

LOOK BACK

JANE STANFORD



IN December 1918, a month after the Armistice, a General Election was called. The leaders of the two main parties in Britain, David Lloyd George and Andrew Bonar Law, issued a joint statement: Ireland could not leave the Empire and six northern counties were not to be coerced into Home Rule. Sinn Féin, the newly emergent national party, was declared an illegal organisation and its leaders were arrested. The move was provocative and, viewed as a challenge, galvanised the Irish vote. Sinn Féin, with a landslide, won 73 seats. Many of those elected were held in high security jails.

The following month, 21 January 1919, the first Dáil Éireann met in Dublin's Mansion House and elected Éamon de Valera, Member of Parliament for Westminster and Teachta Dála for East Clare. President of the Assembly. De Valera, who had famously declared 'we are not at war with Germany', was held in the Victorian red brick Lincoln Prison, 'one of England's stoutest jails'. During his detention he wrote regularly to his wife. He kept his mind active, and Diarmaid Ferriter in Judging Dev relates how he drew up plans for a bicycle-riding cavalry. Horse-less mounts would be cheaper and cleaner and certainly less troublesome.

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A devout Catholic, de Valera served at daily mass and one morning he spotted the key to the rear gate on the chaplain's table. He took an impression of the key with melted wax from the altar candles. Cryptic copies were drawn on two separate and humorous postcards, which passed undetected under the eyes of the censor. One showed a drunken man fumbling with a key: 'I can't get in.' The other card, Eocain na Saoirse, the Key to Freedom, was an image of a prisoner holding a key with a Celtic design: 'I can't get out.'

In a separate communication, instructions were sent to Dublin



Éamon De Valera pictured in 1922.

so that the postcards might be readily deciphered. A key was cut from the sketches and despatched to the prisoners inside a cake. Several attempts were made. One key was too large, another too small. Finally, on the third try, an uncut key, with an accompanying file, was mixed in with dried fruit, eggs, butter and flour, baked and iced with plaster of paris. Sugar was rationed and plaster of paris was frequently used to decorate wedding cakes.

Inside the jail, one of the Irish prisoners, Peter de Loughrey, a master locksmith fashioned a working key with the file. Outside the prison walls, Irishmen, at work on nearby allotments, sang songs in Gaelic, keeping the inmates informed of ongoing developments.

Senior members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, Michael Collins, Harry Boland and Frank Kelly, came over from Dublin and, at an arranged hour, took up position outside the jail. Harry Boland signalled with a large new torch. De Valera, with a flare from a bundle of matches, returned the signal. All was in readiness.

The sentries, their attention engaged by several Irish lasses, did not notice the three figures, heavily muffled, moving stealthily through the cell block. A side exit opened on to the main yard, leading to the rear gate and freedom.

Collins, outside the prison walls, turned his duplicate key in the lock. It snapped in two pieces, effectively blocking the aperture. Dev, at the gate with his own duplicate, pushed it gently into the keyhole. The head of the broken key slipped out, his key turned and the gate opened.

Guided by a landmark clock tower, they headed across rough open fields. Reaching the road, they mingled with passers-by. Moving westwards along

Grootwell Road, they gave the Peacock public house, a favourite haunt of warders, a wide berth. At the junction with Wragby Road they sped up Lindum Hill to the Adam and Eve tavern. Dating back to the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Adam and Eve is on the road leading north out of the city. Opposite Pottergate Arch, it stands in the shadow of the cathedral, where the men on the run were unlikely to encounter prison personnel.

Cars, with engines running, were waiting in the car park. Leaving the city, they were driven at high speed to Sheffield and then onwards to Manchester. For several hours the warders were ignorant of the escape. At ten o'clock whistles and slamming doors sounded the

Toast List

ANGLO-IRISH FRIENDSHIP
The Very Rev. Canon Michael A. Gillman, B.A., B.S., P.P.

IRELAND

Éamon De Valera, T.D.

INTERLUDE

Miss Nellie Walsh (Soprano)

OUR GUESTS

Very Rev. Dean Peter Taylor, V.F.

