available on the internet.

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