Irish National Anthem

"A Soldier Song" by the Company

Chairman: Mr. Frank Short

(National Chairman Anti-Partition of Ireland League)

alarm. 'Soon the prisoner who Lloyd George thought he had safely caged was speeding into darkness and freedom.' The daring escape made headlines across the world. In Manchester, de Valera took refuge with a local priest, Fr



Lincoln Prison, 'one of England's stoutest jails'. Picture courtesy of HMPS

O'Mahoney. On 18th February, in clerical dress, he travelled by boat back to Ireland. At the beginning of June, accompanied by Harry Boland, he took passage to the United States to raise support, moral and financial, for the Irish cause.

Over 30 years later, in early October 1950, de Valera returned to Lincoln as the guest of the Anti-Partition of Ireland League of Great Britain. He spent a weekend in the city. Fianna Fáil was now in opposition and the Irish leader's visit was part of an international tour — the United States, Australia, New Zealand and India — to argue the case for reunification of the island by peaceful, democratic means.

On Saturday afternoon there was a crowded meeting at the Radion Cinema. De Valera said there could be no freedom for Ireland while part of its territory was held by a foreign power. If there were to be good relations between the two countries the cause of the quarrel must be removed. The abolition of partition would 'combine good principles and good business'.

Fenner Brockway, Labour MP for Eton and Slough, proposed a vote of thanks, declaring his support for the anti-partition movement. Brockway, penal reformer and committed pacifist, was in Lincoln prison at the time of the escape. He had led a mutiny in a Liverpool prison and was sent to Lincoln where he was kept in solitary confinement on a diet of bread and water. The Irish prisoners made contact and smuggled newspapers into his cell. Later they alerted him to the breakout. 'Something exciting is going to happen.' Brockway believed it was time to end the division of Ireland. In time of war, as in the two world wars, a co-operative Ireland strengthened England.

That evening de Valera was guest of honour at a dinner in



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the Saracen's Head Hotel, an old coaching inn. In the Second World War it was the favourite watering hole for the many air force officers stationed locally. The CO 342 Bombardment Squadron United States Air Force had initially accepted an invitation to give the main toast, 'Anglo-Irish Friendship'. In a last minute change, Canon Michael Gillman replaced him. De Valera raised his glass to 'Ireland'. Nellie Walsh, the renowned soprano, provided entertainment at the interlude. A Soldier's Song closed the evening.

Early Sunday morning the Irish visitors attended mass in a local Catholic church, St Hugh's. In 1919 the young curate, Fr Peter Taylor, was prison chaplain. Now returned to St Hugh's as parish priest, Dean Taylor had recalled at dinner the previous night how at Christmas the Irish prisoners had presented him with a gift of money. He still had the thank you note from de Valera and produced it for his fellow guests.

Promptly at 9 a.m., the Irish leader rang the bell at the main gate of the prison. Fenner Brockway stood beside him. The entourage included his former comrade-in-arms, Frank Aiken and members of the press. Ferriter's Dev features a vibrant image of the scene outside the jail. The Governor and the Chief Warden, with the permission of the Prison Commissioners, welcomed the former inmates.

De Valera inspected his old cell, D29. A notice on the door described the present occupant as 'Escapee'.

In great detail the Irish leader reconstructed the escape for his hosts, who assured him the locks had been changed. He toured the cell block, the prison yard and the barbed wire fencing beyond the walls. Saying farewell to the prison officials, he strode purposefully to the rear of the building. He climbed over a low wooden fence and pointed out his cell window to the gathering crowd. Some took fragments of barbed wire as mementos.

Later that morning he was a guest of the Dean of Lincoln cathedral and was given a guided tour of the cathedral and its library and ancient manuscripts.

On Sunday evening, invited by the local Irish Society, he travelled to Scunthorpe, a steel town with a large number of Irish-born workers and their families. He attended a Grand Concert in the Jubilee cinema and spent the night at the nineteenth century Blue Bell Hotel on the High Street.

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■ Jane Stanford is an independent historian and author. Her biography of John O'Connor Power, That Irishman, tells the story of the role of the Irish in England in the last decades before independence. Jane was born in Scunthorpe of Irish parents and went back to Ireland to study English literature and languages at University College Dublin. As a diplomatic wife, she spent many years in various postings — Washington DC, New York, Brussels, Madrid and Geneva.

She maintains a blog, thatirishman.com and is currently working on a companion volume to That Irishman. She has three daughters and lives in Dublin.